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?

I don’t like the rhetoric around innovation. It’s a misleading rhetoric as it implies something mysterious to be found and I am not sure that is true. I am much more concerned with doing basic fundamental things for poor children and doing them well. We tend not to do this. Then we ask what’s gone wrong and decide we should be more innovative and try to come up with some brilliant plan. We need to treat the poor kids like they are rich kids. I don’t know if that’s much more complicated than we think. That’s just my gripe against the use of the term innovation to frame thinking.

As to the question of most promising educational changes – the safest answer is always early childhood education. Currently, the state of New Jersey is claiming it is reducing racial and class achievement gaps 20-40% with its early childhood program. The form of early childhood education that I find most appealing can be costly, however, quality does cost money. The idea is to get kids into third grade with a high confidence level and strong skills, since performance at third grade is a good predictor of performance in high school.

Of the various ways in which those programs can be shaped, the one I find to be most impressive is the child-parent center that was developed here in Chicago by the University of Minnesota and others, in which the focus is on age three to five. We put a lot of resources into those years academically, not just for the child, but also for the child’s parents. One of the things that we are seeing is that you can get young, socially disconnected parents who will participate with their children when they are at this age, but tend not to participate in school activities when their children are older. In fact, some of these programs are mandating that their parents participate a number of hours a week. The potential is just enormous. The little that I have never have thought to look for leadership.

From your perspective, what is the legacy of the movement? What are key remaining challenges?

Part of what’s problematic for me when I try to movement has been largely forgotten. It has people distorting the movement or at least movement. So the movement for most benevolent interracial movement more or less charismatic religious leader speaking of non-problematic. Even on the issue of non-violence, who were serious activists in the Deep South tactic of the moment. It is simply not an who would have believed differently, but my about the movement doesn’t really stand up. One of the particularly detrimental things is leader, Dr. King. This belief encourages people to how the movement was made. The single most their own hands made the move. They were then able to propel further. It was initiated way around in almost every significant case. That for me is perhaps the overwhelming depend on themselves. We must always
seen about how parents are reacting is very encouraging.

One of the controversial points is when we should engage the child - age three or at birth. Even though there is a lack of evidence, I understand why people state that we should start at birth. I will admit it is a resource issue and my guess is that here in Chicago, if most of our kids get a strong academic environment at age three, they seem to be fine; the great majority of them seem to be school ready by the time they get to kindergarten. For practical reasons, I feel that is the best option. I would lean toward a three year old to eight-year old focus as opposed to a birth date to eight-year old focus. However, if you have the money, it would be great to do the latter.

We have to support what the president is trying to do, by expanding learning opportunities for poor children. We have to take this into account. We have to take into account how to engage the early grades. Principals must understand how to connect the early grades to later grades. Teachers in those grades are not accustomed to talking to one another and collaboration is clearly a part of what makes the best programs better. There will be issues during implementation, so we cannot assume that the right effect will emerge immediately. However, if we are careful with the implementation there is every indication that this can be a life-changing program. So that’s early childhood as one intervention.

At the high school level there are two kinds of intervention. We have a growing body of evidence, especially for children of color, Black and Latino children, of programs that foster a high level of personalization between students and teachers. I am talking here about personalization in the areas of teachers knowing about a student’s life outside of the classroom and developing bonds of trust between them. Programs that combine personalization with academic rigor are having some big, impressive consistent impacts.

Most recently, the small high schools of choice in New York City have increased the graduation rate and the college readiness rate at an impressive pace. Outcomes in the International Baccalaureate (IB) programs have also been impressive. Evidence shows that when students with average ability have access to an IB program, the results can be effective for those who persist. And then there is the small schools movement that has pretty much been chewed up by the charter schools movement. The data from the small schools movement is pretty clear on the impact of personalization. Some of them were probably not as academically rigorous as they could have been. Montgomery County, Maryland is an example of a combination of both personalization and high academic standards for kids who were working below their capacity.

On another note, think about what we have learned in the last few years about just getting kids to fill out their FASFA. If you just get kids to fill out the FASFA, you end up getting a 10% bump in the proportion of students who will go to college. That’s an awfully big payoff for an awfully small thing, and I suspect it’s a tip of an iceberg. What this is telling us is that not all kids are equally needy. Some students are very close to getting over certain hurdles and they need help in one particular area and they have a shot. In my estimation this encompasses about 10-20% of the high school population. If they don’t get these targeted interventions, they may fall by the wayside as well.

In general I think we need to spend a lot more time worrying about “how,” not just about “what” would work. I believe we know what would work at this point. The challenge is making things work in a particular social political context with a particular kind of research-based method. I prefer mixed methods. Educational research is much more rigorous today than it was 15 years ago. However, it really doesn’t state “how” if you are not asking the right
questions. The kinds of questions that we tend to ask are questions about central tendency, or what’s happening to our average. We think of the experiment as the best way to establish causality when in fact the experiment seldom tells you what the process was - the “how” by which the results were obtained. We pay too much attention to a relatively narrow range of methodological tools.

Your recent book So Much Reform, So Little Change explores the failure of education reform to improve American urban schools over the past two decades. Why have past reform strategies proven unsuccessful and what is, in your view, a promising and feasible alternative for American urban schools?

