The 2019 AERA theme was 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?

First, please let me just express my delight and honor at the opportunity to participate in Lead the Change. I have read these articles since the very first issue and, truly, this moment feels like one of the highlights of my career. Thank you for including me in this series.

Now to the more important question: How can leveraging educational research contribute to the democratization of evidence and to educational change? In my estimation, the answer lies in democratizing research itself. There remains a long-standing “debate” regarding theory versus practice and the extent to which one is, or should be, privileged over the other. As an academic, I work in a space that tends to privilege theory. Yet, at this moment in time when so many young people continue to attend schools where they are not provided every opportunity to succeed, where teachers are burning out and leaving the career at staggering rates, and where fewer and fewer educators are considering school leadership, we must ask ourselves if we are posing the “right” questions, and even if we have the best-suited people asking them.

To that end, I wonder if the question presented here would be more powerfully considered through the democratization not just of evidence, but of the very research which generates it. Lifting the voices of people who work in schools and districts through action research and research partnerships is one way to democratize research (and the evidence that would follow). Such research and partnerships provide a different, yet essential, view into educational change.
An example from my current work sheds light on this type of practice. At the moment, I am a faculty participant in a university-school partnership in a local school. Through a state initiative, we (the faculty) and teachers, school professionals, administrators and district-level officials are working together to identify challenges and problem-solve. Faculty from my university are “embedded” in the school, working alongside leaders, educators, students, counselors, social workers, and psychologists to try to better understand what factors have contributed to the challenges facing the school and what might be needed to help produce continuous improvement.

As a scholar of educational change and leadership, this work has been eye-opening. The translation of research into practice has not been as easy as I imagined it might be. It is this translation piece that might be a further lever for democratization of research and evidence—how can we, as a field, do a better job of making our research not only accessible but also usable for those who need it most? Changing where the conversations take place as well as including more people in these conversations is the next step in sustainable educational change.

Given your focus on the changing nature of the teaching profession and the expectations of those working within it, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

Of all school-related factors, teacher instruction has the greatest influence on student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Yet, as Hargreaves (1994) argues, to understand what teachers do and why they do it, close attention must be paid to the culture in which they work. Strong cultures, defined by collaborative professional relationships, are associated with greater student learning, whereas weak cultures, defined by clusters of teachers who operate separately and sometimes competitively, struggle to produce positive student outcomes. In the current accountability context, in which pressure to raise student achievement oftentimes encourages teachers to focus on their individual classrooms rather than act collectively, it is critical to understand how strong teacher cultures are supported and sustained as well as the role school leaders play in building the types of relationships that such cultures require. My research questions exist in this space: trying to understand how the ways people work, together and alone, influence educational change and progress.

Within this realm, my research demonstrates teachers’ generational differences have an unexpected and largely under-studied influence on how teachers experience their work and careers in schools, including when people begin to
think about becoming a teacher, to how they handle change on the job, to how they ultimately consider what steps to take as the career moves forward. As I point out in my book on this topic (Stone-Johnson, 2016), generational differences matter. While my research focuses just on Generation X teachers, I believe that today’s teachers are in many ways fundamentally different from teachers from past generations. Generation X teachers’ experiences in classrooms as students coming of age during the standards movement, as well as other social factors, have contributed to their understanding of what it means to be a teacher in a time of standardization, how they engage in their work, and how they see the future of their careers. While I do not have empirical data to support this, I would imagine Millennial teachers, with their own unique schooling experiences, would be different from earlier generations of teachers as well.

Given I have only focused on Generation X, my research shows this generation of teachers, (1) has different motivations for entering the career than their older colleagues; (2) approaches change in a pragmatic way that is influenced by their experiences as students in classrooms; (3) expresses their work ethic differently and especially vis-à-vis notions of work-life balance; and (4) may be more reluctant to take on formal leadership roles. It is no longer possible to assume that all teachers experience their careers or change within them in the same fashion.

These generational differences have profound implications for educational change. My ongoing research on Generation X teachers demonstrates that a teacher’s generation impacts how they understand and enact reform in the accountability context, which then affects how schools create a culture of learning to support all students. Because Generation X teachers tend to think more globally, are already accustomed to increasingly standardized work, and have identities less bound by their career, they are able to take a generally positive view toward current reform efforts in ways that prior generations of teachers do not. The difference in viewpoints can lead to cultural conflict within the school, yet little work in the field addresses intergenerational conflict (Stone-Johnson, 2016). This view also has implications at the school level for teacher recruitment and retention. Teacher recruitment strategies that do not address generational differences in why people enter the career, the conditions in which they work, and the rewards they receive will not succeed (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Carroll and Foster (2010, p. 9-10) make a crucial observation: strategies that treat teachers as easily replaceable will fail because they do not treat them as “individuals who merit individualized professional development investments.” This idea may be the lesson I feel is most valuable—that Generation X teachers, and for that matter teachers from all generations—may benefit from

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rethinking a one-size-fits-all approach to understanding the teaching career and to envisioning career development from entry to exit.

*Your work on inter-generational differences in how teachers view the profession, suggests a need for leaders and school systems to be more mindful of different teachers’ needs and desires as they engage in their work. How might these findings contribute to change in policy/practice?*

In considering avenues for how attention to generational differences can influence teacher practice—and ideally student learning as well—it is necessary to think about the role professional development (PD) and ongoing teacher learning play in teachers’ career experiences and what principals and policymakers might do to improve these professional learning experiences. Such a shift might mean, for example, thinking about what the specific change is that requires professional development, what one might expect teachers from each generation to support or find challenging in this type of change, and how each generation could be supported in changing their instructional practice to make the change. I am not suggesting that generational differences be the only or even the primary lens through which to reconsider professional development, but as a more diverse group of teachers enter into and persists in the career, it might be prudent to think about personalizing adult learning the same way we aspire to for our young people.

