The theme, “educational change and poverty” can be framed in learning, rather than in material, terms. The dependence on the essentials of life—food, shelter, health, etc.—for any human enterprise is undeniable, but assuming that students do attend school even with mild or grave material shortages, moves the question to the strictly educational realm. The hope of achieving high quality learning in poor schools ultimately rests on the nature of the relationship that takes place between teacher and student in the pursuit of learning. If this relationship conforms to what a context of productive learning demands, material poverty should not be an insurmountable obstacle to gain learning and mutual satisfaction.

Educational change in the face of poverty cannot be conceived as a “fixed date change”, as the philosopher Enrique González Rojo calls the illusion of democratic or violent revolutionary change: once in power the new group will swiftly cure social evils and change society for the better. Change has to be worked out day by day from the inside of a school system that up until now neglects freedom and variety of experiences, key aspects of learning, in favor of standard procedures, impersonality and control of learning processes. Facing poverty and schooling means confronting the present features that impede good learning.

The ongoing experience with tutorial networks in Mexico shows that irrespective of social or economic conditions, sound teaching and learning are possible when teachers offer freely what they know, students choose what is of interest to them, and both commit to achieve the proposed learning. This seemingly simple arrangement subverts a conventional school culture that preempts personal encounters and therefore good learning. Teachers learn the practice of tutoring by becoming students within a larger network of tutors. Through an uninterrupted series of tutorial relationships, where
apprentices become tutors and tutors apprentices, an extended learning community takes shape. Personal encounters multiply and everyone, teachers and students, have ample opportunities to learn and to teach. For the networks to become a reality in Mexico, extreme poverty was an asset, not a hindrance. In the margins of an extended, centralized school system, teachers, students, and parents perceive the incongruities of a standard service as ones that do not make much sense in their social settings. In an unpromising school situation, the demonstration that good learning is not only possible but also accessible to all through tutorial relationships is an eye opener and commits local people to change. The catalysts are members of the network that reach the school and demonstrate through their own practice that a different, locally satisfying approach to learning is possible. The spark that ignites change in learners is the experience of being personally attended to, having their particular needs and interests met, and their individual styles accepted and encouraged. The basic truth and respect displayed in tutorial exchanges between mentor and apprentice lead not only towards completion of tasks and mutual satisfaction, but to the demonstration of mastery when students become mentors to new apprentices.

The networks are supported from the outside by federal and state educational authorities who accept the new model and provide funding, but they function with the inner dynamism of those who have discovered the power and satisfaction of being able to learn and teach in earnest. The lesson that tutorial networks can offer to the debate on education and poverty in school systems is about the invaluable yet untapped resource that lies dormant within the system itself: the power of every learner to become a teacher, an inexhaustible resource to produce and sustain good learning, available and free in every school.

The model of tutorial relationships first promoted through the Learning Community Project in Mexico and now brought to scale through the Program for the Improvement of Educational Achievement (PEMLE) has expanded relatively quickly to thousands of schools across the country. What are the major features of this model and how do you explain its rapid expansion?

One can speculate that swift unexpected changes in traditional institutions spring from long suppressed tensions that suddenly find release, and give way to a more convenient arrangement for the parties involved. This can explain the quick expansion of a model of tutorial relationships from a few schools to thousands of schools in the country. The tension that is reaching a breaking point in public school systems is the blatant contradiction between stated goals and concrete achievements. Dissatisfaction with results is mounting and shared by families, policy makers, researchers, and the general public. Yet, the several remedies tried in recent decades have not reversed in any significant way the contradiction. The tension that the model of tutorial relationships releases is the one created by a school culture that prevents contexts of productive learning while proclaiming its commitment to foster them. Interest is always the most fateful factor for successful and productive learning; yet interest is least fostered in a traditional school culture when themes and the timing to learn them are imposed on teachers and students alike. Freedom to choose topics, to explore alternatives and move at one’s own pace is the essence of learning; yet, in the overwhelming majority of classrooms, individual choices, spontaneous communication among classmates, idiosyncratic explorations and different rhythms of progression are simply not allowed. In retrospect one major advantage the members of CEAC had in implementing change was their long experience at the margins of the school
system, in urban slums and rural communities. Single-teacher schools became ideal testing grounds, because many standard requirements were not applicable, and because authorities were more easily persuaded to allow outside interventions that did not imply additional costs, and that, however tentatively, promised to improve an otherwise intractable situation. In addition, the intervention of CEAC was successful because of its visible effectiveness embodied in the way the promoters of tutorial networks themselves taught and learned. There was no separation between design and execution, no postponing the fruition of the present effort for the future, but immediate satisfaction with the results of teaching what one knew and loved, and what the other wanted and was eager to learn. Before promoting any learning community in schools, CEAC’s advisors formed one among themselves, became acquainted with the inner works of tutorial relationships, and developed the professional enthusiasm that sustains commitment. Convinced of the academic benefits of their shared practice, advisors ventured to distant schools and spent whole weeks in them promoting tutorial relationships. The favorable results in schools that willingly try out tutorial networks generally spills over into neighboring communities, and generates a grassroots movement that has reached farther and farther. At the beginning of 2008 the news of the movement in telesecundarias – middle school groups run by single teachers aided by broadcasted lessons – reached the Undersecretary of Basic Education. He visited one such school and saw a learning community in action. Since then, with the more decided support of the State, tutorial networks multiplied exponentially.

