The 2014 AERA theme was “The Power of Educational 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 have to say that I’m not fond of this year’s theme. In my reading, the language carries ideas that are misdirected and sadly dominant in current policy circles, especially in the U.S. One is that educational improvement is mainly a matter of technical innovation, pulling attention and resources away from what I see as essential social-political-organizational change. Another is that education research is the key to inventing new tools, privileging research over practice as the source of knowledge for improvement. To me, the title connotes the old R&D paradigm for education research and reinforces a view that there are “best practices” – proven by research – that teachers and school systems need only find and implement. The proliferation of “What Works” clearinghouses across the U.S. testifies to the popularity of these ideas, at least among policymakers and foundations that allocate funds in this direction.

My own thinking about education-change innovations that improve practice and policy is about 180 degrees from such AERA theme connotations. I would bet on practice-based inquiry over educational research as the more powerful engine for innovation to improve education outcomes. I’m taking into account, partly, the dismal findings from implementation research conducted over the past 40 years. No matter how powerful and well-tested an innovative program or practice is in the laboratories of research; it takes a great deal of educator learning and adaptation to enact it – especially if the innovation departs radically from current routines. School systems rarely provide the resources needed for this to happen. But I’m also taking into account evidence from my and others’ recent research in schools and districts where significant improvements are being made, such as Toronto and Sanger Unified and Long Beach Unified in California. These are places where educators and administrators...
carry out their own inquiry to define a need for improvement, design an innovation, and then use evidence to test and refine them. They also have a healthy distrust of any innovation touted as “best practice” and, even where research-based evidence is strong, will pilot it and use evidence from their own schools and students to pursue or reject it. When these school districts do adopt an innovation, whether developed inside or outside the system, the administration invests significantly in supporting principals’ and teachers’ learning and uses their feedback and evidence from observations to adapt the innovation to local contexts and improve their support for making it work.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle\(^1\) made important distinctions about the kinds of knowledge that inform practice that I think are useful for unpacking the idea of “innovations in practice and policy” – and perhaps reconciling the paradigm conflict I’ve drawn. They use different labels to refer to the source of knowledge for teaching: Knowledge for practice comes from external research to isolate “best practices”; knowledge of practice comes from teacher teams inquiring into student work and identifying connections between practice and outcomes; knowledge in practice comes from observations and lessons an individual teacher draws during the course of classroom instruction. Each kind of knowledge is a potential source of innovation and change in classrooms (and in schools and districts if the same distinction is applied to sources of knowledge for administrative practice at these levels). In this frame we see that knowledge for practice, from formal education research, is a small piece of the puzzle of improving knowledge and innovation in education. The other two are crucial and integral. Teacher, school, and district teams are developing new knowledge of practice as they create and test innovations to meet specific needs of their students. And nothing will change if individuals (teachers, principals, district leaders) do not build on this knowledge and bring back their learning to their team(s).

So the short answer to your question is that I see the most promising education-change innovations as those that are being developed and tested in school systems that have a strong professional inquiry culture. The content of innovations varies widely because they address specific local problems, e.g., school readiness, English learner progress, drop-outs. But what these schools are learning from their practice, and the evidence they provide, are innovations that can get legs.

From your vantage point as a co-founder and co-director of the Center for Research on the Context of Teaching (CRC) at Stanford, what are key findings to date on the role of context and reform on the quality of teaching and learning, and what are key burning questions that remain elusive or unresolved?

Our key findings have evolved over time, and I think they track pretty well with research in the U.S. and other countries, so I’ll answer with a short story of CRC research.

When Milbrey McLaughlin and I founded the Center in 1987 with a federal center grant, there was a budding line of “effective schools” research, as well as Rand research on program implementation, to ground our conception of contexts that matter for teaching and learning at the secondary level. We began our research with a framework that pointed to embedded contexts of teachers’ work – the institutional environment of education goals, subject matter cultures, and reform ideas; professional contexts of teacher education programs, professional associations/unions, and networks; higher-education institutions that student graduates attended; local parent communities; school system at federal, state, and local levels; school organization; subject area departments, and the classroom where
students and subject matter intersects. We took a teachers’ eye view of what and how these contexts shape their work and success with students, using field and survey methods to identify patterns.

Our early research in 16 California and Michigan high schools during 1987-1992 produced a key finding that I think still hold true: teachers’ up-close professional community is the context that matters most for the quality of teaching and learning. In the traditional high schools we studied this was the subject department. We were struck by how much teachers’ views of their students, their school administration, and their own professional capacity and career differed between departments within the same policy contexts. In one large suburban high school, for example, we found subject area departments that were night and day from one another in quality of teaching and learning. Social studies teachers taught in isolation and uniformly talked about the decline in student abilities over the years, complained about school and district administrators, and said they were thinking about new career possibilities; while English teachers shared ideas and materials and told us about their students’ successes, explained how their colleagues and administrators supported their success, and projected a long and rewarding career in teaching. On teacher survey measures of collegiality and collaboration within the school these two departments had mean scores that were over one standard deviation apart, and student survey reports of their effort in different subject classes correlated highly with the teacher survey measures of department collaboration. Across the 16 schools in our two-state sample, we found more variance on measures of teacher culture between subject departments than between schools. At the same time, we found school and district differences in the extent to which their policies and cultures supported, or inhibited, the development of “teacher learning communities”, the rare departments in which teachers collaborated to improve teaching and learning. During the 1990’s, research on U. S. schools converged on the finding that the nature of teachers’ professional community has significant consequences for teaching and student learning.

