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ACCELERATING LEARNING FOR CHILDREN IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES:

A SUMMARY



An educational revolution is underway in many places in the world. This revolution is based on recent discoveries about the brain and on psychological and educational research about classroom strategies that accelerate student learning. A recent study funded by the United States Agency for International Development¹ compares these research findings with knowledge about how accelerated learning is defined and applied in the developing world. The analysis reveals fresh insights concerning a definition of accelerated learning, useful principles and practices, a framework for implementing programs in developing countries, and conditions under which accelerated learning programs might be considered.

What Is Accelerated Learning?

Accelerated learning has two definitions, depending on whether the term is being defined in education or development literature.

In education literature (AL-E), which originates in industrialized countries, accelerated learning is associated with deeper, more effective learning. Descriptive terms highlight its general approach: brain-based, whole brain, holistic, integrative, and natural.

While this definition could be considered a subset of effective schools research, it is distinguished because of its basis in brain research, which explains how people learn and what they learn. In addition, as the term implies, the effective schools movement focuses more on the school and the climate that improves student learning. AL-E focuses more on the student as a human being and the way he or she learns.

Accelerated learning in development literature (AL-D) is sometimes used synonymously with high-quality schooling. In this context, AL-D is often applied to address "pressing development needs and local, regional, or national strategic priorities such as literacy, vocational training, or microenterprise development" (Intili and Kissam 2004, 9). Other times, AL-D is used to quicken the pace of learning a set curriculum when children's schooling has been interrupted by social upheaval, natural disasters or other gaps in school attendance. In these contexts, the goal is often to catch students up to their age-appropriate grade level.

Development practitioners recognize, however, that it is not sufficient or wise to simply cover the established curriculum more quickly. They advocate and actively work to condense the curriculum, and/or build students' skills as efficient, self-directed, and collaborative learners (Intili and Kissam 2004, 28). A variety of effective teaching techniques culled from current education literature is used to increase student interactions with teachers and create more active participation by students in their own learning. Thus, a working definition of AL-D that distinguishes it from high-quality learning is "an approach to learning that compresses the time taken to teach and learn the basics of a certain curriculum using learner-centered teaching principles and practices."

The two definitions are tied by several threads of commonality: the idea of faster learning, and the twin ideas of effectively engaging students in active, participatory ways of learning and increasing instructional interactions between teachers and students and among students. A consolidated definition for development practitioners is proposed as follows:

An approach to learning that uses learner-centered teaching principles and practices to creatively engage students' multiple learning systems, resulting in faster, deeper, and more proficient learning.

¹ J. Charlick. "Accelerating Learning for Children in Developing Countries: Joining Research and Practice." Edited by Cynthia J. Prather. (Washington, DC: U.S. Agency for International Development, 2005). By Creative Associates International, Inc.



Accelerated Learning:

Using learner-centered teaching principles and practices to creatively engage students' multiple learning systems, resulting in faster, deeper, and more proficient learning.

When Should Accelerated Learning Be Considered?

In the developing world, planners might consider an accelerated learning program in any of the following situations within regular formal school settings or in special programs in nonformal schools or learning centers:

- If overcrowded classrooms due to universal primary education or other school enrollment initiatives have forced the system to double shifts or half-day classrooms of instruction
- If whole groups or communities of children have been out of school for a term or more due to seasonal work
- If education is being initiated in isolated, rural communities where children previously did not have an opportunity to attend school
- If school has been disrupted for one or more school terms due to some crisis-induced emergency (e.g., natural disaster, war, community epidemic)
- If national leaders are or can be persuaded that significant change is needed and possible in their country's educational system in order to attain the student achievement goals they desire for their country's future.

At the same time, in keeping with the recognition that change can come at any point in a structure or set of processes, educators at the regional or local level can consider altering some of their teaching methods and techniques. They can begin with a small change in their behavior toward students—a homemade learning aid to augment a textbook lesson, a rearrangement of classroom furniture into groups, a little music to settle students down or new lyrics to a familiar melody to aid in memorizing facts. Mentors and supervisory teachers can do the same in their teacher training. Supervisors can encourage innovative teachers who use accelerated learning principles and practices and lead in educating parents and local leaders in the benefits of these changes.

