

# LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

## *Q&A with Helen Timperley*

*AERA is celebrating 100 years of educational scholarship in 2016 with the theme Public Scholarship to Educate Diverse Democracies. How does your scholarship contribute to public understanding, political debate, and professional practice in increasingly diverse democracies in the USA/Internationally?*

The annual meeting theme speaks directly to research in educational change. It is essentially an area of public scholarship because as a research community we are explicitly committed to strengthening public education. But I, together with others in the educational change community, am still grappling with the attributes of diversity and democracy and how they fit into a field where complexity and unpredictability form the reality.

We know a great deal about how intellectually stimulating learning environments should look. We know that under particular conditions we can work successfully with groups of schools to move towards realizing these possibilities. What continues to be challenging is to encompass diversity in our

theoretical, and applied models as we find that what works in one context doesn't in another.

Diversity and democracy (in the sense of having a right to participate in decisions that affect us) are closely intertwined. To have one, the other must be respected. So I hope we are leaving behind the era of taking schools, irrespective of their composition, through highly structured technical change processes dictated by some external vision of what a school should be. Where, in reality, achievement gains are at the expense of a broad curriculum and more an illusion than an academic reality and counter-productive to intellectual curiosity. The educational change community has made a strong contribution to the politics involved in identifying the inadequacy of these processes and their goals.

In saying this, I do not want to romanticize some kind of false utopia that if dysfunctional schools are encouraged to become more democratic institutions and to sort their way through to effectiveness through diverse means, then all will be well. This kind of approach

### EDUCATIONAL CHANGE SIG

The Educational 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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#### ABOUT THE SERIES

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.

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doesn't work either.

In my own work in educational change, I have collaborated with colleagues Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert<sup>1</sup> from British Columbia to develop a systematic evidence-informed inquiry process. It respects diversity by asking schools to scan the environment to identify what is happening for their learners and then to use the information to focus on goals important to them. By developing and testing hunches, those involved identify how they are contributing to the situation so that they can change. Subsequent phases identified in Figure 1 are learning and action and guided by the question, "Are we making enough of a difference?" Complexity and unpredictability are still the norm, but the process takes those involved to sustainable solutions to previously seemingly intractable problems.

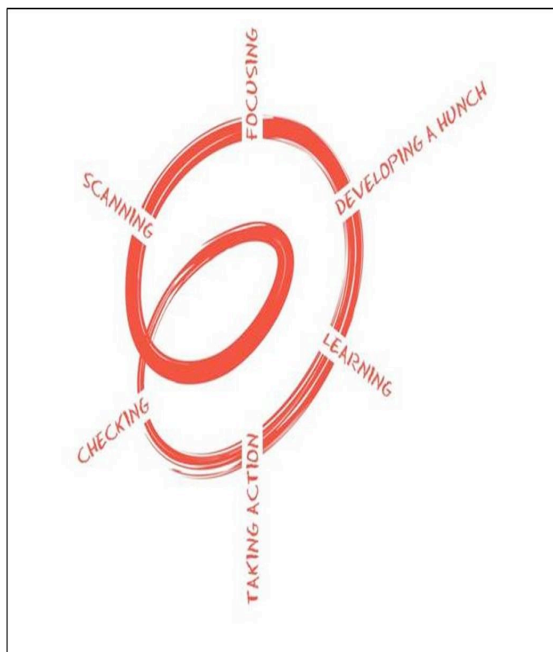


Figure 1. The spiral of inquiry, learning, and action

*Your work in professional learning and development has become widely known, how has this contributed to your ideas about educational change more generally?*

Some of my early research in teacher professional learning was enriched by the opportunity to examine the processes through multiple layers of the education system, including students, teachers, school leaders, professional developers and policy makers.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the initial focus on teacher professional learning developed into a much broader theory of educational change that captured all these layers. It became apparent that to make a difference to students, the process must begin with analysing student learning, with teachers then learning how to improve outcomes for their students, leaders learning how to assist their teachers to improve these outcomes and for the policy environment to support the learning through the layers. Figure 2 illustrates this multi-layered learning and also encapsulates the well-established notion that learning gets much greater traction if it is focused and deep then transferred to other situations.

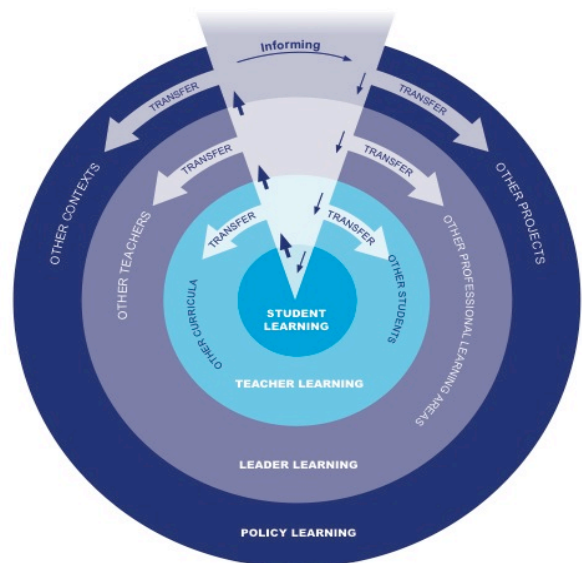


Figure 2. An embedded theory of change

*What key theoretical ideas have shaped your thinking about educational change?*

Educational change essentially means learning to do something differently. So I constantly turn to the research on learning when studying change. At the risk of leaving out most people who have contributed to this strong theoretical base, I would like to mention some who have been most influential for me: the National Research Council on how people learn and education for life and work<sup>3</sup> the OECD work on innovative learning environments<sup>4</sup> and work on distributed cognition that blurs the lines between learners, those with whom the learner interacts and the material and social artefacts in the environment.

