Context-Based Approaches to Developing Theories of Change in Basic Education

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In 2015, ending the era of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), members of the United Nations agreed to adopt more inclusive global goals—the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—in order to fight plagues and poverty, protect the environment, and provide the world with peace and prosperity by 2030 (UN, n.d.; UNDP, 2015). Among the 17 areas for improvement in the plan of the SDGs, we believe "Quality Education" is the central goal to influence the success of the other goals because education is the pathway toward transforming people and developing collaborative partnership.

However, there is no one right way of education, generic enough to be applicable to all the different states, countries, or nations in the world. Rather, we believe that education practices should be relevant to each context and targeted to the specific population in such context to be more effective. In addition, the SDGs recognize that education is the key for equity to build a stronger and just society (Caprani, 2016). We therefore support the needs of equal access to quality educational opportunities for all age groups, including students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds.

But how can we ensure that efforts to improve education in the world are more targeted, relevant, and effective? To support achievement of educational goals, developing a Theory of Change (ToC) is necessary. A ToC is the central framework that drives most project designs in international development. According to Vogel (2012), a "Theory of Change, is an outcomes-based approach which applies critical thinking to the design, implementation and evaluation of initiatives and programmes intended to support change in their contexts (pg. 1)." Additionally, unlike large-scale experimental studies, the ToC approach provides a quality but inexpensive tool to evaluate program impact that can frame and inform the program evaluation (Jackson, 2013). In short, the ToC provides the basis for decisions about the chosen program activities, investments, and monitoring and evaluation protocols. It is based on a set of assumptions which explain the rationale and the process that will result in the desired outcomes within a context. The SDGs set up the goals and targets to achieve, whereas the ToC lays out the logistics to follow in achieving such outcomes. The SDGs are a complex project for any country, which involves many players at all levels, including the governments, the private sector, civil and international communities, and a need for a systemic approach that can map out the logistics was called for.

In the call for this issue, we encouraged the global community of scholars and development

 Citation: Chung, Mi-Hyun, and Gouleta, Eirini (2020). Context-Based Approaches to Developing Theories of Change in Basic Education. *Global Education Review*, *7* (1). 1-5.

experts to examine specific contexts such as cultural, social, political and economic factors to develop ToC for teaching and learning, and education policies and systems. We envisioned this special issue of as providing an opportunity to the international education community to rethink the ways interventions have been designed and implemented, and go beyond the boundaries of the western or other dominant educational approaches. Responding to the call, a team of researchers, Benjamin Alcott, Pauline Rose, Ricardo Sabates, and Christine Ellison, report the process they undertook to develop theories of change across ten countries in "From Assessment to Action: Lessons from the Development of Theories of Change with the People's Action for Learning Network." The effort was collaborative with the members of the People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network in developing theories of change to design and implement context-specific interventions. Based on the results from the "citizen-led assessments" PAL had developed, it was revealed that the children from disadvantaged backgrounds performed poorly in the assessments. To tackle the issue, the researchers identified the common stages through which PAL members should work for better outcomes in learning. While they argue for the common frame that is generic enough for different countries, they highlight the pressing need for flexibility when the frame is adapted to each country.

Defining the theory of change as a tool for "on-going deliberation to work with complexity" and based on the local context and reality, Mariam Smith and Jessica Ball, in "Focusing on Actors in Context-Specific, Data-Informed Theories of Change to Increase Inclusion in Basic Education Reforms," describe and discuss three levels of theory of change, from a generic theory of change to an actor-focused theory of change. Their research starts with reporting a case study of creating a theory of change for an indigenous language-in-education initiative. The first theory of change is generic, providing a snapshot of the intentions and the main strategies of the Cambodia's government's Multilingual Education National Action Plan (MENAP). The second theory of change is more actor-focused, presenting key relationships among actors who are engaged in implementing the strategies to the field and describing the specific behaviors relevant to the implementation of the MENAP. The third theory of change is also an actor-focused, depicting the intermediate level outcomes and perceived perspectives on change based on the data. This article shows the potential and benefit of the theory of change to support educational reforms at different stages or levels and explains that the practitioners should understand how the theory of change can shape or limit the way they think and behave in the field.

Pointing out issues stemming from English- or other second language-based multilingual education, Corrie Blankenbecker, in "Designing for Complexity in Mother Tongue or First Language (L1)-Based Multilingual Education Programs," argues that many factors should be examined to design appropriate first language-based multilingual education programs. Mother-tongue or first language-based language programs should divert from a linear approach to understand the complex nature of language teaching and learning in multilingual settings. Language programs should consider a range of psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociopolitical issues that "include language structure and literacy assessment, language policy and politics, as well as cultural and social behavior change linked to literacy expansion". Without considering these factors, the "one-size-fit all" approaches may result in unintentional negative consequences. The article focuses its argument on developing early literacy programs and examines alternative approaches in

developing theory of changes that is applicable to the first language-based multilingual program in early literacy education.

