AERA is celebrating 100 years of educational leadership in 2016 with the theme Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies. In this context, you have won the AERA Educational Change SIG Emerging Scholar Award. What does winning this award mean to you and how does your scholarship contribute to public understanding of professional practice and political debates in the context of increasingly diverse democracies?

Receiving the Educational Change SIG Award is an incredible honor, for which I attribute 10% to personal effort and merit, and 90% to my immediate network of support and the presence of amazing mentors on whose shoulders I’ve had the privilege to stand—many of them authors featured in this Lead the Change Series.

At the center of my work is the question of how and under what conditions effective pedagogy can spread at scale. By ‘effective pedagogy’ I mean instructional practices and the underlying beliefs that produce greater and deeper student learning. By ‘scale’ I mean not only large numbers of schools, but the more complex set of four inter-related dimensions proposed by Cynthia Coburn: depth, spread, sustainability, and shift in ownership. In my view, the key contribution of my work to current debates on education and democracy lies on reframing the problem of transforming pedagogy at scale as a problem of building social movements aimed at radically shifting the institutional culture and power relations of schooling.

We are at a point in history where effective pedagogy and the systems to spread them at scale are, or have to be, countercultural—that is, qualitatively distinct from the institutional culture and power relations of schooling. The instructional core and education policy are embedded in, and continuously shape, relations of power. In their default mode, instructional practice and policy operate under a logic of vertical authority: the teacher over the student, policy over practice. Effective pedagogies and the few systems that have successfully spread them at scale operate under a logic of horizontal dialogue and mutual influence: students and teachers learning alongside each other, central offices and schools.
shaping and reshaping each other’s practices. Because it involves radically reshaping relations of power, developing effective pedagogies and the systems that spread and sustain them over time, is not only a technical, but also a political project.

We can think of the instructional core as the basic unit of, or a small-scale model, of the relationship between the citizen and the State. As it stands right now in most classrooms around the world, conventional instructional practice perpetuates hierarchical relationships of authority and nurtures obedience and compliance, at the expense of deep learning—arguably the fundamental purpose of schools and educational systems. Broadly speaking, our younger generations, in the most “successful” cases, are learning to be taught—and, as Alan November has poignantly argued, learning to be taught is fundamentally different from learning to learn. Obedience and compliance are counter to learning and, more broadly, to robust democracy. The principles of learning and dialogue that underlie effective pedagogies and the systems that successfully spread them at scale are not only key to enhance the performance of educational systems, but also vital to building vibrant democratic societies.

There are a few examples in our recent history that illustrate the power of social movements organized around radically transforming pedagogy at scale. For the past few years, I have been closely studying two of these examples: Escuela Nueva in Colombia and the Learning Community Project in Mexico. These two experiences offer important insights that I believe offer key lessons to future prospects of conceptualizing and promoting educational change as social movement.²

I’d like to close my response with a brief comment on the “Public Scholarship” part of the 2016 AERA conference theme. Some of the key tenets of modern science that educational research has strived to embody are being challenged by the very sciences that are at the lead of scientific discovery—e.g. quantum physics. Among the key tenets currently under shaky grounds is the assumption that separation between the observer and the object of study is possible and desirable. A new paradigm for the sciences, and in particular for educational research will require a profound shift in what we get to understand and create as valid knowledge. The new paradigm will have to involve a redefinition of the link between researchers and their object of study—from that of an observer assumedly separate from the object of study to a deliberately connected relationship of mutual influence between the observer and the observed; from that of a distant observer that describes the ‘world out there’ to one where the researcher deliberately seeks to transform the world; from the creation of assumedly apolitical and neutral knowledge to the construction of deliberately emancipatory knowledge and practices; from a stance that disregards common sense and the knowledge of the masses as second class to a stance that genuinely values and learns from the multiple ways of knowledge of ordinary people.³ Under this new paradigm, the theme of AERA will not be “Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies,” but “Public Scholarship to Learn Alongside and to Create Diverse Democracies.”

