The 2020 AERA theme is The Power and Possibilities for the Public Good: When Researchers and Organizational Stakeholders Collaborate and is a call to “to address educational challenges through policy and community engagement and to work with diverse institutional and organizational stakeholders.” How can such leveraging of educational research contribute to collaboration and engagement within and across diverse stakeholder groups and to educational change?

A persistent challenge facing educational researchers is not a lack of solid academic research, but the limited boundary of research knowledge transferred to, or exchanged with, diverse organizational and institutional stakeholders. Of course, some educational researchers have conducted blockbuster research studies that have impacted a wide range of policy circles, but, in general, numerous research findings remain largely unapplied in the real world. They are narrowly consumed within compartmentalized academic communities, mostly in the form of peer-reviewed articles. As such, they usually do not gain traction from schools and policy circles. There would be many reasons for this phenomenon. In this regard, the 2020 AERA theme is timely and significant. While there are multiple ways researchers and organizational stakeholders can collaborate to change schools, I think the starting point is to “meet” people on the ground. To take an analogy, if we don’t go to a ballpark at all, and just watch baseball games only on TV, it would be almost impossible to “feel” what is going on in the field. Researchers should meet people face-to-face and feel the issue on the ground. As Hargreaves and Shirley (2012) pointed out, “outside-in and inside-out research expertise and practitioner inquiry” (p. 99) could be an effective way to improve schools with innovation. Educational
researchers should come closer to the ground to sit, listen, and talk.

Given your focus on shifting school structure, systems and culture to support enhanced capacity of teachers and administrators and increased equity and rigor for students, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

I have conducted my research mostly in Asia. I wish to share three lessons, given the limited space, from my work in the Asian context. First, continuity is important. Continuing organizational traditions, routines, rituals, and missions are necessary for sustaining organizational survival and stability. But the continuity of change is more important. For the long-lasting continuity and stability of organizations, paradoxically, organizational change is inevitable. Second, organizational change should start at the end users in an organization, if you like. Let me share a short story about Charlie Munger, the well-known American investor. He was at a local shop to buy a fishing lure and found a sparkling plastic fishing tackle. He asked the shop owner “My God, they’re pink and green. Do fish really take these lures?” The shop owner replied “Mister, I don’t sell to fish” (Griffin, 2015, p. 17). This story offers an analogy to the problems embedded in educational change in the era of accountability. A sparkling object (e.g., turnaround reform, NCLB) is viewed as a quick-fix measure for changing schools and is attractive to various institutional and organizational stakeholders such as policy makers (i.e., customers for the fishing lures). However, such educational changes (i.e., the shiny lure) are, in essence, not appealing to teachers and students (i.e., fish). In other words, it often seems that stakeholders involved in educational change and reform may have been more attentive to a seemingly sparkling tool than what will get teachers and students hooked, and how/whether they will bite. The most important stakeholder has been seriously overlooked (see Lee, 2018 for details).

Third, tensions around school improvement and change have emerged between global grammar (a set of institutionalized rules that give legitimacy to certain discursive practices) and local semantics (active interpretations and sense-making processes by local agents or communities in particular societal contexts) in Asia (Cha, Gundara, Ham, & Lee, 2017, p. 217). For example, we know that instructional leadership has been integral to school improvement (cf. Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). As a highly rationalized global education discourse (given its strong association with student learning outcomes), instructional leadership is widely accepted as a sort of universal policy instrument for school effectiveness and improvement (cf. McEwan, 2008). In this regard, instructional leadership can be called global grammar in “making sense of what and how leadership practices ought to be embodied in school improvement” (Lee, 2018, p. 468). At the same time, however, as local semantics, the enactments and effects
of instructional leadership on student learning outcomes can vary across schools and schooling systems in Asia, since local agents articulate, interpret, and make sense of the concept of instructional leadership differently in the local setting in which they work (cf. Lee, Walker, & Chui, 2012). This is where tensions and dynamics between global grammar and local semantics emanate when it comes to educational change. Research is much needed to understand them better.

Your work often explores issues lying at the intersection of schooling, rigor, and social mobility. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice to help facilitate greater opportunity and equity particularly in the East Asian context?

Because education is perceived as a key instrument for achieving social mobility in East Asia (particularly in South Korea), people strongly believe that we all can achieve social mobility through higher levels of education. This has resulted in shaping the highly competitive exam-oriented schooling systems in East Asia. The role of K-12 schooling has been substantially reduced as a selective channel for a small group of academically talented students to get into top universities whereas the rest of the students become losers by default due to the socio-economic structure. Since university admission and admission to different tiers of universities significantly shape life chances, policy efforts to change university entrance exam systems have periodically been made by governments. For example, South Korea changed the university entrance exam systems 19 times since the 1950s – either substantial change or tinkering occurred, on average, almost every four years. Unfortunately, all efforts for educational changes did not work. Still, a vast majority of South Korean students suffer from the hyper-competitive university entrance exam. To “fundamentally” change schooling systems such as university exam systems and also to scale it up, as a researcher, I believe educational change for greater opportunity and equity must be simultaneously accompanied by changes and/or reforms in other socio-economic sectors with a focus on social safety nets, including adequate health and medical care, affordable housing, fair tax system, and reduced income gaps. It is a myth that education can solve every single social problem. At least, in East Asia, reforms/changes in other socio-economic sectors, which can be well aligned with school reforms, are necessary conditions for educational change to accomplish greater opportunity and equity.

Educational Change expects those engaged in and with schools, schooling, and school systems to spearhead deep and often difficult transformation. How might those in the field of Educational Change best support these individuals and groups through these processes?

