The 2014 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “The Power of Education Research for Innovation in Practice and Policy” What do you see as the most pressing promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?

The evidence that most high performing education systems combine equity with quality suggests that research needs to continue focusing on how to support and integrate disadvantaged students to improve the performance of our education systems as the cornerstone in the development of our societies. As skills and knowledge have become the main driving force of many countries’ economies, the economies and societies of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) cannot afford to have unskilled people. Recent crises have shown how low skilled and low educated individuals have been hit the hardest. At the same time, the new OECD Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies Survey (PIAAC), which measures adult skills across different countries, has shown the importance and value of education and skills for economic and social progress.

While not an educational innovation per se, the consolidation of evidence that equity is key for quality in education and that school failure is too expensive for our governments to sustain economically, is a promising development for improvement overall. It means that governments of various political ideologies need to recognize these factors as policy priorities.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has played an important role on this issue. PISA includes a background questionnaire that allows analyzing results by students’ socio economic background (SES), parental education levels, or immigrant background. Results show how in various education systems, the impact of socio economic background is stronger or weaker, and whether this has changed over time. With the new 2012 cycle, we can see that within OECD countries, Australia, Canada, Japan, Finland, and Korea combine both high

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performance with lower than average impact of SES. Equity has improved in a few countries (using mathematics performance as the outcome measure), and that only a few countries such as Germany have had improvements in both equity and quality. It also shows whether the differences across and within schools in a country are weighted by socioeconomic background.

At OECD, we did a study on equity and quality in education, using PISA and other indicators and saw that across OECD countries, there had been many policies focused on supporting the disadvantaged, but there was not much consolidated evidence and research. Many countries continue to struggle to ensure minimum levels of literacy completion of upper secondary education. Countries have systemic policies such as comprehensive schools in Nordic countries or more targeted interventions at the national or local levels such as Ontario or Netherlands; however, there is not much innovation in this area. One of the key challenges is the lack of research on the impact of their policies and programs. In some cases, research may be undertaken, but the information does not reach policy makers. This is why it is key for researchers to undertake analysis, especially meta-analysis, of the types of programs that are making a difference in educational improvement for the most disadvantaged students. The role of AERA can be vital. And most important is to make sure that the results of the research reach policy makers.

PISA has been instrumental in the world of education and policy making. Since its initial launch, it has grown in the number and the impact on participating countries, which is now at 65. It has grown to provide a unique comparative knowledge base on education by measuring 15 year old students’ skills and capacities to use reading, math and science to solve everyday challenges. The 2012 data has just been released, and it is extremely interesting to see how countries react to the data and prepare the release of their data with suitable messages that contextualize this data.

There are many important contributions of PISA to the education change field. In my view, one of the most important contributions is that it has raised the importance and value of education and placed it in the centerfield of governments’ tasks together with economic issues. Education and its link to the labor market has become more prevalent with the rise of knowledge-based economies. PISA presents clear, tangible indicators that show how a country is doing in terms of the education performance of its fifteen year olds, whether it is progressing or not every three years, and also in comparison to other countries.

This has brought much interest and response of policy makers, teachers and parents worldwide. In fact, PISA has triggered actions and reforms across countries in response to low performance, for example in Germany or Norway. A number of countries are using PISA to set their national objectives, as it allows performance measures in the three key areas of literacy, numeracy, and science.

Additionally, PISA has managed to put equity in the education agenda with much more prevalence, as mentioned earlier. By having performance indicators and background variables related to equity, it is possible to know whether a system is giving similar opportunities to its students across different schools. Another indicator is available that shows differences

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was first launched in 1997 with the intention of evaluating education systems worldwide every 3 years by assessing the competencies of 15 year olds in reading, math, and science. What are, from your perspective, the most important contributions of PISA to the educational change field? And what are key lessons learned by the OECD after over 15 years since PISA was launched?
across and within schools of whether a school system is highly within and across schools that can give an idea of the selectiveness of a district and whether the district tracks students or whether a child can have similar education regardless of the school they attend.

