The Millions Learning report provides some answers to the question of how to achieve quality education at a large scale.

A report from the Brookings Institution, Millions learning: Scaling up quality education in developing countries, analyses 14 learning interventions that have been scaled up to reach hundreds of thousands of students in diverse contexts around the world. The report contains answers to some of the central questions being posed by education stakeholders around the world as they work to achieve SDG4, quality education for all:

What are some successful approaches to improving learning around the world, and how can we adapt these to our own context?

The Millions Learning report identifies 14 educational interventions that were developed in low- or middle-income countries, have shown evidence of improved learning, and have been scaled up to reach a significant share of their target population (see this link for a series of blog posts on each of the chosen interventions). But the report is careful to note that these cases “are not meant to represent the best models or approaches to improving learning; in fact, some of the approaches are being debated”. These cases were chosen because they provided particular insight into how educational innovations can expand to improve learning outcomes on a larger scale. Flexible adaptation to new contexts emerges as one central feature of this process: successful programmes worked to identify which elements of their approach should be maintained as core characteristics and which could be changed to reflect local circumstances and particular education needs.
How can we, as education authorities and funders, encourage innovation to try out different possible solutions to our education problems?

The cases analysed in this report demonstrate the importance of an enabling environment for educational innovation. Government and other influential stakeholders need to be open to new ideas, focusing on the mission of quality education rather than rigidly defending a particular model or institution. This allows a culture of research and development (R&D) to flourish, in which experimentation is valued, and is informed by strong processes of data collection and analysis for continuous improvement. Welcoming a diverse array of actors to take part in this experimentation is also important, although governments must continue to exercise monitoring and regulatory functions. When there are early signs of success, influential leaders with “political will and capital to scale and sustain an idea” are often needed to play the role of champion. Finally, if governments and funders are to invest resources in building a culture of R&D in education, the report shows that they need to offer flexible financing that allows for experimentation, institutional learning, and growth. Scaling up an innovation often requires a decade or more of stable financing, including critical support at the middle stage of growing from an initial pilot to broader implementation.

What principles should education innovators keep in mind if they want to develop solutions that can be scaled up?

The Millions Learning report states that “going to scale must be designed for from the outset” through “a clear vision of what the endgame is and a theory of change about the best way to get there”. The most effective initial designs arise from a participatory process, focusing on the real priorities of students, parents, teachers, and other local actors. While this process is often led by a visionary leader, partnerships among diverse governmental and non-governmental actors are also necessary in order to gather together the range of capacities necessary for designing and implementing a successful educational innovation.

Another key element of learning innovations that have been successfully brought to scale is their focus on supporting teachers and reducing their burdens, either
by introducing tools and technologies that allow teachers to focus more on their core tasks, or by involving community actors to support in some aspects of instruction. Even in the development of an initial pilot, attention must be given to the cost implications of scaling up, since taking out expensive elements at a later stage can jeopardize the model in unknown ways. Finally, embedding strong processes for collecting and analysing data from the beginning can help both to create stronger interventions, and to have evidence available when opportunities for expansion open up. This data can also help to accurately identify which aspects of the approach must be maintained as core elements, and which can be adapted to allow for new contexts and scales of implementation.

We have identified a successful model for improving learning outcomes that is currently operating at a small scale. How can we scale it up?

The first step may be to analyse whether the model is suited for a larger scale. Is there sufficient data on the model to know what learning improvements it can achieve and how? Can its core features be maintained while adapting it to meet local education needs in other contexts? Has it been designed to be cost-effective at scale? If these conditions are met, education decision-makers may need to adapt rules and policies to allow the new approach to be tried in new contexts, as well as providing funding, infrastructure, technical support, or capacity building. In the end, to determine the best approaches to scaling up for a particular context, innovators will need to draw on expertise from diverse actors and work in partnership with government institutions.

There is also a key question the Millions Learning report cannot answer:

Do we need to innovate new solutions, or do we just need to do a better job implementing our current approach?

Millions Learning intentionally focuses on scaling up innovative practices, pointing out that other organizations (such as the World Bank, ODI, and OECD) are already working on identifying effective reforms to existing large-scale education systems. Before spending precious time and resources on efforts to promote
education innovation, education planners would do well to study carefully the challenges they face, asking whether the problem primarily lies in poor design or rather in poor execution. When current approaches to education are poorly designed, targeted efforts at innovation can make sense. But if the major problem is poor ability to execute plans that have already been well thought-through, improvements in institutional capacity and management need to come first.

The Millions Learning initiative has now entered a new phase exploring how to finance the scaling up of effective educational interventions. Take a look at the Millions Learning page for ongoing updates.


Bookmark this

View PDF