PERSPECTIVE

Moving forward in the world: Outcomes and communication for effective reform

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Abstract

Recent years have given rise to an overwhelming number of challenges, thus complicating the prioritization of desirable outcomes in education. Clarity of purpose is difficult to generate when competing forces rage simultaneously. Yet, success in education reform depends on clear objectives. To encourage clarity in thought and action, this short essay discusses three salient notions: essential outcomes, communication pathways between micro, meso, and macro levels, and the practical ramifications of limited conceptions of "world." In the inquisitive and explorative spirit of CIES, and in line with the queries that prompted this response, I offer a series of related reflections for each notion, which I hope will spark conversation and embolden our commitment to critical deliberations and thoughtful initiative.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Let's imagine that we are on an athletic committee. Our task is to judge an archer who is training for an international tournament. How should we assess the archer's abilities? Imagine she always misses bull's eye but always lands arrows in the same 5-inch area. If we prize precision (i.e., hitting the same mark over and over), her chances of scoring high and qualifying for the tournament will be good. If we prize accuracy (i.e., hitting bull's eye), she will hardly make it to the next round. Instead, she will have to continue training. Training means time, coaching, and money.

In archery, the most important assessment criterion happens to be accuracy. To avoid confusion, the archery community has agreed to uphold accuracy as the paramount criterion to judge archery competitions. This goal allows the archery community to track progress, calibrate trainings, and speak meaningfully about competitions and results. It is easy to know whether an archer is good. The goal is one.

Much like an athletic committee tasked with judging sports events, we need to establish clearly what we are trying to achieve with education reform. A clear objective is essential to success. Our

goals, questions, and proposals need not exclude each other. But they do determine how we pursue and assess our projects. Do we want to prioritize test scores above all other measures of academic progress? Or should we focus on broader, more holistic evaluations of students' backgrounds and extra-academic endeavors, as well as their academic achievements? As is the case with all education-related questions, our answers determine the outcome we wish to achieve and the reform program we deem most appropriate to do so. Success is a target we establish—achievement depends on definition.

Though clear goals are equally necessary for sports and institutional reform, there is one obvious and crucial difference between a sport and the world of education. On the one hand, a sport's essence is defined by relatively unchanging rules. On the other hand, the very concept of "education" has been subject to significant revisions and thus escapes a fixed definition. These revisions began thousands of years ago, when various civilizations around the globe gave education its first institutional shape (Gordon & Szreter, 1989; Marrou, 1982). In recent decades, conceptual transformations have occurred at a faster rate than in any other historical era, in part due to the marriage of scientific research and classical scholarship. One needs only to think about the behaviorist, cognitive, constructivist, humanist, and connectivist frameworks—to name only the most prominent ones (IBE, 2016)—to recognize that "education" and "learning" have come to mean very different things to very different people, each with its own internal preferences, objectives, and measurement standards (Zhou & Brown, 2015). The dominant framework we use to conceptualize education makes a significant difference in the way education is enacted, assessed, and reformed.

Indeed, our actions are driven by ideas, whether or not we recognize it. As Hirsch (2019) wrote, "idea change [is] the most effective educational reform of all" (p. 1). Ideas do (and should) change, especially as we test them against reality. Empirical evaluations and theoretical reflections can shed light on issues in any given dominant framework. These evaluations may or may not imply conceptual and practical revision. But even before testing ideas, we need coherent objectives. Without cohesion of mission, our efforts will lose the efficacy they need to bring about durable improvements. This task—to establish high-resolution objectives while retaining enough flexibility in implementing measures to achieve them—may well be one of the most tiresome and difficult challenges for scholars and educators alike. It is also the most important.

In the inquisitive spirit of CIES, and in line with the queries that prompted this response, I would now like to offer a series of reflections by way of questions and literature reviews, which I hope will spark conversation and embolden our commitment to critical deliberations and thoughtful action.

2 | HOW SHOULD WE CRITICALLY LOOK AT AND MEET DESIRED OUTCOMES ACROSS TIME AND SPACE?

