The 2012 AERA theme is “Non Satis Scire: To Know is Not Enough.” How can school systems effectively use data for school improvement?

Researchers have identified a set of technical and normative capacities that are present in school systems that are leaders in the use of data to inform decision making. Undoubtedly, system leaders can examine the lessons in this research and think about what might best be implemented in their local contexts. However, what I think is most important today is for system leaders to first step back and consider why they are using data and for what purposes—and how the process may be reframed.

Many schools and schools systems were drawn to the idea of data-driven decision making as high stakes accountability policies came to the fore. The problem, from my perspective, is that data-driven decision making has been conflated with testing and test data. To be sure, accountability policies have prompted many districts and schools to be more focused on data use. These policies have served as a catalyst for many educators to closely examine data. However, the push for evidence-informed decision making can be found much earlier in other reforms in and outside education. The problem is that the type of data use that is connected to accountability is one that is narrowly construed, both in terms of what data is used and how it is used.

I believe there is value in using data as part of a school improvement process. In fact, a school improvement process in which various forms of evidence about student learning does not play a prominent role would seem to be problematic. But, I think it is important to broaden the notion of what constitutes data and in doing so, go beyond more narrow assessments of student achievement. The time is right for this. There are movements around the world to promote higher-order thinking and real world skills. The push towards 21st Century Skills and the Common Core standards in the U.S. are just two examples. Such movements will have dramatic implications for how students will learn, how we will measure their progress, and how we will use the data we gather to inform school and
system improvement.

**How can schools engage students in data-driven decision-making?**

There is a great deal of promise in engaging students in data-driven decision making. Such efforts must be carefully crafted in ways that support genuine student engagement and ownership for learning. Some of the schools my colleagues and I studied were actively working to increase the level of student participation in data use. Most typically, this involved teachers engaging students in an examination of their own performance on an assessment or assignment, and then involving students in a process of understanding their strengths and weaknesses and charting goals for improvement. One elementary school we visited used a form entitled, “Think Like a Statistician,” where students analyzed their progress and outlined where they might go for help (e.g., the teacher, a peer, a parent) to get assistance in working towards a particular skill, such as including more details in their writing. At the high school level, we also saw examples of teachers asking students to write reflections about their performance and thinking about strategies for improvement. Teachers enabled students to do this by having individual meetings with them. With such efforts, schools brought students into the data analysis by sharing the responsibility for improvement with the students themselves. School personnel often told us that such processes gave students increased ownership of their learning. But, there are some important cautions here as well. Of course, students should not be made to feel like the burden of improvement rests solely upon them, and they must also be made aware of the limitations of certain kinds of assessments as accurate measures of their learning.

There are other ways, beyond measures of academic achievement, in which students can be engaged in data-driven decision making. One way is through student surveys. Some of the schools we studied regularly surveyed students about school climate, teacher experiences, support services, and other important features of the schooling experience. Educators used the findings of these surveys to stimulate other changes in their schools. A promising new direction in this area, particularly at the high school level, is to consult with the students in the development of the survey itself so that the questions the students feel are important to ask are included. Ideally, the students would also then be involved in a dialogue about the results and have a voice in the continuous improvement process.

**What are some of the key lessons of the comprehensive school reform (CSR) models in creating sustained school-level change?**

We learned several important lessons from research on comprehensive school reform (CSR). First, we learned about the challenge of scaling up reform models across a wide variety of school and district contexts. In most cases, reform design teams were “building the plane while it was flying” and continuously attempting to improve their reform models and their levels of support in order to suit schools’ contextual needs. On the one hand, models that were loose and oriented around a set of guiding principles had an easier time adapting to different contexts. However, they then encountered the challenge of ensuring that their principles were in fact embodied in school practices, as implementation varied greatly from place to place. A different set of challenges arose with highly specified reform models. As they scaled up, these models had to identify their non-negotiable elements so that there would be both fidelity in implementation and also adjustments to suit local needs.
From the CSR movement, we also gained further evidence that reform success or failure is a joint accomplishment by players at multiple levels of the educational system. When we looked at events and actions across various contextual levels in the policy chain (e.g., school, district, state, reform design team, federal), we found that conditions at each level were important in shaping the implementation and effects of CSR. Indeed, reform implementation is not an activity that restricted to a group of people in schools at the “bottom” of the policy chain. Rather, reform implementation is a system-wide activity, even when the desired change is mainly at the school level, as was the case of CSR. These findings point to the need for viewing events at federal, state, and district levels not just as “background” or “context,” but as important, dynamic shaping forces in the reform process.

Third, the body of CSR research helped us learn more about partnerships with external organizations and the role of the district in supporting these relationships. Particularly in districts that were heavily invested in CSR, we gained knowledge about the importance of aligning district policies to support reform implementation and the need for providing schools with a level of autonomy that was commensurate with what was required by the reform model. Of course, district factors were not determinant of the outcomes of reform at the school but, along with a myriad of other factors, including school and design team support, helped to co-construct the success or failure of educational reform at the school level.

You are the editor-in-chief of the Journal of Educational Change. How has the journal transformed the field of educational change?

I was fortunate to be at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto when Andy Hargreaves founded the Journal of Educational Change twelve years ago and have been able to watch its progress over that period. I served on the Board for a number of years and recently took over as editor when Andy stepped down. Throughout its history, the Journal has made an extremely important contribution to the field’s understanding of educational change.

One of the most critical reasons for this is the international focus. The Journal has consciously sought out articles reporting on change in many different countries guided by a strong belief that this international perspective is essential for our understanding of the change process. This has helped the field move beyond a myopic view of reform in the U.S. The Journal has also tended to publish more qualitative research on change than some other journals, which has allowed us to get a better sense of educational change on the ground, as lived through the daily experiences of educators. Most of the articles in the Journal mark a strong departure from technical-rational models of educational change, and they uncover the cultural and political realities of reform in addition to the structural ones. These rich accounts of the change have informed my interdisciplinary theoretical perspectives, adding to our depth of understanding of the change process.

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

There are many pressing issues we still need to address in the field, such as figuring out how educational policy at the state or federal level can best support improved teaching and learning and finding the right balance of pressure and support in the school improvement process, and building the public and political will to move away from
narrow assessments of school quality. These are all important. For me, though, given my interest in equity, the most pressing issue is ensuring that the students who are typically disenfranchised in our school systems actually have the educational opportunities that will allow them to achieve at high levels. I applaud Gloria Ladson-Billings’ effort to move the conversation from an achievement gap to an education debt. As she explains, this debt is comprised of the resources we should have invested in the education of low-income and minority students. We have to think deeply and work collectively to address issues of equality of opportunity and outcomes in our educational system, as with changing policy, economic, and political climates, new challenges continually arise.

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