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?

People often ask me about the common thread running through my career. I've been a Ph.D. theoretical physicist, an education journalist, a charity CEO, and now a Professor. The constant across all these roles is my work at the boundaries of research and communication. No matter my position, I continually ask, “What does the evidence tell us? “How can we present it so a wide range of people can understand and act on it?” These same questions lie at the heart of this year’s AERA conference. For me it’s perfect timing.

In the post-truth world of populist and divisive politics, it can be all spin over substance – politicians producing clever rhetoric, offering powerful narratives stirring the emotions of potential voters. Too often it’s policy making on a whim. And it trumps research evidence every time.

In my book Social Mobility and Its Enemies (2018), with co-author Stephen Machin, we argue that populist politics is itself a symptom of a society suffering from low social mobility and extreme inequality. A disturbing trend in both Britain and the United States has been the growing suspicion of the ‘expert view’ in key national debates, including those on education.

But what’s been reassuring in Britain is the countervailing grass-roots movement (Department for Education, 2018) to use evidence in both the daily practice of classroom teaching and nation-wide policy debates on how we run the education system. Teachers think about evidence in a way that just didn’t a decade ago. One of the key challenges is how to make the insights from...
education research more accessible so they get into mainstream debate.

I’ve become convinced by the 50% rule: we should spend as much time translating the complex jargon of academe into an accessible language as producing the findings in the first place. Many academic papers are the antithesis of good writing: long words, passive sentences, clauses filled with caveats, sentences cluttered with adverbs and adjectives. But simplify the research too much and the true story gets lost in crude and misleading headlines. Translation requires skill and judgment.

My role as a Professor of Practice at the University of Exeter is dedicated to improving the education and life prospects of disadvantaged young people, and also explicitly focused on the impact and dissemination of research, working closely with schools, universities, employers and policy makers. We could do better to offer incentives for academics to make their work accessible. Making a difference is the reason that attracted most of us into education. It is time for universities to step up and align their incentive structures and supports to make this more possible.

Given your focus on the intersection of social mobility and educational access, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

In 2011, I was part of a team who published an accessible guide detailing best bets for improving the achievement of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Britain’s then Coalition Government had ring-fenced £2.5 billion in ‘Pupil Premium’ funds for schools in England to help their poorest pupils. It was the Government’s flagship policy for social mobility. Our point was simple: it wouldn’t be what schools spent, but the way they spent it that would get results. The Pupil Premium toolkit (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018) was born.

The guide was based on summaries of thousands of education studies. But we worked hard to present it as a practical and accessible tool for teachers. We estimated the extra months gain in pupils’ learning that our suggested approaches might lead to (if delivered well). It came as little surprise to teachers that the approaches with the biggest learning gains were all associated with the interactions between teachers and pupils in the classroom – effective feedback, metacognition and peer tutoring. Structural school reforms – including reducing class sizes – had relatively little impact on average. It’s the quality of teaching that counts.

Thousands of teachers and senior school leaders across the country attended our toolkit talks. Together we would tease out how the research lessons in the toolkit applied to everyday classroom activities. Adopted by the Education Endowment Foundation, it became the Teaching and Learning Toolkit. Over the years, the tool kit was further nurtured and developed into a 34-strand interactive website anyone can
access. By 2015, two-thirds of school leaders across the UK reported they used the toolkit. And the guide has been replicated in countries across the world. Teachers refer to research on what has worked in the classroom in a way that was unrecognizable before the toolkit was published.

Why was this simple guide so successful in changing the behavior and attitudes of so many teachers? One reason was timing – we published the guide when there was no other independent guidance available. But I believe the secret to its success was that we treated teachers as professional equals, sharing the nuances, complexities and uncertainties of research.

I explore this theme in more depth in a forthcoming book What Works? Research and evidence for successful teaching to be published by Bloomsbury with fellow toolkit co-author Steve Higgins. The question mark in the book’s title is very important!

Knowing something has worked in the past for some pupils is no guarantee in education for predicting what will happen in the future for other pupils. What works? is shorthand for “What has worked, for whom, under what conditions?” Only by working with teachers are we able to grapple with these questions.

Your work points to a number of systemic challenges to social mobility including the increasing gap between rich and poor, worker exploitation, and a diminished commitment to civil society. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice to begin to address these issues?

To change minds, researchers and teachers must work as equals. Our work in England revealed an insatiable appetite among teachers for evidence. The most enjoyable and challenging discussions are when the theoretical insights from research collide with the practical reality of the classroom.

