The 2014 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is “The Power of Education Research for Innovation in Practice and Policy.” What do you see as the most promising educational change innovations and what role does/should research play in relation to such innovations?

Research is rarely directly connected to innovation and improvement efforts. In part, this is because research is about studying what has happened in the past, whereas innovation is about creating a better future. But it also relates to some choices we have made about the kind of research we favor. The form of research which currently prevails in the American academy is longer on objectivity than it is on relevance—researchers have mostly tried to distance themselves from the people and institutions they are studying in the name of preserving their scientific objectivity. There have been many important findings that have been produced through this approach. But overall, when I go to AERA, I feel like the whole is much less than the sum of its parts. I can’t help but imagine that if we took these 13,000 people who are applying their collective intelligence to understanding schooling and more directly connected them to the folks who they were studying, much more could be achieved than through our current paradigm of practitioners acting and researchers documenting and evaluating.

The most hopeful work I see out there are folks who are trying to shift to a different paradigm—in particular, Anthony Bryk’s work around networked improvement communities as well as the work around design-based research. What these approaches share is a commitment to using rigorous methods of inquiry, working with practitioners to shape questions and answers, and feeding results into an iterative process of social learning and improvement. These are forms of action research, but unlike much traditional action research, they are explicitly concerned with change at some scale, often linking together multiple sites working on the same problem of practice. Bryk’s efforts build on pioneering work in health care that has seen really tremendous results using this method of inquiry and...
improvement. Since I’m not hopeful that AERA as a whole will move in this direction, I’d like to see the creation of a parallel conference, call it the Applied Educational Research for Improvement conference (AERI). At AERI, all of the presentations would be collaborative undertakings between researchers and practitioners and there would be a commitment to using what was learned in real time as part of improvement efforts.

Your recent New York Times op-ed “Teachers: Will We Ever Learn?” has been one of the most emailed articles in the NYT, and it has received 80% positive responses. Can you tell us a bit about the article and about the authors and the responses inspired by it?

The article sought to lay out the case for professionalizing teaching. I argued that we need to treat teaching like other professions: develop knowledge, train people in that knowledge, certify only those who have demonstrated significant skill and competence, and create ongoing standards to guide practice. Teaching is not yet a profession by these standards, which helps to explain why new teachers feel so radically under-supported, and why it has been so difficult to consistently produce good outcomes across thousands of teachers. I recommended ways we might remedy this situation through more demanding entry requirements, teaching hospital type teacher training, and career ladders for teachers. I also suggested that we should move away from the ideological fights around things like charters versus traditional public schools, and instead remember that there are certain good practices that are characteristic of all schools, regardless of their stripes.

As you say, most of the reactions were positive. In particular, I received a lot of emails from teachers who said that they wished that the kind of system that I had been described had been in place when they had started teaching. The ages of the letter writers ranged from 24 to 80, and they all described similar struggles in trying to learn how to teach with limited training and support. I also received a number of positive emails from people across the spectrum who said that they found it refreshing to hear a take on the education reform debate that wasn’t just rehashing the usual ideological back and forth.

The criticisms were perhaps more interesting. In particular, I heard from some teachers who felt like I was painting with too broad a brush—they felt like I was saying that all teachers weren’t good at their jobs. That’s not what I was trying to say at all. I was trying to say that we do not have a system that systematically supports quality teaching, but the absence of such a system does not mean that there are not many, many highly skilled teachers out there. And, in fact, it is the knowledge of skilled teachers which is critical to building a more professional system, as it is the master teachers who should be the ones doing the training of new teachers, developing materials, and so forth. So I learned something about the need to clarify the message; it’s about teaching, not teachers, as some have recently put it. More broadly, my colleague Marshall Ganz, a longtime community organizer, says that change is about “urgency plus hope”—those of us who want to improve the system are never short on urgency, but we also need to remember the galvanizing power of hope.

Your New Book The Allure of Order presents a detailed historical and political analysis of the repeated educational reform efforts to rationalize American schools through standards and accountability across the 20th century. Why has rationalization so powerfully influenced the definition of large-scale education reform efforts throughout American History?

The book is called The Allure of Order because it is about the ways in which those who sit in
districts, states, and the federal government have been tempted to think that they can manipulate what is happening on the ground from afar. I argue in the book that, since the Progressive Era, we have worked under the following set of assumptions: researchers will develop knowledge; policymakers and administrators will develop policies, rules, and regulations based in part on that knowledge; and teachers will implement these directives from above. These assumptions are plausible and consistent with our respect for science and the hierarchical relationship between university researchers and policymakers, on the one hand, and teachers, on the other. But, in practice, they don’t work well: researchers’ incentives are to develop knowledge for other researchers; policymakers are too far from schools to know how to guide them effectively; and teachers are highly resistant to attempts to regulate them from afar. I argue that instead we should recognize that teaching is complex and skilled work which is not easily subject to external rationalization. This kind of skill and expertise can be better built through the kind of professionalizing processes I describe above than through state policies seeking to regulate and control. More generally, I think policymakers should think more like gardeners than engineers—they can create the conditions under which good learning can occur, but they cannot actually make people learn from where they sit.

