The 2012 AERA theme is “Non Satis Scire: To Know is Not Enough.” How does educational change research interact with the work of practice (and vice versa)?

There are many ways that educational research should connect with policy and practice, and it is important not to be doctrinaire about any one of them. At root, all research comes with implications and obligations of social responsibility whether in nuclear fission, biotechnology, mental health, or school change. On this score, I still stand mainly with the classic work of sociologist Max Weber on the role of values in social science. They are most relevant and essential primarily in the selection of your subject of study and in taking a clear position on the implications of the research once it has been conducted – whether this is on the use of genetic engineering or of performance-related pay. Taking a clear stand as an intellectual with a sense of public and social response regarding the communication of one’s findings is essential in any scientific endeavor. This issue is magnified further in professional schools like education. During the research process itself, respect for scientific objectivity and impartiality, and for being open to the independent and often surprising impact of the evidence on one’s own thinking and assumptions is imperative. If research has no surprises, it is all the less interesting for that.

In the field of educational change, most research will influence policy and practice to some degree or another. This is true even of basic research that does not necessarily have obvious policy and practice implications when it is first designed and undertaken. An example might be my own research on emotional geographies of teaching where, to my knowledge, it has not ignited new systemic policies, but many educators have contacted me to say it has influenced how they conduct their relations with students, colleagues, parents, and so on, in order to reduce the excesses of emotional distance that impede relationships among them.
Sometimes the intent of affecting policy/practice may be more strategic in terms of creating frameworks to guide people’s change of practice. The immediate effects may still be unpredictable. On the day I am writing this piece, for example, I have been undertaking some pro bono work with a teacher-union run public school to help it with its leadership succession planning in order to sustain the work it has been doing. This follows the book I wrote with Dean Fink on Sustainable Leadership that set out seven principles of sustainable leadership to help people think about issues like leadership succession and distributed leadership. Schools that have read the work, or come across it through my own or other people’s classes, do approach me for advice. Many individual leaders have also contacted me to say how this work has transformed how they approach leaving their legacy. Sometimes, whole systems have applied the work, involving myself or Dean, to develop things like a system-wide succession strategy or a national framework of leadership capabilities. The point is that even in these cases, while part of the intent is strategic, the particular outcomes are still very difficult to anticipate.

In some cases, not only can outcomes be shared with people in policy and practice, but the research itself can be undertaken collaboratively with them. An example would be a large project funded by and conducted in partnership with ten school districts in Ontario, Canada—a seventh of all the districts—to investigate the implementation and change design of a unique system-wide policy to bring about whole school changes in instruction and professional collaboration that are good for all students but especially for those with special educational needs. Conducted over two and half years with my Boston College colleague Henry Braun and a team of graduate students, the project has been conducted within a framework of what we call “critical appreciative inquiry,” where the Boston College team seeks to understand what the districts have set out to achieve in a sympathetic way but, using research, to serve as critical friends in relation to the means they adopt and the tensions they experience in achieving it. The districts have been engaged collaboratively with the Boston College team in long project retreats at the points of research design, interpretation of results, and release of findings. The day before writing this article, for example, Henry Braun and I were involved a day-long meeting in Toronto to discuss an early draft of the report with participants from all the districts plus three very senior staff from the Ministry, and to begin to think through recommendations with them.

Last, but not least, working with policy and practice sometimes means challenging those two domains. My work with Dennis Shirley on high performing educational systems worldwide has led us to develop a model of reform that we call The Fourth Way of innovation and inspiration, which we have directly opposed to the reform strategies that have been implemented and aggressively circulated globally that are based on Second Way principles of markets and standardization (such as Race to the Top in the United States) and on Third Way strategies of data-driven improvement, which we discuss in terms of being data-driven to distraction, in more and more parts of the world elsewhere.

None of these examples describes one best way to engage with policy or practice. But most presume that when we work in professional schools, our job should not be confined to working on projects and with our students in classes, then making occasional forays as an afterthought to disseminate the results to the field. The examples presume pre-existing and ongoing relationships with people in the field—serving them, learning from them, working with them, and sometimes challenging them—as an integral
part of the culture of educational research itself.

You are our SIG’s founder. What are your hopes for our SIG as it relates to field development, global influence, and cross-field collaboration?

The SIG really arose at the conjunction of three forces. First, after editing the *International Handbook of Educational Change* in 1998, and being the founding Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Educational Change*, I had become increasingly aware of the exciting range of work that was taking place in the field of educational change and of the amount of interest within the academic community in relation to what both these outlets were producing. What Michael Fullan called “The Return of Large Scale Reform” in 2000 was also turning the spotlight on high-profile, large-scale change strategies across districts, states, and countries worldwide and bringing forward research-related ideas about reform models as well as research-based critiques of them. The ultimate trigger, though, was quite practical. Many AERA submissions I was involved in with students and colleagues were being neither accepted nor rejected but shuffled about from one Division or SIG to another, not really fitting any of them. So there was obviously an emerging field of research knowledge with no obvious home or discipline in which it could be easily accommodated.

