LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

Q&A with Karen Seashore Louis

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?

I am an accidental contributor to the scholarship of practice, but a now committed one. I began my career (in the Pleistocene Era) as an organizational theorist and I am still also a member of the OT SIG as well as the Change SIG. As an OT theorist, I expected to conduct studies that would illuminate the persistent dilemmas of structure and culture in organizations of all types. My first large research project post-Ph.D. was in health care, not education.

My first forays into OT consistently revealed that the core problem in any setting that I was studying was innovation and change, and I quickly decided that I preferred studying teachers and principals than physicians. The shift toward an interest in professional practice in education came in 1978 when I had the opportunity to collaborate on a large study of a federal initiative to stimulate comprehensive change in rural school systems. The project ended up focusing on the same issues of structure and culture, but it also shifted my attention to practical problems that have concerned every thoughtful educator I have worked with. These included (1) the importance of understanding the local context—one size does not conveniently fit all; (2) the nature of change processes, including planning, early implementation, and adaptation; (3) the central role of local leaders; and (4) the problematic nature of evaluating change.

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Educational Change SIG adopts an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding many aspects of educational change, including large-scale reform, school-initiated change, school improvement, and classroom-level change.

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

Series Editor
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of nurturing participation while maintaining momentum (Rosenblum, S. & Louis, K.S. 1981, *Stability and Change*. New York: Plenum). We have learned a lot in the intervening 30 years, but my commitment to helping school leaders at all levels think about the problems that we encountered in the first days of implementation research has been consistent. I wrote a short practice-focused book with Sharon Kruse in 2009 (*Building Strong School Cultures*; Corwin Press), and each of these themes was still front and center.

But it is also critical to consider what has altered in the educational change field as well as what has not. When Matt Miles and I wrote (1991) *Improving the Urban High School* (TC Press) we focused on urban schools that were early implementers of effective schools research-based programs. Although most of the sites we studied served primarily students of color from low income families, there is barely any attention at all in the book to race/ethnicity as a factor affecting either leadership for change or school success. We, like most at the time, simply accepted that schools were “White Spaces” even when they had many black and brown members. Neither did we pay much attention to the demographics of the communities in which our case study schools were located, although in some governance and power were firmly in traditional hands while in others the question of “who owns the schools” was in greater contention. In retrospect, we were wearing blinders left over from the afterglow of a successful civil rights/desegregation movement.

In contrast, as colleagues and I recently completed longitudinal case studies of five urban schools, the issue of race, immigration, and the composition of the teaching faculty were overwhelming and embedded in the daily consciousness of every administrator, teacher and student. The demographics of schools is no longer just a “control variable” in a regression equation or something to mention when you describe a case study sample: it is a fundamental feature at the center of each school’s struggle to serve students better. The technical answers to the issues that I encountered in the 1970s are less central today; educators are asking for research-based models to figure out how to meet new demands to develop the social capital of their schools and their communities and to figure out how to enact social justice in an unjust world that points to a single indicator of excellence. This is not true just in urban schools because demographic changes and increasing diversity are a fact in most of the suburban and rural districts that I know. Understanding the effects of these changes on communities and their schools must be central to our work if we are remain relevant to practice.

It is relationships within schools and between schools and their communities that promote or hinder improvement and this fact informs our focus on structures (which are more than organization charts) and culture (which is more than norms and artifacts). Building authentic relationships, whether among staff or between educators and students requires that we talk seriously about race. Ethnicity and race infuse these relationships with emotional and largely unexpressed content that must be understood to create a nurturing environment for developing the potential for all students. Recent research (with
Emily Lilja Palmer) on the role of fear in collaborative school equity work is particularly instructive, while the research that I am doing now on caring as a feature of school cultures and leadership practices also seems promising (publications shortly forthcoming). My colleagues, Joe Murphy and Mark Smylie, and I have not yet focused on caring as part of the change process, but, there will be a book for practitioners. All of this builds, of course, on Andy Hargreaves seminal consideration of the role of emotions in teaching. Stay tuned.

My interest will, of course, continue to be on urban secondary schools because that is where my heart calls. However, I am coming to the conclusion that we need to turn our research focus and the attention of school leaders not only to their roles and responsibilities for engaging the emotions of those who are part of the school community, but how the greater community can be mobilized to participate in caring relationships as well, particularly for adolescents. The schools I am working with are at the limit of their capacity to change the life trajectory of youth on their own. More money won’t solve the issues that they face – we need broader achievement zones that focus on older children as well as preschool/early elementary years.

You are well known internationally for your work on school improvement and school reform. What are your key messages to the field of educational change?

Hmmm….summarizing all of my work in 500 words – I feel genuinely ill-equipped to be either that profound or that clear.

The closest I have come to a synthesis that might be worth sharing was in a chapter of a 2006 book, Organizing for School Change (Routledge), which depicts visually the elements of a “High Performing Learning Community” that need to be considered.

