Q&A with Alan J. Daly

The 2013 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “Educational Poverty: Theory, Policy, and Praxis.” What do you see as the most pressing issues related to educational change and poverty today?

Clearly issues of poverty and long standing educational inequities remain despite decades of attention, study, and work. This statement is not to undermine the strides we have made, but as an educational community we still have a great distance to travel in becoming more equity minded and keeping issues of poverty and education front and center. I believe one of the contributing factors in not making greater progress on these issues is that our educational systems, social service and governmental agencies and the business community operate as independent units. This lack of solidarity of interests and responsibility continues to create and replicate separate and unequal outcomes for students and communities.

Typically educational institutions and support agencies have not viewed themselves, either as organizations or individuals, as part of a larger interdependent and interconnected system or network. This failure to recognize and embrace the idea that our decisions, actions, and inactions are mutually influential and consequential has perhaps inhibited our collective ability to address pressing issues that have for far too long plagued educational organizations across the globe. As educational systems and agencies often operate in mindsets of independence and scarcity being in some ways removed from the communities in which they reside, these systems often fail to recognize and embrace the connectedness and abundance in their context, thus in effect creating another type of poverty, a poverty of possibilities. For example, imagine the limitless potential if schools, districts, communities, business leaders, and institutions of higher education embraced the idea that educational change and success was truly in everyone’s best interest beyond just rhetoric, but grounded in responsibility, action, and resource allocation. However, for the most part given many of the real and imagined resource limitations, these different segments of the larger

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educational and social endeavor are all too often focused on short term survival needs at the expense of long term solutions.

In answer to long present inequities, educational change will need to move beyond vestiges of an industrial mechanistic past to become more design based, dynamic, and networked. This approach will blur and eventually erode the lines between: reformers and targets of reform; proprietary and public; creators and consumers; experts and novices; and most importantly researcher and practitioner. I believe these shifts also suggest additional important considerations for addressing the poverty of possibilities. Although we have spent a good deal of energy in developing and enacting rigorous approaches to educational research, which are critical, we have not spent as much time considering how this work is relevant to improving practice and outcomes. Moving forward will require both rigor and relevance in the praxis of research, practice, and policy.

In moving forward in this networked world we will first need to spend more time helping the hippos to dance. Hippos in this sense refer to big important ideas from research. In and of themselves these ideas are important, but are often so weighty they do not “dance” easily into practice or policy. We rarely take the time to collectively teach hippos to dance, rather we wait and hope that somehow they will don dancing slippers and find their way into the ball of educational practice and policy. Sometimes this happens, but more often than not hippos do what hippos do, that is to float, eat, and only move when necessary or provoked. As we face continued and unprecedented challenges in addressing poverty and all its ills, how do we move forward now and leverage the best of our collective intelligence, knowledge, and all forms capital in making a real difference in the lives of students across the globe?

Some of what I describe above exists across the globe in islands of excellence. Many of the readers of this newsletter are at the forefront of this work and charting new directions in addressing poverty in both its usual and expanded sense. These scholars and practitioners know and have experienced what it means to operate in systems that are rich in design, ideas, potential, and connectedness. To these communities I stand humbled, indebted, and eager to know how to spread the good work throughout all of our systems. We are embarking on a new and exciting time in the world of educational change and it will take all of us to cross long established intellectual, disciplinary, and societal borders to craft interconnected systems of care, capital, and commitment in making the strides necessary to alleviate the poverty of possibilities.

Your book “Social Network Theory and Educational Change” has brought attention to how change occurs through a network theory lens in educational systems. Based on your work, how can this framework and set of methods highlight important educational change?

