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**“BEST PRACTICE” IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING:  
HYPE OR HOPE?**

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**“BEST PRACTICE” IN EDUCATION & TRAINING:  
HYPE OR HOPE?<sup>1</sup>**

**A SPECIAL ISSUE**

**NORRAG NEWS NO 39.**

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<sup>1</sup> We owe the provocative title of this issue to Denise McKeon – see article by King

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**EDITORIAL**

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We now know a great deal more about the access to and readership of Norrag News than we ever did before. Thanks to the new, more accessible web-site, and to the work of Robert Palmer, Norrag Assistant for Development, we can tell which of our past 38 issues have been most frequently downloaded. We know how many visitors to the site there have been in the first six months of this year – 67,000. And we even know that only 6% of our visitors have been robots!

These are changed days from when we laboriously sent out hard copies of the red bulletin by post to a small band of some 160 folk, just a few years ago. We are of course delighted that we now have some 1,600 members, and we even know which countries they come from – see article in NN39 by Palmer on Norrag numbers.

In the ‘good old days’, of course, we actually knew personally more than 50% of the membership. Now the management group will only know a fraction of the 1600 members, but we have no idea about the bulk of the readership, the 60,000 who consult past issues of Norrag News, but don't need to register as they don't necessarily want to read the latest issue.<sup>2</sup> Some of these will be members, but many will be surfers and researchers of all sorts. However, in the countries where the management group come from – Switzerland, France, Netherlands and the UK – we probably know a large number of those who have enrolled.

But to get to know the membership and their wishes better, we shall be sending out a five-minute questionnaire in the next short while to all 1600 of you, to get a sharper sense of your organisational base, - whether academic, policy, development agency, consultancy, or civil society. This will also allow you to comment upon and make suggestions on the current and future issues of Norrag News.

We are increasingly aware that although we have had a French edition of Norrag News for many years, one of the reasons why our readership is so low in certain parts of the world, such as the Middle East, and Latin America, is language. We shall, beginning from this present issue, carry a policy brief (summary) of this issue also in Spanish, German, Chinese, Arabic and Russian. And from next issue, NN40, we shall experiment with carrying just a small number of articles, untranslated but with an English summary, in the body of the main NN text.

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<sup>2</sup> It is only necessary to register on the web-site if one wants to get access to the most recent issue of Norrag News. All earlier issues are accessible without registering.

These are just two of a number of experiments we shall be carrying out in this coming year to see if there are better ways of encouraging an interest in NN.

Another of these initiatives, which we shall be trying out in Holland and in Switzerland where there are 61 and 86 current members respectively, is to organise a cluster meeting of the country's Norrag membership back-to-back with another major meeting of likely interest to many members in those same countries. This cluster meeting could be for half a day just before or just after the main meeting, but it would allow our Norrag members there to be more aware of each other, and, more importantly, would allow the Norrag leadership to listen to the views of its members. We shall keep the membership posted of these developments, as we shall have others, possibly in Pakistan, China and Ghana over the next several months.

In addition to Robert Palmer (who received his PhD in Edinburgh this June, and is now on a post-doctoral fellowship), we now have a Francophone Norrag Assistant for Development, based in IUED. This is very good news! Stephanie Langstaff is doing her PhD there, and is keeping an eye on the Working Group for Skills Development, as well as Norrag. Her email is: [stephanie.langstaff@norrag.org](mailto:stephanie.langstaff@norrag.org)

There was a very interesting Norrag section of the Oxford conference in September 2007, organised by Rob Palmer, Ad Boeren (of Nuffic, who is also on the Norrag Management committee) and myself, but with a link also to the Comparative Education Research Centre of Hong Kong University, through Bjorn Nordtveit. There were some 20 plus papers in this section, and we shall be considering an issue of Norrag News which re-explores this section's theme of Education, Skills, Sustainability and Growth. This is a policy dilemma which is not going to go away soon!

The present issue of Norrag News is, we hope, a very good read. Following 'best practice' in Norrag News, we shall provide you with a broad diversity of critical opinion about the discourse about best practice and allow you to decide for yourself where you stand.

We look forward to hearing your views about the issue.

Kenneth King  
21<sup>st</sup> October 2007.

**CONCEPTS, CONTROVERSY  
AND COMPLEXITY  
IN BEST PRACTICE**

**ENGAGING WITH BEST PRACTICE: HISTORY AND CURRENT PRIORITIES**

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When there can actually be a 'Second Life Best Practices in Education International Conference' in May 2007, attracting 1300 participants worldwide, to what was a completely virtual conference,<sup>3</sup> it is surely high time we in NORRAG had a special issue on 'best practice'!

In one way the Research Review and Advisory Group (RRAG) which was set up in the mid-1970s by IDRC, and other donors, and from which NORRAG developed in the mid-1980s,<sup>4</sup> was organised around the assumption of best practice. It was thought by its designers that a great deal of research, including on developing countries, already existed. What the founders of RRAG thought was missing was a systematic attempt critically to synthesise what was already out there, especially research findings that related to the developing world. The term that was used for such a synthesis was 'state of the art review'. The idea was that policy makers in education who would not have the time to sort out all the findings on, say, class size and educational achievement, rates of return to different levels of education, or policies for effective teachers, and a good deal else, would be able to have at their finger tips synthesised, evidence-based guides to better policy.<sup>5</sup>

This notion that RRAG could synthesise educational findings in the developing world, and present them to policy makers through what we might call here 'best practice state of the art reviews' was partly a response to the move of the World Bank into summarising educational research findings (often its own!). At this point in the late 1970s, the Bank was actively seeking to build its own research capacity in education through targeted recruitment. As a result it began to make a series of general assertions about 'what works' or 'makes a difference' in the field of education. Thus we suddenly begin to have claims in the late 70s that 'textbooks make a difference' to educational achievement, or that teachers who have been to college are as good as those who have gone to university, or that diversified secondary schools do not make a difference to students' career orientation or to appropriate employment etc etc.<sup>6</sup> These might well be called best practice findings nowadays.

What happened to RRAG's original intention to synthesise research for policy into punchy, bite-sized findings? The answer is: Not very much. It carried out just one state of the art review - on teacher effectiveness research (Avalos and Haddad, 1979) - but unlike the World Bank's review of teacher effectiveness (by Torsten Husen et al, 1978),

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<sup>3</sup> <http://slbestpractices2007.wikispaces.com>

<sup>4</sup> See the history section on the Norrag website:

[www.norrag.org/history.php?PHPSESSID=73c464f9fca4a5425c7e77bea6372487](http://www.norrag.org/history.php?PHPSESSID=73c464f9fca4a5425c7e77bea6372487)

<sup>5</sup> I still recall the President of the IDRC, David Hopper, saying to the RRAG team at their first meeting in 1977: 'Your job in the education sphere is to make three stalks of wheat grow where there was only one before.'

<sup>6</sup> Many of these research findings were from production functions (see McGinn in NN39).

the RRAG review ended up saying something like ‘it depends a good deal on context, culture and the educational environment’ in which teachers are working (see also Mason in this issue). In other words, the RRAG review was unable to produce a set of punchy, best practice claims for teacher effectiveness, of general application, in the manner that the World Bank review had done.

The reason for this apparent failure of RRAG to fulfil its original mandate is very relevant to our current special issue on best practice. The initial members of the RRAG network, ably led by Robert Myers, were constitutionally and epistemologically disinclined to make universalist claims about what would work across the entire developing world. Instead, they backed off the very notion of these best practice reviews and started instead a series of studies on the ‘educational research environment’, or the culture of education research in countries like Kenya (Court), Colombia (Myers), Mali (Diambomba), Uganda (Namuddu), Thailand (Pote), and Chile (Schieffelbein) which eventually came out in Shaeffer and Nkinyangi (1983): *Educational research environments in the developing world*.

### **The history of best practice**

Both versions of the history of best practice that I have seen trace it back to America. And like so much in education discourse, one version of this history goes back to the private sector and to management-speak. Indeed the idea that “among the various methods and implements used in each element of each trade there is always one method and one implement which is quicker and better than any of the rest” can be attributed to Frederick Taylor (1919) *The Principles of Scientific Management*. This came to be called ‘One best way’ (see also Kanigel 1997).

The other American origin claimed for best practice goes back to the extraordinarily successful model of agricultural extension in the United States where research-based innovations were promoted at the county and state level by extension agents (McKeon, 1998). A key element in the success of this model of good practice adoption would appear to have been the practical orientation of the agricultural research system, and the close collaboration between the extension agents and their clients. Not to mention the productivity gains and profits gained from the adoption of these tested and tried best practices. Arguably, the school system and its teachers and principals inhabit very different worlds from the community of educational researchers as compared to the close linkages between county extension agents and their local farmers.

### **Contradictory uses of good and best practice at present**

True to its diverse origins in agricultural extension and business management, the language of good and best practice is still used very widely today, in diverse contexts, to commend particular innovations, whether in organizations, in technologies or in societies, to a wider audience. Ideally, as Trudell argues in her NN39 article, best practice should derive carefully over time as a result of research and experience. But all too often, in practice (!), the anticipated best practice is passed over in favour of the practice preferred by those with most influence, power or financial leverage. It is precisely this contradiction between what we may term genuine good practice (which is the way communities have learnt to improve, often through borrowing and adapting, since the beginning of time) and the enthronement of a particular set of development or research

priorities by the multinational or international bodies, whether in aid, trade or human development, that is at issue.

So, in every sphere of development cooperation, for example, there are now illustrations of this tension. At the highest level of the MDGs, we saw in 2005 'a practical [good practice?] plan to reach the millennium development goals' (UN, 2005). But the issue of whose 'practical plan' it was continues to be debated (see King, 2007). At other levels, there is plentiful evidence of good practice partnerships in development, good practice case studies, good practice monitoring and evaluation, best practice in international student support, and a great deal else.

From another angle, the good/best practice debate is about the eternal dilemma of going to scale, or mainstreaming when something appears to have been successful locally, in a pilot project, or in a single country. Hence, it faces every organization that moves from supporting a project in a single county or district to having a country strategy, and then a regional strategy and then an international strategy. Thus it is central to all development organizations which operate cross-nationally, whether they are NGOs, bilateral or multilateral.

Historically, of course, bilateral aid organizations based their offers of assistance on what they conceived of as their comparative advantage (best practice?) in Denmark, Canada, Sweden, or Japan. This offer of donor countries' best practice, like Danida's support to the Design School in the University of Nairobi, or tool and dye making in India, or all manner of English language teaching projects, in the case of the UK's Overseas Development Administration (ODA) and the British Council, was naturally a form of tied aid, and those who implemented these practices abroad were naturally termed technical assistance since they were seen to be part of a technology or good practice transfer.

As aid modalities shifted over time, and programme support, sector-wide approaches and direct budget support began to become commonplace in some agencies, so the notion of visiting 'the British project' or 'the Danish project', along with tied aid, has become unfashionable. Current good practice has become accordingly much more complex, as a new aid architecture of the MDGs, and, for education, the Dakar Goals, has been constructed, largely by multilateral bodies, and yet this goes along with the strong view that country ownership of the aid agenda is vital.

As Ellerman has argued forcefully in this NN39 issue ('Best Practice Development Fads 101'), the discourse of best practice is particularly common in international development organizations. This can be illustrated in the most recent World Bank policy paper in education (the *Education Support Strategy Update* [ESSU] 2005), where there are plentiful references to good practice. For both of the main thrusts of the Bank's strategy paper – a) ways to achieve Education for All (EFA), and b) ways to support education for the creation of knowledge economies (KE), there are a whole series of what are termed 'good practice examples of country strategies'.

***For instance, in respect of ways to reach EFA***, the ESSU notes: 'The examples that follow bring together a number of good practices from a wide range of countries,

including ones that are very poor or emerging from deep conflict, demonstrating that progress is within reach where commitment exists to do what it takes.'

Encouraging school-based management (16 countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa).

Reaching poor children through demand-side financing (Mexico plus 8 SSA).

Taking advantage of FTI. (Yemen).

Improving quality in African classrooms (Zambia plus 4 others).

Mainstreaming children from non-formal into formal schooling (India).

Accelerating the education sector response to HIV/AIDS in Africa (25 SSA countries).

Rebuilding capacity after war (Cambodia and Afghanistan).

Shifting the debate from inputs to outcomes in Brazil.<sup>7</sup>

Scaling up progress on EFA in South Asia. (Annex 3, World Bank, 2005)

***As far as reaching knowledge economy (KE) status is concerned***, there is a second list of 'Good practice examples highlighting country strategies to support education for the creation of knowledge economies':

Rethinking the Secondary School Curriculum in Europe and Central Asia.

Building national innovation systems (China).

Constructing lifelong learning systems: Chile

Constructing lifelong learning systems: Mexico.

Rethinking the State's role: Public-private partnerships (Sikkim).

Identifying options for sustainable financing (Chile, Mongolia, China, Morocco)

Strengthening financial management and accountability in Indonesia's tertiary education institutions

Strengthening labour market linkages.

- Diversifying the institutional landscape. In Chile
- Establishing quality assurance mechanisms and accreditation systems (Colombia, Korea)
- Teaching creativity (Singapore)
- Encouraging corporate ties. (Sri Lanka, Mozambique, Argentina)

Addressing the political economy of reform (Mexico)

Emphasizing science and technology in education - Uganda. (Annex 4, World Bank, 2005)

What are we to make of this list of claimed good practices linked to the achievement of the two main themes of the World Bank in its most recent policy paper?<sup>8</sup> First, it would appear that countries are being encouraged to 'mainstream' these 'innovative delivery mechanisms'. But they are also being encouraged to adopt three overall strategic themes which are: (a) integrating education into a country-wide perspective; (b)

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<sup>7</sup> Sometimes the particular good practice country is named in the title of the delivery mechanism; and sometimes the relevant country or countries are mentioned in the text (in which case I have included them in brackets).

<sup>8</sup> Each of these good practice examples is illustrated and explained in a paragraph.

broadening the strategic agenda through a sector-wide approach; and (c) becoming more results-oriented.

I actually happen to believe that some recognition of these three themes is valuable. But where have these three strategic themes come from? The Bank's answer is intriguing, in terms of the origins of its good or best practices:

These themes originate in the objective of responding to the changes in the environment discussed above,<sup>9</sup> with the benefit of lessons from recent years' experience. In many instances, the proposals reflect the mainstreaming of innovative practices that have already been tried in specific regions or countries. (World Bank, 2005: xi)

Each of these three strategic themes also brings with it a series of some 8-10 suggested approaches (good practices?). Thus, countries are being presented with an agenda for action which is relatively simple (just 3 strategic themes, and two overall objectives (EFA and Knowledge Economies)), but is also highly complex, for, as we have just seen, each of the two overall objectives has a range of good practices that could be mainstreamed, as do the three strategic themes. So implementation could be a challenge. Here then is what the Bank says about the implementation process:

#### **Implementation of Strategic Priorities**

Implementation of the ESSU calls for new or modified ways of doing business in terms of viewing education issues in a broader (sector-wide or country-wide) context, knowing more about what drives a country's education outcomes, more systematically building country capacity in certain areas, and harmonizing with donors wherever feasible. While these approaches may not seem entirely new, the "novelty" of the ESSU relates largely to their mainstreaming, as also the mainstreaming of innovative delivery mechanisms. (World Bank, 2005: 43)

Bearing in mind the danger of development fads or fashions (see Ellerman in this issue), the Bank seems to be declaring that mainstreaming (or generalising?) these innovative good practices we listed above for the two goals (EFA and KE), along with mainstreaming the three strategic objectives (also good practice?) is the novelty of this policy paper.

But, for any particular country, what on earth could it mean to mainstream some of the innovative practices highlighted under EFA or KE, for example 'building national innovation systems' which is only illustrated by the good practice example of China? The paragraph that explains what China did may be very difficult for other countries to learn from. This is central challenge of claimed best practice: that the good practice example is of course embedded in a particular system, culture and context. The range of factors, both direct and indirect, that appeared to make it work well in its original

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<sup>9</sup> These environmental changes include changes in the internal environment of the Bank's understanding of service delivery, as well as the external environment of changes in schooling systems.

context are very hard to tease out, and yet they are inseparable from the identified practice.

So what we have, in this example of comparative, cross-national discussion of good practices, is a series of perhaps quite compelling good practices associated with the two objectives or the three overall strategies, but in combination they amount to an enormous range of 'good practice examples'. It is not at all clear what mainstreaming these would imply. Nor is it particularly clear what the evidence base is for these good practice examples.

It should be recalled, however, that the first target of this battery of good practice proposals is the World Bank staff itself. The adoption of cross-sectoral thinking, and locating education within a wider macro-economic framework are acknowledged to require capacity building within the Bank, not to mention with its clients. In other words, the disseminators of these good practice messages and priorities themselves need training to understand the new strategies and objectives.

We have illustrated this dilemma from the World Bank, since its policy material is so accessible, and is also so widely read, and indeed influential. But it would be equally possible to illustrate some of these tensions around the meanings of best practice from other multilaterals, and indeed bilaterals or NGOs. Here, for example, was UNESCO laying out its mandate for 2002-2007: 'UNESCO will promote education as a fundamental right, work to improve the quality of education and stimulate innovation and the sharing of knowledge and best practices' (UNESCO, 2002: 15). Good and best practice run right through the objectives and the benchmarks of UNESCO's programme and budget for 2006-7.

### **Norrag News and Good Practice**

We have not had a policy of identifying best or even good practice, over the almost 40 issues of Norrag News since 1986. What we have sought to do, for any particular issue, such as SWAPs, Education Capacity Building, the World Summit on Education, or the politics of language is offer our readers and contributors a range of different, often critical, approaches to the particular theme, conference, aid modality. We have avoided synthesising across the 30-40 viewpoints expressed, preferring that our readership do this crucial job themselves. Hence our policy briefs, if we are honest, are not executive summaries, but more often testimonies to an inescapable diversity.

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**BEST PRACTICE DEVELOPMENT FADS 101**

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**Keywords**

Development fads, Development assistance, Institutional memory, Best practice

**Summary**

Development assistance, this article argues, seem to be constantly surfing with the latest fads. The institutional memory that large institutions like the World Bank and IMF have of what has been tried in the past is often lacking; the result is failed “bold new initiatives” of yesteryear resurfacing as the hamster-wheel of fad-driven aid programs keeps turning.

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Over the last sixty years, development aid and assistance have been increasingly organized as a deliberate, institutionalized, and well-financed business. Yet it cannot be reckoned a success. Where development has been most successful (e.g., East Asia), international aid and assistance from official or non-profit organizations has had little to do with it, and where assistance organizations have had their largest footprint (e.g., in Africa), success has been the least.

In most areas of organized human endeavour, learning takes place over the years even if there was much painful stumbling in the beginning. For instance, in the fields of medicine and public health, there are real discoveries as well as mistakes; genuine learning does take place, and it is cumulative. Other fields such as “management theory” seem to be constantly surfing with the latest fads; the “classics” are only the latest best-sellers in airport bookstores. Development assistance often seems to be more like “management theory” than an applied science.

One response to failing organizational effectiveness in business management or in development assistance is chasing ersatz “solutions” or fads that promise to quickly address long-standing problems or at least their symptoms.

How might we identify fads? Look at how development assistance organizations justify their continuing existence and budgets. The long term is too long-term; justification must come quickly. Any gardener knows that “successful” weeds are quick to establish themselves on the ground. In a similar manner, a development fad has to show quick results on the ground, results which can then be amplified through public relations activities couched in terms of the latest rhetoric to justify the work of the organization. Thus in development assistance, the fast-growing “weeds” will tend to choke the ground and crowd out the longer term developmental “crops.”

But doesn't learning take place? Over the course of time, there is indeed some “learning” but it is a kind of breathless pseudo-learning as one “best practice” fad after another is taken up and dropped. As each fad proves not to live up its hyped promise, it is quietly

abandoned in favour of the latest “solution”—another cycle in the hamster-wheel of fad-driven aid programmes.

The curious part of this “continuous learning” is the lack of memory; the organization is condemned to repeat its “glorious” past.

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. [Santayana, George 1962 (orig. 1922). *Reason in Common Sense*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Collier Books, p. 184]

There is something like this present-mindedness where “experience is not retained” in large technocratic organizations like the World Bank or IMF. Seeing the mistakes of the past is a double-edged sword - the two edges being learning and blame. Since avoiding blame is a paramount bureaucratic imperative, learning is also avoided as the mistakes of the past are quickly lost down the organizational “memory hole.” Who has time or inclination to dwell on possible mistakes of the past? Children are dying now!

But that is not the only reason why “experience is not retained” in a technocratic organization. There is a superficial view that science advances along a well-defined frontier so that knowledge of past theories and ideas is only of antiquarian interest. How could reading something that Albert Hirschman wrote more than a half century ago possibly have contemporary interest to the modern development researcher eager to stay on the frontiers of knowledge? “Science” marches on! All that was useful or valid in the older theories has been surely swept up and incorporated in the latest theories.

This is a common view in “development economics” and particularly in the large development bureaucracies such as the World Bank. Thus, intellectual life in the field is seen as keeping up with the latest econometric studies, e.g., randomized testing and impact evaluations, and digesting the latest best practice fads, e.g., social funds, free enterprise zones, microfinance, results-based aid, “Big Push” schemes in post-socialist economies or in Africa (or wherever Jeff Sachs is giving advice), labour migration/remittances, or anything described as a “Millennium” this or that. It is particularly interesting when cutting-edge thinkers in “management theory” and in “development economics” keep (re-)discovering the same things such as “performance-based pay” and “output-based aid.” Gee-whiz, why didn't someone think of that before?

It is quite daunting to try to follow the rush of “bold new initiatives” all described in breathless new rhetoric—like trying to drink from a fire hose. And it is all very “scientific” since all this new thinking surely represents the ever-advancing frontier in the science of development. In this manner, there is an all-too-modern version of Santayana's non-cumulative present-minded “savages” who do not study or retain the past.

Amidst this exciting march of science into the future, there is no room for backward-looking thinking that might discover uncanny similarities between the "bold new initiatives" (development fads) of today and the failed "bold new initiatives" of yesteryear.

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### **BEST PRACTICES FOR EQUITY AND EFFICIENCY**

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In this note we discuss three broad strategies to identify policies that promise to raise both equity and efficiency. All have been implemented in some system of instruction, and all have been subjected to rigorous research. None actually reduces total spending on instruction; they require additional effort and improved technologies, but in turn they promise that the returns to increased investments will be higher than those obtained with current methods of finance. As you will see, the strategies are linked and overlapping.

The three strategies are: 1) maximal use of "best practices" to increase learning outcomes; 2) increased use of relevant information by shifting decisions about allocation and utilization of resources to local instructional units, specifically schools; and 3) linkage of disbursement (payment) of funds to improved performance.

#### **Best Practices**

A "best practice" is defined as a methodology or technique that is believed to be more effective than others for a particular objective. This term enjoys great popularity and as a consequence there is no single, short list of best practices for instruction. The term "practices" includes every aspect of the organization and operation of a system of instruction that can be affected by policy, including structural characteristics (size, arrangement of grades); teacher recruitment and selection criteria; content and methods of teacher training; teacher assignment to grades and subjects; curriculum content and organization; instructional methods; classroom management; opportunities to learn; evaluation; instructional materials; rewards and punishments; and others. Lists of "best practices" are available for every level of education, from early childhood training to graduate education, and for types of education (for example, literacy training, vocational training, mathematics education, etc.).

Most of the lists of "best practices" are based on limited experience and not systematic, comparative research. We introduce the concept not to promote the efficacy of particular methods or techniques but rather to emphasize importance of careful analysis to identify which practices are in fact most effective.

