SYNTHESIS FROM PARTICIPANTS' PRE-SEMINAR CONTRIBUTIONS

The 'Quality Education for All' Challenge
Monday 6th and Tuesday 7th October 2014
Møller Centre, Churchill College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

This synthesis draws on all the contributions made in advance to the Cambridge seminar. It complements the summary note comprising selected extracts organised into the main seminar themes, while identifying some key issues that run through several contributions, often cutting across those particular main themes. In each section, a question is posed, which is intended to summarise differences of viewpoint or tensions arising.

Global vs local

The global context of education is widely recognised, and with it, the value of global movements (including via international agencies) to promote innovation and change. But this raises profound questions as to the applicability of paradigms and the evidence generated in research-rich and affluent systems in low-income and marginalized contexts. In this regard, at least two dimensions emerge from participants' statements: the relevance for others of evidence and paradigms from well-resourced Western societies; and the ways in which school systems and knowledge about education may reflect existing structures of power and privilege, especially in low-income countries. Even within single countries, ordinary people working in small groups may take on challenges through grass-roots innovation that in the past would have been the province of governments.

Several participants are concerned about standardised solutions that reduce local action and limit innovation, as well as familiar concerns about the rankings inherent in international comparative surveys. For one participant, these tensions are especially acute in relation to solutions for marginalised populations. At the same time, one participant warns, recognition of the particularities of local contexts should not be at the expense of developing fundamental skills. Regardless of curriculum, pedagogical strategies may be seen as having global relevance. For another, conceptualisation may be global, but implementation and experimentation must necessarily be local.

- How far then can global alliances and agendas be taken, before they run into excessive generality that does not serve well the wide range of different learners and stakeholders?

Industrial models: appropriate for 21st century and innovation?

Several participants suggest that industrial era paradigms are inappropriate – in their linearity and their search for predictability and control – for 21st century learning systems. Here, too, the possibility of arriving at universal solutions is a key question, given that societies as well as education

systems are at very different starting points. The problems identified with the hierarchical underpinnings of industrial management include their limited potential to innovate and realise ambitious objectives for change. For some, this is also about the prevailing discourse of global competitiveness and a narrowing of what counts as education around primarily economic objectives. This may be understood as the shift from efficiency to relevance. Vested economic and political interests may push inappropriate solutions based on the wrong drivers. It is also about giving due weight to the still-often theoretical acknowledgement of the importance of student voice. To move away from the mind-sets of industrial society represents a 'long journey'.

At the same time, the challenge of making transformations happen at some kind of significant scale necessarily introduces the systemic, as opposed to the particular and local. The issue is also one of what counts as 'education': when it refers only to formal schooling and institutional structures the temptation may be to think in terms of bureaucratic systems, but learning and education are increasingly located beyond such formal structures, and need to be, if they are to be dynamic and responsive to 21st century conditions. Learning outside the classroom may often be more engaging and educative than what is available within it. Yet, profound equity issues are raised, both as to the capacity of formal systems to realise equity, and regarding non-formal learning opportunities when they rely on knowledge or cultural capital that are very unequally distributed within and across societies.

– If industrial management models have outlived their purpose, what alternatives have emerged to take their place?

Teacher leadership

Several participants put the drive and leadership for change directly with the teachers and the profession. They are described variously as 'the key to profound change' and as leading 'the movement to bring equity and excellence to our public schools' and even as 'a counterforce that leads the nation toward equity in public education'. One participant calls for a different kind of professionalism as a prerequisite for carrying a larger burden of leadership. There is a widespread injunction that professionalism must embrace collaborative forms of working and dialogue, given the limited impact that individual teachers – or innovators who may not necessarily all be teachers – can have by themselves. One refers to the 'pivotal' position of teachers in shaping future societies. Another argues for teachers as 'learning professionals', in contradistinction to teachers seen as employees in a 'teacher force'. Another goes further to stress the role of teachers as educational activists. New teachers may be especially important in updating a school's collective understanding of the importance of digital technology.

But this is not a straightforward process. For one thing, it is recognised that this calls for new skills and forms of expertise, as well as working collaboratively in ways that may often not be the norm. Where these do not yet exist, how far can teachers, individually and collectively, perform such a leadership role? Indeed, one participant suggests, they may actually lack the will to be the driver of change as opposed to teachers being the deliverers of agendas created by others, while another asks why teachers have not been able to exercise their collective power more effectively to resist dysfunctional reform. When so much education and learning take place in non-formal settings, what does the 'profession' mean in this context?

