AERA celebrated 100 years of educational research this year. How does your scholarship align with this year’s meeting theme Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies?

Jeannie Oakes’ leadership as president of AERA has been critical in pushing us, as a community, to think more deeply about why we do the work we do and how we can better inform and effect policy and practice. She points to three primary areas of public scholarship that I will speak to as they relate to my own work and how I am trying to contribute to public understanding and political debates in the current socio-political context: 1) being a public intellectual, 2) partnering, and 3) creating a demand for research.

First, being a public intellectual who directly contributes to public understanding, political debate, and professional practice is different from the norms and training for many educational scholars. However, as a policy person with a background in sociology, this is very aligned with my purpose in conducting research. My interpretation is that being a public intellectual means intentionally seeking out diverse strategies and mechanisms for communicating my research to inform public debate and ultimately educational change.

This orientation has pushed me to develop new skills in terms of communicating with different audiences or through different formats. For example, in 2013, I presented my research as part of a “bridge” webinar for one of the U.S. Department of Education regional educational laboratories (REL Northeast & Islands). The REL-NEI’s research alliance on Urban School Improvement invited me to participate in this event because one of their regional priorities was low-performing schools. This type of “bridge” event provides a forum for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to jointly discuss specific research studies and bodies of evidence. I have also participated in events held by the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF) and the Center on Education Policy (CEP) at George Washington University, including a webinar, policy forum, discussion group, and roundtable. Finally, I have faced the true challenge of writing a 1000-word blog post about my research as part of the Shanker Institute’s series on the social side of reform (http://www.shankerinstitute.o...
I see my role in these events as beneficial opportunities not just to inform these various groups about my work, but also to better understand from policymakers and practitioners how they interpret this research, what other lenses they bring to these educational issues, and what areas I may be misunderstanding or misinterpreting as I approach my research and examine policy problems. I learn a tremendous amount from these interactions in the questions that are raised and the applications that are made, because they are distinct from the dialogue at academic conferences or question through peer-review feedback. Some people may think that we, as scholars, need to just better communicate our work, but I see being a public intellectual as not just about communicating but about learning.

A second way that Oakes defines public scholarship is through partnerships with school districts, community organizations, or policymakers to mutually identify problems that need to be solved and use our best tools and understanding to help inform problems in combination with local knowledge. Locally, through my long-standing research partnership with the governing board of the Urban-Suburban Inter-district Transfer Program in Rochester, NY, comprised of the superintendents of local school districts, I provide research tools and capacity to help tackle policy and program issues, such as eligibility criteria and expansion of the program. True partnerships though take a lot of devoted attention and a real desire to understand the complexities and both political and practical realities of what is often just a "site" for the researcher. Cynthia Coburn and Bill Penuel talk about a sign of a partnership for administrators as being a researcher who they have on speed dial. Another way to think about this, in my own experience, is the importance of strong trusting relationships with your collaborators—so that when you text them for advice about a problem you are facing, they text you right back (and vice versa).

The third way Oakes talks about public scholarship is in thinking about our role in creating a demand for research by elevating the level of research in debates and helping the public become more sophisticated as to the validity and uses of different types of evidence for different purposes. The primary way I have done this is through my scholarly work funded by the WT Grant Foundation on research evidence access and use in low-performing schools and districts. In addition, my recent edited book (with Alan Daly) titled, Using Research Evidence in Education: From the Schoolhouse Door to Capitol Hill brings this issue to the surface by considering how research evidence is accessed, shaped, used, and diffused at different educational levels. This work digs deeply into areas that have not been as widely discussed around evidence use, including what people value at different levels of the system, the importance of reciprocal, trusting relationships, and the role of intermediaries.

**What do you identify as some of the key principles that can help us to better develop and support public scholarship?**

When developing and supporting public intellectuals, it is important to think about the early training and ongoing development of scholars to help them engage in new ways and in a wide variety of public spaces or venues. Given the whole idea of fostering public intellectuals is often to push people out of their comfort zone so they engage differently, i.e., more publicly around their work, it is important that we identify opportunities to provide training within universities or through partnerships with external organizations so that scholars are equipped with the knowledge and skills to engage in this type of scholarship. This includes writing about their rigorous scholarly work for lay audiences; communicating with media; writing blogs, or connecting with current debates through twitter; testifying at government hearings or in litigation; conducting collaborative research with communities and educators; and related activities, that position research to inform civic participation, engagement, or organized action. Intermediary organizations, such as the RELs,
AYPF, CEP, and Shanker, play a critical role in bringing together practitioners, policymakers, and scholars and can help support or facilitate this process. Also, since the intermediaries usually archive the “products” from these events—from briefing to video documentations—they play an important role in research diffusion by providing access to the public to the knowledge that was generated.

