Q & A with Thomas Hatch

The 2019 AERA theme is Leveraging Education Research in a Post-Truth Era: Multimodal Narratives to Democratize Evidence. How can such leveraging of educational research contribute to the democratization of evidence and to educational change?

For me, the key word in the theme is “leverage.” I see education as essential to developing the communities that enable all of us to thrive. To that end, my recent work takes off from a provocative question that Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley asked in The Fourth Way:

Should schools be improving what they already do, and undertake everything in their power to make it better, and more effective? Or should they be embracing innovation in terms of new ideas, outcomes, and practices—not merely making their existing practice more effective, but transforming that practice and perhaps even the nature of their institutions altogether? (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009 p. 210)

I believe that we have to pursue these two contradictory goals at once. We need to improve educational opportunities and outcomes in the systems we have right now; and we need to transform conventional education systems to make them much more equitable and effective in the future. I see addressing “high-leverage” goals as a key part of this endeavor. As my colleagues and I describe, “high-leverage” goals:

- Focus on issues widely recognized as central to the development of more equitable educational opportunities and outcomes;
- Present opportunities for visible improvements in relatively short periods of time;
- Establish a foundation for long-term, sustained, systemic improvement efforts.

Reducing school absences and drop-outs, for example, can serve as a high-leverage goal because it concerns parents and community members, students,
and school and district staff; addressing chronic absences in elementary school can be a key ingredient in reducing dropouts among older students and may be of particular benefit to students of color, students from low-income communities, and low-performing students; and research demonstrates that unpacking the problems at different levels, exploring solutions, and examining the outcomes can contribute to measurable improvements. Creating more equitable suspension policies and reducing suspensions offers another opportunity to examine and address an issue that has a negative impact on students, particularly Black students, students from families with lower incomes, and special education students.

This work on high leverage goals builds on what I learned from community organizers who begin their work by building relationships and identifying common interests and concerns. When we build on common, practical interests and concerns – whether of students, members of a school community, groups of educators, policymakers or others – we are less likely to have to explain, after the fact, why we did what we did or what significance it might have. By working on problems and issues that people see as meaningful and that provide some opportunities to experience success, our work can help to develop the hope that brings communities together and inspire broader change efforts.

“Democratize” is another particularly important term, and beginning with issues and problems of central concern in the communities where we work may be one way to “democratize” evidence and research. From my perspective, however, it is not just about democratizing the process of education. We also need to reinforce the central role that research and education play in developing democratic societies. Scanning recent headlines about the mid-term elections and the past presidential election in the US, however, highlights that we cannot just assume that improving education for some will necessarily benefit all. As an article on the latest voting patterns in the US shows, right now education may be driving us apart rather than bringing us together.

This educational divide is particularly apparent among white voters: a large majority of non-college-educated white voters vote for Republicans while a majority of college-educated white voters cast ballots for Democrats. Nonetheless, the influence of education on voting patterns appears to be reinforced by geography and intersects with gender. Racial background and education are also used to explain who does and does not vote, as Black voters, particularly Black women, have the highest voting rates overall, and non-college-educated Black women and men are much more likely to vote than the non-college-educated women and men from other backgrounds. Some of the same patterns among voters also seem to have emerged in the UK’s referendum on EU membership and in the popularity of far-right politician Geert Wilder’s in the Netherlands.

But the point is not that those with an education make “better” choices. These developments suggest to me that we have to remain aware of the ways that research and our educational systems contribute to the
problems we have at the same time that we strive to make education—and educational research—part of the solution.

In your book *Managing to change: How schools can survive (and sometimes thrive) in turbulent times*, you argue, inter alia, that schools themselves need to create and design conditions for improvement. What do you see to be some of these necessary conditions for change for improvement? Can you provide examples of such schools and their stories of success?

In *Managing to Change* I emphasized the ways that schools, school leaders and school communities can create the local conditions for their own success. They can do that by developing shared understanding, recruiting and sustaining a powerful staff, creating a productive work environment, and managing the external environment. In that book I focused on a handful of schools in the San Francisco Bay Area that exemplified that approach, and more recently I have been looking at people and organizations that are working to create the conditions for better educational outcomes both inside and outside of schools in the US as well as in places like South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Finland, and Estonia.

