Changing Views of Teaching and Learning

Reform efforts to strengthen teaching and learning in the classroom, are taking place within an increasingly broader context than they have in the past. Goals of educational reform and the thinking that underlies these goals, are rapidly changing. Educational reforms are moving from their historical emphasis on access and improved system maintenance and control, to wider concerns about increased educational quality, relevance, effectiveness, and efficiency. Reformers are also looking to changes that result in more equitable distributions of opportunity, resources, and outcomes. Furthermore, the thinking about how educational systems are governed, managed, and financed is far more likely today to include more decentralized and shared responsibility models than in the past, and more likely to consider teachers, families, communities, and non-governmental players as active participants in the process. Even conceptions about student and system performance, have changed significantly in many countries. Most important of all, policymakers tend to be more cognizant of the fact that in order to increase children’s learning, real educational change must have an impact at the classroom level.¹

Policy makers will need to consider many issues and options. Policy options will depend on the local political and cultural realities and constraints. Many issues of educational reform such as school leadership and governance, curriculum content and methodology, are culturally specific and cannot be easily transplanted without adapting them to the political and cultural context in which they will be implemented. In addition to this, education systems advance through different stages of development according to the need to develop capacity and to provide resources within the opportunities and constraints of the local political and cultural environment.

It is recognized that one of the biggest barriers to economic development in many countries is the lack of quality education. The failure of the education system to reach all the children, to provide each of them with equal learning opportunities, and to provide all children with a good quality of learning. Riley emphasizes two critical issues relating to educational reform: the skills, capacity and commitment of teachers and other education agents at the local system level, and the way educational reform is usually conceived.²

The second issue relates to the way reforms usually tackle structural reforms (building more schools, increasing the number of teachers, restructuring teacher training, etc) without relating them to the impact they may have on teaching and learning. “In the last analysis, reforms will be judged by the effectiveness of their impact on the cognition or learning box - i.e. the extent to which real changes in teaching and learning take place.”³

Educational reform needs to be grounded on what is needed to improve the students learning and it is with the nature of this learning process that we concern ourselves in this unit.
To effectively change how teaching and learning occurs, policymakers must first acknowledge the recent insights we have gained into the process of learning and what kinds of learners are needed for the 21st century. Critical developments have occurred in what we know about the teaching and learning process, and the global context is changing the demands that are being made upon the education system. In developing the enabling environment for appropriate reform and in building the institutional capacity to make change possible, reformers’ strategies must be informed about:

- The changing global demands upon education
- The changing perspectives on the learning process.

Education policy reformers must therefore respond to the imperatives for reform that these two factors require of the education system.

THE CHANGING GLOBAL DEMANDS UPON EDUCATION

Many schools have simply become obsolete in the new global environment. “Schools today,” writes Per Dalin, “prepare students mainly for yesterday.” Even in the better education systems around the world, schools are struggling to meet the challenges imposed by the major changes occurring around them. There are dramatic revolutions in world economy, technology, knowledge and information, politics, social relationships, and values that already have altered what young people of tomorrow must know and be able to do.4

1. Students must be able to successfully participate in the labor market.

Economic globalization has modified patterns of world trade, competition, technological innovation, and information sharing. These globalization effects mean that nations are becoming increasingly “interdependent, more susceptible to external economic shocks, and more vulnerable to international changes in demands for types and quality of products. [In the future] whole new industries will arise from cheap and fast communication. Firms in industrialized countries will subcontract more services from around the world. New technologies and production will transform the international economy. The future of individual nations in world development will hinge more than ever...on the capacity to acquire, transmit and apply knowledge, and to produce according to international standards.”5 Increased global competition will require traditional workplaces to continually reinvent themselves. Similarly, workers in these less secure new environments will have to be more adaptable – possessing not only the proper training, but also the skills to learn new things quickly and be readily retrained when their skills are obsolete. And new skills are required.
As the nature of work changes from an industrial to a more information-based model, and from mass production to more high performance oriented systems, workers of the future will need skills beyond those of basic literacy and numeracy. Economists Frank Levy and Richard Murnane note in their book “Teaching the New Basic Skills” that schools have failed to keep pace with the changing environment of the workplace. In addition to the “hard skills” in math, reading and problem-solving, new workers need the “soft skills” necessary to work well in teams, communicate effectively, and use computers. Competitive companies need frontline workers who understand the problems within the company and have the incentives and opportunities to contribute to solutions. This requires workers who will be able to perform more complex non-routine tasks, assume greater responsibility, take more decisions, think more independently, as well as collaborate effectively when necessary.

Technological innovation in the field of information, both inside the workplace and out, will have significant long-term implications as to the skills needed to be successful. In addition to mastery of these new technologies, the “essential skill of the Information Age [will] not [be] the ability to memorize information but the ability to find, use and make sense of it.” As knowledge becomes more globalized, countries will have to consider the “maintenance of human capital as important as initial education.”

These weighty demands upon education systems worldwide have the potential to further increase the divide between rich and poor nations. Open markets, trade liberalization, privatization—all elements of these global changes—can have the effect of increasing social inequities. A nation’s capacity to moderate some of the negative impacts of globalization has much to do with the extent that the coverage of education can be increased equitably within the country and improved in quality. Not only must nations counter inequality with “vigorous equal-opportunity fine-tuning of economic and social policies,” says Nancy Birdsall, but also with educational policy that is “constructed to ensure that schools work for the poor.” Just as these inequalities must be addressed, so must the likelihood that poorer nations become increasingly marginalized. Wadi Haddad of Knowledge Enterprise argues that these nations have to begin to address the education issues related to the new skills needed for the future, as well as to conscientiously work to develop a national “cadre of highly trained, scientific, technological, and processing personnel, who can fully understand new developments…and can promote their assessment, adaptation and local applications.”

Students must have hard skills like math, reading and problem-solving as well as be able to think critically, communicate effectively, work well in teams, and use computers.

The essential skill of the Information Age is the ability to find, use and make sense of information.

The imperatives for new educational structures, curricula and teaching methods have the potential to increase the divide between rich and poor nations. Educational policy must address these inequities head-on.