We then took up the question of how teacher learning communities could be developed and sustained. For more than a decade we studied several initiatives to achieve this vision. Each invested in a particular design and intermediary organization(s) to leverage change – leading with collaborative data-based inquiry and/or professional development in content instruction with teacher teams. Consistent with prior implementation research, we found that the strategies worked to develop teacher learning community when they were well implemented but, in general, teacher teams and schools fell short of digging into the work. What mattered most were the commitment of school administrators, strong facilitation by inside or external leaders, and a district culture that promoted teacher learning and leadership. It became clear that, regardless of the design for teacher collaborative work on instruction, bringing about authentic joint work in teacher teams entails strategic change leadership within the system.

So our research turned to school districts and questions of what local policies, strategies, and organization norms and routines nurture teacher collaboration and continuous improvement. We studied school districts with relatively strong investments in teacher learning and improvement in several states -- including California, North Carolina, New York, Texas, and Washington – documenting their improvement approaches and teacher responses. Out of this work came the finding that how a district leads change is as or more important than what policies it enacts. For example, we observed teachers’ negative
response to a Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiative that district leaders attempted
to implement using tight timelines and
checklists for monitoring teacher teams’ and
schools’ progress. We found that such
“bureaucratic” implementation approaches
inhibited PLC development, while
“professional” approaches supported shifts in
teaching culture toward teacher collaboration
and shared responsibility for improving student
learning.4

As a fortuitous culmination of this line of
research and with support from the S. H. Cowell
Foundation, my colleague Jane David and I have
been studying a school district that
transformed itself into a professional learning
system with stunning gains in student
achievement. For nearly six years we have
documented Sanger Unified School District’s
(SUSD’s) policies and practices that support
continuous improvement in teaching and
learning, while also recording accounts of the
change process. Lessons learned are about how
to develop professional capacity.

You ask about burning questions. I think
they center on how to transform school
systems to address growing socio-economic
inequalities. 1) What does it take for local
school systems to become learning
organizations – places where professionals at
all levels work together and use evidence to
improve the quality and equity of student
learning? What change strategies, policies and
routines, leadership, and external supports can
leverage and sustain this culture change –
especially in large urban school systems? 2)
What are teacher teams, schools, and district
offices learning and doing that make big
differences in the success of traditionally low-
performing students. What strategies and
practices help bridge gaps in educational
readiness and resources between socio-
economic groups?

What works – and what doesn’t – when it
comes to developing professional capacity in
school systems?

I’ll start with what doesn’t work because what
works sounds too simple and common sense if
one doesn’t take into account what’s being
promoted these days. First and ironically, the
“What Works” clearinghouses popular in the
U.S. don’t work. District administrators and
school boards often see an ‘evidence-based’
program or practice as a ‘quick fix’ and then
move on when they see no results, missing the
fact that sustained professional learning is key
to any improvement effort. And, as I
mentioned earlier, those school districts that
buy into a vision of PLCs for ongoing teacher
learning and collaboration often fall short
because they use a “bureaucratic” approach to
change. Most don’t go much beyond mandating
time for teachers to meet in groups. Instead of
nurturing team lead
ership and joint work, they
continue to mandate hours of teacher
professional development in workshops that
target specific knowledge or skills.

Second, the strategy of selecting and
evaluating teachers doesn’t work. Policy
makers and the public tend to see ‘professional
capacity’ in terms of individual teacher quality;
so building capacity means picking and keeping
“the best” teachers, rather than creating
conditions for teachers to learn and get better
in their jobs. But this doesn’t work in high-
poverty urban schools and districts where
recruiting and retaining well-prepared teachers
and administrators is most challenging. And in
all settings, retaining teachers hinges mainly on
the quality of school leadership and working
conditions. Singling out the best and worst
teachers using “value-added” assessment of
teacher effects on student learning growth, an
approach being promoted by the U.S.
Department of Education, doesn’t work.
Studies of merit pay systems show that
evaluating individual teachers does not
improve their performance. Worse, designs to sort teachers on ‘quality’ chip away at their willingness to share resources and collaborate with colleagues to improve student learning.

What does work to develop professional capacity is demonstrated by school systems like Sanger Unified in the California Central Valley. Sanger USD transformed itself from one of the lowest-performing districts in the state in 2004 to one of the top-performing districts serving a poor Latino population by 2010. The new superintendent and deputy superintendent took on the challenge of reform with a demoralized teaching staff (the union had posted a sign on the freeway exit that read “Welcome to the Home of 400 Unhappy Teachers”). Leading with a vision of PLCs, district leaders brought about a sea change in how teachers and administrators worked together and in their students’ success. Districts like SUSD show that what works for continuous education improvement are learning organization conditions touted in business. Further, the strategies and actions district leaders used to create these conditions suggest principles for leading system transformation.