My hope when the SIG was founded was to establish a place for a community to meet of scholars who looked at the purposes and processes of change from different perspectives and disciplines, and who did this from the standpoint of helping to develop policy, or from a position of challenge and critique. I felt the SIG should honor the founders of the field—like Michael Fullan, Ann Lieberman, and Milbrey McLaughlin—and also to create a platform that acknowledged and encouraged the work of emerging scholars who stretch and challenge the assumptions of the field. This community, I believed, should be one that was not dominated by any one nation and its agendas. It should be inclusive of multiple methodologies. It should also be positively invitational in terms of racial and ethnocultural diversity because the classic field of change, though not necessarily male-dominated, has certainly been predominantly White and Western in its composition. I wanted the SIG to be a place, a room even, where people of all kinds of intellects and identities wanted to examine why and how our schools were changing, to be critical from a place of knowledge and integrity about when changes were badly managed and ill-directed, and to contribute to developing new visions of how educational change could be defined for the future.

There are several places where all this comes together in the SIG—most often at the instigation of outstanding leaders of and within the SIG in the years following when I was the founding chair. The Annual Educational Change Lecture is carefully decided every year to ensure not only that the speaker will be of outstanding quality and raise issues that will challenge the field, but that over time the speakers come from different countries, are of different identities, represent different disciplines, and so on. One of the best presentations involved a debate between speaker Michael Fullan and discussant Pedro Noguera about having clear visions of what to change and why, as well as clear understandings about how to do so. This Series of interviews introduces some of the leading names in educational change from around the world, and symbolizes the inclusiveness that has become a core feature of the SIG’s culture. And the annual Outstanding Graduate Research Award, for example, is just one place to recognize the ground-breaking work...
of emerging scholars who will become the classic foundational theorists of the future.

There are several communities, not just one, that touch on the field of educational change at AERA, and in the coming years, a worthy goal will be to connect these scholars invested in school improvement and effectiveness, school reform, community organizing and so on, more closely together—retaining their separate identities, but pushing each other’s thinking and establishing a strong platform of research-based advocacy and critique.

In your new book, Professional Capital (with Michael Fullan), you present the professional capital agenda. How can this agenda transform how we view and approach teachers and teaching?

There is increasing consensus about the importance of getting and keeping good teachers and good teaching. However, two schools of thought about different kinds of capital are driving nations in diametrically opposite directions on this front.

In the first view, what kinds of teachers we need and how best to get them are driven by ideas about business capital. Here, following the collapse of worldwide property and financial markets, the primary purpose of education is to serve as a big new market for investment in technology, curriculum, and testing materials and in schools themselves as for-profit enterprises.

When education is organized to get quick returns on business investment, and to increase immediate returns by lowering that investment, it favors a teaching force that is young, flexible, temporary, inexpensive to train at the beginning, un-pensioned at the end (except by teachers’ own self-investment), and replaceable wherever possible by technology (by requiring high school students to do at least one course online, for example). Finding and keeping good teachers then becomes about seeking out and deploying (but not really developing or investing in) existing individual human capital—hunting for talented individuals, working them hard, prescribing their practice, and moving them on when they get restless or become spent. The business capital strategy is advocated aggressively in the U.S. and gaining ground in places like the UK, and several countries in Europe.

The most successful school systems around the world take a very different approach into building one of their most valuable societal assets. They promote what Michael Fullan and I call professional capital. Countries and communities that invest in professional capital recognize that educational spending is a long-term investment in developing human capital from early childhood to adult life, to reap rewards of economic productivity and social cohesion in the next generation. A big part of this investment is in high quality teachers and teaching. In this view, getting good teaching for all learners requires teachers to be highly committed, thoroughly prepared, continuously developed, properly paid, well networked with each other to maximize their own improvement, and able to make effective judgments using all their capabilities and experience.

Professional capital is made up of three other kinds of capital—human, social, and decisional. A lot has been written about the first kind—individual human capital. Here, human capital is ‘talent.’ The policy issue is how to get more of it, develop it, and sustain it. Strangely, though, Michael Fullan and I say you cannot just focus on the human capital of individuals and then reward the best and dismiss the poorest of them. Capital has to be accumulated, circulated, and shared.

Human capital has to be complemented by and organized in terms of social capital. The research of Carrie Leana, a business
professor at the University of Pittsburgh, points out that collaborative patterns of interaction among teachers and between teachers and administrators, along with high levels of trust, in an environment that is focused on student learning, all make a large measurable difference to student achievement and sustained improvement.

Leana found that teachers with high social capital increased their mathematics scores by 5.7 percent more than teachers with lower social capital scores. Teachers who were both more able (high human capital), and had stronger ties with their peers (high social capital) had the biggest gains. She also found that low-ability teachers perform as well as teachers of average ability, “if they have strong social capital in their school.” In short, high social capital and high human capital must be combined.

Professional capital also has a third essential element, decisional capital. This is the learned and practiced capacity to make good decisions in complex situations. It is about the capacity to develop professional judgment that is learned through experience, practice, and structured professional learning and reflection in a collaborative environment.

