AERA celebrated 100 years of educational research this year. How does your scholarship align with this year’s meeting theme Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies?

I have attempted to elevate public consciousness and also that of our colleagues in education about the size of the knowledge and skill base for successful teaching. It is far larger and more complex than our voting public, policy makers, and even many within our own profession realize. Over the last 35 years, the six editions of *The Skillful Teacher* have progressively mapped the knowledge and skills of generic pedagogy for successful teaching in all its complexity and made it available with examples and, in the 7th edition now under construction, videos of the skills in action. The view of professional knowledge embodied in this work is based on an understanding that the knowledge and skills in any true professional does not consist of simple “best practices,” but rather of repertoires from which professionals select best responses based on the wisdom of experience to match the situation, the student, or the curriculum. This epistemology turns out to be a catalyst and accelerant for strong Adult Professional Culture, because it opens the door for debate and sharing about different approaches between teachers rather than supports rigid positions about the “right way” to accomplish an instructional task.

The knowledge and skill for successful teaching includes anything a person does that influences the probability of intended learning. So beyond generic pedagogy and content specific pedagogy are skill sets for developing positive family and community relations, cultural proficiency, skills to be an effective team member with colleagues, and skills at data analysis and error analysis. If only we could get policy makers to provide resources and direction to create a personnel pipeline that developed educators throughout their careers in this huge and complicated knowledge!

I have also attempted to profile a common language and concept system for talking about teaching together, an element of any true profession.
And the common concept system includes the need and the associated skills for teachers to convince students that effective effort is the key to success rather than innate ability (see “Expectations” chapter of The Skillful Teacher.)

You are well known internationally for your work on school improvement and on teaching skills and mentoring. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change?

Our work on systemic change at Research for Better Teaching Inc. (RBT) led to policy and legislative initiatives that nearly transformed education law in Massachusetts prior to the financial collapse of 2008. It had enthusiastic support from both state teachers’ unions, the Business Roundtable, the Superintendents and the Principals associations, and the School Committees (Mass. term for school board) Association as well as the State Department of Education and the chair of both house and senate education committees. Our legislative proposal is described in the book John Adam’s Promise (2005)

Our work on Adult Professional Culture in schools, starting in 1984 and first published in 1985, highlighted the need for leaders to create working environments of constant learning for adults characterized by:

- Non-defensive examination of practice in relation to student results
- Data based decisions
- Deep collaboration among colleagues in order to solve learning problems

We have incorporated this learning into our training and support programs for school leaders.

RBT’s work on other aspects of school leadership has filled certain gaps in the field and led to high quality and widely recognized programs on the observation and analysis of teaching. These skills are the basis of constructive feedback to teachers and how to give it, which is another area where we have invested significant resources.

Given your focus on educational change, what may be some major lessons we can learn from local and global educational changes?

Major lessons include the following:

1) The preeminent yet least resourced goal of educational reform in many countries including the United States is change for significant improvement of teaching and learning in the classroom. This means developing high-expertise teaching skills throughout the workforce.

2) Sustainable change in real schools and districts takes 5 to 7 years. “Turnaround” as a concept simplifies the nature of sustainable improvement.

3) Stable, committed leadership is needed for successful change efforts. Pressure-cooker jobs at the top and uninformed and rotating school governing boards make such stability difficult, whereas stable leadership who continue policy commitments to a skillful teaching force for many years (Finland, Singapore) accomplish their goals.

4) The preparation, hiring, supervision and development of school leaders for instructional leadership is sadly wanting in the U.S..

5) Deep collaboration among teachers must be structured into the working environment with time and appropriate venues, especially for teachers who teach the same content (Common Planning Time teams.) But those structures must be supplemented with a commitment to examining detailed current evidence about student learning, a practice of error analysis, and a commitment to re-teach to students who didn’t “get it” the first time around. Countries with more common planning time expected and facilitated networking among teachers (e.g., Ontario Province in Canada) get...
better results for students.

6) Such commitments, however, require a workplace culture of constant learning and willingness to be vulnerable in front of one another.

7) Change must be approached with systems thinking (see response to #5.)

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. From your perspective, what are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize in order to meet these needs?

Young people need expert teachers. That is priority number one.

They need school programs and curricula that include persuasive communication skills in writing and speaking and also skills for working effectively in teams. They need schools that teach them how to learn and be active agents in their learning, because adaptability in the workplace of the future is the prime directive. They need problem finding and problem solving skills as well as critical thinking skills. And young people obviously need technology skills to function in a 21st century society.

Finally, in a world that easily characterizes people who are different from one’s self as “the other,” young people need to acquire knowledge of diverse cultures and to learn acceptance and respect for human differences. Thus they need models in their lives and in their schools of adults who live out this belief in daily behavior.

What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field today?

I am excited about the advanced level of our ability to articulate the nature of professional knowledge and underline those elements that matter most for student learning. The electronic age of video and internet connectivity makes it possible to share knowledge and learn from each other as never before.

By the same token I would identify a number of issues that are significant problems to be solved. First is the failure of voters and policy makers to recognize the very large size and complexity of the knowledge and skills to teach well.

Second is the failure to make the development of the professional knowledge and skills of educators the top priority, and to see that there is a complex system of potentially interlocking processes that makeup that system:

• preparation,
• recruitment,
• induction,
• certification
• professional development.
• supervision,
• coaching,
• evaluation,
• re-certification,
• career advancement.

These should all be based on a common view of what expert practice looks and sounds like.

Third, young people interested in entering education are looking for a career with upward mobility that can be earned by becoming accomplished practitioners. They are also looking for a range of salaries that can be earned with enlarged responsibilities that would support a family and children. Career paths in teaching offer insufficient promise of both in many countries, including the U.S.

The structure of the teaching day and the high ratio of face-time with students vs. planning and collaborating time is a serious problem in the United States that has been
addressed more successfully in other countries. Another issue more localized to the U.S. is small administrative governing boards, locally elected and in control of school policy and governance. Budget cycles that are only one-year in duration compound problems with sustaining long-term plans. Thus policies and commitments to improvement efforts are unstable and rapidly change.

Perhaps the biggest issue in educational change is the failure to think of educational units as complex systems. Beyond individual administrative units are other entities – college preparation programs, alternative certification programs, certifying and accrediting agencies, laws, governing entities, and short term annual budget cycles – that make the total system even bigger. Absence of systems thinking is a severe obstacles to long-term planning, evaluation and follow-up of change efforts.

References:


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