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?

My dream for public education is that we educate the many, both students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those from more privileged families. Public education should be a place where children from all walks of life come together and share one of the most meaningful experiences in their lives. Schools are not just places to learn, but also places where children from various socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, and religions can come together to build a bond and mutual understanding that can last a lifetime. Throughout my career I have seen examples of where this is not happening and public education has become the sink of our education system, creating a social divide between the haves and the have nots and depriving children of opportunities to interact with peers from various backgrounds.

I vividly remember a visit to a primary school in Harlem, New York, a couple of years ago. Walking into the classroom with the school principal, children all came up to me, wanting to touch my (blondish) hair. The principal explained to me that the children (most of whom had black braided hair) weren’t seeing many White people with blond hair. I was perplexed as it signals how, even in a multicultural city as New York, children had few opportunities to mingle with peers outside of their own race/ethnicity. This not only disservices children from under-resourced communities who will find themselves trapped in a system with too many barriers to move upwards on the social ladder; it also harms children from more
privileged families who will become part of a divided society, where a lack of cohesion and inclusivity will ultimately harm us all. Given the rise of private schooling in many countries, one of the most important challenges of educational change is thus to protect an inclusive and encompassing public school system. This requires courage from policy-makers in preventing the establishment or growth of private schools. I'm arguing against one of the current viewpoints here, which says that improving the quality of public schools through additional resources will attract children from privileged backgrounds, and that private education will ultimately ‘wither away’ when there is no longer a need for it.

In my view however, that strategy is unlikely, given that there are many other reasons why well-off parents send their children to private schools. As one UK teacher and parent in a recent article in the Huffington post (“Why Private Schools Are Better,” 2015) explained: ‘I’d simply prefer my children to mix with other children and parents whose speech is not punctuated with ‘innit’ (a contracted form of ‘isn’t it’).

The mere existence of private schools will have an impact on how public education is viewed, and which children go to public schools. Private schools are not simply extending access, they often take children from advantaged backgrounds from public schools and, in doing so, undermine government schools (Menashy, 2015). The best education systems provide a diverse and inclusive environment where children from various backgrounds learn and grow up together in the same school.

You are well known for your work on effects and side effects of accountability systems and particularly for your work on school inspections, and high-stakes testing. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

Accountability systems have had a huge impact on how we think about change and the types of change schools and administrators work on. The vast amount of research in this area shows how the types of standards used to hold schools to account, the targets they have to meet, and the consequences for failing to meet these targets are important drivers for change. Accountability systems not only provide feedback on the aspects of teaching, school organization, and learning outcomes that need to change, but they also greatly shape how we think about what constitutes ‘good education’ and about what is needed to ensure such ‘good education.’

In England, there are many examples of one-day seminars or more extensive professional development courses that promise schools to get them ready for an inspection visit of the Office for Standards in Education (or ‘Ofsted’). Ofsted, the English Inspectorate of Education, reviews school quality on a standardized framework via an analysis of school documents and data (including standardized test scores), interviews with school staff, students, parents, and lesson observations. Various companies offer external reviews of school quality, which have been dubbed ‘Mocksteds’, as they would use similar review standards as in Ofsted’s inspection framework. Similarly, in the U.S., interim
assessments provide information on how well children are ‘on track’ to meet high-stakes test targets, helping teachers align their instruction to the test.

These examples show how external accountability frameworks set the agenda for school improvement and inform our thinking on educational quality. The language used in these frameworks to identify and qualify good practices and outcomes have become so institutionalized in how our schools operate that many teachers and head teachers find it difficult to think outside of this box. In one of my conversations with a newly qualified teacher at my workplace, the Institute of Education, I asked him about his view of a high-quality lesson. His first response was a summing up of the criteria in the Ofsted framework. In his view, the Ofsted criteria provide the ‘golden standard’ for teaching and school quality so there was no point in thinking about other frames of reference. His response is not surprising as Ofsted has inspected schools for many years and the current generation of teachers will have had their almost entire schooling career in Ofsted-inspected schools.

The response of this teacher indicates how each accountability system has its unique set of effects and side effects, which varies across (classroom/school/system) context: schools just below a performance target will respond differently to inspections or high stakes testing compared to schools above a target, schools with a strong and distinct pedagogical concept (e.g. Steiner or Montessori schools) will be more inclined to question accountability targets compared to ‘regular/mainstream’ schools, while a school in a competitive catchment area will likely feel greater pressure to ensure a good inspection report. The diverse effects highlight a need to understand educational change from a systemic perspective, looking at the complex interplay between school improvement interventions, national reform strategies, and agendas and school/community context.

Given your focus on effectively improving the quality of schools through school inspection with a particular emphasis on minimizing unintended aftereffects, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global changes in promoting intended consequences in educational change?

Unintended consequences from external accountability seem to particularly occur in high-stakes settings where teachers and school principals and administrators face targets they feel they cannot meet and are faced with severe consequences when failing to meet these targets (e.g., job loss, loss of funding, reputational damage, and subsequent decline in student intake). Many accountability systems have created a context where educators feel there is no escaping from responding to external measures and they have no option but ‘to play the game.’

It is this context of ‘performativity’ (see Ball, 2003; Perryman et al., 2011) that lies at the heart of the types of side effects that damage educational change: narrowing of curricula by teaching to tested and inspected subjects, focusing on short-term gains and
narrow objectives of teaching and learning, ossification, and datafication.