² Escuela Nueva and the Learning Community Project are showcased in a couple of case studies to be published in an forthcoming special issue of the Journal of Educational Change titled Bringing Effective Instructional Practice to Scale, (Rincón-Gallardo & Fleisch, eds.). They are also the focus of a book I endeavor to complete within the next year or two.
You are well known internationally for your work on the Learning Community Project (LCP) - a grassroots initiative in Mexico that builds on pedagogy of reciprocal learning--that scales up to a nation-wide transformation in teaching and learning within a very short period of time. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

The Learning Community Project (LCP) evolved from a small-scale, grassroots pedagogical change initiative to a nation-wide policy (PEMLE, for its initials in Spanish) that endeavoured to spread a new pedagogy of tutorial relationships within learning communities to the 9,000 lowest performing schools around the country. Thanks to LCP, between 2009 and 2013 the public middle-schools serving the most remote and historically marginalized communities in Mexico dramatically increased their student achievement levels, surpassing the other two modalities of public middle-school serving more privileged communities and, in the case of mathematics, almost reaching the achievement levels of private middle schools. I'll highlight four major contributions of LCP to the educational change field.

1. Turning disadvantage into possibility. LCP started at the margins of the Mexican educational system, in small, rural communities where the needs were greatest, conventional solutions were ineffective and costly, and the presence of institutional controls over the everyday activities of schools was weaker. Instead of looking at these conditions as a disadvantage, LCP turned them into an opportunity to radically depart from conventional practice.

2. Transforming instructional practice from the inside out. Unlike most school reforms that seek to alter the instructional core through external interventions (e.g. new curricula, standardized testing, teacher evaluation), LCP took the radical transformation of the instructional core as its starting point. It created classroom and teacher learning practices that allowed teachers to experience powerful learning themselves and to witness observable improvements in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of their students as a result of changing their practice. This way, it spurred a contagion-type spread of the new pedagogies to new sites through networks of LCP actors. LCP teachers and allies engaged in constant negotiation with local authorities to secure the necessary flexibility and enabling conditions to introduce and sustain the new pedagogy in classrooms. In some cases, “bargaining arenas” were created whereby diverse stakeholders (teachers, local, and state administrators, project leaders, researchers, etc.) discussed progress, identified institutional enablers (e.g. space and time for teacher collaboration) and constraints (e.g. excessive paperwork, mandatory extracurricular activities) to LCP teacher's efforts to change their practice, and made decisions on the spot to strengthen the enablers and remove the constraints.

3. Linking design and execution. In 2008, a senior leader of LCP took an influential position within the Mexican Ministry of Education. Once there, she deliberately sought to maintain a close link between design and execution. First, once in a position of institutional power, she brought in to her national team a cadre of LCP educators with deep experience on pedagogical change and a good reputation among teachers. Second, LCP leaders were constantly in classrooms to see the impact of their work firsthand and continuously modify, adapt and refine their strategies. Third, all LCP participants, regardless of their formal institutional role, were required to know, model, and practice the new pedagogy that was expected from teachers in classrooms. In the absence of a close link between design and execution, the new pedagogy often turns into mechanistic classroom practices of questionable quality,
which confirms the importance of maintaining the design-execution connection.

4. From shift in ownership to co-ownership. A fourth lesson pertains to the challenge of sustainability of promising initiatives such as LCP. PEMLE, the nation-wide policy that spread LCP’s pedagogy to thousands of schools across Mexico, came to an abrupt end in 2012, after a new administration from the newly elected president asked the national leadership of PEMLE to leave the Ministry. Reportedly, some regions and schools in other states continue to use LCP’s pedagogy of tutorial relationships, openly where there is political backing from local educational authorities, and under disguise where there is open opposition of local authorities to pedagogical changes such as the ones advanced through LCP. There’s an effort currently underway to track down such regions and schools, but the total number very likely decreased substantially since PEMLE’s end. Cynthia Coburn suggested in 2003 that shift in ownership – that is, the transfer of ownership of the change agenda from reformers to those expected to implement it – is a key dimension of ‘scale’.\(^6\) The post-PEMLE scenario suggests that what is needed to sustainably change pedagogy at scale is rather the development of co-ownership between teachers and the educational system where they work. Ownership on the side of educational authorities involves openly endorsing the pedagogical change agenda, protecting schools from policy distractors, and securing access to key capacity building resources. Merely shifting ownership to teachers, without ongoing ownership on the side of educational authorities, does not work.

\(^4\) These ideas are further developed in Rincón-Gallado, S. (forthcoming). Large Scale Pedagogical Transformation as Widespread Cultural Change in Mexican Public Schools. Paper approved for Special Issue of the Journal of Educational Change: Bringing Effective Instructional Practice to Scale.


