The 2019 AERA theme is Leveraging Education Research in a Post-Truth Era: Multimodal Narratives to Democratize Evidence. How can such leveraging of educational research contribute to the democratization of evidence and to educational change?

The 2019 AERA theme is timely given our current political context and the state of education research, especially in the field of educational change. Researchers in our field continue to research and discuss professional collaboration and the shift in language and thought to “collaborative professionalism,” which necessarily involves valuing a broader base of voices and evidence to inform effective collaborative practices in educational spaces. Research and practice have indicated time and time again that we must value teachers’ and students’ voices if we want to ensure our change strategies are to be impactful. In my work with Andy Hargreaves on collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2017; 2018), which builds upon the work of others in the area of educational change, we, too, found this to be the case. Valuing evidence from interviews with teachers and students helped us to move beyond a simple conceptual design to a more complex understanding of what makes for transformative collaboration. Recognizing the importance of teachers and students in collaborative designs, as well as the idea that context and culture matter, are not novel ideas, but placing emphasis on these points is essential when educational leaders and policymakers are often seeking a quick-fix replication of a model, especially if that model is not informed by broader voices and perspectives. It is heartening to see how many educational change researchers are centering these voices to democratize evidence as we inform system and school leaders, policymakers, and educators. With the 2019 AERA theme also emphasizing this point, it signifies that we
are on the right path and need to continue pushing forward with research of this kind.

In your work together with Andy Hargreaves on the concept of collaboration, you argue, inter alia, that "One of K-12 education’s big challenges over the last 20 years has been to increase the frequency and quantity of professional collaboration in schools." What do you see to be some effective ways to cultivate such collaboration for school improvement?

Collaboration can be challenging for a multitude of reasons from not having sufficient time or resources to support collaborative initiatives, to a lack of buy-in because of a solely top-down design. Also, collaboration often takes time to see the results flourish and necessarily requires navigating interpersonal dynamics as educators build relationships. In the last 20 years, policymakers and politicians too often have sought out quick-fixes for school improvement. But, as we found by reviewing the literature and conducting our own research, the potential transformative impact of collaboration is clear. Meaningful collaboration can be transformative for school leaders, teachers, and students alike. To increase the frequency, quantity, and quality of collaboration, there needs to be a thoughtful design, support from school or system leaders, and the will of the teachers to put forth the time and energy to collaborate.

What does this look like in practice? Drawing from our work with the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) network in the US Pacific Northwest, it means involving all stakeholders in the design process, considering all factors, contexts, and priorities to craft a collaborative mission that is both compelling and effective. But a design only goes so far. Drawing from our research in the Keewatin-Patricia district school board in Ontario, Canada, collaboration is effective when it is supported by district and school leaders. Specifically, it is essential for professional learning communities (PLC) to receive priority including ensuring embedded collaboration time and topics chosen by the teachers who know best how to respond to their students and the strengths and challenges present in their classrooms. Finally, collaboration can be cultivated by increasing the capacity of teachers, viewing and empowering them as teacher-leaders who then develop the will to drive collaborative initiatives. Teachers face an enormous workload and many challenges in their roles, but we have found that they embrace the work of collaboration when they clearly see how it connects to their teaching and benefits their students. Teachers are more likely to embrace collaboration, and not see it as merely another mandated change strategy, when they find it to be worth the effort, relevant, effective, and transformative for their students.

Given your perspective of school improvement that builds on your work on collaborative professionalism, what would “Meaningful collaboration can be transformative for school leaders, teachers, and students alike.”
be some major lessons we can learn from local and global changes in education worldwide?

Valuing international perspectives and the different contexts and cultures in which schools are situated is essential when thinking about collaborative professionalism. It is an unfortunate tendency that some educators seek to replicate a new change strategy without first considering what is necessary to ensure its effectiveness across contexts. Using what we refer to as “The Four Bs,” we emphasize that educators must understand the complex, multi-faceted factors that set the stage for a new collaborative initiative. “The Four Bs” are: before, betwixt, beyond, and beside.

“International perspectives are crucial when developing a conceptual understanding in education”

Each offers important questions to consider including, “What came before this proposed collaborative initiative?” “What initiatives did school leaders support and what kind of culture has been established to support collaborative work?” “What other forms of collaboration or other school improvement strategies are present betwixt or alongside the proposed collaborative initiative?” “How does this collaborative initiative connect beyond the school, either to other schools and educators or to existing or new research? And finally, “What support does the school or system provide beside this collaborative initiative, and specifically thinking about time and resources?” Investigating these factors can help educators set realistic parameters or acknowledge limitations that could otherwise jeopardize the hope for meaningful change.

Our work on collaborative professionalism took us to the US Pacific Northwest, Canada, Colombia, Hong Kong, and Norway. What worked in one context, both in terms of collaborative design and implementation, would not necessarily work in another. Rural contexts in the US, Canada, and Colombia presented unique challenges that required technology to be coupled with in-person work to leverage meaningful collaboration. In Hong Kong, implementation of an “Open Class” model, in which educators from other schools come to observe and provide feedback and critique on a shared lesson, works because of an established culture that promotes transparency and structured, candid feedback as a means to grow professionally. In Colombia, political factors set the backdrop for the Escuela Nueva network’s approach emphasizing peace, democracy, and community-based learning. We would have neither learned about nor emphasized this essential insight of “The Four Bs” without these international cases. International perspectives are crucial when developing a conceptual understanding in education and, as we learned, must include some discussion of the importance of contextual and cultural nuance so that costly (in every way) replication errors can be avoided.

