LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

Q&A with Ann Lieberman

The 2011 AERA theme was “Inciting the Social Imagination: Education Research for the Public Good.” How can research enable us to advance teaching in the 21st century?

For many years the education field has been struggling with the lack of connection among research, policy, and practice. Not only are there three separate cultures, but there are few avenues where researchers, policy makers, and practitioners actually communicate across cultures. Researchers who take it upon themselves to study phenomena that advance all students must also be sure that their work is being communicated to both those who practice and those who are responsible for policy making.

This can happen in many ways. Some researchers have learned to study practice and also report how their findings can be enabled by good public policies. Some policy researchers have learned how to communicate their findings to practitioner audiences. Some researchers have learned how to do collaborative research with teachers and principals thereby assuring the connection between research and practice. There are also many organizational means for linking practice to research in school/university partnerships, networks for school improvement, collaborative inquiry, and practitioner research.

We have many good examples of how researchers have gotten closer to the problems of practice and how their work has become part of the fabric of change (See Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Hatch et al, 2005; Hawley & Rollie, 2007; Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; MacDonald & Shirley, 2009; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Each of these researchers have found ways to educate us as to how to work differently, collaborate with teachers and principals in a variety of venues. Some work with teachers and have helped explicate the complexities of teaching practice, some have written for the teachers union about teaching, some have created unique collaborations with teachers; while others have studied leadership with teachers who have described...
their learning. Researchers have described professional communities in schools that has helped us all understand the differences in communities and how they affect teachers and their work with students. Some have even written about how to think differently about changing schools in hopes that they can change the conversation. It is about being open to ways of knowing. Research is one way, but practice is another.

There is a growing debate about the teaching profession, including proposals to diversify entry points and open up access to the profession and calls for changing the selection process to emulate international systems. How do you see the teaching profession evolving in the future?

Having been to Finland and other countries where there is a greater selection of teachers, I am convinced that teachers should spend more time in classrooms, studying with a cohort and learning theory at the same time.

The Teacher Residency Program that is being done in Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco tries to put practice and theory together, ending with an M.A. That seems to be a promising program.

I think we should treat becoming a teacher in the same way as other professions – be more selective, educate young teachers in theory and practice, and teach teachers how to do research in their own classrooms. That hopefully will help make teaching a real profession! That is my vision for the future. I have seen it, and it works.

I also think that every new teacher should have access to a mentor, as the first few years are when teachers really learn how to teach and be effective, and good mentoring can be extremely helpful.

How are the growing learning technologies and emerging models like the School of One shaping the role(s) teachers play in student learning?

I would like to see a number of pilot programs like the “School of One.” I think technology needs to be much more present in the schools, and I suspect with a growing number of pilots we will learn how to use technology well and not lose the human aspect of teaching. At the same time, good teachers matter in very important ways. It remains to be seen how teaching and technology can be combined in ways that engage students deeply without losing the teacher’s touch.

Based on your research, what are some of the most effective ways to foster teacher professional learning communities within our public education system?

Much of my research has been on networks and school/university partnerships where there has been more freedom to build community. Having said that, I think the National Writing Project (NWP) has taught us how to build knowledge, leadership, and community both in a partnership way and also in a local and national network. The NWP has been successful in improving writing, and at the same time, has created thousands of teachers who have taken leadership in helping build communities.

There are lessons here that can be learned and duplicated. The biggest lesson is that learning about one’s teaching needs to start with what teachers already know FIRST. As teachers become more articulate about their own practice, they open up to research and other people’s ideas. The NWP model serves as an incredible success with thousands of teachers.
What do you see as one of or the most pressing issue related to educational change today?

I believe the most pressing issue in educational change is how to support teachers in learning how to use technology and engage students in learning. Book learning and worksheets needs to be replaced by student engagement, project work, problem-posing, and problem-solving from kindergarten to the 12th grade. How to do this on a massive scale I believe is the number one problem in educational change.

References


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Dr. Ann Lieberman is a Senior Scholar at the School Redesign Network at Stanford University. Previously, she was a Senior Scholar at The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and is Professor Emeritus of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Lieberman is widely known for her work in the areas of teacher leadership and development, collaborative research, networks and school-university partnerships, and the problems and prospects for understanding educational change. Among her recent books are: Mentoring Teachers: Navigating the Real World Tensions (with Susan Hanson and Janet Gless, forthcoming), How Teachers Become Leaders: Learning From Practice & Research (with Linda Friedrich, 2010), and Teachers in Professional Communities: Improving Teaching and Learning (with Lynne Miller, 2008). Lieberman has served on numerous national and international advisory boards, and is also a past president of the American Educational Research Association. Lieberman received her B.A. and Ed.D at UCLA and her M.A. at California State University at Northridge, where she also received an honorary degree. She can be reached at alieberman@stanford.edu.