In our book Social Mobility and Its Enemies (2018) we discuss in detail the “Great Gatsby Curve”2. It charts nations’ levels of income inequality against their intergenerational earnings elasticities, measuring levels of income immobility. The Curve (actually a straight line) is named after the Great Gatsby, drawing parallels with the levels of inequality witnessed a century ago. It reveals a clear relationship: more unequal societies are less mobile. In other words, when the rungs of the income ladder are wider, the chances of climbing the ladder are lower.

1 https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit
2 https://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/15/the-great-gatsby-curve/
The story of the Curve warrants a book in itself. It was unveiled by Alan Krueger, who sadly passed away last month. At the time Alan was serving as President Barack Obama’s, chief economic adviser. Here was a senior US Government adviser suggesting publicly the American dream was little more than a myth for many citizens. The implication of the Great Gatsby Curve is today’s stark inequality harms future social mobility.

The central debate over inequality is whether current levels of inequality impair or encourage social mobility. Some inequality is good for society and the economy – it sharpens incentives and offers rewards for those who want to improve their lives through their hard work. Yet, the evidence suggests that divides in income and wealth have now reached unhealthy levels: those on the lower rungs of the ladder are peering up at such an impossibly steep climb they would rather step off then step up.

The Great Gatsby Curve indicates that political debates over whether to aim for equality of outcome or equality of opportunity are a false dichotomy. The two principles are inextricably linked: extreme inequality of income and wealth at one point in time leads to greater inequality of opportunity over time which in turn leads to widening gaps between the rich and poor.

Inequality’s crushing hand now reaches well beyond the formative years into early adulthood. The booming gig economy has created an employment underclass lacking security, training, progression or rights, stuck on short-term and temporary contracts. What jobs people get and how much they earn after they finish their education is the forgotten half of the social mobility equation.

We argue that any successful efforts to improve social mobility will have to address inequalities both in education and in the workplace. Employers need to treat employees as a long-term investment, and offer training and skill development that can raise productivity. We need to pay decent wages for teachers and other key workers and close the tax loopholes enjoyed by wealthy elites. The challenge is whether we can agree on the limits to damaging levels of inequality.

*Educational Change expects those engaged in and with schools, schooling, and school systems to spearhead deep and often difficult transformation. How might those in the field of Educational Change best support these individuals and groups through these processes?*

If we want a society in which we develop the potential of all children, then we need to change the education system in a number of ways. That’s a central argument of our book Social Mobility and its Enemies. We highlight several myths about education that need puncturing. For example, we put
unrealistic expectations on education to be, by itself, the great social leveller, enabling children from poorer backgrounds to overcome the circumstances in which they are born. Many schools do a miraculous job counter-balancing the inequalities in wider society. They transform countless individual lives. We can always do more. But an effective education system is a necessary not sufficient condition to help improve social mobility. It is the mix of less divided, segregated and more aspirant, stable and connected communities in the vicinity of good schools that matters. This is an important message for teachers who are under relentless pressure from politicians to address all of society’s ills.

What we observe is an ever-escalating educational arms race in which the poorest children are hopelessly ill-equipped to fight. The numbers of pupils on free school meals passing national school benchmarks in England at age 16 and going onto university, for example, have rocketed over recent decades. It’s just that the privileged children have leaped further ahead. The recent scandal over cheating in elite US college admissions is an extreme example of how those from privileged backgrounds will go to ever greater lengths to secure degree places for their children.

Elite schools and colleges are now hyper-selective, developing ever more intricate ways they believe can distinguish between candidates. To make their admissions fairer for young people from all backgrounds, we suggest they agree to a threshold of academic excellence for entry. Institutions can then decide how to select students that pass the grade – shaping the class, for example, to reflect all backgrounds, or simply picking them at random.

At the same time, there has both been a failure to provide basic functional skills, particularly in numeracy and literacy, and adequately develop students’ life skills, technical know-how or creative thinking to millions of school leavers. These are damning figures for education systems focused on academic tests. The unrelenting pressure to hold schools to account through student data has forced many schools to teach to the test. The truth is that too many children leave devoid of the basic skills to get on in life. We need to reframe the goal of education not solely as a quest to identify the best academic minds (important as this is), but the enabler of all talents.

