

Challenging the education paradigm

by Jennifer Star

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Tara.Ed child
(Courtesy of Tara.Ed)

Ten years ago, as a second-year archaeology student I spent a summer in India teaching at an NGO-run school. It was a powerful experience for a country girl from rural NSW. The moment that it changed the course of my life, however, is forever etched in my memory: I was walking to school over a bridge that spanned an open sewerage channel separating the slum from a main road. Looking to my right I saw a little girl, pants rolled to her knees, a big canvas sack on her back, carrying a stick with a prong at the end. She was wading through the raw sewage, looking for recyclables that could be sold to earn a living.

It was an image that I had become accustomed to over my three months in India. On this occasion, however, I stopped to take a second look because I realised this girl was called Arthie, she was eight years old and in my Year Two class. It was at that moment that I realised that the way we approach education for development needs to change.



Jennifer in action in the classroom (Credit: Tara.Ed)

In countries like India, **statistics indicate that 92%** of primary school aged children are enrolled in school. Despite this, education standards and learning achievement remain low, and student absenteeism and drop-out rates remain high. This suggests that access to education is not the problem; quality of education is. A child like Arthie may be enrolled in school but can't attend because she must contribute to the household by earning a wage or caring for her siblings. In addition, the school may not have separate girls' toilets, or the teacher may be frequently absent.

We know from research what “good quality” education looks like, and we know what impacts student achievement and learning outcomes. Yet little of what we know from research and best practice in education is applied to development and emergency education – we adopt an “anything is better than nothing” approach, and the interventions, projects, funding structures and measures of success have remained static for the better part of 50 years.

This old approach is focused on access to education – providing children in the developing world with access to school. At an international level, this is seen through campaigns such as **Education for All (EFA)** and **Millennium Development Goal 2** – universal primary education. At the local level, we see it through NGO campaigns to ‘build a school’ and Government and private grants and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs that encourage infrastructure development. The measure of success for this approach, essentially ‘bums on seats’, works because it's easy to do a head count.

There is no doubt that access to education is important. But it is only one aspect of development education. We need to move the discussion – and our funding and solutions – away from access to education towards a focus on quality of education.



Tara.Ed classroom (Credit: Tara.Ed)

The conversation at the top-most levels is starting to move in this direction. Initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are forcing the conversation into the realm of quality: **SDG 4** aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all.

This brings up challenges, of course, such as how we measure quality. The answer is incredibly simple. We know from decades of education research what good quality education is; we know what school-based factors influence student learning and achievement and we have the tools available to be able to assess, monitor and track student progress over time. But implementing quality is expensive long-term and difficult to quantify.

As a consequence, while the conversation may have changed, funding cycles and on-the-ground approaches have not. They are still tied to interventions that promote access. Funding, both government aid and private grants, are heavily skewed to favour infrastructure development, resourcing and student sponsorship. Funding cycles are short and evaluation measures boil down to little more than head counts. This means that in practice, we are limited to the same old things we have been doing all along.

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After my encounter with Arthie in 2007, I established an NGO that aims to promote sustainable quality education in rural and remote areas of India (and more recently Bangladesh and Afghanistan). Although there are already over two million NGOs working in India and the wider South Asian region, our programs are unique because they challenge the old paradigm and focus on quality education. Our programs are grounded in educational research – which clearly **shows** that the teacher is the single most important school-based influence on student learning and achievement – and focus on training, empowering and supporting the teacher.



Tara.Ed teacher Madi Mackenzie (Credit: Tara.Ed)

Rather than building a school or sponsoring a child, we work with existing education institutions to build capacity and mobilise resources as partners. Our school improvement programs run for a six-year cycle, are grounded in research, and follow best practice in teacher professional learning. Indeed, one of our flagship programs is built on teacher collaboration in which Australian pre-service teachers spend up to a month in one of our partner schools, engaging in a cross-cultural, professional skills exchange and contributing both to the school and their own professional development. Most importantly, everything we do is aimed at sustainability: once our project cycle concludes, the school, as a model school in the region, has the responsibility to share resources and work to train, empower and support other teachers and schools in their area, thus handing the responsibility for change back to the community.



Tara.Ed teacher tour in 2014 (Credit: Tara.Ed)

We are just a small grass-roots organisation trying to change the paradigm. Over the past decade we have partnered with 38 schools, trained 600 teachers and provided 17,500 children with quality education. In terms of numbers, this is a mere drop in the ocean. But it is sustainable, lasting change. If education and development stakeholders across the spectrum invest in quality rather than access, we might just be able to help reduce poverty within our generation.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/challenging-the-paradigm-in-development-education-20180604/>