With regard to how to develop and support public scholarship through partnerships, it is an important time of reflection and dialogue as to the civic purpose of universities. Often, universities are isolated from the very communities in which they are located and the challenges associated with these. Aligning the civic purpose of universities with the role of the public intellectual requires valuing the development and ongoing partnership between scholars and community members or agencies. This could happen through the development and support of a Community Engaged Scholars Network. I received a small grant recently from the Rochester Area Community Foundation to study the feasibility of this type of cross-university effort in Rochester. In academia, this type of partnership is usually viewed as service to the community, but the work that goes into the development of an authentic research partnership—working to inform and solve community problems—could be valued through the tenure and review process and supported through university resources as a way to institutionalize its value. Funding institutions from foundations to government agencies are also well positioned to encourage more authentic partnership as the U.S. Department of Education’s Institute of Education Sciences (IES) has done through the Research-Practitioner Partnership grant or the WT Grant Foundation has done through its Distinguished Fellows program. Importantly, while my partnerships are often geographically based, the Internet, of course, provides a unique opportunity for communities of scholars to engage with a local, national, and global public in new and evolving ways.

Finally, there are ways that as a community of researchers we can help to generate a demand for research. I am part of an effort by AERA this year to do just that through a Knowledge Forum, which was held in February. As one of 32 Knowledge Forum Scholars (eight focuses on education policy) who were identified through a crowdsourcing open call that nominated scholars from across the country, I participated in an event where high profile decision-makers and thought leaders from across societal sectors were invited to engage with the scholars in considering noteworthy knowledge on education topics that are (or should be) of concern to them. Through efforts like this, our community can help both scholars better distill their findings and policymakers better understand the quality, rigor, and relevance of the current research in the field.

You are known internationally for your work on improving low-performing schools, organizational learning, and desegregation. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

My work has focused on the larger system of schools and districts as they implement educational policies and the extent to which policies and practices provide equitable opportunities and outcomes for youth. I have had two parallel areas of work over the last several years—one focusing on accountability and one focusing on choice. I briefly discuss what I think are the important contributions of this work to the field of educational change (and have included links below to social networking sites for academics where you can locate some of published results from this work).

One area of research, funded by the WT Grant and Spencer Foundations and with my colleague Alan Daly, has focused on the organizational learning processes of schools under accountability policy sanctions over time in four school districts using survey, interview, and social network data from teachers and school and central office leaders. The study focuses on the acquisition and use of different types of research evidence as part of that learning process, as well as the extent to
which the underlying social networks in school systems support or constrain these school improvement efforts. Some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change include:

- A narrow definition of research evidence by educators as closely aligned with data and a paradoxical relationship with evidence, as educators treat both data and research with scepticism.
- The importance of the social web of connections and its relationship to the flow of research evidence both within schools and across districts.
- Trust as both a critical base condition and a catalyst for moving evidence leading to best practices.
- A mismatch between “formal” organizational structures and “informal” exchanges in school districts regarding evidence.
- The critical role of leadership in the access, use, and diffusion of research evidence.
- Both the rarity, and the importance, of reciprocated social ties in sharing research evidence in ways that result in organizational learning.
- The importance of social structural positions (central vs. peripheral) among individuals within a system, as this affects how individuals view evidence and reform.
- A high level of leadership churn in underperforming systems, which undermines the relationships, trust, and evidence sharing in the system.
- The importance of “brokers” in the spread of research evidence both within schools and across districts.

Our edited book recently published by AERA titled *Thinking and Acting Systematically: Improving School Districts Under Pressure* is particularly important in sharing the knowledge around low-performing schools and districts (and the limitations of school-by-school change) as states and districts in the U.S. regroup in response to the Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA).

