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

As educational researchers, we should be very modest in claiming that our work transforms practice, especially when it comes to ensuring that all students are well served. Systematic research can, and does, yield valuable findings about the potential benefits or shortcomings of particular programs or practices. Far too often, however, beliefs trump knowledge and those who make policy, lead schools, or instruct students are untouched by the rich insights and well-grounded guidance that research can provide.

Having access to more sophisticated studies or more convincing findings may do little to curtail misguided actions or disappointing outcomes. However, research can advance our understanding of how those who implement policies do so, thus supporting reformers who would introduce and sustain effective practices.

For over 35 years I have studied teachers’ work, their workplace, and the policies that affect both. One thread of that research has been about the role that intrinsic and extrinsic incentives play in teachers’ motivation and success. Since the early 1900s, influential educators and politicians have repeatedly seized on merit pay—more recently called performance-based pay—as a mechanism for promoting harder work and better outcomes by teachers. For various social and cultural reasons, researchers and reformers in the US continue to believe—despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary—that pay for results will substantially and positively affect teachers’ instruction, ultimately to the benefit of students.

Over the past century, the purported promise of merit pay has risen in waves of enthusiastic policy making, only
to subside when these ventures fail or fade away because they are unpopular, costly, or ineffective. Researchers have dutifully tracked and analyzed such merit pay initiatives, often recommending how they might be improved. Although such recommendations sometimes led to refinements in subsequent policies, those proved to be no more successful in educating students than earlier ones.

Recently, the effectiveness of incentive pay has been tested rigorously in randomized experiments (Springer et al., 2012) and analyzed closely in longitudinal case studies (Malen & King, forthcoming). Studies such as these have documented the serious limitations of paying teachers for results and they have, for now, somewhat dampened enthusiasm for the strategy. However, history suggests that these research findings have not doused the fervor of those who believe that pay incentives are more powerful than the intrinsic incentives that teachers repeatedly report fuel their efforts and the workplace conditions that enable them to accomplish what they set out to do. There is little more that researchers can do to assess merit pay and influence practice in the face of resilient beliefs about its potential as a reform.

Another perspective on the potential of educational research to transform practice comes from the policy implementation studies conducted since the 1970s by scholars such as Pressman and Wildavsky (1973); Berman and McLaughlin (1978); McDonnell and Elmore (1987); Cohen (1990); Coburn (2001); Spillane et al. (2002); and Lipsky (2010). These researchers have sought to understand and explain how practitioners respond to policies. That is, when state or federal officials enact laws or regulations intended to change practice, these researchers study what those who implement the policies in schools and classrooms actually do. (Lipsky calls these implementers the “street-level bureaucrats.”)

Initially, those who conducted implementation studies were surprised to find so much divergence between the intended and actual responses to policies; some attributed that gap to willful disobedience or lack of knowledge or skill among the implementers. McLaughlin, however, proposed the very useful concept of “mutual adaptation” to explain this seeming lack of fidelity. She explained that in the process of implementation, both the policy and the practice changed as school officials or teachers sought to make the policy work to the advantage of their communities and students. Mutual adaptation came to be understood, not as evidence of defiance by implementers, but of their efforts to implement the policy successfully, if not totally consistent with the policymakers’ original intentions.

Recently, researchers also have documented the role that individual and social cognition play in policy implementation, explaining how participants’ beliefs, skills, and perspectives influence their interpretation and responses to policies. These studies further develop our understanding, not only of how educators respond to policies, but also of how policymakers could better address the needs of educators. Therefore, although educational researchers
ought to be motivated by a commitment to improving schooling for all students, the path that leads from convincing research findings to informed policy making, and ultimately to successful implementation is neither direct nor certain. Therefore, we should be both realistic and persistent in our efforts and expectations as researchers.

You are well known internationally for your work, inter alia, on teacher retention and on superintendents as change leaders. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

Throughout my studies of teachers’ work (their preparation, selection, support, and retention) and administrators’ efforts to lead change, my focus has been primarily on the organization and the context of these educators’ work. It’s not that I’m blind to the importance of individuals’ knowledge, beliefs, and skills. In fact, I have found that well-informed selection of superintendents, principals, and teachers is essential and that rushed hiring or haphazard supervision can have devastating effects. However, even the best educators cannot succeed if their organization or the broader context in which they work interferes with, rather than enhances, their efforts.

