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?

It is unfortunate that our research findings primarily appeal to researchers sharing similar interests within the education sector at present. To those accumulated evidence matters, our writing is often considered gibberish if they have access to read it. Thus, the pre-requisites for educational research to contribute to the democratization of evidence require researchers across disciplines and socio-political-cultural-linguistic contexts to: (a) exercise humility and dialogue with a high level of genuineness and open-mindedness, which has always been easier said than done; (b) stop jumping on the politically-correct bandwagons; and (c), most importantly, treat research participants as genuine partners in our reality-based research and understand their experiences with empathy.

The last pre-requisite demands the researcher to have a high level of genuine concern about the investigation subject, requires a research design that facilitates the revelation of true sentiments, and enables data analysis with an elevated understanding of such sentiments.

For instance, I had long been involved with a parent organization for children with specific learning disabilities as an advocate when I investigated parental understanding of and experiences with transition services for students with disabilities in Hong Kong secondary schools. I was well acquainted with some of the parents and offered support for their frustrations with the school system and policies. I recruited a few parent participants to be partners to
refine and pilot the interview protocol and to jointly conduct interviews. When initial codes were developed, we solicited participants’ views on the aggregated interpretation of their experiences. Having gained an increased understanding of the benefits of transition service from this project, parent participants joined hands with policymakers to further discuss and extend the services in the future. We also worked together to pressure local universities, all of which have now developed support systems, to provide support services for students with disabilities. In my later studies on policies and change leadership, I involved policymakers both for an impartial understanding of policy intentions and presenting findings for policy improvement. While recommendations were initially ill-received, some of them have since become policies for current practices.

With our research processes engaging participants with more equal footing, ourselves being advocates of issues we investigate, and involving both policymakers and policy recipients, we are more likely to integrate rich and meaningful data from various modes into compelling multimodal narratives appealing to those to whom the subject matters and to policymakers to bring about educational change.

You are well known for your work on the development of special education in China. What do you see to be some important contributions of China’s special education development to the field of educational change?

China has followed the world trend of setting inclusive education as the policy for special needs education since the 1980s and become a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities since 2007, followed by including its two special administrative regions, Hong Kong and Macao, in 2008.

China’s model of inclusive education is termed as “Learning in the Regular Classrooms,” which has been primarily functioning as a platform to enable children with disabilities to gain access to education. The quality of inclusive schooling has only been sporadically scrutinized in the last few years as scholars and researchers have pressured their local education agencies to do so. The development of inclusive cultures within schools has gained momentum in the last decade.

A few major universities with teacher education programs have begun to require a course in special education for all those programs and to offer undergraduate programs in special education with emphasis on pedagogies for disabilities commonly found in inclusive schools.

District-wide or national/regional conferences/symposia are among the main professional development activities for teachers and administrators. Schools in general are open to collaborations with university researchers to experiment innovative teaching approaches to improve student outcomes.

Foreign experts have been involved in various projects to introduce research-based pedagogies. A team of scholars of a
nationally funded project is currently developing national standards for special education teacher competencies to further improve teacher preparation. Even though these promising developments are mostly limited to major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, they represent catalysts for a paradigm shift needed for positive educational change.

While China’s inclusive education development represents a distinctively pragmatic approach instead of the common association with human rights and educational equity in the West, the continual pressure from various parties, especially teacher educators and researchers, has provided a substantial impetus for schools to adopt and develop a more inclusive culture.

Even though the quality of special education services may vary widely between Chinese cities and rural areas and a great deal of improvement is needed, I believe that China’s experiences demonstrate the significance of simply commencing the journey of inclusive education for whatever reasons to lead to educational change. Once the reform has begun, voices to demand public schools to deliver high quality education and to fulfill their promises will kick in sooner or later.

Hong Kong’s and Singapore’s development in integrated special education have witnessed a similar journey, whether in continuing in-service specialized teacher preparation or resource provisions. For instance, their original plans of only funding two to three years of special training have become part of the regular professional development activities. This has resulted in expectations for a higher quality of education, which continue to rise.

In particular, Hong Kong has moved into the stage of inclusion from integration both at the policy and practice levels, despite the fact that ‘integration’ is used in the official policy statement. These experiences inform us that we must turn our thoughts and debate into actions to make educational change happen.

Given your focus on systemic change in regard to integration of special education, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global changes that are driven by successful integrations?

Hong Kong’s education system is policy-driven, rather than legislation-driven like the U.S. Instead of legal mandates, the government entices public schools to voluntarily participate in educational integration with additional financial resources and professional support.

What is interesting is that many principals decided to participate for reasons other than the ideology of educational equity, but over time a sizeable proportion of them has internalized this ideology. Such a shift is gradual and may partly be a reaction to the global political climate, a stronger local voice of advocating equal rights in education, and/or the need to create a better situation for all when confronted with issues brought by their participation in educational integration.

Systemic changes do not happen within the classrooms. School leaders must take the
responsible to change the system at the school level to bring teachers on board as partners to work toward a shared vision.

While many Hong Kong schools are still struggling with integrating students with disabilities, data from my recent research projects have shown that a number of Hong Kong public schools have implemented integration successfully with innovative and research-based strategies supported by school-wide systemic changes.

