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?

The AERA theme is grounded in sober recognition of social and political changes. The “post-truth era” perhaps reflects more strongly the US setting than that of other countries in which I work, but indeed demands wide attention.

Among components in the elaboration of the theme is the desire “to move beyond our disconnected individual research projects ... to bring our findings into conversation with those of other studies to generate data-rich, multimodal narratives or stories of key findings on specific issues”. Indeed, we are commonly pushed into narrow silos and specialist audiences who have the same basic assumptions and interests as ourselves. This pattern is not just the result of preferences for interaction with people who resonate; it also reflects the mechanisms underlying types of institutional performance indicators that have become common, including peer reviews, grant approvals, and rankings of journals. Some institutions and systems have endeavored to break out of constraints into multidisciplinary fields, but the goal is not easy to accomplish.

My own experience in crossing disciplinary boundaries is to some extent illustrated by my formal training. Following an undergraduate degree in economics, I pursued a multidisciplinary Masters degree in African studies, and then converged on education. Most of my subsequent university career has been in Faculties of Education, but between 2006 and 2010 I took leave from the university world to work in UNESCO. Yet each setting in which I have worked has been less multidisciplinary than enthusiasts would advocate. Faculties of Education, like their counterparts in Law, Science, etc...
face strong centripetal forces reflecting their comfort zones. And even UNESCO, which is explicitly multi-focal in Education, Science and Culture, operates largely in silos that inhibit collaboration across sectors. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) approved by the United Nations in 2015 do contain interdisciplinary elements and stress the role that education (which is specifically named in Goal 4) can contribute to other components; but there too, continued efforts are needed to reach out and to cross boundaries.

I also welcome the trend in university systems to emphasize impact in policy-making and practice alongside more detached academic scholarship. In some systems, this has become a significant component in government-imposed research assessment exercises. In my own case, I have welcomed work with UNESCO and other bodies in order to cross boundaries and to leverage research findings for educational change. The work has also achieved some of the multimodal narratives that the AERA theme values. Recognizing that policy-makers and practitioners may not have skills, time and/or inclination to decipher the genres favored in the academic world, research findings have been presented in websites, video clips, newspaper articles and other genres alongside journal articles and books. This has been a key thrust in the work of UNESCO’s specialist Institutes, which recognize that research that just stands on the shelf will not improve practice.

**You are well known for your work on comparative education in and between a great variety of contexts and countries. You have also worked on theories, research approaches, methods, and methodologies that drive research on comparative education forward. What contexts did your work take place in and what do you see to be some important contributions of research in comparative education to the field of educational change?**

Indeed, I have been privileged to work in and between multiple contexts and countries. Although born and educated in England, my first teaching jobs were in secondary schools in Kenya and Nigeria. They were culturally eye-opening, and provided additional exposure to neighboring Anglophone and Francophone Africa. I subsequently taught at the Universities of Edinburgh, Papua New Guinea and London, before moving in 1986 to the University of Hong Kong. From these bases, I undertook many consultancy assignments and research projects for such bodies as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank as well as for various non-governmental organizations and national governments.

These arrangements have allowed me to operate “on both sides of the street”, crossing between the domains of academia and of practice in schools and policy-making. They have introduced me to cultures in rich, middle-income and low-income countries, particularly in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and the South Pacific, and to some extent, also in the Arab states and in Latin America and the Caribbean. Thus consultancies have been in countries as diverse as Dubai, Malta, Myanmar, Sudan, and Solomon Islands.

Thematically, the foci of my work
have also evolved. During the 1980s, a major focus was on the nature and implications of decentralization of educational administration in less developed countries before that topic became a major component of the wider literature and discourse.

Then, during the 1990s, a dominant focus of my work moved to education in small countries, with recognition that over half of the world’s sovereign states had populations below five million and that 53 had populations below 1.5 million. Ultimately, I wrote seven books on this theme, both developing conceptualization and providing tools for governments and international agencies. The work stressed that small states are not simply large states on a smaller scale. Rather, they have distinctive ecosystems with both advantages and constraints from interpersonal relationships, international dependency, and visibility on the international stage. These themes have retained much pertinence, yet have evolved with globalization, technology, and geopolitical shifts.

My strongest focus in the last two decades has been the so-called shadow education system of private supplementary tutoring. The metaphor of the shadow is used because much tutoring mimics the mainstream – as the curriculum of the mainstream changes, so it changes in the shadow. My 1999 UNESCO-IIEP book was the first global study of this topic, and appeared in six languages. Attracting even more attention was the 2009 sequel, which appeared in 20 languages; and since that date, several further books, articles, and chapters have moved from simple mapping of the phenomenon to investigation of specific dimensions in a wide range of locations. Shadow education has a long history in East Asia, and educators and policy-makers elsewhere have in the past tended to dismiss its relevance to their own settings. Now it has become visible across the world, driven in part by globalization and associated competition. It has far reaching implications for social stratification and for the lives of students, teachers and families. Policy-making is only beginning to catch up with realities, and in this domain the rest of the world can learn valuable lessons from Asia.

These research thrusts have partly reflected opportunities in locations in which I have found myself, complemented by a desire to take local features to a wider arena for comparison and conceptualization. Thus the work on administrative systems, for example, was initially stimulated by the highly decentralized system of education that I found in Papua New Guinea in the early 1980s. Although at that time the country had a population of just 3.5 million, it had 20 Ministers of Education with roles in one national government and 19 provincial governments. Such systems can often be understood more fully when juxtaposed with counterparts elsewhere. Indeed, among the roles of comparative analyses is “making the strange familiar, and the familiar strange”. Comparison provides new angles to view familiar topics, and can provide stimulus first for understanding and then for policy-making and other actions.