Finally, there is the age-old challenge of replicating exemplars of transformational education change across systems as a whole. Many schools have raised pupil attainment while serving disadvantaged communities. But the history of education is littered with singular success stories. We need to devote more effort and time into scaling-up successful approaches.

If I had a magic wand, I would take education policy out of the politicians’ hands. Too often education lurches from
one reform to another – and those instigating the changes aren’t around when the long-term consequences come home to roost. What we need is steady evidence-informed reflection; what we get is a frantic conveyer belt of reform.

Where do you perceive the field of Educational Change is going? What excites you about Educational Change now and in the future?

How much should our efforts to reform and improve schools and colleges take into account what is happening outside the school gates? That’s one of the central questions that emerges from our review of evidence in our book Social Mobility and Its Enemies. This is particularly important if we aspire to improve the outcomes of our least privileged pupils, whose lives are shaped by the environments in which they grow up.

The uncomfortable truth is that countless education reforms ushered in by successive Governments in Britain (and the United States) have had little impact on the many children who leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Policy has lurched from market-based reforms to highly prescribed edicts on what teachers should do. Yet the numbers of young people without the most basic skills remain as high as ever.

Is this because the reforms themselves have been flawed? Or is it that in high inequality countries such as Britain, the education system has to work so hard to counter-

balance the extreme forces driving ever greater divides in society? Finland is the one country where we have evidence for a link between education change and improved social mobility. The creation of comprehensive schools during the 1970’s reduced the link in income from one generation the next. Equitable education without extreme inequality aids social mobility.

“Equitable education without extreme inequality aids social mobility.”

The idea that the worlds outside and inside schools are deeply intertwined is at the heart of the Harlem Children’s Zone (HCZ) (Krip, 2008). It’s an important test case to determine whether a community can be turned around. The Zone’s “cradle-to-career” services range from financial advice; medical services; obesity reduction initiatives; parenting programs; college counselling and job training. So far, the results have been mixed. On the plus side, the math achievement gap between some black children who attended the Promise Academies in the Zone and the average for white students in New York disappeared (Dobbie & Fryer, 2011). Yet other children benefitting from the community interventions but not attending the academies, failed to produce such impressive achievement gains (Dobbie &

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3 http://ftp.iza.org/dp2204.pdf Note: If the world is more equal, then education can prove its worth. Just one social mobility study has demonstrated an impact from education reform. The creation of comprehensive schools in Finland during the 1970’s reduced the country’s intergenerational income correlation, or beta, by several percentage points.
Fryer, 2011).\textsuperscript{4} HCZ suggests that we can’t improve social mobility on the cheap.

“What is the realistic scope of educational reform?”

What is clear is boundaries between school and the ‘real world’ outside have become increasingly blurred. In England, some politicians have linked rising knife crime with school exclusions. All manner of society’s other ills are dumped at the school gates. One of the most promising trials to improve the attainment of poorer pupils has been to give children breakfast in the morning. Another trial will look into eye tests for children. Meanwhile has come a boom in private tutoring outside normal school hours. All this prompts many questions. When does schooling end and life outside begin? And what is the realistic scope of educational reform?

\textsuperscript{4}The real test of the out of school interventions may be long term life outcomes of children:

\textbf{References}


\url{http://www.heritage.org/education/report/assessing-the-harlem-childrens-zone#_ftnref50}
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Lee Elliot Major is Britain’s first Professor of Social Mobility. Appointed by the University of Exeter to be a global leader in the field, his work is dedicated to improving the prospects of disadvantaged young people. As a Professor of Practice he is focused on the impact and dissemination of research, working closely with schools, universities, employers and policy makers.

His Penguin book Social Mobility and Its Enemies has attracted attention across the world. His forthcoming Bloomsbury book What Works? offers best bets to teachers for improving outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. He commissioned and co-authored the first Sutton Trust-EEF toolkit, a guide used by 100,000s of school leaders.

Lee is a founding trustee of the Education Endowment Foundation and chairs its evaluation advisory group. He is Visiting Fellow at the London School of Economics International Inequalities Institute, and an Honorary Professor at the UCL Institute of Education. He was formerly Chief Executive of the Sutton Trust.

Lee regularly appears in national broadcast and print media, commenting on education and social mobility issues. He has served on several Government advisory bodies and presented several times to the House of Commons Education Select Committee.

He has a PhD in theoretical physics and was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Sheffield for services to education. He was an education journalist working for the Guardian and the Times Higher Education Supplement. He is a Governor at William Ellis School. He is the first in his family to attend university.