The 2020 AERA theme is The Power and Possibilities for the Public Good: When Researchers and Organizational Stakeholders Collaborate. Organizational leaders, "who bring knowledge, status, and constituents to critical educational topics" were invited to this year's meeting to reconnect and to harness our collective possibilities. How can the leveraging of such a diverse body of scholars contribute to collaboration and engagement within and across multiple stakeholder groups and to educational change?

The 2020 AERA theme rightly calls for increased collaboration amongst education researchers, organizational leaders, and stakeholders. These partnerships are essential to educational change and reminds me of a similar charge echoed throughout Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, And the Foundations of a Movement, a collection of essays and speeches by Angela Y. Davis. In this work Dr. Davis, a political activist and scholar, passionately articulates the need for 'movement builders' and calls for seemingly divergent movements to coalesce for a common good, a public good. She consistently challenges neoliberal policies and practices found in society at large and in far too many K-20 schools and schooling contexts. The latter is troubling as public education is one of the few services that, if it is to be effective, must address the human condition. In this light, I view the work of education researchers, organizational leaders, and stakeholders as akin to those of movement builders who, by way of AERA's 2020 theme, are charged to unite for a public good: public education.

If we, as an association of 25,000 scholars, are to leverage educational research for the public good, we must intentionally forge meaningful relationships with the public. And, in addition to organizational leaders and stakeholders, education scholars must
join forces with students, parents, teachers, school administrators, community members, and educational policymakers. To do so, we must cease conducting research in schools and communities and, instead, establish meaningful partnerships with schools and communities. Too often, education researchers are detached from the realities of schooling, the lives of young people, and the experiences of those deemed ‘other.’ And while we read journal articles, conduct research, and publish our findings, few researchers engage with schools and communities outside of the course of their study. Moreover, we rarely, if at all, share our findings with the general public nor employ what we have learned to inform education policy. If our scholarship is to impact educational change, we must engage with the public. To be clear, education scholars must endeavor to establish connections with the people, paradigms, and perspectives we persistently marginalize in and outside of the schoolhouse.

‘Theory is cool, but theory with no practice ain’t shit.’ - Fred Hampton, 1969.

At the start of my academic career, I conducted a longitudinal study of the leadership practices exhibited in a large urban high school. Using the lens of Critical Race Theory, I examined how teachers and school leaders identified and considered the challenges to parent involvement “without either engaging in or disrupting normative constructions of the term parent involvement” (Watson & Bogotch, 2015, p.258). Based on what I learned from the school’s parents, teachers, and administrators, and with funding obtained from a community based organization, I conducted parent meetings, teacher workshops, and worked with the school’s leadership team to redefine and reframe the function and purpose of parent involvement. I shared my experience with Sylvia Saunders, a reporter from NYSUT: A Union of Professionals. Our conversation, along with a link to the journal article, Reframing Parent Involvement: What Should Urban School Leaders Do Differently?, can be accessed here. A major lesson the field of Educational Change can learn from this study is that as critical researchers, we must be open to alternative ways of knowing and practice to facilitate change and, ultimately, student achievement.

Given your focus on how racism manifests and is manifested in schools and the impact of such racism as well as class and gender discrimination on Black girls in particular, what would be some of the takeaways the field of Educational Change can glean from your work and experiences with Black girls?

I wrote the following text (tweet) on November 18, 2019:

“We must cease conducting research in schools and communities and, instead, establish meaningful partnerships with schools and communities”
Dear Educators,

Black girls are not loud – they want to be heard.

Black girls are not seeking-attention – they are seeking a connection.

Black girls are not aggressive – they know what they want.

Black girls are not bossy – they are leaders.

Last, Black girls are not adults.

