



**Breaking New Ground: Four Key Lessons from
Launching Education Innovations in Post-Conflict
Environments**

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Childhood Education: Innovations, Volume 93, Issue 5, 2017

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in [Childhood Education: Innovations](http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/INKemD2i6lw4ciVZZAjx/full) on September 6, 2017. Available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/INKemD2i6lw4ciVZZAjx/full>.

Breaking New Ground: Four Key Lessons from Launching Education Innovations in Post-Conflict Environments

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Just over a year ago, 38 Mentors from our organization, Educate!, taught their first lessons in over 90 secondary schools across Northern Uganda. We had been preparing for months. Northern Uganda is a unique and challenging region—it is the most impoverished area in Uganda, with high youth unemployment, low economic development, and very limited access to basic services. Launching in Northern Uganda meant delivering our program to the youth who need it most, but we had never before implemented our model in this type of environment.

To make sure our launch in this region was a success, we had to innovate within our model to adapt it for this unique context. Now, with a year operating there under our belt and nearly 4,000 Scholars graduating from the region this spring, we have learned a few valuable lessons that have strengthened our operations and impact. We believe sharing the lessons we have learned from innovating our model to succeed in this setting can help other organizations looking to expand their reach into challenging environments. To solve the most pressing problems facing youth today, we consider it crucially important for education organizations to learn how to innovate and adapt their models to serve the most difficult—and rewarding—contexts.

In this piece, we will share basic information about our organization and about Northern Uganda, focusing on how we adapted our model to maximize impact within the constraints of this region. We will close with the most valuable lessons we learned, which we believe can be applied to a variety of education models looking to scale and innovate in order to serve populations within challenging environments.

Background

Northern Uganda is the country's most vulnerable and least-developed region, having been at the epicenter of one of Africa's longest-running conflicts. For over 20 years, starting in the early 1980s, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda were engaged in a bloody conflict that is estimated to have killed tens of thousands of people and forced nearly 2 million Ugandans to flee their homes. The LRA is most notorious for its practice of abducting children to become child soldiers and slaves (an estimated 20,000 youth were abducted during the conflict), but is also guilty of perpetrating a chilling range of other human rights abuses, including widespread sexual abuse and the systematic rape of young girls.

While the conflict has abated in the last decade and astonishing progress has been made toward peace and security, the region remains behind the rest of the country in nearly every development metric. The North is by far most impoverished region of Uganda—at 43.7%, the poverty rate is nearly twice as high as the next-poorest region of Uganda, and more than two times the national average. After 23 years of conflict, hundreds of thousands of people continue to live in camps for internally displaced persons. Entire villages were

wiped out, leaving behind a catastrophically high number of orphans and vulnerable children. Basic infrastructure, like roads and transmission lines, was damaged or demolished entirely, leaving the people of the North more isolated and cutting them off from the progress made in other parts of the country. Medical care and education services ceased to exist in many areas, as hospitals and schools closed their doors due to security concerns and a lack of necessary resources. As a result, the region has the highest rate of new HIV infection and the lowest life expectancy compared to the rest of Uganda, and the lowest literacy rates, school enrollment, and graduation rates.

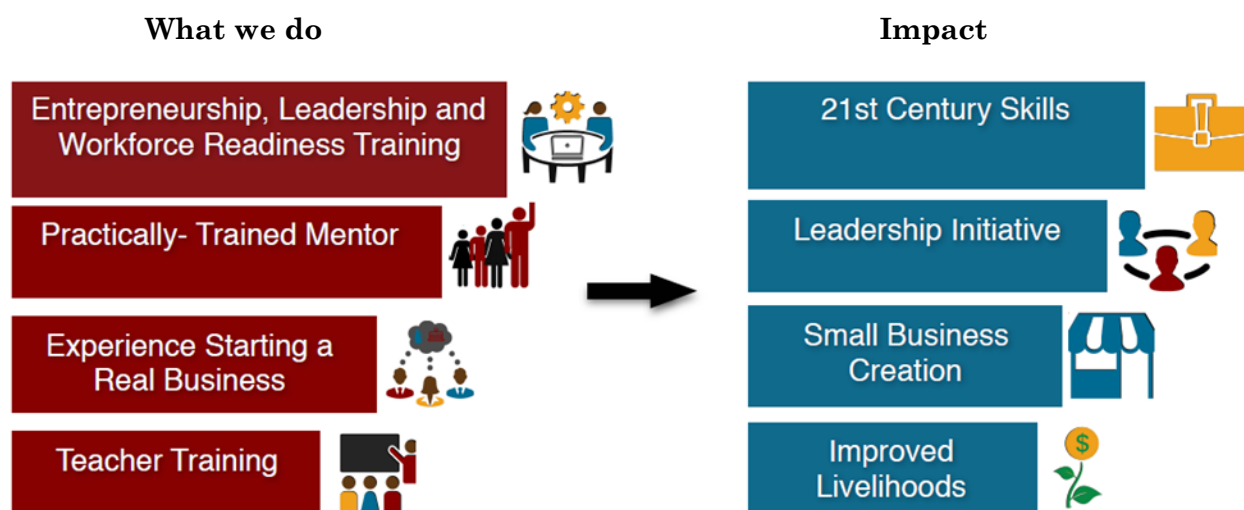
For youth in Northern Uganda, the situation is especially difficult. The challenging post-conflict environment of the North is set against the stark reality of the circumstances for youth across Uganda: Uganda has the second youngest population in the world (56% under age 18), the highest youth poverty rate (94%), and an overall youth unemployment rate as high as 62%. Similar statistics are found across the region; in East Africa alone, between 1.8 million and 10 million youth (ages 15-34) are jobless.

