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?

It all depends on what you mean by ‘justice’. Left undefined, it risks becoming an empty signifier – a progressivist slogan or cliché that is a stand in for a generic commitment to marginalized communities. I can only speak for the Australian context, but in discourse analytic terms when a term such as “justice” begins to turn up everywhere, it risks losing its critical, transgressive and catalytic value. If we are concerned with reforming educational ‘praxis’, then the focus needs to remain on everyday pedagogical strategies for and substantive effects on students’ and communities’ material, intellectual and cultural lives.

Let’s talk schools and classrooms. While there may be a consensus amongst the educational research community that justice matters, when you actually begin to discuss concrete strategy and tactics for reforming school, ‘justice’ and ‘equity’ are used to ground and rationalize a full range of practices, some with dubious consequences for the very communities they’re allegedly serving. In Australia, we’ve even seen the expansion of standardized testing and national (commodified) curriculum justified by successive federal governments under the auspices of justice and equity.

In work we’ve done in Brisbane with Indigenous, migrant and low socioeconomic schools, we and many of our Australian colleagues have used philosopher Nancy Fraser’s later social justice triad of redistributive, recognitive and representative justice. This has enabled us to parse both empirically and interpretively the efforts of schools to, respectively: (1) focus on enhancing students’ and communities’ access to the mainstream cultural capital of conventional educational outcomes, attainments, and resources (redistributive justice); (2) critique, revise and reconstruct curriculum and instruction so that it better recognizes and engages with...
historically marginalized histories, cultures, languages, communities, voices and knowledges (recognitive social justice); and (3) engage communities, extended families, elders and students in school governance, policy and leadership (representative social justice).

These three categories were central to our large scale empirical work on Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school reform. They also have been of real value in ongoing discussions with First Nations educators in Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia.

You recently led and co-authored the most extensive empirical study to date on indigenous school reform to date in Australia. What are main accomplishments and key remaining challenges of policies aimed at improving educational opportunities for indigenous students in Australia?

In 2009 I was approached to convene a team to undertake a 4 year empirical study of Dr. Chris Sarra’s efforts to implement a “Stronger Smarter” approach to school reform, which focused on changing school leadership to recognize cultural strengths and foster high expectations in place of prevailing deficit approaches to Aboriginal and Islander students, communities and cultures. The resultant project opened up the largest empirical and interpretive, quantitative and qualitative study of Indigenous school reform to date. We had extensive teacher and principal survey and interview data, comprehensive test scores, attendance and achievement data, rigorous Indigenous community interview data for 201 schools – rural and urban.

The team was multidisciplinary, featuring non-Indigenous and Indigenous, Australian and international researchers and it attempted to follow both conventional educational research ethics and rigorous established protocols of community consultation and participation. It was a tough run – both politically and culturally fraught and tense, and the research team both embodied and worked through, often with great difficulty, the tensions, responsibilities and problems of such a complex, politically important and difficult project. There’s no reason to dissimulate about this: multi-racial, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, gendered and intergenerational relations of power are at work in any of these projects – and issues of trust, epistemic stance, intellectual property, and intercultural relations were at play in every stage from design, to fieldwork, to write up and reporting. This was by definition a difficult project.

Many of our findings were straight forward:

On the Deficit Model: Indigenous Elders, educators and students were of the view that the ‘deficit’ model that blamed educational problems on cultures, communities, families and kids was the default for schools, principals and teachers. Our teacher survey data corroborated this.

On Teacher Education: Less than a third of the teaching workforce had any specialized pre- or in-service training on the teaching of Indigenous students or on Indigenous communities and cultures.

On Cultural Exchange and Engagement: The teaching and school leadership workforce was 96% non-Indigenous Australians. Most teachers had very little everyday contact, informal or otherwise, with Indigenous families and communities outside of the school and working hours. Around half of the educators had not had a face-to-face conversation with an Indigenous person outside of school in the previous 6 months.

