

LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

Q&A with Gabriel Cámara

The Learning Community Project model currently operating in rural schools offers an intriguing bottom-up approach to learning. How do you see this project transforming rural communities in Mexico?

This 15-year old project is now a part of the Undersecretary of Basic Education and has significantly expanded. This past summer, 78,000 middle school math teachers in all states were learning in depth four chosen problems of elementary math (natural numbers, fractions, proportionality, and geometry), all in tutorial relationships through a network of trainers from a central group down to state and regional groups that have mastered this learning relationship. The basic tenet of tutorial relationships, in this and related programs, is that the tutor must offer the apprentice only what she/he has proved to have mastered, and will offer it to the apprentice who expresses interest. The work is freely undertaken and the learner moves at his/her own pace. The commitment of the tutor is to foster mastery in the

apprentice, and that of the apprentice is to work until she/he satisfies the commitment to learn what initially was of interest. The new mastery is confirmed as the learner reflects on her/his own process, discusses it among fellow apprentices, and finally becomes a tutor to those who want to learn the same subject in the same manner. This way, teaching and learning become common property and the group—teachers, students, and increasingly, parents—form lively learning communities.

The program is the latest task that the Undersecretary has laid upon our group, the National Coordination to Improve Academic Achievement (Coordinación Nacional para la Mejora del Logro Educativo). The other major program, which lends its network of trainers to the previous one, is the Integral Strategy to Improve Academic Achievement (Estrategia Integral para la Mejora del Logro Educativo), charged with the task to improve the academic results of 9,000 schools in which over 50% of the students have remained, for three consecutive years, at

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

Series Editor
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the bottom of the scale in the standard national test ENLACE.

Mentoring in professional development sessions, schools, and classrooms implies one-to-one relationships, tailoring the official program to what each tutor knows—no matter what the standard syllabus or the textbook prescribe for each week or each school day—and the freedom of each apprentice to choose from the mentor's offering what is of genuine interest to her/him and she/he has decided to learn well.

Tutorial relationships go against the grain of standardized practices in training sessions, schools, and classrooms. Those practices are justified as necessary in the economies of scale of an expanding public school system chronically short of resources, mostly teachers. Training sessions and classrooms are typically structured around one person trying to teach standard content to a rather passive group of students. This induced scarcity of opportunities to learn is challenged by the evidence that learning is a social process, based on the capacity of every person to learn and to teach, provided there is interest and commitment on the part of both the one who teaches and the one who is willing to learn. In a learning community constructed through tutorial relationships the induced scarcity disappears.

The bottom-up approach seems intriguing from the top-down perspective, but from basic experience of parents, students, or teachers, we all know what it takes to learn: interest, freedom to explore, and encouragement from trusting elders or fellow learners. Cognitive scientists and psychologist confirm this to be the basic learning experience. It takes place “at the bottom” between mentor and apprentice, irrespective of ages, context, and subject matter; so we as practitioners had to start from there. The interesting thing is that as soon as you allow teachers and students to engage in tutorial relationships, the

classroom starts producing extraordinary results and soon it turns into a different learning environment that draws attention and becomes a showcase of successful educational change.

Luck and the word of mouth led the Undersecretary of Education to visit one of those classrooms on February 11, 2008. He was thoroughly impressed and decided on a policy of expansion from the bottom-up. Through visits to operating sites and demonstrations, authorities and teachers in other places were invited to participate in a program articulated by a network of tutors. Training and follow up visits helped teachers turn their ordinary classrooms into learning communities. Success bred success and in three years teaching and learning in tutorial relationships has become a sort of flagship in the realm of public basic education.

Two aspects in these developments stand out. First, that contrary to practice, a general policy to improve education, while decided at the top, did not impose a new abstract model but rather facilitated the dissemination of an ongoing teaching and learning practice that had demonstrated good results. Second, the practice had been expanding in the previous years mostly by the force of convinced authorities, teachers, students, and even their families. Indeed, local authorities had accepted to make curriculum content and time schedules a function of tutorial relations, had assigned teachers to work full time as trainers within the nodes of the network, and also had provided extra funds for travel and meetings. We, too, as outside promoters contributed to the expansion of the model, but the main driving force of the expansion developed at the base, from ordinary teachers, students, and their families. Mirroring the trend that transformed teaching scarcity into multiple opportunities to learn, the drive at the base, fueled by teachers' and students' enthusiasm, removed the limitation that has hindered the

intended effects of so many educational policy decisions at the top.

The enthusiasm came from having had the unexpected satisfaction of true learning in ordinary classrooms, without special materials or new technologies, just trusting and taking care of one another in the group. The approach was extremely simple, based on what each person knew and wanted to learn, and so was accessible to anybody interested in improving educational practice. Fellow teachers saw this, became convinced, and wanted to try tutorial relationships in their schools and classrooms.

The movement has continued to expand horizontally in a contagion-like manner, both when outsiders come to visit learning communities, and when the students of these communities go out to give public demonstrations of their newly acquired mentoring abilities to authorities, teachers and fellow students. These abilities did not come from just having covered subject matter, but from having acquired a learning competency. Genuine tutorial relationships cannot take place except in pursuit of a clear competency that engages the apprentice and that has to be demonstrated in real practice. The competency that proved capable of sustaining tutorial relationships in ordinary schools—that is, capable of engaging teachers and students—has been the ability to learn from written materials. Independently of the interest or need to learn a particular subject, what engages the learner is the exercise in independent learning as she/he dialogues and argues with the authors of written texts. The role of the tutor is to facilitate, not to substitute this dialogue. It is this basic competency that enables young students—as young as 8 years old—to become tutors of interested teachers and authorities. The drive from the base comes from demonstrating the feasibility of acquiring a competency that sums up the academic goals of public basic education.

