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?

In my 2008 book, Primary Education in Crisis, Why South African School Children Underperform in Reading and Mathematics, I analyzed the pathways through which poverty directly and indirectly impacts education outcomes. There is a great deal of research on the relationship between children’s health and learning performance. A very significant number of children from poor households are malnourished. Consequently, a high percentage of children lack key micronutrients in their diets, which impacts their ability to concentrate in class. Poor children also suffer disproportionately from untreated chronic illnesses such as middle-ear infections, which affect their ability to hear in class. While research suggests that there are few financial barriers to enrollment, parents of poor children are far less likely to act as their children’s advocates and are far less likely to engage on a regular basis with school authorities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, HIV/AIDS is closely associated with poverty. Clearly, in homes where the parents have died or are dying of HIV/AIDS the schooling of children is often seriously disrupted.

That said, research in the last few years has shown that what happens in schools, particularly the instructional practices, notwithstanding poverty, is a very important determinant of success in reading, writing, and mathematics. For example, cross-national studies (SACMEQ) show that countries (e.g., Kenya) that are substantially poorer than South Africa have consistently higher levels of learner or pupil achievement.

The wider implications of educational change in the developing country context is that change should be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective, recognizing for example that children’s health directly impacts their ability to learn. At the same time, educational change needs to pay close attention to the inadequacies of system-wide instructional practices.

A recently published Stanford University/South African
comparative study of mathematics achievement in Botswana and South Africa showed that instructional practices largely account for significant aggregate differences in learner achievement. In particular, while the official number of days of teaching is roughly the same and the teachers have similar qualifications; Botswana teachers actually teach many more lessons than their South African counterparts. The study sampled demographically and socio-economically similar schools on either side of the border.

While it is critical to provide a range of services at schools to children, such as free feeding services and access to basic child health care, both of which are likely to be cost-effective ways of improving the lives of young people, the focus of education change must be on shifting prevailing instructional practices. Although there is a growing body of change knowledge on improving systems that are already relatively strong, we know much less about shifting school systems in poor countries and post-conflict situations.

When you worked in the public school system in South Africa you initiated a number of innovative projects. What made these projects innovative and what are their major lessons for the educational change field?

At the beginning of the political transition in 1995, I was asked to apply for a job that was the equivalent of a superintendent of a large school district in the United States. The district was located in a city near Johannesburg. The initial ‘change’ challenge was to desegregate the four racially separate education district offices in the city. One served white children, one served Black children, one served mixed-race children, and one served children of Indian descent. We had to create a single district office that provided services to all the schools on an equitable basis. Once the new multiracial district office had been established and began working, the full magnitude of apartheid inequality in education became evident. The schools that enrolled Black learners were substantially under-funded, under-resourced, and the aggregate learning outcomes were inevitably substantially lower. As the basic instability of the district offices and the schools was addressed, we decided to focus explicitly on improving primary-school literacy. While government funds were limited, we were successful in bringing together a range of educational not-for-profit organizations, referred to in South Africa as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to collaborate on the district literacy initiative. The ‘turf’ wars between outside organizations were minimized because the district office drove the literacy initiative. We learned from this the importance of government taking the lead to coordinate and align the work of outside agencies. The other innovation in the district literacy project was the secondment of grade 1 and grade 2 teachers out of the classroom and into the district office to work side-by-side with the outside service providers. As these teachers were well known in the communities, they immediately were able to win the trust of fellow teachers. From the seconded teachers’ perspective, they learned an enormous amount about new literacy teaching practices and system-wide change mechanisms. On the basis of their experiences as seconded teachers, many of them have been promoted into school management positions and into other district offices.

We worked very closely with four partners. One was a Para-Statal, the Human Science Research Council, which did the learner assessment piece. Two were NGOs that had been part of the anti-apartheid struggle. The fourth was a group of university-based researchers. The two NGOs had very different approaches to the teaching of literacy that ranged from having a very strong emphasis on using authentic texts to using a language-experience approach. The latter had a strong
track record in teaching reading in indigenous languages. They had never worked together in a single initiative and what we were able to do was essentially build on the strengths of each of their models. Our work with the university added intellectual rigor to the initiative. Working together under the direction of the district, the four partners in the initiative came up with a new innovative model to improve literacy teaching in both the indigenous languages and in English.

In the period after the 1994 elections, international donor agencies shifted the focus of funding away from NGOs into government. In order to survive, NGOs had to work with the government as a partner and learn to work collaboratively with other players in the field.

During the early stages of the political transition from apartheid to democracy, the new government was weak. Province head offices and district offices often lacked trained and competent system managers; they had few experts in literacy teaching and in other areas of the curriculum. In contrast, the NGOs had extensive expertise in literacy program development and in textbook selections. From the school’s perspective, the NGOs had legitimacy because they had been part of the struggle against apartheid.

