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?

Before I can begin to answer this, I need to ask myself a number of questions.

The 2019 AERA conference theme prompting this question is concerned with how education research might be applied at a time of suspicion about the value of scientific evidence. So, to answer these questions, I first need to think about what underpins an understanding of what education research is, how it is produced and its usefulness in educational settings.

For example, who produces knowledge? For what purpose? How do they do it? Who uses it? For whose benefit? I hope these questions make it clear that I am committed to a critical perspective of education research.

For over forty years, feminist scholars have questioned who produces knowledge and whose experience it is based on. Indeed, until the late 1980s, in my own field of educational leadership, management and administration (ELMA), women’s experiences were excluded from the construction of leadership theories. Charol Shakeshaft (1987) and Jill Blackmore (1989) questioned the very premise of male-dominated ELMA knowledge and practice.

The process of circular socialisation needed breaking. Women’s invisibility in leadership practice meant they did not see it as something they might do. Their exclusion from research meant many women could not relate to leadership theories and this exclusion served to weaken their leadership aspirations. In 1987, Charol Shakeshaft wrote women from a century earlier into the
field. In 1989, Jill Blackmore deconstructed the dominant discourse of leadership to reconstruct it using a feminist perspective. So, it is right to question the nature of education research.

But a Post-Truth era suggests this era is one of denialism about major global challenges such as managing climate change, reducing inequalities in accessing resources, and valuing diversity in learning to live peacefully together. That’s dangerous because it advocates the dismissal of ‘expert’ opinions. We had that in the UK before the European Union referendum. Former Secretary of State for education, Michael Gove, declared people had ‘enough of experts’. The campaign to leave the EU was an appeal to emotion rather than a critical evaluation of the evidence. That’s why the Post-Truth Era is dangerous. It encourages people to make up their minds without looking at, questioning and rejecting or accepting the evidence.

Multi-modal narratives, in their presentation of a variety of perspectives in innovative and dynamic ways, are likely to open up debate and dialogue to question the veracity of existing evidence, to enable the democratisation of knowledge production and use. That means using these narratives to educate the educators. To educate educational leaders. University-based teacher education and educational leadership courses at Masters and Doctoral levels are spaces where the production of knowledge can be democratised. That can be achieved through action research projects that contextualise how we know what we know. These identify who benefits from the knowledge produced and asks who might lose out when research is used to influence practice.

*Given your focus on gender, race, identity, leadership and change, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?*

A major lesson I have learned from my work and research in gender, race, and identity in ELMA is about making assumptions about people and their circumstances. That’s probably something we could all benefit from remembering when we work for educational change.

> “It is right to question the nature of education research.”

Often equality, diversity, and inclusion work involves monitoring the representation of marginalised groups in the workforce or by academic attainment in schools and so on. We use people’s characteristics to look at variables to say things about the educational effects of white privilege, Black oppression or Islamophobia. But it is so much more complicated.

A recent project forced me to look at the simultaneous advantages and disadvantages experienced by a British Asian Muslim woman who was a primary school headteacher. The disadvantages were clearly born from societal, institutional, and individual acts of racism. She articulated all of that. But she also demonstrated that strength of character, exercise of agency and high levels of resilience were also born from
those experiences. She turned disadvantage into advantage. Her intellectual engagement with the problems she faced meant she was increasingly able to speak back to power in her institution and in the local education authority [District]. Her responses were emotional and intellectual.

As a white woman researcher, I am privileged in many ways. Not least in being able to hear about the lived realities of women (and men) working and leading in schools. I am privileged that people are willing to talk to me about race. I am grateful for their patience in telling their stories.

If we do not listen to each other, then we might underestimate the risks involved in educational change. One white woman told me she was accused of racism whilst working with Black teachers seen as underperforming. Of course, she was horrified. But the organisation was to blame in failing to carry out a risk assessment before putting her in that position. Had the senior leadership team looked at the composition of their list of underperforming teachers they might have recognised the overrepresentation of minoritized people. They might have asked themselves questions about the process and criteria for selecting them for intervention and avoided enacting institutional racism.

So the question is always to ask: Who benefits from this change? Who loses? That way we might avoid perpetuating institutional racism in our schools, colleges and universities.

Your recent work on intersectionality, gendered racism, and the experiences of women of Black and Global heritages serving as school leaders shows how everyday linguistic exchanges can highlight the type of resistance and/or acceptance these women face from multiple sources. How might these findings contribute to change in policy/practice?

To think about this, I want to go back to Edith Rusch and Sonya Horsford’s (2009) paper, from 10 years ago, about changing hearts and minds, about unlearning privilege. I use their paper in my teaching at Masters and Doctoral level. I use the Privilege Walk to get UK and international students to think about their constructions and experiences of privilege and oppression.

“If we do not listen to each other, then we might underestimate the risks involved in educational change.”

Edith Rusch and Sonya Horsford recount how racial standpoints affected their different interpretations of counterstories shared by research participants. They recount how their discussion of the co-optation of critical race theory reached a point of near paralysis. This paper has taught me a lot. I think it teaches my students a lot.

