The 2018 AERA theme was The Dreams, Possibilities, and Necessity of Public Education. Even though the conference just finished a few days ago, the theme is very relevant to what we do. What can be the promise of public schools and how does—or should—educational change bring us closer to such schooling?

The promise of public schools is that it provides a safe environment where high quality education is given to each and every student. Unfortunately, there are barriers that prohibit this. One of those barriers is teachers’ bias. One of my former professors, Eddie Denessen, conducts fascinating research into teachers’ bias. For example, he and his colleagues found that teachers’ implicit attitudes toward dyslexia related to their ratings of student achievement on a writing task (Hornstra et al., 2010), and that their implicit prejudiced attitudes explained ethnic achievement gap sizes across classrooms (Van den Bergh et al., 2010). These outcomes shocked me, and they also illustrate the complexity of achievement gaps. It is not just a matter of allocating more money to students from a disadvantaged background or with learning disabilities. Among other things, it is also a matter of changing people’s core convictions and attitudes.

Another important barrier is language. In the Netherlands, students from a wide variety of nationalities go to the same schools. For a large group of students and their families, Dutch is not their mother tongue, which makes education in Dutch for them more difficult. Once, as part of my work as a student assistant on a project about parental involvement, I interviewed eight-year-old students about the language they spoke at home. I was surprised by the number of students who indicated that the only language they were able to
speak was Dutch, whereas the only language their parents spoke was that of their native country. So, these students were not able to communicate with their parents. Amongst other things, this brought challenges to their education: they could not ask their parents for help, their parents could not read them stories when they were little, etc. Though these students often found help from other family members (e.g., a sibling or aunt/uncle), this created a barrier between education and their life at home, which students and parents who both have Dutch as their mother tongue do not have. So, in trying to close the achievement gap and to provide high quality education to each and every student, it is important that such language barriers are taken into account and measures are taken to solve them.

*Your work focuses on sustainable educational and organizational change. What do you see to be some important contributions of your work to the field of educational change?*

My doctoral dissertation aimed to determine why data use in schools working with the data team procedure (see Schildkamp, Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2015) was (not) sustained. This explanation was sought in the process through which data team members built capacity for data use both within their team and in their school. The studies of my dissertation illustrated that data teams struggled to build this capacity. For example, team members often did not share their knowledge about data use with their colleagues, and even when they did share their knowledge, it was often done in ways that were less likely to be effective (Hubers, Poortman, Schildkamp & Pieters, forthcoming). Consequently, schools did not sustain their data use and were struggling to develop both policies and practices related to sustaining their use of data (Hubers, Schildkamp, Poortman & Pieters, 2017). Taken together, my thesis illustrated that studying the process of capacity building to understand sustainable school-wide changes is an indispensable part of understanding the long-term dynamic between the intervention and the educational practice. Moreover, this thesis illustrated that both capacity building and sustaining school-wide change require explicit attention and cannot be taken for granted: additional efforts in this area are required.

Consequently, I wanted to increase awareness on the sustainability issue. To do so, I am working as a guest editor on a special issue about sustainability. The first article (of the special issue) provides a theoretical conceptualization of sustainable teacher development and school improvement and, in turn, suggests a starting point in developing a corresponding methodology. The other articles in the special issue included in the special issue illustrate how factors like organizational expectations, personal beliefs and motivation, and school culture can promote or hinder sustainable changes. In addition, the articles illustrate how schools were (not) able to make sustainable changes, by focusing, for example, on the development of leadership and schools’ organizational routines.
Given your focus on sustainable educational and organizational change, what would be the lessons we can learn in order to establish sustainable changes?

In the long run, most educational changes are not sustained (Fullan, 2016; Hubers et al., 2017). Therefore, phrases said by researchers and/or designers of interventions like: ‘the intervention will spread like a ripple in a pond’ or ‘the intervention will snowball,’ should be treated with caution. Lessons I learned from my research on this topic include the importance of focus. It is crucial that educators collectively decide on a single change purpose and keep that purpose on their radar for a number of years. Once, I visited a school which tried to implement eight educational changes within one year. For example, they wanted to use data to improve their schooling, improve their assessment strategies, and personalize their students’ learning. Though each of these changes can be of tremendous value to students, trying to implement them all simultaneously will not work. It is better to choose one type of change and really make it work, than to do a lot of things in a superficial manner. However, the difficulty is to make that decision. What is it the school wants to excel at? What are the core values and what educational changes will not be implemented?