Nevertheless, meaningful comparisons require much care not only with units for analysis but also with contextual understanding.
My methodological books (e.g., Bray et al., 2014, 2015) have focused on these dimensions. They also address multimodal narratives, in line with the 2019 AERA theme, pointing out ways in which quantitative and qualitative approaches may complement each other and/or expose narratives that would otherwise have been misleading. For example, the statistical data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) managed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have great power but can also be misinterpreted if analysts do not pay careful attention to the questions asked, the ways that those questions are likely to have been understood by the respondents, and the nature of local and national contexts.

Given your experience as the Director of UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) and your role as the President of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES), what might be some major lessons we can learn from local and global changes in education?

The IIEP is a special body within the UNESCO framework because it operates under the direction of an independent Governing Board and is able to tackle themes that might be sensitive to politicians and other actors in the main body of UNESCO. Since its establishment in 1963, the IIEP has helped to place multiple themes on international agendas in ways that would not otherwise have happened. Alongside shadow education, its pioneering work on corruption, on HIV/AIDS, and on education in fragile states comes to mind. The IIEP is headquartered in France and has offices in Argentina and Senegal, and the cultural orientations that come with these geographic locations help it to have multifaceted and multimodal perspectives.

The WCCES is a different sort of body. Founded in 1970, the WCCES brings together 41 national, sub-national, regional and language-based societies of comparative education. Most members of these individual societies are academics, but again some bridging is evident with members from international organizations, Ministries of Education and similar bodies. Further, the WCCES is affiliated as a non-governmental organization in liaison with UNESCO.

Both bodies greatly benefit from, and contribute through, their multilingual and geopolitical diversity. The English language is increasingly dominant in international affairs, and brings biases and shortcomings in expression for cultural understanding. Many academic publications written in English are entirely based on English-language sources, even when they refer to non-English-speaking countries. The WCCES organizes triennial congresses in different parts of the world, each time bringing a different flavor in both language and content. The arrangements permit congress participants from different continents to see regional variations amidst global trends, and sometimes to challenge their own assumptions about feasible and desirable directions for change.

Another dictum commonly used in the field of comparative education is: “We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are.” Receptivity to diverse perspectives through the work of bodies such as the IIEP
and WCCES helps participants to take more pluralistic stances and to avoid inappropriately strident statements about Truth (and Post-Truth).

Young people (students) 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?

Indeed it is important to focus on the needs of young people. Of course the field of educational change has many dimensions. Perhaps one that I can add links back to private supplementary tutoring/shadow education. As mentioned, this has become a global phenomenon, albeit with varying characteristics across cultures. Our 2011/12 Hong Kong research indicated that 54% of Grade 9 students and 72% of Grade 12 students were receiving tutoring, while 2016 statistics for Korea indicated 80% of elementary school pupils, 64% of middle school pupils, and 59% of high school pupils. Figures are lower in Europe, but even in England 25% of respondents to a 2015 survey asking whether they had ever received private or home tutoring replied affirmatively, and in London the proportion was 44%. Striking statistics can also be presented from countries as diverse as Egypt, France, Jamaica and Mauritius (Bray, 2009, 2017).

Underlying these statistics are questions about what the private tutoring provides that schooling does not. The demands on schooling seem to be ever-increasing, and many teachers feel the burden. At the same time, the demands on families in this competitive world also expand. The private sector then offers to fill the gaps, sometimes after having raised parental anxieties as a deliberate marketing strategy. Some private tutoring is indeed a shadow, providing more of the same. Other tutoring is complementary and expands the students’ horizons.

A related component of diversity concerns quality. We know that schools have a range of features and qualities, and the tutoring sector has an even wider range. At the top end of the tutoring sector is great talent, relatively unconstrained by traditions and bureaucratic rules and with incentives to satisfy discerning and prosperous consumers. At the bottom end is very poor quality, provided in an unregulated arena in which consumers are under-informed and influenced by the consumption of their peers. Thus, the rise of the tutoring sector is very mixed in reputation and impact, and does not always serve well the needs of young people. I should like the field of educational change to give it more attention. What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field?

Building on the above, change is not all positive. The field has to grapple with multiplicity of actors and forces that cross local and international borders in an unprecedented way. New frontiers are being opened by technology, and internet provision is even less amenable to regulation than face-to-face teaching. Privatization has brought significant shifts. Some companies operate on a multinational basis and have
huge impact (for better or worse), while others are local but added together are also a major force.

To some extent, these shifts reflect the success of UNESCO’s Education for All (EFA) agenda and of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that, in 2015, were transformed into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The globe has more formal and informal provision of education than ever before. One result is that opportunities are within reach for families that would previously have been marginalized. This can indeed be part of the excitement of working in the field.

However, another result has been intensified competition for jobs and other components of livelihood, bringing new pressures on families and the feeling that “schooling is not enough”. The plurality of out-of-school demands and opportunities needs clearer analysis by researchers in fast-changing environments. Careful documentation of the nature and impact of these changes across societies of different types will enhance both conceptual and understanding and practical guidance to the multiplicity of actors involved. And although I am here focusing on a specific domain, a general point may be made about the value of comparative analysis for raising unanticipated questions and for viewing themes from diverse angles.

References
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