Learning and leading is interactive, social, and at its best creates change in the learners, leaders, and the systems in which they do their work. We live in a social world and as such are deeply affected by others sometimes in ways in which we are unaware. Recent research suggests that our happiness, health, weight, and even wealth are influenced by the social networks in which we reside. I know this all too well. I was the first person in my family to attend college and would likely have continued in the same path as my working class parents as I did not know, nor was exposed to, college going folks. I didn’t know or recognize the secret handshakes or hidden rules that got one access to the academy. In fact, high school guidance counselors encouraged me to take a test to get into the military given that I “seemed hardy, strong, and a good rule follower”. Even when I took tests that were meant to determine future careers, the results of these instruments were interpreted by
counselors through a working class lens. For example, one of these tests indicated that I enjoyed travel, talking to people, exploring cultures, and learning about my environment. I was sure I would be destined to become an anthropologist, travel writer, linguist, in short a 20th century version of Dr. Livingstone—or so I presumed. Instead, my counselor recommended that I become a bus driver. Now there is nothing wrong with becoming a bus driver, my family is entirely comprised of folks that make the world work, but in my counselor’s eyes my future was determined by my family’s past and present. The only way I was able to even envision a different future was through a mentor that understood the hidden rules of getting into college. That one social connection changed my life and profoundly influenced my worldview and the way I now think about educational change. There is no shortage of ideas about how to bring about educational change. Many reform efforts draw on a variety of formal structures, processes, and accountability levers to improve performance. However, while these more technical approaches at improving education are important and have been well documented, what appears to be generally missing, but receiving more recent attention, in the change equation, is attention to the relational linkages between individuals through which reform moves. As such, frameworks and approaches that foreground the relational aspect of educational change are becoming increasingly important—one such framework, social network theory, is one I as well as a growing number of educational scholars are drawing upon. Social network theory provides insight into how the social processes involved in change are stretched across individuals and levels of the educational system. Generally speaking, social network theory is concerned with the pattern of social relationships that exists between individuals in a social system. A social network perspective entails a move from a primary focus on the individual and the attributes of that actor to understanding the more dynamic supports and constraints of the larger social network in which that individual resides. Therefore, rather than trying to understand the process of change based on the attributes of an educator (gender, years of experience, training, education, beliefs, etc.), network theorists focus on the influence and outcome of an actor’s “position” vis-à-vis social ties with others, as well as the overall social structure of a network. In many cases, social network theorists suggest that the underlying social structure determines the type, access, and flow of resources to actors in the network leading some scholars to suggest that the old adage ‘It is not what you know, but who you know’, is more accurately, “Who you know defines what you know”. A network perspective on educational change acknowledges the interdependence of individuals within a social system. The significance of the relationships between two people extends beyond just those individuals into a larger network of connections. It is through better understanding this larger interconnected and interdependent system that change can be understood and enacted. Given these ideas, why should we think that once an individual walks on to a school campus or into a district office or out in to a community that their social networks cease to be influential? If networks can influence something as personal as our health or happiness, future paths, and worldviews surely they can also influence how we go about the core work of education terms of learning and leading. Educational change happens not only in technical plans and blueprints, but also through the interaction, co-construction, and sense making of individuals. As such the interdependence of relationships across a network may ultimately moderate, influence, and even determine the direction, speed, and depth of a change.

What is your vision of the role of social networks in educational change in the future?

I study educational change broadly viewed and
have a penchant for thinking about change and improvement, as a systems issue that has at its core the quality of relationships between individuals. I am deeply interested in what moves a community of learners to become a community that learns, what moves a school system to a system of schools. To that end I view the world through the lens of relationships, connectedness, and interdependence. My guiding metaphor of the world, particularly education, is a network. In the 21st century we are moving from models of hierarchal command and control to flatter more networked types of organizing. This suggests a series of transitions from: independence to interdependence; centralized leadership to distributed leadership and shared responsibility; specialists to cross-trained generalists; dogma to dialogue; change being guided not by rigid policy and procedure, but facilitated through simple, shared, and flexible parameters which honors professionalism and the influence of context. In sum, I see the world as a “social network” and as such have committed much of my time, energy, focus, and writing around the topic of social networks. It may not be surprising that we don’t foreground social relationships in the work of change. For years, our educational systems have operated on an industrial model, which is designed around a conveyor belt metaphor. Students move from teacher to teacher in a relatively prescribed pattern with each educator filling their heads with information deemed relevant at the time and then moving the student on to the next teacher. In fact, we reinforce this idea for teachers as well by providing focused time for individual training and recognizing individual capacity, not necessarily social value. In essence we significantly invest in the human capital of educators, while paying short shrift to the social capital inherent in educational systems. Consider the fierce debate regarding “value added models” as an example of an individual human capital investment as opposed to a more social capital investment model of evaluation. One major assumption underlying the idea of traditional “value-added”, as it is typically construed, is that student achievement is the result of the interaction between teacher training/experience; ability to effectively teach content; and previous student performance, and that that combination can be captured in a measure. In this sense, a teacher’s ability to ‘add-value’ is a very individualistic undertaking determined almost exclusively by the human capital, or training, knowledge, and skills, of the individual teacher and the demographics of the student. This assumption seems to ignore recent research, which suggests that while human capital is important in the achievement equation, perhaps equally important is the influence and access to knowledgeable others in a high trust social context that supports sense making and co-construction of knowledge, and as such we need to attend to both the person and the group in the process of change. The idea of the importance about the relationship between the individual and the collective can be represented in some interesting work that has been done around the concept of collective intelligence. Let me illustrate, imagine a jar of jellybeans and a lecture hall filled with undergraduates. The task of the undergrads is to guess the number of jellybeans in the jar. It turns out that individually students are pretty bad at guessing the right number of jellybeans. However, if one was to take the average of their guesses, this “answer” is often a better ‘guess’ then any one student no matter their individual ability to make guesses about jellybeans. I see this to be a profound idea—that the collective is in fact ‘more intelligent’ than any one elite individual. Imagine the possibilities if we could better draw on our collective intelligence in tackling some of the most pressing and seemingly intractable problems facing education. How could we harness and leverage the intelligence of a network of educators in addressing core
issues of importance in the same way many fields have turned to “citizen scientists”? Certainly not every problem can be addressed in this manner, but how are we to know unless we investigate this potential path to change? Our ability to work well with others, networks, and draw on collective intelligence is of critical importance as we move deeper into a knowledge society in which collaboration, emotional intelligence, social skills, and leveraging interdependent social network are increasingly important, necessary, and hold economic value. Ideas such as crowd-sourcing, citizen scientists, and open source co-creation of knowledge reflect the new horizon in which educational change will take place. As such, better understanding newly evolving concepts and findings from network science and beyond are important in adding to our knowledge and building our own individual and collective ability to learn, lead, and enact fundamental educational change.