#### **Production Function Studies**

A major source of lists of best practices is so-called production function research. The phrase "production function" is derived from the factory metaphor in which production

results from the combination of resources or inputs. Instruction is taken as a process of combining inputs, including students, to produce learning (knowledge, skills and values). As in industry, this perspective makes it possible to answer the question, What is the most cost-effective, or efficient, way to produce a unit of learning? Statistical analysis relates measures of variable inputs (for example, school characteristics, teacher characteristics, instructional materials, student and household characteristics) to measures of learning outcomes, for a sample of, say, schools. The results of the analysis specify how much of each input variable to use to maximize the score on the measure of learning (usually an achievement test), taking into account student and household characteristics. Then, using information about the cost of each input, one can determine the least expensive way to produce the most learning.

Production function studies have two characteristics that limit the generalizability of their findings. First, there has been little consistency in the input variables included. Second, the studies rely on measures of association rather than causality and therefore cannot identify causal mechanisms. It is possible, however, to extract general conclusions about "best practices". This has been done in two ways. The first approach treats all studies as equivalent in statistical value, and "sums up" the results, adding across the studies the number of times a given input variable is identified as having a significant impact on learning. A second approach uses statistical procedures to weight the results of the different studies so that they can be combined or displayed as a distribution. Illustrative of the inputs that often appear in the various summaries of production function studies are school size, class size, teacher education, teacher experience, student/teacher ratio, and teacher salary. Of these, teacher ability, student/teacher ratio (smaller is better) and teacher salary (higher is better) appear as important for learning more often than the others. Even for these variables, however, there are studies that report either no or opposing impacts. A "best practice" is therefore a "good bet" but not a guarantee that a given policy will be effective.

Should this research be used as a source of policy recommendations? There are several reasons why not. The method assumes that schools have the same objectives, that they compete with each other attempting to maximize learning outcomes, and that they have equal information about and access to the various inputs. We know, however, that schools (and students and their parents) vary in the importance they give to the cognitive learning measured on achievement tests. Some schools and parents value high test scores, others do not. Second, the method assumes that the "inputs" have a direct impact on learning outcomes (as they would in a factory setting). If in fact their impact is indirect, mediated by how teachers and students use the input (for example, does a teacher with few students use a different method of instruction than with many students?), then failure to include the mediating variable produces misleading results. Very few production function studies include measures of what actually takes place in classrooms. It is difficult and expensive to collect reliable information on teacher and student behaviour, and even harder to estimate variations in costs.

#### Case Studies

An alternative method for developing lists of "best practices" relies on close up study of the teaching and learning processes in systems and schools that have achieved outstanding learning outcomes. An early version of this approach used statistical analysis

to identify schools with levels of achievement much higher than would be expected given student backgrounds known to be correlated with low achievement. These effective schools were then visited to identify practices that explained the high achievement levels. The procedure has been broadened to include examples from all levels of education, including financial management. The method complements the production function approach by providing detailed recommendations for the process of implementation of improvements.

#### Expert Judgment

A third approach uses the so-called Delphi technique to develop a collective best judgment about the effectiveness and cost of various best practices. A panel of highly experienced researchers and practitioners is asked individually to estimate the likely impact and probable cost of a number of practices. Respondents are asked to justify their estimations when they differ from the modal judgment. Only those practices remain on the list for which there is eventual agreement. Because this method combines cost with effectiveness, the results can be more useful to policy makers.

It should be noted, however, that to date few studies on best practices have been replicated. There is no assurance, therefore, that they will be effective in other contexts. Like the practices derived from production function studies these lists do suggest actions that should be considered for improving the performance of a system or school, but they are not guaranteed solutions.

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### UNIVERSALISM VERSUS LOCALISM: WHERE DOES 'BEST PRACTICE' BELONG?

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#### Keyword

'Best practice' concept, Universalism, Localism

#### Summary

This short article believes that while tracing the where and how of the 'best practice' concept could be enlightening, it could not be necessarily liberating. Conversely, trying to understand what it means and how it is used in education circles could be liberating. The former issues, it argues, are secondary while the latter are primary.

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'Best practice' whether it originates in common sense, logical armchair thinking or systematic empirical inquiry and evidenced by 'best results' and whether such epistemologies were carried out on earth, from outer space or an imaginary world appears to correspond more with localism and less with universalism. This short article believes that while tracing the where and how of the 'best practice' concept could be enlightening, it could not be necessarily liberating. Conversely, trying to understand what it means and how it is used in education circles could be liberating. The former issues, in

my opinion, are secondary while the latter are primary. In this article the primary issues are discussed. The literature considered most critical in addressing issues related to 'best practice' is used to interrogate the utility of the concept in early childhood education and care.

'Best practice' as used in education is simply what is considered the most successful model of doing things. It is born when the application of a specific model hinged on a particular philosophical and theoretical stance has provided 'best results'. One of the most important things in trying to understand this concept is to realise that there are many 'best practices', not just one. The reason for this is that every society constantly struggles to educate its young ones using different approaches suited to specific socio-cultural contexts. In the process, some of these approaches prove 'best' at least in the eyes of the beholder to become other 'best practices'. They could be documented or not documented. They could have come from common sense, logical armchair thinking or systematic empirical investigations. Hence, whoever tries to trace the origin of the 'best practice' concept should be prepared to provide an account of other 'best practices' that exist in the world or admit that there could be other 'best practices'. For this reason, I decided to concentrate on the meaning and utility of this concept only.

There is no single 'best practice' that could be claimed to be sensitive to all socio-cultural differences in the world. Whether carried out on earth, from the outer space or imaginary world it cannot escape from that reality. So, what is the utility value of this concept? What best corresponds to it: universalism or localism? Could it be both?

The most critical attack against localism comes from Craig (2007). Craig (2007, p. 131-136) argues for standardised knowledge, skills and technology on the premise that "learning is ubiquitous unless blocked", "biology (brains and bodies) directs the course of learning" [and that] "context exploits and/or limits our plasticity". Arguing along this line, Craig (2007) goes on to say that every human being is predisposed to learn through engagement in unfamiliar cognitive tasks even in unfamiliar cultural contexts. While appreciating the role of culture for individual differences in intelligence, interests and personality, Craig (2007, p. 127) views cultural relativism as restricting change and compares it to the 'apartheid' policy in South Africa that stressed "separate development for different people" [emphasis in original]. Surprised by the way so many people orchestrate cultural relativism, Craig (2007, p. 126) argues,

It is therefore strange that so much ink (and blood) is spilled on trying to prevent change. More particularly, demands for relevance in education (i.e. to bring familiar tasks to the classroom), relativism about knowledge (i.e. to underline the strong relationship between context and belief), and fears about domination of one set of beliefs over another in a market place of skills exchange, seem to go against our natural abilities to change. They also seem to me to be attempts to lock people into their cultural posts.

Ryan and Grieshaber (2005) use the postmodern views of knowledge, power and subjectivity to interrogate the utility of 'best practice'. They advocate localism in early childhood education. In a sub-section entitled situating knowledge, they strongly argue

that knowledge is never ahistorical and value-free. They encourage student teachers to be critical about the contexts in which 'best practice' is located:

Through engagement with the differing contexts that have both shaped or are shaping the current knowledge base, students begin to get a sense that *prescribed practices* and theories are only partial stories or interpretations of phenomena. Although these ideas may have empirical warrant, they are nonetheless not neutral or objective (p.37) [emphasis added].

The cultural relativism for fear about one set of belief dominating over others and the prescribed practices presented above need a discussion. In my opinion, cultural relativism promotes creativity while universalism advocated by Craig (2007) could be the antithesis of it. Once, a particular approach is labeled as 'best practice' and orchestrated for wide dissemination it tends to slow local efforts to do the same thing but in different ways. Although one could argue that 'best practice' is not 'prescribed practice' because it could be adapted to suit local conditions, it still diverts the goal of looking for local other ways of doing things and canonising them so as to ultimately become one of the 'best practices'. Otherwise, the Reggio Emilia approach which is so unique to Italy and currently drawing the world's attention would have not emerged.

'Best practice' is essential because it provides us with the other way of doing things after we have modified them. It is more local than universal. However, the primary goal in education should be to encourage the emergence of other 'best practices'.

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### THREE ILL-CONSIDERED ASSUMPTIONS IN “BEST PRACTICE IN EDUCATION AND TRAINING”

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#### Keywords

‘best practice’, educational development, trans-contextual efficacy, trans-cultural normativity

#### Summary

This article considers three assumptions frequently associated with the claim that ‘established best practice’ can and should be implemented in local development contexts, with a view to encouraging those of us in the field of international educational development to tread a little more cautiously.

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My aim in this short response to the question in “Best Practice in Education and Training: hype or hope?” is to consider a little more critically three of the assumptions frequently associated with the claim that ‘established best practice’ can and should be implemented in local development contexts.

The claim assumes first that there is indeed an established best practice in education and training. In its stronger form, it would be a claim of best practice universally. That ‘best practice’ may frequently have been developed in ‘the West’ or ‘the North’ (depending on the metaphor one chooses), or it may have been developed in developing world contexts, say, through experience gained from one or more educational development programmes. Opponents of the ‘best practice’ thesis might argue that even if best practice could be established in one economic, political, social or cultural context, it is not possible for that particular ideal to have transcultural normative reach or practical traction in different contexts for the simple reason that it originated locally. In their view, only ‘best practices’ that originated universally, or from a ‘God’s eye-view’, would have trans-contextual efficacy and normative reach – and since there is no ‘universal’ origin, no ‘God’s eye-view’ (particularly in a world that has adopted the scepticism of the postmodern turn), no trans-contextual efficacy or normativity is possible. Defendants of the ‘best practice’ thesis, on the other hand, would argue that just because a particular practice or set of norms originated locally, there is no reason to believe that that practice cannot have normative and practical traction across contexts. Here the defendants of the ‘best practice’ thesis are right: there is no reason why we need a view from nowhere to establish a universal best practice. (I have made this argument more fully in Mason [2005].

This debate still, however, begs the question whether there can ever be an evidence-based best practice in education and training. The frequent use of the qualifier, “evidence-based”, employed to strengthen the claim to ‘best’ practice, invites consideration of a deeper question to do with the nature of knowledge: is there an epistemology or methodology in the social sciences that would enable us to inform

future practice by established research outcomes? In his Preface, *On the Non-Existence of Scientific Method* (1983), Karl Popper famously claimed,

As a rule, I begin my lectures on Scientific Method by telling my students that scientific method does not exist and I ought to know, having been, for a time at least, the one and only professor of this non-existent subject within the British Commonwealth ... [M]y subject does not exist because ... there are only problems, and the urge to solve them.

In John Dewey's pragmatic epistemology, evidence provides us not with rules for future action, but merely with hypotheses for intelligent problem solving. There is obviously a substantial epistemological argument supporting this conclusion, but the constraints of space prevent further elucidation of it here. Interested readers could consult Dewey's (1938) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. If, as Gert Biesta (2007, p. 17)) interprets Dewey's conclusion,

we want an epistemology that is practical enough to understand how knowledge can support practice, we have to concede that the knowledge available through research is not about what works and will work, but about what has worked in the past.

We can, in other words, use this knowledge only to undertake further intelligent action. We cannot use it as a blueprint for 'best practice'.

Beyond these epistemological and methodological issues, there is a further question about whether there is or can ever be an established 'best practice' in education and training. The notion of a 'best practice' assumes, after all, a global or universal best. From a rather too shallow sceptical perspective, the answer to this question would be negative: this critic would claim that we would be naïve in assuming even the possibility of one 'best practice'. But such scepticism is perhaps not sufficiently well considered. It's a bit of a cheap shot. The answer to this question should not be sought in a choice between yes and no, but is best located on a continuum, somewhere between the opposing positive and negative poles. The answer would probably tend towards the positive (i.e., yes, it is possible to identify some ideals of 'best practice') if we were seeking ideals that were described at a fairly general level. Most would, after all, agree with the ideals, for example, that "Best practice assumes the existence and enforcement of procedures to minimize corruption in any educational development work", or, "Any educational development work should aim to maximize the life chances of those most at risk in the prevailing context", or, "Teaching or training for learning by induction, from experiences familiar to the learner, is more likely to enhance concept formation and skills development than a deductively structured pedagogy". These are sufficiently general claims as to be widely generalizable.

But any answer to the question whether a universally applicable set of best practices can be identified would tend towards the negative if we were seeking ideals that could be described to a high degree of specificity. What, for example, is meant by "maximizing the life chances of those most at risk in the prevailing context"? Would it mean helping them, in a Freirean sense, to develop critical reasoning skills and a sceptical orientation

to the unequal distributions of power, wealth and opportunities in their society? Or would it mean helping them to acquire the skills to secure a job? And how would either of these best be achieved? Second, who would be construed to be “most at risk”? Would they be rurally located girls of an ethnic minority, mired in structural poverty? And how would they best be helped? By building infrastructure (roads, electricity grids, piped water) for economic and social development, or by building schools and places of sanctuary? Context, as Michael Crossley and Keith Watson (2003) claim, matters. Universally applicable best practices might, in sum, be described at high levels of generality, but might not be so easily set down at the levels of specificity normally required to gain significant traction at the practical level.

This situating of the answer to the question about the very possibility of a universal best practice on a continuum leads to a consideration of the second assumption made in the claim that ‘established best practice’ can and should be implemented in a local development context: the assumption that such practices *can* be transferred across and implemented in different contexts. In one sense, we have already considered that assumption: context matters. Fairly abstracted ideals of best practice might well be universal, but whether practices described at a high level of specificity can be readily implemented in new contexts is another question. Detailed descriptions of best practices will inevitably be more sensitive to and dependent on context than will more general descriptions. Crossley and Watson provide numerous examples in their book, *Comparative and International Research in Education*, in support of their oft-made caution about

the importance of cultural and contextual sensitivities in both educational research and educational development. Studies of sustainable educational reform or sustainable national development – perhaps focused on successful [‘best’] practice – could benefit greatly from more in-depth cross-cultural analyses, enhanced reflexivity and a more critical and culturally informed [perspective] (2003, p. 81).

In some respects, however, this discussion of the second assumption, that ‘best’ practices *can* be transferred across and implemented in different contexts, is the least interesting of the debates that arise from a critical consideration of the three assumptions I discuss here. It is a debate that is largely able to be settled empirically. What is perhaps more interesting are the questions underlying the third assumption, that ‘best practices’ *should* be implemented in different, local development contexts. An argument against this thesis arises from one of the difficulties of a discourse of evidence-based ‘best practice’: that the discourse implies an ‘applied science’ of professionalism that rather too easily precludes the political engagement and commitment which theorists in the traditions of both critical theory (from Arendt and Freire to Habermas) and post-structuralism (such as Foucault or Baudrillard) would argue is necessary for change. The technician orientation associated with the discourse of evidence-based ‘best practice’ promises, as Maggie Maclure (2003) has suggested, to relieve local actors of the responsibility of engaging in the risky, political and imaginative efforts necessary to make and remake their realities.

Apart from removing the political responsibility for finding appropriate procedures and solutions from local actors, it can be argued that the transplanting of 'best practice' from elsewhere also removes from those actors any sense of moral responsibility for the outcomes that follow the implementation of somebody else's 'best practice'. Biesta (2007) situates this issue in a tension between scientific and democratic control over educational practice and research. He draws on Dewey's pragmatism to conclude that it's not only about ascertaining the most effective ways to achieve certain educational or development ends. It's also about the desirability of the ends themselves, an inquiry which extends beyond scientific researchers to the community as a whole.

As Biesta remarks,

Evidence-based practice provides a framework for understanding the role of research in educational practice that not only restricts the scope of decision making to questions about effectivity and effectiveness but that also restricts the opportunities for participation in educational decision making. ... [I]t is disappointing, to say the least, that [almost] the whole discussion about evidence-based practice is focused [predominantly] on technical questions – questions about “what works” – while forgetting the need for critical inquiry into normative and political questions about what is educationally desirable (2007, pp. 6, 21).

There is of course almost no gainsaying the efficacy of practices appropriately based on good science. But there is also no gainsaying the efficacy (and not just the moral importance) of democratic local participation in the process. The discourse of evidence-based 'best practice', it can be argued, seduces local participants rather too quickly into believing that they have a secure foundation for the policy or practice they're about to implement. This can encourage a passive reliance on the 'international expert' and his (usually his) 'best practice'. Local participants are thus reduced to the status of observers, who would naturally fail to take both moral and practical responsibility for the successful implementation of the strategy, for its effectiveness and outcomes. There is a certain disempowerment in the view that here we have a fail-safe recipe, an established 'best practice' based on 'international evidence', so we can simply rely on it. Any blunders and it's the recipe's fault, or that of the chef in the guise of the international expert. It's not ours. Neither the fault, nor the recipe.

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## INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE: 'BEST PRACTICE' AND ETERNAL DILEMMAS OF PRACTICAL ACTION

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### Keywords

International humanitarian assistance, Best practice

### Summary

'How to' manuals of 'best practice'(BP) iterate unproblematic 'tools' without the tears of either philosophy or politics, and are devoid too, while focusing on organizations and resources, of institutional and discourse analysis. Nevertheless, such BP manuals have their uses for trainers and trainees; but there are some caveats.

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The 'how to' manuals of 'best practice' (BP) that I have in mind iterate unproblematic 'tools' without the tears of either philosophy or politics, and are devoid too, while focusing on organizations and resources, of institutional and discourse analysis. Nevertheless, such BP manuals have their uses for trainers and trainees for example in international aid and other public management fields (aid field managers of various kinds tend to deny they – and certain codes of conduct - are of value in their daily work). But some BP efforts too are much less useful for pedagogical purposes than others. Indeed similarly *that* choice morsel of fortune-cookie comment (to repeat it, how captured by our nuggets of wisdom we all are!) itself scarcely means much whether it is about the enjoined 'good habits' of responsible behaviour themselves or 'clear thinking' about them.

But there are some caveats. In the first place how seriously BP is worth taking could all depend on whether at least it would bring strategy in, as well as policy, programme and project, while leaving so much else out.

The world of international aid – ‘Aidland’ - spawns many ‘guidance’ materials. Some have to do with humanitarian emergency relief. Others are about economic development, or governance, or peacebuilding (with typically all confused together in the worst of what is self-labeled ‘do no harm’ – a handy cop-out if ever there were one for international aid agencies who ought rather to go to ‘do some good’). That commissioned and published by the Development Aid Committee of the OECD on evaluation and validation tends to be strong on *projects*, weak on *policies*. On *programmes* of projects (ie. same theme or same sector collections or ‘palettes’ of projects) on the other hand, mostly there is only ‘work in progress’; on the *strategies* of policies (ie. the priority-setting and leadership that – along with programme and project - are required for the objectives of policy to have any chance of being attained) matters are mostly ‘in deficit’.

In fact, you’ll find that on ‘strategy evaluation’ there is no entry at all in the DAC/OECD *vade mecum* on kinds or types of evaluation. And for once google-ing didn’t help much when I went there. Is there any readily available well developed BP on ‘strategy evaluation’ for aid studies *anywhere* that, first, responsibly compares and contrasts strategy with policy, programme and project evaluation, and then goes on to tell ‘how to’ do it? It seems not.

The reasons for such paucity, where evaluation is approached as management by another means, could be twofold. First, for international aid as other public provision management, critical and realistic programme and project evaluation tends to be more (politically and otherwise including philosophically and ethically) shall we say amenable than either policy or strategy when it comes actually to undertaking such assessment. Second, the same applies to the commissioning of policy and strategy inquiries as to actually carrying them out: management doesn’t out-source to a point where its hand that feeds the dog might be bitten off.

The crux for these two pages is then: where BP overlooks strategy – or rather allows it to be covered over in an optic which focuses only on policy, programme and project or some combination of these – it falls short of even mentioning, let alone pondering and probing, the eternal dilemmas of practical action (i.e. the conundrums such as recognizing where, also if you are lucky how, compromise is not the enemy of the best). Thus in what sense if any can the received BP about international humanitarian and other aid at least claim to be about actual practice at all so long as it doesn’t address the dilemmas we live and work with and through, and over and under, in our bearable heaviness of being?

Where there are such recurring, because they are eternal, dilemmas of practical action, along with contradictions, paradoxes and other ironies of that ilk, it is not BP tools and techniques, but practical philosophy, ethics and politics, that have more to offer. ‘Tools language’ is about ‘mechanisms’ and a physics/mechanics sort of instrumental causality. It privileges ‘engineering’ and the quantitative, and gets away with this by leaving the plane of institutions, discourse, dialogue and negotiation out in the cold, appearing to deem it negligible. Tools language can get you into and, if you are lucky out again from black boxes, but policy and strategy boxes – where, that is, either is boxed at all – are more likely to be purple like Pandora’s not black.

In the second place - but that's it folks, my space is up, and no room for any scholarly apparatus either!

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### MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES: REFORMULATING BEST PRACTICES

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#### Keywords

Latin America, Best practice

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No solid theory of innovation, advanced from the Latin American viewpoint, underpins the neo-liberal educational-reform movements which, in the nineties, hoisted the flag of innovation, taking schools as their main arena of action. Educational researchers have warned us that these school-centered reforms have not resulted in the desired transformation, since they focus on “applying” innovation as an end in itself, without taking all its dimensions and consequences - above all in the labour and organizational spheres - into account. Like an unfulfilled promise, an embryonic theory, emerging from Latin America, can be glimpsed - consisting in disjointed reflections defining innovation as a cultural practice, and assigning value to the singularity of experience and the decisive role played by context - of which social and political relevance, the fomenting of social-participation processes, and an acknowledgement of the changes wrought by innovation when applied at the local level, and of its ability to transform practice, form a part (Blanco & Messina, 2000). A review of historical developments reveals that the concept of “innovation” was not introduced into the educational context until the sixties. Classic authors on the topic reassert the idea that a *sine qua non* of innovation is the extent to which it can be generalized and replicated to suit other realities (Havelock and Huberman, 1973). However, at the global level, the theory of innovation has undergone transformation, since the seventies, so as to incorporate conceptualizations that eschew the idea of associating validity with sustainability and generalizability and, on the contrary, attribute the value of innovation to the singular nature of each experience. Moreover, such theories link innovation to research processes and value it to the extent that it helps to foster quality and equity in education. Likewise, they acknowledge that the connection between knowledge and power and the lack of equal educational opportunity affect innovation.

The innovations implemented by governments in the region, based on the human-capital concept, have paid lip service to the arguments that consider educational quality and equity to be indispensable preconditions for countries to become economically

competitive, while resulting in practices that, far from doing away with educational inequality, have given rise to homogenizing programmes that tend to discourage diversity. Such innovations are posited as a local “response” or an “application” of pre-established centralized policies, and consist of projects that are standardized by requiring all proposals to fit into a framework that seeks both to impose a common *modus operandi* and to legitimize a single line of thought.

Faced with this reality, other authors have opted to create a new category called “*best practices*”, which alludes to practice as a basis for knowledge, and, above all, to certain educational practices that have been classified as “exemplary” and can be identified in accordance with certain criteria such as: contextual relevance, the degree of systematicity and effectiveness, explicit role definition, the existence of rules to be followed and of effective leadership that fosters the participation of the various people or entities involved, and educational quality and equity as a guiding principle. Since “*best practices*”, understood as practices that are under siege from bureaucrats or unions, are always perceived as learning opportunities, one of the main tenets of the authors who came up with the said concept has pertained to sharing such practices so that others can learn from them. Unlike the concept of innovation, which gave rise to successive reformulations, the concept of “*best practices*” is defined “by inference” or casuistically, based on the identification and description of particular experiences. Even though the advent of the aforesaid concept of “*best practices*” reflects a commitment to citizens’ participation in education, the interest in results -above all, results categorized as “successful” or effective- subsists, as does the criterion that such results should, at least to some extent, be reproducible. It is no less true that the “*best practices*” concept has fuzzy boundaries, is elusive, and emphasizes “educational effects” while passing over the relationship between knowledge and power, due to its use of an evaluative concept (“*best*”) that is, in reality, complex and open to questioning, being reminiscent of the liberal myth that education is “a thing in itself”, and, moreover, “a good thing”.