This bleak outlook is a direct result of the failure of education systems to equip youth with the skills they actually need to gain employment and make a decent living. For the families who have invested massive resources to put their children through school (an estimated one third of household income on average), the current system represents a broken promise; the education available does not lead to a better life. For the countries that depend on today's youth to solve poverty and drive development, this disconnect is a massive lost opportunity.

Education for Youth Livelihoods

Our organization, Educate!, has developed an innovative model of education to address youth unemployment and the consequent development issues in Africa. We provide youth with skills training in leadership, entrepreneurship, and workforce readiness, along with mentorship to start real businesses at school. Through advocacy, practical training for teachers, and direct service in schools, we are working to make this skills-based model of education part of African education systems, starting with Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya.

Educate! Theory of Change



Educate!’s direct intervention program—the Educate! Experience—reaches youth by sending a Mentor (a highly trained youth volunteer) into existing secondary schools to work with selected students (Educate! Scholars) for almost two years. Through the Educate! Experience program, Mentors teach an entrepreneurship, leadership, and workforce readiness course, which includes practical experience starting a business or community project, to 40 Scholars in each partner school. With support from the Mentor and an Educate!-trained teacher, an average of 100 students in each school form business clubs and practice launching enterprises in a team setting. Educate! also selects at least one teacher and one administrator per school to participate in the Experience Association, which provides training in interactive and student-centered teaching methods, coaching, and other professional development.

The Educate! Experience



Fundamentally, Educate! is attempting to create a model of education that is directly accountable for life outcomes, ensuring that impact persists long after students have left the program. Results from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) show that students who completed the Educate! Experience program earned more than twice as much as their peers (an average of \$338/year, compared to \$165/year—an increase of \$173, or 105%), and the effect on girls was even larger (a \$200 and 120% income increase over the control group). The RCT also showed that students are 64% more likely to start businesses as a result of the program, compared to a control group. Girls again showed an even greater effect—female graduates were 152% more likely than girls in the control group to own a business.

In 2017, Educate! is working in over 450 schools in Uganda, impacting over 19,000 youth intensively as Educate! Scholars in Uganda and Kenya, and reaching over 360,000 youth more broadly through our direct delivery and education reforms in Uganda, Rwanda, and Kenya.

Innovating Educate!’s Model to Reach Youth in Northern Uganda

In 2015, having seen firsthand the success of our model in 250 schools in the Central and Eastern regions of Uganda, we began preparations to launch in Northern Uganda. We recognized that this neglected region for development was facing youth unemployment and the consequent development challenges most acutely, and we had seen the evidence that

our model has an outsized impact for vulnerable populations (like young women) who need it the most. In addition to our deep conviction that in order to best serve the youth of Uganda we needed to expand to the North, we were eager to stress test our model within the constraints of this environment. We knew that if we could innovate and adapt our model to deliver an equal quality program at the same cost to overcome the obstacles of Northern Uganda, we would be well prepared to expand throughout Uganda and internationally in Africa.



Educate! Scholars at Gulu Army Secondary School in Northern Uganda

It is crucial for us to operate the same program model throughout Uganda because we have iteratively designed and extensively evaluated it to maximize the impact on the lives of the students we serve. By operating the same proven model across locations, we take advantage of the benefits of scale, including keeping overhead costs low. While most youth interventions cost between \$300 and \$1,000 per person, it currently costs Educate! just \$125 per Educate! Scholar in Uganda. As we grow our program to full scale (1,000 schools in Uganda), we expect our costs to decrease to less than \$63 per Scholar. To maximize our reach and the scope of our transformation of the youth employment landscape in Uganda, it is crucial that we maintain this core efficiency of our streamlined and proven model.