In telling the story of Sanger’s transformation, Jane David and I point to culture shifts that were the focus of district change – the what of change -- and to the district’s core principles for leading change – the how of change. Both were essential and integral to Sanger’s success in developing professional capacity for continuous improvement – and to the answer to your question of “what works?” The story of what changed, in a nutshell, is that the district brought about four kinds of shifts within and across schools:

- From professional isolation to collaboration and shared responsibility
- From teaching the textbook to diagnosing student learning needs
- From principals as managers to principals as leaders of adult learning
- From top-down mandates and compliance to reciprocal accountability between system levels

All communications from district administrators and staff and professional development for teachers and school leaders focused on the why and how of these shifts. The goal was to create a district culture in which all professionals collaborate to meet the needs of all students and hold one another accountable for doing so. After 3-5 years Sanger USD had developed this capacity for continuous improvement, which district and school leaders continue to nurture. In leading change, district leaders have explicitly and implicitly followed three core principles:

- Take a developmental approach
- Ground decisions in evidence
- Build shared commitments and relationships to sustain change

Over time these leadership principles entered the district culture through metaphors and labels. Taking a developmental approach became ‘painting the Golden Gate Bridge’ – which meant always refreshing and deepening knowledge. Building relationships to support change became ‘working below the green line’ – which referred to a diagram showing policies and structures above a green line and relationships and identities below the line. These principles continue to guide district leaders’ actions as they navigate new challenges for change, such as responding to Common Core standards. And since 2008 the district has grown its own school principals and district administrators steeped in these principles – through a pipeline that extends from teacher leaders of grade-level and content
PLCs to curriculum support provider in schools to assistant principal to principal to district administrator.

*How does/can knowledge about the role of context and reform on the quality of teaching and learning support or improve educational policy?*

I think your question is about how knowledge from our and others’ research can find its way into local and state policy systems. Based on what I’ve said so far, the question is how can policymakers learn from effective local school system reform and, specifically, how they can learn to leverage and support their system’s shift toward a learning organization?

First, it’s important to figure out how policymakers can have access to this knowledge. Unfortunately, education researchers who study system change tend to publish their findings in journals, book chapters, and books that practitioners or policy makers rarely read. And often the focus is on a particular theory/hypothesis or particular program – the results of which are not readily translated into policy decisions. So how can education researchers innovate to make their findings more interesting and useful for practice and policy?

This is a question that Jane David and I and our colleague Ken Doane of the S.H.Cowell Foundation deliberated at length. How could we make our findings about Sanger USD’s success in developing itself as a learning organization accessible to a wide audience of school administrators, teacher leaders, lay school boards, and policy makers – to folks who influence education policy decisions? Ultimately we designed a short book that can be read in one sitting – and that is provided free to school districts and other organizations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the book is being widely shared and read across California districts and beyond, though the jury is out on whether and how it is making a difference in shaping education policy.

Second, it may be important for system change that key state and local policy makers hear from and work with ambassadors of the vision – like Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, Ann Lieberman – who promote and put meat on the big ideas. Building relationships between researchers and policy makers is a fairly new frontier, but evidence suggests that there is an appetite within the U.S. and in other nations for learning from system change experts. For example, Michael Fullan’s work with several California districts appears to be reframing district leaders’ thinking about improvement strategies and reinforcing their moves toward building system learning and leadership capacity. Enhancing researcher–policy maker dialogue promises also to make educational research more relevant to problems of practice and more influential. Researchers need to develop a better sense of policymaking – what is relevant and when in policymaking cycles – and how to translate key findings into straightforward language and messages that are grounded in reality and understanding of what it takes to change current practice.

Building bridges between research and policy pushes against the grains of academe and school systems. It calls for new genres of research reporting and dialogue between researchers and school leaders around school and system improvement.

*Where would you like to see education research heading in the next 20 years?*

I’d like to see much more research focused on how education professionals organize and carry out their work in ways that improve student achievement on a continual basis. The enormous investment in research designed to isolate effects of a particular program or practice seems misplaced. More important are
questions of how teachers learn to implement and adapt them to students and how schools and districts create conditions for educator learning. A bottom-up view on the problem of change focuses research questions on improving results for teacher teams and their students.

In thinking about how we can learn from and influence practice in the future, I see benefits from closer collaborations between researchers and school systems. We need to document, retrospectively and in real time, more examples of how school systems have shifted their cultures to develop professional capacity for continuous improvement. And we need examples of how schools and teacher teams within them have learned to diagnose and address gaps in student achievement. Case studies of how administrators and educators lead change and navigate local challenges and policy mandates can be key resources for practice and for the growing knowledge base on change leadership.

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