

Publication : Harvard Business Review

Date : 22 MARCH 2011



Innovations in Education is the second of three blog series on social innovation culminating in three Think Tanks organized by the **Advanced Leadership Initiative** at Harvard University. The first blog series explored **Innovations in Health Care**.

From Good Teachers to Good Teaching

8:48 AM Tuesday March 22, 2011

by Anustup Nayak




*Editor's note: This post is part of a **three-week series** examining educational innovation and technology, published in partnership with the **Advanced Leadership Initiative** at Harvard University.*

Close to quarter of a billion children go to school in India. Many leave without mastering concepts, gaining confidence or communicative skill. Oftentimes, our 6 million practicing teachers are blamed for this poor outcome; and labeled as "under-motivated," "unskilled," and "closed-minded." Eight years ago when I returned to India with a Harvard classmate with a dream to reform schooling, I also held a dismal view about our teachers.

In India, and across the world, three big attempts are being made to fix this problem of so-called "bad" teachers — retraining them, recruiting "smarter" people, or replacing them with technology. None seem to have quite delivered results. We are not surprised. Our initial experience of training 2000 teachers yielded excellent reviews but NO classroom change. I wonder about the outcome of the millions of manhours that Indian government budgets for in-service training every year. Efforts like **Teach for America** to recruit talented teachers and millions of dollars invested on e-learning have mixed results when applied at scale.

Why don't these fixes work? It took us several hundred hours of sitting inside real classrooms to figure out. Teaching is an incredibly difficult job even for a driven person and especially so for a middle-class housewife with a basic education who is thrown into a classroom to "tell" from the text and get 40 children to listen. Blaming her for being a poor teacher or giving her theoretical discourses is pointless unless we have a better recipe for how she could teach as an alternate. So instead of running after a mirage of "good" teachers can we pursue a more pragmatic agenda of equipping existing teachers with a recipe for good teaching?

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Three critical ingredients are needed for good teaching to happen inside classrooms.

First, we need a 'micro-process' for good learning — one that is sufficiently detailed and works in the classroom. What if we created a teachers' toolkit that takes every concept taught to children, say properties of air, and breaks it down in to five simple steps — make the objective clear to children (understand that air occupies space), conduct an hands-on activity to experience it (immerse a brick in water), questioning to grasp the concept (where do the bubbles come from?), apply this knowledge to a real-life challenge (what would happen if we burnt a candle inside a glass?), and finally assess what children learn?

Good teaching also requires the practical skill of engaging every child in the classroom. What if we create a continuous teacher education program situated inside the classroom, that gets teachers to observe expert demonstrations, discern effective classroom management practices, "micro-teach" lessons and finally get constructive feedback? This will sustain when supported by instructional leaders — principals who are equipped to make curricular choices, demonstrate lessons, observe and give feedback on teaching, and lead collaborative practices.

Good teaching becomes visible only with regular measurement of learning and actionable feedback. Instead of high-stakes tests that label children, what if we had a continuous assessment system where every child got to apply knowledge to a multiplicity of application tasks, received specific feedback on her progress and created a actionable plan to improve her learning?

We have implemented these three insights in more than 500 mainstream Indian schools, many of which are severely constrained by teaching talent. We created a teachers' toolkit that mapped every concept in the Indian K-8 syllabus into 8000-plus detailed experiential teaching plans, trained teachers in classroom skills, and gave each child formative assessment and feedback. Equipped with a better process and support, the same teachers are now able to show visible improvement in children's understanding of concepts, application ability and communication skill.

Across the world there are several examples of how good teaching can manifest. A recent McKinsey study that benchmarked over 60 "most-improved schooling systems shows that process interventions did better than ones that focused on resources and organization. The success of Escuela Nueva in impoverished Latin America shows that structured tools can offset the scarcity of teaching talent. In the U.S Doug Lemov has a radical approach to teacher training by videotaping successful teachers and breaking their actions into a taxonomy of effective teaching.

Our experience shows that it is indeed possible to get children to learn better with the same teachers. What can make the difference is superior process backed by practical skill-building and supportive leadership. This is a ray of hope for school reform in India and for the world.

Anustup Nayak is a Partner at iDiscoveri Education, a social enterprise with a mission to renew education in India. Anustup leads communications and advocacy at iDiscoveri and holds an Ed.M. ('02) from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

The article draws from the work and writing of Ashish Rajpal, founder and CEO of iDiscoveri and its innovation thought leader. Ashish left a corporate career in Europe to pursue his dream to reform education in India. Ashish holds an Ed.M. ('02) from Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Learn more about the Advanced Leadership Initiative at Harvard.