From the point of view of our practice, opportunity to learn has to be personal, tailored to the learners' interests, and cultural experiences, provided the tutor strives to develop in them the ability to learn and teach by themselves. In fact, as the learners become tutors, it is clear that they are acquiring the ability to learn by themselves and are capable of pursuing independent learning interests. This basic intellectual autonomy should be the goal of public basic education. As for training the future citizen, the radical human leveling of tutorial relations—trust, respect, commitment, sharing—turns schooling into life itself, not just preparation for it.

To promote in the educational system experiences of true learning, where interest on the part of the apprentice matches squarely the competency of a knowledgeable tutor. The multiplication of opportunities to teach and learn in personal relationships is the strategy to make teachers become more professional and students more independent. In addition to their regular tasks as organizers of the service, deciding programs and overall standards of achievement, authorities should foster exchanges, demonstrations, and experiments that discover better ways of offering basic education to the general public.

Tutorial relationships are forcing basic changes in the regular educational system: what needs to be standardized and what needs to be open ended; what is best left to students and what is best decided by the authority; how situated the preparation of teachers must be. If each person must learn according to interest, particular background and ways of approaching subjects, homogeneous grouping appears illusory and standard separations by levels and grades obstruct, rather than enhance independent learning. Also compulsory attendance

should be questioned along with the custodial role of schools in large cities.

In a highly centralized national education system like the one in Mexico, the decision of an Undersecretary of Basic Education is a two edged sword—it can either foster radical change, or stymie it; continue or discontinue promising programs. So far, we have fared beyond expectations and moved farther than what could have been imagined. Yet, in 18 months, a new Undersecretary will take charge. At this point, we are still far from the point of inflection, where the movement at the base would have gathered enough momentum so as to prevent a policy reversal. The hope that the expansion of learning communities will continue throughout the country's schools can only rest on having enough administrators, teachers, students, and their families persuaded of the benefits and satisfactions of learning in tutorial relationships.

How can educational reform promote social reform in Mexico?

The best a school system can do in a troubled country is to aim directly at the learning core and to make sure that people meet in honesty and truth. It does not take exhortations or impositions but rather, fostering of mutual trust and understanding in classrooms and schools.

What are some key educational changes that you see Mexico engaging in going forward?

Mexico is focused on standards and accountability as means to improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools. The trend follows guidelines and examples in other countries and seems inescapable given the technological possibilities to collect and handle information in massive educational systems. Opposing trends are

demonstrated advantages of alternative ways to teach, learn, and evaluate progress in schools. The basic challenge is to start at the base, understand that what a program prescribes is not what every teacher knows, and what students are offered may not be what they are interested in learning. Training or retraining teachers must change, must be personal, attuned to contexts and individual needs, effective, and most of all, humanly and professionally satisfying. As for students, they need freedom and variety of experiences, which is accessible in select schools where teachers teach only what they know and where students learn what they want.

The 2012 AERA theme is “To Know is Not Enough.” How do we make educational research more relevant in practice?

Research will matter more when it becomes better focused, because researchers have turned away from areas that now appear to be of the utmost importance. Since the 1960s, it has been commonplace to decry the neglect of relevant research on the part of decision-makers. The motto *non satis scire* assumes this neglect to still be the case. Yet, many well known researchers have been working next to policy makers all these years, and the resulting educational policies on the whole have not really improved results. The perspective of researchers focused on structural changes leave out the micro aspects of teaching and learning. On the other hand, researchers that were better focused, like the late Seymour Sarason—to name one of the most germane to our approach—have not been much appreciated or taken seriously. Now, it is widely accepted that unless the prevalent culture of the school undergoes radical changes, unless the core learning relationships in classrooms are transformed, structural changes will continue to disappoint their promoters. Therefore, while fully accepting the thorny

problem of how to affect what we know to be obviously good in education, we may safely say that non satis scire needs to be complemented with melius scire, to know better. Researchers have to attend to the base, looking at what takes place between teacher and students in specific contexts.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

To create learning environments in which there is freedom to teach what one really knows and to learn what one genuinely

wants. These environments are based on mutual respect, produce concrete accomplishments, and are sources of intellectual and human satisfaction. The challenge is to make it happen through research and discussion, trial and error, and demonstrated accomplishments that give substance to whatever political struggles are deemed necessary at the base of the system. Unless there are indisputable, demonstrated accomplishments in schools and professional pride for them among teachers, top down policies will continue to have the upper hand and will continue to override independence and creativity at the base.



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Dr. Gabriel Cámara is a doctoral graduate from Harvard University. After his studies, he worked on various private and public education systems, including the Intensive Basic Education Centers (Centros de Educación Básica Intensiva) for young urban dropouts (1980-1984) and the Post-Primary Centers (1996-2003) in small rural communities. Out of these experiences sprung Convivencia Educativa, A.C., a group of researchers-promoters that has been conducting educational projects with public and private agencies and that in recent years became almost completely incorporated in the National Coordination to Improve Academic Achievement for the office of the Undersecretary of Basic Education. His recent books include: *Otra Educación Básica es Posible* (2008), *Enseñar y Aprender con Interés* (2006), *Comunidades de Aprendizaje: Como Hacer de la Educación Básica un Bien Valioso y Compartido* (2004), all three published by Siglo XXI Editores, and *Learning for Life in Mexican Rural Communities: The CONAFE Post-primary centers* (2003). He can be reached at gcamara@laneta.apc.org.