Given your tenure with the Educational Change SIG, what would be some major lessons and insights that you have garnered throughout the years and that can inspire members of the Educational Change SIG to become executive members of the SIG?

Joining the executive committee of the Educational Change SIG is one of the best decisions I’ve made in my recent professional career. I would definitely do it again, and I strongly encourage young and senior educational change scholars to do it. In a nutshell, it offered three key opportunities to my professional career. First, it granted me direct access to some of the most brilliant and influential thinkers in the educational change field in the US and abroad today – many of whom have been featured in this Lead the Change Series. My three years of service as SIG officer were crucial in forging strong relationships of friendship and mentorship with many of them. Second, it gave me the opportunity to shape the content and processes of interactions within the vibrant and diverse community that makes the Educational Change SIG through initiatives and activities such as the Lead the Change Series, our annual Business Meetings, and monthly emails. And third, it allowed me the possibility of providing many of our SIG members the additional service of helping them navigate with more ease the annual conferences of AERA, which can become rather overwhelming without communities such as our SIG.

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 major shifts taking place in our societies and our planet that should make us
reconsider what our best legacy to the younger generations might be. I’ll list down seven here: the explosion of digital technologies that put most information and knowledge at our fingertips, almost instantly and at any time; the exponential growth of and rapid changes in knowledge; the uncertainty of the survival of the human race and life in our planet; growing inequalities, poverty, and the massive increase of those outside the reach of governments and public institutions, followed by the widespread expansion of fundamentalism and violence; a predicted dramatic drop in jobs in next few decades; and the erosion of democracy even in countries self-proclaimed as democratic. An honest look at schooling as it exists today suggests that school systems, even the best, are far from preparing our kids for an increasingly unstable and rapidly changing world.

In my view, the best legacy we can offer the younger generations is two-fold: first, learning to learn (as opposed to learning to be taught); second, as recently articulated by Michael Fullan, is nurturing their skill and commitment to be agents of change – of pedagogy, of organizations, and of society at large. This requires fundamental changes in how we understand and practice schooling and policy (for example, talking less, listening more; less teaching, more learning; embracing rather than avoiding failure, etc.). We don’t know if schools and school systems will be able to adequately build this legacy – they have not done so in over a hundred years – and to respond to the massive shifts of our time. But if they will, they will have to become something fundamentally different from what they are now. My responses to the first two questions in this interview offer some ideas for the future.

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

It’s been exactly 20 years since Richard Elmore’s classic article Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice.7 In my view, the challenge of radically transforming the instructional core and creating the systems do so at scale to be one of the most important, exciting, and even daunting issues for educational change today. As they currently exist, schooling and school systems won’t take us much farther in the direction of nurturing deep learning, change agency, and deep democratic values among our younger generations (they have arguably taken us in the opposite direction). Using the words of revolutionary intellectual Antonio Gramsci, schooling and school systems are in a state of crisis, that is, a state where the old system is dead and the new is yet to be born. If twenty years ago the challenge of spreading effective pedagogy at scale was already important, it is more urgent today. The dramatic shifts occurring in society and nature, some of which I listed down in my response to question 4, are making the contradictions of schooling and school systems—for example, that the very institutions supposed to prepare kids for the future are proving unable to do so—are becoming more evident, and more unbearable to larger numbers of people—adults and youth alike. Boredom, disappointment, and hopelessness are accumulating among increasing numbers of educators and students. We’re yet to see if schools and school systems will be able to radically redefine their role or if something else will come to fulfill in more effective ways the function of enhancing learning and preparing our youth for the future.

I have had multiple opportunities to see glimpses into what a bright future of learning might look like for schools and school systems. Some of these glimpses come from the global south, such as the Learning Community Project in Mexico and Escuela Nueva in
Colombia. Others from North America, most notably some school districts involved in developing New Pedagogies for Deep Learning in the province of Ontario. In addition to nurturing my hopes and optimism, I believe examples such as these will grow in importance over the next few years because of the lessons they offer to those invested in creating the education systems of the future – where deep learning is at the center of the work of every actor in the system. Whether the majority of educational systems around the world will adopt these lessons and turn themselves around into vibrant learning systems remains an open question, with lots more odds against it than for it. And yet, I believe we should give this endeavor our best shot.