The other area of research has focused on inter-district choice through a longitudinal study of the Urban-Suburban Inter-district Transfer Program in Rochester, NY, as well as a Ford Foundation study with my colleague Jennifer Jellison Holme that examines the eight metro areas across the country with choice initiatives focused on desegregation. This work has contributed to the field of educational change in several ways, including by uncovering the racial dynamics around crossing school district boundaries; illuminating the spatial connections between choice, segregation, and academic performance; examining variability in the design and implementation of these policies; and highlighting ways that these programs provide equity of access and opportunity (or not) for poor students and children of color in these communities (see [http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo9.pdf](http://school-diversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo9.pdf)). This work is important to the field of educational change because school choice is often promoted as a change strategy but without a greater understanding of the design of these policies, racial dynamics, regional inequities, and underlying political and spatial contexts of these communities any efforts to bring about change will be futile or could result in unintended consequences.

**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?**

Young people need engaging places to learn with adults who support not only their academic growth but also their socio-emotional development. Unfortunately, my research across more than 20 years uncovers school and district environments that struggle to meet this need because teachers feel demoralized; leaders feel pressured to improve schools with limited capacity and resources or little political support to take risks; and students feel alienated. Most of the instructional practices that stem from the current knowledge base in the field of learning
sciences around how students learn cannot be found in your typical public school. It is an important time in education to consider how educational change can happen at scale so that more students have rich educational experiences that we know benefit children.

Historically, the field of educational change has primarily focused on changing organizations or institutions within the educational system. While this body of work has made important progress in uncovering the organizational levers to bring about change, there is much work to be done given the current needs and realities of youth. In policy, we have focused for years on what students should know and be able to do, but we have overlooked the importance of how change happens and the context of educational change. In light of the first question, it is important to consider how we can not only strengthen the body of research that focuses on these areas, but also ensure that this rigorous research is effectively communicated to policymakers and practitioners so that our schools and schools systems benefit from this growing knowledge base.

As far as priorities, first the field should prioritize scholarly work on the process of change, or how change happens. Aligned with other work in this area, my social network research points to the collaborative relationships among educators that are necessary to learn new ways of teaching diverse populations of students. However, our policies have focused on placing blame on every level of the system—students, parents, teachers, leaders, policymakers—rather than finding ways to develop new human and social capital particularly within the lowest performing schools and districts. Second, the field of educational change should prioritize the context of change, or where change happens. The field has not sufficiently attended to the connection between challenges in education and challenges in the health and social welfare of youth. There is a growing body of work relating to how the trauma that results from violence in communities and poverty-related challenges impacts youth. Related to the AERA theme of educating “diverse democracies” the educational change literature should prioritize consideration of whether and how diversity fits within the goals of achievement, innovation, engagement, and equity. More attention to the context of change requires developing new conceptual frameworks and more complex methodological approaches in our research to better understand how technical and relational reforms play out differently in different types of communities and how to build upon the assets in these communities to develop change strategies.

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

I think one of the most important issues facing the field today is the stark inequalities in our educational system that map closely to racial and socioeconomic lines. We are at a critical point in time—reminiscent of the civil rights era—as protests become stronger and more coordinated thought grassroots activism like Black Lives Matter and in communities and college campuses across the country resulting from high profile shootings of African American youth. A critical issue is for those of us who focus on educational change to think more deeply about, and use a variety of methodological tools to investigate, how these broader societal issues relate to issues in our educational system rather than considering them as outside of our unrelated to educational success or the change process.

Although it is an exciting time given the shifting policy context through the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, which puts an end to many shortcomings of No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, my primary concern is whether this new legislation will adequately target the needs of students. Will the new law bolster efforts of states and local school districts to ensure that students who attend high poverty, residentially segregated schools receive the types of learning environments that will enable them to
succeed not only in our public schools system, but also in their subsequent college or career trajectories? In essence, are these learning environments that enable success in K-12 and college/career likely to be implemented in ESSA provides more flexibility to locales given the large number of high-poverty, highly segregated schools across the country?

Finally, educational change must begin to focus on the consequences of segregation. As state and local districts—and our larger educational community—re-think policy priorities, it is time for these groups and the federal government to begin to tackle the interconnectedness of educational change with other societal changes by better understanding the impact of changes in housing, economic development, social welfare, and transportation policies on students and their families and developing policies and programs that cut across these sectors. We know that there is nothing inherently different about the motivations and abilities of students who are born into our most challenging communities, but rather that the concentration of poverty, the direct impact of poverty on their lives, and the structural racism that exists in our educational system and in these other sectors limit the opportunities and outcomes for youth. I am excited by the opportunity for us to tackle this complex and important area of work in the field of educational change.

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