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?

Like many others interested in educational change, I am driven by the belief that education can be a means to enhance equity of opportunity and outcomes. I also believe, unfortunately, that we are currently failing to achieve this promise for too many. One reason for this, and the one I address in my scholarship, is that many of the assumptions regarding the cause of school underperformance and the resultant policy interventions are misguided at best and harmful at worst. If accepted, this framing – that current policies may themselves be a problem – also helps to explain why, despite sustained effort and investments, real and lasting change to better meet the promise of equal educational opportunity has been so hard to achieve. As such, and in keeping with this year’s AERA theme, I see my work as a potential mechanism to (1) identify gaps between what we know about educational improvement and change and the policies that are often implemented to facilitate it and (2) advocate for better policies and approaches.

For example, I have worked to unpack the concept of “turnaround” policy within schools and, I hope, disassemble some of the unhelpful rhetoric associated with this approach. This policy tends to blame chronic underperformance on weak human capital (e.g., bad administrators, bad teachers, etc.), and a lack of school-based autonomy. Less emphasis is paid to the key issues of organizational culture (e.g., Wahlstrom et al., 2010), capacity building (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 2010) and educational infrastructure (e.g., Peurach & Neumerski, 2015) despite strong evidence that investments in these areas are needed for meaningful change and improvement to occur. My research sheds light on this misalignment via the experiences and perspectives of
those engaged in implementation and by conducting rigorous evaluations on the policies themselves. Taken together, my work supports assertions that turnaround has been largely ineffectual in producing meaningful change and requires reform (e.g., Peck & Reitzug, 2014; Stuit, 2012).

Beyond looking at these specific policies, I have also worked to unpack the how larger societal conditions, and specifically issues of racial and gender bias, impact our views of school leadership and who has access to and can flourish in such positions. With my colleague, Dr. Laura Burton, we find that female leaders are often caught into a type of “double-bind” (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013; Weiner & Burton, 2016). They can either exhibit what are considered male characteristics and be seen as strong leaders but unlikeable (e.g., dragon-lady, man-hater, etc.) or can engage with more stereotypically female characteristics (e.g., caring, compassion, etc.) and be seen as likeable but weak. Research also suggests that Black, Latina and other minority women are susceptible to even greater bias (Rosette & Livingston, 2012) with real implications for their opportunities to lead and their perceived effectiveness in such roles. Naming these biases and bringing these women’s voices into the larger research discourse can help to change the narrative about why such groups are underrepresented in leadership and facilitate meaningful change.

*Given your work on teacher leaders and on leadership teams in educational settings, what do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?*

One thread through my research, whether it be focused on teacher leadership, instructional leadership teams, principals or the role of the district in supporting school improvement, is the need to re-conceptualize leadership in education. Specifically, I see educational institutions, and particularly those in the U.S., continuing to embrace a “lone hero” orientation towards leadership in which positional authority and a top-down approach rules the day. We see evidence of this orientation in current principal practice, for example, as I found in principals’ unwillingness or inability to release authority and decision-making to instructional leadership team members (Weiner, 2016). We can also see it in larger policies like turnaround in which the principal is positioned as a, if not the, key mechanism for creating change and improvement in chronically underperforming schools (Murphy, 2008). As I already hinted to above, the lackluster results of turnaround efforts in the U.S and elsewhere, as well as the continued high rate of principal turnover and dissatisfaction suggest that current approaches may not be fulfilling their promise and are worth reconsidering.

On this point, one important contribution of my work for educational change, in the traditional of Hackman (2002) and others (e.g., Hallinger, 2010), is to present an alternative conceptualization of leadership in which the focus is on creating organizational conditions that facilitate greater worker voice decision-making authority and learning. With this framing,
our understanding of leadership then moves away from examining the discrete activities of an individual and towards investigating the degree to which those working in the organization feel empowered, engaged and are learning and growing to engage in change. It also shifts the researcher’s attention towards the organizational conditions that best facilitate these outcomes and how school leaders and others serving as informal leaders in the organization might help to build them.

For example, I have worked with my colleague, Dr. Monica Higgins, to consider how school leaders can develop organizational features to support psychological safety (Edmondson, 2003) and encourage workers to speak up and take risks without the fear of retribution. We find that teachers’ views regarding the degree of collaboration in the building, principal support and the degree to which they feel trusted and trusted him or her were key predictors of psychological safety (Weiner & Higgins, 2017). We also find that teachers’ feelings of psychological safety positively impacts students learning culture. Taken together, such findings, as well as work by Bryk et al. (2010) and Ronfeldt et al. (2013) and others, serve to reinforce the importance of professional culture as a key mechanism in organizational learning, change and improvement and the need to advance research and policy that shifts attention towards recruiting and developing leaders who are skilled in shaping and sustaining such cultures.

