

Foundations of classroom change in developing countries: a review

by Robert Cannon

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Considerable variety in classroom behaviour exists in both the formalistic and progressive education paradigms

Photo Credit: Robert Cannon

Foundations of classroom change in developing countries, by Gerard Guthrie, was self-published online this year and is available for free [download](#).

Foundations is an important, two-volume work of research, synthesis, and advice. *Volume 1: Evidence* draws together the findings on classroom change from all 142 'developing countries'. This evidence is organised by distinct groups of countries with similar cultural values. Extensive evidence is presented that 'progressive' education ideas, introduced by donors or borrowed by national governments, were adopted in two-thirds of developing countries since the 1960s. Yet, Guthrie also shows that, astonishingly, there has been no sustained shift away from traditional, 'formal' teaching in any country. *Volume 2: Synthesis* integrates these findings and considers the implications for theory, policy and practice. *Foundations* significantly updates two previous books by Guthrie I have reviewed for Devpolicy Blog, [The progressive education fallacy in developing countries](#) and [Classroom change in developing countries](#).

The ideas of formalism and progressivism are central to *Foundations*. Traditional teacher-centred formalism has not been fashionable in education for over 50 years. Common practice has been to attempt to replace it with the progressive education paradigm that emphasises student-centred learning. Progressive policies and practices have long dominated the approach of aid agencies and in policy borrowing by many developing countries. Yet the evidence revealed here is that progressive policies are widespread failures. The reason? According to Guthrie, deep-rooted cultural values shared by teachers, students and parents are key to understanding classroom behaviour. The Anglo-American, individualistic cultural values of the progressive student-centred approach clash with different cultural values that shape formalism in developing country classrooms.

Guthrie shows that formalism can support high standards in teaching and learning. The most productive approach is to focus on the development of culturally appropriate classroom methods. To support this approach, Chapter 6 in Volume 2 outlines a helpful teaching styles model to guide planning and action, while Chapter 11 conceptualises 'reverse engineering' as a model for identifying successful teaching methods. This involves working backwards from students' learning to identify those methods that facilitate learning. Chapter 14 provides an 'eightfold path' for classroom change with formalism as the frame of reference.

The author, Gerard Guthrie, is a prolific contributor to educational research and development. For more than 45 years, Guthrie has been an academic in Australian and Papua New Guinea universities, was Foundation Professor of Education at the University of Goroka, a Director in AusAID, and a consultant in Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific.

Written with developing country lecturers and students in mind, this free work should also become a standard reference used by professionals and academics in the foreign aid educational development community. Why?

First, Australia continues to invest **considerable resources** in developing education in the Pacific and Southeast and East Asia. In 2019-20 Australia spent approximately one-third of that assistance on primary and secondary education, the focus of *Foundations*. A professional responsibility of those involved in implementing programs is to be aware of current research, such as Guthrie's, to ensure that those investments do yield benefits for those intended. Effective action based on such awareness will minimise the risk that development programs do not become further footnotes in the litany of failure identified in *Foundations*.

The second reason why *Foundations* should become a standard reference among development professionals is its clear explanations across several academic domains. These domains include educational theory, research design, teaching styles, classroom change, and policy. The explanations will be of particular interest to the large cohort of professionals working in educational development who have no formal qualifications in education or teaching.

Third, development professionals and academics need to be aware that progressive education reforms in developing countries have failed, why, and what needs to be done in future to secure sustained change.

The purposes of *Foundations* were to update the evidence on classroom change from all 142 developing countries and, from that evidence, provide a synthesis of the theoretical and policy foundations for change in classroom teaching. These

purposes have been achieved. Further, they are presented to a very high standard for a self-published work. Guthrie's introductory explanation of why he has self-published is compelling reading: he vigorously critiques the vested intellectual interests that protect academic in-groups and the current publishing practices that generate the outrageous prices of books that few students and academics can afford.

Foundations has two distinguishing differences from most other books on development: first, it is published free on ResearchGate for download; second, it is written for a target audience in 'developing' countries, where scholarly texts are often prohibitively expensive. In that sense, *Foundations* is a constructive form of development assistance in its own right – not only because it is free, but because it is thoughtfully designed for clarity to assist in the reader's professional development.

These accessible volumes illustrate the best in aid and development analysis and presentation. Not burdened with the convoluted English that cripples too much writing in education, they are a pleasure to read. The language is direct and the layout engaging. Helpful chapter introductions, summaries and conclusions, study questions, suggestions for further reading, and a good index, all assist comprehension. Many of the publications listed in the massive reference list are available free on the Internet. The presentation, layout, and publication links will also be of immense value to busy professionals in the field seeking easy access to research findings and guidance for implementation.

These volumes should be in every educational developer's library. I hope that developing country academics and students do respond to Guthrie's novel invitation to contribute their local knowledge via ResearchGate to inform future editions of this important work.

Disclosures:

As Guthrie has declared in his Preface, I have read draft chapters of *Foundations* and have provided critical feedback. My objectivity may be questioned. However, that experience has given me insights that might not strike other reviewers. My relationship with Guthrie is entirely professional, with no financial or in-kind considerations. We have only met via the Internet to share interests in securing better educational outcomes for children.

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