Another major lesson we learned is that effective collaboration should not merely be pursued by teachers for students, but with students. Through our research on the NW
RISE network in the US Pacific Northwest and Escuela Nueva in Colombia, we saw clear examples of how teachers better understood the collaborative work they were undertaking by seeing how their students also collaborated. For example, when students connected virtually across state lines using technology in the NW RISE network, teachers learned they needed to support students with clear expectations, guidelines, and practice to ensure they had meaningful virtual connections. Though the primary goal of connecting students was to help one another with their argument writing as peer editors, the teachers learned more about the instructional support that was required, leading to relevant, meaningful discussions to ensure both students’ and teachers’ collaboration led to enhanced learning.

Young people (students) 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?

In education and more broadly in society, there is a necessary focus on identity, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Young people are trying to determine who they are, where they came from, where they are going, and how they fit into their existing and new communities. Young people also crave learning. We, as educators, must consider how we either help or hinder young people through our research and practice. Through our research on collaborative professionalism, I re-learned the importance of context, culture, and community, especially when thinking about educational change strategies. Further, I learned that students must always be at the center of our work, and this must go beyond a conceptual understanding to actually including students in collaborative practices if they are to be meaningful and transformative. Young people want to be heard and want to learn. When I was conducting interviews of secondary students for my dissertation work on the NW RISE network (O’Connor, 2017), one student’s response struck me and has stayed with me. When asked why he chose a particularly formal tone and certain language choices in his argument writing essay on a community-based issue intended for the state representative who lives in his rural community, he responded saying, “I thought I could be heard.” It was a simple, yet powerful statement.

Despite the reality that all students have important things to say, many educators preference certain student voices over other. We hear the voices of our students differently based on their identities and our own biases. Race, culture, socio-economic status, gender, orientation, and so on all impact the ways our students are ‘heard’ across our educational contexts.”
conduct research and make recommendations for school improvement that equitably and justly serve all students, and especially those who have been historically or are currently marginalized. I have been inspired by many in the field of educational change who take up these issues and I believe that these topics must continue to be prioritized so that our work can be transformative for all students and communities.

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

As someone who greatly values collaboration in education, I (perhaps to no surprise) find collaboration and collaborative professionalism to be an important issue in educational change. This past year, I am working with all K-12 Catholic school principals in the state of Rhode Island in a professional development series. When I met with the superintendent to discuss this work, he said that, in many ways, collaboration is at the heart of all educational change. If we seek to make changes to our individual schools and broader systems, it requires the will of the many, not just the will of one. This sentiment has stayed with me when thinking about the field of educational change. At the same time, I recognize that there is much beyond collaboration that impacts meaningful and transformative educational change and am grateful to the many researchers and practitioners in the field who are doing important research and leading our field forward.

As I mentioned in my previous response, issues of identity, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are also paramount. We must consider these issues for students, certainly, but also for teachers and other educators. How are we considering teacher well-being, in addition to student well-being? How are we considering equity and diversity in school leadership opportunities? How do empirically-informed proposed educational change strategies impact schools and communities, especially those that have been historically or are currently marginalized? I have seen members of our field take up these issues in their work and I look forward to seeing how research evolves going forward.

Two things that excite me about the educational change field is that it is both global and personal. International perspectives force us to consider context and culture in rich and meaningful ways that impact policy, practice, and research. I was fortunate to learn from international perspectives in our research on collaborative professionalism. I have also personally benefitted from wonderful conversations with colleagues from across the globe at Educational Change SIG events at AERA annual meetings and in other conference or

“If we seek to make changes to our individual schools and broader systems, it requires the will of the many, not just the will of one.”
university spaces. Their insights and feedback push me as I continue my work and it gives me great pleasure to learn from, celebrate, and highlight theirs. As indicative in these comments, our field is also personal and relational. We have outstanding mentors, those who have established a strong foundation of research in educational change, who now encourage me and others as early-career scholars to be the leaders of change in research, policy, and practice. Those of us – past, present, and future – leading the change benefit from both the global and the personal. The global and personal help us to remember the importance of topics and issues discussed above like context, culture, identity, and equity – topics which inform extant and current educational change research and which encourage members of our field going forward. Seeing this focus excites me and shows the promise for how we in the field of educational change can work with others to seek to bring about a more excellent and just educational experience for the leaders, educators, and students that we have the distinct privilege of serving.

References
MICHAEL T. O’CONNOR

Michael T. O’Connor is the director of the Providence Alliance for Catholic Teachers (PACT) program at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island, USA. In this role, Michael coordinates a Master’s secondary track, teaches Master’s level courses, provides supervision and instructional coaching to the program’s teachers, and offers support to the program’s partner Catholic schools in the New England region. A former middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teacher and instructional coach, Michael received his Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction from the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. At Boston College, he worked with Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley on the Northwest Rural Innovation and Student Engagement (NW RISE) network project. This project, and specifically his work with ELA teachers participating in the network, informed his dissertation work on examining secondary students’ language choices in authentic, community-based writing activities and the ways in which teachers collaborated to support student writing across rural contexts. His work with NW RISE also served as a key case for his work on collaborative professionalism, resulting in the publication of his book with Andy Hargreaves: Collaborative Professionalism: When Teaching Together Means Learning for All (Corwin Press).