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Cover photograph courtesy of The Shaker Schools
Blue sky thinking redesigns refugee education

Richard CC Davies reports on a case study in social entrepreneurship

As the International Baccalaureate celebrates 50 years of inspiring global engagement, open-mindedness and a commitment to lifelong learning, its Director General Siva Kumari believes that its expanding network will build an ever-stronger community that seeks to create a better world (IB, 2017a). From the outset, early IB influencers such as Kurt Hahn recognised the opportunity to develop a transformative, progressive curriculum that augments traditional elements, such as developing inquiring and caring students, with an explicit emphasis on taking action to create a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect (IB, 2017b). Hahn believed that there are three pedagogical approaches through which such a curriculum could be delivered: you can preach at them (persuasion); you can say ‘you must volunteer’ (compulsion); and you can tell them ‘you are needed’ (Alchin, 2017). It is essentially this final approach that underpins the IB mission and places the onus on future ethical leaders and creative entrepreneurs to ‘carry the beacon of hope and incite positive change for the next generation’ (IB, 2017a).

Sky School is an organisation whose co-founders, Polly Akhurst (Atlantic College, 2006) and Mia Eskelund Pedersen (UWC Mahindra, 2007), exemplify the next generation of ethical leaders and creative social entrepreneurs seeking to incite change. In 2015, 50 million children were uprooted from their homes. For 27 million, this was as a result of violence and insecurity (Unicef, 2018). Whether these uprooted children are refugees, migrants or internally displaced, every child has the right to an education, but there are 27 million children of primary and secondary age in 24 conflict areas...
without access to education, and fewer than 25% of refugee youth have access to secondary education (Unicef, 2018). Empathising with frustrated young displaced learners denied access to education, Polly and Mia were inspired to tackle this perceived injustice and took direct action by drawing upon their experience of international education to establish Sky School in order to close the gap in quality secondary education provision for young displaced people (Martin & Osberg, 2007; Sky School, 2018a). Rather than waiting for someone else to tackle this problem, it is precisely such direct action that characterises the entrepreneur who, inspired by the opportunity, seeks to realise their creative solution to overcoming the barriers and challenges that arise and act to maintain the status quo (Martin & Osberg, 2007). Moreover, it is predicated on having such ‘alertness’ in the first place, which economist Israel Kirzner argues is the entrepreneur’s most critical ability (Raumol, 2006).

In seeking to articulate the difference between entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs, however, Dees (2018) argues that, for the latter, the social mission is ‘explicit and central’ and that mission-related impact, as opposed to wealth creation, becomes the central criterion. Against a backdrop of real terms funding cuts to secondary education in UK government schools (Sibieta, 2018), achieving at scale the Sky School mission, ‘A Global High School for Refugees’, does not raise the prospect of wealth creation through any avenue other than in the capacity of an agent of change that empowers refugees economically; indeed their value proposition specifically targets a neglected and highly disadvantaged population that lacks the financial means of political clout to achieve the transformative benefit on its own (Sky School, 2018; Martin & Osberg, 2007). Such an explicit focus on mission related impact would, therefore, appear to substantiate its credentials as a social enterprise.

Moreover, those personal characteristics in a successful entrepreneur (including inspiration, creativity, direct action, courage and fortitude) so crucial to the process of innovation are abundant in Sky School’s co-founders. Innovation, in particular, is paramount because, rather than tinkering around the edges and refining existing systems and structures, entrepreneurs think creatively and eschew these in favour of finding wholly new ways of approaching the problem (Martin & Osberg, 2007). Taking a pioneering and transformative approach to education that resonates with those earlier IB influencers, Sky School has embraced such innovation and sought to develop a 10 module, 2-year high school curriculum for refugees, delivered through a ‘new educational model’ predicated on blended learning which harnesses the content rich aspects of an online course with the power of physical learning communities (Sky School, 2018a). Sky School works with project partners in refugee camps such as the UNHCR Refugee Camp in Kakuma, Kenya, to facilitate each module, over the course of 10 weeks, with students completing 60% of the course through face-to-face seminars and the remaining 40% completed independently through its app provided by Aula Education (Sky School, 2018a; 2017a).

Whilst empowering students with an education in a particular camp is a laudable goal and undoubtedly provides a social service, such an initiative is not truly a social enterprise unless the learning programme is designed to achieve at scale, without which it is unlikely to lead to a new ‘equilibrium’ in the education landscape (Martin & Osberg, 2007). The combination of a strong technology platform, together with the outsourcing of course facilitation to aid groups already in situ, alert to the particular demands of their learners, means that Sky School does possess this transformational potential to scale up and re-calibrate this equilibrium beyond the confines of a particular camp. The key here, however, is persistence and seeking to engage in a process of continuous innovation and learning; investing time in developing a course in the first instance before scaling it up is invaluable (Dees, 2001). The first module to be delivered was itself, appropriately enough, on Social Entrepreneurship and was piloted with a small group of refugees in Athens. The feedback from this was used to refine the second iteration of the module as well as the general approach for delivering this ‘new educational model’ (Sky School, 2018a).

