The 2018 AERA theme is *The Dreams, Possibilities, and Necessity of Public Education*. In your view, to what extent are countries realizing the dreams and possibilities of public education?

I speak as a practitioner who has worked mostly in contexts of developing countries and now based in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). In these contexts, public education remains critical to fulfilling dreams, optimizing potential, and helping with social transformation. In these contexts, public education in its most basic forms remains the only source through which the majority of citizens are able to access formal learning opportunities. While the gains over the last two decades have been tremendous, access to a meaningful education remains a major global problem. Globally, over 60 million primary-aged children are out of school and the 2015 target of 70 percent of children completing primary school will not be met until 2030. The situation at secondary level is of even greater concern: only 14 percent of children complete upper secondary in low-income countries (UNESCO, 2016).

**Government owned, controlled, and regulated systems** supply the majority of education around the world. These systems of public education ensure that education is provided to the masses according to a set of standards. Public education remains a critical public good that must be preserved and strengthened as part of the efforts to improve democracy, reduce inequity, and ensure economic and social development. It remains necessary because there is a massive education debt (see Ladson-Billings, 2006 for a discussion of the education debt in the context of the USA), largely resulting from the exploitative practices such as colonialization, that cannot be equitably met by other
approaches to education provision. Most importantly, public education remains necessary because the purposes of education are best met by a strong and equitable system that is intentional about its social transformation agenda. Providing public education is an equity and social justice issue and an investment in developing a country’s most critical resource, its children.

While traditionally, public education connoted government control and ownership, many countries are placing emphasis on government supervision and regulation including being the final determinant of cost and standards. This should continue to be the case, as it will create a greater role for non-government stakeholders to partner with public education systems. However, it is essential that governments do not outsource their education systems to the markets and commercial entities interested in making a profit. Some African countries, probably frustrated by years of failing education systems and enticed by slick sales pitches, are allowing private companies and non-governmental organizations to run large numbers of schools while charging fees. In other countries, governments have maintained control of their education systems but, challenged by weak government financing, supply only the teachers and administrators. These bottom-up approaches to financing defeat the equity-focus that public education should pursue as children will only get the education their parents and communities can afford. Both scenarios also put public education systems at great risk of being undermined if there isn’t strong state regulation and financing. While strategic partnerships and innovative approaches must be pursued to strengthen public education, governments must be careful not to sacrifice the building of strong sustainable systems for short term gains.

The dream, which we should all share, is for public education systems to develop robust curricula and provide the investments that allow all children to complete a high quality basic education. This education should help young people develop the range of skills and competencies required for 21st century citizenship. This requires strong, and in some cases, non-traditional partnerships within a robust public education framework. This education framework should allow for flexibility in how education is offered and who provides educational services; it should be creative and innovative in terms of how content is developed and delivered; it should be robust in regulation, supervision, and support for service providers, teachers and students; and; it should be unflinching in the drive to ensure the most marginalized get priority access to education services.

Your work in Zimbabwe is particularly relevant to understanding processes in educational change in SSA. What is one of the most important educational change interventions taking place in Zimbabwe and what challenges has the process faced?

The educational change efforts in Zimbabwe must be looked at against the challenging political and economic context, which the country currently faces. Primary and secondary education receives approximately 20 percent of the national budget annually.
However, this budget is spent almost entirely (over 98 percent) on employment costs and leaves very little of government funding for sector development. That gap is filled by parents through school-level contributions; the implication of this is that school quality is largely dependent on what parents at each school can afford. There is a lot of scrutiny of what happens in the education system and the expectation is that high standards be maintained despite the challenging context.

In the midst of the economic and political challenges, the country undertook a set of bold reforms, which revolve around developing and implementing a new curriculum. Despite previous attempts, Zimbabwe had not succeeded in developing a formal curriculum since its independence in 1980. In 2016, after years of reviews and consultations, the country completed the development of a new national Curriculum Framework for Primary and Secondary Education, a first of its kind for Zimbabwe. This new curriculum is far reaching and potentially transformative for the system given strong provisions for learning assessment, increased emphasis on science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics (STEAM), technical and vocational areas, heritage studies, and early learning.

