The 2017 AERA theme is “Knowledge to Action: Achieving the Promise of Equal Educational Opportunity.” In what ways is educational research transforming praxis and where does it fall short?

I can’t think of any research that has been fully transformative, nor can I think of any that has led to term-long praxis. Part of the reason is that nearly all research that is called that by name today is involved with verification instead of discovery. I use those terms in the sense that Paul Feyerabend defined them.

Feyerabend (1993) indicated that the term discovery was largely irrational, most often it occurred outside prevailing paradigms. It was essentially irrational because it followed no rules or method. On-the-other-hand, a logic of justification means working within existing rules and methods. That is the status quo. Research contains rules and methods and most of what emanates from it is verification of what is already known. This distinction is what drove my critique of the NRC’s Scientific Research in Education (English, 2007).

To change this situation would require a whole new definition of “research” and an expanded horizon of appropriate methods to conduct it, especially in my field of educational leadership. Such a definition of the term research would move into what has been termed “cognitive aesthetics” (Brown, 1977). Brown emphasized the aesthetics of sociological knowledge and stressed that “failure to recognize the metaphorical character of ‘scientific’ language leads one to mistake the proper metaphorical nature of theories, models, and representations” (p. 102). Specifically, in leadership studies one has to deal with the emotional and subjective side of human nature and without that we understand only half-human actions (English, 2008). The process of change requires a dissolution of the objective/subjective binary which prohibits dealing with the emotional side of professional practice. So-called subjective elements of decision making are eliminated at the outset as unverifiable and hence unreliable in traditional research studies. In other words, if we want to introduce cognitive aesthetics into our research in educational change, we have to dissolve the boundaries of logical empiricism.

You are well known for your work, inter alia, Bourdieu for Educators, which you published in 2015. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?
My work over the past fifteen years has been to expand the boundaries of research practice and thought in educational leadership beyond logical empiricism to include aesthetics. My latest work *Leading Beautifully* (2016) is based on three years of research with my Australian colleague Lisa Catherine Ehrich in which we challenged prevailing ideas of “effective” leadership as essentially minimalist in nature. We began our research with artists first and educational leaders second. A corollary to teaching would be that unless one sees teaching as an art form and deeply involved with performance, the science only tells half the story.

Bourdieu’s work underscores how vastly more complex real change is and why most of what we think of today as change is largely tinkering at the edges of what exists, although we are quite adept at exaggerated claims for “reform.” Change agendas are largely minimalist and involve check lists of verifiable skills or activities. In these lists I find very little real change. In this approach, policy becomes (1) a statement of a crisis of some kind, (2) a statement of goals at some future point in which the crisis is resolved with implementation which glosses over enormous complexities, and (3) check lists of compliance activities to ensure proper behaviors.

Bourdieu’s notion of the social field as contested space (Bourdieu, 1998) explains a lot regarding the forms of resistance and interest involved with the expansion and contraction of the field of power of groups and individuals involved with change proposals. A key concept from Bourdieu (1998) is that of the “logic of practice” within teaching or leadership which is internal to what we do within schools. Teaching is a communal activity. It is not an individualistic, materialistic practice. Change that does not embrace this understanding will remain superficial.

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

All change is, in the end, local. All change involves self-interest and the promotion of values most dear to those seeking a change. Change is very much culturally defined and class based. There are no “neutral” change agents. Change is about power first. Everything else is second. Who are the major power players, those individuals or groups advocating change? Diane Ravitch (2010) called them the “billionaire boys club.” Would anybody pay much attention to Bill Gates or Eli Broad for their simplistic ideas of how to “fix” schools if they were not billionaires and pumping money and influence onto policy makers and legislators? The neoliberal ideas of increasing alternatives to public schools with privatization as advanced by former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s *Race to the Top* initiatives are another example of the use of power to promote a certain kind of change.

Globalization is the adoption of forms of technology and ideas which more often than not originate locally. Even technology is not neutral. It is accompanied by content of some kind. Globalization has meant the drive to open world markets to Western ideas and products. As such it erases or marginalizes the criticality of local culture. Those who choose to resist build it in the process at the outset. Global culture is somebody’s local culture imposed on other local cultures.

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?

While there are certainly cultural and social differences among countries and even within countries regarding “needs”—as defined by the young people themselves and not by external agents who tell them what their “needs” are—they have not changed much over time. Young people want safety, assurances they are valued and respected, patience by those teaching and guiding them, and sensitive challenges to their intellectual growth. That is, they want to be “pushed” to reach for new learning but not threatened or humiliated into reaching for that learning.

If all of these aspects are in place, then we can think about skill acquisition, technology, etc. Fear is a poor motivator and we have too much of it with the accountability schemes foisted on schools and students today. The relentless quest for measurement by tests and...
the punishment mechanisms for alleged failure to score well have contributed to the draining of the joy of learning and teaching in too many schools around the world. Tests contain limited contexts and exclude others.

The power to test is linked to the power to control as scores of research has shown both empirically and theoretically. Consider, for example, the work of Alphie Kohn (1993) who has shown that once grades kick in, the child’s enthusiasm for learning is kicked out of the window.

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

The most important thing about educational change today is that we are finally coming to terms with an understanding that much needed change is far more difficult and will take much more time than the terms of the politicians in office to become a reality. Proclamations and lofty goals cannot bring meaningful changes and may make change more difficult because they tend to promote a “quick fix” mentality over seeking to come at change problems more systemically.

I think of NCLB (No Child Left Behind Act). What NCLB did was eliminate any but the most simplistic and superficial means to meet them while spending millions of dollars to reap a disappointing harvest of meager results. We must do better in the future. A systematic approach to return to schools the richness of learning and teaching would begin with the abandonment of the tenets of efficiency. Efficiency has no end. Rather it is its own end. It is a tautology that should be exposed for a vicious circle that subordinates everything else. Systematic change should begin with the criterion of “goodness” and not failure. Such an idea is counter intuitive to the dominate “business” mindset which is erasing the purpose of education to free the human mind and replacing it with the goals of the nation state to attain economic and technical dominance over other nation states. While these goals may be beneficial, educational change that celebrates meaningful experiences of learning and teachers may suffice to bolster the process.

References


FENWICK W. ENGLISH

Fenwick W. English is the R. Wendell Eaves Senior Distinguished Professor of Educational Leadership in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a position he has held since 2001. He has served at five other universities in the capacities of department chair, dean, and vice-chancellor of academic affairs. As a practitioner he has served as a middle school principal in California; assistant superintendent in Florida, and as superintendent in New York State. He also has experience in the private sector where he worked as a manager/partner for three years at Peat, Marwick, Mitchell (now KPMG Peat Marwick) in Washington, D.C., and as an executive in a national educational association (The American Association of School Administrators) in Arlington, Virginia.

His record of publications includes over forty books, numerous book chapters, monographs and referred journal articles. He has presented his research at Division A and L of the American Education Research Association; Australian Association of Research in Education; British Educational Leadership Management Association, and the Commonwealth Council of Educational Administration and Management. His most recent published research is Leading Beautifully: Educational Leadership as Connoisseurship for Routledge with Australian colleague Lisa Catherine Ehrich.

He is the former president of UCEA (University Council of Educational Administration) in 2006-07 and NCPEA (National Council of Professors of Educational Administration) in 2011-2012. In 2013 he was the recipient of the Living Legend Award from NCPEA.

Professor English can be reached at: fenglish@email.unc.edu