Interestingly, these articles have discussions on issues of language education, and how various factors including local culture and policies should be considered in developing a theory of change for language teaching and learning. This argument is not surprising, because language and literacy is not only an important field of study, but also an imperative tool for success in any level of society; regional, national, or international community. According to Wagner (2017), there are two levels of approaches we need to consider when it comes to responding to the issues of multilingual education. First, we need to examine socio-political realities and consider practical solutions suitable to each context. Some of the questions we want to answer in this level of approach include: "What are the dynamics of languages in a multilingual society?" "What is the need of official languages to be successful in such a society?" and "How can we support students to be fluent in national languages?" Second, we must apply a more inclusive pedagogy of language teaching and learning. Smith and Ball present the three different theories of change with the procedure that can be followed by others who want to develop alternative approaches for different contexts. Blankenbecker argues for a close examination of the hegemony of a dominant language in multilingual educational settings, and calls for the development of first-language based approach in early literacy education. Alcott, Rose, Sabates and Ellison emphasize the importance of assessment and data-driven decisions and actions. Based on the results from the "citizen-led assessments" PAL had developed, it was revealed that the children from disadvantaged backgrounds performed poorly in the assessments. Then, what can such "disadvantaged" backgrounds mean to us and to education? When applied to multilingual societies, children from marginalized communities are easy to fail in schools because they do not know the dominant language or language of instruction in the classroom. This issue is often beyond the boundary of schooling, because the dominant language is closely connected to social classes or political powers (e.g. Kaiper, 2018).

Bilateral and multilateral donors, non-government organizations(NGOs) and private development foundations, country governments, and stakeholders in international education development have been focusing their efforts—making huge monetary and other investments—to eliminate illiteracy, poverty, inequality, inequity, and marginalization in the world by designing education programs for children including minorities, children with disabilities, and hard to reach children in conflict and crisis, girls, and marginalized populations. Despite the amount of effort, time, and resources that have gone into education development, the progress as it is measured through the results and outcomes is not the one expected and most importantly not matched with the level of the contributions.

As the SDGs aim to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure safety and prosperity for all by the year 2030, placing education as a central and underlining goal that influences and to a degree determines the level of success of all other 16 goals, it is imperative that we take a hard look at the work we have been doing and develop better frameworks for effective educational interventions not only in developing and transforming countries but also in developed countries' underdeveloped and deprived areas. Educational programs have been traditionally focusing at least on four main areas within the educational context of the countries of intervention including:

(i) Improving classroom instructional practices (textbooks and materials, teacher guides and training and coaching, literacy and numeracy approaches, first language support and instruction, girls schooling, universal design and inclusive education.

(ii) Strengthening the ways education systems are organized, function, and deliver services including Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) programs, education and language of instruction policy development, educational assessment policy development, educational policy for children with disabilities, girls, and minority populations, education ministry organizational structures and procedures, teacher education, recruitment, deployment, retention, and support, book supply chain, and effective coordination and collaboration among education stakeholders.

(iii) Developing and supporting programs for family and community engagement including the creation, training, and mobilization of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs), the development of programs for young children at the pre-primary education age, supporting and educating families and caregivers for children with disabilities, running literacy and biliteracy campaigns within communities and localities, and providing monetary and other incentives to families and communities to send and keep their children in school and to be active participants and supporters in their education process.

(iv) Addressing education access and quality for all, including children with disabilities in conflict and crisis states, in times of epidemics, natural disasters, political unrest and displacement including providing school buildings, school feeding, teacher training and educational materials for literacy, numeracy and socio-emotional learning, and supporting families and communities in times of hopelessness and crisis.

However, although the above areas of intervention may paint the picture of a rather comprehensive and holistic approach to tackle illiteracy and inequality in educational opportunity in the world many very expensive programs fail to deliver the aspiring results. One of the questions this raises is to what extent the ToC embodied in international development organizations and agencies' interventions go beyond of what are thought to be complex processes. Indeed, while there is now expert consensus on the importance of understanding the country context, it is unclear how effectively our interventions have been in this respect. There is a real need and opportunity to reexamine how carefully our education programs have sought to understand the foundations of specific contexts in terms of historical, cultural, social, and economic forces that drive a system. To investigate the epistemological underpinnings or assumptions that define literacy and educational processes in any given community. And to examine and determine the ways such deeper understanding inform the development community's efforts to tailor interventions according to their needs going beyond the incorporation of educational approaches and system structures that are borrowed -unexamined- from other countries.

It seems that there is still a lot of room to re-think the ways we develop our interventions. We propose to "alter from doing business as usual" no matter how difficult this may be in a world with long tradition of government inflexibility and bureaucracy. We advocate for sincere and honest attempts at context-based approaches to understanding the environment of an intervention and to create new, innovative frameworks of developing a Theory of Change that has a better chance to bring the "change" that has been promised

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