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?

It is important that research around educational innovations is active education research. The greatest concern I have about education research is that apart from one or two pockets, it is not being actively encouraged in the right group of people.

There are fantastic research teams in various places around the world, led by education research experts who lead programs and processes, and who publish materials and guidance. These sometimes lead to policy transformation, sometimes to debate, and sometimes nowhere. But very little of it makes its way into what I think is genuine transformation where it is needed most: in classrooms, in lecture theatres, and in schools and colleges. We need to work much, much harder at doing a number of things to empower teachers to become active action researchers. We need teachers to be far more confident in skills and technique for action research, in reporting and sharing research. We need to create greater forums to create a greater sense, spirit and activation of collaboration.

I think these things are lacking at the moment. The perception of most teachers, particularly in cultures like the U.S. and the U.K., is that policy is informed mostly by third-party research. We need to empower our profession more, we need to skill it up more, and then we need to encourage teachers to collaborate more. They need to collaborate across phases and age ranges so we get the education profession out of its silos and create a more empowered and professional body of people who can truly drive education transformation forward.

As a teacher myself, I used to look at education research, read documents, read policy material, and read publications with a kind of envy but at the same time a sense of terror that impacted me in a number of ways. One, I felt I wasn’t worthy and I wasn’t doing anything more than the next person. Two, I felt I didn’t have the skills and expertise to do it. Three, I felt I didn’t have the expertise to be able to do it.

I want to see organizations actively engaged with educators to help them with educators about what a day at Apple feels like. Then using the expertise of educators to think we need far more of that. The implication for me politically is two-fold. We need to create through policy not just an vehicle by which those forms of collaboration discuss where the action research broadens and former educators and education experts are involved. I want to see organizations actively engaged with educators to help them with educators about what a day at Apple feels like. Then using the expertise of educators to think we need far more of that. The implication for me politically is two-fold. We need to create through policy not just an vehicle by which those forms of collaboration discuss where the action research broadens and former educators and education experts are involved.

The Education Change SIG adopts an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding many aspects of educational change, including large-scale reform, school-initiated change, school improvement, and classroom-level change.

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Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

Series Co-Editors  
Santiago Rincón-Gallardo and Kristin Kew
my job properly. Second, there was fear because I didn’t understand part of the language and the context of the research being reported.

Then, as I grew as an educator and then became a school principal, I got to a level where I thought, “I’m going to trust my own professional process and believe in myself.” As I shared my ideas with others, I experienced a different form of verification. People would say “that’s great, that’s brilliant.” And so I encouraged myself to work through process-driven research, and this had a profound impact on my colleagues. More importantly, it had a profound impact on our practices and in turn, our students. For me, this was a very tangible, very practical example that if research is carried out in the right way by the right people, it has a dramatic and immediate impact on education transformation. The problem, I think, at the moment is that the two entities are divorced from each other.

To offer some background, I took over a school that the government had labeled as “failing” and was in the process of being closed down. The children were failing their exams, behavior was poor, truancy was high, there were issues with long-term stress… all the usual symptoms. I was told to implement government policy and focus on exam outcomes in order to prove the school was capable of improving. Instinctively, I knew that if I did that, we would just get more of the same.

The school had been in decline for 8 to 10 years. So I decided to start by reconnecting with the community with a passion and purpose of why we wanted to teach, why we wanted to serve young people, and what that should feel like. So we embarked on a very active process of how to create a school that was exciting- one that children wanted to attend everyday. We asked, How do we create a school where the learning is contextualized so that students feel that learning is a value, not just because it might be important to them one day in the future, but actually it feels really important to them now?

And how do we create a school where children themselves feel that they are co-collaborators in the process, not just in the learning, but in the design of their learning?

That was the approach we took. As a result, we created a very different form of curriculum and pedagogy that is very well reported in many books. This ultimately led to three main initiatives. One was the Grangeton project where the children at a very young age were running their own micro-community, including library, shops, museums, cafes, television stations, and radio stations, as well as political systems. The second was that we recalibrated the curriculum to be focused on four strands of human development rather than specific subject specialization. And third, we created a university which allowed our children every week to self-select courses they found of interest irrespective of what age or stage they were at.