In studying the initial efforts of twelve newly-appointed superintendents to lead change in their district (Leading to Change, 1996), I found that they not only shaped the context of work for their principals and teachers, but also were, themselves, empowered or constrained by the history, politics, and policies of their local context. Certainly the skills and beliefs of superintendents in that study differed; however, in some cases, individuals faltered, who might have succeeded in a different setting. A new superintendent who was astute as a manager, educator, and political actor could soar in a context where school board members and the community valued his skills and created opportunities for his success. However, such individual strengths proved to be far less effective in a setting that discouraged initiative or undermined a commitment to important principles, such as equity.

Recently, my colleagues and I at the Public Education Leadership Project (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015) studied the working relationship between a central office and its schools in five large urban school districts that had achieved national recognition for their success. We were interested in understanding whether a particular approach to managing a district’s schools—either centralization or decentralization—was more effective.

Here, too, we found that context made the difference. What proved to be important was not whether district officials retained important decisions or delegated them to school leaders, but how they did so. Centralization was effective when the district systematically engaged principals and teachers in assessing and improving the district’s practices, such as curriculum and instruction, hiring, and budgeting. Decentralization was effective when school leaders were given the expertise and support...
they needed to make good decisions and sustain effective practices. In all cases, strong and knowledgeable principals were essential. However, without a coherent strategy and ongoing support by district officials, there was no assurance that those principals could and would effectively serve both their local community and the larger district.

The value of bringing an organizational perspective to educators' work has become especially clear over the past 20 years as my colleagues and I studied teachers' experiences, both in schools and in the profession. In our initial study at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, *Finders and Keepers* (Johnson et al., 2004) we tracked 50 new teachers over four years. Initially, we focused on them as individuals, seeking to understand why they were entering teaching, what they expected to find, and how they experienced their work.

By 2000, it became clear that many of those we studied had only a tentative commitment to teaching; as a result, we predicted correctly that retention would pose a serious problem for schools and districts. One thing we learned clearly was that, for these novices, most of what really mattered as they began their career and decided whether to stay, happened within their school.

Certainly, decisions by state and local officials about pay, instructional resources, or testing affected their experience, but interactions with their principal and colleagues proved to be far more important. When they worked with committed, well-informed, responsive educators, they were more likely to experience a sense of success in their own teaching, which then stoked their enthusiasm and confidence as teachers. When they were isolated in their classroom or encountered arbitrary administrators or bitter, disheartened peers, they were far more likely to leave their school or the profession. This study and others that followed have convinced me that attracting and hiring skilled teachers will not ultimately benefit students unless those teachers work with the consistent support of colleagues and administrators.

Our studies at the Project are part of a broader research field called “teacher quality.” This large and expanding field of research has focused primarily on what is frequently referred to as “the teacher pipeline,” that is, the established steps and practices for recruiting, preparing, hiring, assigning, assessing, rewarding, and sustaining teachers. Despite an enormous array of strategies intended to strengthen that pipeline—for example, increasing or decreasing licensing requirements; offering hiring bonuses; providing mentors; or evaluating performance with standards-based tools—turnover among teachers persists and students’ performance is not appreciably better.

I would argue that the impact of these efforts is modest because they are focused on affecting the individual, rather than both the individual and the school organization.
In our latest study of six high-performing, high-poverty schools, we found that teams were a central, ever-present component of teachers’ support in five of those schools. Teams were purposeful, well organized and their meeting times were inviolable. They yielded benefits for the teacher, and for students throughout the school, who experienced coherent instruction and consistent support.

Deciding to focus on the individual and/or the organization has methodological implications for researchers. For the most part, studying the organizations and contexts where they work requires intensive, qualitative inquiry, which is time-consuming and often expensive to conduct. Studying individuals’ responses to policies can be more efficient if researchers use quantitative methods to analyze administrative data sets, which states and school districts have built systematically over the past 15 years. As a consequence, most of the funding and research about teacher quality continues to focus on individual teachers and their responses to particular policies, rather than on their complex experiences within their schools and districts.

Some of the most informative research, however, does both. It brings to bear organizational concepts in analyzing quantitative data and relies on mixed methods to better illuminate how context influences teachers’ practice and career decisions.