The past three years have upended the world of education. That is no longer a dubious claim. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic alone have forced us to face undesirable realities and overwhelming challenges (Di Pietro, 2023; Hass et al., 2023; Okagbue et al., 2023; Skar et al., 2023). These challenges appear worldwide, albeit in different forms. In the early stages of the pandemic, Azorín (2020) highlighted COVID-19's exacerbating effects on the Spanish education system. The study pointed to several dynamics which fairly encapsulate a global picture, including high rates of socioeconomic segregation (Kuzmanic et al., 2023; Macías León & Del Pino-Brunet, 2023; Praharaj et al., 2023); overcrowded classrooms (Graham, 2023); obsolete curricula (Abdallah & Alriyami, 2022); and teachers' digital competency, or lack thereof (Basilotta-Gómez-Pablos et al., 2022). As early as (2021), UNESCO reported that COVID-related school closures have been linked to students' stunted cognitive and psychosocial development and other similarly troubling trends. In most cases, school closure disproportionately affected minority populations, especially young women (Duby et al., 2022). However, it has had damaging effects across populations (Freeman et al., 2023; Nanda & Ryan, 2023; Schuurman et al., 2023).

Before these challenges, the imperative is to form adequate responses and pursue them with adequate measures. What outcomes do we wish to achieve? For example, as regards the Spanish example, we may want to ensure that students have access to online, on-demand, personalized tutoring services to address academic disparities and overcrowded classrooms simultaneously. As regards teachers' digital incompetency, we may want to make digital literacy part of teacher training programs in higher education.

If only it were that easy. As it quickly becomes clear, any desired outcome produces parallel outcomes with a set of particular challenges. For example, how would a state cover for the costs and implementation of large-scale online tutoring services? And how would we design digital literacy teacher training programs that are at once relevant and responsive to the explosive nature of technological progress?

Once we identify a set of parallel outcomes, a more important question arises: how do we prioritize? It could be that an outcome we deem *essential* (i.e., free access to healthy meals for all American high schoolers) contradicts another outcome we deem *significant* (i.e., fostering awareness about prejudices against body types that do not conform to dominant expectations). If so, would it be wise to forego the significant outcome for the essential one? We may think that the two need not be mutually exclusive. Yet, resources are limited. We rarely deal with only two simultaneous parallel outcomes, which means that we have to juggle long lists of priorities constantly. Time is of the essence when students are prone to destabilizing changes at the rapid pace that is so characteristic of today's world. It may thus be wiser to unite around essential issues first, and tackle significant issues thereafter. This approach, however, first requires agreeing on an essential issue.

Before we attempt to define an *essential* issue, we should discuss the process that enables us to define such a concept. Genuine consensus about any given matter can only come from continuous critical reflection. To be critical in the context of outcome evaluation and project implementation is to constantly question the validity and efficacy of the outcome we seek and the process we follow to achieve it. That does not mean we should upend ongoing projects habitually at the first sight of compromising evidence or theoretical doubt. Such an approach is unsustainable, for it would create a much too destabilizing world for teachers and students, who are the primary actors and benefactors of educational reform. But if we want to lead fruitful analyses of the merits and faults of a reform program, we will need honest examination that combines reasonable critique and empirical research. We would wish our students to learn and embody this critical spirit throughout their education, so why not wish it for ourselves?

A study by Mosiur Rahman and Pandian ([2018](#)) shows us one way in which we can be reasonably critical through careful, evidence-based evaluations of desired outcomes. After assessing the effects of a long-standing English-teaching program in Bangladesh, the study concluded that English education policies in Bangladesh need to be "revisited and revised without vested Western interests and influence"; "the fundamental problem in Bangladesh, like many other developing countries, lies in its misplaced faith in imported Western methodology as a means of improving its ELT curriculum. Curricular reform should be localized and based on social and classroom needs" (pp. 47–48). This study's critical appraisal of an ELT curriculum combines careful consideration of empirical data and a conceptual commitment to adapting the curriculum to local needs. The conceptual commitment to English Language Teaching remained unaltered: "in Bangladesh [English Language Teaching] has a great role to play" (p. 43). What should change, in Mosiur Rahman and Pandian's estimation, is the practical prescription that follows that commitment. Critical examinations of this sort are necessary, as they help us bridge the gap between theory and practice and thus ensure that our endeavors are as effective as they need to be.

