The 2013 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is Educational Poverty: Theory, Policy, and Praxis. What do you see as the most pressing issues related to educational change and poverty today?

Poverty is worse today than it was 20 years ago, and especially child poverty. Student achievement is more unequal by socioeconomic group than it was 40 years ago according to research by Sean Reardon. These abominations will not be solved by schools alone, although schools can do much more than they are presently doing. We need to improve conditions under which many families live to provide the foundation for healthier, safer, and more supportive conditions for their children and their connections to schools. These will require: 1) Productive jobs with decent pay and working conditions for all who are able; 2) Safe neighborhoods that provide constructive activities for all ages; 3) Access to public transportation; 4) Adequate and appropriate housing in safe neighborhoods; 5) Health care that ensures wellbeing; 6) A system of criminal justice that provides supportive supervision and assistance rather than incarceration for non-violent offenders and replaces punishment with education, training, and jobs; 7) Reduction of neighborhood stratification and isolation by race and social class; 8) Universal access to publicly supported, high-quality pre-school opportunities; and 10) Schools with a different pedagogy.

But we will not make headway on these priorities without a spiritual renaissance that overcomes the extreme tendency towards individualism. Individuality is good, and we should all have the opportunity to develop our interests and strengths and pursue the good life. But, if our society is characterized by large inequalities, excessive incarceration, violence, homelessness and bad housing, rampant unemployment, falling wages, poor medical care, inadequate support for elders, then our entire society is threatened by injustice and an ethical challenge. Living in gated communities is not a solution to the dilemma when outside the...
gates there is suffering and unfairness. The spiritual awakening must encompass this understanding and that we all have an obligation to create the conditions under which families and children will thrive.

What is the Accelerated Schools Project and what have been its major achievements? And its major drawbacks?
The Accelerated Schools Project (ASP) is an attempt to provide children from educationally at-risk situations with enriched education that will accelerate their learning into the mainstream rather than slowing down their progress through remediation. We established the movement towards acceleration for all students in the early 1980’s in response to the failure of “remediation” to create successful learning outcomes for students at-risk of educational failure by virtue of family poverty and other difficult conditions in homes and communities. Remediation has traditionally been chosen by schools as the appropriate educational strategy for such students by which curriculum content is simplified and the pace of instruction is reduced. The rationale behind remediation is that students need to master basic skills and facts before they can do more challenging work. But, many decades of experience have shown that the fruit of such an approach is that students get farther and farther behind the mainstream and find school to be dispiriting and defeating.

Accelerated schools represent an attempt to deepen the learning experience of such students by developing an enriched approach that builds upon experience, intrinsic curiosity, active involvement, and embedding the learning of basic skills in more challenging student participation. In many respects it owes its spirit to John Dewey. Its goal is to engage students on their own terms and experiences and expand their desire to learn through research, community projects, and artistic endeavors, while building mastery of basic skills through the motivation and challenge of deeper learning experiences and creativity. At its heart is an attempt to provide all students with the gifted and talented opportunities that are normally accorded to only a small and privileged group of students. Acceleration is based upon a deeper and more engaging learning approach for all students.

As much as the overall goal and approach are compelling to many educators, the process of implementation has been found to be daunting. In contrast to approaches that focus only on changing individual teachers and classrooms, the Accelerated Schools Project undertakes to convert entire schools by transforming school culture to build on three principles: unity of purpose, responsibility for decisions and their consequences; and a pedagogy of enlisting student, teacher, and family strengths as a basis for instructional content and activities. Not only does this entail the widespread reconstruction of most school practices, but it also requires a profound shift in school culture from professional individualism of school staff to deep collaboration; from relegating responsibility for decision-making, governance, and accountability from higher administrators, rules, and regulations to school staff, parents, and communities. It enlists an instructional approach that aggressively identifies all available resources including those of parents and school community to build on the strengths of school participants rather than decrying and addressing weaknesses. It brings these together around a powerful learning approach of enrichment of school experiences rather than remediation.

Starting in 1986 the Stanford University project began to construct the process collaboratively with two schools that had volunteered to participate. Keep in mind that thirty years ago the term acceleration was associated only with “high performing” students, mostly from higher income families. Through experimentation and application of the central ideas, the model was developed and expanded
to other schools, largely through regional networks. The ASP also used its foundational principles for schools to work continuously on learning and improvement of practices. Although implementation was found to be highly challenging requiring strong leadership, coaching, and commitment, the Accelerated Schools Project expanded rapidly, reaching about 1,000 schools in 41 states and 50 schools in Hong Kong and a few experimental schools in other nations (e.g., Brazil, Spain and Australia) by 2000.