The most important point is that students are at the center – whatever is done in a school must first be measured against the criteria of how it will affect students. What I didn’t say in 2006 but would add now, is how the elements in this figure would affect the equitable distribution of scarce resources (mostly adult time) to the students who most need it. This is, of course, the primary lesson of RTI: the importance of understanding each student’s vulnerabilities and addressing them early, before they become problems.
for them and the school. This is easy to say, but difficult to do because we are so used the voice in the back of our heads asking “what will the parents of the AP students think if Mrs. A teaches 9th grade general science instead of 12th grade physics?” A second point is that the two outer circles in the figure cannot be ignored. For example, instruction is important – but it is not, in spite of a decade of emphasis on the technical aspects of “closing the gap” through better curriculum and teaching – sufficient. Much of this picture reflects aspects of the school’s work that don’t have immediate and direct impacts on kids, but which have important indirect effects – and are, therefore, part of any good school’s work. Adult relationships, including between the formal leader and teachers, and how teachers work with each other, can make a huge difference. And although much of my work has emphasized the importance of relationships, structures are still important. A new principal in a high school that I followed about ten years ago ended the previous principal’s practice of herding students on the early bus into the auditorium (where very few productive interactions occurred) and instead got teachers to agree to open their classrooms. In a virtually all minority school, the small symbolism of assuming that teachers and students could use the extra half hour productively and together was affirming in a way that astonished teachers as much as the students. So, we can’t ignore structure. But the outer circle – the community, the district, other agencies – are increasingly important, not just as “boosters” but as partners. The clever school leaders that my colleagues and I have been shadowing for the last five years would turn over any stone that might hide additional stimulation for teachers, resources for students, or productive ways of engaging parents and communities. Most of these extra resources, whether time or money, come from people and organizations outside the school.

Districts are increasingly a focus of important research after years during which they were ignored – I am also a member of the District SIG. The research that my colleagues and I carried out in the “Leadership for Learning” study (including Steve Anderson, Molly Gordon, and Emanda Thomas) suggest that many--perhaps most--districts still lack the capacity to carry out autonomous and effective change programs on their own. Between Superintendent turnover, budget cuts, increasing responsibility for costly testing, and the cornucopia of new expectations associated with state and federal programs, they are stretched beyond what can be reasonably expected. However, it is important to emphasize that even when they are small and/or out of breath they can still choose to support or get in the way of talented school-level professionals.

Again – what is lacking in the original exposition of the figure is a focus on the student experience. Too much of our research on change assumes that students are passing through and don’t bear the responsibility for or the weight of the change process. I think that Jeff Andrade-Duncan’s work (among others, including Joe Murphy’s newest book) suggests that this is nonsense. Students are ignored because we treat them as the passive recipients of change rather than agents of change. A 5th grade teacher in an Illinois school district told her students to design
a better classroom – and uses crowd sourcing to help fund the work:
“Our driving question is: If you could design your own learning environment, what would it look like? Our teacher is going to let us design our own classroom! How awesome is that?!” (https://www.gofundme.com/pbl5thgrade). Why not conduct more research on students and design thinking around educational reform?

Your work is informed by organizational theory as a way to understand effective school improvement and reform. What do you think policymakers and educational leaders should be paying particular attention too in their attempts to scale-up effective reform?

When I start down the OT path that I described in my response to the first question, the focus of research in general organizational studies and in human services was on structure. The questions were important, and largely derived from the elaborations of Max Weber’s theory of bureaucracy, including the emerging critical theory (such as that of Dahrendorf) that provided strong counter narratives emphasizing conflict and its implications for alienation. The development of “new institutionalism” perspectives in the educational literature drew attention to structure again, but focusing on the memetic nature of organizational groups (why do all schools look pretty much the same?) while the emergence of a post-modernist critical perspective that focused less on structure and more on lived experience points to the importance of “bringing people back in” to OT. All of these threads are alive and well in research on organizational change today, and each brings strengths to policy analysis and to “street level bureaucrats” in districts and schools. While these four perspectives obviously oversimplify OT today, they provide a simple framework for thinking about what we need to say to those who are making decisions as they try to negotiate the change process.

Schools—even charter schools— are bureaucracies, and to pretend otherwise ignores embedded assumptions of hierarchy, specialization, “rights of membership” and other features that we cannot easily get rid of. Our ideological battles have prevented us from understanding evolving organizational phenomena: We know too little about the organizational features of charter schools/ chains that might make them more or less successful, particularly with less advantaged students, because we have been caught up in question of whether they are “threats to public schools.” If a school is operating and serving vulnerable children, we need to understand its strengths and weaknesses in order to help individual organizations (and therefore systems) improve. Schools, considering the critical perspective, are places where structures and culture can impede good work, and can also (usually inadvertently) damage. Only if we genuinely understand them as organizations can we contribute to the policy debates in an authentic way.