At the same time, when working in a new context, it is essential to be able to rapidly adapt to meet the unique needs of the beneficiaries and their environment. For us, launching in Northern Uganda was a golden opportunity to learn how we can refine and improve our model to work well under more challenging conditions while maintaining high levels of measurable impact and cost-effectiveness. Further, we realized that the lessons we learned from launching in Northern Uganda would provide a strong foundation for future expansion efforts. Since the North represented such entrenched barriers to success, if our model could be successfully adapted there, we should be able to effectively implement it anywhere in Uganda.

Key Challenges for Launching in Northern Uganda

Education organizations are at heart people organizations; this is especially true for our model. The core of our model has our Mentors delivering our Skills Course weekly in three schools, and also traveling to bi-weekly trainings in a central location. Our Program Officers, who oversee Mentors at the district level, spend their days dropping in on schools to supervise and evaluate lessons. For our Central and Eastern regions, the transportation

to fulfill these job functions was not a critical issue. We discovered quickly, however, that it posed a challenge in Northern Uganda.

Challenge 1: Travel and Access

We found that field staff in the North would have to travel for hours upon hours to reach schools due to poor roads, slow or broken-down vehicles, and the rural nature of the region. This increased both the monetary cost of transportation and the time cost for our field staff, who consequently had fewer hours in the day to juggle their many responsibilities.

Our response to this challenge was to restructure the organization of our district-level program units so that field staff would go to a certain area and stay there longer, perhaps even a few days, and see several schools while in the area. This strategy contrasts with that of their counterparts in other regions, who can drop by a school easily without prior planning and then head home or to another meeting. By supporting our senior field staff to restructure and plan around travel time, we were able to mitigate the associated costs.

Based on the transportation issues in the North, we also made a staffing change at the organizational level that improved our operations across all regions. Since it was impractical for our Northern Program Coordinator (the top level staff member in the region) to be based in our main office in Kampala—six to ten hours from the districts he was overseeing—we piloted basing him in the field. This helped the Coordinator to monitor the program more directly and resulted in high performance from our Northern staff and schools. This strategy was so successful, we decided to shift our Eastern Program Coordinator into the field as well, and we will base future Regional Program Coordinators in their respective regions going forward.

Challenge 2: Literacy Levels

After our first school year in Northern Uganda started in February 2016, our Mentors reported new challenges in delivering the model to students in the North. A key immediate challenge was the low literacy level of many students in the North, which made it harder for Mentors to explain concepts to their Scholars.

To address this issue, we asked Mentors to break down words and definitions in the lessons to make them more accessible, and to have Scholars read materials and case studies in class instead of at home to improve their comprehension of the concepts.

Challenge 3: Girls' Attendance and Other Gender Equity Issues

After the first term of the school year, we found that Scholar attendance had dipped below our target and was lower than in Educate!'s other regions. Our field staff investigated the matter and found that it was primarily girls who were missing the lessons, largely due to obligations at home preventing them from attending Skills Courses. Families were also concerned if girls stayed later after school to participate in the lessons, especially if they would have to travel home after dark.

In response, Mentors now work with school administrations to identify optimal lesson times during the school day that allow all students to attend regularly. We were able to boost our attendance rates to be in line with the other regions following this adjustment.

This first gender-related issue tipped us off to other gender concerns in the North, as our field staff noted gender disparities that were more pronounced than in other regions. Girls were held back in other ways, including being less likely to hold leadership positions at school or speak up in class. Noting these challenges early on was helpful for us to develop strategies to address gender-related issues in a more comprehensive way—not just in the North, but across all our regions—including launching an intensive gender justice training for our Mentors and incorporating stronger gender justice components into our curriculum.



Lessons Learned

The challenges we faced in adapting our model to Northern Uganda were opportunities to innovate and improve our model to be successful in a challenging context. The lessons we learned from this experience were invaluable in preparing us to roll out our model nationally in Uganda, and internationally in Africa. The top four lessons we learned were:

Do Your Homework and Invest in Laying a Solid Groundwork Before Launching

Before we launched our model in Northern Uganda in February of 2016, we spent a full year preparing. We spoke extensively with other organizations operating in the region to understand the challenges they faced. We met with local government and community leaders to gauge their support for our work. Most important, we sent our most experienced

staff members to the region for extended periods of time to learn the local context and begin building essential relationships.