Finally, PISA does not only show performance, but has a very rich set of indicators and information on teachers perceptions, what students think about their teachers, the practices of principals or the level of centralization in education decision making. This data helps to contextualize the results. This can be done by showing the level of choice parents have, the use of assessment in the system, the use of repetition, or other features. It also gives researchers the opportunity to explore much further beyond results, for example, to look at students’ interest and engagement in their schooling, their thoughts on how teachers are teaching them. The data gathered from 65 educational systems around the world can be used by researchers to help shape valuable education curricula for students.

You are currently engaged in the Education Policy Outlook, a new OECD publication series that will review education policies across OECD countries. What inspired the creation of the series, who do you envision as the key audience/users, and what do you expect will be its impact?

In 2013, as part of our new program of work we proposed the development of an Education Policy publication to our 34 members. The inspiration behind the creation of this series was the glaring lack of an international overview of what countries are doing in education policy reforms and the growing demand by policy makers for more international evidence on educational policies and practices.

While there have been many reports focusing on best practice countries or high performers, and there is a solid body of research across different journals, including the Journal for Educational Change, there has not been a systematic overview of educational policies and reforms being implemented across countries. Indeed, many reports highlight specific education systems such as Ontario, Shanghai, Finland, or Australia. However, there are many different education systems that introduce policies to respond to different or similar challenges, which may also be valuable, promising or relevant for different countries.

At the OECD, we have a rich knowledge base of comparative indicators and assessments of outcomes in education, including PISA, TALIS (the Teaching and Learning International Survey), Education at a Glance, or the recently released new PIAAC (measuring adult skills). Additionally, we have many comparative thematic policy studies focusing on different sectorial policies. Until recently we did not have a comprehensive overview of countries education policies and practices beyond indicators. This motivated our proposal to launch an Education Policy Outlook, which was welcomed by countries and their policy makers.

The key question driving the outlook is: What are countries doing to respond to their challenges? And, in turn, we eventually need to look into the impact and review what works under different contexts. We aim to give policy makers and those who influence practice and delivery in education comparative information and analysis of policy reforms.

We defined a conceptual framework, laying out the key policy issues for which we had knowledge at OECD and defined 6 policy levers grouped as follows:

- **Students**: How to raise outcomes for all in terms of equity and quality and preparing students for the future?
• **Institutions**: How to raise the quality of instruction through school improvement and evaluation and assessment?

• **Systems**: How are governance and funding of education systems aligned to be effective?

Defining these policy areas was challenging, and the aim was to focus on those areas where OECD has gathered knowledge that are key for improvement. Following this framework, we are now developing individual policy profiles for thirty-four countries and we will then be able to compare and contrast, review trends, and follow up in the future. We have profiles for Australia, Czech Republic, Chile, Finland, Ireland, Mexico, Norway, New Zealand and Turkey, and are beginning work on Denmark, Germany, France and Spain. A comparative report will be published every two years from 2014. It will review trends in education policy across countries, present a snapshot of country profiles and present special topics of relevance to reforms. For example, for the 2014 version, we will have the results of two surveys of teacher union and business union engagements in educational policy reforms.

Eventually, we want to contribute to the improvement of education systems. We want to get support to develop a policy reform database (called the policy reforms bank). By reviewing what countries are doing, going back to ask what happened, finding trends, and also providing a shortcut to understand what OECD is saying about different countries educational policies, we are filling a niche that has not been covered yet.

The OECD comparative report Equity and Quality in Education provides policy recommendations, evidence, and strategies to support disadvantaged students and schools. What are key characteristics of policies that effectively improve student achievement in contexts of disadvantage?

Across all OECD countries there is the problem of school failure and dropout: almost one of every five students does not reach a basic minimum level of skills to function in today’s societies and students from low socio-economic background are twice as likely to be low performers. Tackling this issue requires investing in students early on and through at least upper secondary education so that all students are able to obtain the skills and knowledge they will need for effective social and labor market integration.

Our study is geared to give policy makers strategies to reduce inequities and therefore raise performance and we defined two parallel approaches: eliminating system level practices that hinder equity; and specifically targeting low performing disadvantaged schools. The following description is based on our report (OECD, 2012).

**Avoid system level policies conducive to school and student failure**: The way education systems are designed can exacerbate initial inequities and have a negative impact on student motivation and engagement, eventually leading to dropout. Eliminating system level obstacles to equity can improve equity and benefit disadvantaged students, by contributing to prevent failure and promote completion of upper secondary education.

