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?

The AERA theme for this year reflects one, if not the most central, challenges of the educational research community. It touches on the principle of relevance, which is perhaps the defining element of an applied field of research. Although relevance is often associated with applied research, some have suggested it as a basic scientific commitment. The noted educational psychologist, Lee Cronbach, argued that social scientists need not accumulate generalizations to "a theoretical tower" but first and foremost capture contemporary facts, relationships, culture, and realities. I agree with Cronbach's argument and I think policy and community actors are excellent partners if we want to make research more relevant to practice.

First, policy and community engagement can help researchers better understand whether and to what degree their ideas on educational change are context specific. The aim here is to promote, by discussion with stakeholders, more context-emic studies that use the local context and its specific features as central input in selecting the concepts of interest and in forming the theoretical model and relations between the concepts. For example, some cultures value improvisation in implementation, and others value meticulous execution in implementation. Second, engagement with community and organizational
stakeholders might shed light on matters in which stakeholders use research. These insights can help researchers develop an improved understanding of educational change as an empirical functional concept and the processes underlying it. These insights can also aid researchers in producing a better understanding of educational change as a normative concept that involves a value judgment on the nature of the baseline, the change process, and the ideal of change. Thus, engagement has valuable potential for promoting new practical understandings and for giving a voice to silenced individuals and groups. From my experience, I found that prolonged research relations with specific sites help develop such understandings. Immersion of this type enables researchers to better understand what is considered a school challenge, functioning work relations within the school, and community support for the school. That said, I think there is a tension between policy and community engagement in research on one hand and the expert and independent nature of science on the other. As a result, democratization and equality are difficult in many cases, and undesirable in some. For example, we can see this in the evaluation of policy programs and the heavy pressures to perform pseudo-positive evaluations.

"Engagement has valuable potential for promoting new practical understandings and for giving a voice to silenced individuals and groups."

Given your focus on leadership and school leaders’ emotional support of teachers, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

My work with Ori Eyal (Berkovich & Eyal, in press) on school leaders’ emotional support of teachers focuses on developing a model of emotional leadership in schools that is cardinal for sustaining change. We argue school leaders need to understand teachers’ emotions and be able to positively influence these emotions. Some may question why promoting emotional meaning making and teachers’ emotional wellness are so important, but because teaching is an autonomous profession, performed most of the time by a sole teacher behind closed doors, and at the same time an interpersonal occupation that involves maintaining relationships with students and parents, we must acknowledge that teachers’ emotions are a valuable input and output of teaching. Two central lessons can be learned from our work for the field of educational change.

First, we contend the process of influencing emotional meaning making of the work, which we call "emotional reframing," is the key for fostering motivation to sustain change in schools. Conventional claims of work design inspired by scientific management argue that shaping contextual elements at the workplace is the method to promote employees’ intrinsic motivation, but our findings suggest otherwise. Our work points to the fact that school leaders’ ability to promote positive emotional meaning making of work events is a main mechanism by which leaders affect and promote teachers’ intrinsic motivation.
This seems logical when acknowledging that individuals are not a motivational "blank canvas" and that many of them, specifically in public service professions, come to work with strong crystalized motivational drives. This type of drive has been referred to as public service motivation, i.e., the "orientation to delivering services to people with a purpose to do good for others and society" (Perry & Honderhgem, 2008, vii). Our qualitative and quantitative work stresses that emotions are the key organizers of identity and that individuals who connect emotionally to a positive frame of meaning are more likely to work for the organization than those who have the change imposed on them.

Second, we suggest thinking about effective emotional leadership as a dual process of influence. On one hand, we found that school leaders embracing transformational leadership behaviors as a generalized style of action, beyond individuals, time, and situations, are successful in altering their negative emotional frames of meaning in a manner that supports their motivation and commitment to school. On the other hand, this is only half of the story. Our findings suggest that those interested in institutionalizing change must also seriously consider the mundane aspects of leadership (e.g., active listening, informal exchanges) (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2003). We found that mundane leadership communication practices, such as words of empowerment, normalization messages, and empathic listening, together with principals’ availability, are central to help teachers process affectively charged daily work events (e.g., failures with students, parents’ complaints, and so on). We showed that both extroverted managerial behaviors and reserved ones can be emotionally effective. Effective school leaders, therefore, promote positive affective influence at the collective general level as well as in daily communication around mundane events.