For example, we sent our now Head of Programs Richard Luuba to the North on a research mission prior to launch, where he was able to gain some important insights about the local context and to speak with key stakeholders and other organizations operating in the region. Richard noticed immediately upon arriving that transportation would be a huge issue for program implementation, which gave us plenty of time to come up with mitigation strategies before our program launched. Richard also quickly picked up on the importance of local leadership and buy-in when entering post-conflict communities, and he was a driving force in our recruitment and hiring process in the North, enabling us to hire the right team of locals from the region.

Invest in Local Knowledge and Leadership

Educate!'s successful expansion to Northern Uganda depended on people who are from the region and passionate about working within their communities. We invested heavily in hiring the strongest possible team from the start to lead our expansion to Northern Uganda, and ensured that they were all from the region.



Educate!'s team in the North

This small team quickly became one of our highest performing teams, and their passion and expertise was absolutely crucial to our successful launch in the region. Northern team members had personally witnessed and lived through the conflict and instability that damaged so many communities and left deep scars in the region, and they were able to directly relate to the youth and communities we hoped to impact.

Our Northern Program Coordinator, the team leader for Northern Uganda, perfectly illustrates the importance of local leadership. Lawrence Komakech is from Gulu, Northern Uganda's major town. He is extremely passionate about and proud of his home community, while also acknowledging that it has a complex and painful past. Lawrence recognizes that trust is an essential factor for a region that has gone through such collective hardship:

"For the community to really own this program, there must be high level of community participation and engagement, trust, consistency, honesty on both sides, and a belief or a feasible feeling that the program is impactful. A program can best be implemented by people who really understand and appreciate the needs of the people, the culture of the community they serve, the environment, the politics, and the unique history of the region."

Don't Be Afraid of Challenges—Embrace Them!

Absolutely key to our success in the North was our culture of welcoming feedback and encouraging staff to be candid about challenges. By anticipating that unfamiliar and complex difficulties would arise and sharing this expectation with our team, we created an environment in which staff were not afraid to speak openly about setbacks when they did occur.

We hold regular Internal Advisory Board (IAB) Meetings, which are opportunities for our leadership team to sit down with our frontline field staff and hear directly from them about any challenges they are facing in program implementation. At one IAB meeting shortly after launching in the North, the Mentors discussed a problem they were experiencing with student attendance. If we had failed to invest in a culture of transparency and openness, our Mentors may have been reluctant to share about this challenge for fear of being penalized for the low attendance. Instead, our Mentors were able to work collaboratively with our leadership team to come up with creative solutions for the attendance issue. As a result, we were able to reach our attendance goals. An organizational culture in which staff are afraid to share challenges is the ultimate barrier to organizational learning and growth.

Adapt Quickly: If You Fail, Make Sure You Only Fail Once and Learn From It

Our expansion to Northern Uganda taught us that the key to success in a challenging environment is the willingness to adapt quickly and identify creative solutions. We kept a laser focus on our mission while recognizing the need to be flexible about everything else in order to make our model successful in this new context. Keeping the mission and impact of our work at the forefront freed us from being tied to preconceived notions and let us think outside of the box when we encountered new obstacles.

For example, the decision to base our Northern Program Coordinator in the field represented a huge departure from our previous organizational structure, and had implications that rippled across the organization—from HR to procurement to training to finance. While making this change was unquestionably the right decision, it felt daunting and risky at the time. Now that we have seen how successful the move was, we have instituted the same structure across the rest of our regions and experienced excellent results.

We learned many important lessons from adapting our program to fit the impoverished, post-conflict, rural context of Northern Uganda. Above all, we saw that environments that present new constraints spur innovation, and help a team develop creative solutions they would not have found otherwise. These creative solutions, tailored to the demanding conditions of the North, ultimately strengthened our programs nationwide.

Now, one year into our operations in the North, we can call our launch there an unqualified success, as our monitoring statistics are in line with those of other regions and our costs have remained the same. Our Northern team has demonstrated that we can be successful in implementing a program of equal quality despite the difficulties of operating in this region. These lessons have proven invaluable to our scaling strategy in Uganda, as we gear up for another big expansion into new districts next year—a crucial step toward our goal for full scale: 1,000 schools across six regions in Uganda.

While innovating our model to fit the Northern Uganda context was a relatively incremental adaption, we have seen many of the same principles apply for adapting our model to a new country and beneficiary group. We hope that sharing our experience helps other organizations grow their impact by innovating to successfully enter challenging new environments.