Michael Fullan and I draw on our own research and strategic work around the world as well as key research studies by other scholars to show why professional capital matters; why we must invest in our teachers if we want to get a good return; why we must accumulate the capital that we have over significant periods of time rather than squander it on short-term results; and why we must circulate it freely in cultures of collaboration within schools and networks of assistance between them.

We believe our work points to a new agenda for the future of teaching. It shows that we need to retain as many good teachers as possible for eight years and more when they have amassed the 10,000 hours of practice that turns them, on average, into true maestros of decisional capital in their classroom performance. We need to align with high performing countries like Finland, Canada, and Singapore in taking measures to move all the profession forward so as to benefit everyone’s children rather than rewarding a few stars at the top and perseverating on how to dismiss those at the other end. We need to recognize that high differences in test scores within a school are not a justification to reward the high performing teachers with more money, but they give reasons to acknowledge that there is something fundamentally amiss with the leadership and professional community in such schools that allows these dramatic differences in quality to persist. They show how we should develop strong social capital among all teachers in all schools that will yield high returns for everyone.

In your two upcoming books with current and future SIG Chairs, The Global Fourth Way (with Dennis Shirley), on educationally high performing countries and states, and Performing Beyond Expectations in Business, Sport and Education (with Alma Harris), what do you say it takes to move the needle from average to great school performance? How do we build schools that emulate the best practices in the world including the world of business?

I have had the very fortunate opportunity to work with a number of outstanding research and writing partners over the years and Dennis Shirley and Alma Harris are among the very best. Dennis Shirley and I have been privileged to have the chance to study high performing systems in a number of countries and states or provinces and to highlight what seem to us to explain that performance. We do not believe our work does or can compete with the international policy organizations like the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and McKinsey
and Company, and indeed, much of what we find concurs with their own analyses. But, we do believe our work complements that of these organizations by raising issues that sometimes come from a different perspective, that burrow a little more deeply and directly down from the Minister’s or the administrator’s office into life within a nation’s schools, and that do not need to be as sensitive to the stakeholder interests that these other organizations have to address.

In the work with Alma Harris and a large transatlantic team of researchers, we have been able to be among the very first to move from the world of education to study high performance in business and sport as well, covering 18 cases of organizations that do better than most of their peers, better than they used to, and better than you would expect given their resources, clients, or levels of support. In organizations as different as internet companies, auto-manufacturers, retail giants, hockey and soccer teams, and schools and school districts, what astonished us and what we have focused on in our work is not the differences in leadership and performance issues across these sectors, but their commonalities.

Both programs of work with Alma and with Dennis have been deliberately designed to investigate high performance in different countries and sectors from a basis of first-hand research in which my co-investigators and I, and not only the members of our research teams, have been intimately involved. We can best express some of what we have found in terms of five fallacies it has exposed of wrong-headed approaches to educational reform that do not cohere with the best practices we see that characterize high performance elsewhere.

1. The fallacy of speed: effective turnarounds can and should be quick. In education and elsewhere, however, successful turnarounds take at least five years to make a difference and leave a mark.

2. The fallacy of substitution: effective turnarounds require wholesale changes of leadership and staff. However, most of the high performers we studied valued high staff retention, moved problematic staff into better suited positions, and either developed leadership internally, brought back leaders from elsewhere who had worked in the organization in earlier career, or appointed incoming leaders in a lower position first before moving them up to a top job later.

3. The fallacy of numbers: tough targets and bottom lines matter most. But high performing businesses and sports teams value many indicators of success on a balanced scorecard of performance such as customer satisfaction, reputation, or environmental responsibility; and targets tend to be developed collectively rather than imposed from outside.

4. The fallacy of standardization: standardization and prescription yield better results. But the high performers we studied value flexibility and innovation. People play in multiple and interchangeable positions. And leaders often move their organizations against the grain of what all their peers are currently doing.

5. The fallacy of competition: high stakes competition raises standards and improves results. Yet the high performers in our research collaborate with their competitors (for example, Finland with Alberta in education, or neighboring schools in the same city, or sporting rivals when they want to serve a common community, or competing companies who want to promote their shared niche as microbreweries).
What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

The major challenge in the coming years is the orchestrated assault on public education in many countries through the rapid attrition of the power of local school districts and their local authority. This is leaving excessively centralized national authorities with untrammeled and unchallenged power over a fractured mosaic of individual, competitive schools. Cutbacks in public education following the global economic collapse are being made at the expense of quality teachers and teaching. Yet more morally supportable economies can just as easily be made in educational tests and testing. This has already happened in England and will very likely occur soon in Alberta. They understand that you can save money and still save children too. There is no need to test everyone, on almost everything, every year. The only people who gain from this strategy are the testing companies. It is time to invest in better teaching. It is also time to show more prudence in educational testing. It is time to find ways, like Finland, to have teachers working together on designing quality curriculum locally rather than imposing endless standards and curriculum requirements on them nationally. Benchmark internationally, steer and inspire but do not micromanage nationally, develop and implement locally—that is what the highest performing countries do.