Q & A with Kirsi Pyhältö

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?

I find the theme of the 2019 AERA conference highly contemporary, engaging, and important. Education is our most important asset for building and changing the future of human kind. If educational decision making and policy is not systematically informed by educational research, it is then driven by the everyday experiences or agendas of those who are in power and the fragmented evidence used by them, which does not provide solid grounding for sustainable societal development. Yet it is not self-evident or easy to build such an educational system. I think there are at least a couple of things that we as a research community can do to promote this cause: firstly and foremost, doing it together matters. That is, focusing on gathering and building cumulative evidence on the core phenomena of educational research such as learning, teaching, and educational change, and making it easily available; embedding rigorous large-scale research designs into educational reforms; studying them and their effects in natural settings as they are implemented, which can only be done by the network of research groups; carrying out research as design, i.e., doing it together with educational practitioners; involving educational practitioners into our designs, resulting in both advancement of research-based pedagogical practices and more sophisticated theories; reaching out, particularly towards the educational policymakers and administrators; and seeking dialogue.

In Finland, the school system is based on the idea of equality for opportunity. Until the age of 16, all Finnish children receive a similar basic education. Education is publicly funded, and includes daily school dinners and health services such as dental care. There are no ability-tracking structures or other structures that separate comprehensive school students early on into either academic or vocational education. Support systems are flexible and half of the students who complete comprehensive school have received special education at some point in their school career.
In spite of growing cultural diversity and differences in family demographics in terms of educational background and income, Finnish schools differ rather little in learning outcomes and students’ experienced well-being compared with schools in other countries. Low child poverty, early childhood support and intervention systems, free public schooling for everyone, and a strong welfare system supporting families provide fairly equal opportunities for every child in their early school career.

Developing public schooling for all has been a significant investment from our society, but so far I think it has been somewhat successful in promoting equality for opportunity in the society, for example, by a buffering effect of socio-economic differences between the students.

Although the Finnish educational system can still be considered homogeneous, there are indications that school and gender differences are growing in students’ school attitude, performance, and well-being. In most schools there are large numbers of students who do well in an academic, social, and psychological sense, but also some students who are disconnected from the academic track or social community of the school. At the moment, one of our main national concern is how to prevent growth in differences in learning outcomes between schools and between boys and girls.

The Finnish culture of education puts a lot of emphasis on trust, autonomy, and responsibility on schools and teachers. Accountability structures, in general, are flexible and place a strong emphasis on trusting schools and teachers. For instance, our national core curriculum sets the general goals, which provides the grounds for the district level curriculum development work. Accordingly, instead of just delivering it to schools, the curriculum is locally constructed and developed by school districts or municipalities, based on the general goals set by the national core curriculum. This has enhanced educational practitioners’ agency over school development, since all the teachers are expected to engage in curriculum making.

At the same time a challenge here is how to build coherence within and between the levels of the educational system, and prevent differences between the schools in terms of quality of instruction.

You are well known for your work on the role of teachers as active professional agents in school reforms. What do you see to be some important contributions of teachers’ role in shaping the field of educational change?

Our recent research on teacher agency shows that a strong sense of professional agency contributes to school development in various ways.

There is, for instance, emerging evidence that professional agency in the teacher community also promotes active and intentional teacher learning in the classroom. This implies that learning in and between the classroom and the professional community is one of the focal areas of teacher learning. Professional agency in the form of active and intentional teacher learning both in the classroom and in the professional community has shown to be associated with increased student engagement and academic success, reduced levels of early career in-service teachers’ attrition, teachers’ experimentation with innovative teaching methods and commitment in school development, and reduced levels of teacher stress.

It can be argued that teachers’ sense of professional agency is a central determinant for the extent to which they are able to engage in continuous professional learning, contribute to school development, make a difference in their working environment, and continually develop sufficient strategies to cope with work-related stressors—to promote sustainable change in the society.
Given your focus on teachers’ agency in large-scale educational change, what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global changes that are driven by teachers’ agency?

Teachers form a highly significant professional group in society. Engaging most brilliant minds in the teaching of future generations and cultivating teachers’ professional agency is key for embracing sustainable societal change i.e., building resources for solving global challenges through education, generating innovations, preserving what is considered valuable in the society, and promoting innovative learning. The sustainable societal change is affected particularly by teacher’s professional agency, not only through teaching the future citizens, but also through their involvement in school development and, ultimately, in building educational systems that facilitate democracy. This means that professional agency—both in the classroom and in the professional community—is key for enhancing both positive school and societal development.

Our previous studies, have for example, shown that there is interdependency between the teachers’ sense of professional agency in terms of the school reform and their perceptions of it. Teachers who had holistic perceptions about the reform were more likely to display strong professional agency over the reform. This implies that the development of professional agency may first occur at the interpersonal level between the teachers, for instance in the form of shared sense making, that, in turn, may trigger more profound changes at the intra-personal level, including the professional self. If needed, a strong sense of professional agency also enables well-justified opposition, generating initiatives, fostering collective developments, and transforming dominant power relations within the school community. Yet, lack of such agency leaves teachers ill-prepared in the era of constant change, resulting in reactivity and lack of pedagogical coherence and direction that may at its worst lead to burnout and attrition.

Young people 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?

If I need to choose, I would focus on three major issues. Firstly, I would invest heavily in promoting students’ learning agency—the will to learn (motivation); learning skills (both self- and co-regulated learning skills); and self-efficacy in learning (both individually and together with others); because strong learning agency is likely to allow students not only to cope with still largely unknown changes of the future, but also to change the world. Secondly, I think facilitating learning of socio-emotional skills is a good investment because they have been shown to be associated with many attributes of positive development such as pro-social behavior, sense of belonging, study engagement, good learning outcomes, and reduced risk for mental problems. Thirdly, promoting learning of well-being skills enables students to cope with the stressors they themselves and their communities will face.
This calls for building learning environments that cultivate learning agency, for instance by enhancing individual and shared sense making, complex problem solving, and knowledge creation. Such environments enable the exercising of interpersonal skills and consider well-being as something that can be learned and intentionally built in and through the pedagogical practices of schools.

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

There are a couple of things that I find currently particularly interesting in the field of educational change studies. It seems that there is an emerging shift from single-ingredient and outcome-oriented studies toward studying system-like processes of educational change. I find this shift from the what to the how very relevant and exciting.

These kinds of studies provide knowledge on the anatomy of educational change processes is also highly useful for those school administrators and educational practitioners who are engineering and implementing the reforms. Moreover, I am also excited about complex composite studies, integrating several levels of educational systems into their empirical design. In my view, studying such complex processes calls for longitudinal multi-method studies that include data collection from administration all the way to grass root levels of single schools. This also provides an opportunity to design new instruments to study such processes at the different levels of the system. I think that the main benefit of such systemic designs is in its potential to explore interactions between the levels and, in turn, to identify central determinants of reform work.

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