The 2017 AERA theme is “Knowledge to Action: Achieving the Promise of Equal Educational Opportunity.” How does your scholarship align with the 2017 meeting theme?

As a graduate student at OISE/University of Toronto, I remember having great conversations with my supervisor, Stephen Anderson, about innovation theory and its potential influence on how research can inform practice. While my graduate student days are long gone, my commitment and interest in ensuring our research is both accessible and meaningful persists. The theme of the AERA 2017 conference is close to my heart and inspires our work at UCL Institute of Education in London, UK.

Our interest in professional practice and educational improvement focuses on both individual and system-wide perspectives. We are specifically motivated by spotting emerging trends across and within systems and trying to learn more about them. In turn, we use the evidence gathered to engage stakeholders from across systems to examine potential implications for their policy and practice work.

Over the last four years, we have been actively involved in exploring the careers, lives, and aspirations of Generation X leaders funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the United Kingdom. More specifically, our Global City Leaders project has been working with under-40-year-old principals and vice-principals in London, New York City, and Toronto to understand more about how they approach their careers, leadership, and future work lives. Evidence from beyond education demonstrates how Generation X members are more mobile, techno-savvy, and strongly committed to diversity and organizational innovations.

Based on our observations, we believed quite strongly that this emerging generation of school leaders may be experiencing their careers differently due to their own generational positioning and characteristics. Generational influences on professional practice and careers remains under-researched in the public sector. As a result, these factors may not be fully considered by policy makers and scholars.

Throughout the study, we examined career trajectories, conceptions of professional identity, approaches to school leadership, and future aspirations. Our contribution to the educational change discussions has been vested in broadening awareness of the potential influence of generational factors on the work of teachers and leaders.

We have also started to concentrate our efforts on the role the educational policy and practice context may play in career development and
longevity. In the next six months, we will be formalizing our learning around the broader social policy context in each jurisdiction and the influence on leader and teacher lives and work. Our approach to understanding professional practice and our interest in educational change has been very much through a generational, comparative, and deep contextual lenses.

The Global City Leaders project was deliberately designed from the start to engage policy makers, leadership development professionals, academics, and practitioners from each city. We were committed to ensuring that the research would be informed, rigorous, and relevant to a variety of stakeholders. To achieve these goals, we worked with multi-stakeholder city-based Advisory Groups that have been integral to our ability to understand each jurisdiction, gain access to participants, design relevant tools, and share findings.

Based on our findings, we have been creating opportunities to have meaningful conversations with school, district, union, and policy leaders about the generational tensions we observed. We have also been active in sharing our jurisdictional observations from the research and the implications for how educational change agents at all levels of the system may be able to harness these specific findings to support improvements in retention, recruitment, and diversity in school leadership.

You are well known internationally for your work on innovative school systems, generational patterns and educational accountability policies and practices. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

One of the most interesting findings across the three cities was the increasingly significant role that the greater educational context and infrastructure play in the lives and work of teachers and leaders. The Global City Leaders project had a strong international comparative component from the start. Our choice of Global Cities was inspired by their top 10 rankings, at the time, but also their innovative approaches to improvement in very different policy contexts.

Once we started working with school leaders, it became clear that our research would need to become a much deeper dive into the connection between the greater social and educational policy context and the working lives of leaders. However, we also quickly recognized the influence of massive, and often unacknowledged, different national ‘cultures,’ established (if unspoken) social hierarchies and system-level structures more broadly. Differences in the wider social policy context that appear to radically shape the lives and careers of leaders include maternity leave, job security, pensions, and accessible housing, all of which were found to strongly influence the lives and experiences of working adults in each city. While this may not be surprising, the extent of the influence was palpable when all three cities were contrasted. As a result, our work has examined, to an extent, how educational and social policy infrastructure influence the lives of leaders within and beyond schools. This element of research is even more important as our collective obsession with national comparisons escalates. The lives of leaders outside of schools may be a greater than anticipated influence on their work within schools.