Reflection on the theory of innovation and the concept of best practices leads us to believe that the concept of “meaningful experiences” is more open and more promising. As in the case of best practices, the latter concept is not “user-friendly”. However, referring to experience rather than practice allows us to acknowledge the importance of reflecting upon experience, since, without such reflection, practice turns into mimesis. This concept reminds us that experience is always subjective, always mediated by the self; likewise, the said concept makes it clear that experience is not only what happens to us, but **what we think about what happens to us** – i.e. the account given by a subject within a context. Furthermore, thinking in terms of experience obliges us to acknowledge that experience has become an impossible phenomenon, since contemporary society deprives us of singular experiences capable of transforming us, obliging us to engage in meaningless, stereotyped activities and subjecting us to experience as a burden, and to experiences so painful that those who go through them are left empty and devoid of any experience whatsoever (Benjamín, 1991).

In accordance with Larrosa (2007), we posit the concept of “experience” in order to explore its potential in the area of pedagogy, in the belief that we urgently need to formulate a new concept of education as experience-based, acknowledging that it is unclassifiable *per se*, and freeing it from all pretensions of objectivity and universality, from all arrogant references to expert knowledge, and from all fetishisms. While traditional science captures and reduces experience - jumping, too fast, to concepts - Larrosa’s proposal make experience a part of the flux of life. In traditional research, experience becomes “experiment”, seeking to control the dimensions of reality, which become “variable” - i.e. measurable and observable attributes- while, on the contrary, by recognizing that our experience is both a draining of experience and an acknowledgment that our experience has become impoverished we are able to start afresh. At this point in time, we need to realize that we live in a whirlpool of facts that causes us to react like automata, repeating existing practices. It is important that we in the field of education, besieged by indices, criteria and results, take stock of what is happening and of what people think about what happens to them, neither seeking to convert this awareness into categories and sub-categories nor breaking everything up into its parts or components, but just allowing the said experiences to happen to us and be converted into a narrative, and then expressing it.

*“Meaningfulness”* has to do with the satisfying of many different needs, with commitment to complex contexts and realities, and with the feeling that all those subjected to education are participants. It has to do with the very meaning of experience in terms of the links set up, with the denaturalization of official knowledge, with the social relationships produced, with the way of facing adversities and challenges, with innovation *per se* and the positing of alternative models, with the personal and collective processes unleashed in the participants, with the degree of solidarity, and with the very history of the program. *“Meaningful experiences”* are those that leave something behind in those who take part in them because they are eloquent in what they have to say, because they speak of educational possibility and of manifold alternatives, and because they offer answers and bring education closer to people. They are singular experiences in a world that tends towards homogeneity and the obliteration of the subjective, in which experience constitutes a burden rather than a heritage.

A “meaningful experience” in education is one that doubts itself, deconstructs the official account of experience and builds another one that is inter-subjective and critical. This reflective process leads “readers” to think about their own practice, where they see themselves reflected and are able to learn to the extent that they are prepared to risk not being tied to a given world vision. Significant experiences permit radical reflection, an untrammelled look at the knowledge-power equation, and an extension of the boundaries themselves. In short, significant experience allows us to reassert the idea that the world is still a habitable place.

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**BEST PRACTICE IN SKILLS  
DEVELOPMENT AND  
ENTERPRISE**

## MICROFINANCE AS BEST PRACTICE FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES?

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### Keywords

Microfinance, Developing countries, the poor, Best practice

### Summary

This article questions whether microfinance programmes are the sort of assistance that builds self-reliance rather than dependency, or that builds capacity rather than prolongs incapacity. It argues that the rush to do good with pre-packaged and easily-installed microfinance programmes may provide some heart-warming short-term poverty relief but it seems to have little or no developmental impact.

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Is microfinance a best practice to “help the poor”? Microfinance (MF) programmes are usually in fact lending-led (as opposed to savings-led) programmes that can be “installed” by development organizations using seemingly off-the-shelf “best-practice” models and external finance. Not only is sustainability an issue, there is an issue as to whether or not that sort of development assistance *should* be sustained. Is that the sort of assistance that builds self-reliance rather than dependency that builds capacity rather than prolongs incapacity?

While it is a delightful fantasy, there unfortunately seems to be little basis in fact to assume in the developed or developing world that poor people—who (practically by definition) have trouble getting and/or holding a job—have the necessary entrepreneurial knowledge, skills, and opportunities to *start* businesses if only they had access to external finance. Indeed, it is the micro-version of the much-discredited view of the “development banking community” (e.g., the World Bank and the regional development banks) that external finance is the key to development in poor countries.

In the developing world (and in the depressed parts of the developed world), donor-funded organizations are thick upon the ground to “help the poor.” Instead of really helping the poor to become the agents or doers of their own development, the poor are seen as the clients and customers of the multitude of externally funded organizations with the ostensible purpose to deliver services—such as microfinance lending services—to the poor.

For example, one might consider a recent survey and prognosis [Rhyne, Elizabeth and Maria Otero 2006. *Microfinance through the Next Decade: Visioning the Who, What, Where, When and How*. Boston: ACCION International] of the MF field commissioned by the Global Microcredit Summit 2006 and written by two leading practitioners based on comprehensive statistics and dozens of interviews with microfinance leaders. The striking thing about this excellent document is that it is entirely framed in terms of the “microfinance industry” as “suppliers of financial services to the poor.” There is no hint that this might have anything to do with the collective agency of poor people’s

movements; it is all about better serving the poor as the customers and clientele of the microfinance industry. It is as if one surveyed the labour movement and took it for granted that the purpose of labour unions was to provide various services to workers such as access to finance (credit unions and now credit cards), cheaper group rates for health insurance, better retirement plans, and the like—all without any hint that the labour movement might have (at least historically) something to do with the collective agency of employees to “change the system.”

In contrast, a savings-based credit cooperative (or “credit union” as another type of union) is an organizational form by which large numbers of people, each with small savings, can pool their savings together to finance non-trivial business opportunities (in addition to some consumption-oriented lending). There are many ways that donors could subtly help to catalyze and facilitate the development of savings-based credit cooperatives. One way is to foster and partially fund up-stream organizations whose mission is to catalyze and help animators organize savings cooperatives and to help those cooperatives learn on a peer-to-peer basis from each other about propagating the examples and about overcoming the obstacles they face. Another way is to promote partial insurance schemes for small depositors in credit cooperatives so that the fear of losses through organizational or financial collapse will not paralyze individuals from becoming involved in such a collective activity. In any case, the idea is to foster and catalyze the collective agency of poor people to change their own circumstances, not to simply have better services delivered to them as passive customers and clients.

Genuine development assistance, where the helpers do not crowd out and undercut the agency of the doers, is a slow, subtle, and painstaking process. Yet various leaders of development assistance agencies, assorted well-meaning celebrities, and a few publicity-seeking academics are constantly badgering the public, the political leaders, and the donors to “do more” to help the poor and to “do it quickly” because things are getting worse. “Children are dying!” Thus donors and the organizations they fund are “in a rush to do good”—which accounts for much of the “popularity” and “success” of installing off-the-shelf loan-led microfinance programmes.

Clear thinking about microfinance also requires getting beyond the carefully selected stylized stories about outlier individuals who are then treated as the norm. The activities of microfinance organizations are described as funding “entrepreneurship” by the poor when the bulk of loans seem to be better described as consumption smoothing. This includes bulk consumption expenditures on things that cannot otherwise be purchased on commercial credit as well as the various family crises that might otherwise force a family into the embrace of the village money-lender. The point is not that these goals are unworthy but that they bear little relationship to the development-oriented story-line of “funding entrepreneurship by the poor.”

In the minority of cases where some business activity is being individually funded, it will often be an activity with little or no barriers to entry; so many micro-borrowers may simply end up in cut-throat competition with each other. For instance, one nanobusiness is to buy a spice or staple in some bulk and then to repackage it in small amounts so that other poor people can afford it. Such microbusinesses are easily imitated, have little

if any potential for growth and diversification, and do not address the more fundamental organizational obstacles to the development of small and medium-sized firms.

The rush to do good with pre-packaged and easily-installed microfinance programs may provide some heart-warming short-term poverty relief but it seems to have little or no developmental impact.

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### **NAMIBIA: A BALANCED APPROACH TO TVET TRAINING**

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#### **Keywords**

TVET, Namibia, Best practice

#### **Summary**

This article argues that Namibia is at the forefront in the region in the development of a new TVET system comprised of a qualifications framework, unit standards, curriculum and training materials.

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Namibia has embarked on several policies and initiatives for integrated and sustainable local, regional and national social and economic development. Vision 2030, National Development Plans and regional development plans provide a guide for the overall national comprehensive master plan, which encompasses the restructuring of the TVET system. Namibia is reforming its technical and vocational education system to make it more effective and accessible to disadvantaged sectors of society, which in turn will foster the development of a skilled workforce for both modern industry and contribute to growth of self employment and the informal and small and medium enterprise (SME) sectors of the economy.

Until recently the vocational training system in Namibia was not well suited to the learners utilising the system as it took for granted the time that people had to dedicate to training and also the level of schooling that learners would have prior to commencing vocational training. It was also isolated from the market needs of the private sector.

The then Minister of Education,<sup>10</sup> now Prime Minister, Nahas Angula, realised that a different approach to formal vocational and technical training for modern industry and the SME sector was required, one that recognised the social, economic and political realities of both individuals and the private sector in Southern Africa. The Ministry of Education began the process of establishing the Namibia Training Authority (NTA) to remodel the vocational training structure and curriculum to ensure its relevance, efficiency and quality. For the past two years the Namibia Training Authority has led the

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<sup>10</sup> A regular Norrag member for many years, as Minister of Education.

process of improving TVET through the development of a competency-based system (CBET) that is suited to the needs of both the private sector and to individuals as it is modular in structure, provides for flexible entry and exit, allows recognition of prior learning (RPL) and recognition of current competencies (RCC) and allows training programmes of varying duration.

Whereas in most countries national agencies develop only unit standards while leaving the development of curriculum and training materials to individual institutions, in Namibia it was quickly realised that the development of curriculum, training materials and delivery guides based on the new CBET system could not be left to individual training centres as they lacked the capacity to fill that role and instructional staff lacked knowledge of the new system. The NTA found it could greatly support the vocational training centres by producing curriculum, training materials and delivery guides for instructors as there were incredibly limited resources of this kind in the (vocational training centres) VTCs. The training material that was present was out of date and written in a technical language that was not well suited to learners from disadvantaged segments of society who are likely to possess a low level of basic education, have low literacy and/or speak English as a second language. When learners were surveyed it was found that many of them undertook vocational training because they were intimidated by the formal maths and science requirements of other streams of studying. As a consequence the NTA undertook the process of developing training manuals in simple language with many pictures and diagrams that are easily accessible to all vocational learners and can actually be used a platform for distance study. The NTA's approach also responded to learners with difficulties in math and science by embedding requisite math and science skills for a field of study within the skills training curriculum.

The NTA found that the quality of instruction in the vocational training centres could be enriched by the development of delivery guides to assist instructors in teaching with the new CBET system. The delivery guides help to compensate for instructors with limited pedagogical and technical experience which is common in developing countries such as Namibia.

Throughout the process of developing unit standards and curriculum the NTA conducts consultations with the private sector to ensure that there is no longer a gap between vocational skills training and skills required in the working world.

The Prime Minister has also led the drive for training for the development and growth of self-employment and the informal and SME sectors of the economy. Namibia's Community Skill Development Centres (COSDECs) have been at the forefront of the technical and vocational training among the most disadvantaged segments of the population. By introducing a research based approach to curriculum development, the COSDECs have used local market assessment and tracer studies to develop training programmes that are reflective of the real market opportunities available to their learners, as well as the areas that are most compatible with the target group. The COSDECs have benefited from this information and diversified to implement training in both long and short course formats, with different skill and product focuses. To strengthen the potential for successful self-employment in formal and informal sectors, the COSDECs have also adopted a project focus in their practical skills training. As they

develop technical skills, learners also learn product design and specification, production planning, costing and pricing, quality control, and marketing. With the introduction of “incubation” or “production” units and SME service centres in 2007, the COSDECs will be further supporting entrepreneurial development and increasing the impact of TVET on the development of the Namibian economy.

Notwithstanding the small population and limited resources Namibia is at the forefront in the region in the development of a new TVET system comprised of a qualifications framework, unit standards, curriculum and training materials. By balancing skills training for modern industry and the informal SME sector and using a unique practical approach to ensure that the TVET system is effective and accessible for both learners and the private sector the country, Namibia is an example of how education reform can contribute to economic development in Southern Africa.

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### FORMALIZING THE INFORMAL ECONOMY: BEST PRACTICES?

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#### Keywords

Formalizing informal economy, Best practice

#### Summary

This article argues that efforts to formalize the informal economy often involve the coming together of multiple forms of ‘best practice’. It notes that the key to formalizing the informal economy will be to create incentives for those operating informally to see the value of becoming formal. One way to formalize the informal economy may be to informalize formal structures.

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What does formalizing the informal economy mean? Is it the best way forward (a best practice)? And, if so, for whom is it best practice? In what ways is it best practice? And how feasible is this best practice anyway?

There are many aspects of the informal economy that policy makers and development agencies are keen to formalize or, to put it another way, to move into “the economic and social mainstream”. Main areas where formalization is promoted include: employment policies; basic education and vocational training; occupational safety and health; social protection; access to critical resources; dialogue and representation.

In effect, efforts to formalize the informal economy often involve the coming together of multiple forms of ‘best practice’; best practice in microfinance, best practice in formalizing informal training (including best practice in skills recognition), best practice in reforming formal skills training for the informal economy, best practice in formalizing informal trade and community associations, best practice in formalizing informal social protection, in formalizing land rights and so on...

For example, since the mid-1990s there is a great deal of interest in formalizing informal apprenticeships in developing countries. There have been numerous projects and programmes that have, with mixed success, put in place public policies addressing formalization or facilitating the transition; linked formal training institutions and informal training systems; set up formal recognition and certification of skills acquired in informal apprenticeships; or worked with informal sector associations in formalizing informal training systems. There have been a number of useful lessons learned in the process (Palmer, 2007), though some lessons appear to have very short life-spans as institutional memories fade fast (see also Ellerman, this issue, 'Best Practice Development Fads 101'). With regard to formalizing recognition and certification of skills acquired in the informal economy, some countries (e.g. Ghana) are attempting to use the 'best-practice' of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs). However, incorporating skills acquired informally through apprenticeships into an NQF may prove to be too big a task for most developing countries (Palmer, 2007) (see also McGrath, this issue, 'Lessons from Qualifications Framework Experience').

While there are many areas of the informal economy where formalization can be promoted, for many policy makers in developing countries, however, formalizing the informal economy – in the short term at least – simply refers to formalizing informal ventures in order for them to pay taxes and get licenses (and pay the associated fees); a desirable outcome for the public purse perhaps, but hardly an incentive for the (informal) private pocket to formalize. While this might be 'best practice' for the government (e.g. they will increase their tax base), from the perspective of informal micro-enterprises it certainly is not!

The key to moving informal ventures into the economic and social mainstream will be to create incentives for those operating informally to see the value of becoming formal; in other words, to create an environment in which the benefits of formalizing outweigh the costs of remaining informal. Necessary incentives and other mechanisms making formalization more affordable and appealing to informal economy workers and economic units need to be created (de Medina, 2006). In doing this, informal ventures are more likely to voluntarily opt to formalize (Nelson and de Bruijn, 2005), and governments will have to expend less resources in enforcing formalization.

Such incentives for informal enterprises formalizing might include improvements in the accessibility of micro-finance, improvements in labour standards and legislation, social protection (de Medina, 2006) and worker benefits, secure property rights, stronger and more representative informal sector associations that can add the voice of informal workers to the policy process [1]. Policies and legal frameworks facilitating appropriate formalization need to be developed and, more crucially, implemented (de Medina, 2006). Opportunities for productivity and market enhancement need to be generated (ibid.). The costs of formalizing – in both time and money – should be kept to an absolute minimum and procedures should be greatly streamlined and simplified. For formalization of informal ventures to occur, such incentives need to be in place. In most developing countries, however, formal policies and legislation remains very much disabling for micro- and small enterprises (MSEs). In other words, the wider economic and social environment is failing to provide the incentives required for formalization.

There needs to be action at the macro, meso and micro levels to address this issue. At the macro-level, policies concerning labour standards and legislation, social protection and worker benefits, property rights and social dialogue need to be made more pro-poor and pro-MSE in general. At the meso and micro levels, public and private education and skills development, and financial and business development services (BDS) need to approach the delivery of their interventions in more innovative ways. One way of doing this is to informalise formal support structures aimed at MSEs; to make, in other words, formal support structures less formal. By learning from the existing informal providers, formal services might be better placed to reach informal MSEs more effectively. One *potentially* useful approach (a best practice?) is highlighted by the case of mobile bankers in Ghana. In some districts in Ghana, rural banks have set up 'mobile banking' – a daily 'door-step' financial service modeled on the traditional door-to-door money collectors. Rural bank collectors go out every morning into the community and collect savings from clients, returning to the bank in the afternoon to deposit the money. The mobile banker also facilitates the process of micro-enterprises getting access to formal credit. Due to the daily personal contact they have with their clients, they are well placed to inform the bank on that client's suitability for receiving a loan, thus breaking down the information asymmetry and some formal collateral requirements that hinder usual formal financial extension to micro-enterprises. However, these mobile bankers might be well placed to provide more than just financial services. If they were provided with further training themselves, each mobile banker could, in theory, become a mobile BDS unit; providing additional training services to their clients (including basic book keeping, business skills). Having mobile bankers/business advisors would greatly increase outreach to the entrepreneurs that need advice. Is this not a good example of how we can formalize the informal economy by informalizing formal structures?

### Notes

[1] For informal wage employment other incentives might include getting a secure contract.

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## GOOD PRACTICE AS A SOURCE OF LEARNING: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM LEARNING THEORIES?

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### Keywords

Learning Theories, Good practice

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Let me start this brief note with a strong statement: To present good practice as best practice is very bad practice. I will make a short expedition into learning theories to explain what I mean.

Many assistance projects funded and/or undertaken on behalf of international donors are characterised by policy *transfer* or policy *copying*. They are based on the assumption that at least on paper, or perhaps even somewhere in the real world, there exist “best policy practices” that are relevant for any other country and can therefore be easily taught by and learned from international consultants, or studied and copied by national policymakers. The practices are considered “best” because they either fit in particular theoretical or ideological constructs, or because they “work”. However, policies based on

transfer or copying of best practices have generally resulted in unsustainable policy proposals. The main reasons for this are that they did not fit in the wider context of the countries, there was no real ownership among key national stakeholders, and hence no possibility or commitment from anybody to make the policies work in practice after a funding agency would withdraw. As a result, implementation of new policies has often been catastrophic and has practically never achieved the results foreseen and hoped for. Most often these policies were not implemented at all or have produced unintended – and unexpected – side effects that in the end produced results similar to those that they were supposed to correct in the first place. Precious resources have been wasted and little progress has been made.

Assuming that policies can be regarded as a form of knowledge and that policy development therefore can also be understood as a process of *policy learning*, it appears that many traditional development approaches are rooted in a particular understanding of knowledge as something that already exists independently of the policy learners, and of learning as a process of acquiring the policy knowledge presented by someone else. These are also the basic assumptions of *behaviourist* and *cognitivist* approaches to learning that have dominated educational practice for such a long time. Instead, an alternative and perhaps more realistic, approach would at least assume that the policy learners themselves also bring valuable knowledge to the policy learning process (such as about the institutional context, history, culture, values and power relations in their country), and that *new* policy knowledge therefore can only be the result of active participation of policy learners in its very development. This is what *constructivist* approaches to learning would argue, especially when learning is about the solving of very complex and ill-structured problems, which is what policy development of course is all about. Policy learning in this sense is more likely to produce new policies that are truly owned by stakeholders who actively developed these policies themselves, and therefore have much better chances to be implemented and become sustainable.

But merely replacing policy transfer or policy copying by talking about policy learning will not *per se* change much as the concept of policy learning can be applied within very different approaches to learning. In reality there is always implicitly some view about learning present in all assistance activities. Indeed, it is when we are trying to make the underlying learning assumptions more explicit that much of policy development assistance appears to be rooted in an understanding of how people learn that has already lost much of its relevance to the learning theory community at large. It remains therefore astonishing how little of international assistance in education policy development in fact draws on modern theories of learning.

The point that I wish to make here is not so much that exposure to policy experiences or practice from elsewhere has no role to play at all in international assistance. That would be totally ridiculous of course. It is the way those experiences are used which really makes the difference. The use of examples is good practice in any educational or learning setting. But as in any other formal learning settings such as schools or training centres, the good practice of using examples is dependent on why, and what needs to be learned, and how it is understood that learning can best be facilitated. Just a brief reminder therefore of what the major learning theories have to say.

From a *behavioural* perspective the goal is to predict and control with reasonable certainty what people will do in specific situations. The objective of instruction is to develop desired behaviour through conditioning behaviour in response to external stimuli (experience) through different kinds of media. Knowledge is an individual's repertoire of behavioural responses to stimuli from the environment from the past. Learners are seen as basically responding to external stimuli, not completely passively though as they learn by doing, experiencing, and engaging in trial and error through repetition. Learning is considered as a change in behaviour due to experience whereby the change in behaviour is the response to a stimulus event. Here, best practice is the external event and the application of best practice is the desired learning outcome. To organise the learning process so that the learner will achieve a desired change in behaviour is the main task of the teacher (or for that matter - consultant).

*Cognitivists* share many of the assumptions of the behaviourist approach and differ basically only in a focus on cognitive aspects as opposed to behaviourist ones. Much like behaviourism, cognitivism emphasises the role of environmental conditions in facilitating learning. Thus, explanations, demonstrations, examples of good practice can all guide learning and so do feedback and practical experience. But instead of a more or less mechanical absorption of such stimuli here the learner is thought to actively process stimuli in the mind. Memory plays an important role. Whereas the behaviourist teaching focuses on organising the environment (stimuli), the real focus of the cognitive approach is on changing the learner by encouraging the use of appropriate learning (information processing) strategies. Despite assuming a more active mental role from the side of learners, however, the cognitivist approach also shares with behaviourism the same role definition for the teacher (or consultant): transfer of existing – best practice – knowledge in the most effective and efficient way. Learner characteristics and differences only play a role in deciding where to start (importance of prior knowledge for giving meaning) and which particular learning strategies are to be stimulated (learner disposition and learning styles).

The implications of “putting the mind between” stimulus and response are developed further in their consequences by *constructivist* approaches. These stress that knowledge is not so much acquired from others as constructed by people themselves as they try to give sense to their own experiences. More radical social constructivists insist on the importance of interaction, dialogue and negotiation with relevant others for learning. Learning is not the lonely act of an individual but a matter of being initiated into the practices of a community. Constructivist approaches see learning as a continuous – and highly selective – process of exchange between individuals and their “Umwelt” through which people give their own meaning to new information. Learners learn based on what they already know and guided by how they have become accustomed to see the world around them. Learning is seen as situated in activity which is why its validity can only be assessed in terms of providing a “viable”, workable, acceptable action relative to potential alternatives.

But as learning is social action, a person's knowledge must constantly be communicated and negotiated with others in that community which requires continuous re-assessment, reflection and self-regulation from the learner. Meanings do not necessarily have to be fully shared but need to be broadly compatible with those of relevant others. Knowledge

therefore is temporary, open to continual negotiation and memory is always under construction.

Since knowledge is constructed and cannot be transmitted, instruction should consist of experiences and practices that facilitate knowledge construction. Indeed, a central issue for constructivists is that there is no single best practice that simply needs to be learned and applied. The role of instruction and teachers (or consultants) would be to assist learners to understand how knowledge is and can be constructed, to promote collaboration with others (learners, peers, more advanced experts) in social activities, to show that multiple perspectives can be relevant for a particular issue, and to arrive at positions that they can defend and commit themselves to, while understanding that there are other views with which they can disagree. Such a role goes beyond the analysis of, and support for individual learning tasks and should be rather conceived in terms of creating a strong learning environment that enables these interrelated aspects of constructivist instruction. The teacher acts as a coach and, being a professional learning facilitator, also needs to be able to diagnose where learners are in terms of making progress towards achieving their own learning objectives, help identify which - and guide where - relevant information that could be of use for learners can be found, and assess when and how learners can eventually transfer their newly constructed knowledge to other kinds of situations and activities.