What are some of the key lessons for districts on understanding and accessing the power of formal and informal networks?

In any organization one can imagine at least two systems at work, one “formal” and the other “informal”. This distinction between “formal” and “informal” is important in understanding the work of educational change. At an individual level, the “position” of an actor can be conceptualized as representing a “formal” position such as superintendent, director, principal or teacher for example. In a “formal” role, an educator has a certain set of interactions, which are often based on expected skill sets and position in a hierarchical structure. For example, the superintendent or other high-ranking district leaders may be at the top of the hierarchy and as such one might expect expertise, advice, and directives to flow outward to others who occupy “lower” formal positions in the hierarchy. This process is often reflected in the organizational charts of most organizations. In fact, the hierarchical org chart has been the predominant metaphor in the way organizations are conceptualized and often how the work is “supposed” to take place. However, beyond “formal” positions, individuals also occupy “informal” social positions that may differ from more “formal” titles.

The “informal” social system refers to the quantity and quality of relationships that an individual possesses. For example, in a formal system the Director of Curriculum of a district may be the “hub” for interactions related to curriculum, while in an informal system, the Director of Curriculum may or may not be the “actual” person that other actors seek for advice around curricular matters. In fact, it may be a principal or another knowledgeable individual who serves as a “hub” in the informal social system. This informal social structure is not codified, but is experienced by individuals within a social system. Consider the graphic of a “formal” organizational chart and an “informal” social network above. The left side of the illustration displays the “all knowing” red box that is on the top of the organizational structure. One might assume that the individual represented by this box is central to the overall operation of the organization. However, if we take a network perspective on the organization, it is clear this individual is actually on the periphery with others playing more central roles in the work of the organization. Better understanding both the (mis)alignment of formal and informal systems may provide interesting insights into how change does and does not occur.

In grounding this idea further, consider an example from my practical experience. One of
the many duties of a school administrator is to at least in part be responsible for the physical plant of the school, which includes playing fields. At this particular school there was a very nasty and persistent gopher. The facilities director, who occupied the ‘formal’ position of gopher remover and hole fixer, was not overly fond of handling gopher problems. However, as I come from a family of cafeteria workers (my grandmother and mother were both school cafeteria workers), I was “connected” to the director of food services, who happened to also have a close relationship with the facilities department. So when faced with a gopher hole, I did not call upon the ‘formal’ system to get my issue resolved. I was able to accomplish my goal by drawing on my “informal” network of connections. I also did not share this bit of social capital, which I am embarrassed to admit, as I was afraid I would lose my own unique access. I made the decision in my own best interest, not in the interest of the system, and in this way allowed inequities and inefficiencies to continue. As we know in many human systems, these formal and informal interactions are at play, clash, and at times align. The question is how do we create the conditions for important work to get done in the interest of the larger network? This idea of formal and informal also extends to the ways in which we enact change. Formal reform structures are often layered onto existing relations, which form a ‘base-state’ of interactional patterns. These pre-existing informal relations, upon which formal structures are layered, may either support or constrain the successful implementation of a change effort. For example, if a district undertakes a Professional Learning Community or coaching reform, which includes collaboration, and then layers that effort onto a grade level that lacks the necessary informal ties to collaborate, the reform is less likely to be successful. A typical response would be to conclude that the technical elements of the reform were faulty when in fact failure may be more related to the quality or lack of ties between teachers. Therefore, a clear understanding of the informal relations prior to enacting formal structures may be useful. However, in doing this work we must also be cautious, as we do not know what unintended consequences may arise when we expose this often well functioning set of informal relationships to the light of formality. In addition to providing training and support around the content of the reform, capacity building around the “social work” of change may support efforts. Interpersonal skills such as facilitating, questioning, active listening, and collaborating are often assumed to be among capacity of educators, but that assumption is potentially faulty and can derail efforts.