Generations. We also believe our evidence has opened up a new conversation about generational influences in education and the public sector (see: Edge, 2014). Current Generation X school leaders often discuss their aspirations to move out of their school level posts in the next five years. If they act on these desires, there could be even greater retention pressures on school systems. There was variability between cities with Ontario leaders making longer plans to remain in school-level leadership positions. The findings point to some potentially damaging trends and posit solutions to retaining Generation X leaders by acknowledging their desires for flexibility, work/life balance, and sustained and challenging learning experiences.

Care. Perhaps linked to the generational membership of leaders in our study, we observed an overarching, cross-city discussion about the role of leaders in caring for their staff members within and beyond schools (see Edge et al., 2016). This was most interesting because of how different structural and legal relationships are constructed between leaders and teachers in each city. Regardless of the configuration, overwhelmingly leaders felt it was their role to develop and nurture teachers while supporting their need for lives beyond schools. We see big implications for policy and practice in terms of principal-teacher relationships and addressing current retention issues in cities like New York and London.

Gender. Finally, we have also been able to gather and share interesting evidence related to
the different lived experiences of women leaders in each city. Generation X women appear to often take on their roles earlier than previous generations of leaders. If they have children, they are also often having children later than previous generations of women leaders. This new temporal proposition creates a cohort of women leaders who are also simultaneously leading their schools and parenting small children. This presents a new set of tensions and opportunities for women leaders. We found marked differences between each city related to promotion, access to opportunity, and perceived ability to be a leader and have a family—evidence that context truly shapes every aspect of leaders’ lives. For example, leaders in Toronto appear to feel very secure and supported by the greater maternity policy and did not have concerns about having families and leading schools. Conversely, in London where school leaders are much more independent, have weaker district-level supports, and higher stakes accountability/inspection pressures, many women in our study express their concern and hesitation at leading a school while parenting. The influence of context on the working lives of leaders would not have been as visible had the study not been conducted across the three cities.

**Recruitment and retention.** There is an element of urgency in many Global Cities to recruit the ‘best and the brightest’ teachers and leaders to ensure the best possible educational experience and learning for all students. Looking across various jurisdictions, the emphasis on recruitment often overshadows that of retention. In Toronto, there is a steady flow of teachers and leaders perhaps due to stable policy conditions, healthy pensions, and a strong level of public support for teachers and education. There is little movement away from traditional province-to-district-to-school support. There is not a multitude of non-profit and corporate organizations intervening in or ‘rescuing’ the education system. This may be one of many factors, that lead to leaders staying in school-level posts. However, Toronto leaders see few career routes beyond school leadership in Ontario compared to other jurisdictions.

Conversely, in London and New York City, both recruitment and retention are more volatile. Fast-track teacher and leader training has become more prevalent and this, we observed, may influence more wide-spread perceptions of educational careers. Similarly, in both cities, the attractiveness of school-level expansion of school support organizations, and educational entrepreneurialism has created the unintended influence of providing a wide range of post-school careers for leaders and teachers. This may, in fact, escalate retention issues as talented leaders are able to find meaningful educationally-focused employment beyond schools. Perhaps not surprisingly, these findings have been of interest to policy and practice colleagues across all three cities as they consider how best to influence and escalate retention efforts for school leaders.

*Given your focus on educational change, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global educational changes?*

One of the most interesting observations from our Global City study was the merit of tweaks. Looking at the policy trajectory in each city, London and New York City experienced clear escalations in the pace and scale of change. Both cities adopted efforts to radically reconfigure the structure and infrastructure of schools. The introduction of different forms of schools including charter schools (NYC) and academies and free schools (LON) in many ways completely bypass what most educational change scholars point to as core to creating sustainable improvements: 1) clear focus on teaching and learning; 2) supporting the professional development of educators. Structural changes rarely feature in any of the go-to lists of ‘how to’ improve educational outcomes. These structural changes, in our opinion, have created costly and challenging obstacles to improving instruction for all children.

Perhaps even more shockingly, at the moment in London, there are more and more unqualified teachers being hired. This is permissible within the new structural context of schools. It is not perhaps surprising that the lack of protection and perceived value of teachers is influencing the retention challenge. These patterns are part of a larger privatization agenda, predicated on the assumption that private school success is rooted in structural conditions. It is a dangerous experiment.