The approach was designed to address a broad range of educational goals including the expansion of meta-cognition strategies of students and their full development in communicative, artistic, analytic, interpersonal, behavioral, and citizenship skills. Although test results were an important by-product of acceleration, the key academic outcomes were viewed as student performance in planning, implementing, performing, and evaluating such undertakings as research projects, artistic endeavors, problem-solving challenges, and community service activities. These are much more multi-dimensional, far-reaching, and complex than can be assessed by conventional standardized tests in a few subjects.

Nevertheless, given the currency of standardized testing, the external evaluations by independent entities mainly focused on these narrower attributes. Even with this narrow focus, independent evaluations showed positive impact of ASP on student achievement, as measured by test scores in math and reading (Bloom et al., 2001), other subject areas (Ross et al., 1999), and enrollment of ASP graduates on advanced math courses in High School (Burris, Heubert & Levin, 2006).

The major drawbacks have been the difficulties of implementing profound changes in schools that are not convinced that enrichment is the right approach for “these children”. Normal school rituals have been premised on other assumptions, and the activities to create, sustain, and provide continuous improvement in accelerated schools require a change in common beliefs and commitments. The greatest obstacle has been the shift to test-prep associated with NCLB where the schools have become AYP factories. Pressures on teachers and school leaders have undermined the broader goals and processes required for accelerated and enriched education for all.

Accelerated Schools were envisioned as places where all children excel to high levels, where they are treated as gifted, and where their strengths are the basic asset upon which educators draw to promote and expand their learning. How was the ASP able to create school cultures to achieve such vision? And how was the project able to do it on a large scale?

Most attempts to transform schools constitute efforts to impose external changes on school culture. They typically fail as the prevailing school culture is more effective at transforming the imposed plan than the plan is at transforming the school.

We decided to take a different tack based upon two principles: informed consent and a process leading to internal transformation of culture. For each school that took interest in the Accelerated Schools Project, we set out an approach that began with provision of information. This usually consisted of materials, presentations, and discussions of teachers from accelerated schools communities with teacher groups at the interested school. We also requested that prospective school staff visit an accelerated school and ask questions of the personnel at that site. If there was no nearby school we encouraged conference calls with a more distant school. We asked for involvement by the full school staff in these deliberations, including parents, students of high school age, teachers, administrators, other professionals, cafeteria workers, and maintenance personnel. Usually this was done over several months with reports by small groups on what they had learned. We did not begin to work with a school until the commitment of the school was affirmed.
by an 80 percent vote of support by all personnel with signatures of supporters. Thus, the school had to buy-in to be accepted. This did not always work as some principals hurried the process and pressured for approval.

Once the school accepted participation, the ASP national center or one of its 13 regional centers trained coaches from the school or school district and the principal and a representative from the central office on the process of change. ASP comprises a process of internal activities in the school and a set of principles around school direction, governance, and pedagogy which were introduced in the buy-in process, but applied in the school change process. Rejecting the external transformation concept, we focused on a process that required all school staff, parent representatives, and older student representatives to participate. This structured process empowered members to define, design, adopt, and implement measures which led to the internal transformation of both their culture (beliefs and how they worked together and taught) and their activities. It was a self-sustaining process with support from the district and a coach and strong principal and teacher leadership.

Regional and national meetings were held periodically so that schools could share ideas and experiences with other schools on how they overcame challenges and how they applied our powerful learning approach to provide enrichment for all children.

It is rather unusual to see university professors directly engaged in instructional transformation initiatives the way you were invested in creating, launching, and sustaining the Accelerated Schools Project. Why did you do it, and what did you learn in the process?

I have tried to write up the answer to this question in an article, “Do you have high metabolism?” in Carl Glickman, Ed., Those Who Dared (Teachers College Press, 2008). But, essentially this began after more than 20 years of doing research and teaching in the economics of education. I felt very frustrated and disappointed with where my career had taken me. I had used my Ph.D. in economics to work on issues of education and health that had resulted in many pages of publications, but no ostensible improvement in the conditions of the populations that I thought my work might contribute to, those in poverty and who otherwise faced adversity.