Increasingly, as my Masters module progresses, I sense more students of Black and Global Majority heritages, British and international, grow confident to tease me for my white privilege. They are speaking back to both my positional power as teacher and my white privilege, living and working...
in a world where my racial identity dominates.

The intellectual work for the project referred to in this question was based partly on their work. I was mindful I would face criticism of being a white researcher co-opting Black voices. That I might be re-colonising the colonised or ‘whitesplaining’ in my work. I prefer to be criticised for including rather than for excluding people. But, like Julie Laible (2003), I also believe I have a responsibility to ‘travel’ through different worlds, to see myself through others’ eyes, as well as to see other selves as they see themselves. By using a variety of feminist theories including intersectionality theory and Black British feminism I hope I avoid rewriting people using only my Western eyes. I hope my use of social theory speaks truth about lived realities, that it further equips people to resist oppression and that it moves people to continue the struggle.

So, an analysis of our everyday linguistic exchanges has the power to show up one another’s responses to leadership in education. I see leadership as relational, as a social construction. This paper demonstrates how others resist or accept a leader’s authority based in part on their assumptions of what constitutes ‘good’ leadership and ‘good’ education, their reading of what she says or does. In this case, the headteacher’s, pupils’ and parents’ linguistic resources were undervalued. It was symptomatic of the institutional racism the headteacher described. I think that happens too often in too many educational settings.

Such findings can contribute to change in practice if we use them in our teaching: in schools, on undergraduate courses, with beginning teachers, at Masters and Doctoral level. They can contribute to policy change if and when policy-makers recognise the ubiquity of inequality in education. It’s our job to remind them about it.

**“I hope my use of social theory speaks truth about lived realities, that it further equips people to resist oppression and that it moves people to continue the struggle.”**

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?

Once you lead educators and educational leaders to question some of the premises of their practice, it is vital to provide support in helping them negotiate the inevitable discursive struggles they have as a consequence. If we want students and research participants to stay in the profession, we also need to tell stories about how others negotiated their cognitive dissonances.

What appears to a researcher as contradiction or obfuscation of concepts is quite likely to be symptomatic of
interpreting and enacting ever changing education policy (particularly in England) as national education systems adopt features of the Global Education Reform Movement and its emphasis on marketization, managerialism, prescribed curricula and high stakes testing.

So, we have to question the drivers of educational transformation. Is the transformation designed to align a school’s practice with the dominant discourses of the day about ‘what works’ in education? Or is it about enhancing, and possibly changing some people’s lives, by establishing a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion? Will it enable access to learning and resources?

If our perspective is critical, we must find ways to support grassroots movements that clearly resist some of the dehumanising impacts of contemporary education systems. A recent research project looking at an international social media based network for women in education, #WomenEd, demonstrates its members are more concerned with why and how they do leadership than with who does leadership. They desire humane organisations that are people, family, work-life and women friendly. Organisations where everyone can thrive, not just survive.

It is possible for equity to sit alongside excellence in education.

We can support and challenge the process of educational change, alongside those enacting it.

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

I am particularly excited by the grassroots movements facilitated by social media and, particularly, EduTwitter.

Educators and school leaders are discovering and connecting with likeminded colleagues across organisational, phase, sector and geographical boundaries to support and challenge one another. They use social media to debate educational leadership, to connect for distance mentoring and coaching, to organise and publicise professional development opportunities and to provide synchronous and asynchronous chat. Disguised identities embolden some contributors where their values might not align with those of their organisation. Others are able to be more open about what they think. Often responses are immediate.

However, there is a danger that the brevity of posts reduces discussion to hashtags and soundbites that go unproblematised. #Slowchats and #Digimeets are ways to encourage reflection over longer periods of time. Links to blog posts enable lengthier articulation of ideas. Posting comments to blogs can lead to lasting relationships that, in the case of #WomenEd, has developed a
followership in excess of 24K worldwide, four Unconferences (where delegates are speakers), a host of regional face-to-face events and a book. All in under four years. There is a dark side too of course. Some responses can be offensive or abusive. To counter these elements, #WomenEd used a different extranet (Yammer) to re-group and re-articulate what its members wanted to say.

Social media use is also problematic in schools for children and young people who use it to bully and influence one another in negative ways. We are not yet good enough at educating about social media use and in taking responsibility for what is posted. So young people are still exposed to, and sometimes create and upload, material that shows pornographic, violent and self-harmful images. This needs to change.

The use of technology in education remains a challenge and an opportunity.

References
Dr. Kay Fuller is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Management. She works in the Centre for Research in Educational Leadership and Management (CRELM) at the University of Nottingham. Her research interests are centred in gender in educational leadership including research on the distribution of women secondary school headteachers in the UK; women and men’s constructions of identity among school populations; and the use of a variety of feminist theories including intersectionality theory. She is a member of the international Women Leading Education network. Kay is also an elected member of BELMAS Council, research co-ordinator and co-convenor of the Gender and Leadership Research Interest Group. She is a former English teacher and Deputy Headteacher of mixed comprehensive schools, an Initial Teacher Educator in secondary English education and currently leads the MA in Educational Leadership and Management at the University of Nottingham.