This brief excursion into the territory of learning theories may help to develop a more realistic use of good practice by international consultants in their role of facilitators of policy learning processes.

I have focused in this brief note on only one of the reasons why international assistance to policy development usually produces poor results, namely the *lack of local ownership* of new policies. There is a lot to be learned from ongoing learning theory discussions on the issue of ownership, even though the practical and operational dimensions of creating strong policy learning environments are still largely to be developed. Learning theories, moreover, largely focus on the learning of individuals even when they stress that individuals are learning as members of larger social communities. If there would have been enough space, I would also have discussed the second important reason for failure, which is the often total lack of *embeddedness* of borrowed and imported policy solutions in the contexts of the countries that should introduce these new policies. Apart from the sociological dimensions of this issue (a society is not just a collection of separate unconnected institutions that each can be changed at will), there are also learning theoretical aspects implied by the need to optimise embeddedness. These collective forms of learning also need to be better understood if assistance to policy learning wants to successfully contribute to co-constructing new policies that are not only locally owned by a small number of national policymakers but also embedded in local contexts, including the various interest groups and professional communities that exist in a country.

### Notes

[1] This note is written as a personal opinion and in no way expresses or reflects an official view of the European Training Foundation. However, several recent ETF projects have been inspired by the thinking presented here.

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## LESSONS FROM QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK EXPERIENCE

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### Keywords

Qualifications Frameworks, Best practice

### Summary

This article raises a series of questions about the motivations of governments and international agencies in adopting Qualifications Frameworks (QFs) and the likely challenges faced in developing a QF that is both effective and efficient.

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National and regional qualifications frameworks continue to exert great power over policymakers' imaginations. Hong Kong, for instance, will launch a new Qualifications Framework (QF) in January 2008. However, this policy fascination is not easily explicable by the evidence of the first nearly two decades of experience of running QFs. The purpose of this short piece, therefore, will be to raise a series of questions about the motivations of governments and international agencies in adopting QFs and the likely challenges faced in developing a QF that is both effective and efficient.

### Why QFs?

Part of the problem facing actually existing QFs is the rationale behind them. QFs have too often been seen as a panacea to solve complex problems and challenges. A QF purportedly will deal with the legacy of Apartheid or British class society; reposition an Antipodean nation from an ex-dominion to a Pacific Rim nation; or more, generally, help in the creation of a globalised knowledge economy (whatever that soundbite might actually mean). Often, they are expected to address multiple goals that are in serious tension with one another. However, in these aspirations they are clearly and grossly oversold and, thus, doomed to at least partial failure, mirroring other educational grand projects down the decades. Even if a QF is presented as the solution to the apparently simpler issue of the academic-vocational divide, it is clear on reflection that this works far better as slogan than reality.

### What are the key challenges facing QFs?

Beyond the issue of over-ambition, I want to look at three types of challenges faced by QFs:

- Design
- Implementation
- Unanticipated Effects

### What are the challenges of design?

Should a QF include both academic and vocational programmes? Clearly, from the point of view of ambition, a QF is only a "real" QF when it covers both academic and vocational programmes. However, a number of countries have sought only to develop vocational qualification frameworks (VQFs), at least in the short- to medium-term. Others, South

Africa being a very visible example, have struggled to make a full QF work. Finding the issue of comparability (and, hence, portability of occupational awards into the academic system) impossible to resolve in practice, South Africa has essentially abandoned a fully integrated approach in favour of loosely articulated occupational and academic/vocationally oriented sub-systems.

Should it address all levels of education and training or be sub-system based? Again, the heroic logic is clear. However, a two-fold pragmatic logic has often prevailed that has concentrated attention on the youth/further/intermediate element of the system. First, it is argued that the real "problem" is in developing an articulated and relevant system of education and training that can lead the youth into either work or further studies. Therefore, this is the point at which to concentrate scarce resources. Second, it is argued that universities are best positioned, and highly likely, to resist incorporation into a QF and so it is prudent to leave HE out, at least in the early years of QF development. Again, different actually existing QFs have varied in their positions on this and these positions have sometimes shifted over time in the direction both of more and less ambitious coverage.

There are further design questions for which there is also no QF best practice. These include:

- Should a QF be understood and designed as an enabling or a regulatory framework?
- Should both whole and part awards be allowed?
- Should there be a set of core competencies evidenced across all programmes, and should these be tested for separately?
- How generic should awards be across levels, subjects and sectors?

Moreover, there are difficult issues about sequencing reforms - including capacity development and promotional matters. Perhaps more fundamentally, there are also major challenges in promoting participation in the design of QFs. Too often, the QF process has been the preserve of experts (often international consultants), with its own arcane language rather than a site of democratic involvement by a wide range of practitioners and other stakeholders.

### **What are the challenges of implementation?**

QFs are relatively easy to develop on paper but the capacity to deliver them is far harder to put in place. They have tended to generate a plethora of new structures, all requiring financial and human resources and bringing significant challenges of institutional development. With the proliferation of QF-related agencies has also tended to come empire building, as these agencies battle for limited resources and status. Individual institutional logics also tend to operate in semi-autonomy from each other and the system, resulting in incoherence and inconsistency of policies and practices.

The setting up of new institutions, new awards and new processes means that QFs take considerable time to be established. In South Africa, for instance, it has taken 13 years from Act of Parliament to the introduction of new awards in the further education and training colleges. They are also high cost solutions. South Africa took the decision not to charge commercial rates for the South African Qualifications Authority's services and

has been dependent on EU grants ever since. How poorer countries without a significant set of formal sector employers are likely to pay for a QF without donor subvention remains unclear.

Other implementational challenges include:

- the participation of small, micro and/or informal enterprises;
- the continued existence of “old” (particularly transnational) awards;
- the position of private providers; and
- the effective implementation of programmes of recognition of prior learning.

### **What are the challenges of unanticipated effects?**

I have already suggested the QFs have been given unrealistic ambitions. I also want to argue that they have also resulted in a series of unanticipated negative effects.

First, although initially constructed as social democratic solutions, they have been characterised in practice by increased bureaucratisation and the rise of technocratic language.

Second, they have also had serious impacts on the progressive educational project, albeit allied with other reform trends linked to the rise of the new public management. Instead of empowering learners, they have encouraged credentialism and a decline of andragogy, with certificated outcomes crowding out self-directed learning. This has also led to an undermining of the “university of the third age” in systems dependent largely on state subvention, as resources are increasingly targeted to the promotion of employability amongst those of working age.

Third, they have also contributed to the wider undermining of education and training professionals, through the rise of the tendencies noted in the previous two paragraphs.

### **What might be the characteristics of a “Clever QF”?**

My scepticism about the QF experiment will be clear from what I have already written. However, in so far as QFs continue to be bought and sold as a policy solution to very real problems, there is a need to conclude with some suggestions of where good QF practice may lie.

Given the history of QFs to date, caution and modesty are both required in developing new models at the national and regional level. I would also suggest that the evidence favours an incrementalist approach to implementation over South African-style attempts at once-and-for-all implementation. Maximising participation and transparency are also notions that fit well with QF rhetoric, if not much of the reality. Equally, QFs should aspire to facilitating the participation of learners, providers and employers and should work from a basis of trust. Finally, future QFs need to take very seriously the issue of contextualisation of awards in the communities of knowledge and practice in which they will need to be located. An arc welding certificate and a PhD do not need to have the same format of certification or examination to both co-exist on a QF and serious violence may be done to both in the simplistic search for equivalence.

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### **BEST PRACTICE IN POLICY LEARNING IN VET: REFLECTIONS ON RECENT UK EXPERIENCE**

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**Keywords:** policy learning; policy memory; policy transfer; vocational education and training; United Kingdom;

**Summary:** Drawing on recent experience in 14-19 education and training policy in the UK, this article argues that effective policy learning should aim for a deeper understanding of policy problems and processes than is provided by a simple search for 'best practice'.

Best practice in policy learning involves much more than a search for best practice. This seemingly paradoxical conclusion can be drawn from a recent volume of papers on *Policy-making and Policy Learning in 14-19 Education*, edited by Ken Spours and myself. The book examines recent experience in England and Scotland, but many of its conclusions apply more widely.

We define policy learning as 'the ability of governments, or systems of governance, to inform policy development by drawing lessons from available evidence and experience' (Raffe and Spours, 2007, p.1). It includes:

*The ability to learn from past experience.* This in turn requires a capacity to recognise continuities with the past, something which many governments are unable or unwilling to do. Even in stable countries governments often rest their appeal, or even their

legitimacy, on their claim to have made a break from the past; this is especially true in countries whose past is marked by colonialism, political repression or economic failure. However, this pursuit of novelty often leads governments to pretend that the old political, social and economic forces have somehow disappeared: that there is nothing to be learnt from past experience. And even when governments are willing to learn, policy-making institutions may lack the stability to accumulate the necessary policy memory. Or this memory may be selective: it may remember past successes but ignore the failures from which there is most to be learnt. One of the first questions which any government addressing a chronic policy problem should ask is: why have previous policy initiatives failed to solve this problem? Governments too rarely ask this question. Several contributors to our book note that current 14-19 policy in England, in particular the attempt to create a broad vocational track based on Diplomas, has made no explicit attempt to learn from past policies which pursued the same objectives, and it looks likely to repeat the same mistakes.

*The ability to learn appropriately from other countries.* Globalisation and international competition have made governments more willing to compare their performance against international benchmarks and to use international comparisons as a source of policy ideas. However, too often this welcome interest in cross-national comparisons is expressed in attempts at policy borrowing rather than policy learning. Policy borrowing, by which I mean the attempt to transfer institutions and policies from other settings, rarely works (and when it does work, this is often by accident). Policy learning, on the other hand, involves using comparisons both to understand one's own country better and to understand current policy problems and possible solutions better, by observing similarities and differences across different national settings. Policy-making may have become more sophisticated since the days when, for example, policy-makers across the world seized on the German dual system as a model of 'best practice' and tried to introduce it in contexts where the conditions for its success were notoriously lacking. But policy-makers still tend to see international comparisons as a source of models of good practice, rather than a source of the deeper understanding which not only explains why certain practice may be good but also helps us to understand the conditions under which it is effective and the problems that may be faced in implementing it. As a result the uses of cross-national comparisons tend to be narrow: they typically focus only on countries which are perceived to be successful and they ask questions about the ('best') practice rather than the broader context in which it is applied.

*An ability to lean from local innovation.* Effective policy learning should harness and build on the creativity and capacity to innovate of teachers, trainers and other practitioners at the local level. Innovations that are designed and developed locally may be best able to address the practical issues that arise from the local context, which may be less visible to central planners. Several recent policy initiatives in the UK have sought to exploit this creativity through 'pathfinders' which support a diverse range of local initiatives and experiments. The intention is that the lessons learnt from these local initiatives can be shared with other areas, and that the best practices that they generate can be identified and adopted elsewhere. This model of policy learning, of course, requires adequate time horizons and funding. Moreover, it can only work when central government genuinely empowers the local practitioners who are responsible for innovation, and does not impose national policies or accountability systems which unduly

restrict their freedom to innovate. It requires that central governments are willing to learn the lessons about their own practices and policies that may emerge from the experience of local innovation. It also requires a more sophisticated view of the process whereby good practice is recognised and adopted elsewhere. Policies promoting local experimentation tend to have been more successful in supporting good practice in the areas where it is developed than in promoting its wider adoption. As in the case of cross-national comparisons, the most important form of learning across local initiatives is that which leads not to an identification of good practice but to an understanding of the underlying processes – of the factors which make some practices good and of the conditions in which they do so. And the experience of UK pathfinders suggests that if local practitioners do not go through this deeper process of learning they are unlikely fully to understand and ‘own’ models of good practice developed elsewhere.

In each of these three areas of policy learning a naïve concept of best practice may obstruct the search for a deeper understanding of why certain practices may be effective, of the circumstances under which different practices are effective and of the practical issues that must be addressed in developing and implementing them. It typically focuses narrowly on success (witness OECD countries’ obsession with learning from Finland since its ‘success’ in the PISA assessments), whereas we can learn at least as much from failures. It detracts from the wider political, social and economic factors which drive and constrain the process of change. And it will not lead to practices which can be understood, owned, adopted and adapted by those who implement them.

A simple mechanistic search for ‘what works’ may sometimes be the start of policy learning, but it should never be its end point.

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## BEST PRACTICE IN VOCATIONALISATION OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

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**Key words:** Vocationalisation, general competencies, technology education

### Summary

Vocationalisation of secondary schooling is considered to be an important measure in improving the vocational relevance of education and in helping students to prepare for effective participation in any area of work. It is argued here that technology education is an example of best practice with regard to vocationalisation.

Traditionally the vocationalisation of secondary education has been seen as an effective measure for developing human resources. The main goal of vocationalisation is to

improve the vocational relevance of education, although the main purpose of education remains general education and students becoming qualified for higher academic studies (Lauglo, 2005). Usually, vocationalisation means the introduction of practical and/or vocational subjects, industry visits, vocational guidance, and more applied ways of teaching general education subjects. Studies done in both developed (e.g. Coombe, 1988) and developing countries (e.g. Lauglo, 2005) have shown that economic goals were one of the main motives for introducing pre-vocation education, practical subjects and a curriculum more orientated to work.

Introduction of vocational courses into secondary schooling probably is not considered as a best practice, at least for the developed world. Usually these courses lead to the lowest level of certification and provide students with practical skills and knowledge for a very specific occupation. A much better option is the development of general competences such as collecting, analysing and organising ideas and information; expressing ideas and information; planning and organising activities; working with others and in teams; using mathematical ideas and techniques; solving problems; and using technology, as these are considered essential for effective participation in any area of work. Their inclusion in the mainstream curriculum would be beneficial for the education of an abstracted worker able to bring general competencies to any vocation. "If these capacities can be successfully taught, the chance of their being put to use are much greater than in the case of occupation-specific skills" (Lauglo, 2005, p. 47).

One example of best practice in developing these general competencies is through the **introduction of technology education**. In particular, certain assumptions have been made about the goals of technology education - to be relevant to the economic needs of the nation and to prepare students for work and life in society. Technology education has been seen as a means for developing knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that allow students to maximize their flexibility and adaptability to their future employment, mainly, and to other aspects of life as well. Internationally, there is no widely accepted framework for the development of technology education. Diversity of the socio-economic and cultural conditions in countries and in the availability of resources play an important role in the orientation of the subject. Different aspects of technology are selected and considered as a basis for curriculum development, particularly, the emphasis on either modern or traditional technology. Some courses in the field are based on 'technical' characteristics of the phenomenon, some on development of the child, others on cultural and aesthetic values. For example, Bail, Blachford, Eckersall, and Hamer (1986) recognized four major orientations to curriculum: curriculum as technology; curriculum as a cognitive process; curriculum as humanism; and curriculum as social relevance or reconstruction.

In Australia, for example, the rationale adopted in the national documents in 1994 (the National *Statement and Profiles*) introduced the process-based approach for the development of technology education. It identified the role of technology education in terms of preparing students for living and working in a technological world. Social, cultural, environmental and economic aspects of technological development were identified as important knowledge. The development of critical and creative minds aimed at finding innovative solutions to personal and community needs were considered as important aims. Four strands were identified to structure curriculum: Designing, Making and Appraising; Information; Materials; and Systems. This document became the common basis for curriculum development in each State and Territory.

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# **BEST PRACTICE AROUND UPE AND EFA**

**GOOD PRACTICE IN SUPPORTING ENVIRONMENTS FOR LITERACY**

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**Keywords**

Literacy, Literacy environment

**Summary**

While a supportive literate environment is necessary to bring investments in literacy programmes to more complete fruition, the adult education profession has still not given potential investors the information on what good practices will promote such fruition and what level of investment is necessary to achieve it. This article investigates the supporting environments for literacy to be sustainable.

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It has long been clear and been made clearer by contemporary studies that simply teaching people how to read, write and do written arithmetic will not ensure that they will go on reading, writing and doing written arithmetic. They seem to need an environment that demands that they do so. Otherwise, the skills so prized by the international community “lodge with them useless”. Worse, they gradually erode away. Apparently, securing your right to literacy does not necessarily secure your grip on it.

This fact raises the issue of the balance between ensuring just the human right to literacy for every individual, on the one hand, and on the other, regarding expenditures on literacy programmes as investments in social, civic and economic development for society as a whole. An argument could be made that offering individuals adequate opportunities to learn literacy satisfies the obligation to honour the right to literacy. Consolidating and developing the skills once they are grasped can be left to the individual. On the other hand, regarding literacy programmes as social investments involves the question of adequate capitalisation. If an enterprise is under-capitalised, it courts failure. Failing to foster a supportive environment for literacy could be viewed as under-capitalisation. The inference would be that, unless a programme supports the continued development of its neo-literates, it would more than likely be wasting its investment.

More than half a century ago, Dr. Frank Laubach and his team recognized this probability and ran workshops on how to produce materials that would encourage and enable neo-literates to become permanent literates. Thoughtfully chosen topics and rigorously controlled and developed reading vocabularies with attractive illustrations and layouts formed the grist of instruction for would-be writers. As with so much in literacy and adult education, the outcomes were apparently not evaluated, so that no assessments of their returns on investment are available to policy makers and financiers. Nevertheless, in principle, Laubach’s approach would seem to constitute good practice.

Mrs. Welthy Fisher’s Literacy House in Lucknow, India, again a half century ago, not only produced such targeted and graded literature, it also organised box libraries that

circulated on bicycles through villages to reportedly good effect. The model seems sensible and appeared in several other countries. However, no assessment of whether it was a necessary or superfluous capitalisation is available to guide policy makers.

In the mid-1970s the government of Indonesia applied kindred principles in creating a 'Paket A' of 100 booklets on a variety of 'functional' subjects, all graded for reading difficulty. Completing the first 20 of the series constituted the attainment of basic literacy and managing to read all 100 of them signalled the official attainment of permanent literacy. Reading 100 booklets amounts to more than mastering one or two primers and, on the face of it, could be deemed good practice. However, the available evaluations do not assess whether the investment in 'Paket A' was excessive, deficient or just about sufficient capitalisation to ensure that successful learners did take up the literate practices of mainstream society and contribute to social development.

Contemporaneously, the literacy authorities of Thailand published and disseminated large news-sheets for villages, which were put up for public reading. Again, the idea seemed sound, entirely relevant to the interests of neo-literates and likely to promote social development –in short, good practice. Again, however, evaluations of whether the news-sheets constituted sufficient or over-capitalisation do not seem to be available.

To summarise: while a supportive literate environment is necessary to bring investments in literacy programmes to more complete fruition, the adult education profession has still not given potential investors the information on what good practices will promote such fruition and what level of investment is necessary to achieve it.

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## LITERACY FOR LIFE: DO WE KNOW HOW MUCH IT WILL COST?

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The persistence of around 1 billion illiterates has been a disgrace for over 30 years. There have been a large number of small scale programmes – especially those run by NGOs such as ActionAid - but it is acknowledged that there is a need to better understand both the costing structure of different programmes, including what categories/components are identified and / or omitted, and their effectiveness before suggesting that any one approach or set of approaches is the most appropriate.

### *Costing Programmes*

A wide range of factors are likely to affect costs (see Oxenham, 2002): but the diversity of programmes in terms of their costings, modalities, objectives and intended outcomes makes it very difficult to make meaningful comparisons between them. This note draws on a recent study by Carr-hill and Roberts who collected actual costs of programmes from nine programmes that were supposedly successful in both operational and output terms.

### *Appropriate Range of Costs*

The report on the ActionAid/Global Campaign for Education survey suggested that a good quality literacy programme that included all the features they had identified in their review was likely to cost between US\$50 and US\$100 per learner per year for at least three years (two years initial learning + ensuring further learning opportunities are available for all).

The problem with setting a benchmark like this is that, in addition to the diversity of programmes organised in very different ways, circumstances vary (the social, linguistic, economic, geographical and historical contexts will all impact on the needs of learners, the range of approaches required, and hence costs). In the programmes studied, there is a five-fold range from US\$63 to US\$299 per participant per year<sup>11</sup>.

### *Determining unit costs?*

Programme unit costs are usually calculated by dividing total programme costs by the number of learners, but;

1. In principle, the opportunity cost of the literacy participants, the imputed costs of facilities provided in kind, and the opportunity costs of the time of volunteer facilitators, should all be included. This very rarely happens.
2. Whatever costs are included, there are three figures that could be useful for a programme implementer:
  - Unit costs per learner at the start of the cycle

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<sup>11</sup> Figures should be adjusted by Purchasing Power Parity

- Unit costs per learner at the end of the cycle
  - Marginal unit costs calculated as the additional costs for one learner to join an already functioning class
3. The difference between costs per learner and the costs per completer and per 'successful' completer are important. At the same time, one should not assume that drop-outs or those who do not pass assessments have gained nothing from the course.
4. A full societal economic costing should consider other inputs that have contributed to literacy. Many of the participants in literacy programmes have previously been to school and may have acquired some literacy skills (see Carr-Hill, 1999). Abadzi (2004) argues that the total cost to make them literate should arguably include the money already spent on them. Whilst that argument could be extended almost indefinitely and without a clear resolution, one might take it into consideration when debating the appropriate follow-up to those who drop out of school.

#### *Most important factor*

Oxenham (2002) found that the most important factor in determining the unit cost of a programme was whether or not the programme relied on facilitators who received a salary or on volunteers with possibly a small honorarium. Obviously this is an important issue, particularly at provider level, but our investigation suggests that an even bigger issue may be the treatment of central management and overhead costs. In particular, for many government programmes, it is very difficult to attribute the costs of a permanent civil service to specific programmes.

#### *Conclusions*

The International Literacy Decade has prompted calls for renewed commitment to funding adult literacy; but it is not straightforward.

#### *Content of programme*

There remains uncertainty over the effectiveness of different modalities for delivering adult literacy programmes partly because of the contextual specificity of each programme, partly because there has usually been insufficient attention to straightforward monitoring of the programme and also perhaps partly because there have been insufficient external evaluations of those programmes. Different modalities may be more appropriate in some circumstances (countries/ provinces) than in others and the association between modality and circumstances has not yet been established so that the relative effectiveness of different programme costs cannot be assessed.

It is difficult to propose a common approach to monitoring; instead it is important that each programme should articulate clearly its objectives and intended outcomes and how it is monitoring both of those.

#### *Accounting Practices and Reporting of Costs*

Accounting practices clearly differ. It would be possible to promote common accounting practices based on internationally accepted accounting procedures but, given the diversity of approaches already described, it is unclear that there would be much

advantage in such harmonisation and there is a real query as to whether this would lead to more bureaucratic costs than the savings it might generate. Indeed one might question the cost effectiveness of such harmonisation. Instead, we would argue for a more general agreement about the components that should be considered in any costing of an adult literacy programme but that the imposition of a common costing structure would not be appropriate.

The evidence we have unearthed, suggests that the minimum unit cost of making an adult literate is much more likely to lie in the region of US\$100, than the US\$50 minimum currently stated in Literacy Initiative for Empowerment (LIFE) documentation (UNESCO 2006).

#### *Further Exploration of those Issues*

Ideally, what are required are longitudinal studies of the costing and outcomes of specific literacy programmes to understand how costs and 'successes' vary over the lifetime of a programme; and to understand the starting point of that target population. This would be very onerous and resource intensive. But a first step at least towards identifying appropriate costings would be for local consultants to compile an inventory of the major programmes in each country (international consultants would eat up the budget for literacy!). This inventory should include information on objectives, intended outcomes, target audience (size and type), design of programme, delivery modalities, and specific factors making for good or poor quality. Compiling such an inventory appears tedious but is essential for developing an understanding of what is required (see Carr-Hill 1986; Carron and Carr-Hill 1990). This could be the basis for review and discussion at the national level.

