The 2015 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “Toward Justice: Culture, Language, and Heritage in Education Research and Praxis” What are key accomplishments, limitations, and possibilities of education research to advance justice?

I will answer from the perspective of my own leadership in the state of Texas together with civil rights organizations and communities with whom I have worked closely over the years specifically in the policy arena of the Texas State Legislature. It is a virtual truism that while research is optimal in the development of good policies—and in so doing, to advance justice—this does not automatically translate either into the development of good, research-based policies or the preempting or elimination (i.e., “killing”) of harmful legislation.

One could get really cynical about this and conclude that research is therefore ineffectual to the advancement of justice in legislative or policymaking contexts. It actually bothers me quite a bit to hear fellow researchers—people that I respect—hold this view. I think it more often reflects their inexperience, bias, or naïveté than it does reality. In other instances, it’s an ivory-tower mentality that “looks down,” if you will, at policy actors. So we become our own enemies sometimes, working against our own—and ultimately, our communities’—interests because we simply do not engage policy debates.

A positive example comes to mind. During the 2003 legislative session, a Texas state legislator called me, asking whether it would be a good idea to pass a bill that would require teachers to stop teaching to the test. From the conversation, I gathered that he had constituents in his district that were very angry about this and were desirous of legislation that would forbid this kind of “teaching.” I was appreciative of his intention, but let him know that no such law could be passed primarily because the available research evidence at the time pointed less to a problem within the teaching profession and more to a perverse logic of marginalizing children and tests that our accountability system

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Q&A with Angela Valenzuela

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itself engenders. I helped him to see how Texas’ high-stakes system of testing was the real culprit. Decoupling the rewards and sanctions from the standardized tests, I explained, was the real policy work that needed to be done if we wanted to create a shift in behavior.

While I don’t think he was very happy to hear my perspective in the moment, my advice nevertheless kept him from getting too invested in this proposal, and in so doing, possibly protected him from potential embarrassment given that folks on the ground certainly knew what was up and how a bill like this wasn’t going to solve anything. This is actually one of a number of examples where the knowledge, frameworks, and research experiences that we as researchers and scholars possess actually do make a difference.

The more involved one gets in these spaces, the closer one gets to the development of actual legislation which is another significant way that we can be involved. At its best, our involvement with legislative bodies is not sporadic, episodic, or piecemeal in a “tinkering” fashion, but instead deeply situated in trusting relationships that involve community and genuine relationships with legislators and their staff. A benefit of longevity at the state level is becoming a human pipeline to internships and opportunities in the legislature. A good number of students are now either actual players in state politics, or are actively involved either as legislative staff or legislators themselves. So far because of this, my access improves with the passage of time. That makes this work very rewarding, of course.

A major accomplishment was eliminating the high stakes attached to standardized tests for our state’s third graders, positively affecting 300,000 children statewide beginning in the fall 2010 school year. We are still at work addressing this in the other grades and coming up with a system based on authentic assessments to replace our old one. Ambitious and involved, but doable.

So our power and effectiveness grows through everything we do, ranging from research, to building constituencies around the issues we take on primarily through educating others—which is what we do well as scholars and researchers. We don’t lobby; we educate. Moreover, as a result of a deep, personal identification with a progressive, civil and human rights agenda our chances of getting coopted get minimized. Effectiveness also comes from learning how power is arranged in this setting, as well as in the community at the grassroots, and working to leverage it from these diverse contexts even to the point of weighing in on the political process itself.

Having access to caucuses like the Mexican American or Black Legislative Caucuses or the Senate Hispanic Caucus creates avenues for change through an exercise, if you will, of “soft power” where certain ideas and preferences can get expressed. Legislators have their own views, but they are often also interested in what knowledgeable, friendly “insiders” think about things that include, but also go beyond actual policy proposals such as committee structures, campaigns, races, constituent views, house and senate leadership, interim charges, and the like.

So it’s not just an issue of whether or not we are involved as academics in policy debates, struggles, and initiatives, but rather how we are involved. Can we make a difference? Unequivocally, yes. And we do.

You have had a prominent role in bringing cultural studies into educational research. What are some of the major contributions of cultural studies to the educational change field?