*Given your focus on psychological safety in healthcare and education organizations, what would be some major lessons we can learn from educational changes in your local context and from those taking place in the global context?*

While there are a number of useful lessons that can be gleaned in considering psychological safety as a lever for educational change and improvement, there are two that I see as fairly obvious but often overlooked and thus worthy of further consideration whether in a local or global context. The first is that institutional context matters in the degree to which a given organization can develop a productive culture. Frequently, it seems that school are treated as existing in a vacuum, disconnected from the larger institutional environment in which they are situated. One example of this is the growing but still relatively sparse research on the role of the school district or other type of oversight organizations in school improvement and change. And yet, despite our tendency to focus solely on local conditions, what our recent comparing psychological safety in education and healthcare (Edmondson et al., 2016) suggests is that these institutional environments have a powerful impact on how culture develops and changes over time.

For example, the degree of specialization in the medical field has an impact on how many and the type of doctors working in a hospital and hence the work rules and structures to support effectiveness and efficiency. These rules and structures then impact how organization culture and subcultures develop. Indeed, we find that while psychological safety appeared to be a school-level phenomenon in schools, in
hospitals, there was greater variation within work groups than from hospital to hospital. Taking a step back then, this work suggests that while psychological safety shows great promise as a tool to facilitate employee learning and hence organizational improvement, it would be a mistake to think that it exists in the same way across institutional contexts and is therefore easily replicable or that it would produce similar results from one context to another. Such understandings should also push researchers, policymakers and practitioners to learn deeply about the larger context and how institutional pressures serve to impact current practice before making modifications.

The second lesson is that educational infrastructure (i.e., structures and resources used by educational systems to enhance instructional practice) (Hopkins & Spillane, 2015) is a key aspect in building a culture of psychological safety and a positive professional culture more broadly. For example, in the study I mentioned earlier by myself and Dr. Monica Higgins (i.e., Weiner & Higgins, 2016), we found that teachers’ physical safety and access to materials were key predictors of psychological safety.

Additionally, given the importance of teacher collaboration and trust in fostering psychological safety, one could imagine that infrastructure to support such efforts (e.g., scheduled times for teachers to meet, coaches to ensure meetings times are used effectively, etc.) would also be critical elements in achieving positive results. In other words, if you want to shift culture, a good place to start may be in considering the degree current infrastructure supports such a shift and make investments here when needed.

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?

As perhaps already clear from my responses here, my scholarship focuses on schools and educational institutions as work environments and how to support professionals in them to do their best work. I am less knowledgeable about what is best for students and would likely defer to the many incredible skilled and thoughtful educators I have the privilege to work with in my role as a teacher and researcher.

That said, as a researcher, citizen, and a parent of two children currently in public schools, I feel that, given the larger political climate and changing world, there is a need for young people to have access to and participate in communities that build their compassion, empathy and courage. I also feel and the research suggests that the professional culture of the school and how teachers engage with one another have real and important consequences for this culture. As such, it seems important that as a field, we continue to focus on how to build positive school cultures for adults and students alike.
What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field today?

There are so many important issues to be addressed! In terms of where I will be expending my efforts, I hope to continue to work to help to shift the focus from blaming educators to investments in creating organizational conditions to help them do their best work and engage in productive change and improvement. Given reports of looming educator shortages, turnover and general dissatisfaction as well as the often overwhelming expectations and pressures they face, I think it is incumbent on educational change researchers to focus on using our collective skills to improve the profession. This would include speaking up and out in response to problematic policies and to participate in engaged scholarship around issues of justice and equity to make sure that as we change, we change in ways that elevate good practice and increased opportunity for all. As part of this focus, and as a professor working with teachers and school and district leaders, I see part of my responsibility to help my students to feel empowered to use their voices to become change agents in their own settings. I am excited by the prospect of educators taking back the reins of their profession and the corresponding policies of improvement and will do all I can to support such efforts.

Connected to these points, I think another critical issue in educational change is, given what I perceive to be a shifting environment regarding standards-based accountability and the locus of regulatory control, we get active in the reshaping of the policy environment. Indeed, in these times of flux it seems a particular good time to, for example, re-evaluate how we hold schools accountable, for what and to whom. Part of this consideration would be the degree to which neo-liberal frameworks including what Day and Gu (2007) have called “performativity” have truly served to enhance education opportunity and outcomes for all. I am excited to see the kind of innovative and perhaps even revolutionary thinking from the field to generate a new and, I hope, more inclusive and ground up approach to educational change and improvement.

References


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