To date, this tweet has been shared over 21K times and was ‘liked’ more than 68K times. As a Black woman and the mother of a Black girl, I know that schools, for many Black girls, are sites of trauma. This tweet is based on these truths and aimed to challenge oft-cited (mis)perceptions of Black girls. In addition, my article, “Talking Back”: The Perceptions and Experiences of Black Girls Who Attend City High School, is based on data gathered as part of the aforementioned longitudinal study. In this manuscript, I centered the voices and perspectives of Black girls and Black women scholars “to honor the voices that are oftentimes silenced in schools and to employ standpoints that are seldom considered in education research” (p.239). The recommendations from this study appear below and were offered to improve the educational experiences of Black girls at CHS and are offered here as takeaways the field of Educational Change can glean from my work and experiences with Black girls.

**Affinity groups.** Several of the study’s participants described negative perceptions that many of CHS’ teachers, administrators, and security agents held of Black girls. In response, schools should establish affinity groups for Black girls: They build self-esteem, provide a safe place for students, and foster positive relationships among students and the larger school community.

**Mental-health professionals.** Mental health is essential to student success. Several girls shared that they suffered from depression and anxiety. Unfortunately, by-and-large, therapy is frowned upon in the Black community, and many Black girls oftentimes suffer in silence. Schools should provide access to mental-health professionals to students and, if requested, their families.

“As a Black woman and the mother of a Black girl, I know that schools, for many Black girls, are sites of trauma.”

**Post clear rules and regulations.** Several Black girls felt CHS’ security agents targeted them. By posting clear rules and regulations throughout the school building, unpleasant interactions between students and security agents may be avoided. Moreover, if a student is disciplined, the student should know why she is being disciplined, and the consequence(s) should be clearly articulated in the regulations.

**Form a task force.** While all the study’s participants were on track to graduate from high school, data trends show Black girls tend to drop out of high school at higher rates than their peers. Furthermore, based on the data gathered for this study, several
Black girls at CHS were found to experience challenges during their high school career that could have caused them to drop out. To ensure their success, schools should form a task force aimed at improving the educational experiences and outcomes of Black girls.

**Professional development.** Several Black girls interviewed for this study detailed conflicts they experienced with teachers and administrators at CHS and readily offered advice for the school's leader to improve their lived experiences.

“We must gather the political and moral will to create systemic race-conscious educational policies and practices.”

In this light, schools should invest in professional development centered on meeting the needs of culturally, socially, and linguistically diverse students to improve teacher practices and, ultimately, student achievement.

In your recent work, you conceptualize racism in schools through an ecological lens to show the ways it operates across the system (i.e., individual, dyadic, subcultural, institutional, and societal) and how it is dynamic and changing. In so doing, you challenge school leaders and others to think beyond traditional approaches to addressing racism in schools and towards more systemic approaches. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice to address these findings and bring them into practice?

To effectively address racism in schools through policy and practice, we must first commit to the fact that society in general and public schools, in particular, are fundamentally racist. This truth is evident in the nation’s founding charter and in legal jurisprudence and throughout the history of public education. It is also quantified in the disparate educational outcomes of America’s children (see NCES Graduation Rates). Next, we must problematize the process of schooling. Meaning, we must ask hard questions about the ways in which schools function in our society. Paying close attention to how neoliberalism and its byproducts (capitalism, school choice, and standardized testing) have polarized the most vulnerable children, families, and communities. Then, we must gather the political and moral will to create systemic race-conscious educational policies and practices. Gathering such will is challenging, as while most people will readily admit that they are not racist, very few will support mandates that operationalize racial equity and social justice in the places that we call schools (see NYC’s Chancellor’s school desegregation efforts) In fact, I will go one step further and suggest that while most people, especially White people, will call out overt racism, very few will acknowledge and address the systemic and insidious ways racism functions in our society and schools. And that, dear colleagues, is wherein the challenge lies.

Dr. Rosa Rivera-McCutchen, my colleague at the City University of New York, and I drafted the case study #BlackLivesMatter: A Call for Transformative Leadership to
provide aspiring and current school leaders with the opportunity to engage in critical reflection and transformative leadership practices. We were inspired by the acceptance speech Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings delivered in the spring of 2015, upon her receipt of the Social Justice in Education Award at the American Educational Research Association’s annual meeting.