Another caveat to consider when prioritizing desired outcomes concerns their interrelated nature. As has become increasingly clear to decision-makers worldwide, the problems we face can no longer be understood as individual problems of finance, policy, resources, and so on (Jackson, [2019](#)). Rather, a systems-thinking approach is better suited to frame and address these problems, which are anything but simple and isolated. Ackoff ([1999](#)) called them "messes," and Rittel and Webber ([1973](#)) called

them "wicked problems." Messy and wicked problems are often difficult to formulate, have multiple causes, have multiple potential solutions with their own set of consequences, and make knowing when an outcome has been achieved a great challenge. Although it is most often employed in finance, marketing, and other business-related domains, educational reform would benefit tremendously from applying a systems-thinking approach to every area of research and action.

For instance, we know that access to healthy foods improves school attendance and academic performance (Acham et al., 2012; Berezowitz et al., 2015; Chandrasekhar et al., 2023; Jamaluddine et al., 2020). In turn, we know that access to educational resources and better academic performance improve socioeconomic mobility (Abu-Saad, 2016; Benos & Zotou, 2014; Habibi & Zabardast, 2020; Haskins et al., 2009; Silva-Laya et al., 2020). Thus, ensuring access to reliable food sources is likely to increase academic performance and, consequently, social mobility. The line is not straight, for there are always unforeseen contextual complications. However, starting from the foundation is necessary to build durable structures. Strictly speaking, nutrition is an issue best addressed by an economic policy that targets food markets and distribution. Yet, the push for improved food policy and distribution can come from all sides, as the issue intersects several domains, including education. With this systems perspective in mind, we may define an essential outcome in education reform as an outcome with the largest number of positive education-related ramifications.

As we track our progress on ongoing efforts through empirical means, the essential goal may change. And that is fine. Outcomes, unlike archery rules, are flexible aspirations we should be molding continually. Part of the critical look with which we should gauge our desired outcomes may involve revising them significantly, or discarding them and starting anew. Yet, we ought not to lose sight of the essential; for that is where we can change the most.

3 | IN WHAT WAYS MAY MICRO, MESO, AND/OR MACRO EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES, STRUCTURES, AND PROCESSES BE IMPROVED ALONG WITH THEIR ENVIRONMENTS?

In an article that discusses the role of benchmarks, indicators, and targets in local and international education policies, Boeren (2019) described the micro, meso, and macro levels as "(1) individuals and their families (the micro level); (2) schools, education and training initiatives (the meso level); and (3) regulating governments (the macro level)" (p. 277). At the micro level, for example, we can ensure that a child's learning is sustained outside formal academic settings. At the meso level, schools can provide accessible after-school assistance and other extracurricular services to help disadvantaged children continue learning at a regular pace. Macro-level administrative entities (governmental or otherwise) can allocate material and digital resources to schools and programs in need. Each level is equally important; understanding the complexity of education-related social dynamics requires understanding the three levels simultaneously.

Within the levels, challenges arise to track improvements in students, program efficacy, and government resource allocation. How can we map changes in, say, particular program structures onto desired cognitive developments? Are there ways beyond statistical analyses to ensure that changes at the meso level translate into *real and sustained* changes in students' cognitive developments broadly defined? And what are the precise mechanisms through which data flows to and from regulating entities with substantial financial and administrative power? These questions are crucial and deserve more scrutiny than they have received. For brevity's sake, I will discuss intra-level communication, which is more easily tractable than large-scale methodological issues.

As the adage goes: communication is key. Communication between micro- and meso-level stakeholders guarantees that children fully benefit from available educational resources; this is particularly true in special education (Curle et al., 2017; Janus et al., 2007; Woods et al., 2018). Clear and constant communication between administrators and teachers can ease teachers' workload and result in better teacher–student interactions (Pressley & Ha, 2022), as well as increase teachers'

academic effectiveness (Baydar, 2022). Communication strategies can help institutions of higher education develop quickly and effectively in times of upheaval (Popadynets et al., 2020) and benefit disadvantaged populations (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2022).