**Overall, the schools that have adopted the model of tutorial relationships in Mexico are showing improvements in student achievement as measured by the national standardized test ENLACE, even though this has not been the main focus of the program. What are those improvements and why are they happening?**

In the case of the 9,000 public schools where most students had scored “insufficient” for three consecutive years, their inclusion in tutorial networks was decided as a means to effectively improve their academic achievement, not to increase test scores. Yet, yearly all the students have taken the national standardized test, and there is a striking correlation between the frequency of their participation in tutorial networks and improvement in their test scores. A simple explanation of the paradox of improved test results among students doing the opposite of studying to the test is their constant training in making sense out of written texts as their central academic competency. Multiple-choice tests offer independent readers an occasion to make sense out of deceivingly varied answers to one simple question, assuming they had not learned the right answer beforehand. To truly gauge the academic achievement of students in tutorial networks, one has recourse to their public demonstrations, their reflection on the learning process itself, and their capacity to teach others – the clearest test of having mastered a particular subject. Also, the general competency of being able to learn guarantees that the student has attained self-confidence and autonomy—the basic goals of public education.

**What are major risks and areas of improvement of the tutorial networks model promoted through PEMLE?**

Structurally, the major risk is the authoritarian nature of a single public school system that controls the allocation of material resources and shares extra-legal power with the leaders of the teachers’ union. Policymakers can maintain a steady course or suddenly switch priorities in the system, without having to negotiate their decisions with all concerned. It has been in this institutional structure that the power of tutorial relationships has called attention and earned
acceptance on the part of some authorities. At this juncture, with a new administration taking command after the 2012 presidential elections, the fate of the tutorial networks rests on the strength of the changes that have taken root in various regions across the country. Up until now, the major accomplishment has been awakening in schools genuine interest to learn on the part of teachers and students. What is being learned in earnest invariably produces good results, creates self-confidence and leads to further learning, but depends on the depth and extent of the knowledge of the available tutors. Learning is still confined to separate themes of the official program, not organically linked to wider academic themes or to concrete local issues that call for study and transformation. We are seeking linkages, present or virtual, to experts in local or near institutions of higher learning.

Based on your experience in Mexico, what do you see as the desirable relationship between educational research and practice?

I would suggest that researchers be attuned to local promising developments, rather than taking up themes that respond more to formal academic requirements than to ongoing needs of teachers and students. Being close to where the changes are taking place offers researchers the opportunity to uncover themes that call for exploration, and promise immediate benefits to improve the achievement of tutorial networks – or similar large-scale developments in the school system. Educational researchers, as a rule, study school developments from up high, which partially restricts their vision; being mentored by students puts them on level ground to appreciate how people learn and share knowledge in ordinary life.

NOTES

1. CEAC is a Non-Governmental Organization that since 2004 has been promoting tutorial networks with the support of public and private sources. The majority of its former members work at present within the Ministry of Education. Convivencia Educativa, A.C. recently changed its name to Redes de Tutoría, S.C.
Gabriel Cámara (Ed.D., Harvard Graduate School of Education, ’72) currently advises the Directorate of Management Development of Educational Innovation of the Undersecretariat of Basic Education in Mexico. He was the founder and senior advisor of Convivencia Educativa, A.C., a small Non Governmental Organization that catalyzed the radical transformation of ordinary classrooms into learning communities in a handful of schools and inspired a movement that has expanded the new practice to thousands of schools across the country through the Program for the Improvement of Educational Achievement, PEMLE. Gabriel’s work is noted for his research and promotion of alternative models of education at basic level and in community settings. Gabriel talks about the change from the inside out that education needs: tutoring systems where tutors teach only the topics they know well and students are allowed to choose the topics of interest to them. He can be contacted at gcamara@laneta.apc.org.