“In her lecture aptly titled “Justice . . . Just, Justice!” Ladson-Billings explained why she was troubled by the current use of the term “social justice” and feared how it was, for some, purely ideological. Most distressing, she noted how many social justice advocates fail to recognize injustice. Poignantly, Ladson-Billings challenged the audience to move beyond justice as a theory to justice as praxis.” (p. 3).

Dr. Ladson-Billings’ message rings true for the field of Educational Change. Public education will not right itself. We must move beyond rhetoric and theory - if we are who we say we are.

*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?

I began my teaching career in 1994 at a middle school in East Harlem. I elected to teach at JHS 45 because it was located between two housing projects and many of the students who attended the school shared life experiences similar to my own. Nearly 20 years later I joined the Department of Leadership and Human Development at The City College of New York (CCNY). The College’s legacy of proffering “access, opportunity, and transformation” to the children of the City of New York aligns with my primary aim, as a scholar-activist, to improve the educational outcomes and life chances of historically excluded and underserved children and families. Moreover, based on my educational experiences, I deeply understand that schools are complex systems and require a heavy lift from individuals and groups who seek to transform them. Hence, during my first year at CCNY, my colleague, Dr. Hope Hartman (Professor Emeritus) and I explored the effects of metacognition on school leaders. Our article, *Transformational Leaders Who Practice Metacognition*, appeared in the New York Academy of Public Education’s research journal [here](http://www.aera.net/SIG155/Lead-the-Change-Series).

Dr. Hartman and I wrote the aforementioned manuscript with our graduate students in mind. We knew that as novice school leaders they would be charged to contend with systemic racism, inequitable funding, and the legacy of low expectations for children of color. We explained:

“We posit that in order to reform schools, specifically in urban areas, transformational leaders who systematically practice metacognition..."
are better able to promote effective, caring, and socially just schools and communities than those who do not. This article provides a paradigm for and examples of metacognitive transformational leadership” (p.8).

The field of Educational Change can best support individuals and groups engaged in the transformation of schools by creating and offering workshops on transformative leadership practices (see Shields, 2010) and metacognition (see Schon, 1983). Those who seek to transform schools and the process of schooling “must observe their own actions, inactions, and attitudes, as well as their impact on others. Upon awareness, they should take steps to enhance their effectiveness” (Watson & Hartman, 2013, p.9). Learning experiences centered on transformative leadership practices and metacognition promotes social justice and self-awareness and can help individuals and groups actualize their goals for educational change.

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

We are currently experiencing unprecedented times. In an attempt to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus NYC’s public schools, the nation’s largest public school system, recently announced that its 1,700 schools will remain closed for the remainder of academic year. I am sure other school districts throughout the U.S. will soon do the same. While many are lamenting the possibility (and impossibilities) of this decision, I am inspired by its promise. The physical closure of schools will force many in the field of Educational Change to reimagine and redesign the form and function of schooling. We can no longer rely on traditional paradigms and practices and must find new and different ways to engage young people, establish community, and effect change. This forced shift will be refreshing. The traditional structure and function of schools and schooling created nebulous and hostile environments for far too many children, particularly those of color. This is the time for the field of Educational Change to implement new solutions to old problems. We have nothing to lose and everything to gain!

**References**


Terri N. Watson is an Associate Professor in the Department of Leadership and Human Development at The City College of New York. A Harlem native, her research examines effective school leadership and is aimed to improve the educational outcomes and life chances of historically excluded and underserved students and families. Dr. Watson is the guest editor for a special issue of the Journal of Educational Administration and History (Taylor & Francis Group) titled, A Seat at the Table: Examining the Impact, Ingenuity, and Leadership Practices of Black Woman and Girls in PK – 20 Contexts (Publication Date: Summer 2020).