Those things had a tremendous transformative power. Within only eighteen months of embarking on this program, the school had moved to the top five percent of high performing schools in the U.K. We won the UNESCO World of Education Award. And now when people ask me what our secret was, I know it sounds like a big word, but “empowerment” was the absolute core of our philosophy.

In your article “The Moral Imperative,” you noted the need to prepare students for the future through courage, creativity, and commitment. Can you tell us a bit more about your message in this article?

Particularly in the U.S., the U.K, and Western Europe, we are fixated on accomplishing very traditional outcomes. The most prominent organization and documents in Western education policy-making over the last 5 to 10 years have been, without a doubt, the OECD’s PISA reports. These reports are very much based on the traditional industrial model of Taylorism the pre- and industrial thinking.
Educational policy has suffered from two major criticisms. First, education policy tends to react to the political climate, to the headlines, figures and publications like the OECD reports, and therefore to media pressure and public opinion. The second is that policy tends to be very short termed. Policy is always designed within the democratic flow of the government’s time scale - every 4 to 5 years - so policy has to show results in that time frame. Policy has to show results based on one factor: quick gains in traditional academic achievement measures.

Economically speaking, mass education is the way to prepare future generations to ensure continued economic stability and growth of a country’s development. Therefore, the job of education on that level is to prepare our young people, to not just survive, but to thrive in the world they will be inheriting from us. There are a number of issues: education policy is short term, always based on reaction, and at best it is short term policy reacting to the pressures and needs of today. In reality, children today who start school at five won’t be inheriting the world from us for another 15 years.

You can think about how exponentially the world has changed in 15 year years, for example, when I was in school, and when the new generation of young parents were in school. Looking forward and saying, “We have to create an environment where children are prepared to thrive for today” is irrelevant. Take the following just as an illustration of how quickly the world is moving. So much has been said about preparing children for the 21st century, yet the kids who started school this year will be living in the 22nd century. So, when you look at it this way, for me, the moral imperative has to be more than, “can we satisfy these exam systems?”

We’ve got to move away from satisfying OECD achievement data and focus more on what today’s most successful education systems look like. And we’ve got to be projecting more and truly understanding what the challenges for our children will be. John Jalvine has pointed out that the only people not celebrating their high achievement in PISA were Finland, China, South Korea, and Singapore because they realized that the systems which got them to the top were no longer suitable to prepare kids for tomorrow.

So for example, when you have the new education secretary in China making a statement in February that says, “If we are to prepare our children’s success for the future, we have to discover and nurture the next generation of Steve Jobs.” And our education system simply doesn’t do that; you start to realize ironically, China is far more focused in creating a system for the future than we are. Because our conversations still exist around “how do we compete in the academic lead tables, how do we create more efficient systems?”

So the moral issue for me is that we are not focusing on the needs of our children and their futures, we are focusing far too heavily on short-term political outcomes, media interests, and current public opinion. But we need to be spending far more time projecting into the future. And there’s also the interesting quandary that we can’t project the kind of knowledge and information our kids will need. But what we can do is project the kind of skills and behaviors the will need to cope in a world that is increasingly uncertain and exponentially changing. And I guess that’s the explanation I was trying to put in “The Moral Imperative.”

In “The New Politics and Education” you discuss a paradigm shift for the future of education. What is your vision of education in the future and what do you see as the role of government in educational change?

There are two wonderful old African proverbs that I use a lot. The first is that, “tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it” and the second is, “it takes a village to raise a child.” The second proverb is incredibly pertinent to me,
particularly in relation to what we are talking about. It resonates powerfully with the incredible role that action research and collaboration can play.

I think there are a number of challenges for us. First, there is a massive amount of work to be done to make sure that the entirety of our society realizes that they have an active responsibility in the education of our children. The days when you could drop your child off at school when at the age of three and pick them up educated at eighteen are long gone.

