Managing Education Systems to Improve Quality and Student Learning

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Speaking of quality

• “Improving quality” has been an important, “new” topic for some time
  
  ex: Manzoor Ahmed’s quote from 1999
• We know enrollment does not necessarily lead to quality or learning
• Many kids are not learning what we want
• Discussions of how to improve quality seem to lead to recurrent conversations
• Reflecting inherent tensions, these debates may be irresolvable
  
  ex: “build the foundation” vs “don’t settle for less” camps
• I would argue that as a field of knowledge and practice, we:
  ▫ Know a lot of what (seems) necessary to improve quality
  ▫ Have an extremely rich storehouse of inspirational goals
  ▫ Also have a large inventory of practices that don’t (seem to) work
  ▫ Are beginning to converge on promising strategies, as at APEID
• Do we know what is sufficient to improve quality on a systemic basis across school systems?
What do we (not) know? True? Beyond US? True now?

Why do good ideas about teaching and learning have so little impact on U.S. educational practice? This question, I argue, raises a central problem of U.S. education: A significant body of circumstantial evidence points to a deep, systemic incapacity of U.S. schools, and the practitioners who work in them, to develop, incorporate, and extend new ideas about teaching and learning in anything but a small fraction of schools and classrooms. (Elmore, 1996)
What (I think) we know and don’t know

1. **We lack consensus about the meaning of quality**
   - Learning to know: Foundational skills – reading, writing, mathematics, Others?
   - Also: Learning to do; Learning to live together; Learning to be

2. **Maybe a lack of consensus is ok ...**
   - School systems may be too variable to speak of improving quality in a single way
   - Does a system where one-third of children completing 5th grade are not even semi-literate much less literate at sustainable levels may need different definition of quality than a system where (virtually) all children learn to read but where testing is narrowing curriculum to a few tested subjects?
   - Contexts and peoples vary in their needs and aspirations, different tasks for different systems
Starting points ...

3. Still, perhaps there are starting points, foundational elements we can agree must be in place for there to be quality
I would argue
- For 1) sustainable literacy and numeracy and 2) broad inclusion as foundational
- That we as an intellectual and practicing education community do not know how to do this to scale across multiple school systems
- That educators are prone to distraction from the foundational tasks in front of them by larger aspirations of our profession
- That we should redouble experimentation in trying to learn to do these things in different contexts, and develop systematic ways to learn from diverse national experiences
Managing to improve quality (qualitatively) different

4. **Managing to improve quality is a different task than managing to improve access**
   
   **Improving “traditional” access**
   
   Easier to manage with centralized intelligence and capacity (and compliant capable local eyes, ears and hands)

   **Improving quality**
   
   - Cannot be commanded; Blueprint approach does not work
   - Requires classroom intelligence as well as centralized intelligence and capacity, coordination and support
   - Willingness and professionalized capacity in classroom
   - Support from system – resources, technical assistance
   - Vision of good instruction
   - Normative structures supporting good instruction
   - Trust?

**Full inclusion**

- Requires systemic change

5. **Government is not always as effective as we like but underfunding government is unlikely to increase effectiveness**
We know that ...

6. **Good ideas are not sufficient, that good ideas do not implement themselves**

7. **Until recently, many systems have not systematically checked to see how much of the curriculum children actually learn**

8. **Some inputs (perhaps a threshold) are essential**
   - Safe protected space, gender friendly
   - Opportunity to learn
     - School open
     - Teachers and students present
     - Time available for instruction
     - Time on learning tasks
   - Language child can understand
   - Pedagogically sound instructional materials
   - Capable and motivated teachers
   - Teacher professionalism
   - Actionable feedback to teacher on teaching/learning in classroom
We also know that ...

9. In many systems, we still do not do this? Why? Do we not know how or do we lack will?

10. Providing inputs is (of course) insufficient to improve quality

11. Curriculum, teacher training, and assessment need to be aligned and aimed at goals of system

11. If learning is a core goal, it is important to look and see if children are learning

   - Way of determining that is necessary
   - Incentive structures (accountability for example) are important
   - But incentive structures and accountability can take many forms
   - Like testing, accountability has counter-intentional effects
We (I?) know and believe that ...

12. Inputs and accountability alone are insufficient to improve quality in school or systems that do not know how Accountability needs to be balanced with support

13. To improve student learning, testing needs to be usable, results need to be linked to a system of improvement, and results need to be used

   Actionable information to those who can take action in context of appropriate incentives and support (often not case)

14. Because of their counter-intentional effects, testing and accountability systems need to be monitored to see

   If they are achieving their goals
   If they need adjusting in face of serious side effects
We know that ...

15. **It is often instructive to begin with student learning and “map” “backwards”**

   Beginning with end in mind, what is needed at each level to support student learning?

16. **Effective systemic interventions**

   - Link bottom, middle and top
   - Charge each level with key functions in support of goals (student learning?)
   - Align functions toward goals
   - Systematically assess progress and make corrections

17. **Family background makes a great difference in student achievement**

   Schools can work to exacerbate or diminish larger societal differences in student background
Learning to build systems to sustain quality ...

18. **Good ideas/best practices can sometimes be borrowed or transplanted, but it’s important to think about borrowing appropriately**

   Is the right thing being borrowed?
   A good practice? A set of innovating conditions?
   The product of a set of innovating conditions?
   (How) will the idea thrive in the new environment?

19. **Lessons can be learned, but getting best lesson requires thought**

20. **Real challenges are sustaining and scaling innovations**

21. **Pulling lessons together: Role for graduate students and academics?**
Questions to ask

• What are the lessons or best practices from:
  successful innovations in quality?
  *sustained* innovations in quality improvement?

• What conditions led to the innovation?
  to the sustainability of quality improvement?

• How can such conditions be created in different contexts. i.e., mine?

• How can innovativeness be sustained?
Discussion

Questions and comments