One potentially transformative way to think about professional development would be to focus on expertise rather than subject or grade area. Hatano and Inagaki (1986) describe two types of experts, routine and adaptive. While both learn throughout their professional careers, adaptive experts seek variability in their work through active experimentation to improve their craft while routine experts maintain a status quo in their professional practice. This finding reflects Huberman’s (1989) work on the teaching career, recalling that teachers who were most satisfied were those who tinkered in their own classrooms. Not only might such experimentation keep teachers satisfied in their careers long term, the research also reflects that adaptive experts gain a better understanding of the knowledge and skills expected of an experienced expert compared to routine experts (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Hatano & Igagaki, 1986; Hatano & Oura, 2003; Lin, Schwartz, & Bransford, 2007).

Professional development that allows teachers to demonstrate their expertise not only might keep teachers engaged in their work, but it could also invigorate new teachers who are eager to learn from their more senior colleagues and re-invigorate other experienced teachers who might want...
to try new instructional techniques (Stone-Johnson, 2016). Expertise-oriented PD would also support the multiple views of professionalism held by different generations of teachers (Stone-Johnson, 2014). Instead of simply focusing on mandated reforms and the skills and knowledge needed to implement them, such PD would allow teachers to focus on areas they believe require development in their own practice. For example, even Boomer teachers who perceive certain aspects of current reform efforts to undermine their professionalism might be interested in learning from an expert about how to help a student who is new to learning English improve their reading skills. A sense of freedom and choice regarding which skills to develop might appeal to this demographic of teachers. Likewise, Generation X teachers who show an appreciation for aspects of standardization might benefit from learning the same skills. Such PD might not always be the answer, but considering it could be a first step toward thinking about how PD could keep more teachers engaged in their work over time.

I also believe those of us in the field might do well by engaging in the work of schools ourselves, not just as researchers but as participants in change. University-school partnerships offer one way to begin this kind of work, but there are other ways. Learning and working alongside teachers, leaders, students, and families can connect the work we do at universities to the schools where change needs to occur. The ivory tower model has certain beneficial features, for sure, but democratizing educational change and educational research means sharing our own expertise while being open to the expertise of others. As researchers, we have developed important skills that can help with change; we are good at research methodologies that allows us to minimize bias. As such, we can provide feedback to people engaged in change in ways that they might not be able to as well themselves. We also are skilled at macro-level thinking; through our empirical and theoretical training, we can take what’s happening in one school or location and

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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?

I believe the answers I gave for the earlier questions present a good answer to this one: those of us in the field of educational change need to democratize who we include in the conversation about what happens in schools and why, and we need to be more mindful that everyone who works in schools brings their own backgrounds and experiences to their work. What previously might have been considered a challenge to educational change—differing views—must be seen as a strong force for positive change. I am not so naïve to think that this work will be easy, but I am optimistic enough to believe that it is not only possible, but essential.
think about it in a larger context. At the same time, though, we might be most helpful by using our skills not solely as outsiders. Some research questions lend themselves well to engaged research, and increasingly I have come to believe that such a model presents a new way forward in thinking about change.

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

Some of the most exciting work I have seen recently is the renewed focus on understanding the contextual conditions that support—or hinder—change. Last year, I was fortunate to co-edit a special issue of the journal *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*. In this issue, my co-editor Helen Janc Malone and I highlighted the work of the Educational Change SIG. On its face, this issue was quite unique in that we had an array of authors from around the world, yet all were women. The field can certainly use more diversification, and as editors, we were proud to spotlight this group of talented women. At a deeper level, the papers discussed the importance of recognizing contextual factors as they relate to change. This theme is important because it gives more empirical evidence to the notion that not all change efforts, even those that were incredibly successful in one site, can be replicated in new sites. The focus in this issue was not on the changes themselves but on the contextual differences and the roles they played.

In addition to the *where* question, I am also excited that the field continues to ask the for whom question. Certain educational changes may be effective generally speaking, but we can always do a better job of ensuring positive effects are felt by all in schools. Research that looks at the effects of educational change on students of color, students in poverty, students who speak languages other than the primary language of instruction, students with disabilities—any work that deeply examines these questions has the potential to transform schooling for young people is a direction we should head.

Finally, I continue to be excited about research that helps the field to better understand the changing work of teachers. As I continue to expand my practice as an engaged researcher, I hope to learn more about how to connect the work of schools to our work as researchers. Exploring teacher work provides an ideal venue to do this, and I am excited there is both a growing number of researchers doing this work and a growing desire on the part of universities and schools to support it. I am looking forward to where this next phase of research goes, and I am optimistic that the Educational Change SIG will be a home for such innovative and important work.

References


Dr. Corrie Stone-Johnson is Associate Professor of Educational Administration at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. Her research examines the social and cultural aspects of change, highlighting how people interact to foster or impede reform in a context of accountability. Her work has been published in journals including Educational Administration Quarterly, Education and Urban Society, and the Journal of Educational Change. In 2016, she published the book Generational Identity, Educational Change, and School Leadership with Routledge. She is the Associate Editor of Leadership and Policy in Schools and is on the advisory board of the Journal of Educational Change.