We also need to continue to understand how schools change for the worse. Andy Hargreaves and his colleagues emphasized that process in their “Change over Time” study, but the public’s emphasis turned quickly toward “turnaround” and the positive story rather than thinking about decline. Focusing on the unanticipated negative effects of well-intentioned changes is a constant requirement for policy makers (through
honest evaluations and analysis) and school leaders at all levels. A recent example in an urban district was the decision to move to full inclusion of all special education students. The implementation went rather well in most elementary schools, where most were already on the path to full or almost full inclusion. In high schools, however, it meant that adolescent EBD students were suddenly in classrooms where teacher and other students had no preparation for how to address their needs. Needless to say, the well-intentioned decision had serious negative consequences— including for the now unmoored adolescent EBD students who went from classes of five or six to “regular” classrooms of 25-30.

The institutional perspective is a reminder for policy makers and practitioners that changing schools requires changing the environment outside schools at the same time. Research-based decisions that follow an organizational logic have, in my experience, resulted in more than one excellent Superintendent losing their position because the political consultative process was deemed too onerous or was managed in a way that felt inauthentic. Finally, if you don’t know what is in the heart and minds of the people in your schools, you cannot create change. The original “Change Game” (now available in an on-line form) begins with the simple presumption that change leaders need first to spend an enormous time talking to people before they do anything. Assuming that one’s own way of thinking is paralleled in a colleague’s is still a most common mistake – and one that is encouraged by a lot of business OT theorists who would like “leaders” to start with a vision and then recruit the talent to support it rather than assuming that the talent may shape the vision. We need to revisit race in ways that get beyond Peggy McIntosh (which our freshman students have read several times in high school….).

The best leaders are still those who mold and remold changes to blend with local agendas and specific needs. We have known this for a long time, but it is still important to draw attention to both “what works” but also what clearly does not. We have come a long way since the critical insight that “mutual adaptation” usually outlasts “implementation” but we have not convinced policy makers and leaders to abandon a top-down bureaucratic mindset.

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?

I am not the right person to answer this question. We need to ask young people. One of my recent Ph.D. students, Abby Felber-Smith, gave 10 year old students iPads and asked them to take pictures of places they learned outside of school, which were then shared with teachers and students in their classes. It would be hard to ask these students abstract questions about what they need, but they can give us the data (and explain) what it is that helps them to learn and thrive. The project-based learning assignment in a 5th grade classroom that I referred to above is another example of how students will be able to tell us what needs to change.

But I do know, based on the work that I have been doing with Mark Smylie and
Joe Murphy (as well as the corpus of research on student engagement/affiliation/membership) that we need to spend more time assessing how well we are doing in making students feel that both adults and other students care about them. Caring is important not just for students whose lives outside of school may be objectively more challenging – it is also part of giving all students and their teachers the experience of being in an environment that is focused on nurturing talent. Pasi Sahlberg once said at a conference that if Finland is to take the next step in excellence, they should have the goal of having all students graduate being expert in something they had chosen and felt passionate about.

As part of my OT research, I have sat through many hours of classroom observations. In my experience, most elementary classrooms are lively and interesting places, but the older the student, the less challenging and more alienating the instruction and the material being studied. If we ask them, they will tell us.

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

Every good study reveals new challenges and elaborates what we know. Recently I wrote a short piece for the brand new *Journal of Organizational Theory in Education* (2015; www.organizationaltheoryineducation.com) where I argued that focusing on organizational learning was a promising focus for increasing research-practice connections for a variety of reasons, including the capacity of OL approaches to accommodate alternative theoretical perspectives (Weberian, critical, institutional and post-structural/interpretive).

An OL approach is useful to schools: teachers and administrators know that if they are to improve they have to grapple with new ideas as well as reflecting on what they already know and do. It can also incorporate rather technical approaches (data-based decision making) as well as more interpretive perspectives (sensemaking), each of which has resonance in schools that I work with. Because it is a big (if ill-defined) tent, it encompasses the idea that knowledge can come in the form of research or “big ideas” that may not have a less firm research base but are worth considering anyway. Knowledge that is generated within the school through more formal inquiry and less formal reflection is also important, as well as external information that creates dissonance (such as new research-based mandates or the results of an equity audit). The OL lens acknowledges the limited capacity of most schools to design their own change programs, but also assumes the agency that ensures the potential for a fit between any proposed change and locally energizing issues. Knowledge use for school change is, at its core, a collective phenomenon. The latter point reinforces the assumption that improving schools must be both an organizational and an individual phenomenon.

That said, it is up to the new scholars who are earlier in their careers or now entering the field to find the best spaces for development. My doctoral students are always challenging me with important new perspectives, even when they cite old
sources. Some novel theoretical perspectives will pay off and create major shifts in the focus of scholars and practitioners; others will have temporary resonance and become quickly dated. But, if an OL lens is a particularly useful one for the next few years, it is our reflection on the churn of ideas that will help us to look again at old problems, new solutions, and emergent dynamics that we cannot predict. If the preceding era of accountability has had one particularly negative effect on the scholarship and practice of change, it is that we have been asked to produce certainty and reliability where is should not be expected. Albert Einstein is asserted to have said “As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.” The same certainly applied to us.

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