On Pedagogy: The reported and observed default models of pedagogy were an emphasis on basic skills instruction and vocational education. When schools hit a threshold of around 12-15% Indigenous enrolments, these default models tended to lock into place. There was very little evidence of curriculum innovation.
With regards to achievement and attendance outcomes, we found no systematic pattern of ‘closing the gap’ in the 201 schools surveyed. Pushed for increased accountability and test scores, principals were engaged in fairly arbitrary choices of curriculum and in-service packages, which resulted in idiosyncratic performance spikes with no consistent pattern. The general national policy imperative to ‘close the gap’ on Indigenous test performance was yielding incoherent and inconsistent curriculum reforms.

Let me return to the question of social justice. From our path analysis of teachers’ accounts of school reform, we learned that schools tended to be pursuing one of the ‘pathways’ to social justice I noted above. Many focused on improved teaching/learning strategies and relations (redistributive justice), others on engagement with and the embedding and integration of Indigenous knowledge, culture, history in the curriculum (recognitive justice); and yet others had focused on Indigenous community leadership and school governance (representative justice). But these were mostly reported as mutually exclusive pathways. Of all the schools we studied, only 4 showed coherent gains in achievement across the board. Here’s the central finding: each of these had a strong emphasis on improved quality of face-to-face teaching with an engagement with Indigenous knowledge, culture and history with a systematic focus on Indigenous leadership and governance. In the context of Aboriginal school reform, schools have to systematically work at all three modes of social justice: redistributive, recognitive and representative. ¹

A lot of your work incorporates Pierre Bourdieu’s interest in the dynamics of power in society. What are, in your view, some of the major contributions of Bourdieu’s ideas to the educational change field?

Often our engagements with theory don’t come from the tedious work of pouring over complex texts late at night, but instead emerge as epistemic moments, where we actually can see theory-in-action as a means to explain everyday events we see in classrooms and our own lives. Hence, I’ll spare readers another long exposition of Bourdieu and instead describe where and how Bourdieu’s work changed how I view the world.

My first really serious use of Bourdieu was in trying to account for the relationships of ‘literacy’ and ‘power’. In the 1980s, there were several common claims made: that literacy, variously defined as basic mastery of print, explicit knowledge of genre, access to ‘secret English’, as critical political ‘reading of the world’ was ‘empowering’. At the same time, I was reconnoitering why many of my Father’s generation of Asian-Americans and many other minorities had become highly literate – but because of the structural barriers of racism, sexism and social class discrimination were never able to translate their literacy into material, social and economic goods. Bourdieu’s explanation that people deployed their cultural, economic, and social capitals for exchange value in specific social fields of institutions, communities, cultures, offered a new explanation about literacy and power: that you become ‘literate’ but whether it matters or counts depends on the other resources at your disposal, and the rules of recognition and exchange in the specific field in question. My Father was highly literate, critically literate, a Chinese-American man with a 1930s Bachelor Degree in Journalism from the University of Washington. But he was unable to use and ‘convert’ this cultural capital into economic or social capital for decades because of racist barriers to employment and access in the White institutions of the day. Whether and how literacy might lead to ‘power’, then, depends on the stated and unstated, just and unjust rules of the social fields where it’s put to work.

My second ‘epistemological moment’ from Bourdieu’s work occurred when I was observing an early childhood reading lesson in Canberra in the late 1980s. The audiotape was running and I
was attending to the teacher/student turn-taking and classroom questioning strategies in a “shared-book experience” where the teacher was leading a group of 15 8-year olds in a choral reading of an enlarged print book. When I looked at the transcript later, I realized that a significant proportion of the teachers’ talk, gesture and ‘gaze’ was devoted to monitoring, moving and controlling the children’s bodily movements: “eyes over here”, “sit up straight”, “follow my hand”, “turn in this direction”. Following his teacher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu adopted the term “habitus” to describe the durable physical/cultural/moral disposition that we acquire in families, communities and institutions like schools, churches, mosques. Following this argument, I made the case that literacy teaching and learning was an “embodied” practice: that teachers are, literally, training kids to act, look and embody Western print literacy practices and conventions. Literacy is not just in your head, it’s in your body.