Thank you so much. This is a great question primarily because cultural studies and policy studies are constructed as widely divergent, separate subfields. It almost feels schizophrenic sometimes when one sees and experiences the separation. Cultural studies itself led me to a reconciliation of these two broad areas. Cultural studies led to a reconciliation of these two broad areas.
studies focuses on issues of language, culture, difference, and most especially, power relationships. We use a lot of frameworks that help us to understand power relations and dynamics across varied educational, social, and political contexts at multiple levels (i.e., micro, meso, and macro). For example, Critical Race Theory, feminist studies, and area studies like Mexican-American Studies, Black Studies, and Women and Gender Studies help us to examine structural discrimination and oppression not only in societal institutions like schools, but also in spaces like the Texas State Legislature.

In time, I came to understand all policymaking and policies as eminently cultural—characterized by values, preferences, and priorities that not only map onto minority-majority relations, but also find their way into actual bill proposals and legislation. At the end of every legislative session, we have a statement of values: It’s called the budget. After all, we do budget for those things that we value; however, the "we" to which this budget corresponds is the outcome of power struggles that are themselves inflected by race, class, gender, urbanity, and the like. Hence, a cultural studies lens is very useful not only for ascertaining and thereby exercising agency in these spaces, but it also holds promise as a methodology for illuminating exactly who or which persons and organizations are the gatekeepers of the status quo. Now that’s a powerful methodology.

Construed in this way, cultural studies and policy studies together illuminate the micro-politics that exist on the ground level even as they demonstrate how these are intertwined with macro-level societal arrangements and constellations of power.

The relationship between standardized testing and educational opportunity for Latino/a students has been a major focus of your research, policy, and advocacy work. What do you see as the most pressing challenges and the most hopeful avenues to improve educational opportunity for Latino/a students?

This is a really big picture question and I’m afraid that I don’t have enough space to comment. Suffice it to say that I recently commented in the context of a legislative working group of researchers and advocates that have come together in anticipation of the 2015 Texas State Legislative Session, that we need to be “strategically essentialist” in policymaking. What I meant by that is we need to focus our efforts on a few issues – to the extent practicable – but in a strategic manner. I see from my work in schools, as well as with my local school district how great ideas with respect to curriculum, culturally relevant pedagogy, dual language literacy, technology and the like simply get compromised under the weight of our existing accountability system. It is therefore important for us to strategically organize around the testing system so that we can eliminate a chief barrier to kinds of authentic educational experiences that we want our children to have.

To this end, we need advocacy against this system from every corner and every quarter. The business community, especially our business chambers that often support these tests, need to know just how much this system works against their interests of developing youth with advanced, technical skills, and knowledge, together with our 21st Century need to cultivate students that are not only creative and self-directed, but who also divergent “out-of-the-box” thinkers. Our children need the cultural and linguistic skills and sensitivities to navigate an increasingly complex and global society.

We need to significantly reduce the numbers of standardized tests that students have to take, in general, alongside a moratorium on the uses of these tests in a high–stakes manner. This refers to consequences to children (i.e., to retain in grade, promote, graduate, or not allow to graduate) and schools (i.e., to rate schools as failures or successes and thereby perversely incentivize cheating and gaming).
And we need to replace this system with an authentic assessment system that empowers teachers and principals to refocus on actual learning in their classrooms based on real-world problems that realistically prepare students for productive, civically engaged lives as members of moral communities.

From a policy perspective, an excellent direction for us to go in education is modeled by the New York Performance Standards Consortium which represents 28 schools across New York state—most of them in New York City. I am not at all saying that we should eliminate standardized tests, but rather that they should occupy a limited role in assessing either a child’s learning or the learning that goes on in schools and districts. Accordingly, we need to abide across the board to the principles outlined by the National Center for Fair Open Testing—or FairTest—where I proudly serve as a board member.

Regarding school and district quality, we do not need to test every single student in every class in every school. To know the health of the body, we do not need a blood transfusion: We only need a sample. Our state testing systems could be modeled on the NAEP test, for example, that consists of sample, rather than census, testing. The Intercultural Development Research Center has been making this argument in Texas for some time now. What we have to do now is act. We also need to simply reject the untenable argument that we will test our way to equity. We as a community have to reclaim the democratic purposes of public schooling, beginning with our school boards and state boards of education where we, as a public and community, still have a voice.

For several years, you have combined your academic career with very active policy advocacy work. What inspires you to do that and what have you learned in the process?

I have learned a lot of things, but I think one of the most important is that of perseverance, vision, and hope. Trust me, I do get frustrated and tired of these battles. I long to someday be on the other side of these battles and to take on other issues that I also care deeply about. I have also learned that once you dig in your heels, the need for informed, reputable policy advocates is so great that regardless of what you try to do, these issues will continue to find you. Sometimes it comes as a direct plea for involvement. At other times, it presents itself in a deeply personal manner such as with my children’s own experiences with this massively unfair testing system.

