The 2020 AERA theme is The Power and Possibilities for the Public Good: When Researchers and Organizational Stakeholders Collaborate and is a call to “to address educational challenges through policy and community engagement and to work with diverse institutional and organizational stakeholders.” How can such leveraging of educational research contribute to collaboration and engagement within and across diverse stakeholder groups and to educational change?

I think educational research can contribute to collaboration that leads to educational change, but it requires thinking creatively about how practitioners and researchers can best work together. It is not enough to produce educational research and hope school-based stakeholders will use that work or even have access with it. There is effort and skill involved in taking the findings from educational research which are often focused on very particular content areas, grade levels, and student populations, and applying those findings to school systems.

For example, recently my team completed a 7-year improvement project with a local school district, and the teams of teachers we served had plenty of research they wanted to read and explore (read more about this project in Dobbs, Ippolito, & Charner-Laird, 2017 & Ippolito, Dobbs & Charner-Laird, 2019). But they were prevented from it by expensive paywalls, lack of access to university library resources, and a genuine lack of time to use to troubleshoot these issues. In my position, one of the most important supports I could provide was to pull these resources together, to share them with teams, and make spaces for them to discuss what was useful about them. Often because research is so specifically focused on very particular populations, age groups, practices, or contexts, it takes discussion to

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Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.
discern what might apply in a classroom with an array of students.

In this way and many others, it takes varied stakeholders, including researchers, around a table as equals with practitioners to bridge research and practice. Moreover, the stakeholders whose voices should be primary in this work are students and their teachers and caregivers. I think those in the field of educational research should work to ensure they learn from school stakeholders and with them, and those of us in educational research would do well to listen and amplify their voices.

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Given your focus on helping teachers reframe reading instruction as disciplinary literacy while simultaneously building organizational structures (e.g., professional learning communities, teaming, etc.) to support such efforts, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

I hope my work connects instructional improvement to structures that support teachers in doing improvement work, in part because of my own experience as a teacher. When I was teaching, I often felt professional learning time was deeply disconnected from my instructional practice. Indeed, I must say that what was presented during those times did little to change my practice. Moreover, I felt blamed when my students were less successful than we had hoped and unsupported when I was desperate to better address my students’ needs. I wanted answers to questions about how to respond when students’ comprehension was only at the surface level, or how to support a student who was disengaged from school life, or how to respond most effectively when a student asked a question that revealed a misunderstanding. I think some of the professional development workshops I attended would have said they answered those questions, but I never felt that they did. Unfortunately, large numbers of teachers have similar experiences and report that professional learning largely falls short of what they need (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Gates Foundation, 2014; Wei et al., 2010) and suggests new approaches are desperately needed.

Now as a researcher, I work with colleagues to create a what and a how of instructional change. To create the What, we work together on literacy (in the broad sense, meaning reading, writing, and communication practices in all of the disciplines) as a broad lever to improve student outcomes. I love literacy because language and literacy are the mechanisms by which we teach and learn all of the various content in schools. Additionally, and related to the how, we work to create spaces for teachers to learn together, about disciplinary literacy instruction, in ways they choose. Therefore, this how piece of the work relies heavily on making space – time for collaboration, schools organized enough to give teachers the room to
consider instruction deeply, organizations that make room for improvement work to happen, and the permission to try different practices that may or may not bring immediate or dramatic ‘results.’ The work of improvement in many places is the work of tuning instruction for particular students and their needs and preferences. My work is not invested in prescribing to teachers how to create stronger literacy outcomes for teachers, but rather in creating spaces where teachers can ask and answer these questions for themselves. I am never surprised when the instruction they create is something far more innovative and effective than I could have never imagined.

Your work on building teacher capacity through context specific and collaborative professional development efforts suggests both opportunities and gaps in school leaders’ and professional development providers’ current ability to consistently support teachers as they learn and change. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice to begin to address these issues?