Since the reforms come at a time of significant challenges with resources, a major part of the debate that has ensued relates to how the reforms will be implemented. Teachers’ unions and some of the other stakeholders have raised concerns about the risk to quality and the increased burden placed on teachers. While acknowledging the resource gaps, the Ministry has challenged practitioners to be innovative in implementing the curriculum.

The reform process, especially given the context, needed to have invested more in communications and a plan to ensure transparency and accountability of all stakeholders. It is not sufficient to consult at varying stages of the process, as was done. The process needed a stronger and more binding framework of engagement that would ensure meaningful participation of stakeholders and hold all partners accountable. The process also needed to better communicate basic information to stakeholders, especially teachers and parents.

One of the critical questions that the reform process raises relates to the relationship between vision and resources. Should resources drive the reform agenda? Put another way, should education systems await availability of optimal resources before embarking on far reaching reforms?

*Given your focus on educational change, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global educational changes?*

It is quite easy to lose sight of the long-term aims of educational change especially in contexts of developing countries where external funding influences priorities and the pace of implementation. These factors make it tempting to circumvent the established systems and rely on external entities for expertise and to lead implementation. While this approach almost always guarantees a successful project, it is unsustainable and the effects are often short...
term. The better option is to work within the existing systems. Execution will not always go according to plan but the system will learn and be better able to provide services in the long term. Investing in the system is important because what matters most in the end is a strong public education system that can serve present and future generations.

Closely related to the previous point is the increasing projectization of development assistance. The education sector is a favorite target for projects: it is easy to build a school, feed some children, conduct workshops on teaching methods, and so forth. A lot of these projects are good initiatives that reach children directly and are meant to do well. However, if we are honest with ourselves, we must also accept that most of these interventions cannot be considered reforms. They typically have a service orientation that, in some cases, fosters a sense of dependence among recipients and the intervention dies when the funding ends. The change that most education systems in Africa require cannot be achieved through piecemeal approaches that tinker with a few schools and do not influence the system. If the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) for education is to be achieved, there is need for a more careful look at how to provide development assistance in ways that contribute sustainably to nations building strong public education systems.

Finally, something we know well but often forget: context matters and it does even more when ideas and priorities are heavily contested and politicized. When the intent is to serve a political interest, rational responses will not be sufficient. Educational change must invest more in understanding context, especially its politics, because change is political and so educational change must better embrace the politics involved. It matters not if the ideas are grand and evidence informed—they will succeed or fail on the politics of the context.

**Young people (students) are the focus of educational change. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change in the context of Zimbabwe and other African countries prioritize in order to meet these needs?**

Very few African countries have maximized the dividends from natural resources, which many possess in great abundance. In some cases, the losses are linked to colonial regimes and their extractive practices (see Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012 for a discussion of extractive economic practices, including cases from Africa). In recent times, poor governance has exacerbated the effects of these extractive practices. Having failed to optimize the dividends from natural resources, most African countries risk doing the same with the potential demographic dividends that could accrue from their youth bulge. A major part of the problem is that education systems are failing young people.

A lot of young people in developing countries are leaving secondary and tertiary institutions with high degrees of bitterness and regret. They feel betrayed by their countries as they end up in the same place as
those who are not formally educated. Increasingly, they do not earn the added value of formal education, especially beyond the basic years. While education is not the only factor contributing to the disillusionment of youth, with weak economies and poor governance, it is education that has traditionally been viewed as the path to social and economic advancement. Hence, those who do not get the promised rewards of an education question its value and over time this undermines the traditional view of education.

The needs of young people can be met through educational change but this must be in concert with broader societal changes. Below, I set out my view of the critical issues to be addressed, namely, youth inclusion, helping young people feel hopeful about their future, and emancipation of the African education.

1. **Youth inclusion**: It is unfortunate that most of the potential of youth in developing countries is not fully developed or utilized. So few are the opportunities that young people are constantly in competition with their peers instead of focused on optimizing themselves and their contribution to the society. A critical first step towards youth-inclusive societies, that provide a continuum of support for young people, is creating genuine spaces and opportunities for engagement in ways that allow these youth to shape their path and that of their society. Education systems are critical in this regard but they remain focused on curricula that socialize young people to conform to the status quo. The emphasis on conformity and control has stifled innovation; to break from the norm is viewed as a challenge to authority. There is a need to help young people dream and organize individually and collectively to achieve those dreams. It is in so doing that we can end the rolelessness of African youth.