To have been trained in sociology, a field that focuses on societal problems, makes a difference, too. I always say this to my students. Social, political, and economic inequalities are difficult to take on. Nevertheless, by accident of birth perhaps, we are in a privileged space as students, scholars, and researchers situated within universities. It is therefore incumbent upon us to speak truth to power. If all we do is manage to hold up a mirror to society through our research, we will have done a lot. There are no innocents here. Doing so helps make us all responsible for the directions that our policies, practices, and priorities take—or fail to take, as the case may be. In a word, we are privileged to do what we do. Therefore, act, we must.

Finally, as a Mexican-American woman, third-generation Tejana and product of a racially biased and discriminatory educational system in Texas, I guess you could say that every day reminders tend to quicken my spirit to both feel and act on injustice. To not respond, to be indifferent or dispassionate is simply not within my constitution.

US-Mexico relations are an area of interest and expertise for you. What are examples of or what do you envision as productive collaboration for educational improvement between these two countries?
I am glad you asked this question. I actually tried to lead in this area several years back after having returned from Mexico where I lived with my family as a Fulbright scholar. Fortunately, my husband Emilio Zamora, a history professor at the University of Texas at Austin, also secured one and so we were able to go as a family.

I will share with you my attempt to lead in our state toward a fresh kind of bi-nationalism that is actually rooted in a deeper history. It is my strong belief that the peace and prosperity of our nations and our region along the U.S.-Mexico border depend on our ongoing commitment to respect the dignity of humanity, to strive for the education of all of our children, and to build international relationships that facilitate constructive dialogue regarding education, technology, trade, immigration, and so on. All of this is really pie in the sky, however, and my studied opinion is that we actually need to build an infrastructure that fosters these relationships and networks through which constructive policies and practices can develop.

Throughout our history we have unfortunately seen the persistent marginalization of Mexicans, Mexican Americans, and Latinos in the United States. Inequities across class and race within and across both of our nations continue to limit our potential for prosperity. With the current crisis of unaccompanied minors in mind, it is critical more than ever that we extend the relationships across our regions rather than dismiss or sever them as some would have us do.

Since the inception of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), we have entered a global economic phase of rapidly increased interdependence across nations. It is therefore troubling that our countries continue to fail to both connect people across our borders and foster cross-cultural understanding within our own respective communities. We have soaring high school dropout rates in the Latino community of the United States and persistent inequities in Mexico. I see a connection to Mexicans of every stripe related to this shared history of both struggle and oppression even if our communities are frequently estranged from one another based on the wide diversity that exists within.

While NAFTA underscored the important role that trade and commerce play in prosperity and national development, the important mediating role that education, in particular, can play in reversing inequities has been underestimated. Moreover, because of the organic ties that many of us have across borders, we still do have an unprecedented opportunity for international leadership, collaboration, and community development.

Our shared history as nations actually provides direction on how to (re)create this fresh, collaborative spirit for our times. In 1943, as a response to United States federal policy and leadership, the Mexican federal government, wartime labor needs, and social issues, the state of Texas developed the Good Neighbor Commission to address social, cultural, and economic problems of Mexican Americans and to strengthen ties with Mexico and other Latin American nations. It was housed at the Texas State Capitol next to the governor’s office. The commission officially operated for over four decades, but its duties, budget, and support decreased over time, rendering it no longer relevant by 1987. This history nevertheless points to the kind of infrastructure we need to have in place in order to promote bi-nationalism.

After returning from Mexico and in anticipation of the 2009 Texas Legislative Session, I reached out to legislators and university leaders with the specific proposal of re-establishing the Good Neighbor Commission to deepen networks, foster partnerships,
Promote collaboration, and effective communication and policies across borders. My idea was that this Commission could begin with a focus in education and gradually expand to other social, cultural, and economic issues of mutual concern. Furthermore, the Commission could serve as a hub that would actively engage local, state, and national communities on both sides of the border in the development of policies and programs that hold the welfare of our children and families at their core. Unfortunately, this idea fell on deaf ears. One can only imagine that if this Commission would have been realized, our responses to our current humanitarian crisis of thousands of unaccompanied minors along the U.S.-Mexico border might have played out differently. Perhaps this story can still serve as a guidepost for the future. We can only hope.

NOTES
1. http://performanceassessment.org/

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