AERA is celebrating 100 years of educational scholarship in 2016 with the theme Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies. How does your scholarship contribute to public understanding of professional practice to improve education, and to related political debates in the context of increasingly diverse democracies?

The recent emphasis on evidence-based research demands a closer investigation in the meaning of “evidence.” Researchers see evidence as empirical work (qualitative or quantitative), whereas teachers see evidence as their past practice. The focus needs to be on how we privilege the many forms of evidence to assist educators in their moment-by-moment decision-making, their planning, and their reviewing of their impact. It is the interpretations of the evidence that we make that matters, whereas we have been overly concerned with the evidence per se.

My reading of the research indicates that we can claim there is a “practice of teaching,” we do know much about what works best, and the critical attribute is the expertise of the teachers and school leaders to make improvements based on evidence of their impact. So, why do we focus so much on the structures, on the sometimes small differences in context, when our role is to assist those who are making the moment-by-moment education decisions make better interpretations of the learner, of the context, of the nature of the learning? Hence, I am trying to convince politicians to value expertise and see quality education as a function of whether students gain at least a year’s growth for a year’s input (provided we—teachers, school leaders, students etc.—have worthwhile and shared concepts of what this “gain” means).

I see my role as a measurement specialist is to develop more effective reports from assessments in order to provide teachers with feedback as to the nature and magnitude of their impact and to assist in guiding them “where to next.” One way of doing this is through the e-asTTle, which is a NZ online assessment tool.
developed to assess students’ achievement and progress in reading, mathematics, writing, and in pānui, pāngarau, and tuhituhi. This reporting engine has provided the “where to go next” information for NZ schools for 15 years. This NZ system is voluntary and most teachers are still using the reporting engine 15 years later—there is a hunger for feedback about impact. Moreover, my work on Visible Learning shows that while we are surrounded by so many successful teachers and schools, we do not have the courage to recognize this, preferring, instead, to look elsewhere for success. A profession that does not esteem its own expertise is at risk; hence my political aim is to reverse this and privilege expertise.

You are well known internationally for your work on visible learning (VL) and visible teaching. What do you see to be the major contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

VL is based on information garnered from about 250 million students and this evidence supports the prevalence of excellence in our profession. Such an approach recognizes that many educators are already doing an excellent job, so there is no need to start by beating up the schools, claiming there is failure, looking elsewhere for the silver bullet, and asking for change—why change success! I think this is one reason VL has flourished as it is based on a success-model.

I also emphasize, “know thy impact” as the message is NOT to tick off the top ten in VL. The major message is to help educators see their own impact (i.e., most students gain at least a year’s growth for a years’ input) and if desirable then there is ‘permission’ to continue; but if not, there is an imperative to change. Yes, there are high probability interventions, but it is the evidence of the particular intervention with the particular students in the particular context that matters. Of course, this begs the questions: what do we collectively understand in this school when we talk about impact, what is the desired magnitude of this impact, and do all students gain this desired level of impact? The message of VL is more about a way of thinking (the mind frames) than about particular interventions.

I have now seen this way of thinking introduced into so many schools. We have worked out efficient ways to implement the model and it is based on a virtuous cycle—identify success, form a coalition of this success, base success on the nature of the impact on students of what we do (not how we teach), and then invite the others to join. It demands collaborative action and discussion, it demands evidence through the eyes of the students, and it demands consideration of the desired progression in worthwhile curricula. The very evidence that informs this cycle is also that which we wish to maximize so there is a dual purpose in asking about Impact.

VL was based on achievement (in many domains) and we are completing a similar synthesis, with “how we learn” as the focus. There is a German team working on motivation and emotional outcomes. David Mitchell has completed a similar analysis of VL focused on special-needs students, and there are other exciting meta-syntheses being conducted. The most exciting is the emerging area of syntheses of qualitative studies, and this will add an important perspective to the way we are interpreting our research.

Your new book Visible Learning into Action has recently been published. What messages or implications does this book have for educational leaders and teachers seeking to support educational change for improvement?

This book outlines 15 case studies of schools

http://www.aera.net/SIG155/NewsAnnouncements/tabid/12194/Default.aspx
implementing the messages from the VL. The major message is that there is no one way, no recipe or cookbook, and no set of routines. Instead, it is the collective debates about what is meant by impact, what do we mean by challenge in this school, and a relentless focus on how educators think about progress. The progress of a student should not be a function of a particular teacher’s expectations if these expectations turn out to be low. The book shows how schools built high levels of trust so that these debates could be held, how they worked together to challenge the ways teachers think about their role, their curricula, and their students, and how to move from seeing their classes through their own eyes to seeing it through the eyes of the students. Hence, there is a focus on student voice, seeing test information as feedback to the teachers, going into each other’s classrooms to observe the impact on the students (not watching the teacher), and bringing samples of students work over time to discuss the nature and meaning of impact.

From a systems perspective we aim to show how critical it is for school leaders to see themselves as instructional impact coaches, how the system should provide resources to schools to assist in them debating their impact, how there is a major cost in finding the collaborative time to undertake these debates, and making sure all this is undertaken in high trust environments.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

There are fewer careers, fewer ladders, and fewer long-term opportunities. My concern is that teaching will become a part-time job and cease to be viewed as a profession; that we will continue to evolve and defend our current methods and not adapt to new exciting ways of teaching; and that we will defend our dominant “tell and practice” model of teaching and not see how we can teach our students to become their own teachers. We demand so much more of students not only in terms of what they know and how much they know, but also how they evaluate their knowing, and how they relate and extend their knowing. We demand more and more proficiency in their transferring their knowing to new situations. We now demand schools not only teach the content curricula, but also develop the person (self-respect and respect for others), but we still need to privilege a broader notion of excellence. In Australia one in four who start high school do not finish. I have been convinced by Henry Levin’s evidence that the best predictor of adult health, wealth, and happiness is not achievement but the number of years of schooling. How to make schools more inviting places to come and learn—if you are interested in chemistry, sports coaching, being a barista, or air pilot. We still have a narrow conception of excellence.

What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about educational change field today?

The most important issue is scalability. There is a rich source of educational research, there are so many excellent educators in our schools and universities, and there is so much we know about what this success looks like. The missing ingredient is how to scale this success. The issue of scale is rarely discussed and needs to become the most important debate in our discipline. My mission is to change the common belief that the essence of our professionalism is our right to teach as we wish to the belief that the essence is our right to collaborate with others to see our impact through the eyes of the students. Too
often we believe that the multi-million students in our schools are all different and thus fail to see our success has been a function of how we see similarities and allow for differences. Can we see similarities in great teaching and scale this so more students can benefit? I do believe there is a “practice of teaching” that is scalable and this may mean we think differently about our roles and thus enable educators to do what they do best—make the moment-by-moment judgments that make the difference to the learning lives of students.

John Hattie is Professor and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, Australia and chair of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. He is the author of Visible Learning, Visible Learning for Teachers, Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn, and Visible Learning into Action. He is also co-editor of the International Guide to Student Achievement.

John Hattie’s influential 2008 book Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement is believed to be the world’s largest evidence-based study into the factors which improve student learning. Involving more than 80 million students from around the world and bringing together 50,000 smaller studies, the study found positive teacher-student interaction is the most important factor in effective teaching.

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