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

Educational change is never an instrumental process. Education always has a particular purpose and is part of a societal development. In educational change a teacher and a researcher can choose particular goals and develop their own educational vision. Taking these points together, we understand that educational change does not happen in a vacuum. Societal and political conditions are determining factors in educational change and many times limit concrete possibilities. Educational change scholars, in my view, have the responsibility to clarify the educational purpose of the change they want to see and to analyze how societal and political conditions may or may not shape that very change. I think it is important to focus on the process of educational change from the perspectives of both the political and the sociological contexts and the pedagogical aims.

AERA’s 2017 theme of the promise of equal educational opportunity will, undoubtedly, reflect respective political and social contexts. In the Netherlands, for example, we have an educational system that gives priority to parental choice and freedom of education. This basically means that students and their parents can choose the school they want to attend. This freedom of education policy allows each school to develop its own educational view. Currently, two thirds of all Dutch schools are Christian; one third are public schools. However, the religious schools are fully funded by the Dutch government and these schools create their own educational practice and select the teachers and students they want within the framework of national curriculum guidelines and assessments. Each school tries to show how they differ from other schools. Many international scholars are very enthusiastic about this Dutch model of parental choice and freedom of education that allows for a plethora of school profiles and communities.

However, this Dutch policy and practice of parental choice and freedom of education does not, in actual fact, contribute to equality! There is not only a differentiation between schools...
but also a competition that results in a hierarchy: a hierarchy that corresponds to social class and that stimulates segregation along the lines of social class, culture and ethnicity. Parents, and not only those who come from higher socioeconomic status, prefer to choose schools that offer only the highest levels of education and that are, more often than not, culturally homogenous. Dutch educational system contributes highly to segregation!

In the Dutch context equality would benefit of less parental choice, of a greater communality between schools, and of less tracking. Many principals and change agents have romantic views (often based on child-centered pedagogies) about developing their own unique educational vision and practice. But from a sociological point of view, equality would benefit of a stronger educational policy of equity.

You are known for your work on, inter alia, associating educational change with the notion of networking. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

In the nineties I started publishing about networking. The focus was on networking of schools. Members of secondary-level school personnel came together to work on ideas relating to education and educational change. The networking project was supported by the University of Amsterdam and its focus was to allow an informal way of exchanging experiences, practices, and ideas about education and educational change. Fast forward 27 years, we are still working on networking of schools. We have monthly meetings of school personnel from about 12 schools. The participants are mostly vice-principals in their schools, but there are also some principals, and teachers. In other words, we have a representation of all change-leading agents working together to bring change in their respective schools. These ongoing meetings in the networking project have been coordinated and chaired by me, Wiel Veugelers—a university professor together with a school principal—Henk Zijlstra.

Bringing people from different schools together, we believe, is crucial when thinking about networking. As you have probably noted, a few lines ago I framed the Dutch policy of parental choice and freedom of education as generating negative effects especially on equity and equality but the other side of Dutch educational system is that we can celebrate differences between schools framing them as opportunities for collaboration. It is differences in views and practice that stimulate a critical dialogue in our networks. Of course, each school, even in a very centralized system, has possibilities to create their own organization, curriculum contents, and, in particular, their own teaching and learning environments. Schools always differ, but in the Dutch educational system these differences are acknowledged and appreciated by politicians, principals, teachers, parents, and students.

We think that in a competitive educational system like the one operating in the Netherlands and in many other Western societies—that acknowledge the diversification between schools—networking is of paramount importance. Networking brings people together, makes them part of a larger educational community, and allows for the development of a common purpose. Networking can become a tool through which educators can develop a public responsibility for education and a broader engagement that goes beyond their own school. Learning together in networks counterbalances the competitive climate in education thus laying down shorter pathways to educational change. Work through networking creates balance between autonomy and social concern for a good education for all.

Networking is also interesting from the perspective of learning. People get to know and often experience other educational ideas and
pedagogical practices. Surprisingly, our experience shows that by talking about pedagogical practices, educators in our networking program learn about their own perceptions and practices, which is equally important to learning new information about education. In constructing narratives about their own perceptions and practices, they have to clarify why they make particular choices, they have to make their vision and purpose explicit, and they find themselves having to deconstruct their conceptualizations, perceptions, and practices.