2. **Reason to believe**: Every day our children and youth see models of inauthenticity and greed. They are surrounded by vast inequity and many, having done what society asks of them, still cannot find a way to live with decency. Slowly, they disengage and begin to lose faith and become hardened into that which they hate about their society. Education systems must disrupt the supply of disengaged and disempowered young people by teaching about social justice as a way of understanding the factors contributing to their despair. This means that education systems need to help youth build the competencies that go beyond coping with the status quo to being the desired change. In so doing the young people do not simply leave the education system disillusioned and resigned to being tools for use by those with greatest influence; they become agents of disruption and help to shape the society they wish to live in. Schools can help young people remain optimistic about the future, nurture their belief that they can change the world, and help them work towards that change.

3. **The end of colonialization in education**: While there are global
contents and approaches that are applicable across contexts, we should be very worried when classrooms in a rural Zimbabwe village are identical to those in a city in North America or Europe. Too much of African education is still based on colonial (and neo-colonial) models; there is a need for radical changes to Africanize content, teaching methods and even the way schools are conceptualized. Across the continent, countries are taking steps by insisting on the learning and use of indigenous languages and teaching of heritage but there is a lot more that needs to be done. It is important to revisit the philosophies of African thinkers such as Nyerere (see Kassam, 1994) as part of a complete rethink of what African education should engender.

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

In Zimbabwe, and most of the rest of SSA, the educational change issues that are of greatest importance relate to ensuring schools meet basic educational needs. Access to quality learning facilities remains a major issue; even in some countries where enrollment is high, time on-task is limited, the infrastructure in which children learn is minimal, and learning resources are absent. Addressing these basic challenges becomes the default mode of the systems while the investments and innovation required to meaningfully tackle issues of quality are not made. When SSA countries are compared to others globally, the idea of an education debt is applicable.

This debt includes historical deprivations arising from colonial and post-colonial repressive practices, generally inefficient systems, and insufficient prioritization of educational investments. We owe it to our children to prevent further escalation of this debt. While the responsibility is that of national governments, there is also a global responsibility since African resources were exploited to fuel development of many powerful western economies.

It is therefore exciting to see the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) give significant focus to education in a comprehensive way that includes learning. This provides a great opportunity for acceptance of and the taking of the required steps to pay down the education debt to Africa, especially SSA, by investing in strong public education systems to achieve the SDG. Closely related to the educational potential of the SDG education goal is the continued emphasis on equity, which has increased in prominence in the national reforms as well as the strategic plans of most development agencies. The equity focus suggests that there is a debt that is also affecting different groups in different ways and requires an approach that provides varied types and levels of support.

In SSA, there are a number of countries that are pursuing large-scale system reforms in areas such as curriculum and teacher preparation. These are exciting because of their potential to contribute to systemic improvements and further the decolonization of the systems. In this regard,
I am very excited about the systems building component of the work I support especially those that will be sustained by the national institutions such as early assessment interventions and school-level planning.

Like most practitioners, I am excited by the potential that technological tools offer education systems especially for countries that need a dramatic shift in order to address challenges with resources. While excited by this potential, I also dread the haphazard ‘leave it to technology’ approach that often becomes a source of distraction rather than meaningful disruption.

And yes, I am super excited about the possibilities if young Africans are given opportunities to innovate and use technologies to shape the future they desire. It is through the engagement of students and other young people in large-scale system reforms that African education systems will be able to serve, enlighten, and optimize the continent’s potential. When this happens, education in Africa will truly become a vehicle for social justice and change.

References

KENNETH RUSSELL

Dr. Kenneth Russell is an Education Specialist with UNICEF. He is currently based in Zimbabwe and has also worked in Sri Lanka and Jamaica. His current work is focused on providing technical assistance for implementation of education reforms. His research focuses on school-community partnerships, which is also the subject of his forthcoming book based on his study of community participation in schools in Jamaica. He holds masters and doctoral degrees in education from Harvard University.

Dr. Kenneth Russell can be reached at: krussell@unicef.org

The views expressed in this article are the author’s only and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) or any other UN agency or program.