It also became obvious to me that the existing approaches to remediation were wrong, even though well-intended. They were repetitious and dispiriting and inevitably resulted in growing gaps in academic achievement rather than closing the gap. I began to make trips to visit schools and classrooms in inner-cities. The only classrooms that seemed to be throbbing with learning and excitement were the few gifted and talented classrooms that I encountered. And then it came to me that bringing all students into a healthy and productive academic mainstream needed to be propelled by acceleration and enrichment, the pedagogy that we limited to those anointed as gifted and talented. It became obvious that if we developed instruction based upon looking for and building on strengths rather than decrying weaknesses and relegating students to the slow-down and repetition of remediation, we would make much more progress. As counter-intuitive as it seemed, I became convinced that acceleration needed to replace remediation.

I was somewhat afraid of taking the next steps because I didn't know how we could transform schools in this direction. But I got together with interested graduate students who were experienced teachers and principals, and we formed teams to learn how to do it. I was also given a lot of encouragement by two valued colleagues, Ed Bridges and Larry Cuban and my wife, Pilar Soler, who joined me in this effort. So with others, I worked up the courage to approach two schools, after gaining approval from their superintendents. For almost a year we visited the schools weekly in teams and observed classrooms and spoke with teachers.
and other staff as well as parents and students. Soon I felt comfortable enough for us to initiate the “buy-in” informational processes in the two schools. I had loads of help and support from my team members who tolerated my ignorance. For two decades, I experienced the greatest professional and personal satisfaction of my career and fulfilled my desire to be an active educator. Two events intervened to end this joyous work. The first is that I encountered a serious health problem. The second was the advent of NCLB which forced schools away from enrichment in favor of test-prep. There is so much more that needs to be done when we get over the failures of test-prep as pedagogy, and I am hopeful that others will be inspired to take up the struggle. Still some excellent accelerated schools have persisted in spite of the pressures of NCLB to undermine their directions, but it takes unusual leadership to defy the NCLB test-prep juggernaut.

Privatization of education has passionate proponents and fierce critics. As a Director of the National Center for the Study of Privatization of Education, what do you see as the major possibilities and the most important risks of privatizing education?

I initiated this center when I moved from Stanford (after 31 years) to Teachers College, Columbia University (where I am in my 14th year). Health problems reduced my ability to engage in the administration, fund-raising, personnel, speaking, and travel required to support and implement Accelerated Schools. So, I had to turn from action in the field back to academic activities. What had happened while I was working on ASP was the rise of an industry promoting privatization in education (e.g. Edison Schools) and educational vouchers (e.g. Milwaukee). There was too little known about the consequences of educational privatization, considering its rapid expansion. We started the center to serve as one of the only neutral sites devoted to studying rather than advocating or opposing privatization.

What have we learned? Thus far there are no revolutionary changes created by privatization. Promises of enormous educational breakthroughs have not transpired, and neither have predictions of disaster. Of course, the presence of educational privatization in all forms is still relatively modest. A number of for-profit entities that entered the field of managing schools have retreated without ostensible success (including Edison). The main activity of the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education (NCSPE) is to create and disseminate balanced research in the field. Although we have sponsored conferences and other activities, our principal output is our occasional paper series of 220 research papers that we have issued, some done by us and others by outside authors. Our main focus has been to assure that whatever the conclusions of these publications (and most are later published in peer-reviewed journals), they are not advocacy pieces but provide good research that supports their conclusions.

“Neutrality” in this arena requires some sacrifice because the funding of publications and other activities is almost exclusively provided by supporters or opponents of privatization, most of them with ideological axes to grind. So, in this field neutrality leads to a low-budget operation, but greater sanctimony. Our stance to study rather than advocate has been helpful in developing an evaluation model which we have used in many of our own research endeavors. Rather than limiting our work to achievement score comparisons between privatized and public schools, our publications set out four criteria for evaluating choice and privatization that we and others have found useful: (1) freedom of choice; (2) productive efficiency (addressing all dimensions of school outcomes and costs); (3) equity; and (4) social cohesion. These four dimensions and the design features that affect them – finance, regulation, support services – are used to assess the impact of different approaches to privatization and school choice. We are fortunate that these criteria and
our use of the policy instruments of design have been widely adopted by persons in educational policy and evaluation and in several countries. So, while I miss the excitement and feeling of accomplishment of accelerated schools, I still keep quite busy with this center and our Center for Benefit Cost Studies in Education (CBCSE. Org). I am still nostalgic for the times spent in schools and try to share those memories and excitement with my current students.

NOTES

1. Many of the lessons of the initial phase are found in the Accelerated Schools Resource Handbook (Hopfenberg et al, 1993)

2. References for the Curious:
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