"School leaders’ ability to promote positive emotional meaning making of work events is a main mechanism by which leaders affect and promote teachers' intrinsic motivation"

In your recent work connecting school leaders’ effectiveness with teachers’ organizational commitment, you find that the principal’s leadership is mediated by things like teachers’ relationship with the leader and their internal resilience and empowerment. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice to address these findings?

This recent study, conducted in collaboration with Ronit Bogler (Berkovich & Bogler, 2020), is a conceptual review that uses and augments empirical data published over two decades to better understand what promotes the most discussed outcome in the literature in relation to effective leadership, that is, subordinates’ affective and normative organizational commitment. This type of commitment reflects a deep internalized
mental attachment between a person and an organization.

To understand how deep this link is, we turn to Blake Ashforth’s work on organizational commitment and identification, which involves anthropomorphism—the attribution of human qualities to nonhuman entities (Ashforth, Schinoff, & Brickson, 2020). The strength of commitment lies in our coming to think of the organization as a person whom we bond with its own identity. We then are moved to feel affinity for the organization, when we feel well treated, dislike the organization when we mistreated, and/or indebtedness when we gain opportunities, and so on. Guided by a theoretical lens, we found robust support for two central paths that serve effective school leadership to influence teachers’ commitment: the socio-affective path (e.g., principal-teacher quality of relationship, trust in principal, teacher’s job satisfaction) and teachers’ psychological capital path (e.g., sense of psychological resilience and of psychological empowerment).

Understanding how leaders affect commitment is vital to promoting effective schools and schooling systems.

“Understanding how leaders affect commitment is vital to promoting effective schools and schooling systems.”

Likely to have a considerable negative effect on the resources and operation of schools, particularly when taking into account shortages in effective teachers and public pressures to improve educational outcomes. Our work supports changes in educational policy and school management practices. For example, policymakers are advised to finance psychological counselling for teachers to support and promote their resilience. School leaders need to make time for interpersonal communication with staff that help form high quality relations and trust. Principals can also create a system of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that is broad and aims to recognize teachers’ diverse contributions to school functioning.

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?

The field of educational change has done an excellent job in shedding light on many aspects of initiating, mobilizing, and sustaining change in schools and educational systems. I identify three main collective challenges in this applied academic field, which we address to amplify our contributions to practitioners. I call these the three Cs: context, complexity and chronology.
First, we need to better capture the external and internal context of change in schools and educational systems. This pressing need is recognized by many. Philip Hallinger (2018) called for “bringing context out of the shadows” and outlined several types of contexts (e.g., institutional, community, socio-cultural, political, economic, school improvement). We need to better understand their influence on the mobilization and operation of effective schools. For example, the vast majority of effective school leadership literature ignores socio-economic and cultural aspects despite schools being community embedded institutions (Berkovich, 2018). In light of such disconnection, it is no wonder that, at times, educational practitioners remind us that while interesting, academic work often has little to do with real life.

Second, we need to better represent the complexity of change circumstances, behaviors, and processes. Complexity is a basic human characteristic, and as such it is embedded in all changes. We need more research that conceptualizes and tests schooling contexts, behaviors and outcomes as multifaceted phenomena. By this I mean that social phenomena are not uni-dimensional, the unique combination of such aspects is what creates the effects. This requires using typological thinking and clustering analyses, and can be applied in quantitative (e.g., Urick & Bowers, 2014) as well as qualitative works (e.g., Berkovich & Grinshtain, 2018). Alma Harris and Christopher Chapman’s studies (2002, 2003) on schools in challenging circumstances are excellent examples of multifaceted conceptualizations and typological thinking.

Third, we need to better capture the chronological development of change behaviors and processes. We need to better understand how relationships and processes evolve over time (Shamir, 2011), and how early events or circumstances shape the organizational dynamics that follow (Howlett, 2009). Some studies in this area show that layering the dynamics of policy meaning at the individual level (Coburn, 2005) develops over time and influences the subsequent chain of events in education. Other works in this field have argued that educational systems often exhibit strong organizational imprinting that has persisting effects for decades and even centuries after the imprinting period (Mehta, 2013).