There are a number of stakeholders who currently almost abdicate their responsibility for education over to schools. It’s fascinating to me the way political convention over the last few years also seems happy to place the blame of all social ills on the education community. There needs to be a far more active and responsible role played by all parents in the recognition that they have an equal and very important role to play in the education of young people.

It is fascinating to look at the issues and debates around climate change, socio-ethnic issues, and global economic structure. Everyone focuses on transforming the mindsets and behaviors of adults. But we should realize that the responsibility from agencies and organizations lies in helping to reconfigure the education system and focus on how they can help to reeducate young people.

Politicians need to realize that if they want to keep the notion of democracy alive, they have to be far more actively engaged. As a society, we need to move away from the perception that childhood is something like the catholic version of purgatory - something you have to go through before you become an active functioning citizen. I think that’s something we have to deconstruct. We all need to invest more time, energy and thought into working directly with young people to help support their education, development and transformation.

We need to create through policy not just an imperative for everyone to become involved, but a vehicle by which those forms of collaboration can occur. We need more active debates and more active discussions where the action research broadens around the education debates, so it’s not just educators and former educators and education experts who are engaging in the action research.

I want to see organizations actively engaged in that research, like our most forward thinking organizations such as Apple and Google. I had an incredible meeting recently, available on my blog, with Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple. We spent seven hours on an airplane talking to one another after speaking at a conference together. And there’s something he said which I think is incredibly profound, and it was the recruitment mantra that he and Steve Jobs created when they first started employing people in Apple. I love it for its elegance simplicity by the way. He said, “At Apple we will never employ anyone who needs managing.” I said to Steve, “Wouldn’t it be brilliant then if you were engaging with educators to help them understand what that meant in their context?” You could talk with educators about what a day at Apple feels like and the kind of skill sets and behaviors kids need and then using the expertise of educators to translate that into a learning experience for young people. I think we need far more of that.

The implication for me politically is two-fold. First, politicians have to understand that they cannot control and design education policy in exclusivity. They have to broaden the debate and they have to create a more active forum for that debate, discussion and evolution to occur. Too much education policy is defined by a small group of academics working with policymakers to define policy in relation to reacting to existing short-term measures.

I believe that the role of politicians should always be to monitor if the education process is
working and they shouldn’t be there to define it. They should hold education accountable, but they shouldn’t be responsible for defining its process. So, it’s a huge challenge because we need to divorce the two. We need independent bodies of people working on the development and implementation of education policy, and politicians need to find a way to hold those independent bodies accountable.

So it’s divorcing the two, but it’s a huge amount of groundwork that needs to be done through empowerment and ensuring active involvement. Politicians need to be far more about holding the education system to account in order to encourage a system of democracy in the community. We need to have a separate body that evolves and develops education policy that is made up of a massive number of stakeholders in our society and that no one stakeholder should be allowed to divorce themselves from the process. In order to make that happen, we have to build the capacity for people to enter into that discussion in a proactive and constructive way.

A core theme in your work is developing greater levels of trust within the teaching profession by focusing on the process of education and not being fixated by data driven outcomes. What are some key lessons related to building trust with teachers you can share with our Educational Change Special Interest Group?

The first core theme revolves around the profession’s own perception of itself. We need the profession to be more confident of the power of their voice and their professional integrity. There is a survey carried out here in the UK every year by Ipsos MORI, one of the largest European polling organizations. Every year they conduct a survey that is published at the end of January, beginning of February called the “trust index” where they do a big polling screen across the country asking the general public to name their most trusted and least trusted of about 20 professions. At the bottom every year for the last ten years have come politicians. One place above politicians are journalists. At the very top of the list over the last ten years every year, number one in the trust index, is doctors. Number two in the trust index every year for the last ten years, have been teachers. Irrespective of the barrage of fire in present headlines that teachers have been receiving and despite constant political criticism, trust in the teaching profession in the UK remains unmoved. Indeed, teaching on last year’s survey had an 84% trust index rating, which is a high percentage.