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

That’s a very big question. One response is that, although we can learn from the experiences of other nations, we should not assume that US schools can or will readily adopt what works elsewhere. Mark Tucker, Linda Darling-Hammond, and their colleagues have carefully documented other countries’ effective practices for developing and sustaining a strong teaching force. The successes of Singapore are well known. However, it has become clear that transferring those lessons to US schools is very challenging. In large part, that is because the US society is not strongly committed to providing an effective public education for all students. Further we do not have the governance structures that would make such a wholesale transformation possible. Our recent experiences with states holding schools accountable for successfully teaching to a set of academic standards and the controversial—but widely accepted—Common Core State Standards document that clearly.

It is also apparent that mandates are only partially successful and that they often come with both benefits and unintended, adverse consequences. For example, in my view, the greatest benefit of the No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) was that it forced schools to account for
the learning of all sub-groups of students; a school could not meet its required targets for what was called Adequate Yearly Progress by cruising to success on the high scores of some students, while disregarding the performance of students with special needs or those learning English. Advocates for these sub-groups found much to celebrate in the law because, for the first time, these students were being taught rather than ignored.

However, the high-stakes tests and punitive public sanctions that also came with NCLB narrowed the curriculum—especially in low-income schools, where teachers were required to focus on reading and math to the exclusion of science and social studies. Some years ago, McDonnell and Elmore identified a set of policy instruments, including mandates, incentives, and capacity building, which could be combined to ensure that initiatives relied on a wide range of instruments for improvement. Despite its size and complexity, NCLB was a policy with a singular mechanism. Its mandate and heavy-handed sanctions did little to engage educators in solving the very problems that this law was intended to address.

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?

I think that students in the US have been shortchanged by various unintended effects of NCLB—a narrowed curriculum, more teacher-centered instruction, more time spent on test-taking skills, reduced attention to career preparation, and less attention to students’ social experience and psychological well-being. Students throughout the US, but especially those in low-income schools that have been the targets of accountability, need more experiences that take them as they are and engage them in active, meaningful learning. The goal should be to enrich their lives, rather than to extract evidence that they have acquired rudimentary knowledge and skills. It continues to be very important that schools are held accountable for all students’ success, but the means for doing that should be re-examined and rethought.

Researchers can be important players in documenting the practices of schools that succeed with all students, but especially those who have been ill-served by public schools. In studying successful rather than failing schools, we should investigate what is taught and how it is taught; students’ opportunities for formal and informal learning; how time is used during days, within weeks, and across the school year; how teachers share information and supports to ensure that no student gets lost in moving from class to class and grade to grade; how schools engage parents and others in the community in students’ learning and opportunities; how schools draw upon social and medical services to support their students; and how teacher leaders and school leaders collaborate to advance the school in achieving its mission.

Such research is costly and complex to conduct, but ultimately promises to have real value for educators and to deliver real benefits to their students.
What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field today?

At this time, public education is being seriously challenged in the US by citizens and politicians who do not believe that our society should invest the resources necessary to educate all students. Educational change is not being designed to provide greater opportunity for all students, but instead, to increase options for some students.

Although I think that market-based strategies and de-regulated schools can contribute to a richer, more robust system of schools, relying on those mechanisms alone will not lead to a well-informed, prosperous society. Although this current direction of reform concerns me greatly, I continue to be encouraged by the work of certain states, districts, and schools that reap benefits from their sustained commitment to both equity and excellence.

References


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Johnson has written three books about teachers and their work: *Teacher Unions in Schools* (1984), focuses on the role of teachers unions in the day-to-day work of schools. *Teachers at Work* examines the school as a workplace for teachers. *Finders and Keepers: Helping New Teachers Survive and Thrive in Our Schools* (2006), written with colleagues at The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, centers on the experiences of new teachers. Subsequent research at the Project focuses on teachers’ careers, alternative preparation, the role of unions, hiring, induction, performance-based pay, teacher teams, and teacher evaluation.

Between 2007 and 2014, Johnson served as co-chair of the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP), where she and her colleagues wrote *Achieving Coherence in District Improvement* (2015), which examines the management relationship between the central office and schools in five large urban school districts. Johnson is a member of the National Academy of Education.