The 2018 AERA theme is The Dreams, Possibilities, and Necessity of Public Education. How does your scholarship align with the 2018 meeting theme?

The necessities of public education systems are rapidly evolving. Nevertheless, if I were to identify one of the most salient areas that is undergoing a pronounced transformation, it would likely be in the broader field of literacy. How one defines and conceptualizes this construct is changing fairly rapidly—often in response to the digital world that most students within the developed world are situated. The increased use of technology in contemporary classrooms presents both opportunities and formidable challenges—particularly as educators strive to promote an engaging learning environment within contexts that may be under-resourced.

At the same time as our notion of literacy is changing, conventional trajectories of student achievement on traditional literacy measures are also changing. Consider the robust gender gap that is often reported between boys and girls. More recent findings suggest that this gap is beginning to close when the assessment domain shifts from paper-and-pencil to online testing measures.

Collectively, changing notions and performance in literacy achievement are especially important for our most vulnerable student populations—often those disproportionately represented from lower socioeconomic groups. Although the available research is fairly clear on some of the recommended best practices, these pedagogical approaches must still be enacted in a global context that seems to be skewed toward a narrow construct of “literacy.” In my opinion, narrow visions of all curriculum domains alienate significant segments of the student population and lead to reduced educational opportunities for our most vulnerable students.

My most recent scholarship examines the conditions under which some of our most
vulnerable student populations can thrive and achieve outcomes similar to non-migrant and/or more affluent peers across various international public education systems.

Ultimately, I aim for my research to inform the development of education policies so that all students have opportunities to learn and the possibility to realize their potential. Public education systems play a critical role in actualizing the dreams of these marginalized students.

Your work focuses, inter alia, on the intersection of international achievement testing and educational policy. What may be some challenges and possibilities international achievement testing poses?

International achievement testing, particularly PISA, continues to be fiercely debated for the role it plays in influencing educational policy reform. Proponents of PISA underline its important role in spurring education system improvements through the lessons learned from top-performing nations. Essentially, PISA results help governments ‘borrow’ policies from effective education systems, often referred to as ‘reference societies’, in the hopes of emulating their high-achieving success within their own national context. Prominent reference societies include Finland, Shanghai-China, and most recently Singapore – which was the highest ranking country in PISA 2015. Although many academics contest the value of ‘borrowing’ policies, one of the positive messages associated with PISA is that high achievement and equitable learning outcomes are indeed possible. This is reflected in both the messaging provided by the OECD, which is responsible for the administration of PISA, as well as the burgeoning interest in using disaggregated results to understand the achievement differences between various student populations (i.e., males versus females, high versus low SES students, immigrant versus non-immigrant populations, etc.). Collectively, this body of research has increased the salience and overall importance of raising the educational outcomes of diverse student populations – many of which have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education settings.

The academic community in education, for the most part, has expressed serious concerns with the impact of PISA on large-scale reform. This litany of concerns is aptly expressed in an open letter in The Guardian (British national daily) newspaper entitled “OECD and PISA tests are damaging education worldwide—academics,” which was directed to Dr. Andreas Schleicher, the current director of the PISA program. The overall sentiment expressed in the numerous critiques of PISA seem to suggest the OECD has eroded the autonomy of nation states and promoted the homogenization of educational systems around the world.

Collectively, the expanding role of PISA in the policy realm has both galvanized support for the development of key foundational skills across the life span and been criticized for the narrow focus inherent with the testing of select subject matter. My own research with a group of international colleagues suggests there is a diversity of policy responses, sometimes in the form of political rhetoric, which have been enacted in response to this international benchmark measure. Moreover, the trajectory of reforms that stem from PISA
seem to be fairly diverse across the range of Western educational jurisdictions which I have examined.

Given your focus on academic achievement of immigrant students and your recent observation that “PISA results suggest [Canada has] much to celebrate, but also some cause for concern,” how might education policies help address achievement gaps in immigrant students?

It is important to remember that various factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, school demographics, ethnicity, country of origin, among others, are frequently examined in relation to the achievement gap between non-migrant and immigrant student groups. These characteristics operate within distinct national and regional contexts with overlapping as well as distinct education policies. Education policies can help narrow the achievement gap, but also unintentionally increase it if they are not designed or implemented properly. Research supports the previous claim, as evidenced by the variety of outcomes that result from diverse education policies around the world.

At the same time, there is a danger in separating education policies from broader social protection and economic policies that ease integration for recent immigrants and refugee children. Thus, a coordinated approach, which is responsive to local communities, and recognizes the intersection of education, social, and economic policies, is more likely to be successful in reducing student achievement gaps for first- and second-generation students. Although educational disadvantages can certainly be addressed and reduced by schools, these outcomes do not occur in a vacuum devoid of other important sectors. Governments departments need to strive for policy coordination and coherence when addressing this increasingly salient issue. From my vantage point, we do a disservice to children, adolescence, and adults when we divorce education policies from the broader cultural context in which they are implemented.