I think my most consistent and nagging challenge in my work has to do with where we situate expertise in schools, and this impacts how policy is made, both generally and locally. Students have expertise, communities have expertise, teachers have expertise. And in a world where we want higher achievement for students, we make mistakes when we don’t look across stakeholders and their varied expertise when making decisions. So as a researcher, I think of myself as bringing expertise about research and methods to the table, and the research is often quite difficult for teachers to access without a university stakeholder. But I rely on teachers, students, community members and school leaders to bring the expertise needed to bring about change. They bring expertise about the specific context, the community, various disciplines, and invaluable historical knowledge. To truly bring about change, this expertise has to be combined in real partnerships.

For example, the project discussed above contained teams of teachers from an array of content areas. I remember in a session early in the project with the science team, we were discussing using non-fiction text features to better comprehend informational text. So, the team leader and a chemistry teacher and I were talking about their textbook. She walked us through a number of the text features in the chapter we were analyzing, pointing out which diagrams were important to understanding the material and which were designed merely to brighten pages or generate interest. Without her chemistry training and my team’s comprehension knowledge, the team would not have come to build a protocol for reading in chemistry to better orient students to their books. It took all of us to truly grapple with the literacy skills needed in a chemistry context.

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In the same project, a history focused team was trying to understand how well students were using historical literacy practices to read the textbook and primary sources. We discussed many skills from the literature about historical literacy, and the teachers had suspicions of what students were doing and not doing well. But they wanted to gather some specifics, so we worked together to design some short assessment tools that would provide this information. We found that when we asked students about their skills and expertise, a broader array of skillsets emerged than we hypothesized. Conversations with students revealed lots of additional ideas about effective history instruction. Teachers needed to ask good questions and hear student responses to make smart decisions about how to best move forward, and they needed our assessment design knowledge to support that work. It took everyone’s expertise, including the students to bring about positive educational change.

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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’ve been in the field of literacy for years, where we constantly see waves of new curriculum. Some waves have brought improvement, but I have never seen massive shifts for students. This is not to say that some schools couldn’t benefit from stronger curriculum to support teacher instruction. But, among the curricula that result in moderate gains for students, substituting one for another seems unlikely to result in massively stronger results or even strong differences in teacher beliefs about instruction (Skott, 2015). We have an immediate need we cannot address using simple solutions and it often takes an in-depth conversation with school leadership to ensure their professional learning spaces address the complexity of improvement. I think a key to progress is creating spaces where people want to work toward stronger instruction and are willing to do the difficult work of examining what they believe, how they enact that belief through instruction, and how they might make changes for the very particular students they serve at any given moment. A key way to support groups through processes of transformation is to listen and support the spaces needed for real improvement. This support can come through financial support for time for teachers to collaborate or leadership that acknowledges the expertise teachers have and drive that expertise through autonomy. I have often relied on McDonald’s (2014) idea of action spaces to work with school
leadership to design professional learning. He says true improvement action spaces need three-pronged support: civic capacity, professional capacity, and money. Often schools have professional capacity, the expertise of teachers, to use as a building block in improvement work, but lack money or civic capacity, the widespread support of stakeholders for a project. Our recent work explores how action spaces are made and what skills and practices survive when they close (Dobbs, Ippolito & Charner-Laird, in preparation).

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

I hope the field of Educational Change is going toward a more collaborative space wherein various stakeholders build creative solutions together. I hope we move to a world wherein student achievement is less narrowly defined and more connected to students’ own goals for their futures. I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the idea of disciplinary literacy and how it might marry with critical pedagogy approaches to instruction, to ensure that students have access to any spaces they want after high school ends but also to have the tools to make the world a more just and equitable place. I’m excited to see collaborative, site-specific projects being studied in depth, not in service of eventual replication, but in service of understanding deeply what the work of transformation truly entails. I hope that we will focus less on what is ‘scalable’ – we already know a great many things about general strong practices. Too often these strong practices are left untried or discarded without proper implementation and support or, because the tides have changed to something new, when they could have worked with support to cover the distance between the general and the specific context. Instead of continuing this cycle, I hope we will focus on what I perceive to be the real work of educational change – the work of taking big and broad ideas and making them work in specific contexts for specific students and teachers.

References


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