In the book you posit that powerful ideas shape politics and policy. If the idea of rationalizing schools was the dominant paradigm that shaped education reform throughout the 20th century, what would be a powerful, promising, and appealing enough paradigm that could change the direction of large-scale educational reform?

In the final chapter, I argue for a future vision of schooling which would “invert the pyramid.” Rather than having feds controlling states controlling districts controlling schools controlling students, we would flip over that whole picture, and start with what students need, and then what teachers need to support students, and then what schools need to support teachers, and so forth. This would push power downwards to the people who are the most important in this enterprise—students and teachers—and push the rest of the apparatus to show its worth on the basis of whether it can actually improve the learning process on the ground. The shift to portfolio districts, in which schools are given increased authority to make choices about staffing and budgets, and districts refrain from micromanaging from above, is one policy manifestation of this approach.

More radically, I think we should think seriously about reallocating significant sums of money from district offices to schools—large cuts in district personnel could result in significantly increased salaries for teachers, as well as increased money for ground level programs that more immediately benefit students. Andres Alonso began to move in this direction in Baltimore, and you can see other portfolio districts doing it as well. If we had the kind of rigorous training and certification processes I described above, then the system as a whole would have a coherent theory of action: we would put a lot of effort into training and certifying teachers on the front end, which would ensure that all teachers demonstrated a core level of professional skill, which would greatly reduce the need for the kind of back-end accountability through testing and teacher evaluation. We’d push money and responsibility downwards, which would make the field more attractive to prospective teachers, and we’d need fewer district supervisors because there would be more expertise on the ground. Knowledgeable readers will see the parallels to the Finnish system, which is highly selective in choosing teachers and offers extensive training in the initial years, which frees them from the need for the kind of accountability systems that are so prevalent in the United States.
A core idea in your recent publications is that current educational reform efforts in the United States have reached their limits and failed to fulfill their promises of increased quality and equity in education. Why have current strategies proven insufficient and what are key leverage points to dramatically change the course of education reform?

The current system does what it was designed to do: It was created at the beginning of the 20th century, as a batch-processing system, with little individualization for students and limited training for teachers. This system worked fairly well for white students up through about 1960, because the expectations for academic performance were modest. Even if what you actually learned was fairly limited, you could graduate from high school and land a decent middle class job with a high school diploma. But over the past 50 years, the combination of civil rights imperatives and the shift to a post-industrial economy have increased expectations such that we now expect all students to leave school “college and career ready” and the system is not built for these kind of performance goals.

Paul Reville and I are beginning to work on a project to think about what it would really mean to build a 21st century school system. This would presumably include some familiar (if difficult to achieve) pieces, such as professionalizing teaching, integrating the school system with other social service arenas, and shifting from bubble tests to more ambitious assessments. It would also include some things which are harder to conceptualize, such as building a knowledge base to support teaching, developing competency based systems that would allow students to move at their own pace, integrating technology effectively, and building new school models. Part of this is about innovation—can we create new and more personalized learning environments?—but a lot of it is also just about core processes of improvement—how could we get every student a decent education? We would welcome your ideas – please be in touch!

NOTES


3. The op-ed can be found in the following link: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/13/opinion/teachers-will-we-ever-learn.html


Jal Mehta is an associate professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His primary research interest is in understanding what it would take to create high quality schooling at scale, with a particular interest in the professionalization of teaching. He has published articles on these topics in a variety of journals, including The Sociology of Education, American Educational Research Journal, Teachers College Record and Sociological Methods and Research. He is the author of The Allure of Order: High Hopes, Dashed Expectations and the Troubled Quest to Remake American Schooling (Oxford University Press, 2013) and the co-editor of The Futures of School Reform (Harvard Education Press, 2012). He is currently working on two projects: The Chastened Dream, a history of the effort to link social science with social policy to achieve social progress; and In Search of Deeper Learning, a contemporary study of schools, systems, and nations that are seeking to produce ambitious instruction. He also very much enjoys his teaching, particularly a research design course for doctoral students, “How to Ask an Interesting Question and Get a Defensible Answer.” Jal received his Ph.D. in Sociology and Social Policy from Harvard University. He can be reached at jal_mehta@gse.harvard.edu.