Given the paramount importance of intra-level communication, are there clear, effective communication pathways between the micro, meso, and macro levels? An answer may well depend on cases and contexts. Some entities (i.e., countries, states, regions, and districts) may have developed efficient and effective ways to facilitate communication between, say, school districts and households, but still lack ideal communication pathways between governmental entities and school districts. The opposite may be true in other cases. Regardless, a closer look at certain problems that arise when intra-level communication fails can help us understand how to improve it in and through related education reform.

One source of poor communication is the deployment of new technologies. New technologies require adequate and often lengthy preparation, which can result in more confusion than assistance (Tokareva et al., 2019). Similarly, online education has brought students and teachers into much more frequent contact with screens and other hyperstimulating realities, which can disrupt classroom expectations and instructions (Erlangga, 2022; Ficthen et al., 2020). These are recent issues, and we are still unsure how to address them effectively.

At the macro level, problems in communication can stem from gaps between bureaucratic entities and meso-level actors like teachers and school administrators, be they related to trust, policy implementation, or community building (Mateos-Moreno & Bravo-Fuentes, 2023). Bureaucracy may also render academic environments (across types of education) slow and overwhelming through an overflow of information, thus leading to poor teacher–student relations and worsening the quality of classroom experiences (Nash, 2019). Though far from comprehensive, I hope this partial review provides a useful synopsis of significant problems that result from a lack of intra-level communication.

One promising strategy to reduce the communication gap between the meso and micro levels is "entertainment-education," whereby educational and administrative information is delivered across the levels through relatable and captivating media (Singhal & Rogers, 2012). One strategy to ameliorate macro–meso level communication may be to foster regular outreach initiatives between bureaucratic representatives and meso–level actors. One strategy to address over-bureaucratization in academic environments and its consequences in the classrooms may be to reduce the amount of red tape academic employees have to navigate for mandatory scholarly and administrative functions (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020).

Regardless of strategy or example, the broader point in this section is that making intra-level communication faster, clearer, and more effective is essential to improving micro, meso, and macro educational strategies, structures, and processes, and to succeed at education reform.

4 | A NOTE ON WORLD

What does "world" mean? A simple question, right? As fanatical forces the world over rage political and military wars on claims of exclusion and supremacy, we are reminded that this question is anything but simple. When we transpose it to the world of education, several queries arise: Who is the "other"? How is the "other" included or excluded in decision-making processes? Who is and who should count as a stakeholder with decisional power in curriculum reform and resource allocation? Global citizenship, international education—what do they mean *in practice*?

Park et al.'s (2013) report for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching stated that "the work [of stakeholders committed to improving education] should center on engaging relevant actors in codeveloping testable hypotheses" for specific problems (p. 4). Though each actor may exert influence to varying degrees, education reform is the most successful when all relevant actors are involved; that is, when the "other" is included. As our discussion of micro, meso, and

macro level dynamics suggests, relevant actors include legislative entities, school districts, parents, teachers, and students. Macro- and meso-level actors are most likely to participate in decision-making processes, for education reform most often occurs in a top-down fashion. Micro-level actors, however, can provide inestimable insights into a community's needs and its orientation toward a particular reform program, for they are the direct recipients of most education reform. Though generally accepted in theory, this fact is often eclipsed in practice. Even when decision-making processes are apparently open, micro-level actors' potential for genuine participation in decision-making often succumbs to managerial control (Mitchell, 2017). As Smith and Benavot (2019) noted, "Largely absent in discussions of quality or accountability are the voices and views of those who work, learn, and teach in schools" (p. 195). This negligence results in a loss of trust. In education, trust includes trust in a person (i.e., a teacher), trust in the profession (i.e., school administrators), and trust in the process (i.e., the legislative process vis à vis education reform) (UNESCO, 2017). Trust is a crucial prerequisite for social cohesion as well as substantive education reform. When relevant actors perceive a program as untrustworthy, commitment to that program diminishes. A lack of trust fragments the world. How, then, do we engage neglected actors in sustained relationships to co-develop reform?