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## WELL PROVEN BEST PRACTICE IS NOT USED IN LATIN AMERICA TO COPE WITH POOR PERFORMANCE

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### Keywords

Latin America, Primary education, Best practice

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Even though Latin America provides universal access to primary education, eventually only half of each age group is able to understand the main message from a simple 100 word text. Fortunately, there are a few programmes that provide good quality education in spite of being implemented in rural isolated areas. However, this best practice is not being replicated in the rest of society.

The rhetoric of universal access hides the tracking of Latin American students from the richer half of the society into private schools or good suburban public schools, while the poorer half enrolls into public urban marginal or rural schools. In both tracks teachers use a “whole class” (frontal teaching) approach. This approach is efficient for students that received fairly early stimulation at home. For example, teachers can help 7-year old students from families in the wealthiest socioeconomic quintile --who are able to use more than 3000 words and have the ability to make reasonable inferences and abstractions -- to be reading by the end of grade one. On the other hand, only 10 to 20% of students from the “lower half of the income distribution” may be reading by the end of grade one. This low learning achievement in the poorest quintile is probably linked to temporary drop out, lack of relevance of what is learned, lack of preschool, lack of textbooks, lack of family support, poor vocabulary used at home (some 500 words), and the fact of being taught by young teachers with little experience.

However, there are a few programmes - Escuela Nueva (Kline, 2002) (in Colombia), Instructores Comunitarios (Ezpeleta, 1997) (in Mexico), Regularizacao do Fluxo Escolar (Leitao, 2005) (in Brazil), and Junior Achievement [1] (in two dozen L.A. countries)-- that have been able to provide good quality education to students from families in the lower half of the economic distribution. In fact the Regional UNESCO Education Office reported in 2000 that the average score of rural Escuela Nueva Colombian schools was higher than the average in urban schools. Evaluations carried out by The World Bank (Psacharopoulos, Rojas and Vélez, 1992) and other researchers (McEwan, 1998) have also reported good results for the Escuela Nueva schools.

The best practice provided by these successful programmes involves ten key common components: (i) Interactive scripts (guides) with precise instructions for students to generate (and experience) interesting learning processes; (ii) students work in small groups (four students) for some parts of the activities asked for (demanded ) in the interactive scripts; (iii) students follow instructions to interview people, work with relatives, develop projects, and write results that are shared in the groups; (iv) informal

coaching is provided in each group by the best students (in a course with 28 students working in seven groups, one of the best 7 students is assigned to each group); (v) Each group of students advances at their own pace and the teacher monitors the advance and makes decisions about further work before moving into the next unit; (vi) a student government is elected and takes responsibility for recreation, garden, library, discipline, and other activities; (vii) a school willing to join the programme must organize their teachers to visit a demonstration school; (viii) each teacher spends one week in a training course using interactive scripts (as students would do) to simulate its usage in a class; (ix) the best teacher for teaching to read and write is assigned to grade one that requires more experience and professional skills (as suggested by a group of experts in a cost-effectiveness study), and (x) teacher learning is then supposed to continue in micro-centres (attended by teachers from a few nearby schools), where teachers meet once a month to exchange experiences, help each other solve teaching problems, agree to carry out small experiments, and report the results in the next meeting. Four videos are available to document these components [2].

Interactive scripts are the results of selecting the best approaches of all teachers willing to try their own approach and evaluating the learning achieved by representative groups of students (similar to the approach implemented in Sesame Street) [3]. Developers of the materials avoid the use of local examples (or foreign drawings), by asking students to “look at a bush or a tree through the window and bring a couple of leaves for each of the groups to work with”. Special attention is paid to the instructions for students to carry out the activities [4]. Instructions help students to learn “how they learn” (metacognition) and they are able to explain to visitors (or even new teachers) how they are learning. Furthermore, the best student in each group helps each member to understand the instructions and (in such monitoring process) students learn to fully understand what they read (and the monitor develops social competences as a local leader).

Unfortunately, other Latin American countries are not taking advantage of these proven best practices. Many countries are distributing free textbooks to students, but the textbooks are not tried out and validated with a sample of pupils before the massive distribution to all schools (therefore, half of the pages are of poor quality and the material is seldom used). Also, teacher training institutions keep training new teachers as they were trained 30 or 40 years ago and are not trying out (and evaluating) the approaches described above. This is a pity because even a single strategy (assigning to grade one the best teacher for teaching to read and write) would probably reduce by half the percentage of students that never learn to understand what they read (in spite of spending six or more years at primary school). Several other strategies identified as cost-effectiveness by the group of experts could also be considered (Schiefelbein, Wolff and Schiefelbein, 1998).

## Notes

[1] Activities in each LAC country are reported in  
<http://www.ja.org/near/nations/americas.shtml>

[2] <http://www.volvamos.org/espanol/testimonios.php>

[3] <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet9/treuen.html>

[4] <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000947/094700eo.pdf>

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<http://www1.worldbank.org/education/globaleducationreform/pdf/Schiefelbein%20Cost-effectiveness.pdf>  
[http://www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/xml/7/19977/lcg2120i\\_Schiefelbein.pdf](http://www.eclac.cl/publicaciones/xml/7/19977/lcg2120i_Schiefelbein.pdf)

**SCHOOL FEEDING ADDS VALUE TO LEARNER-FRIENDLY SCHOOL PACKAGES**

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**Visitor:** I want to know what portion of the government funds the school spends on feeding the students.

**Headmaster:** None. There is no provision for meals.

**Visitor:** When you say none, do you mean that there is no arrangement for school feeding?

**Headmaster:** No, there is none. But we have appealed to the parents to pay 5,000 shillings a term for porridge. The young children get their porridge at break time; then the others get some at lunch time.

**Visitor:** Do all the parents pay?

**Headmaster:** No. Some say it's too much.

**Visitor:** So, what do the children eat if their parents don't pay?

**Headmaster:** Some bring money, maybe 100 shillings.

**Visitor:** And if they don't bring any?

**Headmaster:** Then they have nothing to eat.

**Visitor:** And they look at the other children eating?

**Headmaster:** (*amidst murmurs and soft laughter among other visitors*) Yes, they do.

**Visitor:** That must be very difficult!

It is difficult indeed for children to cope with learning demands on empty stomachs, especially in those home contexts where a family supper and a breakfast before school are, in reality, luxuries that families cannot afford. They can be very unhappy and, worse than this, are liable to hate schooling. Such considerations are invaluable in the face of any celebration of the gains of universal primary education (UPE) as is apparent in the constant reference to the rise in enrolment from 3,068,625 in 1996 to 7,354,749 in 2004 (Annual School Census, 2004). They are useful for reflection on how whole education systems and individual schools can both widen the range and maximise the benefits of good practice in the quest for improved quality in learning.

The above interview was part of a meeting in the staffroom of a primary school that is one of the 24 beneficiaries of a project entitled *Increasing Retention through Improved Literacy and Learner-Friendly Primary Schools*. The school, located in a peri-urban setting, has been cited several times to different publics as an example of successful implementation. Both pupils and staff have, through the project activities, been equipped with the knowledge and skills deemed necessary for supporting appropriate management of sexual maturation processes. School staff, pupils, parents and school management and PTA committees have been trained on what teachers and pupils need to know about body changes in girls and boys, their needs with regard to sexuality and maturation, guidance and counselling, and the making of sanitary towels. The school is also endowed with material provisions to match the management requirements in respect of menstruation - incinerators, water tanks, solar water heaters, and resource rooms furnished with pain killers, wash basins, spare uniforms, mattresses, resource

books on maturation processes and needs and suggestion boxes. To support literacy improvement at both lower and upper primary levels, teachers and primary teachers college (PTC) tutors have been trained in English literacy development skills, and readers and other library and classroom teaching resources have been provided. Periodic assessment is conducted to measure the learners' progress on competences in specified literacy skills.

School enrolment figures are reported by the administration to have risen drastically at the project school, much to the disappointment of neighbouring schools, some of whose pupils are being lost to this particular school, attracted by the provisions there. Children observably enjoy the readers, and teachers report greater confidence in their teaching methods. Besides, the hot water hand-washing facilities, incinerators, sanitary towels and items in the resource room are reported to have supported a rise in levels of awareness on hygiene in addition to instilling confidence especially in girls. Yet, while the higher enrolment figures are desirable as an indicator of (i) the learner-friendly character of the school and (ii) the success of the project, the school administration itself is overwhelmed by the development since it translates into demands for more space, more facilities and greater efforts by the teachers and administration.

These outcomes of good literacy development and learner-friendly school practices wear another face too. Break and lunch times are characterised by small faces with the distant, wistful look of hungry children wandering slowly but not quite aimlessly back and forth on the school compound, avoiding yet keeping in clearly view their more fortunate school mates who enjoy a cold packed snack or a half mug of hot porridge served at the make-shift school kitchen. Much as the provision of meals was not included among the target features of learner-friendly school environments that would support pupil retention, the break and lunch time picture described above has not escaped project team members' comment on every monitoring visit. Various sentiments such as the following are shared over these observations.

Unless parents realise that their children cannot learn on an empty stomach, I am sure we are fighting a losing battle.

Parents need to be sensitised that UPE does not mean that their children don't need nourishment.

I wonder if they don't feed their children when they stay at home.

It may be impossible to convince parents, but at least Government should provide a very modest lunch.

Such concerns expressed over lack of lunch are essentially concerns about the feared effects of hunger on school attendance as well as on the quality of learning besides enrolment figures. Hungry children will hardly concentrate in class, are bound to participate little during learning activities and will dislike school or at least be anxious to leave and find something to eat if they can. A majority of the more than 110 million school-aged children around the world who are suffering from hunger are reported not to attend school (Friends of the World Food Programme, 2007). The report asserts that food provision at school serves the dual benefit of fighting hunger among poor children and drawing them to school, thereby granting them an education. Since education is a basic human right, it is a duty for those of us engaged in education and in raising children to think how we may make it available through attractions like food. After all,

food provision is also reported to lead to increased enrolment and attendance rates and to enhance academic performance through improving concentration and hastened comprehension of learning content.

Promises for certain gains are discernible in the story of the eight year old Senegalese girl Fatouma who, coming from a poor background, has had her confidence boosted and her interest in school maintained by the prospect of eating a meal at school made a reality by “a mere \$34” per year. Fatouma’s narrative offers evidence of the joy and hope that can be given to poor children through the provision of this basic human right,

.... I get ready to go to school very quickly because I know that good food is waiting for me. I am happy that I can spend the whole day at school learning and I don’t have to walk the long way home hungry. ...

But perhaps Fatouma would have had no access to school and certainly none to food if parents had not responded to WFP’s initiative for provision of food by contributing US\$0.60 per month or, if they cannot afford this, providing firewood for cooking or helping to prepare the meals. 15 year old Loaugulya in Tanzania also lost so much from trying to get to school before breakfast and to leave school and get home for lunch. But after meals were introduced at school he comes to school on time and stays throughout the school day, and he testifies to having “become a top student” (World Food Programme, 2006).

To ensure that the benefits of efforts for retention such as those in the Ugandan project are not lost, stakeholders should take a leaf from the literature of successes in enrolment and retention, reflecting especially on the sources of these successes. For a start for Uganda, there are some useful indications that the significance of feeding is recognised by the beneficiaries in the project for increasing retention in primary schools that is cited here. For instance, in the first project monitoring and evaluation term the student teachers at the participating PTCs reported that they liked best the meals provided at their colleges (68%) after which came all the other provisions: tutors’ clear explanation and rich content (49%), more attractive and friendly classroom environment (34%), sports and football (24%) and tutors’ greater care for students (22%) (Kasente 2007). The communities too demonstrated the value they place on the significance of feeding as is evident in the record of the support they provided to children in the same period. Community support was registered in various areas including provision of scholastic materials, renovation of classroom infrastructure, meetings to plan what the communities can do for the schools, provision of food, and enrolment of children previously out of school. While the scores relating to provision of food were not the highest, with the scores on all the items ranging between 26% and 49%, three aspects were reported in which communities contributed to feeding: providing children with porridge/food at school (31%), packing food for children (29%) and financial contributions for food/utensils for feeding pupils at school (26%) (Kasente 2007).

Similar but certainly more support for children’s feeding is observable in schools in Kyenjojo District of Uganda where Fort Portal Diocese Education Secretariat, using funds provided under UPHOLD’s projects with education civil society organisations (CSOs), supports programmes for strengthening school-community relations with the overall aim of improving learning in school. As one outcome of discussions held at school-community meetings, parents are obliged to provide lunch. Some children bring either a packed lunch from home or, where the family income is still very low and hardly supports

even the family meals, 100 Uganda shillings are enough for the children to buy sugar cane at school. Consequently, almost every child has something to eat at break or lunch time. The project schools endeavour to provide clean drinking water for the pupils.

In the face of the literature on school feeding, the plight of hungry children has implications for good practices that can enhance quality in UPE. This is especially with regard to the willingness of communities to take responsibility for food provision after sensitisation about children's needs at school. In Uganda, it is clearly stipulated in the UPE guidelines that feeding is the responsibility of parents. Listing the areas in which parents' contribution is crucial, the guidelines cite, among others, what are referred to as "basic child survival requirements" including feeding, hygiene and medical care, shelter and clothing (The Republic of Uganda, Ministry of Education and Sports, 1998). Yet many parents do not play their role, in spite of schools having been well guided to leave it to them. Since some project work demonstrates that, effectively sensitised, parents can accept their responsibility and operationalise it, there is need for focused efforts to mobilise parents and community leaders to work with school administrations to ensure provision of a school lunch for pupils. But the school administrators themselves need a lot of support especially to ensure that they are not misunderstood by the parents and any political leaders to be introducing extra charges to the parents. It is therefore necessary that in playing their supervisory, monitoring and evaluation role, the Ministry of Education and Sports, resident district commissioners, local government and founding bodies interpret the UPE guidelines for each other and for the community to appreciate, and mobilise the stakeholders to make their contribution in form of food, a centre for its collection or storage or preparation and the resources for supervising meal times. By this means school management committees should be empowered to play their own role of mobilising resources for maximising the benefit of pupils' learning.

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## WHAT POLICIES FOR SCHOOL FEES IN BASIC EDUCATION?

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### Keywords

Basic education, School fees, Best practice

### Summary

The 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights states that education shall be free, at least in the elementary stages. Yet in many countries even public schools charge fees. The fact that this is still happening six decades after the Declaration is an indication that matters are not simple. Best practice may be difficult to find.

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UNESCO is committed to the principle that no child should be denied access to schooling by the household costs associated with schooling. The ancestry of this principle includes the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26 which states that everyone has the right to education, and that education “shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages”.

When the Declaration of Human Rights states that education shall be free, it is self-evidently referring to the public sector rather than to private schools. Yet in many countries even public schools charge fees. The fact that this is still happening six decades after the Declaration is an indication that matters are not simple. Best practice may be difficult to find.

One fundamental starting point is that schooling can never be free in the sense of not being paid for somehow. In most states, fee-free education in government schools is principally paid for through taxation revenues. However, few poor countries have strong systems of taxation; and aid flows can bridge only part of the gap.

Further, the fact that some people could be excluded from schooling by school fees may not be an argument for making education free of charge to everybody. Some analysts consider it not only legitimate but even desirable to encourage payments by middle-income and rich families. Not only do the payments provide much-needed revenue; it is argued that they also encourage the families to take more interest in the nature of schooling than would be the case if it was provided free of charge.

Allied to this point, in many cases fees are levied not by the central authorities but by the school and community authorities. In these cases, the fees may be a valuable manifestation of local involvement with education systems.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that fees can be a significant barrier to participation by poor households; and in some settings it makes more sense to abolish fees for all children than to devote resources to screening mechanisms to identify who can and cannot afford to pay fees at particular levels.

Thus, policies on fees are likely to remain controversial. Some advocates would simply assert that best practice is a situation in which no fees are charged to any child in a public school. Other analysts would recommend more nuanced approaches based on the availability of taxation revenues, the ability of different families to pay, and the perceived benefits of greater interest in schooling that may result when families are asked to pay at least token amounts.

UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) has long been concerned about these issues. They remain a major focus for both research and capacity building in the Institute's Eighth Medium-Term Plan, which was approved in mid-2007 and will cover the years 2008 to 2013.

Readers who would like to know more are invited in the first instance to consult the website [www.unesco.org/iiep](http://www.unesco.org/iiep).

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### CHILD-FRIENDLY SCHOOLS AS "BEST PRACTICE"

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#### Keywords

'Child-friendly schools', Best practice

#### Summary

This article describes child-friendly schools – a school model easily adapted to different contexts, that is, first of all, inclusive of all children.

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In the mid-1990s a number of agencies located in Bangkok, including the UNICEF Regional Bureau for Education and the Save the Children Alliance, started working on what a school based on the (until then) rather abstract notions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child would look like. Knowing that a programme focused on "rights-based schools" might make some countries of the region a bit allergic, the name of "child-friendly schools" (CFS) came into being. Eventually, through many discussions, workshops, iterations, and pilot projects, the concept of the CFS became clearer and now, in one form or another, is being implemented in (at last count) over 40 countries around the world - in Asia, among other countries, in Cambodia, Thailand, Mongolia, China, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

A child-friendly school is, as one might expect, a child-centred school. But it is also child-seeking, actively looking for children not in school - girls, the poor, those with disabilities or who speak a different language - instead of being satisfied with those who knock on the school door and trying to develop a programme that will keep each of them in

school. The basic definition of a CFS, adapted easily to different contexts, is a school that is, first of all, inclusive of all children. It therefore does not exclude, discriminate against, or stereotype on the basis of difference; provides education that is free and compulsory, affordable and accessible, especially to families and children at risk; respects and welcomes diversity and ensures equality of opportunity for all children and responds to diversity as an opportunity and a resource (not as a problem or a mere factor of inequality) and meets the differing needs of children. It is also academically effective with children (usually where definitions of “quality” education stop), healthy and protective of children (both physically and psycho-socially), gender-sensitive, and encouraging of the participation of children, their parents, and the larger community.

I think this is a “best”, or at least a “good” practice in educational development, and largely unpublished evaluations have demonstrated this status. It is a comprehensive yet operational programme, tackling school improvement from a broad range of variables, of the learner, the school, and the larger community. It is adaptable to different contexts, can start from different entry points, and can be added on to - and help to enrich - existing programmes; it can begin, for example, from a school health programme, a programme promoting community participation in the school, or a gender equality project. By focusing on school- and community-based diagnoses of the current state of “friendliness” and subsequent planning for greater school improvement, it fits well with the general trend toward decentralisation and school-based management in the region. It has also led to the development of various indicators and criteria for each of the components and to tools such as readiness assessments and checklists for monitoring progress towards child-friendliness, which have proven useful in other school improvement projects. And it has been made part of national/EFA education plans in many countries of the world.

Several challenges remain, of course. How to make sure that reaching child-friendliness is considered a process rather than a product - in other words, a never completed process rather than just a label? As with other major innovations, how to ensure that a CFS innovation moves from a project basis, funded by UNICEF or UNESCO, to a programme firmly embedded in national plans and budgets? And despite its apparent simplicity, it is basically about fundamental change in how schools and education systems operate and how people behave. How to ensure, therefore, that continual learning and change, both institutional and individual, take place and that the necessary consolidation and institutionalisation of the innovation (e.g., in pre-service teacher training) occur.

"Child Friendly Schools in East Asia and the Pacific: How friendly can they be?" Joint UNICEF EAPRO & UNESCO Bangkok publication, May 2004

"Assessing Child Friendly Schools: A Guide for Programme Managers in East Asia and the Pacific." UNICEF EAPRO publication, 2006.

**WHAT COULD BE BEST PRACTICE IN WHOLE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT (WSD)**

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**Ingredients of Whole School Development (WSD)**

It is often very hard to pin down what are the ingredients of WSD; and what makes it any different from any other general programme of school improvement e.g. Heneveld and Craig (1998)

**1 Supporting Input**

- Parent community support
- Effective support from (higher levels of) education system
- Adequate material support

**2 Enabling Conditions**

- Effective leadership
- A capable teaching force
- Flexibility and autonomy
- High time in school

**3 School Climate**

- High expectations from students
- Positive Teacher Attitudes
- Order and discipline
- Organised curriculum
- Rewards and incentives

**4 Teaching/ learning process**

- High learning time
- Variety in teaching strategies
- Frequent homework
- Frequent student assessment feedback

**Evaluating any Whole School Development intervention**

There are several problems with evaluating the impact of any specific programme of impact of Whole School Development in terms of student outcomes such as

- Participation
- Academic Achievement
- Social Skills
- Economic success

In order to evaluate the impact of the added ingredient, one has to be able to collect sufficient information not only on these outcomes – which is difficult enough (see below) - but also on the four sets of well-known ingredients (supporting input, enabling conditions, school climate, and the teaching learning process). Each of these is difficult but those in category 1 and on outcomes are especially difficult because they are not

under the control of the school administration. Even in well-developed EMIS, detailed information is not collected on a routine basis about parental-community support, and adequate material support.

This is for at least three reasons;

1. Data confidentiality in a decentralised democracy will not allow for the collection of extensive routine data on parental and community support.
2. Pupil mobility between schools requires sophisticated internal tracking systems; the difficulty will be aggravated if the WSD is a success because of the inevitable inward movement of pupils from other schools
3. Post-school tracking systems require extensive follow up

Even where information of this kind is available – which is very rare - there will often be a problem of the nature of the data collection. An example is the programme of Whole School Evaluations in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, where ratings are collected on a large number of school characteristics<sup>12</sup> that has covered 49 schools in 5 years. Data has been collected from only a limited number of schools so that very few of the correlations are statistically significant, but all of the correlations were negative which either means that the quality of the learning environment has deteriorated over the period, or that the evaluators have become more rigorous in their assessments. The suggestion that the evaluators have become more rigorous in their assessments needs to be investigated because it throws doubt on the usefulness of the evaluations if criteria are not being applied consistently. In either case, we cannot conclude that the quality of the learning environment has improved.

### Community Support

The development of linkages between schools and their communities is regarded worldwide as a crucial factor to improving teaching and learning in the classroom. Concomitant with this notion is the understanding that schools and education in general are affected by the socio-economic context. Hence, we find the development of systems to involve communities in schools in effecting whole school transformation.

But the impact of many school-community integration projects does not last much beyond the project themselves. Where they have been successful during the project phase, this termination is rather surprising, given that very few resources were required to encourage these communities to continue with the gains made during the pilot phase. All that is usually necessary is for local officials to encourage the schools to continue with the projects on the basis of the skills, information, structures and networks that were developed during the life of the pilot project. The fact that this does not happen suggests that there is a problem with the initial thesis.

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<sup>12</sup> **Overall characteristics;** Learners' attainment on entry, Learners' socioeconomic background, The schools' overall performance, Accuracy of schools self-evaluation. **Specific characteristics;** Basic Functionality of the school; Leadership, management and communication, Governance and relationship, The quality of teaching, Educator development, Curriculum provision, Resources, accommodation and staffing, Learner achievement, School safety and security, School discipline and procedures, School infrastructure, Links with parents, Links with community

**Inputs and Processes**

The only alternative is evaluation in terms of the items cited in 2 to 4 above; but then there is nothing specific to the WSD.

**Confounding Factors**

Often a Whole School Development takes place at the same time as other developments and resource inputs, where there can be steady improvements in clearing the backlogs of physical infrastructure, as well as of communications. The evidence usually has to rely on the *condition* of that infrastructure, including the condition of desks and seats in the classroom, the staff and learner toilets, whether or not telephones function, and the levels of security (what mechanisms exist; how many break-ins have there been); and more qualitative indicators, e.g. the arrangement of desks and seats in the classroom. All these factors are difficult to collect data upon routinely.