So partly this for me is about supporting the teachers. The problem is that teachers feel constantly undermined by the criticism that comes out through the media and through headline political speeches. At the grassroots level, most parents trust teachers more with their children than they would ever trust a politician or a journalist. So part of the work of teachers is not simply waiting for somebody else to celebrate them or to underline and reinforce their trust, but actually to actively exploit the trust they already have; to allow themselves to have a more pertinent, more confident voice. We have to stop talking negatively about how this is stopping me from doing what I believe in, how this is wrong. You know a bit like the trap politics has fallen into today.

People are desperate for a vision which they can cling onto, behind which they can stand with conviction. We need educators to be more constructive. So rather than moaning about how bad things are for them, we need our profession to create a much more powerful positive narrative about what education can be and what it should be because that will make it far easier for people to trust in the vision of the profession. We also need to create a more powerful and persuasive positive argument as to what education could look like. It actually gives the democratic public something far more
tangible to do than to attack our politicians. In order to utilize the trust that is actually alive in our society, we need to create a far more positive, constructive and narrative.

*From you work and that of others, what ideas do you find most promising to transform teaching and learning on a large-scale?*

As I travel around the world, I’m constantly amazed by the extraordinary educational practices I see and the incredible potential that many teachers have to deliver truly exceptional, inspirational, visionary systems. I’m always amazed by the potential of young people. One of the key issues for me is that too often we predetermine what we think they are capable of, and often learning is limited by our belief in the potential of young people. We are always too conscientious not to push them too far, not to let them fail, not to let them make mistakes. But when you cut children free of those pre-constraining ideas, they achieve remarkable things, they are unbelievably perceptive and eloquent. They have a desire to learn and the younger they are ironically, the more voracious is their appetite to learn. A challenge is how to nurture that incredible voracious natural appetite for learning and curiosity, because when you harness it, children achieve the most extraordinary things.

There are two things that I think are extraordinarily exciting. I think new technology has added a dimension to the way education can evolve over the next generation in amazing ways. However, we have to stop looking at technology as the answer. Technology is a tool for the transformation of education. It is a catalyst of the transformation of education but the answer does not lie in technology. One mistake I have seen made over the last twenty years is that we think we’re transforming the system by putting new systems and new equipment in schools. I believe technology has a limitless potential to play, the danger is to see it as the answer.

Early in the Summer I was in a meeting with Eric Schultz, the executive chairman of Google, and I asked him, “Do you ever see a time where technology will replace the human part of education, the teacher?” And he said “never, never ever will there come a time,” because education is a human experience, education at its best will always be about a series of human interactions. So for me the greatest optimism I have for the profession and for education in the future, is if we learn not to fear these opportunities as many people do with technology, if we learn to embrace them, if we learn to trust that we don’t have to have all the answers.

I learned more than anything that you’ve learned nothing new by getting something right. You only learn something new from a mistake or a realization that you don’t know something or you can’t do something. We venture into a world of the unknown knowing that we should never try to control it. We should just enjoy it, celebrate it and evolve in it. The potential of children is limitless and the potential of the profession to create and innovate is extraordinary if we create the right conditions. The abilities of children to learn doesn’t need to be controlled, it needs to be empowered. Technology can play a vital role - but we must never lose sight that it is the power of potential of humanity that will drive our system forward.
Richard Gerver has been described as one of the most inspirational leaders of his generation. Beginning a teaching career in 1992, in five years he had been identified by the school’s inspectorate as one of the most outstanding teachers in the country. In 2005, he won the prestigious School Head Teacher of the Year Award in Britain for leading a school from the brink of closure to becoming one of the most innovative in the world. Gerver’s work and philosophy have been widely reported in the media around the world from the US to Russia, Australia to the Netherlands. His best-selling book *Creating Tomorrow’s Schools Today* has become a seminal text in the development of education vision around the world. His new book *Change: Learn to Love It, Learn to Lead It* deals with the complexities of personal and professional change in the 21st century. Gerver worked in 2003 as an education policy advisor to Tony Blair. He works closely with Sir Ken Robinson and features in Robinson’s best-selling book *The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything*. He contributes regularly to the British and Spanish print media. He can be reached at richard.gerver@btinternet.com.