



A Life Devoted to Schools

Steve Heyneman '61

STEVE HEYNEMAN '61, ON A
22-YEAR RUN PLANNING
EDUCATION REFORM IN
OVER 60 COUNTRIES,
EVALUATES A SECONDARY
SCHOOL IN THE PHILIPPINES.

It's not supposed to happen this way. Careers are supposed to be planned, prepared, calculated. Mine wasn't. Like many Putney students I started out small. I went from my first protest at a Woolworth's lunch counter (in Brattleboro, no less) to the Free Speech Movement, to a Peace Corps volunteer in a Malawian village. Malawi is where I discovered schools. In California, schools were treated like air and water—free, available, and uninteresting. I could not understand why Malawians loved schools, sacrificed for them, and were desperate to attend them. That sent me to the University of Chicago to study more.

That led to an opportunity to do a survey of primary schools in Uganda, the first in Sub-Saharan Africa, and that survey led to a conclusion (ready for this?) that social status was unrelated to school achievement. Huh? Isn't social status supposed to determine how children perform? In Uganda, that is not the case. Perhaps

Uganda is just an outlier, an exception? The World Bank heard about the result, and asked me to do a consultancy. The consultancy was the opportunity to visit Somalia during its "Soviet period" and evaluate

learning achievements of children in secondary schools. What had taken five years for me to do in Uganda, the World Bank wanted me to do in three weeks. **Lesson one:** when given a rare opportunity, take it—even if the expectations are stupid. Just work within the time and resources available and do your best.

The Somalia report led to a conclusion that the practical workshops in diversified secondary schools, an innovation the Bank had supported in thirty countries, was a failure. That led to an offer of employment. My boss was the ex-minister of education from Sweden. Why would he hire the source of criticism that had the potential of destroying his pet innovation? He put it this way: when you have a potential enemy, keep him close. So I agreed to work for him. That led to a 22-year run planning education reform in over 60 countries. The remainder of this story will describe what it was like and will end with a word of advice.

My first assignment was in global research and evaluation. I was to provide a new technology (now common) of using school facility surveys to predict learning. This technology could respond to the question "how good are our schools and how can we prove it?" The result,

in turn, was designed to respond to Ministers of Finance who ask difficult questions with respect to the use of public expenditures. **Lesson two:** the competition for public resources is essentially the same in every part of the world. Public resources are insufficient, and empirical evidence is helpful to make a case that additional resources

for education would be wisely spent.

I would apply this "technology" wherever invited—Bolivia, Botswana, Bangladesh. My passport began to look like the Yellow Pages. I

found this frustrating at first. I needed to experience a culture to understand problems, and two weeks in and out of a country was never sufficient. But it was a fate worth accepting. Though I was four times in India before I had time to visit the Taj Mahal, I was quite familiar with old Delhi and could call the deputy minister by his first name when drinking scotch on his veranda. That, I suppose, was sufficient to classify as a "local experience."

This period allowed me to witness, on occasion, the bizarre. During a ten-day stay in Bolivia, the minister of education changed three times. Each one gave us new marching orders. When the team finally appeared in his office to make recommendations, we were kept waiting until his shoes could be shined. On entering his office he informed us that he had just returned from his first visit to Mexico. There he saw something he insisted would be the top priority for Bolivia: *Calle Sesame* (*Sesame Street*). The problem was that at that time, less than half of the Bolivian population had access to electricity and less than ten percent had access to a television. Learning how to politely say no became a finely honed skill.

Many ask how the World Bank makes decisions over its own resources. The answer is analogous to how nations make decisions—through a combination of technical argument, power,

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prestige, and fad. The competition over Bank resources is fierce. Power, water, health, banking, industry, agriculture, and public sector management all have legitimate calls on public expenditures, and were legitimate priorities. In my mind, however, assistance to schools and universities, never more than five percent of Bank lending, needed to be expanded. Hence part of my responsibility was to find the arguments and the lending strategies that would be competitive with the other sectors. It was a never-ending and deeply interesting war.

After six years in research and evaluation I was asked to start a new division in the Economic Development Institute, the training arm of the Bank. This division was to personally train education ministers. I was asked to help design three-day senior policy seminars on the economics of textbooks, teacher salaries, university management, and education finance. This offered many new opportunities, including the first meeting of ministers from states officially at war (India and Pakistan; Somalia and Ethiopia). It also allowed me to experience the tragic. In one private meeting on structural reform in French-speaking Africa, one minister arrived late at night. I explained the principles and purposes of the meeting and asked if he had any questions. He had one: when could he eat? It turned out that food in his country, locked in civil conflict, was unavailable. He had accepted the invitation to the meeting simply to eat regular meals.

Six years in this training function led to a new opportunity to manage education (and public health) in a specific region—the Middle East and North Africa, countries from Tunisia to Iran. There I discovered that few people recognized the role of religion, specifically Islam, in economic development. That led to a series

of meetings on how Islam could help improve public health, women's rights, and social services. This led to conflict with the executive director of Saudi Arabia who demanded that the papers that emerged from these meetings be suppressed on the grounds that they were insufficiently Islamic (later they were published by Vanderbilt University Press). As that debate was reaching an apex, the Berlin Wall came down. Twenty-six new countries demanded to join the World Bank. The Europe and Central Asia region—a new region—was formed, and I was asked if I wanted to be the division chief for Human Resources. "Oh yes," I said. No Russian. No history of any kind preceded the appointment. Within a week I found myself on a plane to Moscow with 16 colleagues to make the first contact with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. No credit cards were recognized—only cash. Before leaving I stacked \$16,000 in 100 dollar bills on the kitchen table.

I will never forget the eyes of my sleepy children as they ate their cold cereal that morning and spotted the pile. "Dad," my son shouted, "I never knew you were important."

That period allowed the first look at education under the former Soviet Union without the control of the Communist Party. Our report on Russian education took three years and involved experts from Finland, France, England,

Korea, and the United States. We discovered many problems that had never come to light before. As one former minister said, "When I was a boy I once took off all my clothes and looked at myself in the full length mirror in my parents' bedroom. I did not like what I saw.

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But I had to admit it was me.” That report led to a meeting of education ministers from all 15 republics of the former Soviet Union and a list of recommendations on what their education sector would have to change to prosper under a free market democracy.

After twenty years, I can now look back and see that each recommendation was correct, and they are today the object of reform across all countries in the region. Were we clairvoyant? No. What we did was base judgment on what we knew to be true from our experience. At age 56 I was invited to teach international education at a university. Now I have done this for ten years. I love it. It gives me an opportunity to train graduate students and to reflect. Among the lessons I learned, and which I offer you, are

two things. The first is don’t insist on working only on the village level. When asked my profession, my description has been uniform throughout: I build schools. Secondly, don’t allow the necessary preconditions of a career (pre-med, law, environmental economist) preclude taking advantage of an opportunity to experience the unusual. You may find, as I have, that it can lead to learning many new things of value.

<upper left photo> **STEVE ASSESSING, UNDER LENIN’S STEELY GLARE, A SOVIET RUSSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL IN 1991** <upper two right photos> **CELEBRATING A NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL IN BOLIVIA IN 1980**