Your book “Managing Educational Change: The State and School Reform in South Africa”, provides a comprehensive account of educational transformation between 1994 and 2002. What are the most relevant accomplishments and lessons learned from educational change in South Africa?

I would like to talk about the concept of system change readiness, which is particularly relevant for post-conflict countries, such as Libya and Tunisia. In the aftermath of major political transitions, each country has its own unique features. Many countries recently emerging from a major political change face similar problems that need to be resolved before seriously considering its system-wide educational improvement. In many post-conflict contexts, institutional authority has been challenged and their legitimacy has been undermined. This was the case in South Africa during the early transition, when teachers and high school learners challenged the authority of the district office and the school principal. Schools became a site on which the political transition was played out. With the erosion of the authority of the principal came the collapse of what was called the ‘culture of teaching and learning.’ School attendance was irregular and children often came to school late and left early. Teachers were routinely absent or if they did come to school, they did little substantive teaching.

In other words, before we can really begin to think about trying to improve the quality of instruction, we need to ensure that the basic social relations of schooling are normalized, and that the boundaries of schooling are restored. This is what I call system change readiness. This stage in the change process is often taken-for-granted in stable systems.

What are some key educational changes that you see South Africa engaging in (or, should engage in) in order to move forward?

In the past two-and-a-half years I have been working closely with the provincial government and the 15 district offices on a system-wide initiative to improve literacy and more recently mathematics in grades 1 to 7. I have drawn a number of valuable lessons about system change from my work as district director. We currently have the advantage that the system as a whole is far more stable and ‘ready’ for system-wide change of instructional practice. Drawing on the international change knowledge, we focus on four pillars of change: measurement of learner achievement, improving teaching practice, working with parents, and improving school and district management.

The second pillar—improving teaching practice, is seen as the core. To do this we made
use of three key interventions. First, we developed high quality but contextually sensitive lesson plan scripts. Second, we ensured that all schools were supplied with high quality learning materials such as complete sets of graded class readers. Third, we developed just-in-time training and provided each teacher with an instructional coach.

While this provincial initiative is still relatively new, a number of key lessons are beginning to surface. Although we had hoped to use the standardized tests scores to hold schools accountable, our testing system was not sufficiently well developed and results, therefore, lack credibility. This turned out to be an asset as it allowed us to build higher levels of trust before applying accountability measures. The scripted lesson plans emerged as a key strength in the initiative. Rather than seeing them as deskilling, the teachers see the seemingly prescriptive lesson plans as part of their professional growth. For teachers, the lesson plans demonstrate how to operationalize the new instructional practice across the entire school year. Along with incorporating new instructional techniques, the lesson plans also increase the pace of lessons, ensuring that children have substantially more opportunities to learn. Providing full sets of learning materials linked to the lesson plans, while it might seem self-evident, was not something that had been done in many previous reform efforts.

Possibly, the most important aspect is the added value of the instructional coaches. They are playing a range of roles. Coaches actually get into classrooms and teach model lessons and they work collaboratively with teachers to address very specific classroom-management problems. Teachers are increasingly recognizing the value of coaches as they hold them accountable for the quality of their teaching.

What models/ideas promise greatest success for large-scale educational improvement?

There are very different models that need to be employed depending upon where a system is in the improvement journey. In education systems that have recently been through a radical political and/or social transition, where government is often relatively weak, it lacks professional capacity, and the institutions of the state are short on legitimacy, a unique set of strategies needs to be deployed. Collective trust is absolutely essential in these kinds of systems. Trust by teachers, learners, and parents is an important ingredient in all system-wide change. That is why high-stakes testing and performance accountability, particularly in the early stages of a change process, can fundamentally undermine the process.

Once a post-conflict system reaches a state of change readiness—readiness to begin substantial change in instructional practices—there is often the need for large-scale external capacity. In the case of the Gauteng province in South Africa, this external capacity takes a number of forms, but the most important are the scripted lesson plans and instructional coaches hired from outside the system. Both the lesson plans and the coaches bring new instructional practices to promote teacher learning in the classroom. But for these new practices to be institutionalized, the lesson plans cannot simply be benchmarked against international best practices, but must be crafted to move teachers forward from where they are. Equally, instructional coaches have to work alongside teachers, to model and demonstrate the new practices, to collaborate with teachers as they move forward, and to hold them accountable as they move from the novelty of the change process through the period in which the new practice becomes part of the daily routine.

NOTES

1. The term “seconded teacher” is used to describe a teacher holding office in the teaching service who is seconded to carry out duties under the direction of professional officers engaged in administration or supervision of education.


http://www.aera.net/Educational_Change_SIG.htm
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