But *Managing to Change* also highlighted that, despite the successes of some individual schools, it remains extremely difficult to develop, sustain, and spread more powerful approaches to instruction and schooling. That challenge is even more difficult for those that pursue a vision for education that looks substantially different from the teacher-centered, age-graded, academically oriented, standardized tested classrooms that have developed over the past century all over the world.

The efforts to create, improve or “turnaround” individual schools remain limited by the unwillingness and inability to build the capacity for school improvement at the system level. As Richard Elmore put it, in the US, we have overinvested in accountability and underinvested in capacity. Therefore, after I finished *Managing to Change*, I wanted to look beyond the US and explore what was “working” in education in other parts of the world. I hoped to visit some of the “usual suspects” – places like Singapore and Finland, at the top of the charts on international tests like PISA and stars of many media stories of educational success.

In what turned out to be a wonderful set of coincidences, I ended up spending a year living in Norway, with my wife Karen Hammerness (whose grandparents on her father’s side all came to the US from Norway) and three daughters. While Norway shares many traits with Finland, only one of the two regularly found itself in discussions of educational “high performance.” On the PISA tests so often used as a measure of education systems, Norway performed about the same as the US. As a consequence, rather than trying to figure out why the US education system has not been as good as Finland’s, I found myself exploring why Norway’s education system has not performed as well as Finland’s either.

Out of that set of inquiries, I developed a greater appreciation for the broader purposes of the Norwegian education system that go beyond high-performance on PISA, and I
identified three key conditions at the system level that I believe we need to put in place if we want to see dramatic improvements in educational opportunities and outcomes overall. First, we need to establish mechanisms to foster common understanding of the purposes and goals of education. Whether one sees Finland as a “high-performing” system or not, a coherence-building curriculum renewal process roughly every ten years provides a model of the kind of societal reflection required for the development of common purposes. Second, we need to recognize that powerful learning experiences depend on far more than great teaching; powerful learning at scale depends on developing materials and resources (“technical capital”), expertise (“human capital”), and relationships (and “social capital”) among the many individuals, organizations, and institutions engaged in education that build the capacity for improving instruction at the system level. Third, in contrast to the US where the credit and the blame for learning often gets placed on individuals, we need to go beyond holding individuals “accountable” and develop the kind of collective responsibility I encountered in Norway and Finland. Much of my work since that time has explored what it takes to create those conditions, but there is still a long way to go!

You founded International Education News, which brings in news related to educational change around the world. Given your perspective of changes that are simultaneous yet different, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global changes in education worldwide?

International Education News (IEN) is a weekly blog and daily twitter feed that grew out of the isolation and frustration I felt after I returned from Norway in 2010. When I got back, I quickly found myself immersed in the same polarized debates about education reform in the US that I had left behind a year earlier. I felt cut off from the educational discussions and the different perspectives I encountered while living in Scandinavia. To deal with that frustration, I wanted to take advantage of the emerging possibilities of social media to get access to some of the news, research, and diverse perspectives on educational policy and educational change around the world. I also hoped that sharing some of what is happening in educational policy and educational change in different places could help to foster discussions that go beyond the constraints of current educational systems and the limited debates about how to improve them.

This regular connection to some of what is going on in education in other parts of the world has also been instrumental in helping me to continue to develop my understanding of what it will take to foster meaningful educational improvements on a wide scale. In particular, working on IEN has helped me to see that educational reform efforts are often too big and too small. They are too big in the sense that they focus on major policy issues where it is extremely difficult to make visible progress on the ground, in schools and classrooms in the short term. At the same time, these policy efforts are often too small because they get trapped in political disputes, fail to engage broad groups of education stakeholders, and never inspire the kinds of social movements that people like Santiago Rincon-Gallardo argue are central to transformative
improvements in education. Through IEN and my international work, I have learned from organizations like Wordworks and IkamvaYouth in South Africa, that are able to make a substantial difference in students’ lives with scarce resources and difficult conditions where large-scale policies have not yet delivered; and I have learned a tremendous amount by being exposed to the successes of grass-roots efforts in places like Mexico and Columbia that have grown to influence policy. Looking at what is happening in education in different countries makes clear the pervasiveness of the conventional “grammar of schooling;” but it can also provide the ideas and examples to rethink the simple linear equation – get a high school diploma which will lead to college which will lead to a good job – that ignores the many learning opportunities inside and outside schools that can support all aspects of development.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. 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?