The third powerful use of Bourdieu emerged from classroom observation I was doing in Singapore about a decade ago (Luke, 1997). I was coding a lesson in one of Singapore’s low socioeconomic schools, where a group of Malay Muslim students were succeeding in disrupting and resisting all of the teachers’ best efforts. I had been working with my colleague Dr. Mukhlis, who was exploring the home/school cultural transitions for the Malay community, an ethnic minority in a Han Chinese dominated society. He and others had observed that the Quranic literacy intergenerationally taught in the Mosque and practiced at home was not ‘resisted’ like school literacy. My earlier work in Canada and Australia had focused on the “commodification” of literacy into measurable, packaged curriculum skill and sequence. Rereading Bourdieu’s work on exchange in nomadic North African Kabyle life, I began to contrast two basic economic/cultural modes of exchange: the ‘gift’ versus the ‘commodity’. My conclusion was that the same cultural minorities who engaged with and reciprocated the intergenerational ‘gifts’ of traditional knowledge from their Elders, were actually refusing the ‘commodity-form’ of conventional, measurable school knowledge. I believe this is still the case amongst many linguistic and cultural minority groups.

Bourdieu’s notions of capital and field have influenced my understandings of Indigenous school reform in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia – particularly after I had spent several years working as a senior policy bureaucrat and advisor for the Queensland government. Discussing the work of Aboriginal lawyer and activist Noel Pearson, I applied Bourdieu’s notions of capital, exchange and field to explain why and how government policy interventions consistently failed in rural and remote Indigenous communities. Simply put, governments provided unwieldy, dysfunctional and uncoordinated combinations of ‘capital’ to communities, who then were unable to ‘convert’ these into substantive development and progress. Certainly, a new educational policy in early literacy (e.g., Reading Recovery, direct instruction in phonics) might bring test scores up for a given cohort of Indigenous kids, but if health care was inadequate, jobs and vocational pathways non-existent, or community policing and governance struggling, it wasn’t going to ‘empower’ anybody in the long run. Following Bourdieu, government policies often provided dysfunctional combinations of resources and capital, often in accord with electoral/policy cycles.

So for me – Bourdieu’s models of habitus, capital and field offer powerful and practical explanatory templates for accounting for the mechanisms of injustice. They give us one template for looking at how and why particular
practical interventions in schools might make a difference, for whom, how, in what ways, and in what combinations and synergies with other cultural and policy actions.

You were part of the New London Group that proposed a multiliteracies approach as an alternative to traditional language-based literacy practices. What are multiliteracies and what is the current status of the work initiated by the New London Group?

The New London “pedagogy of multiliteracies” – driven by our Australian colleagues Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis – was a very deliberately crafted educational and political intervention. Working in the field of literacy education, our belief then was that the historical shift from print to digital culture had created a moment ripe for an educational and cultural paradigm shift: from traditional print literacy to multiliteracies across a range of media and systems of representation. It was also very much a utopian project: stemming from the belief that this technological shift in dominant communications media and modes of information might set the grounds for a redistribution of knowledge and power. Our aim was not just that schooling should engage with new technologies, new modes of creativity and social relations. It was also to explore how educators and schools could leverage this shift in communications media and power relations to break up the fault lines of social class, culture and language that had defined and were defined by the distribution of print literacy.

Of course, there were some notable limits and points of contention in the New London work – unsurprising given the diverse backgrounds, histories and resources we all brought to the table. In my view, the initial model of multiliteracies relied too greatly on functional linguistic models of text which couldn’t adequately account for emergent digital and multimodal representations. But more importantly, many scholars and teachers have focused subsequently on models of text and design rather than on the “pedagogy of multiliteracies” model presented. We argued that engagement with texts, discourses and media required a multi-faceted and varied pedagogy that necessarily included but was not limited to: explicit instruction in how texts worked, immersion in everyday texts and practices, critical analysis and deconstruction, and creative design and redesign. This idea that quality teaching – pedagogy – entails a weaving together of different pedagogical approaches; that skilled teaching is about a repertoire of approaches and methods, rather than mastery of a single method is crucial and remains central to the questions about teacher skilling, quality pedagogy and school reform. It was the informing principle of our collective reform efforts in Queensland, Singapore, New South Wales and Ontario.