As I mentioned earlier, I believe educational researchers should come closer to the ground to sit, listen, and talk. As Sinek (2014, p. 111) points out, “Trust is not formed through a screen, it is formed across a table. It takes a handshake to bind humans [...] and no technology yet can replace that. There is no such thing as virtual trust.” In a trust-building, collaborative process between educational researchers and diverse organizational stakeholders, one specific approach I would recommend for sustainable school improvement is design thinking. Unlike
standardized solutions such as pre-packaged, top-down reform initiatives, design thinking offers a method and framework for planning, implementing, and creating desirable change by starting with practitioners’ inquiry (e.g., by listening to their voice about the problem to solve). The principle in this approach is to scaffold the problem-solving process by valuing practitioners’ voices, knowledge and perspectives. In short, design thinking is a backward mapping process that synergizes organizational stakeholders’ experiences with external researchers’ expertise. I believe design thinking-based school change/improvement has a great deal of potential for educational research to collaborate and engage within and across diverse stakeholder groups.

Where do you perceive the field of Educational Change is going? What excites you about Educational Change now and in the future?

Let me start by recalling two crucial events that significantly impacted educational research and policy in the field. Probably, the most shocking event to the U.S. during the era of the Cold War would be the Sputnik launch in October 1957. It fundamentally impacted discourses of educational change by igniting blame, conversations, and debates regarding U.S. schools. 44 years later, another shocking moment came to Germany. When OECD released its first PISA results in 2001, German students’ low scores triggered a wide range of public outcries and debates about its school systems and education policies. While the Sputnik shock and the PISA shock are similar as they can be characterized as a serious wake-up call or maybe, a “shock doctrine” (cf. Kline, 2008), there is a clear difference. For the Sputnik shock, the U.S. eventually became a winner by Neil Armstrong’s first step on the Moon, whereas for the PISA shock, the winner was not an individual country such as Germany, Finland, and China (i.e., Shanghai). The ultimate winner was the OECD which is now able to sway “global” discourses of educational change through its policy infrastructure such as PISA.

“Design thinking-based school change has a great deal of potential for educational research to collaborate and engage within and across diverse stakeholder groups”

The thing that makes me excited about educational change now and in the future is not PISA-driven changes. When it comes to educational change in the future, I pay special attention to an event, which seems to gain far less attention and traction from most Western media. On the 9th of March 2016, “AlphaGo,” the artificial intelligence-based computer program of the complex board game Go, defeated multiple times world champion Lee Sedol. The artificial intelligence (AI) program, developed by Google’s DeepMind, had easily defeated the seemingly invincible world champion. The message from this “AlphaGo shock” (to coin a term) is clear; a machine can outperform humans not just in relatively simple cognitive areas (e.g., memory, routinized tasks), but also in tasks required for
some people view the event as signaling the beginning of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is characterized as a range of technological advancements, including hyper-connectivity with the Internet of Things (IOT) and AI, that fuse “the physical, digital and biological worlds” (Schwab, 2016). I don’t know whether this is true. The whole discourse of the Fourth Industrial Revolution could be just another marketing, noise, or hype about uncertain futures. However, what is clear to me is that our education systems and schools should change if we are going to live with technological advancements such as “AlphaGo” in our daily life in the future. That is, our students will need to learn “new” skills about how to know and how to do (e.g., how to work with AI machines, how to utilize enormous computing power). More importantly, our students will have to learn about how to live together with other human beings and how to be as a human-being amid such unprecedented, overwhelming technological advancements that would substantially change the way we relate to others. As a researcher in the field of Educational Change, I am excited to go deeper into this uncharted territory.

“Our students will need to learn “new” skills about how to know and how to do.”

References


MOOSUNG LEE

Moosung Lee holds one of the University of Canberra’s prestigious Centenary Professor appointments, ten of which have been made across the University’s five strategic areas of research. Having been appointed tenured full professor within 4 ½ years of completing his PhD, Moosung is by far the youngest Centenary Professor. He currently leads a research group focusing on Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Canberra. He also holds a joint appointment as a professor of comparative education at Yonsei University in South Korea. Prior to joining the University of Canberra, he held appointments as Associate Professor and founding Deputy Director of the Education Policy Unit at the University of Hong Kong.

His research areas are educational leadership & administration, social contexts of education, and comparative education. He has published extensively in these areas. His scholarly productivity and quality output contribute to the research fields. This has been evidenced through a number of international scholarly communities’ recognition of his work; as examples, he received the Richard Wolf Memorial Award by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) in the Netherlands, and he was the first scholar in a non-U.S. university to receive the American Educational Research Association’s Emerging Scholar Award (Division A – Administration, Organization, and Leadership). He was also chosen as a recipient for the University of Canberra Research Excellence Award in Social Sciences in 2018.

He has been a Fulbright Scholar, UNESCO Fellow, Korean Foundation Fellow, Asia Pacific Center for Leadership and Change Senior Research Fellow, Erasmus Mundus Visiting Scholar (at UCL & Aarhus University), YFL Outstanding Visiting Scholar (at Yonsei University), and Visiting Fellow (at Seoul National University Asia Center). His work has been funded by UNESCO, the European Commission, the Australian Research Council, the University Grants Council in Hong Kong, the Korea Foundation, the Academy of Korean Studies, American Educational Research Organization, Economic and Social Research Council (U.K.), National College for Leadership of Schools and Children’s Services (U.K.), and the International Baccalaureate Organization.

He has served on the editorial board of a number of international journals. Also, he is Co-Editor of Multicultural Education Review and Senior Associate Editor of Journal of Educational Administration. Having gained extensive academic networks and experiences as a researcher and teacher in South Korea, Hong Kong, the U.K., and the U.S., he has opened a new chapter of his career in Australia since 2014 (email: MooSung.Lee@canberra.edu.au).