A Framework for Accelerated Learning in Developing Countries

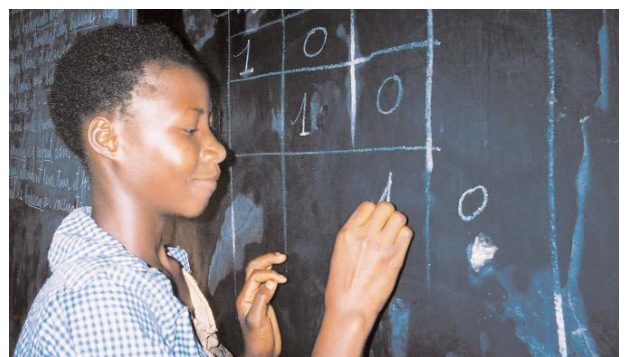
An analysis of the principles and practices associated with each definition of accelerated learning resulted in the following list of shared principles, which could be used in implementing accelerated learning in the developing world context:

- Learner-centered instruction based on brain research and natural learning
- Inclusion of students' emotional and social needs in teaching
- Multi-sensory, mind-body activities
- Active, problem- and project-based learning
- Low-stress, stimulating environments
- Collaborative and cooperative experiences
- Performance-based assessment with frequent, specific feedback

AL-D literature offers additional principles that have been used in existing programs in developing countries with some success. These principles include getting more children into school, involving girls and other underserved populations, integrating media, involving the community, and establishing alternative schools.

In addition, some of the ideas from accelerated learning in Western contexts could effectively expand academic achievement in developing contexts. For example, there is little mention in the AL-D literature of the use of images and music in the learning process. It seems likely, however that, with some adaptation to culture and available resources, both music and visuals could be used to enhance learning. Body movement, used primarily in AL-D for sports and recreation, could, with direction, also enhance classroom instruction.

The educational framework for accelerated learning in the developing world context featured here was the result of merging concepts from both literatures.