**Improving Learner Effectiveness**

The basic conditions for improving learning effectiveness in the classroom are those identified by Heneveld and Craig – or similar lists;

**School Transformation?**

It is not clear what are the appropriate lessons to be drawn here. Possibly, it is because many of the schools lacked basic essentials so that the training for transformation was seen as over-theoretical and detached from real-world problems. Possibly that the bureaucratic procedures that are still in place for procuring learning and teaching support materials stifle any other initiatives. In any event, whilst the school transformation model when it is successful can provide material for very good videos, it is not clear that it can be brought in system-wide without considerable support.

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**A GOOD THING? THE CREATION OF NEW BEST PRACTICE: THE ORIGINS OF SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING IN CHINA**

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**Keywords**

Best practice, School Development Planning, China

**Summary**

This article looks at the development of School Development Planning in Gansu and its influence in China and beyond, as a practical example of how best practice informs new initiatives, which in turn may become benchmarks in their own contexts.

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The attempt to define “best practice” reminds one of the famous saying coined by the authors Sellar and Yeatman in their book “1066 and All That” in which English history was reduced to a series of events / movements that were either a “Good Thing” or a

“Bad Thing”. These phrases and others were always used with capital letters to denote their tongue-in-cheek nature e.g. The book’s subtitle was: "103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings and 2 Genuine Dates". Clearly therefore, in this tradition, it seems “Best Practice” must be a “Good Thing”.

The story below, of the development of School Development Planning (SDP) in Gansu and its influence in China and beyond, is a practical example of how best practice informs new initiatives, which in turn may become benchmarks in their own contexts.

In 1999 Cambridge Education Consultants (now Cambridge Education) was asked by DFID to design the Gansu Basic Education Project (GBEP) (Brock was a member of this team). The educational problems faced in this poor rural area of China were not materially different from other developing countries; differences were more of a contextual nature. The interventions proposed stood on two main planks (there were 15 components in total) – one of which was improved school management (especially improved school-community relations) through School Development Planning.

This was DFID’s first post-1997 project in China and the first to explicitly target poverty reduction as the principal goal. As such it was seen as a flagship for DFID’s work in China. The real novelty in the Chinese context was SDP. SDP in the Gansu project was seen as a vehicle for delivering many of the desired improvements in school management – better school-community relations ; more autonomy for schools to solve local issues (like increased access for minority girls) ; a more participative and less hierarchical approach to school development.

At that time SDP had a respectable history of about 15 years in developed countries (especially New Zealand and the UK where the most far reaching attempts had been introduced), but there was little track record in developing countries (though there was experimentation in South Africa, Tanzania, the Caribbean and some states in India). Although the impetus for SDP in developed countries was very much driven by attempts to devolve funding to schools and reduce the power and political control of intermediate public bodies such as Local Education Authorities, the underlying principle of giving schools more control over their development and more flexibility to allocate resources was central and seen to be the most successful element of the initiative.

Interestingly, in proposing to initiate SDP in the Gansu project the project memorandum made no reference to “best practice” in any of the above mentioned countries, but that experience – and most importantly, the principles that underlay it – most certainly informed the proposals. In the first two years of the project study visits to the UK and to Shanghai reinforced this connection.

Despite concerns about SDP among some local officials in Gansu – that it was a thinly disguised attempt to introduce democratic concepts in rural China; that it would fail because of the hierarchical nature of the education and social systems; that the quality of the headteachers was too low to benefit from it – SDP became, within the first two years, probably the most successful element of the project.

It was successful primarily because it took the principles mentioned above and through cooperative working between international, national and local experts allowed them to be contextualised to the local situation. For example, the principle that better decision making comes with wider consultation with school communities was done through informal means rather than formal Governing Bodies such as are found in the UK. Likewise, the principle that devolving some financial power from education bureaus to schools can release considerable initiative was accepted but, unlike New Zealand, this was done modestly in Gansu and under fairly tight control.

The experiment in Gansu also spawned interest in other parts of China with other donors (UNICEF and Plan International) sponsoring it and the Ministry of Education starting to support it. To date there are at least four multimillion dollar projects in poorer provinces in China promoting SDP in one guise or another – and all of them use the Gansu model as a reference, in some cases as a template. Three of these projects are in part or whole funded by DFID who have explicitly stated their support to disseminate SDP and the experiences of Gansu.

Partly, as a result of the positive experiences in Gansu, DFID have also, directly or indirectly, supported SDP in other projects internationally. For example, in South Africa, Jamaica, Bangladesh and Vietnam. There have been several exchanges both of information and personnel between GBEP and these other initiatives, though whether GBEP has done more than act as a reference point and resource is debateable. Nevertheless, a successful and practical reference point.

SDP in Gansu, though by no means perfect, has thus become an example of “best practice” at least in its own, Chinese context, and perhaps further afield, partly through its own success and partly through repeated references to it. It has led to initiatives which may perhaps, in time, create other examples of “best practice” for SDP. In that sense “best practice” in this context has become shorthand for a mode of transmission of at least the fundamental principles and structures of the original initiative, and in some cases perhaps more. It is also now part of the received wisdom (which it helped to create) that SDP is a “Good Thing”.

### **Further reading**

All material including project reports and multi-media materials can be obtained from Cambridge Education China (edu@camb-ed.com.cn). Most material relating to GBEP can also be found on our website at: [www.camb-ed.com.cn](http://www.camb-ed.com.cn) (Chinese), [www.camb-ed.com](http://www.camb-ed.com) (English), or <http://gbep.legend-net.cn/en/>

## HIV AIDS: BEST PRACTICES IN PROGRAMME DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION?

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### I introduction

The development of Anti Retro Virals (ARVs) as a treatment for AIDS has deflected attention from the more serious issue of prevention (Kelly, 2000). Yet, given that the economies of the most affected countries are struggling - even with the support from the global programme on HIV AIDS Tuberculosis and Malaria and other interventions - it should be obvious that prevention is a lot better than cure.

UNICEF frequently argued for the delivery of prevention messages by primary and secondary and school teachers, citing several programmes in Sub-saharan Africa. None of those have been peer reviewed or published. What is the evidence about the effectiveness at school or individual level - or even existence - of any of these programmes? The paper draws on the experience of Tanzania as an example

### 2 Implementation

Several interventions were supposed to have been implemented in Tanzania: strengthening management; introducing HIV/AIDS and life skills education into schools; peer education; guidance and counselling committees and counselling services into schools; etc.

MOEC carried out a nationwide baseline survey in June 2003. Their review showed a lack of hard data to support anecdotal reports of the impact of HIV/AIDS on education. There was wide variation in the pattern of interventions between regions; and a wide range of fragmented interventions, dependent on local initiatives and largely unevaluated, being implemented by NGOs, CBOs etc. We do not know:

1. Whether teachers are more at risk.
2. What is the impact of teacher deaths on the system.
3. What is the impact on students.
4. Appropriateness of curricula, pedagogy and programme.
5. How to Improve MIS to include HIV/AIDS indicators.
6. Effectiveness of current methods for prevention and control of HIV/AIDS and impact mitigation.

Not all can be considered in this short piece; we consider the first and second in the following section and the fourth and fifth immediately below

#### *2.1 Appropriateness of Curricula, Pedagogy and Programme*

The current curricula and pedagogy do not take account of the diversity of new household forms and situations for children. The ACCESS programme of ActionAid

reports success with more flexible schooling. Without any evaluation it is difficult to make any assessment, although these authors believe that only a small minority of teachers should be involved in HIV/AIDS training.

There is also the question regarding whether pupils with HIV, given their limited life expectancy, should be asked to follow the same programme? Should they not be allowed to enjoy themselves if they want to, rather than going to school? – Of course many may choose to go to school.

## **2.2 Effectiveness of current methods for prevention and control of HIV/AIDS and impact mitigation?**

There are a number of recurring questions, but no easy answers:

- 1) Payment of peer educators? Peer education with well-trained peer educators is known to be an effective means of informing youth. The relative importance of payment is less clear.
- 2) How should managers be sensitised to promoting AIDS education interventions? This is a more general problem of management capacity at a local level, and the difficulty for many managers to hand over control to NGOs.
- 3) Effectiveness of current methods? Any evaluation of the effectiveness of an intervention has to be based on an understanding of current trends. This does not happen.

### *3 Impacts of Epidemic on the actors in the Education System*

#### **3.1 Teachers and Students at Risk**

In most writings on the education sector, the focus, quite naturally, is on the loss of teachers because they are a key and expensive resource. But children are also infected and dying. Both numbers of students and teachers will decline (relative to the expected population growth) and, whilst it is the loss of teachers that concerns management, the trend in pupil/teacher ratios across African countries suggests, rather unfortunately, that pupils are either dying (or abstaining from school) as fast or faster than teachers.

In addition to the disadvantages suffered by all orphans (see UNICEF, 2005), those who are AIDS orphans may suffer stigma and prejudice leading to social isolation. About two-thirds of children born of HIV-positive mothers do not contract the virus, and hence have the potential to grow up as healthy as any other child. Evidence however suggests that AIDS orphans are more likely to die from preventable diseases because of the mistaken belief that their illness must be due to AIDS and that medical help is thus pointless<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> UNAIDS, 1997: *Children orphaned by AIDS* p.4

### *3.2 Are teachers More at Risk*

The teaching profession is relatively female and young, compared to other key service delivery sectors, which means that the large majority of teachers are in the highest HIV age-sex prevalence groups. Secondly, it is commonly suggested that teachers are more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviour compared to the rest of the adult population. This is on the basis that they are relatively well off, are frequently posted from one school to another, and are often from urban, high prevalence areas. In the case of male teachers, it is also alleged that many have sexual relations with their students.

According to Galabawa and Mbelle (2002), the teaching force is disappearing at a rate of 0.8% per year and data from the Teachers Service Commission shows roughly the same rates. AIDS has therefore already had a large impact on the sector. Nevertheless, it should not be concluded that teachers are *more* at risk. Calculations suggest that the prevalence for teachers is lower than for the general population at a similar income level (Carr-hill et al, 2005).

## **5. Conclusion**

There is very little evidence for any of the policies implemented at district level and even less for procedures in schools. In particular, the lack of enthusiasm of teachers for discussing HIV/AIDS in the classroom should be taken seriously; asking teachers to take on another, very sensitive, task is not in general appropriate.

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**BEST PRACTICE IN  
RESEARCHING AND  
EVALUATING THE  
DEVELOPING WORLD**

**IMPACT EVALUATIONS: THE ULTIMATE LOW HURDLE FOR “BEST PRACTICES”**

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**Keywords**

Impact evaluation, World Bank, Best practice

**Summary**

This article takes a critical look at the “best practice” of ‘impact evaluation’ promoted by the World Bank.

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There is an old critique of evaluations in the field of development assistance. Basically, the critique is that it is well-nigh impossible to get an evaluation that is truly independent. Usually those who fund an evaluation are closely related to the project and will not welcome bad news as it reflects on their judgment and expertise. This lesson is not lost on the evaluators who draw their income from this business. Hence, aside from minor wrist-slapping to show “independence,” evaluators are rarely the bearers of bad news, and project administrators are duly thankful for the “good job” the evaluators are doing.

But recently the problems with development evaluation have been carried to a new “high” by the most recent fad of “impact evaluations.” The root function of an evaluation is, as the name indicates, to judge the value of something. But the value of something is only determined by considering its costs which entails comparing it to the alternatives. One of the most basic concepts in economics is the notion of opportunity costs. When certain resources are devoted to Plan A, what is the real cost of the resource commitment? The resources might include time and effort and many other difficult-to-quantify investments so it is not just a matter of adding up the costs. The doctrine of *opportunity cost* says that the true cost of committing those resources to Plan A is the benefit that was foregone by not committing those resources to the best alternative Plan B. Thus the notion of evaluation leads directly to the “compared-to-what?” question. If the benefit from investing those resources in Plan A was greater than the opportunity cost (i.e., the benefit from the best alternative Plan B using those resources), then Plan A has a positive net value and gets a *positive evaluation*.

This basic concept of evaluation is not “rocket science”—in fact it is just elementary economics. Yet, we now have the fad of “impact evaluation” in full flower and it is promoted by many economists who should know better. The basic idea of an “impact evaluation” of a plan or project is not to compare it to alternatives using comparable resources but to compare it to the alternative of doing nothing. In other words, the “counterfactual” is not the best alternative use of *the same resources* in the current circumstances but what would have happened if *no resources* had been expended in the current circumstances. No matter how what resources are expended, if the results are “better than nothing” then the project gets a “positive evaluation.”

When described in such stark terms, one might wonder how “impact evaluation” could be seriously promoted. One treatise devoted to the subject notes on the first page:

Notice that in concentrating on impact analysis we will not be concerned in this book with the worthwhileness of a programme, as in benefit-cost analysis, for example, but rather, we will limit our concern to certain of its accomplishments. [Mohr, Lawrence B. 1988. *Impact Analysis for Program Evaluation*. Chicago: Dorsey Press, p. 1]

How can a treatise on “programme evaluation” not consider the “worthwhileness” of a programme? Apparently, it is enough to say that it is an “impact evaluation” or an “impact analysis.” Inside many aid organizations concerned to justify their programmes, the tell-tale adjective “impact” is soon dropped so that we have so-called “evaluations” that do not consider the worthwhileness of the programmes.

In this as in so many other aspects of development assistance, the World Bank has been the leading opinion-maker and practitioner. Indeed, the World Bank's Development Economics Department (i.e., the Bank's research department) has launched a major initiative to promote impact evaluations themselves as the ultimate low-hurdle way to evaluate development programmes and verify best practices.

Impact evaluation is an assessment of the extent to which interventions or programmes cause changes in the well-being of target populations, such as individuals, households, organizations, communities, or other identifiable units to which interventions are directed in social programmes. One way of conceptualizing net effects (or outcome) is the difference between persons or other targets that have participated in a project and comparable individuals, or entities that have not participated in the project.

An impact evaluation must estimate the counterfactual, which attempts to define a hypothetical situation that would occur in the absence of the programme, and to measure the welfare levels of individuals or other identifiable units that correspond with this hypothetical situation. [1]

Perhaps there is some irony here. The World Bank often tries to legitimate its leading role by citing its unique standpoint to scan the whole world for alternatives and to ascertain “best practices.” Yet after decades of failures, it has now decided that the best way to evaluate its development programmes is not to compare them to all the actual alternatives that might be undertaken with the same considerable resources but to compare them to “a hypothetical situation that would occur in the absence of the programme.”

A genuine evaluation not only considers costs and real alternatives but should be seen as *an integral part of the process of social learning*. Under conditions of uncertainty, local variation, and an acknowledged Socratic ignorance of “The Solution,” the best approach to social learning seems to be parallel experimentation and the real-time evaluation of benchmarking and communication of ideas between actual (i.e., non-hypothetical)

experiments where comparable resources were expended as opposed to no resources [see Ellerman, David 2005. *Helping People Help Themselves: From the World Bank to an Alternative Philosophy of Development Assistance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press].

[1] On the World Bank's website, [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org), click on "Data & Research", then "Impact Evaluation", and then "Overview" to find this description and to find a handbook [Baker, Judy L. 2000. *Evaluating the Impact of Development Programmes on Poverty: A Handbook for Practitioners*. Washington DC: World Bank].

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### BEST PRACTICE IN LIFELONG LEARNING: HUNTING THE JACKALOPE? [1]

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#### Keywords

Lifelong Learning, Best practice

#### Summary

This article argues that Lifelong Learning is not necessarily best practice in education.

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In the search for 'Best Practice' in Lifelong Learning, the first task is to identify exactly what *LLL* means. In addition to the vast differences in methodology throughout the world, there also exists a broad spectrum of theoretical interpretations. From adult education to continuing education to non-formal education to education for all, *LLL* indeed seems to be interwoven with many popular buzzwords within certain levels of educational policy discourse. There is one common denominator, however, which seems to permeate all definitions regardless of cultural or historical variations: that *LLL* is a realigning of priorities with more emphasis placed on educational opportunities being available throughout one's lifetime, rather than an emphasis on educating youth. *LLL* is the first major educational ideology to promote a shifting away from the traditional practice of focusing educational resources primarily on young people. Since the efficacy and rationale for this drastic change is rooted in the quest for efficient ways of (re)training the workforce, we must ask...is the trade-off efficient? Does deferring education from adolescence to adulthood create more value than a complete education in youth, or, is there an opportunity cost incurred by foregoing formal schooling during late adolescence? Given that so many supranational entities such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and UNESCO are heavily promoting *LLL*, it is imperative that these issues are confronted.

Child development theory provides a good framework to examine these issues. Jean Piaget is credited with identifying the four stages of child development, which are broadly categorized as: *sensorimotor (SM)*, *pre-operational (PO)*, *concrete operational (CO)*, and *formal operational (FO)*. The stages progress in the same order for everyone,

yet some stages may last longer for some than others. In essence, we all begin understanding the world first through our senses (*SM*), and as we grow older we develop the ability to use speech to represent needs and ideas (*PO*). As we mature, we start to solve problems using logic, often utilizing complex classification systems and hierarchies (*CO*). By adolescence most people have entered the stage of development typified by thinking about thinking, or the ability to engage in abstract thought (*FO*). So, is it more efficient to foster the *FO* stage with formal schooling or practical work experience? While this author does not claim to have the answer, it does seem logical to explore this question further from a child development perspective.

Piaget believes that "...some people, for instance those in manual professions, specialized labourers of various sorts, may reach the formal operational level in their particular professional domain, but not right across the board" (Evans, 1973). Although Piaget does not extrapolate further about the relationship of *FO* thinking to job selection, it is interesting to ponder that if such a relationship does exist, which came first, the chicken or the egg? Do students only reach *FO* thinking in their particular occupational domain because they have been slotted into that milieu by the education system? Or, is it that schools are efficiently matching student ability and interests with a corresponding occupation? If so, what is the margin for error? It is obvious that much more work needs to be done before the ramifications of deferring education to adulthood are fully understood or justified. Until then, best practice in *LLL* is just a jackalope, since *LLL* itself is not necessarily best practice in education.

### Notes

[1] A creature appearing as a large jackrabbit with antelope-like horns; not unlike the Loch Ness Monster or Big Foot, it is best observed in its natural habitat...on postcard racks in roadside gift-shops.

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## RATE OF RETURN TO EDUCATION: BEST PRACTICE?

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One of the most popular methods that has dominated the research in the area of Economics of Education for the last several decades has been the rate of return to education. Since the very formal heralding of Economics of Education in 1960 by Theodore Schultz (1961), researchers have estimated rates of return to education in many countries. That the method, a marginal improvement over the cost-benefit analysis, has been extensively used in most economic analyses of public investment projects, provides sufficient justification for its use in economic analysis of investment in education. Even in case of investment decision-making at the individual level, the cost-benefit framework has simple but strong relevance. In general, it has a powerful and strong logic, which appeals to all.

The rate of return to education, to be more precise, the internal rate of return to education, is that rate of discount that equates the net present value of life-time earnings of the individual, taken as the benefits of education, to the net present value of costs of education. For investment in any project to be economically justified, the rate of return should be positive, and should be higher than the alternative rate of return. Among the several projects, investment in that project is preferred where the rate of return is higher, to the projects where it is lower. Alternatively rates of return to education are also estimated using Mincerian earnings function, originally proposed by Jacob Mincer (1972). But the full method of comparing costs and earnings has been more extensively used by researchers and it has also been controversial.

Among those who popularised this method, with a series of studies in various countries and a series of global updates (see, e.g., Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004), George Psacharopoulos, formerly of the London School of Economics and then the World Bank, stands so tall that he was described by Mark Blaug (1987), another popularizer of Economics of Education, as Mr Rate of Return. Today estimates on rates of return are available on more than a hundred countries and Psacharopoulos himself estimated many of them.

As the estimated rates of return to education are found to be higher than, or at least comparable to, the rates of return to investment in other sectors of the economy, many welcomed the estimation of rates of return as providing a strong case for public investment in education. These estimates suggested that investment in education is justified not only for social and cultural reasons, but also strictly on the grounds of economic efficiency. It was hoped that this would compel the ministries of finance to treat education with due respect in the matters of allocation of resources, rather than providing resources as a charity and/or on a residual basis, i.e., allocating to education the resources that remained after allocating to all other sectors.

However, the method of rate of return has not been free from criticism. In the early 1960s itself (see, e.g., Merrett, 1966), the method was subject to severe criticism on the grounds that it assumes earnings of individuals as equivalent to their marginal productivity, or in other words, differences in productivity of people are reflected in their earnings' differentials. The method was also criticised in the earlier days for its inability to separate the influence of non-educational factors on earnings, for using simulated life time earnings profiles, etc. Theoretical improvements in the later years have answered some of this and other criticism. But the most important weakness of the method that still remains unanswered, relates to the inability of the method to account for non-economic benefits; it simply considers the earnings of the individuals – pre-tax earnings as total social benefits, and post-tax earnings as private (or individual) benefits. The criticism becomes stronger and more valid in case of social rate of return, which is not a true *social* rate of return, as the social rate of return is also confined to considering earnings – pre tax earnings of the individuals, and does not consider any non-economic benefits – social, political, cultural, etc., which accrue to the society as a whole and which are generally referred to as 'externalities' in education. Though many economists of education do take note of the externalities, these externalities are rarely brought into the calculus of rate of return, simply because they are not measurable with any acceptable level of precision. As the externalities cannot be captured in the estimation, the efficiency of the principle of the rate of return is restricted in resource allocation. But instead of advocating it as a criterion to be supplemented by other considerations in investment decision-making, it has been mostly advocated as the sole criterion, which gave rise to several kinds of problems.

This criticism has assumed higher proportions in the 1980s, as the rates of return began to be advocated as a reliable sole criterion in public policy formulation on investment in education, and as the interpretation of the estimates of rates of return in the context of public policy led to somewhat dangerous implications. According to the estimated rates of return to education, primary education yields a higher rate of return than secondary education, which in turn yields a higher rate of return than higher education. Secondly, at every level of education, in general, private rates of return are higher than social rates of return. The policy implications of these estimates are clear: countries, particularly which are starved of public resources, should reallocate public resources in favour of primary education and withdraw from higher education; and since private rates of return are higher than social rates of return, individuals should be required pay high levels of fees and public subsidies could be drastically reduced. Though the later implication is valid for all levels of education, including primary education, the argument in the policy debates has been confined mainly to higher education and extended to some extent to secondary education. These policy implications turn out to be valid, if rate of return is considered as the sole criterion in investment decision making. But there is no justification for considering it as the one and the only criterion; it could have been supplemented by other considerations. As Psacharopoulos and others at the World Bank went on estimating rates of return to education in various countries and became strong advocates of their relevance and for rather exclusive reliance on them in policy formulation, and as the policy implications drawn within a narrow technical framework of economic efficiency were highlighted, policy makers and researchers from developing countries joined the critics and strong attacks are made on the very relevance of the method of rate of return to education. Rate of Return is viewed as a ploy and even as a

capitalist conspiracy to see that developing countries do not develop strong higher education systems, would remain under-developed educationally as well as economically, and would forever remain dependent on the advanced countries. Some researchers (e.g., Bennell, 1996a,b, 1998) have also shown that the Bank and its researchers have distorted some of the research findings, or used small or inappropriate sample surveys, made simple averages, ignored more reliable database and research available, etc.

But given the overall influence of the World Bank on developing countries, many governments felt pressurised to change their policies of investment in education, particularly to give high priority to primary education at the cost of secondary and higher education. Perhaps very few governments did the same, out of any conviction on the relevance of the estimates of rates of return.