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

I am greatly interested in the effect of digital activism of teachers and parents on educational policy. Digital activism has gained global momentum in recent years in light of the financial crisis and a renewed neoliberal agenda. In 2018, we witnessed the role of digital media in educational protests worldwide in the "Teachers' Spring" in the US, in France, where
thousands of teachers joined the “Red Pens” movement, and in Iran, were teachers organized to protest against the government. In all these protests, public school teachers acted together using digital media to influence government priorities and promote investment in public education. While scholars increasingly acknowledge that digital media is not the democratic game changer once thought of, it does open new paths for organizing and exerting influence, which challenge traditional structures and at times even overturn elite agenda. My recent book on the topic, with Amit Avigur-Eshel, based on Israeli cases (Berkovich & Avigur-Eshel, 2019), provides new insights on how activist collectives and social movements of teachers and parents take advantage of the capabilities of digital platforms, how they structure their messages, what distinctive operational dynamics of protest can emerge, and on the link between the lived experience of participants and online activism. The growing integration of digital platforms in educational policies and reforms is an uncharted research water, despite being a fact of life today. I expect, therefore, that expanding knowledge on this topic will be one of the main challenges of educational change researchers in years to come.

Another topic that interests me as a researcher is the de-stabilization of the democratic state model. We see more and more citizens in democratic countries turning a cold shoulder to traditional politics and political institutions and adopting an anti-immigration agenda. So many citizens worldwide renouncing liberal democratic ideas and forming a basis for solidarity on perceived threats is of great concern that undoubtedly will affect the educational policy environment. This is not a process that came out of the thin air, and to some degree it is related to countries embracing minimal state policies (e.g., cuts in public expenditure, privatization).

Growing socio-economic gaps is one of the key outcomes of such policies. As a result, the fabric of social cohesion is beginning to unravel, and with it liberal democracies. Regrettfully, the coronavirus and its economic aftermath will potentially accelerate this process. Consequently, I think we will see higher levels of societal tension and conflict surface in the policy arena and the school arena, and educational changes will be more entangled with what Andy Hargreaves (2001) called "emotional geographies," specifically around sociocultural differences and moral conflicts between stakeholders. In this context, empathy and listening skills, as well as creating working conditions that make emotional understanding possible will be more valuable than any technical knowledge.

References


IZHAK BERKOVI CH

Izhak Berkovich is a faculty member in the Department of Education and Psychology at the Open University of Israel. He serves as the head of the Research Institute for Policy Analysis at the Open University of Israel. He graduated from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, with a BA in Behavioral Sciences and Education, and received MA and PhD degrees in Policy, Administration and Leadership in Education from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His research focuses on the strategic and micro aspects of leading educational organizations, as well as on educational policy, governance, and planning. He has authored a variety of publications on educational leadership, ethics, and social justice in school management, emotions in schools, politics and policy making in education, and educational reforms in journals such as Review of Educational Research, Journal of Educational Change, Comparative Education Review, Critical Studies in Education, Journal of Educational Administration, Educational Management Administration and Leadership, Leadership and Policy in Schools, School Leadership and Management, Urban Education, Teachers and Teaching, British Journal of Sociology of Education, and Globalisation, Societies and Education. He currently serves on the editorial board for the International Journal of Educational Management, and as co-editor of several special issue projects in progress, such as "Organizational perspectives on globalization in education," "Failures in school and school failures: Lessons for leadership and management," and "School leaders’ emotional experiences and capabilities: Perspectives, challenges, and prospects." His recent books include "Digital Protest and Activism in Public Education" (2019, Emerald) and "A Model of Emotional Leadership in Schools: Effective Leadership to Support Teachers’ Emotional Wellness" (in press, Routledge). He has received several awards, including the Emerald/EFMD Outstanding Doctoral Research Award in the Educational Leadership and Strategy category, and the Emerging Scholar Award from the AERA Educational Change SIG. Izhak can be reached at izhakber@gmail.com and you can learn more about his work at: http://izhakber.com.