Letter from the Editor:
To the Educational Change SIG community,

It is a tremendous pleasure and honor to serve as the editor of Lead the Change (LTC). It is also an easy assignment in the sense that the prior editors, Helen Janc-Malone and Osnat Fellus, did such a fantastic job for so long using LTC as a platform to share of some of the most innovative, thoughtful and thought-provoking research on and practice in educational change. They also set the precedent of thinking about educational change in expansive ways. When so much of what we read can become narrower and narrower in focus over time, from its inception, LTC provided opportunities to hear from those with different disciplinary backgrounds and lenses (e.g., organizational theory, anthropology, organizational behavior, change management, critical theory), different content expertise (e.g., adult learning, mathematics, technology, school choice, etc.), and different contexts (e.g., Mainland China, South Korea, Kenya, Israel, United Kingdom, etc.). This is one of key strengths of the series and one which I think makes it particularly special and worthwhile.

With this in mind, we (Jennie Weiner and Min Jung Kim), thought one way to honor the legacy and future of LTC, and celebrate this incredible milestone of 100 Issues, was to revisit some of our past issues. Specifically, we asked various authors to re-read their piece and to consider how they might modify/adjust/add to what they wrote based on their experiences and insights since publication. The result is, we believe, a group of highly relevant and thoughtful pieces bridging the past and the future and offering new opportunities for us to collectively consider the power of change and its limitations in the educational sphere. In the coming year or so, we will be integrating some of these special pieces into the regular rotation of new LTC contributions. We hope you will find them as illuminating and interesting as we do and look forward to the next 100 issues!

Sincerely,
Jennie & Min Jung
Dennis Shirley, PhD.

How, and in what ways, has your work evolved since the first publication of this piece? What ideas/points still hold true? Which might you revise?

Since I published my original contribution in Lead the Change in 2012, I have studied school networks and innovations in the US, Canada, Germany, Norway, and South Korea. This research shows just how transformative joint work by educators across schools and systems can be. In the original 2012 contribution, I was most enthusiastic about community organizing for educational change; since then, however, I have seen how community organizations can be co-opted by powerful corporations and their philanthropic agencies. In one particularly egregious case, a community organizing effort in a struggling inner-city high school that had shown signs of improvement led to half of the school being turned over to a charter management organization. The irony here was that the traditional public school continued improving and the charter school part did not in spite of generous philanthropic support. So, there is good and bad community organizing, and I’m more discriminating about promoting that model now.

The one statement that stands out the most for me from my previous piece is “Educators can help to allay nationalist anxieties that have been exploited in times of economic insecurity.” I wish I had stated that point more emphatically in my 2012 Lead the Change submission, given all that has happened since then with the rise of authoritarian populism and contemporary political polarization. I also wish I had been more outspoken about the challenge of climate change and situated that more centrally in contemporary curriculum reform. Finally, at the time of the submission, I was optimistic about the capacity of policy makers to attend to important research findings and to integrate them into their strategies, but now it is apparent that the educational profession will have to find other ways to influence governments than evidence alone, so that political advocacy and coalition-building must become more central components of our professional identities.

What do these shifts suggest to you about the field of educational change more broadly?

On the one hand, the field of educational change is a small enterprise in what Amitai Etzioni once called the “semi-professional” of teaching, so we have little impact on our large and often unwieldy school systems. On the other hand, I think we’ve done a good job punching above our weight and nudging systems in good directions, given the magnitude of the challenges that confront us. Even though the larger political environment is marked by
increased insularity in many countries, including my own, I’m encouraged by the overall tenor of our profession and by educators’ determination to question dangerous political ideologies and their ramifications for our students. Because younger generations are less nostalgic for an idealized past, more curious and open to interactions with others from different cultures, and more concerned about climate change than older generations, we have reason for optimism about the future. New technologies are helpful here, by providing for ease of communication and by enabling students to learn how to check facts and to distinguish conspiracy theories from evidence. I would like to see these tools used more intentionally and skillfully in our schools—which does not mean that we should be blind to the dangerous aspects of the Internet and social media.

What most excites you about the direction of the field of educational change is going? What are the future research directions that should be addressed in the field of educational change?

Several years ago, I was alarmed by the rise of nationalism and decided that it was time to create an on-line masters’ degree program called “Global Perspectives: Teaching, Curricula, and Learning Environments” at the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College (Go to: https://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/lynch-school/sites/lynch-online-programs/online-masters-in-education-programs/masters-global-perspectives.html). I credit this program with providing some of the richest and most rewarding cross-cultural encounters and exchanges I’ve ever experienced. It’s one thing to read about teaching strategies in different places; it’s quite another to have an on-line class with students from Kenya, Nigeria, Germany, Korea, and the US in their classrooms all around the world engaging in spirited debates with one another. Contrary to my worries, students quickly bonded with one another and shared lesson plans and assessment tools in a spirit of collegial generosity. I hope these kinds of experiences both on and off-line will help to promote a new movement of fundamental human solidarity in our schools and societies that will overcome the regrettable tendency to stigmatize outsiders and to impute negative motives to them when none exist. “Love of your country is a beautiful thing,” the cellist Pablo Casals once said, “but why should the love stop at the border?”

What advice might you have for those interested in affecting change and improvement?

The major piece of advice I would give to anyone entering educational change today would be to avoid the temptation of groupthink. Too often in education, we fall into a kind of mindless parroting of whatever the research du jour is. Think of the “self-esteem movement,” “emotional intelligence,” “multiple intelligences,” and “growth mindsets,” for example. Each of these ideas spawned a cottage industry of professional development workshops that became all the rage in our schools for years. Eventually, however, it was shown that while each development effort had some basis in fact, each easily became open to misinterpretation and often was implemented in ways damaging for positive youth development. Right now, we are in the midst of a fascination with social and emotional learning in the US (generally referred to well-being elsewhere). I encourage all of us to distinguish between what is positive in this new trend and
will help our young people to flourish, and that which is silly happy-talk. The young know when they are being patronized and appreciate honesty and direct feedback more than we give them credit for. There are serious social and ecological crises that await a rising generation, and the righteous indignation of youth at the condition of the world they are inheriting deserves honest acknowledgment and continual encouragement.

What are the future research directions that should be addressed in the field of educational change?

Political philosopher Hannah Arendt once wrote that “Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it.” Do we love the world, in this specific sense? I’m not so sure. Confronting the magnitude of the climate change crisis upon us, I can’t help wondering if we’ve been overlooking some fundamental realities about our human condition: That we are embodied, that we are interdependent with nature, that we exist in a historical chronology in which we are reliant upon one another for sustenance and shelter. It seems we have been evading these ontological truths, have become caught up in other transient pursuits, and now are having to confront our essential contingency in a planet of breathtaking beauty that we have taken for granted and exploited shamelessly. It’s time for a major pivot for all of us. I would like to see the field of educational change take up this climate challenge in our schools seriously and sustainably.

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