My main reason for mentioning these is that the important theoretical constructs have been developed through studying student learners. Yet I find these constructs just as applicable to professional, organisational and policy learning. Take an important principle as an example. In any learning situation, engagement of learners' theories about how the world works<sup>3</sup> in relation to alternative ideas and testing them against the evidence is fundamental if we want to promote real change. This is just as true of student learners, their teachers, school leaders and policy makers. I think of diversity in terms of the mix of beliefs and ensuing activities that are based on particular views of how the world works and just as importantly, how to make it work better than before.

There are many similar principles that apply at all levels of our education system. Another example is the OECD's work on innovative learning environments that identifies how motivation and emotion act as the gatekeepers of learning. Having worked with policy makers in many different parts of the world, I have come to understand that these gatekeepers are just as applicable at this level as they are for student or teacher learning. So I am a passionate advocate

of both bringing and further developing theories of learning to enhance our understanding of educational change.

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

One of the main issues arises from the strengths of educational change. In all education settings in which I have worked there has been a strong commitment to students, their learning and welfare. I have worked in places where people have largely given up but they still cared and their motivation to change returned when they found they could make a difference.

This very caring gives rise to the problem of trying to fix things with too many untested ideas. In Tony Bryk's presidential address to AERA in 2014, a major theme was the plethora of failed 'good' ideas in education. Missing are the careful analysis, focusing and testing of these ideas, identifying the implementation challenges, and building the relevant capacity together with wide-spread commitment.

A related issue is what I have previously called the "everyone except me" problem where each participant believes that things would improve if everyone else changed. My vision for educational change to be successful includes policy makers, school leaders, teachers and students all having the knowledge and skills to undertake effective diagnoses of challenging situations and the capacity to design fit-for-purpose solutions. I find one of the biggest challenges when working with practitioners in the inquiry spiral in Figure 1 is leaping to premature solutions that involve everyone else doing something different.

Lorna Earl and I recently wrote a working paper for the OECD<sup>5</sup> on evaluative thinking in educational innovation that highlights some of the same ideas. Until we are much less enthusiastic about the good ideas and more

enthusiastic about carefully designing and testing their worth throughout all phases of implementation, we will remain the slaves of doing more, often with less effect, as our good ideas distract from one another.

### *What excites you about the educational field today?*

There is no dispute that it is unacceptable to have increasingly stratified outcomes for learners. The field is reaching the point of developing strong theoretically-grounded actionable knowledge that makes a difference. I would like to reference previously seminal work here but space precludes this. This work is as diverse as the field itself and parallels the complexity and unpredictability of educational change. However, if we are to create useful knowledge for practitioners and policy makers, then we need to agree on principles that come together in disciplined ways that allow the generation of real and practical possibilities. Although most of the ideas below have been expressed by others in various forms, I would like to offer them for inclusion in an actionable theory for change.

- Reducing the unacceptable variability in outcomes for learners requires us to embrace rather than attempt to eliminate diversity and complexity;
- Any approaches to change should be consistent with what is known about learning (including individual and social cognition, emotion and motivation) and be tested against the important theoretical ideas and discarded if they violate them;
- The design of solutions to unacceptable outcomes are based on deep inquiry into how the current situation is maintaining the status quo;
- Change encompasses and builds capacity at multiple system levels because we cannot ask that one group changes, most often teachers, without considering the changes that must occur within the system for them to be more effective;
- Evaluative thinking and measures are used throughout any change initiative to answer the question, “Are we making enough of a difference for our learners?”

### ENDNOTES

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3. Bransford, J., Brown, A., & Cocking, R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience and school*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
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5. Earl, L. and H. Timperley (2015), “Evaluative thinking for successful educational innovation”, *OECD Education Working Papers*, No. 122, OECD Publishing, Paris. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jrxtk1jtdwf-en>



Helen Timperley is Professor of Education at The University of Auckland in New Zealand. Her early teaching and school leadership career led to a research focus on promoting leadership, organizational and professional learning to improve the educational experience of students currently under-served by our education systems. She led the work on the Best Evidence Synthesis iteration on professional learning and development for the New Zealand Ministry of Education that has received major international attention. She has published widely in international academic journals such as *Review of Educational Research*, *Journal of Educational Change*, and the *Journal of Curriculum studies*. She has undertaken international consultancies in many countries and has presented keynote speeches in a range of invited conferences. She has written six books on her specialty research areas with her work translated into many different languages. Her latest works are a sole authored publication, “Realizing the Power of Professional Learning” and a co-authored monograph on transforming learning in schools. She can be reached at [h.timperley@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:h.timperley@auckland.ac.nz)