In juxtaposition, Toronto represents an incredibly stable example of an educational change environment. While there have been significant shifts in the provincial approach to education over the last decade, the structure of schools and districts has remained constant. Improvement efforts have focused, to name a few, on creating political stability, enhancing...
school leaders’ knowledge of improvement, and infusing and accelerating evidence-based practice. The lack of structural overhaul in Ontario, and widespread acknowledgement of the strength and equality found within the system, convince us more and more that tweaks need more attention! The distraction of overhauling the core nature of schools detracts from the core task at hand.

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?

Over the last five years, one of the most transformational influences on my own academic/research thinking has been the arrival of our son. He is now a kindergarten student in a London state-funded primary school. Watching his own learning journey through nursery school and into primary school has been extraordinarily interesting from pedagogical, emotional, and developmental perspectives. I was greatly surprised by how much our experience as a family within the education system has raised questions about policy, system design, and structures for my own research and teaching. In many ways, I now believe that parental engagement in their children’s educational lives may also be more strongly influenced by the overall policy context than is widely acknowledged. From this vantage point, as an academic and parent, I think three of the most substantial needs of young people are parental engagement, stability, and diversity.

Parental engagement. We often look at parental engagement as a two-way process between schools and parents. However, parents experience constant nudges from other parents, schools and the overall policy context. These nudges and messages influence their sense of confidence, security, and influence within schools. In turn, there is a knock on for their children’s educational lives. The subtle (and not so subtle) nudges experienced by families and students can be radically different in different educational jurisdictions. Each parent will also have a different experience with their child’s school and teachers. For example, while my colleagues with children in Ontario simply journeyed through toddler years knowing their children would go to their local school, my own lived parental experience was very different. In London, where ‘school choice’ exists only to be compounded by small catchment areas and over-subscription, parents expend extraordinary energy ‘choosing’ and ranking their options. Conversely, there can be a pervasive sense of hopelessness associated with not truly being able to choose where to send your child to school. In our case, in the first instance, we did not gain a place in our local school but one almost two miles away! For parents with multiple children and jobs within or beyond the home, the pressure imposed by commuting-distance of the school runs can be daunting if not impossible. Choice is not really a choice even though that is what is sold on the tin! This is just one example of how relationships between schools and parents and between parents themselves as formed even before children get to school. We don’t talk about this enough when we talk about engagement. The economic and social disparities within ‘choice’ processes are also stark and shocking.

Considering the energy and emotional cost of school-related issues, a considerable amount of parental energy is expended in decentralized or choice-based systems that could, conceivably, be more appropriately channeled for good. If this is the start of parental engagement in education, it sets a rather unhelpful tone upon which to build collaborative and supportive relationships with schools. These more subtle influences on the wider set of actors engaged in educational change are important. For those interested in international comparison and understanding of educational change in different jurisdictions, deeper examination the lived experience of parents in a system may be a potential lever for improvement.

Stability. Young people need stability. This is not a shocking revelation. However, based on our research, I am more convinced that the stability children require extends well beyond their homes—where the stability discussions often centre. Children need to feel safe and secure at school. Children need stable cadres of teachers and leaders who are calm, supported, and able to attend to the needs of their students. The level of unhelpful ‘noise’ experienced by educators and parents in different jurisdictions can create conditions that appear to be the antithesis of stability. You don’t have to look far to find cities and rural areas experiencing shortage of teachers and leaders.

In my current system, in England for
example, teachers are leaving the profession at what some would call a ferocious pace. Workload and stress are often cited as reasons for departures, however, there may also be generational factors at play. Teachers and leaders in the system now, have been told for their entire lives they would have multiple careers and jobs. For some, perhaps it is not just linked to conditions but also conditions that are not responding to shifting teacher and leader demographics quickly enough to employ more appropriate retention strategies. Regardless of the reasons, high levels of turnover are a pressing issue for educational change researchers, leaders, and policy makers. Often city-based schools, and those that need stability the most, are the most vulnerable in terms of teacher movement.