Nowadays, the focus in educational change focuses less on networking and more on professional learning communities. Whereas framing collaboration as professional learning communities focuses on learning processes and on developing practices together, framing collaboration as networks highlights learning processes that are more hybrid in nature because the entry point and the exit point represent respective educational practices. As such, professional learning communities often miss the dynamic of dialogues between schools and the sense of a broader educational community.

For more than a decade, and especially between 1990 and 2005, there were numerous publications on networking so much so that the concept has become the zeitgeist in many sessions in AERA. Before and after the publication of *Network Learning for Educational Change* (Veugelers & O’Hair, 2005), we organized several symposia at AERA with Mary John O’Hair (Oklahoma), Lew Allen (Georgia), Eero Ropo (Finland), William Wu (Hong Kong) and Joan Rue (Spain). These symposia were followed by invigorating discussions with Ann Lieberman and Andy Hargreaves who used the notion of networks in their larger educational change theory. I think it would be interesting to organize a follow-up symposium on networking at AERA to see what has emerged in the field.

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

In my responses to the first two questions, I have discussed the pros and cons of the Dutch education system. In the last decade, I had the opportunity to be part of educational activities in Latin America and in Asia. Working in other parts of the world, you learn how social, cultural, and political contexts are shaping educational ideas and practices. Using the framework of network learning, you learn about yourself and your own educational ideas and practices. In Latin America, for example, I was involved in a project on how universities can contribute to equity, social cohesion, and democracy. Many old friends of Paulo Freire were involved in this project and demonstrated intellectually critical views on these issues. Educators should, in their view, contribute to democracy, social justice, and political change. Whereas the project was sponsored by the European Union, the Europeans learned a lot about the Latin America experiences.

Being twice a visiting professor at the University of Yogyakarta, Indonesia and lecturing in Singapore and Hong Kong gave me opportunities to learn about these regions. In particular, I got a chance to learn about the positive effects of strong social orientations.

To me, thinking about global educational change, the challenge in theory as well as in practice is how we can combine autonomy and social concern on all levels from individual students to educational systems.
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?

The past 15 years, a substantive part of my research focused on moral education and citizenship education. The concept of citizenship, nowadays, is not only relevant to the political dimension but also to social and cultural dimensions. What’s more, citizenship also embraces the identity of individuals. It brings attention back to the socializing function of education—its most relevant question of what kind of citizens schools want to develop. I think a socially just global world needs to develop a strong unyielding bond between autonomy and social concern. The Western world should become more social, many other parts of the world more autonomous. Therefore, it is important that we pay attention to the purpose of educational change.

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

What excites me about educational change is realizing that thinking about educational change is, in actual fact, thinking about what kind of world we want and how we can contribute to making it happen. Secondly, it is also important to make our research really international; to make our knowledge multipolar, to paraphrase Chantal Mouffe. This means that we recognize different ideas and practices and give more credits to other visions. And finally, there is a need for a new generation of scholars who will take on educational research and specifically educational change as it has expanded significantly. The generation who constituted the field needs to be succeeded by a younger generation that hopefully makes the field even more dynamic and global, with a focus on balancing autonomy and social concern.

References and further reading


WIEL VEUGELERS

Wiel Veugelers is a professor of education at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands. From 1979 until 2015 he also worked at the University of Amsterdam. In 1988 he started the Network Upper Secondary Education University of Amsterdam. He published nationally and internationally on educational change, and in particular on networking of schools, the purpose of educational change, and tensions between bottom-up and top-down processes in educational change.

Dr. Veugelers’ research and teaching is in the areas of citizenship education, moral development, teachers’ pedagogical professionalism, as well as educational change, networking between educational institutions, identity and citizenship development, and youth studies.

He is editor and founder of the book series ‘Moral Development and Citizenship Education’ of Sense Publishers. He is associate editor of the Journal of Moral Education and member of the editorial boards of the journals International Journal of Leadership in Education, Compare, Pedagogiek, Akademeia, ECCOS, and Revista Lusofona Educacao. In 2012, he received the Maslovaty Award of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction for his book Education and Humanism. In 2015, he received the Kuhmerker Career Award from the Association of Moral Education for his contribution to the research on moral and citizenship education.

In the Netherlands, Dr. Veugelers is scientific advisor for educational change and citizenship education in the Dutch Institute for Curriculum Development (SLO), the National Pedagogical Centers, and the Organization of Public Schools (VOO-VOS/ABB). He is a member of the international program advisory committee of the IEA study on citizenship education (ICCS).

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