Thus the criticism of the rate of return method largely includes its incapability to consider the huge set of non-economic benefits, and even any economic benefits other than earnings, treatment of education essentially as an economic good, and the policy implications that follow, viz., reallocation of public resources in favour of primary education and away from higher education, and raising student fees and other user charges in secondary and higher education. The most important weakness of the method, viz., its inability to capture non-economic benefits of education led to the policy conclusions of the kind mentioned above. Because of the same reason, it is also felt difficult to explain why and how the social (or private) returns from higher education could be less than returns to primary education; or why do children go for higher education, when it is clear that the marginal private rates of return to higher education are less than those to secondary and primary education; or why rates of return to education are higher in developing countries than in advanced countries; and so on. The conflict between practicality versus rate of return is of late becoming increasingly clear. (see, e.g., [http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2007/03/education\\_pract.html](http://econlog.econlib.org/archives/2007/03/education_pract.html) )

Certainly the policy recommendation requiring an ill-treatment of secondary and higher education is widely seen rightly as the myopic vision of the economists of education for not being able to understand the inter-dependence of the various layers of education on one another in the education edifice on the one hand, and on the other their reluctance to note the importance of secondary and higher education in societal development, beyond the labour market, particularly in deepening democracy, building social harmony, nurturing the national and social values such as freedom, and in moulding a humane and civilised society.

The same problem of not being able to consider the non-economic benefits, also led many to argue that the whole underlying approach of the rate of return method is essentially anti-educational, as education which should not be considered as a normal economic good, is being considered as human capital and as any other economic good/service. The criticism assumes much more importance, as this contributed to viewing education as a commodity and the commoditisation of education has further helped in privatisation and vulgar forms of commercialisation of education in several developing countries, which further strengthen the forces that argue in favour of committing it to WTO and GATS for international trade. This, it is feared, would lead to the burial of the public good nature of education once for all. If so, should the blame go

to the economists of education and to the rate of return method or to its zealous advocates and users who did not pay due attention to its limitations? After all, economics of education and the rate of return to education in particular have been useful in unraveling several phenomena in education. While the rate of return method is likely to stay, its value and relevance would certainly get enhanced considerably, if any attempt is made to capture the externalities and bring them into the rate of return calculations.

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### TOWARDS BEST PRACTICE IN NORTH-SOUTH ACADEMIC LINKS?

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### Keywords

North-South academic links, Best practice

### Summary

North-South academic links have existed for more than fifty years. One would expect that best practice would have been identified, disseminated and widely adopted by now. However, this is not the case, and the question is whether it will ever actually happen.

This article argues that it will be difficult for these kinds of programmes to generate concrete examples of best practices for wider dissemination and adoption.

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North-South academic links have existed for more than fifty years. One would expect that best practice would have been identified, disseminated and widely adopted by now. However, this is not the case, and the question is whether it will ever actually happen.

There are plenty of examples of successful academic links, and it is not difficult to analyse what has contributed to their success. There have also been many evaluations of academic cooperation programmes between Northern and Southern partners which provide valuable lessons on the preconditions for successful and sustainable academic links. Given these insights, it should not be too difficult to 'construct' a model of best practice, on paper at least.

Throughout the many years that linkage programmes were supported by a host of donor agencies, some convergence seemed to have developed regarding the policy principles governing these programmes, though differences in implementation continued to exist.

In 2002 it looked as if the academic linkage programmes funded by the donor countries would also converge in terms of their approach. They tended to emphasize long-term commitment to capacity building and the partnership ideal, and gradually the need to embed academic partnerships in institutional strengthening programmes became clearly recognized. These insights had been gained through processes of learning from experience, improving practices and adapting approaches on the basis of internal and external evaluations. The changes were evolutionary rather than revolutionary. In other words: the programmes were deliberately working towards achieving better results through improved practices.

In 1999 the Netherlands' Minister for Development Cooperation broke this unspoken consensus on 'best practice' in the international cooperation programmes in higher education. She decided to abandon the existing practices and initiate alternative capacity building programmes on a completely new footing. Old principles made way for new ones. The partnership philosophy and long-term commitment were abandoned. A 'new practice' was introduced whereby capacity gaps would be filled in a business-type arrangement, with the South acting as client and the North as supplier. The new programme (NPT) [1] was designed as an experiment and was intended to cause a revolution in relationships between collaborating partners in the South and North.

Has the Dutch NPT programme disturbed or harmed the evolutionary process of arriving at best practice for linkage programmes? Probably not. The programme was a reaction to certain weaknesses that donors perceived in the existing cooperation programmes, notably the dominance of Northern and academic interests in many of the linkage projects. Unfortunately NPT will have little opportunity to prove its best practice potential, as it is to be phased out over the next few years. However, some of its elements have been positively rated by external evaluators and by the Southern organizations [2]. The programme has certainly prompted a stronger sense of ownership

in the South. As such, it has contributed another useful lesson to the stock of knowledge about what makes cooperation programmes effective.

Whether changes come about in a revolutionary or an evolutionary manner, the fact remains that it will be difficult for these programmes to generate concrete examples of best practices for wider dissemination and adoption. This can be attributed to a number of factors:

- successful academic links depend greatly on chemistry between individual partners as well as institutional support and commitment on both sides. While the latter is often difficult to achieve, the former is unpredictable from the start. Chemistry between people is impossible to replicate;
- academic links between Northern and Southern partners involve unequal relations, at least at the start of the cooperation. Mutual understanding and respect are essential if one is to cope successfully with the ensuing tensions. Again, this requires the right kind of relationship between the partners;
- local and institutional conditions and resources on both sides determine whether and how results will be achieved and sustained. In many cases these local contexts are beyond the control of the collaborating academic partners. Hence, what might work in partnership A may not work in partnership B;
- the interests of the various stakeholders involved may not always converge. What individual academics may define as a successful link from a personal and academic perspective may be regarded as a failure by their institutions because it has not produced value for them, or by the donor agency because it has not contributed to development or poverty reduction. “Beauty lies in the eye of the beholder” as the saying goes, and this certainly applies to the appreciation of the success of academic links by the various stakeholders.

The complex and context-related nature of academic links, and the fact that the interests of the academics, institutions and donors involved seldom overlap, will probably continue to prevent these programmes from defining a best practice model for North-South academic links that is fit for wider dissemination and adoption. However, approaches to or models of partnership programmes which set the stage for successful and sustainable academic links are within reach. They are evolving as practitioners learn from experience, and are modified to suit changing conditions in both the North and the South. They are based on mutual understanding and respect between partners at all levels of collaboration: individual academics, institutions, governments and donors.

### Notes

[1] The Netherlands Programme for the Institutional Strengthening of Post-secondary Education and Training Capacity (NPT) which started in 2002 with an annual budget of EUR 31 million.

[2] ECORYS Nederland BV, Evaluation of the international education programmes NPT and NFP managed by Nuffic. Final Report. March 2007.

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### BEST PRACTICE

#### The Africa Unit: UK-Africa Higher Education Institution Partnerships

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### Keywords

Best practice, UK-Africa Higher Education, Partnership

### Summary

This article describes two of the key outputs of the Africa Unit (Association of Commonwealth Universities): One will be a database of UK-Africa partnerships. Another key output envisaged by March 2008 will be a "Manual of Best Practices".

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Partnerships are by definition a form of collaboration in which all parties hope to achieve goals beyond those which they could achieve individually. Partnerships do not have to be equal, but there must be a mutual respect and understanding of what each party contributes and the benefits that each brings and derives.

The Commission for Africa Report, published in March 2005, placed significant emphasis on Africa's capacity-building needs, which led to the Gleneagles G8 commitment in mid-2005 of: 'Helping develop skilled professionals for Africa's private and public sectors, through supporting networks of excellence between African's and other countries' institutions of higher education and centres of excellence in science and technology institutions'. With funding from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Office of Science and Innovation (OSI) - both now within the new Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) - the Africa Unit (located in the Association of Commonwealth Universities) was set up to support and promote the development of partnerships between UK and African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as a means of helping to address Africa's capacity deficit. Science and Technology (S&T) is one the

vantage points through which the Africa Unit will enhance and facilitate UK-Africa HEI partnerships.

One of the key outputs from the Africa Unit will be a database of UK-Africa partnerships. The database will be a source of information for preparation of an extensive and detailed evidence-based guide to best practice in UK-Africa HE partnerships. Another key output envisaged by March 2008 will be a "Manual of Best Practices", which will be based on a literature review and practical examples of active partnerships. These examples will entail successful partnerships under the England/Africa Partnership (EAP) scheme funded by the former DfES, and the Development Partnerships in Higher Education (DeLPHE) scheme supported by the Department for International Development (DFID).

The Manual is intended to serve as a tool for a European audience, with careful consideration being given to the perspective of both needs and challenges of Africa partners in UK-African partnerships. The main objective of the S&T sector of the Africa Unit is to promote partnerships in the same way, though from a different vantage point. In May 2007 the Unit submitted a four-year 'European Union-Africa' S&T cooperation proposal, and eventually received favourable evaluation. The Unit will coordinate the project on behalf of Government Office for Science.

Examples of case studies being used (specifically for the Manual) in their different partnership categories, are the Leicester University health partnership with Gondar University (Ethiopia), the Bradford University peace and conflict studies partnership with University of Jos (Nigeria), the Leeds Metropolitan University ICT partnership with University of Malawi, and the Greenwich University National Research Institute (NRI) agricultural partnership with the Makerere University Department of Agriculture (Uganda).

Thus far the outcomes of the studies above prove, in multi-faceted ways, that good partnerships tend to be those where the benefits are mutual and recognised as such. Successful partnerships tend to be driven by a strong and coherent commitment from the senior management team in the UK, especially during the initiation of the partnership process. The same commitment at African institutions, during the implementation stage of the partnership process has proved to be helpful. What is lacking however is an efficient evaluation process to identify failure and ascertain success.

Research is also showing that good partnership means recognising the enormously difficult challenges faced by most partner institutions - financial, technical, administrative - and helping them address those challenges. But it means recognising equally that they can benefit from building a relationship of trust and mutual support with African partners. For example, where better - other than Africa - to give young British academics experience in tropical medicine or agriculture? It is this sort of collaboration that is the hallmark of true partnership.

It is striking how some UK institutions do not recognise how much they can learn from much broader partnerships, preferring instead to see grant funding as a way of getting in a few more PhD students to study in the UK. This actually exacerbates the problem, robbing those countries in the short-term - which, regrettably, often turns into the long-

term - of the talents and skills so crucial to promoting their economic well-being. However this trend can be averted by reversing brain drain from the continent.

The outputs described above remain work in progress. Research is focusing on challenges faced by institutions actively involved in a partnership, especially an understanding of the intricate details of the process of partnering itself, that is, initiation, implementation, evaluation, and prospects for a partnerships' long-term sustainability for capacity-building purposes. A clear understanding of specific academic, institutional, country, and regional needs has also proved to be helpful.

The main focus of the Africa Unit has been on HE and S&T, though there are clearly other important areas which could be covered. Health partnerships are one area; the Unit is already collaborating closely with the Tropical Health and Education Trust (THET), and we eagerly await the Government's response to the recommendations of the Crisp Report on developing health partnerships. There are other areas too; we know, for example, that one or two NGOs would be very interested in knowing which African HEIs have capacity (and are therefore potential partners) in other areas such as water and sanitation. Delving deep into these and other areas will require funding which goes beyond the current cut-off date of March 2008. On that note, to achieve specific goals in both HE and S&T the Unit is making commendable progress – hoping to continue doing so through 'best practice' – towards a partnership with the Association of Commonwealth Universities (AAU), which has just received a DFID grant to help establish a new programme of support for higher education in Africa, and other groups such as the Working Group for Higher Education (WGHE) in Accra, Ghana, and the Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA), Kampala, Uganda.

We would be happy to hear from those who think they may be able to contribute to the Manual of Best Practices based on their own experience or observation; and equally, in tandem with our mission to enhance and facilitate UK-Africa partnerships, we would be delighted to hear from those who think we might be able to offer useful advice in their own research or partnership endeavours.

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WGHE - <http://www.aau.org/wghe/index.htm> <http://www.aau.org/wghe/index.htm>

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**CHINA'S EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH AFRICA: TOWARDS A NEW BEST PRACTICE IN SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION?**

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**Key words**

Sino-African educational partnerships, approach, institutional practice

**Summary**

Educational cooperation was perceived to be the key to the sustainable development of Sino-African political and economic cooperation under the FOCAC framework. Although human resources development, higher education, technical and vocational education and training are higher on the FOCACA agenda than basic education, a holistic integrated cross-sectoral approach of cooperation emphasizing mutuality, equality and two-sidedness has been adopted in developing educational partnerships. In response to it, a new pattern of institutional practice, characterized by an institutional strategy to develop academic, research and consultancy capacity to meet both institutional and national development goals, is taking shape among Chinese higher education institutions.

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Education has been an important part in Sino-African cooperation since China first established diplomatic relations with Egypt 51 years ago. The main modalities of earlier Sino-African educational cooperation include exchange visits, student and staff exchange, government scholarships, dispatch of teachers, joint academic and research projects, supply of educational equipment and facility, etc. Such initiatives and endeavours varied, however, with the changes of the international geo-political landscape and the development of Sino-African relations. Education did not become a

priority until very recently, when educational cooperation was perceived to be the key to the sustainable development of Sino-African political and economic cooperation under the FOCAC 'framework.

Different from the western focus on basic education, human resources development, higher education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) are the fields perceived to be high priorities for cooperation under FOCAC. This does not mean a deliberate deviation from the MDGs. The pledge to support 100 rural schools by the Chinese government at the Beijing Summit in 2006 can be understood to be closely associated with the MDG of universal primary education. The FOCAC educational agenda has developed from academic exchange, government scholarships, dispatch of teachers, cooperative higher education and research projects, and human resources development to cover TVET, distance education, educational establishments, the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language, the dispatch of volunteers, the mutual recognition of academic qualifications, etc. The modalities and areas of cooperation are constantly growing but are systematically related, representing a holistic approach towards development cooperation in the education sector.

Education does not stand alone but represents an integral part of the “Cooperation in Social Development ”<sup>2</sup> under the FOCAC framework. The integrated cross-sectoral approach of cooperation is both practical and strategic in that it makes educational endeavours relevant to other development goals and in that it makes educational cooperation sustainable under a structure.

For China, interaction with African countries in education provides a new means of capacity building and development. This partly explains why in the policy discourse “educational cooperation/exchanges” is preferred to “educational assistance/aid”. As partners, China does not single out any region in Africa or any African country but take the continent as a whole. However, it is mainly the idea of “cooperation for mutual development” that leads to an approach emphasizing the mutuality, equality and two-sidedness of cooperation in the education sector. Such an approach is also determined by the very nature of South-South cooperation between China and Africa, with China as the largest developing country on the one hand and Africa being the continent with the largest number of developing countries on the other.

In response to the changing role of education in Sino-African relations, a new pattern of institutional practice can be identified among Chinese higher education institutions. It is an integrated approach to supporting the capacity building of the institutions involved. Academic partnerships with African education are no longer simply taken as political missions assigned or sponsored by government. Rationales are becoming more diversified and such endeavours are internalized or institutionalized, making them part of the institutional strategy to gain expertise and comparative advantages in the domestic higher education arena. Beyond the active participation in educational cooperation with African countries, Chinese higher education institutions are developing academic, research and consultancy capacity to meet both institutional and national development goals. In addition to the founding of a centre for African education studies at Zhejiang Normal University following its years of involvement in educational activities in Africa, similar research infrastructures are developing in some other big players like Tianjin

University of Technology and Education (with the establishment of a research center for African vocational and technical education) and Nanjing Agricultural University (with the establishment of an institute of African agriculture). As a matter of fact, Zhejiang Normal has already started to provide consultancy to education institutions and businesses going to Africa. This has led to the inauguration of a full-fledged Institute of Africa Studies at Zhejiang Normal in September this year.

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<sup>1</sup> Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, which was first launched in Beijing in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/eng/zyzl/hywj/t280369.htm>.

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### IS THERE A BEST PRACTICE IN EDUCATION RESEARCH COLLABORATION?

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As several other writers in this issue of NN39 have said, there has been a great deal written and practiced over the years about the area of education research collaboration. This has been particularly by bilateral bodies such as IDRC, NUFFIC and SAREC, foundations like Ford and Rockefeller, but also many, many others which have been mandated to fund research collaboration. Such partnership need not mean only north-south collaboration; it could also mean south-south, in a network of research centres within a region, or it could mean cross-regional collaboration, as in a recent initiative funded by the Japanese between Africa and Asia.

Are there any propositions that are worth considering in what is often a complex project of cross-national collaboration? Here are some.

Symmetrical research collaboration is the ideal, between partners who have known each other and respect each other's work. It is difficult enough to organise this within a single institution let alone across 3000 miles, but there are many good examples. The key issue is the right chemistry, and similar approaches to timing, deadlines and productivity! Not to mention theory and discourse.

The crucial design phase of the research needs adequate time, for both partners to be in the same place. Collaboration on design is virtually impossible by email.

Symmetrical research work can be difficult when the funding is all on one side of the partnership.

Many donor agencies don't wish to fund symmetrical collaboration, since their mandate is to build capacity in the south. This means that the northern partners have to be seen as the source of more expertise than the southern.

The old stereotype that research is designed in the north, data is collected by southern collaborators, but the analysis and publication take place in the north, is hopefully no longer in place.

But dramatic changes in institutions in the north and the south may mean that the ideal of long-term research collaboration over 3-4 years, with a whole series of different published outputs, is being exchanged for something closer to a consultancy relationship with each 'deliverable' costed in advance.

The dramatic reduction in the value of university salaries in many developing countries has led to the rise of the consultancy culture over the last 20 and more years. Research collaboration between short-term consultants in the south and researchers on regular long-term, or permanent university contracts in the north can be problematic in terms of symmetry.

Where there are multiple northern and southern partners in a research collaboration, it is not uncommon for the northern partners to visit all the southern countries to advise and consult, even if their expertise is limited to one; while it is uncommon for the southern partners to visit all the northern partners, let alone all the northern.

Now that the southern partners, in some agency models, are expected to take the initiative in leading the partnership, and also have to feel an ownership of the process, this may not sit easily with the continued claim that there has to be capacity building for southern partners.

Given that the northern partners' original research expertise is often in particular countries of the south, what should be their role in carrying out fieldwork themselves, jointly with their southern colleagues. If they don't do this, what is the role of the northern partners? Management and capacity building??

Even if the partnership's fieldwork data is held in common, in a situation where the southern partners are in the consultancy culture and the north on regular university contracts, there will be more time for data analysis, interpretation, reflection and publication on the northern side of the partnership.

In multiple partner research collaborations, one of the greatest dangers is that proportionately so much more time can sometimes be spent on planning, budgeting, scheduling and coordinating the diaries of all the different partners than if it were a two or three partner collaboration.

Moral: small can still be beautiful!

# **BEST PRACTICE IN AID MODALITIES**

## SEEKING BEST PRACTICE IN AID DELIVERY

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### Keywords

Aid modalities, direct budget support (DBS), Best practice

### Summary

This article argues that best practice for education requires that an appropriate balance is maintained between aid modalities to create sustainable high quality service delivery where it really matters, that is in the schools.

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When we talk of *best practice* we are likely to be assuming that our interlocutors share our own answers to the questions ‘best for what?’ or ‘best for whom?’. But they may not. In aid funding for education and training, different stakeholders may have in mind what is best for the donors, what is best for the partner governments, what is best for the education providers or what is best for the learners. Current practice suggests these are not identical.

Donor countries’ concerns to improve the effectiveness of their aid led to the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD 2005) and a range of activities to follow this up. A quick look at the Declaration reveals that, while there is an initial reference to reducing poverty and inequality, there is then no mention of those who provide the necessary services (such as schools and teachers or clinics and doctors) nor of those who are intended to benefit from the services (such as the learners and the sick) which the effective aid is expected to fund. By implication, best practice for the Paris Declaration partners means effective harmonisation and alignment: these are necessary to increase efficiency, but will clearly not be sufficient to result in the most effective impact of aid on the intended beneficiaries.

Other elements of best practice for donors include ownership and accountability. The move by many aid-giving countries to providing a large proportion of their aid through direct budget support (DBS) is intended amongst other things to increase these. There are clear benefits in increasing the flow of funds through government channels, but donors providing DBS understandably expect to influence the national budget and policy-making, which tend to diminish ownership, and if large proportions of the national budget (or even, in the case of sector budget support, of the education budget) are not coming from the country’s own taxpayers then accountability to the people is also diminished.

A recent evaluation of budget support (IDD and Associates 2006) for the donor agencies found that DBS has been an effective instrument, for example in strengthening harmonisation and public financial management, and results in increased expenditure on basic services, especially education and health, but that the expansion in services has “often been accompanied by a deterioration in quality” (p. S7). While providing the

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funding through central government strengthens central ownership, this tends to decrease the effectiveness of the funding at the level of service delivery, the school. Experience globally has shown that government bureaucracy can result in delays and the diminishing of funds as they pass through the different administrative layers, and there is a tendency for civil servants to want to use the funds which are available for the benefit of themselves – through activities such as training courses, study tours and workshops – rather than facilitating the direct use of the funds at the level of the school where they are likely to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning. What appears to be best practice at the central level may prove to be far from this at the local level.

DBS is a convenient mechanism for one central government to provide aid to another central government, but the provision of education is often far removed from the central government – either because schools depend on local authorities such as districts, or because schools are semi-autonomous, or because schools are non-state – run by communities, by faith-based organisations or by the private sector. (Indeed, at a time when the pressure to increase access to education is greater than governments can cope with even when funding is increased, much more needs to be done both to facilitate non-state provision and to increase its quality.) As an earlier analysis of the relationship between aid modalities and what is known about effective implementation of education reform indicated (Smith 2005), while DBS may enhance government capacity, it is unlikely to have much direct impact on school capacity, which is essential for successful education change. Best practice for education requires, therefore, that an appropriate balance is maintained between aid modalities which result in expanded services and those which will directly build capacity for delivering quality teaching to the learners.

The very serious efforts by donor countries and recipient governments to identify best practice in the use of aid funds must be strongly encouraged. Sector-wide approaches and the emphasis on capacity building for policy, planning and financial management have indeed had a positive impact. But in the education sector this must be balanced by the best possible use of aid funds directly to create sustainable high quality service delivery where it really matters, that is in the schools.

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## BEST PRACTICE IN BIG COUNTRIES

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### Keywords

Best practice, Brazil, Education

### Summary

'Best practice' is a useful and crisp enough concept. But it remains alien to the education community of a big country such as Brazil, for the simple reason that Brazil pays little attention to international agencies.

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Since I have worked in three international agencies for several years, the expression 'best practice' has become so familiar to my eyes and ears that it has always been taken for granted. Without thinking twice, we all considered the term 'best practice' to be a seasoned international traveller, as we ourselves tended to be. But is it?

From the best of my knowledge, it migrates smoothly to those smaller nations that are much more dependent on loans and international assistance. But as I think harder, it does not migrate so successfully to bigger countries, such as Brazil, which are less dependent on foreign loans and aid. In fact, even relatively large loans - from the perspective of the Banks - add only a tiny fraction to education budgets. Loans of hundreds of millions of dollars only put a small drop in their multi-billion dollar budgets.

These modest sums, from the point of view of the recipient countries, do not give much clout to the technical advice from international agencies. And the fact is, money is what makes the countries pay attention to the preaching of foreign experts. The small contributions of loans to the overall spending of the countries frequently accompany deaf ears to the papers and wisdom served by well-meaning international officers. Even less attention is paid to United Nations agencies which bring what amounts to petty cash to big countries.

Therefore, 'best practices' are parts of packages that tend to remain unopened in the Ministries of Education. It is not so much that the term sounds funny or wrong. However, it fails to be appreciated on its own merits, together with all the other jargon that comes in the package, such as 'rates of return' or 'internal / external efficiency'. They are all seen as World Bank lingo, something that is both 'neo-liberal' and irrelevant.

As far as I can tell, 'best practice' is not an idea rejected on its own merits, because nobody is much aware of it. It is just part of a strange dialect that no one sees the need to understand. Reading regularly our local newspaper clippings on education, I do not

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remember having ever come across this expression. Journalists are not aware of it and ministry officials have not included it in their baroque-bureaucratic jargon.

People like me - who are active in discussing education policy - often refer to the idea. In fact, the idea is unavoidable. If one sees something wrong, the immediate reaction is to propose a better practice. But we avoid using the term, because it rings no bells to the educated public opinion or administrators.