Our ‘bounded rationality’ and need to simplify a complex concept of ‘educational quality’ into a set of discrete and comparable numbers has simplified how we come to understand educational change. The standardized nature of most accountability systems and the fact that these systems require a transparent evaluation of quality on a set of regulated criteria ensures that schools are measured along the same yardstick, which almost precludes an evaluation on a more locally defined, meaningful set of indicators. The benefit of such a standardized approach is to have a shared understanding and set of practices in how we educate our children, ensuring cohesion and alignment within the education system where children and teachers can relatively easy move between schools and school phases. Taken to the extreme however, we rule out variety between schools where there are limited opportunities to learn from a range of different practices, or to accommodate learning needs and interests of children from a wide range of backgrounds.

What we have learnt from our work on school accountability is that (shared) ownership of change and standards of quality education by those who work in and with schools, combined with a strong focus on changing what works in improving (a broad range of) learning outcomes, is the most successful strategy for long-lasting change.

Such shared ownership is created through (national) conversations between policy-makers, administrators, teachers, parents, and students to define what constitutes good quality education. Examples of such conversations are the ‘round tables’ to discuss inspection standards, organized by the Inspectorate of Education in the Netherlands when developing a new framework, or the place-based scrutiny in Scotland where a range of regulatory bodies meet up with local communities to understand what it’s like to learn in that area and how that might be improved. These types of conversations ensure that educators, children, and parents are part of setting the standard for change, are on board with these standards, and that trust is created within the education system to work collaboratively towards sustainable improvement of all schools and to identify and address key barriers in a system that might prevent such change.

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

This question goes back to my first response in saying that young people need an inclusive environment where they learn and grow up with children from a broad spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, races etc., and where they develop a sense of shared understanding and responsibilities. Part of that package is the need for a broad curriculum where children are offered a diversity of learning
experiences, allowing them to develop a multitude of talents. Perhaps this is not so much a current or pressing need young people would talk about themselves, but it certainly is a need of the societies these children are part of and will help shape.

We need to celebrate and enable diverse and inclusive communities that are providing a rich learning experience for all children. A great example is the work of the West Belfast Partnership Board (n.d.), which supports the collaboration between early years settings, primary and post-primary schools, and community centres in reducing inequality in the region and helping children to achieve their full academic potential. English teachers from primary and secondary schools have shared their curricula and teaching to ensure a continuous learning trajectory for children, while staff in nurseries and primary schools have jointly developed a transition pack to support parents and their children in making the transition to primary school. The Northern Irish Inspectorate of Education (ETI) has been a great enabler in developing this work through their area-based inspection.

This inspection evaluated the relevance, appropriateness, adequacy, and effectiveness of the provision of education and training within the West-Belfast area, and particularly whether the partnership ensured a coherent experience for all learners. Using the strategic planning and self-evaluation of the partnership as a starting point, ETI motivated the partnership to further develop a shared curriculum, which will serve the needs of all learners across the area and provide them with individual learning pathways, which are broad, balanced, and coherent.

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

How do we reform education systems? And how do we create a system where schools and other service providers share responsibility for improvement and collaborate toward a more equal and equitable system? Those are the questions that interest me, and particularly the role of educational accountability, and evaluation in all of this. Coming up with answers requires us to understand the complexity of systems, and how educators interact and collaborate to improve outcomes for children.

In my recent EU-funded study, we have seen some exciting examples of how Inspectorates of Education are developing new frameworks to understand educational quality across school boards, such as the example above of the area-based inspection in West Belfast.

I’m currently also involved in two projects that try to unravel some of the complexities of education system change. One is a really exciting OECD project, which tries to develop indicators to understand ‘knowledge governance,’ ‘enabling accountability,’ ‘capacity,’ ‘system alignment,’ and ‘stakeholder focus.’

The second one is a longitudinal piece of research I’m leading that looks at the relationship between trust, capacity, and ace
accountability to improve learning outcomes. One interesting insight from this last project is how trust between principals and school inspectors is an important condition for effective accountability: trust ensures that schools will be more open in sharing of weaknesses, it reduces the inspection capacity needed to guard against opportunistic behavior (deliberate misrepresentation) on the part of schools, and it also ensures that schools take on board inspection feedback to improve. Trust facilitates open communication and allows potential misunderstandings or conflicts about inspection outcomes and judgements to be reconciled in a deliberative process. These interactions point to reinforcing feedback loops and key levers of system change, which allow us to really get to the heart of these questions, and provide us with new viewpoints for more sustainable and effective improvement.

References


MELANIE EHREN

Melanie Ehren is a Reader in Educational Accountability and Improvement at the UCL Institute of Education and head of the Centre for Educational Evaluation and Accountability (www.educationalevaluation.net).

Her academic work focuses on the effectiveness of accountability and evaluation systems and aims to contribute to a greater understanding of the interplay between accountability and the broader education system in tackling inequality and improving student outcomes.

Her recent work includes EU comparative work on the impact of school inspections on school improvement, the role of inspections and accountability in decentralized systems, and an ESRC-funded longitudinal study on the interplay between trust, accountability and capacity in improving learning outcomes.

Professor Ehren can be reached at: m.ehren@ucl.ac.uk