Another major lesson learned is that it can never be assumed that knowledge will automatically flow through a professional learning community or a school; this is something that requires explicit attention, focus, and considerable effort. Our studies illustrated that educators found it really difficult to share their knowledge with others (Hubers et al., forthcoming; Hubers, Moolenaar, Schildkamp, Daly, Handelzalts, & Pieters, 2017). To overcome these difficulties, it is important to support educators in determining what content they need to share given the aims of their educational change, at what level of detail knowledge needs to be shared, and what activities best fit these aims. The most often chosen activity, yet least likely to be effective, is written communication (e.g., an email or a piece in the staff newsletter). In contrast, simulating active participation (e.g., scheduling a workshop) is most likely to be effective (Wenger, 1998), but this strategy is hardly ever chosen. See Hubers and Poortman (2017) for additional practical strategies to face the sustainability challenge.

Young people are the focus of educational change for improvement. 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?

Globally, schools are confronted with a plethora of changes. Examples include classroom differentiation, data-based decision making and research informed practice, addressing students’ 21st century skills, implementing STEM education and inquiry-based learning, and the implementation of ICT (information and communication technology) in schools. In principle, all of these changes can be of value to students. Today, I think one of the most important challenges is to address students’
21st century skills. The reason for this is that our society is changing rapidly and students receive education for jobs that do not yet exist. For example, thirty years ago, the Internet did not yet exist. Today, a plethora of jobs exist because of the Internet, including web developer, web designer, and digital marketeer. Stimulating students’ 21st century skills helps to prepare them for such an ever-changing society. Examples of those skills include critical thinking, non-routine problem solving, teamwork and information fluency (Ananiadou, & Claro, 2009). Moreover, it is important to create a learning culture in which students (but also adults) engage in continuous learning to stay up-to-date of new technologies and research findings.

The field of educational change should prioritize the implementation of 21st century skills, though a solid foundation of basic skills such as reading, writing, calculation, etc. is required. However, the implementation of 21st century skills comes with some challenges. For example, those skills will be taught by teachers who do not necessarily master those skills themselves. Moreover, part of the 21st century skills is that some problems are so complex that they do not have one appropriate solution. This means that in assessing such skills, one should allow for multiple solutions. This is uncommon in education and requires different assessment strategies.

Taken together, professional development programs are required to aid teachers in implementing 21st century education. Fortunately, those programs are already being developed, and beautiful examples of this exist in the educational practice.

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

For me, one of the most important and exciting issues is how we can understand and study the change process itself. There are a lot of factors at play: the way in which leadership is displayed, the availability of resources, the relationships between colleagues, the individual and organizational learning processes, etc. This list becomes even more extensive when we want to understand an entire school system, district, or nation-wide reform.

Though we already know a lot about these factors, we understand them in relative isolation. We do not yet know their underlying dynamic processes. More importantly, educators’ learning processes, which are essential in establishing real and sustainable change, remain a black box. Those learning processes are fascinating to me, especially how individual and organizational learning processes take place, how they result in individual and organizational changes, and how those changes influence subsequent learning processes. I firmly believe this requires a more holistic and dynamic lens: it is not just about individual teachers learning about a specific change, it is about a dynamic interplay between teachers, school leaders, and administrators (not to mention pupils, parents, and the government) learning both individually, in teams, and as an organization. I believe one of the biggest challenges is to find a way to study this dynamic nature to come to a true understanding of the fundamental principles of change.
Another related exciting issue came to me when reading Kahneman’s book: *Thinking fast and slow*. In a nutshell, the book is about our mind, and how we cannot always rely on our (professional) intuitions. A core underlying assumption in the educational change literature is that teachers’ participation in professional development programs is the most fruitful way to implement such changes (Sleegers, & Leithwood, 2010). However, when we look at psychological research, we know that people are not likely to change their behaviour, not even when their own health is at stake. For example, such research illustrated that even when people gained knowledge about a healthy diet, they did not change their actual eating habits (Khare & Inman, 2006). So then, why would you change your practice at work?

Kahneman and Klein (2009) showed that various types of bias influence work-related behaviour, and that such biases might also occur during change processes. Currently, I am setting up experiments together with my students to see if we can elicit teachers’ bias towards change, and I am very curious to find out what the results will be.

**References**


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