But what kind of knowledge, skills and understanding constitute is ‘Lifeworthy learning’ relevant to refugee learners in order to convince them that ‘they are needed’ and, given the limited financial resources, how do you design this?
constitute ‘Life-worthy learning’ relevant to refugee learners in order to convince them that ‘they are needed’ and, given the limited financial resources, how do you design this? (Perkins, 2016). Once more, Sky School has demonstrated its entrepreneurial flair by dispensing with traditional models of discrete subject blocks and embraced design thinking to generate a learning programme that empowers these displaced young people to proactively affect change in their communities. Besides the initial pilot module on Social Entrepreneurship, a module on Peacebuilding has been developed in conjunction with UWCSEA’s Initiative for Peace and other modules in the pipeline include Global Politics, Identity, and Arts and Culture (UWCSEA, 2018a). Such an approach predicated on exploring knowledge that can be applied beyond national borders, building skills (such as critical thinking and collaboration), and developing an understanding of how these can be used to shape attitudes and inform direct action, is an effective blueprint for realising Hahn’s objective of creating a better and more peaceful world through intercultural understanding and respect, peaceful co-existence and sustainable development for the future of the human race (Hill, 2012; IB, 2017a). There are essentially 5 strands to the Learning programme, each comprising an entry level and advanced component. Taken together, it is hoped that the 10 modules would be accredited to constitute a high school diploma which could then enable these learners to access American higher education institutions and seek to redress the despairing situation of less than 1% of refugee learners entering university (UNHCR, 2016).

Credit: UWCSEA, 2018a

What is a Hackathon in the context of education?
One of the most compelling aspects of the Sky School movement has been its ability to draw on specialists to volunteer their skills. Nowhere is this more visible than at one of Sky School’s Curriculum Hackathons; an intensive weekend at which a group of professionals from a range of backgrounds, both within and outside education, map out the curriculum for an entire module. One of the first hackathons was held this summer at UWC Maastricht to design a module on Social Entrepreneurship. An eclectic mix of individuals, including educators, students, parents, technical specialists, a UN Development Economist, a corporate financier and many others assembled to hear Polly lay out the objective.

AAA+ Learning: Director of Learning Stuart MacAlpine explains his model of learning pioneered at UWCSEA.
for the weekend and emphasise the prescient nature of the task given that it would be delivered to students in Jordan in only 3 weeks. Early sessions were predicated upon team building and learning about the tremendous range of skills within the group, before turning attention to the displaced learners around which the mission is focused and trying to prioritise the competencies within the confines of the module. Informed by what needed to be prioritised, and why the demands of the refugee learners made that so, work continued on the framework for the unit by looking at possible concepts and grouping these by key themes which were then mapped to a timeline. Trying to allocate particular skills to a discrete section of the module seemed problematic at times, so it was decided to embed some of these, such as communication which had been identified as a key learning objective, by listening to interviews with prospective participants throughout the course. By the end of the first day, a much more refined understanding of the purpose of the unit had been developed which, informed by research, had started to be mapped out in a curriculum with specific themes, such as stakeholder analysis, systems mapping and design thinking.

The second day, however, was very much where all the heavy lifting was completed. Polly and Mia introduced us to Daniel Christian, a refugee at Kakuma camp from Burundi, who had completed a module wholly online and was so inspired by what he had learned that he volunteered to facilitate the first module of the face to face section, only to end up himself being resettled to Canada shortly before it began (Sky School 2017b). His video message about the transformational effect Sky School had on him was inspiring, and provided renewed emphasis on completing the module. Following an intensive half hour session in which learning engagements were added to the theme for each week, Sky School’s pro bono Director of Teaching and Learning from UWC South East Asia, Stuart MacAlpine, then led a short workshop on conceptual understanding and the AAA+ learning model (Awareness, Abstraction, Application, Deliberate Practice) to establish a more robust understanding of backward by design curriculum planning (UWCSEA 2018b). This was drawn on throughout the remainder of the day as, working in small groups, the conceptual understandings, learning goals and teaching activities for the face-to-face section and online learning were articulated. The final stage was to refine the assessment rubric in order to determine the extent to which the module achieves its objectives. Throughout the 2 days Olaya Garcia, who had taken the lead for designing this module, facilitated the discussion and activities and was left with the task of polishing up the final unit, before it was delivered to the project partners in Amman, Jordan; later in 2018, the course was also to be delivered in Hong Kong, Greece and Kenya.

It was humbling to see how much a small group of committed individuals with the same shared vision could achieve over a weekend. However, emphasising the importance of ‘alertness’ to which Kirzner referred earlier on, the outcome for Sky School was even more notable as the number of volunteers to have signed up to the Hackathon was such that, less than 24 hours before the start, Polly and Mia realised there was scope to build 2 modules and set
Against an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape, and the rise of populism, the importance of international education that transcends national boundaries and focuses more on that which brings us together has never been so important.

References


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