A closed decision-making arena often results from hyper-bureaucratic administrations, which lack the impetus and resources to engage in distributed leadership (Liu et al., 2021; Lumby, 2019; Sasson et al., 2022). One way to remedy limited conceptions of "world" and corollary limitations in reform is to open closed decision-making processes. A more open and democratic decision-making process may result in "better aligned and consensual aims, less reliance on temporary responses by strongly vested actors, and accountability which is less fractured and more coherent" (Smith & Benavot, 2019, pp. 201–202). Such a process is more conducive to establishing intra-level trust, and restoring it where it has been broken.

We should note that, sometimes, the decisional breakdown which results in closed and undistributed leadership begins at the micro level. For instance, many able parents may be either unwilling or uninterested in participating in fora, assemblies, and other open processes. Such "hard-to-get" parents can derail resources that would otherwise result in significant progress (Rudo & Dimock, 2017). Yet, there are ways to create incentives that would make participation in decision-making processes an appealing option for actors who may otherwise be uninterested or unwilling (Bassok et al., 2019; Matthews & Dollinger, 2023; Rahman & Gilman, 2019). It is up to us to use creative measures to ensure that decision-making is open to all relevant actors.

Even though democratizing decision-making processes has been an appealing concept for several years, empirical evaluations of specific programs' effectiveness in democratizing decision-making are scant. Empirical evaluations are necessary to gauge the real impact of direct democracy in education reform. We need to boost efforts to distribute decision-making power. How can we deploy our best research methods to assess these efforts?

A corollary issue concerns the more practical domain of data-gathering. In a pre-COVID article, Muthukrishna et al. (2020) offered a statistical comparison of psychological data from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, and Democratic) and non-WEIRD countries. The study's purpose was to remedy an allegedly universally applicable scholarly enterprise "that may have instead uncovered truths about a thin slice of our species" (p. 678). Though the study focused on underrepresentation in psychological data, its conclusions are relevant to education. Education scholarship often draws insights from psychology. If a broad base of psychological literature is limited to narrow population sets, can we expect our extrapolations to bear fruits for analyses of locally dependent dynamics? It may be that a more comprehensive database that includes historically underrepresented populations would yield similar insights about human psychology and related domains as our current skewed database. But that is an untested empirical hypothesis that deserves scrutiny, which ought to come through a broadening of the data structures on which we rely for so much of our work.

Efforts to diversify the comparative scope of empirical studies go hand in hand with CIES' commitment to universality and impartiality. The "CI" in CIES stands for Comparative and International. How might we follow in Muthukrishna et al.'s steps and gather *truly* international datasets and observations? We cannot call ourselves an international movement when a significant majority of the ideas we engage stem from partial observations of potentially nonrepresentative populations. Who is part of our world? And why is it not whole?

5 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this short essay, I offered some remarks by way of questions and literature reviews which I hope will prompt fresh conversation. Admittedly, I set myself up for an easy job—to ask questions without delving into any one particular answer. To an experienced researcher, many of these questions might seem obsolete and undeserving of prolonged attention. The real difficulty lies in crafting answers that are sound, historically aware, and time-sensitive. Why keep asking?

Yet, I would like to stress the simple power of conceptual analysis. If our driving concepts are stale or inadequate, and if the door into the question-room is shut, our efforts will lose efficacy and potential. Whatever our current practical commitments, conceptual analysis provides us with a space to doubt, admit, challenge, and re-imagine. For over 60 years, CIES has championed this self-reflective spirit through numerous activities and initiatives. Self-reflection begins with questions. I hope these words will fuel interest in theoretical discussions, not as vacuous ruminations of abstract ideas, but as vital steps in our efforts to catalyze meaningful education reform. Like an archery committee without guidelines, a reform program lacking clarity of purpose will be slow and ineffective. That, we cannot afford.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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