The 2011 AERA theme was “Inciting the Social Imagination: Education Research for the Public Good.” How can education research enterprise be redesigned to more effectively inform school level practices?

There are a few ways. The most important is to be much more collaborative with practitioners. I think that when practitioners are participants in the research, then the questions we are posing are much more germane to the work of practitioners. I also think that practitioners bring insights and concerns that researchers might not have, even if the researchers were once practitioners themselves. Practitioners tend to be very motivated by practical concerns, understanding how something is used. Collaboration is one key that makes a huge difference.

Second, researchers should be very clear in advance about the audience of their research. The big problem I see in academic research is that it is really being done for other academics, for career mobility, to get into a research journal, but it is not clear at all how practitioners—who are ideally or theoretically going to be influenced by what we do—are going to be made aware, how are we going to disseminate ideas to them. I think it is important to think about the audience and how information and research findings will be shared.

Third, we have to think about how we pose questions. If you are thinking about practice, implications for practice, then you make that a priority. If you come back to it as an afterthought, you might find it difficult to make those connections. Just putting up those concerns of practice at the beginning makes a difference, how you design your project and the methods you utilize.

How are public schools influenced by poverty conditions facing some of their students?

They are influenced in many different ways. First, they are influenced by the academic needs of children. The kids who are not well nourished, who do not have stable homes, and who do not have strong family support tend to be poor and live in poor communities.
Poverty impacts child development, cognitive development, and the degree of support the child has back at home. We have known this for a long time. We have known that poverty has this impact, but we have largely not addressed it as an issue in our society and consequently, we do not see poor children doing as well. Here is the key...

Poverty is not a learning disability and should not be thought of as a learning disability. However, if we do not develop strategies to mitigate impacts of poverty, it is likely that poverty will become an obstacle for many children.

Also, poverty impacts schools. Schools that serve large numbers of poor children are overwhelmed by their needs. When we compound that with the fact that we typically spend less money per pupil in these schools and that we often do not assign the most qualified teachers and administrators to those schools, you create a situation where schools are overwhelmed by the need of the children, both by their non-academic needs and also by their academic needs. You need professional educators who are more knowledgeable, who are experts, but we rarely find that to be the case.

I think poverty has not been addressed due to ideology. We like to believe that people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps without a lot of help, even though that is almost never the case; most people need help to rise out of poverty. We have been there since the War on Poverty and the efforts to alleviate poverty in the 1970s, and that was once a bipartisan issue. Bill Clinton ended welfare as we know it but did not replaced it with any kind of serious anti-poverty effort in this country, and subsequent administrations have done the same, so we are constantly cutting the services poor people need. But, we are not just cutting the services, we are also cutting the programs people in poverty need to escape from it, and so, I’d say it is both a political and an ideological problem, and there is little will to do anything about it.

What educational changes are needed to adequately address issues of race and equity in the 21st century public school system?

First of all, we need policy changes to approach poverty at a more integrated manner. We need to look at housing, health, education, and economic development together. The way we organize ourselves politically at the federal, state, and local levels is that each of these is in it’s own silo, and consequently, we do not have integrated thinking that cuts across these areas, but the family that is experiencing lack of housing also does not have health care, does not have a job, and we do not have a way to think comprehensively how to serve children and families in need. The first step is to have a more integrated approach.

The second, and most important, is that we need to move away from thinking about ending poverty through services. We have a pretty good body of research showing that services, while important, do not end poverty. Services make poverty livable; they make sure there is access to the clinic, to transportation, to affordable housing... Those things are absolutely important but not sufficient. To break the cycle of poverty you need strategies that allow families to have more control of their lives, to make better decisions for themselves and for their children. You have to find ways to help people find jobs, to own small businesses, to move toward home ownership, to enable people to become more independent and less dependent on those services. Some conservatives are right that many times the anti-poverty initiatives produce dependency, and dependency does not break the cycle of poverty.
You recently published Invisible No More: Understanding and Responding to the Disenfranchisement of Latino Males. What type of education reforms stand to benefit Latino youth the most? How can such reforms be realized?

There is great diversity. For new immigrants, the problems are political, whether they are documented. The undocumented immigrants are facing the biggest challenge because they are living like fugitives in this country, and that is where we need to create a rational immigration policy. For the non-immigrants, the issues have to do with intergenerational poverty.

Latinos tend to have high employment rates but tend to be stuck in low-wage jobs, almost permanently. This happens in many communities and creates a cycle that repeats itself across generations. So, if your father or mother was a maid or worked in the food industry, it is likely you will too. It creates a ceiling on aspirations. What makes it possible for people to rise up out of the working class and into the middle class is access to influential adults who will have influential positions of power, and many Latinos do not have that.

One of my colleagues did research on where Latino youth get information about college, and most of them do not get it from anywhere, and the ones that do, are getting it from a relative that went to college. Those who do not have a relative that went to college are in a difficult situation. Unfortunately, that is the case for many.

The most important thing to be done is to recognize that this is our future—Latinos are the fastest growing segment of our population. They are already the second largest ethnic group, and in some states, like California, a majority of preschool children are Latino. This is our future. We have a great need to make sure these children are well educated and integrated into the society both with English skills and having educational opportunities so they can contribute to their families and the society as a whole. What people need to understand, given the political backlash targeted against the Latino immigrants, is that our economy is largely dependent on immigrant labor. If they were to leave, there are sectors of our economy that would collapse—agriculture, construction, hotels, restaurants, health care—because they are heavily dependent on immigrant labor. We have to recognize that immigration is important. It is also important in respect to social security.

We have a racial challenge in front of us; it is largely the poor Latino kids who will be supporting old White people in their retirement. In many communities, the older White residents do not realize that and that they need to tax themselves to support the schools, because those kids will otherwise not have a good education or jobs that would allow them to support old White people in their retirement. It is an important way for people to understand that our faiths are connected.

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

The issue of inequality, and the fact that we do so little to address it. The achievement gap is really an educational manifestation of social inequality. Inequality shows itself over and over again as a predictor of school success, achievement, who has access to college, and is the issue we do nothing about as a society, and we are getting more unequal. We cannot close the achievement gap without addressing inequality.

At the highest levels, the President and the Secretary of Education need to call for a more integrated approach to respond to the educational challenges facing the country, to think about it in more comprehensive ways.
Today, we are worried about the auto industry, but we are not worrying about Detroit dying as a city. And, it is. People are leaving the city because there are no jobs there. Resuscitating the auto industry should also mean resuscitating Detroit, investing in the people of Detroit, and there is no strategy to do that. We gave lots of money to bailout the auto companies, but no money for education. We are actually closing schools in Detroit. That is not a strategy for reviving a country.

At the highest level, we need a different kind of strategy, to make the connections between economic needs as a nation and the educational challenges we face. The same is true for other areas like health. I have seen glimpses of it on the local level. Some mayors have embraced this. Richard Daley in Chicago under Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, ironically, created more full-service community schools than any other place in the nation, schools that offer health clinics and extended learning programs. It is surprising for me that that kind of vision is not promoted today.