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Teacher Talk in collaboration with OECD

“Alternative Education Methods as a Lever for Teaching Innovation”

Saturday October 7th, 2017

- **Ebtesam Alshemeili**, Teacher, Al Rouya School, UAE
- **Soonufat Supramaniam**, Teacher, SMK Lubok Buntar, Malaysia
- **Stephen Ritz**, STEAM/STEAM Director, Public Scholl 55 New York, US

Moderated by: **Kristina Sonmark**, Analyst, Innovation and Measuring Progress, Directorate for Education and Skills, OECD

Alternative education methods include developing a holistic approach to students' capacities and needs and focusing on meaningful experiences and interests. What are some important and effective alternative education methods, and in what ways have these methods informed the innovation agenda?

Alternative education methods can be a safety valve for students who may otherwise leave school early, and for those who do not learn or thrive in the traditional system. Some of the methods used include project-based learning, cooperative learning, non-directive teaching, open space learning and gamification, said Sonmark.

Ritz has had a wildly successful approach to this area, one that solved an issue facing his students, encouraged them to learn, improved their lives and health and ultimately earned the school awards, as well as international attention and funding. His school, which is located in the poorest congressional district in the United States, one where there are no supermarkets and no food, came up with Green Bronx Machine. The indoor and outdoor gardens he helped create not only send a hundred bags of fresh healthy food home to poor families per week, it teaches students science, nutrition, care, nurturing and a host of other skills.

Before the project launched, the graduation rate at the poverty-stricken school was 32%. It is now at 100%.

“We’ve gone from barely surviving to now thriving,” he said. “These are children who are actively involved in something wonderful, growing food. Food and food production represents a wonderful opportunity. This is evidence of what we can do when no one thought anything that would grow.”





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Alshemeili, a physics teacher who said she has spent hundreds of hours online trying to solve problems like this, would like more virtual reality education. “Maybe we can’t always offer a lot of tools but it would be less financially expensive for the students,” she said.

Whatever the project that is chosen, Ritz’s aim was to make it sustainable for teachers down the line. “Take yourself out of it and have a playbook you could pass on so literally anybody could take it over,” he said.

It’s also important for teachers to believe in themselves when pursuing projects that some people may see as unorthodox. Supramaniam approached banks to privately fund his goal of having his students perform for the community in spoken English, in a rural school district where language is one of the biggest issues.

He worked with four different schools and a local performing arts festival on the project, as well as non-government organizations, artists and fashion designers, and ultimately saw children who had never spoken in English performed in front of 600 people.

Main Takeaway: Getting students involved in projects that help them learn and benefit the community can be one of the best ways to ensure they stay in school and thrive while there.

