The 2012 AERA theme is “Non Satis Scire: To Know is Not Enough.” How can research empower school leaders?

This is an old challenge. It has been around for as long as we have been doing education research. It is a knowledge transfer problem. We do our research, there are findings, and we expect that those findings will find their way into practice. Of course, that does not always happen. And, when it does happen, the core ideas often get lost in translation.

I think that is because researchers often do not think about producing research that is not only rigorous but also useable and useful. The challenge might be to do a good job translating our research findings so they are usable and accessible, but that is only a part of the challenge.

How do we create learning opportunities? How do we engage practitioners with some of our research instruments we use so that they can use these instruments to reflect on their own practice? For example, some researchers use diaries or logs to study practice. These instruments may also be useful to practitioners enabling them to generate own practice that can promote reflection in and on practice. In addition, researchers might think about packaging some aspects of their work into modules that create learning opportunities for practitioners and policy makers. We have actually built modules that use not only findings from our work on distributed leadership but also instruments to actively engage principals and other leaders in school in conversations about how the school is organized, how information and advice flows in an organization, and how do they spend their time. In this way, research findings are not only written up in scholarly journals or books, but also presented to a group of principals and school leaders so they are engaged in a conversation about practice. Such arrangements bring information alive for practitioners and actively engage them in the knowledge production process.

The work of developing school leaders and managers has to go beyond principals. The problem to me is that our approach is grab them, zap them, and drop them back in. They go to a workshop for day
or two, learn a lot of strategies, and are sent back to their schools. This model has huge knowledge transfer problems. The problem is that we are developing knowledge and not practice, which involves a different mind-set. It involves working with school leaders in the actual transformation of practice.

For example, you work with a school to implement a particular routine school-wide, and you scaffold the implementation. It is not just about high fidelity implementation of that routine, but that a routine is generative of the change in administrative practices overall. The idea is that we are developing practice, and by developing practice, we are generating situated knowledge, knowledge that is useful and usable for practitioners. This is what I mean about developing practice and not just knowledge.

**Based on your work on policy implementation on the local level, how do schools generally understand and interpret national reform policies?**

This is a learning problem. Policy does not directly act on the central nervous system of principals or school staff. The challenge in a field like education is that policies are texts that have to be noticed and then interpreted by those who are the final arbitrators of educational policy. School staff notice some texts and not others; or some aspect of texts and not others—student assessments often get more attention than learning standards. School staff ask themselves, What is this policy text asking of me as a principal or a school teacher? A big implementation challenge is—how can policymakers create policies that encourage school leaders and teachers to think in new ways about what it means to know, teach, and learn a particular school subject?

I do not think the federal government can (constitutionally or administratively) dictate what gets taught and how, but, it does need to create an infrastructure that supports teaching and improvement of teaching. In the U.S., this infrastructure is very impoverished and until recently, efforts to develop the infrastructure have focused mostly on carrots and sticks, and these can only get you so far. One question here is the role of federal, state, and local levels of government in designing or supporting the development of this infrastructure. It seems impractical and inefficient to have each school design this infrastructure from scratch. The comprehensive school reform models, for example, are trying to create infrastructures to support teaching. We need to think about creating an infrastructure that will enable effective instructional practice and constrain ineffective practice.

**How do we recruit the best people?**

Administrative practice must be anchored in teaching and learning. It is about creating engaged internal and external stakeholders committed to improving instruction. We need to move away from the simplistic mindset of “here is how you do x and y.” We need to cultivate a diagnostic and a design mindset in our school leaders. Really thinking about what is going on here, what evidence do I have to support that, and recognizing that diagnostic work is not just technical but also fundamentally political. It is about how do I design positions and routines at my school so as to address a particular problem that I have diagnosed with my staff.

School leaders have to engage in diagnostic and design work. In our leadership preparation programs, we cannot just think about expertise and human capital as something individuals have, but rather, on how to capitalize on distributed expertise. It is not just about finding a person that has all the expertise. It is about creating a leadership team whose members complements one another.
Good principals are very savvy when they go to hire a teacher. For example, if a principal wants to hire a science teacher, they are thinking of the overall make up of the school, how would this person complement others, could this new person fill a leadership role... Taking a distributed perspective allows us to think differently about what each person brings to running the school effectively. It complicates the hiring process, but in a good way.

How does your distributed leadership framework help school leaders implement and sustain educational change in their schools?

It is an acknowledgement that leading and managing schools may involve more than the person at the top of the organization. A distributed perspective is also about putting the practice of leading and management center-state. We can change positions, who occupies positions, create new organizational routines, but what is important is day-to-day practice and how it changes. That is where we are going to get improvement in teaching and learning, because it is where the rubber of school administration meets the road of instructional improvement.

This idea is not new. It originates from work in socio-cultural activity, distributed cognition, situated cognition... The basic notion is that activity of practice is important. Practice is really in the interactions and is co-constructed. It is also in the interactions between teachers and students. Interactions are only possible because of things in our environment, our language, organizational routines, and so on... things that enable and constrain our interactions.

Practice is constructed, created through the interactions among people and these interactions are shaped in important ways by aspects of the situation. If we used that framework, we will think much more broadly about how do we improve practice in general, how do we improve school leadership and management practice in particular. It will anchor us in practice. It will get us beyond just giving principals new knowledge, getting principals to change his/her actions. There are ways to improve practice that have to do with aspects of the situation, such as the protocols, materials, and organizational routines that are at the core of leadership and management practice.

If I am a superintendent, it will have certainly impact how I interact with a school who has embraced distributed leadership, especially in the current climate where my hands are tied due to financial and high stakes accountability constraints. I would be thinking very carefully about how I can use the available resources to develop leadership from a distributed practice. It would influence how I think about recruitment, as I would be thinking about recruiting a team rather than several individuals. I would be asking, How is the work of school leadership and management distributed vertically and horizontally within the education system? How are district office practices complementing, or not, school practice? How is the work of leading and managing distributed in the school community? How are parents involved in this work? How are community organizations involved? It is thinking about leadership and management practice as stretched over the school-community and the broader education system.

What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

We need to think about practice and its improvement. We need to think about
practice in ways that get beyond our fixation with individuals-equating practice with the actions of individuals. This in part involves acknowledging that practice is in interactions, stretched over people. It also involves acknowledging that everyday things, more often than not, that we take for granted, fundamentally define everyday practice including the practice of leading and managing our schools. It poses a much tougher challenge when it comes to improving practice, but our chances of making some sort of difference over the long haul are improved.

JAMES SPILLANE

Dr. James Spillane is the Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin Professor in Learning and Organizational Change and Chair of Human Development and Social Policy at the Northwestern School of Education and Social Policy. He is also a faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research and Principal Investigator at The Distributed Leadership Study. He has authored numerous book chapters, articles, and books including: Diagnosis and Design for School Improvement (Teachers College Press, 2011), Distributed Leadership in Practice (Teachers College Press, 2007), and Distributed Leadership (Jossey-Bass, 2006). His current work focuses on organizational leadership as a distributed practice, organizational change, and on how local policymakers come to understand state and national reforms. He holds a Ph.D. from Michigan State University. He will be our SIG’s 2012 guest speaker. He can be reached at j-spillane@northwestern.edu.