What inspired you to study educational change?

I am the daughter, niece, cousin, and friend of teachers, most of whom work in public schools. The struggles of teachers and their schools were part of my reality for as long as I can remember and drive my work in educational change. I first felt compelled to be part of the education field and its improvement while I was in college. Specifically, I was interested in questions of economic and geographic equity in Ohio’s public schools. Many states in the U.S. finance their public schools through local property taxes, including Ohio. The disparity this causes is well-known, but legislators remain arguably complacent to change it. Indeed, it has taken legal action in many states to get people to even consider options other than property taxes. While I was an undergraduate student, Ohio was sued for using property tax as the mechanism for school funding. It was found by the State Supreme Court that the Buckeye state’s funding of its public schools in 2000, 2001, and 2002 was unconstitutional.

I followed these court decisions with frustration and wanted to be part of the solution. Therefore, I continued the family tradition by becoming a teacher. I intended to teach a few years and then become a full-time advocate for teachers and schools. I began this path through my master’s degree program at Miami University. My professors set me on a journey of intellectual exploration to the needs of classroom teachers. Nearly two decades later, I am still passionate about teachers’ workplace conditions and the need for quality education for all students.

What and/or who inspires you in the field? Why?

While I can point to many scholars whose research made a meaningful difference to me, the #RedForEd movement inspires me to continue to find ways to highlight challenges teachers face daily. The #RedForEd movement is a grassroots effort by teachers’ associations (not necessarily teachers’ unions) advocating for
better pay, benefits, and working conditions at public schools around the country. They have used social media and teacher gatherings to lobby, advocate, network, and strike to improve schools and teachers’ work conditions. Their work is impactful. Recent teacher strikes in Arizona, California, Colorado, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and West Virginia have made fundamental changes to the way teachers in those states are paid, managed, and supported. I believe those teachers on the picket lines—mostly women, who are the majority of the teaching profession but tend to be under-recognized by policy proposals and research studies—are changing public schools faster than any court case, legislation, or policy has in the last two decades. My research on women teachers happened to coincide with the rise of #RedForEd, and I watched as my cousins and friends (mostly all women) learned to become advocates for themselves and their colleagues. They found the courage to strike through their strong connections to their colleagues and communities. I think supporting teacher agency, even during pre-service training, may be significant in preparing future teachers.

What do you believe to be the biggest challenge for educational change and what would be a first step to address this challenge?

I am currently most concerned by the difficulty in recruiting and retaining talented and well-trained teachers. Teachers in the U.S., UK, and other developed nations continue to leave education at high rates. Some studies find teacher turnover makes it difficult to institute innovative practices and new policies without experienced educators at the helm (Ronfeldt, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2011; Trujillo, 2012). The culture of teaching needs to change by increasing pay, providing teachers with more resources, and offering more opportunities for professional growth.

The educational change field can begin to change cultural perceptions of teaching and teachers by studying, partnering, and highlighting the work of grassroots teacher organizations that have developed in many jurisdictions. I am a national co-founder of one such group, WomenEd_US, the American affiliate of #WomenEd, a British organization. We help women educators (and allied men as well) connect, collaborate, and strive for new opportunities. Members of #WomenEd have become county commissioners, school board members, and building leaders. Keeping our adopted motto of ‘10% Braver’ in mind, they faced difficult work situations, applied for leadership positions, and advocated for themselves and their students. My research findings echo others (Markowitz, 1993; Sherman, 2005), in that there is a need for advocacy groups such as #WomenEd.

What are some new areas of inquiry and/or directions you think the field should be headed?

“The culture of teaching needs to change by increasing pay, providing teachers with more resources, and offering more opportunities for professional growth.”
In addition to studying problems of schools and grassroots advocacy, I encourage my fellow educational change scholars to examine the ways state and local governments impact schools and actively participate in policy making. More specifically, educational change scholars should read state and local school board minutes, review reports about districts, and offer expert opinions at open meetings. The research field can provide oversight of departments of education intervention. Indeed, several of the Ed Change SIG founders have served in such roles in Ontario, Scotland, and California. I encourage the field to continue these efforts as there is much we all can learn from each other, as researchers, policymakers, and educators. Much can be learned, and perhaps policymakers will accept some constructive feedback from Ed Change SIG members and others in the field.

References


MARY BRIDGET BURNS

Mary Bridget Burns is an educator, researcher, and advocate for teachers. A former classroom teacher, she taught elementary school in Texas, along with classroom time in Florida, Massachusetts, and Ohio. She also was an instructor for undergraduates at Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development, at Cisco Junior College (Texas), and at the Juhász Gyula Teachers College at the University of Szeged (Hungary). In addition to teaching, Mary Bridget served as the inaugural Managing Editor for the Journal of Professional Capital and Community. She recently worked as the Assistant Director for the Two-Way Immersion Network for Catholic Schools, an initiative of the Roche Center for Catholic Education at Boston College. She has published articles on bilingualism, school leadership, American inclusion models, and social studies education. Mary Bridget conducted research on minority education and the training of teachers in Hungary for her Master's thesis through a Fulbright Grantee to Hungary, where she was also an English instructor at the Teachers College. She received her bachelor's degree in English from Northwestern University, her Master's in the Arts of Teaching from Miami University of Ohio, and her doctorate from Boston College. Mary Bridget is active in her community in Central Massachusetts. She is a member of the Worcester County Commission on the Status of Women and Girls (MA), an Overseer for Old Sturbridge Village museum, and a National Network Co-Leader for #WomenEd_US.