Agency is certainly a buzzword these days, but for me the capacity for students to develop and pursue their individual and collective interests over the course of their lives remains a central concern. I began my career examining how young children’s intellectual strengths and interests developed in free play in kindergarten, and I started with the belief that developing the power to direct our own learning and manage the educational process – even if we make mistakes or make the “wrong choices” – will put us in the best position to pursue meaningful and satisfying lives. Ironically, despite this aspiration, my entire career seems to have focused on explaining why it is so hard to create schools that help children do that.

Although I still think that supporting student agency is a central need, I am constantly humbled by how hard it is to determine what it will take to meet each generation’s needs now and in the future. Even my experiences with my two oldest daughters – who are 20 and 18 – has not prepared me to support the learning of my youngest daughter, who is 14. Even though my youngest is going to the same high school her sisters went to, I am still struggling to help her pursue all the dance and drama activities she loves at the same time that she completes her homework and participates in all the required activities that she does not seem to care about as much; and we are still working to understand the course options and navigate the college process.

Making things more complicated, my daughters are only four and six years apart, but they seem to be from different generations. When the two older girls were growing up, we would watch videos on TV together; but by the time my youngest came along, she was not only watching videos on an iPad, she was making videos with it. She would watch “how-to” videos of kids her own age making bracelets or other kinds of jewelry and explaining each step along the way; and then she would videotape herself making her own constructions and explaining what she was doing for an unseen audience. Even
though she never posted the videos for others to see, it was a highly reflective and meta-cognitive activity that I expect benefitted her. Nonetheless, she also got a smartphone at a much younger age than her sisters, and I expect that the amount of time she spends on Snapchat will also create challenges that none of us really comprehend. How do you plan for things like this?

Under these circumstances, all I can do is try to help them develop the agency and capacity to do what they think is best, reflect on it, and learn from their mistakes. Ideally, as my colleague Ann Lieberman says, if we can share some of the things that we have learned along the way, those will be “new mistakes” instead of the same mistakes we have been making over and over again for years.

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

I think this a time when people are coming to terms with the fact that the world around us is changing – for better and worse – in ways we cannot control. I know that in some ways that sounds depressing. But to me, that means understanding educational change is at the heart of everything we need to do. What’s more, the challenges we face today give us a chance to get beyond the search for “the one best approach” to school improvement. These are difficult times, but times that can encourage us to recognize that no single approach to school improvement – no one model, system, or set of tools, resources and practices – will work for every child in every community. Rather than pitting one approach against another and fighting over inadequate funding and limited resources, we are in a better position than ever before to get beyond zero-sum games and strategies that build pathways that only enable a fraction of people to reach their goals. We can proceed believing that our work can make a difference even as we know that our individual contributions will never be sufficient. This is a time when we can each make crucial contributions to the improvement of education and the betterment of our communities, at the same time that we recognize that the long-term purposes we care about can only be pursued collectively, when we manage to work together.

References


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Professor Hatch is also the founder of internationalednews.com and has developed a series of images of practice that use multimedia to document and share teachers’ expertise.

His research includes studies of school reform efforts at the school, district, and national levels. His current work focuses on efforts to create more powerful learning experiences both inside and outside of schools in “higher” and “lower-performing” education systems. His books include Managing to Change: How Schools can Survive (and Sometimes Thrive) in Turbulent Times (Teachers College Press, 2009); Into the Classroom: Developing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Teachers College Press, 2005); and School Reform Behind the Scenes (Teachers College Press, 1999).

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