Part of it has been that they have been under-resourced and disconnected. There have been programs and interventions that have spoken to one part of a very complicated and declining program. By and large, our past efforts have not taken the impact of failure into account. The larger point is that more times than not, we fail to place sufficient attention on the social and political dimensions of the problems and we are trying to fix only its technical dimensions

One of the things that we consistently fail to think through is the importance of teacher beliefs and how we are going to negotiate the fact that in our low performing schools the belief system doesn’t support good teaching. It is a belief system that is protective, an unconscious strategy, a protective mechanism for the chaos that has evolved due to the lack of support in their environments.

What are key leverage points to dramatically change the course of urban schools in America? And how can urban schools successfully improve on a large scale?

I’m a little hesitant with questions like this because you are asking about things that haven’t happened yet, so we can only in effect, extrapolate from experience. With this in mind, some of the most successful programs in the country combine a high level of academic rigor with a high level of personalization. I’m thinking of New York’s Small Schools of Choice, Chicago’s IB programs, or the research on the IB programs from the consortium on school research and some of the work that has been done in Montgomery County. Part of what seems important to me is finding ways to offer children both academic rigor and sense of a personal connection with the teachers - a sense of the teachers knowing something about them individually. That’s a kind of a tip of the iceberg and the rest of the iceberg is figuring out how you can create school organizations that will support both rigor and personalization. I believe this starts with improving the level of leadership at the building level.

I believe it is more useful and strategic to think about how you improve the quality of the organization than to think about what kind of program you are going to put into the organization. And organization is partly a matter of leadership; it is partly a matter of whether or not there’s a shared body of belief to support the organizational mission; partly a matter of whether or not faculty in this case can work together, and partly a matter of whether or not they can work with parents. So, that’s one set of components in organization.

Since we are particularly concerned with urban schools, schools serving low-income children, there’s a whole other set of issues that have to do with just stabilizing those schools. Teacher turn-over is high, student turn-over is high, and misbehavior of both students and teachers tends to be high. Attendance tends to be atrocious especially for the very young students and for high school-aged students. Getting a handle on those issues which are much more transparent than some of the issues that we face when we are trying to improve instruction will make it a lot easier for us to
improve instruction in the long run.

*Your recent anthology Teach Freedom explores the African American tradition of education for liberation. What are key lessons from this tradition and what do they offer to the educational change field today?*

Clearly one of such lessons is the idea that most people have a great deal more potential than we believe. Most poor people, most oppressed people have potential in them that we don’t ordinarily see. It is important that they have the potential to be a part of the leadership in their communities. Even if they don’t necessarily have the kind of credentials that we associate with leadership, if they are both supported and challenged, they can often do more than we imagined.

Another lesson is that people often come to feel a part in society by fighting for a place in it. These are the folks who often benefit most from these kinds of initiative. The folks who feel the most disconnected from society or in the case of our conversation, those who are most disconnected from school may be the ones who will profit most from being put into leadership programs. This can be extremely powerful.

In the anthology, there are some examples of how people have more talent and capacity than is recognized. Community organizing, the civil rights movement, projects like the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which became a political party of national importance that was essentially run by poor people. Most Americans would have never envisioned them running something that complex and of such importance. Most Americans could never envision a timekeeper from a cotton plantation, and the public argument was with the president of the United States, but that’s exactly what happened in the case of Fannie Lou Hamer. And so the story of the movement is over and over, foregoing into communities and finding leadership in places where most folks would never have thought to look for leadership.

*From your perspective, what is the legacy of the Civil Rights Movement to education in America, and what are key remaining challenges?*

Part of what’s problematic for me when I try to think about this is that the legacy of the civil rights movement has been largely forgotten. It has been robbed of much of its value by a long history of people distorting the movement or at least distorting some of the most dynamic elements of the movement. So the movement for most Americans has become somewhat of a fairy tale, largely about a benevolent interracial movement more or less headed by a benevolent president and a benevolent charismatic religious leader speaking of non-violence. All of those assumptions are extremely problematic. Even on the issue of non-violence, there is probably no time at which most of the people who were serious activists in the Deep South believe in non-violence, other than believing in it as a tactic of the moment. It is simply not an American tradition. There were a significant number of leaders who would have believed differently, but my point is that most of what Americans think they know about the movement doesn’t really stand up very well to historical examination.

One of the particularly detrimental things is the belief that the movement had a single charismatic leader, Dr. King. This belief encourages people to look around and wait for the next leader. That is not how the movement was made. The single most important lesson was that people who took issues into their own hands made the movement. They created the kind of momentum that Dr. King and others were then able to propel further. It was initiated by pressures coming from the bottom, not the other way around in almost every significant case.

That for me is perhaps the overwhelming lesson of the movement: that people have to learn to depend on themselves. We must always
be in the process of building organizations that will not be dependent on leaders. What has happened is that the willingness to do the slow and arduous work that is involved in real organizing has dissipated as people got caught up in a media oriented politics.

There are still places in Mississippi where the Freedom Democratic Party meets, but more than that, there are still places in which that kind of organizing is done. Chicago actually is one of them. The last I heard is that there are over 200 community organizations in this city, many of them doing leadership development work. The Children’s Defense Fund Freedom School Program, which is mostly a summer program, had over 1,500 sites last summer. It is a literacy program, but it is also a civic engagement project. I think last year the theme was “the reduction of gun violence” and the year before that the theme was something like “inequities in educational funding in this country.” It gets young people involved in some very important issues.

That’s a direct product of the Civil Rights Movement; another would be schools like the one in New York Brotherhood Sister Sol which does the same kind of work that Freedom Schools did back in the 1960’s.

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