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?

A commitment to equality (or, actually, equity) requires us to look outside and inside simultaneously, to consider both public policy and pedagogy. For me, that has meant a focus on, respectively, high-stakes testing and the sort of rote-recall instruction that is disproportionately reserved for low-income students of color.

Standardized tests, particularly when the results determine the fates of students, teachers, and schools, tend to measure two things: (a) the socioeconomic status of a given student population and (b) how much time has been diverted from meaningful learning in order to train students to become more proficient at taking standardized tests. When (a) is low, (b) tends to be high. Because these tests measure what matters least, intellectually speaking, every hour spent on test preparation is an hour not spent helping kids to become critical thinkers and enthusiastic learners. To be clear, some of our children have long received a second-rate education, which is shameful. But the top-down, corporate-styled, test-driven approach to school reform, which has turned so many inner-city schools into test-prep factories, has made this situation far worse—in part because rising scores are mistakenly regarded as a sign of progress.

The promise of equal educational opportunity is also related to what happens in individual classrooms. The haves and the have-nots live in two different worlds, educationally speaking—which often plays out, as I described it in an essay a few years ago, in accordance with the motto "The rich get richer while the poor get worksheets." Accompanying this mind-numbing, test-oriented curriculum are pedagogical strategies designed to control even the most minute features of students' behavior and an apparatus of rewards and punishments designed to elicit mindless obedience. These would be inhumane and objectionable wherever they occurred. That they are confined largely to schools that serve low-income African-American and Latino students is a moral outrage. And the fact that these schools, with their
scripted instruction and militaristic approach to discipline, are actually celebrated rather than condemned by politicians, corporate executives, and journalists is damning testimony of how deeply entrenched inequity is in the way we think about education.

Of course I've joined the call for equitable funding, and opposition to attempts to privatize our democratic public schools (in the name of "choice"), but I've also urged education scholars and practitioners to go further: to risk making enemies by condemning "No Excuses" charter schools, by demanding an intellectually rich curriculum and student-centered pedagogy for all students, and by pledging to stop evaluating schools—or interventions being tested in research —on the basis of standardized test scores.

Given your work on competition and rewards and on standardization and learning, what do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

I rise to the intriguing challenge of responding to a question about the "important contributions" of my own work without succumbing to the temptation of self-congratulation. I can't say what impact, if any, my work has made, let alone whether it's important. I can say only what I've tried to do.

One objective—a common denominator of much of my writing, I came to recognize in retrospect—is to invite educators to ask the root questions: not whether standardized test results are being misused but why we would want to standardize assessment in the first place, not how teachers can deliver information more effectively but whether learning is best understood as the delivery of information, not how to grade more fairly but why (in light of the disadvantages, and the alternatives) we would use grades at all. And so on.

Another, related objective has been to focus less on the means by which to get students to accomplish something and more on what it is they're supposed to accomplish—and whether it's really valuable. I can't help noticing that schools of education typically require "methods" classes but not goals classes.

Many educators cheerfully declare that they don’t care about theories; they just want something that works. But this begs the question: What do we mean by “works”? At its best, and on those relatively rare occasions when its results are clear-cut, research can only show us that doing A has a reasonably good chance of producing result B. It can’t tell us whether B is a good idea, and we’re less likely to talk about that if the details of B aren’t even clearly spelled out.

There has long been evidence, for example, to demonstrate the effectiveness of certain classroom management strategies, most of which require the teacher to exercise firm control from the first day of school. But how many readers of this research, including teacher educators and their students, interrupt the lengthy discussion of those strategies to ask what exactly is meant by “effectiveness”? The answer, it turns out, is generally some variation on compliance. If you do this, this, and this, you’re more likely to get your kids to do whatever they’re told.

With respect to academic outcomes, meanwhile, discussions about “promising results” from various policies and practices are admirably precise about what produced them but swiftly pass over the fact that those results consist of nothing more than scores on standardized tests, often norm-referenced and multiple-choice versions. Thus, the putatively successful teaching strategy—and all the impressive sounding data that support it—are worthless because there’s no evidence that it improves learning. Just test scores.

So my argument has been that if we're going to dedicate ourselves to meaningful change, we need to shift our focus from details of implementation to underlying premises, and from how to why.
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?

At this time, and at all times, young people, like older people, might be said to need three things. (I borrow here from the work of Ed Deci and Richard Ryan at the University of Rochester.) They yearn for a sense of relatedness or belonging, a feeling of being connected to others. They need to experience themselves as self-determining, to be able to make decisions about whatever affects them. And they seek opportunities to feel effective, to learn new things that matter to them and find (or create) answers to personally meaningful questions.

The field of educational change should be organized around these three priorities, not least because our schools so often aren’t. What could be worse, for kids who desperately desire a feeling of connection, than to plop them in a large institution where they feel invisible, anonymous, lost? Particularly in high school, too many people are thrown together, and too little time at a stretch is provided for any subset of them to come to know each other well. From early every weekday morning until well into the afternoon, it is rare for students to have much meaningful contact with adults—or even with one another. Moreover, any sense of community that does manage to develop is snuffed out by practices that set kids against one another. When students must compete—when, for example, they are not only rated but ranked—the lesson each learns is that everyone else is an obstacle to his or her success.

Similarly, what could be worse, for kids who need to be able to make decisions and feel some control over their lives, than to make them spend their days following other people’s rules, to tell them what to read, where to go, what to do? Why would we expect that children subjected to this regimen year after year would emerge as responsible decision-makers? In particular, the average American high school is terrific preparation for adult life—provided that its graduates intend to live in North Korea.

Finally, what could be worse, for kids who need to make sense of themselves and the world, than to treat them as passive receptacles into which facts are poured? They are made to sit at separate desks while a stream of details about predicates or decimals or photosynthesis wash over them. Rather than being invited to pursue projects that seem relevant and engaging, they are required to slog through tedious textbooks, memorizing what they think they will need for the next quiz. Rather than coming to understand ideas in depth, they’re exposed superficially to a vast amount of material that corresponds to a set of uniform standards imposed by distant experts. And when students predictably respond to all this by tuning out, or acting out, or dropping out, we promptly blame them for not working hard enough. Or we focus on instilling in them a “growth mindset.”

From my perspective, our field would be much improved if we made sure this simple truth informed all of our work: Children learn how to make good decisions by making decisions, not by following directions.
ALFIE KOHN

Alfie Kohn has been described by *Time* magazine as “perhaps the country's most outspoken critic of education's fixation on grades [and] test scores.” He is an independent scholar who has written 14 books, and scores of articles, about education, human behavior, and social theory. Among those books: *Punished by Rewards* (1993), *Beyond Discipline* (1996), *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (1999), and, most recently, *Schooling Beyond Measure* (2015). Kohn’s essays, meanwhile, have appeared in publications ranging from the *Review of Educational Research* to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and from *The Nation* to the *Harvard Business Review*.

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