Based on our observations, toxic combinations of factors can create undue and detrimental stress for students, schools, and parents. These can act in opposition to the conditions that support stability for students. These are, perhaps, unintended outcomes of the nexus of decentralized school governance, weak middle tiers, high stakes testing and accountability regimes, public comparison of schools, and explicit processes that publicly deem schools as failures. Constant messages about school and teacher failure do not build public confidence in schools and this has knock on effects on parents and students.

Many educational change and leadership scholars have contributed to foundational evidence that support the idea that collaboration and consideration for teachers’ and leaders’ professional lives will improve the commitment and performance. There is what we have started to call a ‘chain of care’ that needs to run throughout schools and districts. We believe the notion and enactment of care for leaders and teachers within an education system will become an ever increasing driver of system-wide improvement.

**Diversity.** Young people need diversity – widely defined. For children, including my son, having their own diverse identities acknowledged and represented amongst their teachers and leaders is important. This is less about having representative role models and more about ensuring school leaders with diverse personal and professional experiences and understandings are engaged as key change agents across a system. There is great variability across the three cities with respect to the diversity amongst the cadre of school leaders.

In our study, we worked with leaders who were immigrants to their countries, who spent time in refugee camps, who can explicitly detail how their own lived experiences as children and ‘others’ in many contexts enables them to understand the structures and supports required to ensure children, from all backgrounds, are able to succeed. In systems with strong middle tiers/districts and strong pathways of promotion and development for leaders, there appear (at least based on our observations) to be more diverse cadres of leaders emerging. In London, where leader recruitment and development often happens within single, isolated schools, there is less system-wide coordination and effort to ensure that the overall cadre of leaders is becoming more diverse. The result is a very homogeneous leadership cadre across the country—surprisingly so! We believe there is a role to play for educational change scholars and policy makers in exploring some of the structural conditions that negate professional mobility as a key element in ensuring diverse and successful systems.

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

Working across three very different contexts has given us a unique vantage point to understand the influence of public confidence in education and collective and explicit ambition for all schools to succeed. Similarly, we have developed a deeper understanding of the factors influencing retention and the importance of social policy contexts in the wider lives of adults in the education system. These three areas, we believe, will become increasingly important as competition for teachers and leaders increases and more Generation X leaders flood the system.

I am excited for the future of the field for several reasons. Building on the amazing legacy of research and policy work over the last three decades, there is a new era of scholarship that builds on what is ‘known’ and asks more nuanced questions and seek answers in innovative ways that reflect the current times. At the same time, there are new questions being asked about the role of context, diversity, and gender that provide a more subtle examination of the current foundation of educational knowledge. There appear to be new ways of academic working as well, which may be attributed to the increasing...
mobility of scholars and the emergence of social media as a lever for research collaboration, policy interaction, and understanding.

Collectively, we are on the verge of being able to more clearly articulate what makes systems work well for educators, students, and families. Within our work, we are constantly reminded that most of our new insights only became visible because of the deeply comparative nature of the work. By paying very close attention to the lessons that can be learned and by examining change and leadership in different contexts, we are much more able to understand what can be helpful/adoptable in other contexts to the same ends.

References


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Dr. Edge studied Biology and Environmental Science (Bsc) and Higher Education Policy (MA) prior to pursuing a PhD at OISE/University of Toronto in Educational Administration. Before joining UCL, she worked for the Minister of Education (Ontario), the Centre for Educational Leadership at UC-Santa Barbara, and the World Bank (USA). Dr. Edge’s work continues to focus on bringing policy, practice, and research together to influence understanding and action to improve education for all students and adults in our education systems.

Dr. Edge consults domestically and internationally on a range of strategy, leadership, and research topics. Partner organizations have included DfID, British Council, PLAN (UK), Gates/Hewlett Foundation, and STIR Education. Dr. Edge is a member of the Economic and Social Research Council (UK), the Danish Strategic Research Review Panels, and the Executive Board at UKFIET. She is the past Editor-in-Chief of Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability and has held recent visiting academic appointments in Canada, Chile, and Malaysia. She sits on the international advisory panel for the International School Principal Program in Ontario, Canada. Dr. Edge regularly delivers keynotes and workshops for academic and professional audiences related to leadership, knowledge management, talent spotting, retention, gender and leadership, and system-level reform.

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