The 2018 AERA theme is The Dreams, Possibilities, and Necessity of Public Education. What can be the promise of public schools and how does—or should—educational change bring us closer to such schooling?

In South Africa, which is the context I know best, I think the main way that we are currently falling short is that we do not properly understand the way that the political economy in the country affects educational policy and educational reform. For example, I think you cannot solve a political problem with a technical solution. The vast majority (about 95%) of South Africa’s schools are public schools and about 70-80% do not charge fees. However, where internationally the divide may be along public-private lines, in South Africa the real divide is along fee-charging versus no-fee schools.

Most of our research is on the under-performing 80% of no-fee schools that the majority of students attend. Often when reforms are proposed for this part of the schooling system the main opposition is actually political, but it often isn’t presented that way. Typically, opponents will critique technical or ideological issues without mentioning the very obvious political reasons why they oppose the policy. For example, that the ruling party does not want to antagonize the unions due to an upcoming election. So, in short, knowledge to action often has to go through policy and that is inherently a political process. We need more research on that.

Your work sheds light on education policy in South Africa and specifically on topics related to accountability and capacity building. What led you to focus on these two topics, and what would you say are the key capacity constraints and key accountability constrains in South Africa?

When I was still doing my PhD, I was heavily influenced
by an article that Richard Elmore wrote titled "Agency, Reciprocity, and Accountability in Democratic Education."

My background is in economics where the focus is on incentives and sanctions—typically measurable incentives and sanctions. Where Elmore's article helped shift my thinking was on the bi-directionality of capacity and accountability, and especially his view that you cannot hold people accountable for things they cannot do. In South Africa, Yael Shalem was making a similar argument in her paper "Do we have a theory of change: Calling change models to account," where she states quite emphatically that until we have given teachers meaningful learning opportunities, speaking about accountability in South Africa is highly problematic.

I would say the biggest accountability constraint is that the major teacher union in South Africa (SADTU) is extremely powerful and blocks any and all forms of accountability no matter what is proposed. They can do this because they are one of the biggest unions in COSATU (the confederation of trade unions) and COSATU is in a ruling alliance with the African National Congress (ANC), the elected government.

The major capacity constraint is that teachers lack even the most elementary content knowledge of the subjects they are teaching. Although one does require a teaching qualification to be a teacher in South Africa, we have found that qualifications are not a good indicator of content knowledge or pedagogical content knowledge. Currently the entrance requirements for studying to become a teacher are amongst the lowest of all fields. Unsurprisingly teaching is not seen as an especially prestigious career and on average draws students with lower matric points (matric is the school-leaving exam in South Africa). For older teachers this is because a large percentage of them were trained under apartheid and received inadequate training and in the post-apartheid period have not received the kind of meaningful learning opportunities they would require to improve their content knowledge and pedagogical practice.

To give you an idea of how severe this is, in a nationally-representative sample of primary schools where Grade 6 mathematics teachers were assessed, 79% of these teachers had a content knowledge level below the grade 6-7 level (see Venkat & Spaull, 2015, “What do we know about primary teachers’ mathematical content knowledge in South Africa?”).

Given your focus on accountability and capacity building, and given your call to work within a theoretical framework to understanding educational change, how might learning opportunities improve teachers’ content knowledge and pedagogical skills look like?

I think we really need to ask questions about the quality of the professional development courses that we provide to teachers in South Africa, both in-service and pre-service. I have sat in on some of these workshops and spoken to many teachers about these workshops. In many ways, the teachers see these as usually of exceedingly low quality.
I am currently trying to develop a high-quality video and coaching-based course to teach isiXhosa Foundation Phase teachers how to teach reading, since I’ve become convinced that unless we can get reading right it doesn’t really matter what we do later in the system. I also think there is a lot of potential in internships for new teachers in South Africa and using our high-functioning schools as national sites of teacher development. These schools often have a wealth of expertise that we aren’t currently utilizing.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might be the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

I think the world that young people are going into is changing quite rapidly and their education should prepare them for that. The rapid developments in Artificial Intelligence, robotics and Mixed Reality mean that the types of work that a Grade 1 student in 2017 will be doing when they are 30 are totally unpredictable. In South Africa this is tricky because it’s difficult to focus on 21st Century skills (communication, collaboration, critical thinking etc.) when students are battling with things like reading and basic numeracy. For example, in an earlier round of the Progress in International Reading and Literacy Study (PIRLS) found that only 13% of South African Grade 4 students could reach the low international benchmark (as a point of reference 96% of Grade 4 students in the United States reached this benchmark). We can see similarly low levels of achievement in the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study where only 39% of our Grade 5 learners reached the low benchmark in TIMSS-Numeracy. This is in contrast to other better-performing middle-income countries like Iran (65%), Chile (78%), and Turkey (81%). That being said, there have been meaningful improvements in learning outcomes at the Grade 9 level in mathematics and science between 2002 and 2015. In 2002 only 11% of our Grade 9 students reached the lowest TIMSS benchmark but by 2015 this had increased to 34%.

What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field today?

I think the most important issue is the same as it has always been: conducting policy-relevant research using the most rigorous methods, to provide the best advice we can to those in elected office. I’m excited that there are still fields in education—particularly in developing countries—that remain completely un- or under-researched and under-theorized. Things like understanding how decoding might be different in agglutinating African languages, or whether the reading fluency-comprehension relationship is different in African languages than in English. For example, the oral reading fluency norms that have been established in English are not applicable to agglutinating African languages.
languages where prefixes and suffixes are added to a root-word creating a longer single word. Even things like lists of high-frequency words by language—these don’t exist for our African languages. We really don’t know the answers to these questions and won’t have them until we spend time, energy, and money doing that research. I’m also excited about the increasing use of quantitative methods and large-scale data in educational change research.

**References**


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Nic Spaull is currently a Senior Research Fellow at the Research on Socioeconomic Policy (RESEP) group at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. He has recently returned from Paris where he was a Thomas J Alexander Fellow at the OECD, and before that a Visiting Scholar in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University in the United States.

Nic has a PhD in economics and has published numerous journal articles on education focusing on assessment, accountability, literacy, and education policy in South Africa. His current research focuses on exceptional township and rural schools in South Africa as part of a ESRC/DFID grant for 2016/17/18.

Nic has been involved in a number of research projects for local and international organizations, including the South African Presidency, the Department of Basic Education, UNICEF, the EU, UNESCO, and SACMEQ. He is currently seconded to the Allan Gray Orbis Foundation Endowment where he heads a team that are developing a high-quality video-based course to teach isiXhosa Foundation Phase teachers how to teach reading in South Africa. Nic also advises numerous NGO’s, policy-makers, and grant-making bodies, and also regularly updates his website (nicspaull.com) with new research and articles he finds interesting.