– Can the teaching profession assume leadership of a widespread process of innovation and transformation?

Collaboration and design

Teachers as designers is one vision articulated in the statements, acting as 'curators' 'picking up on new trends, research, pedagogies, technology, content and seeing how they can be put to use in a new context.' Cooperation, collaboration and the creation of communities of practice is widely seen as essential. Drawing on evidence from international research is also widely seen as a necessary means to inform change. For one participant, this is about disciplined professional dialogue informed by a strong evidence base about learning, achievement and associated strategies. More than one participant describes how, in their different systems, teachers are engaged in learning experiences that are co-created, connected, personalised, and integrated, while representing large scale professional learning, intervention and diffusion. Technology is identified as an integral means for such collaboration and professional learning to work.

'Best practice' models seem beguiling in an international context, but they raise profound questions as to what may transfer across very different contexts, how well it is possible to identify what is 'best' based on existing or past experiences, and indeed whether this removes responsibility for change from local actors by suggesting that answers can be found elsewhere. 'Copy and paste' from one system to another, one participant put, is neither possible nor desirable. Incorporating actual knowledge and relevant evidence into the reform process is a larger challenge than may be realised.

–   What design principles and practice deserve to be especially privileged?

Reforms reaching into the 'Pedagogical Core'?

There is widespread agreement on the key interface between educators and learners, teachers and students that can broadly be described as 'pedagogy'. Many participants also identify how often reforms do not touch directly on this vital locus of where education and learning actually take place. The burgeoning knowledge base on what constitutes good pedagogy has not necessarily worked its way into everyday practices in schools. One participant suggests that reforms are only meaningful if they make learning the core business of education, something that might be thought of as a given but that in fact cannot be assumed. Of course, this begs the question of what kind of learning is in question. There may be a temptation to think that pedagogies should be 'new' – and indeed technology opens up approaches that are genuinely innovative – but the pedagogical principles and the nature of learning may not be new at all.

Yet there are concerns that narrow understandings of pedagogy may predominate, including the concept of 'instruction'; for another, it is to recognise the interactive nature of pedagogy and to move away from the assumption of uni-directional 'transmission'. One participant referred to the pedagogies as necessarily complex, if transformative change is to occur. Diverse approaches are needed, relevant to the contexts and students in question. They are especially needed for disadvantaged students for whom personalised approaches are particularly effective. There are also the contexts of countries where conditions outside the classroom are so problematic that addressing the pedagogical core seems a secondary concern.

–   Might reforms that directly affect pedagogy be seeking to control the very dynamic that requires local flexibility and autonomy?

Measurement as a prerequisite to change?

For some, the case is clear: measuring progress and learning achieved is fundamental to effective education. Adequate data and careful measurement is also key to understanding the extent of inequities and the causes of inequalities. Monitoring, for more than one participant, is about providing information to drive improvement, but this places particular onus on what is measured, not on measurement as simply a good in itself. This applies to teacher evaluation systems, just as much as those about students, especially where this is regarded as primarily an administrative matter with little connection to student performance or teacher learning. Evaluation needs the careful analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data – avoiding addiction to purely quantitative measures, as put by one participant – with attention to comparability, bias, and generalizability. The challenges of doing this adequately may be especially acute when it comes to marginalised populations.

Yet, one participant warns, relying on greater evaluation and measurement as catalysts for improving student learning, should not replace a focus on teaching and professional cultures. The perverse effects of accountability regimes that lead to game-playing, teaching to tests, and distract from profound change in teaching and learning are familiar, and several participants draw attention to these. Intelligent accountability recognises the whole teacher and the whole child. Too often, evaluation and measurement systems negatively affect pedagogy by encouraging approaches meeting short-term demands. Even when they are not exercising perverse effects, management and accountability frameworks, as put by one participant, have not been designed to measure the impact of teaching on deep learning or learner engagement. However, some approaches – assessment for learning, dialogue, self-regulated learning, visible thinking routines, learning stories, habits of mind – serve the 'double duty' of supporting immediate learning needs and developing lifelong learning.

- When do the benefits of measurement and assessment get outweighed by the reductionism of simplifying complexity?

Prepared by the planning group, September 2014