After two decades some of the messages of New London have taken root in schooling in Australia, the UK, Canada, South Africa, the US, and, increasingly, in Singapore and other East Asian systems. There is some very innovative and critical research and development in curriculum design in “multiliteracies”, which now features in many state curriculum documents. Some of this work focuses on students’ and teachers’ work with new digital media and creative arts, as well as visual images of all kinds. There are many exemplary programs and interventions engaging youth and children from urban, minority and working class communities in “design” work and “digital arts” occurring internationally. So some of the promise of New London has been fulfilled. This has been fuelled by the engagement of educational researchers with models from cultural studies, applied linguistics, sociocultural psychology and other resources.

As with all paradigm shifts, intellectual fields eventually catch up, supersede the work
and create new anomalies and problems. The shift by schools from an exclusive focus on print to an engagement with digital cultures – however belated, begrudging and reactionary – has not served to break up or alter unequal patterns of achievement to any major extent. And unsurprisingly, the technological, cultural and social issues raised by digital culture have superseded the New London work. The advent of video gaming, ubiquitous social media, the “internet of things”, unprecedented issues of surveillance, privacy, public access, intellectual property rights, freedom of expression are all part of 24/7, wall-to-wall, sleeping and waking digital cultures. At the same time, questions of transnational corporate and state control, power, and ownership and persistent questions of inequitable (and, indeed, compulsive) access remain. Not surprisingly, schools, teachers, state systems, curriculum developers, and indeed, many teacher educators and researchers are caught in the headlights of technological and cultural phenomena that are way beyond anything we could have imagined in New London, Connecticut in 1995. Not surprisingly, there are no current curriculum models that actually take on the normative issues of what kids should be taught about this new information order. As Neil Postman explained, we’ve had 24 centuries to develop criteria and protocols for the evaluation and exchange of print texts. In the last two decades, we have developed and implemented practical curriculum models of “critical literacy” for print and broadcast media – but how and to what extent we teach these in relation to this digital universe needs further exploration.

I’m currently working with colleagues at the University of Calgary to convene a forum on education in this new information order – after Wikileaks, after Edward Snowden, after Charlie Hebdo, after Hacktivism, after Apple and Google’s unprecedented levels of profit and control. My concern is with questions of communicative ethics – about how students and teachers can engage with questions of ethics, value, truth and action in the new information order.

What do you see as the most promising developments and key unaddressed issues of theory and research on literacy education in relation to educational change?

I’ve been fortunate enough to be involved in actual school reform on the ground in Australia, Singapore and Canada for several decades – from classroom based in-service interventions, to policy formation and implementation, and large scale empirical research. I actually think we have all the research and development, policy and practice tools in hand to improve social justice for marginalized and excluded students and communities. We have exemplars of individual schools, school districts, and larger state and provincial systems that have demonstrated significant improvement in democratic education and inclusive achievement. The general principles are well established: compelling emphases on teacher knowledge, pedagogical expertise, repertoire and professionalism, instructionally and community-focused leadership, school, classroom and community-based accountability without the distorting overreliance on simple test-based metrics, engagement with community cultures and diversity, and the encouragement of school-level curriculum innovation and reform.

In terms of literacy education, we have pluralistic models like the ‘four resources’ model stand against the perennial quest for single, magic-bullet methods and curriculum packages. At the same time, many teachers are engaging with new digital and community cultures, new student identities and social relations – with all of the uncertainty that always accompanies intergenerational and intercultural exchange.

School reform is, by definition, never done,
never completed, never entirely successful. The complex ecologies of schools mean that staff change, leadership shifts, community demographics and economics change, student cohorts shift – and, of course, the sustained political will for change and reform ebbs and flows with economic crises, electoral cycles and policy shifts. This means that, just when we think we’ve got some runs on the board and there are tangible student and community benefits – the game changes and starts over again. All the more reason to keep at it.  

NOTES
1. The report can be downloaded at: http://eprints.qut.edu.au/59535/

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