To sum up, 'best practice' is a useful and crisp enough concept. But it remains alien to the education community of a big country such as Brazil, for the simple reason that Brazil pays little attention to international agencies - which is not necessarily a virtue, by any means!

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### THE END OF POVERTY OR THE END OF BUDGET SUPPORT?

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Time is drawing near when donors kiss off years of romance with budget support. Budget support is a relatively new modality of aid whereby donors channel funds directly to the partner government budget system. This monetary approach of aid has been strongly advocated as an ideal form of aid by some European donors such as the U.K. who believe that the conventional project type assistance failed to bring about overall development effect in the recipient countries, particularly in Africa.

However, while the efficacy of budget support is unknown, it is fraught with many risks and dangers as noted below.

#### *No exit policy*

Budget support does not present a clear a priori exit policy. Because budget support is intended to piggyback a part of the budget of poorly financed government, it tends to be used to pay for administrative costs such as salaries of the public servants and office expenditures. Seventy-eight per cent of the health budget of Ghana which is heavily subsidized by the sector wide budget support is spent for the salaries of health workers. Such routine expenditures tend to be perpetuated and it will become a long-term burden on the donor governments that supply funds.

In the case of project based aid, donors and recipient government agree on the fixed-term project framework, usually, for four-to-five years. Thus donors can have a clear vision on the path for achieving development objectives as well as the timeframe for their exit from the projects, which makes them easy to predict and control their overall aid budgets over time.

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Unlike project assistance whose aim is clearly to support development of partner countries, such as capacity development, research and training, budget support poses a risk that it may not be linked directly to the development effort of the partner countries. This development risk is far more crucial than the widely recognised fiduciary risk to development partners whose common goal is to show concrete results towards achievement of the MDG's.

#### *Dependency rather than self reliance*

Budget support tends to develop a sense of dependency rather than self-reliance among those who receive it. Any government will find it cosy if a substantial amount of their budget is granted by the foreign donors indefinitely. In Africa where the level of aid dependency is already high, the proportion of budget support within their national budget is rising in a number of countries such as Uganda (55%), Tanzania (16%) and Ethiopia (15%). In these countries, budget support is provided within the expenditure framework of the PRSP. But it does not impose any actions or efforts on the part of the recipient in terms of raising revenues and thereby graduating from it. Thus budget support and aid dependency may be perpetuated regardless of the pressing needs to link national budget with the achievement of the MDG's.

#### *Unfriendliness to decentralisation*

Budget support is not a friendly tool to support the decentralisation process which is the current move in many developing countries. Budget support, particularly, general budget support is intended to strengthen the state in its core functions and usually deals with the central state as a partner. However, there are other relevant stakeholders beyond the ministry of finance and other central ministries if the MDGs are to be achieved. They are regional and local governments, the private sector and civil society who are the key actors in the decentralisation process. It is widely recognised that the budget support modality does not reach out to the intended beneficiaries on the local level such as community health posts and rural schools. In the case of project assistance, it is relatively easy to target any beneficiaries at any level or localities.

#### *Conditionality trap*

Apart from the stated objective of budget support, which is to enhance the state ownership of development policies and to build the state capacity to manage public expenditures, there is an underlying objective of promoting policy dialogue between the state government and development partners. Unlike the much criticised conditionalities attached to the structural adjustment lending by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which were largely ex-ante macroeconomic policy conditionalities, budget support donors usually impose process conditionalities such as good governance and democracy. This is made possible because budget support is easy to disburse and easy to stop. Thus donors can flexibly and timely respond to what donors consider as a violation of terms and conditions for budget support, for example, in times of military action, human rights abuse and election rigging.

In Ethiopia, budget support donors suddenly stopped funding when they learned Ethiopian police fired at the demonstrators who protested against the government election rigging. This incident illustrated the self-contradiction of budget support. While budget support is touted as building national ownership and ensuring long-term aid

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predictability, it enables donors to pressure national governments and to disrupt their budget expenditure flows.

*Limited number of clients*

Budget support made its debut early in 2000s. In spite of the efforts of some enthusiastic donors, the number of countries eligible to receive budget support has not increased so much in the past. The number of budget support clients of DFID is still hovering around twenty countries. It seems to be a difficult task for DFID to increase the share of budget support in their ODA more than 20 percent. Due to its intrinsic exclusive conditions, such as governance and fiscal management, budget support is far from being a universal tool for development aid.

*Evaluation pitfall*

Every aid intervention must be evaluated against its impact on development. Budget support tends to blur its impact on development for the following three reasons. First, because budget support, and general budget support in particular, are given to help achieve the general purpose of the public expenditures, it is difficult to pinpoint the specific development purpose of a certain tranche of fund release by the donors. Second, because budget support is attached with various non- developmental conditionalities such as good governance, participatory processes or democracy, evaluators may obscure the pure developmental goal or poverty reduction goal of the budget support by positively referring to the impact on the conditionalities, which are the “attachment” not the substantial part of the support. Thirdly, as budget support is usually provided on the basis of multi donor agreement, donors are collectively held responsible for its outcome. No donor is attributed for its success or failure. Unlike project assistance where a specific donor behaviour is duly evaluated, budget support tends to dilute the responsibility for managing and evaluating its outcome on the part of participating donors.

Having examined all the above aspects of budget support, it must be said that the current project based assistance proves to be a much superior tool for development aid than budget support, provided that donors make constant efforts to improve the former’s efficacy on development. We all agreed to work hard to achieve MDGs but we haven’t agreed that budget support is a panacea for MDGs.

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## IS FREE PRIMARY EDUCATION REALLY BEST PRACTICE IN ACHIEVING UPE? CRITICAL VIEWS FROM KENYAN SCHOOLS

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### Keywords

Kenya, UPE, Free primary education, Best practice

### Summary

Taking Kenya as a case study, this piece examines whether free primary education really is best practice in achieving universal primary education.

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The second goal of the Dakar Framework for Action clearly states that “by 2015 all children, particularly girl children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete, free and compulsory primary education of good quality.” Abolishing fees is being implemented across many African countries. But can free primary education (FPE) go in tandem with good quality in these countries where there is always a budgetary constraint? It is difficult for such countries to implement challenge of universal primary education (UPE) using only their own resources. Is this implicitly encouraging them to be more aid-dependent? We used to discuss the importance of ownership in recipient countries and their self-help efforts in the 1990s when the aid budget was shrinking. Nowadays, almost no one expresses misgivings about becoming aid-dependent.

Kenya has targeted the achievement of UPE as a national development goal and reintroduced FPE in 2003 as soon as the new President Kibaki arrived. It instantly and dramatically increased the number of children attending school by 18%. Apparently FPE had a great impact on enrolments. Improvement in enrolment ratios tends to become the sole target, leaving the quality behind. The rapidly growing number of children attending school necessitates an increase in the number of pupils per teacher or per class. In the situation where the quality of primary education must surely be enhanced, the government has recently announced that they would implement free secondary education from 2008. This is a policy message that says that the spread of secondary education enjoys priority over the qualitative improvement in primary education.

There are some problems that have arisen in terms of FPE in many schools. For example, some parents have come to believe that the government takes full responsibility for education and they have become apathetic to all school activities; which makes effective school management difficult. Grants from the government are not distributed in the new school term when schools need funds, nor is the amount sufficient. Free education does not always function as well in practice as policy makers expected.

Shortly after FPE was introduced, the government strictly prohibited all schools from collecting levies or taking any money from parents. Nowadays, however, schools tend to collect some money as fees for remedial classes, facility maintenance, and so on. Good performing schools in terms of examination results in Nairobi tend to charge prohibitive fees though they are public. Boarding schools in the provincial cities are other places where the quality of education is relatively high. However, even if tuition fees are free, payments of boarding fees and some other expenses are compulsory. Poor children are naturally excluded and cannot receive quality education.

Although the current situation seems equal in terms of access to educational opportunities, comparison of the quality of available education reveals that not all children are guaranteed the same standard of education. Poor children can receive only poor education. Then, how much benefit will each child get from such education? For whose benefit is UPE? Kenyans actually say that UPE stands for Universal Poor Education!

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### **AN ANALYSIS OF JICA'S SALARY SUPPLEMENTATION REGULATIONS ON BEST PRACTICE**

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#### **Keywords**

Salary supplementation, Counterpart, Donor agency regulations, JICA, Best practice

#### **Summary**

This article assesses JICA's regulations that disallow the Agency from providing salary supplements to local counterparts. While JICA believes that the regulations are a necessity of good practice, in actuality the implementation of such regulations may have serious limitations and difficulties.

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The provision of donor-funded salary supplementation for selected civil servants is a common practice in many development projects. The practice is necessary to obtain commitments from local project personnel, who in general are not paid enough by their government. However, both donors and recipient governments have recognised that the practice of donor-funded salary supplementation is something of a double-edged sword. A major negative consequence is that the practice is perceived to be not sustainable. It has been criticised that salary supplementation leads to a number of problems such as undesirable competition among donors, distortion of development work, corruption, abuse of the process, and brain drain. It is generally believed that these problems may even threaten the ownership of the project by the recipient government.

For these reasons, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has established strict rules that forbid providing salary supplementation for recipient government staff.

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Japan's aid philosophy has emphasised the importance of assisting self-help efforts of recipient countries. Long before "Ownership of Recipients" became a buzz-word among donors in the 1990s, Japan had already realised this philosophy's importance based on its own successful experience of economic development (Nishigaki & Shimomura, 1999, p.145-155). Such realisation resulted in concrete actions to demonstrate Japan's aid philosophy of "assisting self-help efforts of recipients", and one of these actions was the establishment of JICA regulations that forbid giving salary supplementations to local counterparts.

JICA seems to be highly proud of the agency regulations, believing that they can generate good practice. For example, JICA views the science and mathematics teacher training project in Kenya as a successful project. In this project, JICA did not provide financial incentives to counterparts and workshop participants, even though they were used to getting financial allowances provided by other donors. The Teacher Training Workshops were conducted without the consideration of monetary incentives to participants. This approach was considered as sustainable even after the project was terminated. JICA often introduces the experience of such a project as being "good practice", as it appears that the approach had encouraged self-help efforts of recipients and had taken sustainability of project activities into consideration.

However, in reality, many JICA's projects encountered difficulty in compliance with these regulations and resulted in JICA's inability to generate good practice. This observation is supported by evidence as delineated in the following:

First, JICA has been struggling to find non-financial incentives, as alternatives to salary supplementation. In many cases, JICA uses the opportunity of counterpart training in Japan as one of those alternative incentives. However, some counterparts do not regard the purpose of training in Japan as capacity development per se. Therefore, during their stay in Japan, they are keen on accumulating JICA-provided daily allowance, which is sometimes equivalent to one month salary provided by their government. In some cases, instead of working diligently, some even spend their time busy shopping for budget cars, computers, and electric appliances, which are not easily obtainable in their home countries. As such motives are human nature, how can JICA claim that providing counterpart training in Japan is not associated with financial incentives? Also, although JICA is not permitted to provide salary supplementation to their counterparts, JICA is allowed to give out other forms of payments, such as staff training fees and travel allowances, to counterparts. How can the counterparts distinguish these payments from salary supplementation? Although all these varieties of payment forms are specific terms in JICA's accounting books, from the point of view of the counterparts, they all represent monetary incentives, no different than if the money were from salary supplementation.

Second, JICA's regulations about denial of salary supplementation would ironically threaten the sustainability of the project activities. Under the situation where many other donors provide salary supplementation to their counterparts, JICA's regulations may actually discourage their counterparts from committing themselves to project activities. In JICA's irrigation project in Ghana, the counterparts felt that JICA's rule was

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too strict, compared to other donors who often provided monetary incentives. Consequently, some counterparts sought to be transferred to other organisations for better salaries. The loss of these trained counterpart personnel not only negatively influenced the efficiency and effectiveness of the project activities but also threatened sustainability in the post-project era (Miyoshi & Nagayo, 2005).

Third, JICA's salary supplementation regulations may not help in raising the ownership of recipient governments. While it is said that salary supplementation practice may run the risk to threaten ownership in government, actual research has demonstrated that this may not be always the case. In Cambodia, for instance, higher ownership can be found in government departments which were well-resourced by donors through salary supplementation and other operational assistance. Such a desirable situation tended to raise capacity and ownership, compared with those poorly funded departments with few resources (Hubbard, 2005). This cause-and-effect phenomenon points to the fact that providing salary supplementation may actually help the recipient government to have higher ownership.

Fourth, JICA's regulations on salary supplementation do not comply with donor-coordination. With the introduction of Sector-wide approaches (SWAps), harmonisation of salary supplements becomes an important agenda among donors in many countries. While civil service pay reform is being implemented to increase the wages of counterparts, as a transitional measure many donors call for salary-topping-up schemes through donor budget support or setting a ceiling on the amount. They attempt to establish unified approaches to salary supplementation issues (UNDP, 2005). Such attempts have often been introduced as "good practice" by many other donors (see, DANIDA, 2004). When the practice of salary supplementation is being justified and coordinated among many donors, how can JICA keep insisting on denying salary supplementation?

Thus, JICA's regulations that forbid salary supplementation would in reality suffer from limitations and difficulties in their implementation. Under these circumstances, the rigidity of donor agency regulations would not necessarily generate an intended good practice, and it may even be counterproductive. Perhaps JICA should not be so over-confident of its own regulations. JICA may be wise to explore other better approaches to refine the salary supplement issues so that it can realise Japan's aid philosophy about "assisting self-help efforts", and help to achieve best practice.

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**BEST PRACTICE IN  
LANGUAGE, SCIENCE, ICT &  
EXAMS**

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## ICT AS BEST PRACTICES IN THE ASIAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

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### Keywords

ICT, Asian Development Bank, Best practice

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International organizations' impact on national education policies can be institutionalized through promotion of particular strategies for educational change as 'best practices'. It is essential to understand such best practices and the reasons why they are construed as exemplary approaches, as discursive frameworks of international institutions shape the 'limits of the possible' (Mundy, 2007), by constructing the challenges to current institutional forms of schooling and preferred solutions, with implications for the structure, culture, and organization of education at national, sub-national, and regional levels (Robertson, 2005). The Asian Development Bank (thereafter ADB, also bank), for example, has selected on its web site a few practices in education that it views as exemplary and refers to them as 'good' rather than 'best' practices, suggesting a cautious approach to the notion of best practices within the bank. These 'good practices' in education include Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and sector-wide approaches, among a few others. In the following sections I discuss the reasons why ICT lends itself to being selected as a best practice by a multilateral development bank and the limitations of ADB's construction of ICT as a best educational practice.

Broadly, ICT support several focal points in multilateral development banks' policies: poverty reduction, cost-effectiveness, decentralization, and public-private partnership. Given the location of multilateral development banks in the international financial marketplace, it is not surprising that ICT's cost effectiveness is among its main virtues. According to the ADB, increased computing power, wireless access, satellite technology, and reduced telecommunications costs will reduce the cost of delivering education. Similarly, ICTs are convenient for rapid knowledge transfer through, for example, a 'cluster leader schools' concept in Uzbekistan, providing "an institutional infrastructure for the rapid development of teacher training" (ADB, 2006, p.8). However, there is some indication that the technology package itself could not sustain the onslaught of electricity cuts, telephone line cuts, and inadequate fibre optic cable in developing countries. For instance, distance learning 'requires national level infrastructural development in the areas of phone and computer networks, email Internet service provision, as well as substantial subsidizing of these systems to allow a larger group than those who can afford these links to join the educational process' (Halileh and Giacaman, 2002, cited in Dicum, 2004). Thus, addressing concerns about maintenance and sustainability of ICT projects requires evaluating the ICT-readiness and needs in the recipient countries, including the enabling environment in recipient countries.

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As Ellerman argues in this Norrag issue, *en vogue* development practices, often identified as ‘best practices’ have to show quick results on the ground, results which can then be amplified through public relations activities couched in terms of the latest rhetoric. In this regard, ICT can be quantified in terms of inputs and outputs (the number of computers supplied, computer labs opened, and the number of teachers trained using ICT) and the ADB’s approach to ICT focuses on such inputs and outputs. This input-driven approach to ICT, while facilitating the reporting of project results, encapsulates computer-assisted learning processes and outcomes in a black box. The bank’s existing ICT projects are guided by the assumption that e-learning, e-training, and e-textbooks generally enhance education quality. ADB’s discussion of ICT as a best practice lacks supporting evidence on specific ways in which information and communication technologies improve learning outcomes and on the effectiveness of computer-based learning systems in individual countries in the Asia-Pacific. While the bank has proposed pilot studies in Bangladesh, Mongolia, Nepal, and Samoa under the project “Technical assistance for innovative information and communication technology in education and its potential for reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region” in 2004, results of these pilot studies are difficult to locate.

Further, consistent with development agencies’ equity and poverty reduction concerns, ICT is envisioned as essential for bridging the digital divide and for reaching the poorest members of society (ADB, 2006, p.14). However, ICT is envisioned to support mainly formal education, with little attention to the role and impact of ICT in reaching migrant, refugee, and street children, and children in conflict and emergency situations.

ICT in education is also construed as a best practice given its purported role in the ‘global competition’: “Intense global competition and rapid technology change require a well-educated and technologically skilled workforce, producing high value-added and knowledge-intensive goods and services’ (ADB, 2006, p.6). Thus, ICT skills are legitimized as important as reading and other literacy skills. Given the importance of knowledge-intensive societies, ICT is seen as important in providing crucial linkages to knowledge hubs (e.g., breaking down “isolation from information and support mechanisms faced by rural teachers”). In brief, inclusion of ICT as a best practice requires attention to the core matters of educational process, including measuring the impact (i.e., learning outcomes) of ICT-driven projects.

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## BEST PRACTICE AND ACTUAL PRACTICE IN LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICY

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I found this definition in my trusty online dictionary:

***Best practice:*** *A technique or methodology that, through experience and research, has proven to reliably lead to a desired result.*

If this off-the-cuff definition is anywhere close to correct, then presumably the discovery of best practices takes time, resources and a certain belief that their application elsewhere will make a difference. Once the best practice is found, one assumes, implementation will follow. All we lack is the information!

However the sad truth is that, when it comes to language choice in formal education settings, the discovery of best practice often makes little difference to the language policy environment. Issues of power, tradition and the hegemony of European languages carry much more weight than research findings.

Consider: one of the most celebrated experimental programmes in bilingual education in Africa was carried out in Nigeria from 1970-1978. The Ife Primary Education Research Project, directed by renowned scholar Prof. Babs Fafunwa, found clear evidence that using a child's own language - Yoruba in this case - in school brings significant cognitive and academic benefits. Another study, undertaken by the Canadian International Development Agency in Cameroon in the early 1980s, found the same thing. Brilliant! Let's all get geared up for using children's own languages in the primary classroom. It is not only eminently common-sensical, but we now have research to show that it is 'best practice' too.

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But that's not what happened. Parents said: Why should my child learn in our language? It won't get her anywhere. Teachers said: Teaching in the local language is unprofessional. Governments said: This is too expensive! Elites said: Equality of access to education is simply not in our interests.

When it comes to language of instruction questions, 'best practice' has faced a hard slog to acceptance. Such acceptance as does exist has usually been the result of hard pushing by international agencies such as UNESCO, and ceaseless advocacy by national-level organizations who work the system to achieve what they know is right. However the ongoing obstacles - not the practical ones, but the attitudinal ones - are enormous in every case.

These facts belie the naïve idea that people and institutions operate in less-than-effective ways because of a lack of knowledge about more effective alternatives. They don't. Often they operate as they do because it is to their advantage. Applying 'best practices' is quite attractive to those who do not feel themselves well served by the status quo. For the beneficiaries of the system, however, the motivation for change can be negligible - notwithstanding the research.

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# **NEWS ABOUT NORRAG & NORRAG NEWS**

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## Norrags Numbers: is World Domination Best Practice?

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### Keywords

NORRAG, membership numbers

### Summary

This piece examines how the membership of Norrag is growing and asks whether specific attention should be paid to certain regions and groups that are under-represented in the Norrag ranks.

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### Membership changes April 2004 – Sept 2007

Since April 2004, membership of NORRAG has increased by approximately 1,200 members: from 415 individuals to over 1,600 by September 2007 (Table 1). Up until December 2006, the average monthly increase in membership was approximately 15-24 individuals a month. However, since December 2006 the average monthly increase in membership has increased to 62. This is a result of new efforts to target potential members as well as changes to the norrag.org website which made most articles accessible to google type search engines from February 2007.

**Table 1. Total membership April 2004 – Sept 2007, including average new members/month for selected intervals**

Date	12.04.2004	19.10.2004	24.08.2005	04.12.06	02.09.07
<b>Total membership</b>	<b>415</b>	<b>557</b>	<b>705</b>	<b>992</b>	<b>1614</b>
Period (months)	n/a	6	10	14	10
Average new members/month over period	n/a	24	15	21	62

### The period December 2006 – September 2007

Overall there has been a *significant increase* in NORRAG membership over the last 10 months (Dec 06 – Sept 07); membership has increased dramatically from approximately 900 to over 1,600 individuals. Membership has increased in every region, in both relative and absolute terms. However, this growth has been uneven: Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), East and South Asia / Pacific, Europe and North America appear to be gaining much more members (in absolute terms at least) when compared to the Middle-East and North Africa (MENA), Central Asia / Russia and Latin America / Caribbean.

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During the period Dec 06 – Sept 07 membership in SSA increased by approximately 120, from 204 to 321 members. In East and South Asia / Pacific membership has increased by approximately 130, from 178 to 312 members. In Europe, numbers have increased by 220, from 437 to 657 members. In North America (Canada and USA), membership has increased by approximately 110, from 93 to 203 members. However, in MENA membership has only increased by 18, from 12 to 30 members (Dec 06 – Sept 07). In Central Asia / Russia over the same period, membership only increased by 5, from 6 to 11 members. Likewise, in Latin America / Caribbean membership has only increased by approximately 20, from 61 to 80 members. It is suspected that the difficulties in attracting membership from these latter three regions is both an issue of language (NORRAG's current weakness in reaching Arabic, Russian and Spanish speaking groups) and content (there is not much in Norrag News on these regions!).

### **Main country groupings per region**

- SSA: Mostly in Anglophone countries (80% membership in SSA), especially South Africa (64), Ghana (42), Nigeria (42), Kenya (25), Tanzania (19) and Uganda (17). Only Francophone country with sizeable membership is Rwanda (19).
- MENA: Largest membership in Jordan (7) and Morocco (5).
- Central Asia / Russia: no significant groups.
- East Asia / Pacific: Together India (75) and China (50) make up 40% of all membership in this region. Other substantial groupings are found in Japan (39), Australia (36) and Pakistan (29).
- Europe: The UK (206) alone accounts for over 30% of all European membership. Other substantial groupings are found in Switzerland (86), France (70), Netherlands (61) and Germany (56). Smaller, but sizeable groupings found in Italy (28), Sweden (24) and Denmark (20).
- Latin America / Caribbean: Largest membership in Chile (14) and Mexico (11).
- North America: USA (155) accounts for over three-quarters of all membership in this region. Canada (48) accounts for the remaining quarter.

### **Is World domination best practice? (And, if so, how do we get there?)**

Should we be concerned about these numbers in MENA, Central Asia / Russia and Latin America / Caribbean? Should we be concerned about the dominance of Anglophone members in SSA? Is the objective of Norrag to reach everybody, everywhere; in effect to go for world domination? If we are to outreach to these groups, what is the best strategy to adopt?

If you have any thoughts on Norrag's membership patterns, or suggestions regarding how we might proceed, please get in touch with us: [rob.palmer@norrag.org](mailto:rob.palmer@norrag.org)

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**NOTICE ABOUT SARE: SOUTHERN AFRICAN REVIEW OF EDUCATION**

[We think this issue of SARE could well be of interest to members of Norrag. Editor]

# SARE

## **Southern African Review of Education**

**Volume 13, No 2**

**(forthcoming November/December 2007)**

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