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 be the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

Part of my answer to this question could have been written 100 years ago. And ironically, it can also be written 100 years from now. By that I mean there will never be a substitute for good teaching—regardless of the structure or delivery models of schools in the future. I also don’t think technology will ever supplant the important role that teachers play in fostering an effective learning environment. Similarly, if you accept the premise that good teaching is a “key need” of young people, then I would venture to say that good assessment is equally important since assessment is the foundation of good teaching. Certainly, the seminal work done by colleagues (see for example, Black et al., 2004) in the Assessment Reform Group from the United Kingdom underlines the important role that formative assessment plays in improving teaching, learning, and student performance within schools.
Unfortunately, proper assessment training for pre-service and in-service teachers is easier said than done. Indeed, the lack of assessment literacy in a significant number of teachers is a persistent problem that requires sustained attention. Compounding this problem is a global zeitgeist that affirms that prominence of large-scale assessment, often to the detriment of teacher’s classroom assessment data. From my perspective, students need to demonstrate “twenty-first century” skills such as creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving and our curriculum, teaching, and assessment must be aligned to reflect these critical skills.

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

Without a doubt, the most important issue facing educational change, from my perspective, is the overarching challenge of sustainability. Education change is often situated within a specific national or regional context that possesses its own unique historical, cultural, economic, and political issues. With respect to political interests, this often presents formidable pressures to see rapid success whenever a specific educational change initiative is adopted or promoted. Governments, particularly within the Western world, are often given four-year mandates by their public. Yet the educational change literature is fairly conclusive in this regard—namely, that sustained change often requires a timeline that exceeds the mandate of one-term elected policymakers. Thus, it seems imperative that scholars around the world seek to understand the most effective ways to preserve the integrity of key change initiatives or elements in the face of a rapidly changing geo-political environment. Certainly, the recent elections in the United States and United Kingdom are two notable jurisdictions that will be grappling with this important issue as newly elected policymakers seek to put their own stamp on education.

One of the most exciting developments in the field of educational change is that it appears to be evolving into a more interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of study. My own work in relation to an upcoming Routledge volume titled *The PISA Effect on Global Educational Governance* is aligned with this growing cross-disciplinary emphasis.

Scholars with expertise in diverse fields such as comparative education, educational administration and leadership, economics of education, educational statistics, political science, public policy, sociology, as well as leaders working for educational research councils, governmental and non-governmental organizations, discuss salient issues related to the expanding role of this international achievement measure. Overall, I believe the study of educational change benefits from an eclectic and cross-disciplinary approach and may eventually lead to greater policy coherence across various government departments—albeit in select jurisdictions that have moved away from opinion-based approaches to educational policy reform.

**Reference**

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Dr. Louis Volante is Professor of Education at Brock University in Ontario, Canada. He is also an Affiliated Researcher at the Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, UNU-MERIT (United Nations University–Maastricht Economic and Social Research Institute on Innovation and Technology), in the Netherlands.

Professor Volante is currently the President-Elect for the Canadian Educational Researchers Association (CERA) and is a former recipient of the R.W.B. Jackson Publication Award, which is awarded annually by CERA for the best English language journal article.

Professor Volante’s research is focused on the global governance of education, comparative policy analysis, international achievement studies, migrant integration and student achievement, socioeconomic inequality and student outcomes, and educational reform and innovation. His publications have been widely disseminated and referenced by scholars around the world. Louis’ latest book is entitled “The Intersection of International Achievement Testing and Educational Policy: Global Perspectives on Large-Scale Reform” (Routledge Press, 2016 / ISBN: 9781138936515). Forthcoming books include “The PISA Effect on Global Educational Governance” (Routledge Press, in press / ISBN: 9781138217416) and “Immigrant Student Achievement and Education Policy: Cross-Cultural Approaches” with Drs. Don Klinger and Özge Bilgili (Springer Press).

Professor Volante is currently the Principal Investigator of a large 5-year research project that examines the relationship between immigrant student achievement and education policies across Canada. The results of this mixed-methods longitudinal study will have profound implications – particularly as governments around the world seek the most effective means to improve the educational outcomes of immigrant student groups. Other members of this project include the Co-Investigator Dr. Don Klinger (Associate Dean, Faculty of Education, Queens University) and Collaborator Dr. Melissa Siegel (Professor and Head of Migration Studies, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, UNU-MERIT).