Some effective ways to eliminate system level obstacles to equity include eliminating grade repetition, avoiding early tracking and deferring student selection to upper secondary, managing school choice to avoid segregation, making funding strategies responsive to the needs of students and schools, and designing equivalent upper secondary education pathways to ensure completion.

**Help disadvantaged schools and students improve**. Schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged students are at greater risk of
challenges that can result in low performance, affecting education systems as a whole. A set of policy interventions have shown to be effective in supporting the improvement of low performing disadvantaged schools such as: strengthening and supporting school leadership; stimulating supportive school climates and environments for learning; attracting, supporting, and retaining high quality teachers; ensuring effective classroom learning strategies; and prioritizing linking schools with parents and communities.

Indeed, this is a full menu of actions, as the report is targeted to OECD countries in general. One area we did not directly tackle was that of the use of data, which is key as a lever for improvement. There is another project on the issue of evaluation and assessment that has presented recommendations on the issue. From following up with countries after the release of the report, I am aware that countries take on board or focus on the issues that are more relevant to them.

Finally, I want to highlight the fact that disadvantage is not an education issue alone and that it is important that education policies need to be aligned with other government policies, such as housing or welfare, to ensure student success.

From your standpoint as Senior Analyst on Education Policy in the OECD, what models/ideas promise greatest success for large-scale instructional improvement?

From my work across countries and across different education policy areas, the focus on equity with quality is at the heart of improvement, and this requires multilevel strategies. In addition, the models that have more traction are those that target school and classroom improvement, with a special focus on teachers and school leaders.

I also see the imperative to review how to successfully integrate ICTs in learning, as this is at the heart of our learning futures, and there appears to be a lag in the education public policy in this area.

I keep seeing that implementation is as the heart of success or failure. Often, Ministries of Education design the best-intended policy reforms, with clear mandates, objectives and strategies. Yet, they fail to take ground as intended. I can think of a number of issues why this is so, and how it can be targeted.

Focus: Many strategies lack focus, or target too many objectives at once, spreading resources too thin for the specific components of the policy and confuse those that have to implement them. I can think of different national plans that have around twenty objectives in many different areas. The risk that there is hardly any progress in at least half of the objectives is high! Therefore, it is important to set a few objectives that are clear and understandable to those involved, and that have mid-term indicators to help guide progress. Developing assessment strategies and indicators aligned to the focus can also contribute to success.

Implementation on the ground: Some strategies may not include ways to ensure that objectives get traction at the local and school level. Local level governments, schools, their leaders and teachers, are the ones who need to introduce curricular reforms in classrooms, changes in the student body, new assessment practices, new schedules, new pedagogical approaches or new leadership practices. If they are not involved in the process, or are not on board with the reforms, the chances that these are introduced appropriately are slim. Also, there may be reform “burnout,” when too many strategies are enforced upon them. It is important to engage those that will be involved from the beginning, and to ensure that there
are clearly designed ways on how they will be engaged. This requires capacity building.

**Policy vs. politics:** Another issue is the key challenge between policy and politics. On one hand, the design, introduction and implementation of education policies take time, and even more time to demonstrate an impact. For example, a change in teacher training can take a year to design, four years for the first cohort of teachers to go through, and then more time for them to start working in schools. Other policies may take less time, but often not less than two or three years. At the same time, political mandates are short and often require accountability and results between elections, which put much pressure for quick results. Designing intermediate objectives to longer-term strategies or plans can help. When countries experience shifts in education policy and government, this can create instability to the profession, schools, and slow or stop the development of policy impact.

**Capacity building:** Indeed, the capacity to introduce large scale change depends upon the people: the policy makers that are designing the policies, the mid-level leaders that have to work between schools, and the school leaders and teachers from the local and national levels. Capacity of those involved is at the heart of success. Investing in formal training and in more informal approaches such as developing networks, and ensuring teamwork of teachers within and beyond schools is at the heart of raising the quality of the professionals involved in education policy and practice.

**SOURCES**

OECD (2012) Equity and Quality in Education: Supporting Disadvantaged Students and Schools


www.oecd.org/edu/pisa.

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