What relational ideas are promising for understanding large-scale educational improvement?

In sum, I think we as a field are poised for a resurgence regarding the importance of social relationships in the work of improvement. Relationships have always been important, but I think now after enduring so many years of technical fixes, rigid accountability, and pressure/stress, the educational community and the students and families they serve are ready for a change. I see that change in terms of reinvesting in the human and social capital in systems of improvement. The work of the 21st century is not only about facts, figures, and rote learning, it is about the generation of intellectual capital and the creation, development, and management of knowledge as it exists in multiple arenas. The generation of knowledge therefore is a socio-culturally embedded process conducted through, between, among, and with people who reside in social networks. Therefore, the quantity and quality of those ties may be consequential for both individual and collective outcomes. Focusing on quantity and quality of the pattern of relationships first represents a shift in the
way we approach reform. Typically a reform effort begins with an overall articulation of the strategy including the components of the effort, necessary resources, assessment tools, timelines, and personnel. In the best situations these elements are integrated within existing social systems. However, in many cases these formal approaches are merely layered onto existing efforts without systematically attending to the structure of the informal network or established relationships already in place. The implication of this integrated perspective is that successful change efforts will require intentional emphasis on both the formal architecture of reform as well as the informal networks of relations upon which these formal structures are layered.

The idea driving this more relational approach to change, conceptualized broadly, is an intuitive one, that relationships matter in very central ways to the work of change. Despite the intuitive nature of this statement, it is a point that has almost been lost on policymakers at all levels of education. We recognize that the work of educating and creating conditions for learning is at its core a people endeavor. All one has to do is examine spreadsheets of any school district and note that in most places 80-90% of educational budgets are dedicated to human resources. The work of education is at its core "social work." We are social beings and that sociability does not stop outside the schoolhouse or district door.

Approaching change is at its core a "systems" affair in that while reforming individuals schools is important, recognizing that schools are embedded in a wider district and community context is essential. My colleague Kara Finnigan and I through research supported from both the WT Grant and Spencer Foundations have found that it is through a web of social relationships that research evidence and a host of other important resources related to improvement flows. In addition, our work also suggests that the role of "brokers", those individuals/agencies that connect otherwise disconnected others, are important as they can have significant control over the flow and access to resources as is displayed in the graphic. Our work indicates that these brokers are often in power positions in a system as they have the opportunity to filter, hoard, and even modify resources as they move from one group to another.

Understanding the role of brokers, both formal and informal, will be an important area of examination given the increasing role of intermediaries in educational reform. One of the most important and consistent findings from across network studies is the importance of subgroups. Subgroups are important in understanding change in systems. Pairs of actors that have connections to another common ‘third’ party can increase access to novel resources and serve as a ‘tertius iungens’, the ‘third who joins’ others in a manner that supports the exchange of resources and meeting of goals.

Subgroups can shape the individual experience of members and as such filter group norms, information flow, and influence over attitudes. Strong ties within these groups can assist actors in coordinating systemic action and the movement of resources such as teaching practices, as members have direct access to the resources of others. On the other hand, strong ties within these subgroups are also likely to represent redundant information between these individuals, which may reduce the overall access to novel information and reinforce existing approaches. Ties between subgroups can play meaningful roles within networks. The question to be asked, as we move in to the future of change, is how do we better create, nurture, and sustain networks in support of equity and excellence? The answer to this question I believe will require educational systems to redefine what is valued, requiring fundamental shifts from a focus on the lone individual/effort to leveraging connected networks of design, experimentation, reflection, and refinement.
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