The single most important factor to facilitate systemic changes is the effective principal who cares about students, is keen to improve student outcomes, can build mutual trust with teachers and staff, communicates vision clearly, understands teachers’ difficulties and affective needs, and, most importantly, ‘models the way’ (as most principal participants emphasized) to demonstrate his/her commitment to be in the same boat with teachers.

These school leaders have impressively contributed to the overall positive attitudes toward recognizing:

(a) students’ right to an education with appropriate support in public schools,
(b) parental right to participate in decision making, and
(c) the significance of professional development in improving teacher competencies in implementing changes.

The single most important factor for effective integrated education at the practice level is to have a team of well-supported—and well-equipped—teachers who share the vision of integrated education. Data from my projects have revealed that master teachers exert leadership in promoting the integration policy, training peers in and outside their schools, and establishing school-based policies and systems with their principals.

The major lessons we have learned from these schools include:

(a) ‘getting feet wet’ may be a propeller for our desire to improve and the energizer to perfect practices;
(b) leadership preparation for effective management of changes is of foremost priority for successful systemic changes; and
(c) adequate support for teachers’ work and learning is the key to successful practices.

Young people are the focus of educational change for improvement. What are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

The world has changed but our education system has not changed fast enough. The field of social work has informed us that young people across cultures are in need of establishing identity (including self-esteem), positive family and home life, engaging and relevant education, and desirable influence that helps to lead to meaningful and productive adulthood.

Most of these needs are not academic per se but have tremendous impact on student learning by escalating the likelihood of young persons to be engaged in poor self-care, offending/anti-social behaviors,
substance abuse, poor attendance at school or college, and even to have mental health issues.

The field of educational change should place needs of youth as the top priority with the ultimate goal of serving them through research, teaching, and advocacy. As such, we need to turn our conceptual and theoretical debates into workable policies and actions.

We need to advocate systemic changes that support teachers’ learning for increased ability to adapt and transform; that permit teachers to collaboratively design curricula to address both affective development and academic needs of students; that enable school leaders to manage changes with a focus on meeting diverse student needs; that appreciate and offer room for the development of abilities other than academic capacities; and that connect assessment with engaging curriculum to equip the youth with skills and mental and physical health to succeed in the adulthood.

**What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about educational change?**

I think that the broad expectations for a quick fix, the involvement of many parties, different understanding of various parties about the goals of the changes, the multifaceted requirements for changes to happen, and dichotomous demands at the practice level are among the key issues.

When the policymakers launch a new educational policy, they set dates for reporting back and criteria for accountability purposes. How the policies are understood and interpreted at the district and then at the school levels are hardly examined and considered. New and revised policies seem to surface every other week. Before principals and teachers fully comprehend a policy, another is published.

Take Hong Kong as an example. Schools in Hong Kong have gone through massive changes following the publication of the Reform Proposal for the Education System in Hong Kong in September 2000. Within those few years, schools were also instructed to establish school-based management system following the policy of decentralization. Simultaneously, the government formally launched the policy of integrated education. Thus, teachers were placed in managing the dichotomous demands between addressing diverse student needs in integrated classrooms (e.g., individualizing and adapting curriculum/assessment) and their accountability for student performance within the assessment-driven education system.

Having said that, what excites me most about the educational change field is the strong voices from around the world in desiring to bring positive changes, which places us one step closer to changes. The voices come from many, including politicians, researchers and teacher educators, as well as practitioners such as principals and teachers. Many renowned scholars, as featured in this Series, have taken action to demonstrate their commitment to bring about changes through their research, teaching in and outside the classrooms, and advocacy in their respective capacities.
Most importantly, the participation of the field is expanded to practitioners. Locally, some of the principal participants of my projects have been participating in government committees that formulate school management, curriculum, and assessment policies. They have repeatedly presented issues with evidence from their experiences in implementing policies to Hong Kong’s Education Bureau to seek changes for improvement. Though the journey of educational change is never ending and may be windy, we must assume our collective responsibility to help our next generation succeed in achieving a fulfilling life.

KIM FONG POON-MCBRAYER

Dr. Kim Fong Poon-McBrayer has been a teacher and teacher educator in the United States, Singapore, Brunei, and currently is an Associate Professor at the Education University of Hong Kong, which was ranked 9 by the 2018 QS World University Rankings by Subject in the world and 2nd in Asia.

She is the former Deputy President of Hong Kong Institute of Technology and Senior Registrar of Hong Kong Council for Accreditation of Academic & Vocational Qualifications. She has served in myriad leadership capacities in international professional organizations such as Council for Exceptional Children and been a keynote/plenary speaker in many conferences.

Dr. Fong Poon-McBrayer was among the 2,000 Outstanding Intellectuals of the 21st Century and Marquis’ Who’s Who in American Education 2003, 2009 and 2010. She has widely published in the areas of inclusive education and leadership for change. One of her papers won the First Paper of the World Conference on Educational Sciences in 2013.

Dr. Kim Fong-Soon McBrayer can be reached at: mcbrayer@eduhk.hk