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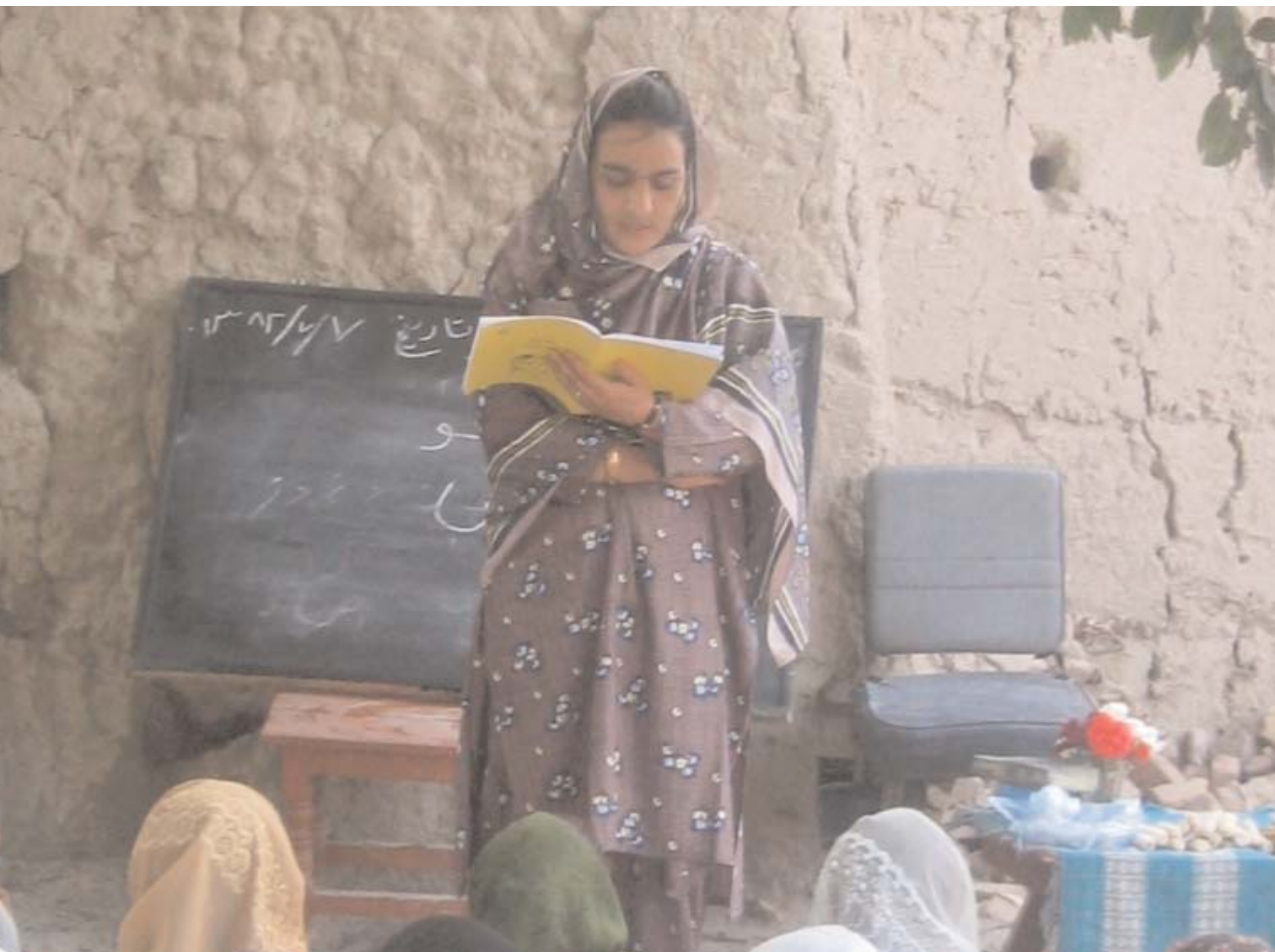
ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
Instructional Philosophy	The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be ignited Learning is creation, not consumption Learning takes place on many levels simultaneously, it is not a linear process
Instructional Basis	Uses all five learning systems– cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and reflective (referred to as holistic instruction) Instructs to engage the whole brain Integrates curriculum topics
Instructional Goals	Reduce the time it takes students to complete a designated level of instruction Re-engage out-of-school students with in-school peers
Target Population	Students of all ages and levels of schooling Children who need to "catch up" with other learners of similar age. Special emphasis is placed on girls, children from isolated areas, children from war-torn or other crisis situations, or other children whose schooling has been disrupted in some way
School and Classroom Learning Environment	Learning environments that are safe, welcoming, and unthreatening, even to anxious or traumatized students Classrooms that stimulate all five senses, and include visuals and real-life objects to handle and examine Room arrangement and furnishings that facilitate individual, small-group, and large-group activities Flexible schedules where necessary to accommodate student needs
Curriculum	Principles/practices can be applied to any curriculum Condensed curriculum can be created Incorporates specific needs (e.g., life skills, HIV/AIDS prevention, vocational skills, etc.) and local problems and contexts
Teaching	Is learner-centered ² Uses active, problem- and project-based activities Acknowledges multiple intelligences and different learning styles Augments presentations with numerous collaborative activities to encourage students to cooperate and teach each other Uses technology to supplement and enhance personal instruction
Instructional Materials	Traditional textbooks and guides as well as instructional aids, locally developed learning materials, and materials collected from the surrounding community Technology used to provide and/or enhance instruction
Student Learning	Learning through doing as well as seeing and hearing Individual, paired, and small-group activities Learning through cooperation and collaboration as well as competition Some choices of instructional materials and methods guided by students' natural curiosity and motivation to learn Learning through structured play
Classroom Management	Rules of expected behavior explained and positively reinforced Corporal and other physical punishment prohibited Emotional putdowns and other abuse highly discouraged Classroom "controlled" through positive experiences, success in learning, incentives, and rewards
Community Participation	Families encouraged to send children to school and to support classroom activities and school policies and programs through outreach campaigns and community-based learning projects
Performance Monitoring	Continuous and informal assessment to begin and implement program Specific, varied, frequent, and performance-based feedback provided to students Standardized testing used to enter formal school or desired grade level
Teacher Training	Sustained in-service training in accelerated learning principles and practices Technology used, where possible, to extend/complement teacher training programs

² See Charlick 2005 for details.



“The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be ignited.”

Plutarch



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