The 2014 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “The Power of Education Research for Innovation in Practice and Policy.” What do you see as the most promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?

A major challenge in researching productive approaches to teaching and learning in urban schools is the evolving manifestations of student diversity. One promising educational change innovation in this regard is our improved conceptualization of student diversity. Urban classrooms are no longer defined (and indeed, may have long been mischaracterized) as those that serve students from primarily one racial, cultural, language, or socioeconomic group. Teachers are now understood to be working within culturally and linguistically complex classrooms (Ball, 2009) housing students from two (and typically much more) racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. As well, urban contexts include transnational youths—those who live and go to school across two or more countries that can differ greatly in culture, language, economics, politics, and educational policy and practice—and who make the concept of student diversity even more dynamic (Skerrett, 2012). Adding to the rich cultural and linguistic repertoires of urban students are the communities of multiple literacy practices (or multiliteracies) to which they belong—social groups that cut across national, racial, language, and other social backgrounds. In these affinity groups, young people share leadership and collaborate in creative, meaningful work that demand multiple modes of communication and design (Lam & Rosario-Ramos, 2009).

With urban demographics ever shifting, educational researchers must enact dynamic approaches that situate us permanently within communities of change. We must inquire with school leaders, teachers, students, and other educational stakeholders to better study and innovate relevant and effective educational approaches for unique contexts at particular moments of time that can inform educational policies and practices of broader reach.
Can you tell us about your recent work on adolescents’ literacy practices and enhancing student success in urban schools? What are some of the major lessons for the educational change field?

Two of my recent projects lean on a complex conception of student diversity and enlarged roles for teachers and students in educational research. Borderzones in Adolescents’ Literacy Practices involved a year and a half long inquiry into the disconnect between the rich outside-school literate lives of urban youths, such as I described earlier as affinity groups of multiliteracies practices, and the disengagement and failure that literacy practices in school often produce for these students. Our research team wanted to study, theorize, and innovate on educational practices that made school literacy environments and practices more engaging and productive for urban youths and their teachers. Taking the contributions of teachers, students, and other partners in educational research seriously, our team included an urban teacher who was also a new scholar in adolescent literacy, having just completed her master’s thesis on the literacy practices of urban youths. This teacher was eager to inquire into and innovate curriculum and instructional approaches in her classroom based on research knowledge.

Her students also collaborated with us as ethnographic partners. They helped us discover—through interviews, observations of them in school and self-sponsored, outside-school literacy practices, and analyzing the literacy artifacts they used and produced—what constituted a productive literacy education for them. Working as the lead curriculum innovator, with university researchers in a supportive role, the teacher designed, assessed, and continuously revised literacy instruction in ways that were responsive to her students’ strengths and needs. An important part of our innovation of practice related to fostering students’ literate lives outside school. We maintained a view of them as whole literate beings with important literacy agendas that extended well beyond academic life—into personal, religious, civic, and other domains.

Several youths in the Borderzones study led transnational lives. Reviewing literacy research on transnational youths, I made connections between its findings of the cultural and linguistic flexibility transnational youths develop and similar capacities of the transnational youths in the Borderzones study. But my expansive understanding of the multiliterate diversity of youths led me to new insights for literacy research—how youths’ multi-literacies practices both shape, and are shaped by, their experiences of transnational life (Skerrett, 2012). I also noticed that the bulk of literacy research on transnational youths deals with movements across the US and Mexico. Yet one in five children led transnational lives across world nations (Mazzucato & Shans, 2011). I became intrigued with this phenomenon of youths’ literacy development across diverse countries. A US immigrant of Caribbean descent, I knew of Caribbean youths that belonged both to the US and the Caribbean.

Accordingly, my new project Literacy Learning across Transnational Settings brings to the attention of literacy researchers an understudied demographic of youths who live and go to school across US cities such as Boston, New York, and Miami; and Caribbean isles like St. Maarten, St. Martin, and Dominica. I am partnering with the youths in a long-term endeavor, following and co-inquiring into their experiences with language and literacy across formal and informal literacy environments in different national geographies. I am using the educational knowledge emerging from this work to theorize and develop approaches to literacy education that are responsive to the language and literacy strengths and learning needs of these translational youths. Keeping in mind the unique diversity of any social context, longer
term, I will partner with teachers and youths across particular schools in different countries to refine and innovate educational theory and practice, with related policy implications, regarding responsive approaches to literacy education for diverse youths, including transnational youths.

**You have had an important role in bringing cultural studies into the educational change field. Why do cultural studies matter to educational research, policy, and practice?**

Human beings develop their identities—and attendant values, beliefs, and ways of knowing and understanding—from participating with others in cultural worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). These tenets suggest that we cannot identify, study, understand, and address educational problems outside the lens of culture. The questions educational researchers ask and the ways we pursue answering them; the policies we create about curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment; and the daily practices of school leaders, teachers, and students, including the extent and ways in which they advocate for, innovate within, or resist particular findings of research or policy mandates are deeply shaped by our cultural identities. Studies of educational change, and related conclusions for policy and practice, should thus maintain a focus on the cultural dimensions of individuals and groups.

**What are some key educational changes you see urban schools in the United States engaging in (or, should engage in) going forward?**

Austin, Texas, where I currently live and work, is a rapidly growing city proximal to smaller diversifying towns and unincorporated communities. The demographics of the student bodies across these communities are likewise changing, reflecting the dynamic forms of diversity I earlier outlined. In what could be described as an ironic response from educational policy and practice—but in fact is a troublingly typical response to diversifying student populations—the state, and in turn, school districts and individual schools have greatly standardized curriculum and increased testing of narrowly defined literacy and numeracy skills. These external pressures challenge the agency and innovation of teachers, students, and school leaders. The changes needed are, at the levels of state, district, and school-level policy and practice, to create spaces for teachers and students to inquire into the learning resources and educational needs students bring to classrooms, and innovate unique curricular and instructional approaches that allow them to meet and exceed the demands of standardized tests. Educational researchers must also forge partnerships with schools, teachers, and students willing to take up these innovations. Finally, teachers and other educational actors can capitalize on professional learning communities. In these networks they can grow their knowledge of, and also innovate, educational research and practice that will provide the wealth of evidence needed for changing policies to better support teaching and learning in urban schools.

**Sources**


http://www.aera.net/Educational_Change_SIG.htm
Allison Skerrett is an associate professor in the Language and Literacy Studies program area and an affiliate faculty member in the Cultural Studies in Education program area at the College of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, in The University of Texas at Austin. Her teaching and research interests include secondary English education, adolescent literacy, and sociocultural influences on teaching and learning. She can be reached at askerrett@utexas.edu.