What inspired you to study educational change?

My interest in educational change stems from my experiences as a high school science educator and teacher leader. I think there were two big takeaways from this part of my career: (1) change, good or bad, is everywhere in schools, and (2) education is complex. First, the teachers I worked with were constantly making changes to their instruction, refining assessments, and developing new curricular materials. Similarly, at the school level, there was always a new initiative rolling out. However, and this is where the complexity came in, the change did not necessarily produce the desired outcomes. Although many of the changes at each level were well-intentioned, many also failed to have a systemic impact. While classroom level efforts lead to changes for individual teachers, this learning didn’t typically get shared with other teachers. Likewise, organization-level changes, which were often top-down and disjointed from other efforts, frequently failed to influence the day-to-day practices of educators. School leaders were often unable to contend with the complexity of the change as an ongoing process or to build coherence among initiatives. As a result, capacity-building efforts failed to connect with each other or develop from one year to the next. Seeing these missed opportunities for learning has been a key driver for my interest in looking for strategies and processes that can aid in building greater coherence and sustainable change happening in schools. Consequently, these experiences have directed my work to examine how educators conceptualize teacher leadership and how schools are using teacher leadership to support organizational change.

What and/or who inspires you in the field? Why?

The people I’ve gotten to know and work with as an educator inspire me. As a practitioner, I was fortunate to work with other high school teachers who helped me to grow as an educator. One relationship that stands out is my work with Dr. Mark Brockmeyer. In addition to being a curricular leader within our district, Mark and I taught the same science course together and collaborated on...
professional development efforts within the district. Mark introduced me to frameworks for school change (e.g. Fullan, 2001), modeled what effective professional learning should look like, and challenged me to think about the different strengths teachers bring to work. This relationship continues to be source of inspiration for my current work. The ongoing conversations I have with Mark and other former colleagues in schools help to keep me connected to the classroom and challenge me to keep my research connected with practice. Similarly, as graduate student, I’m excited to be working during a time where teacher leadership is increasingly taking root within schools. Likewise, I’m inspired by scholars like Dr. Jill Harrison Berg, Dr. Jason Margolis, Dr. Melinda Mangin, Dr. Jennie Weiner, and Dr. Sarah Woulfin who have influenced my thinking about teacher leadership and educational change. Even more, I’m thankful for the welcoming spirit among these scholars and their willingness to support emerging scholars.

“**It’s my hope that future scholarship will continue to examine what it means to lead in schools and how educators harness their collective strengths to support student learning.**”

**What do you believe to be the biggest challenge for educational change and what would be a first step to address this challenge?**

There are so many challenges to educational change, but one that I’ve been thinking about is how we [educators, researchers, leaders] talk about change. Too often, changes are framed in ways that suggest they are discrete events (i.e., if we do this one thing, change will happen) rather than as an ongoing and complex process (Fullan, 2001). For example, in my work (Stier, 2019) I examined policy discourse surrounding the development and implementation of Iowa’s Teacher Leadership and Compensation System (Iowa House File 215, 2013). The policy language suggests that, by creating teacher leadership roles, teachers will collaborate more and student achievement will increase. This framing is problematic in that it glosses over the re-culturing of school norms (e.g., Donaldson, Johnson, Kirkpatrick, Marinell, Steel, & Szczesniak, 2008) and conceptions of leadership among administrators (e.g., Weiner, 2016) that might need to take place to facilitate teacher leadership within schools. I think as schools shift towards more distributed forms of leadership, it is important for leaders to frame this shift as an on-going process, focused on relationship building and constructing new conceptions of what leadership in schools can look like. Additionally, I’m interested in how the framing and implementation of teacher leadership can provide greater autonomy and influence within schools. For example, in my dissertation research, I explore how administrators and teachers are navigating the process of integrating teacher leadership into their day-to-day practices. Additionally, my dissertation uses the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) to examine how and why teachers engage in teacher leadership, and how schools can effectively
frame and integrate teacher leadership to support school change efforts.

What are some new areas of inquiry and/or directions you think the field should be headed?

Perhaps it is no surprise given my interest in teacher leadership and collaborative approaches to education, I’m interested in areas of inquiry that re-conceptualize some of the ways that education has been traditionally organized. In the case of teacher leadership, I’m interested in how teachers and administrators can co-construct new visions for shared leadership that harness the complementary strengths educators bring to schools. For example, I think Berg’s (2018) recent book on teacher leadership brings together core ideas about what we know about teacher leadership and provides useful tools for teachers and principals to develop collaborative leadership relationships built on trust. Additionally, Berg’s framing emphasizes building upon the collective strengths of educators rather than deficit perspectives that frame teacher leadership as a means of “fixing” teachers. It’s my hope that future scholarship will continue to examine what it means to lead in schools and how educators harness their collective strengths to support student learning. I’m also excited to see work that examines how action research (e.g., Ryan, et al., 2017) and similar forms of inquiry can blur the lines between research and practice to create tighter relationships among scholars and practitioners. As educators are increasingly asked to use data and engage in forms of inquiry (e.g., data teams and PLCs), I think action research provides a valuable model for professional learning and promoting educational change (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). I hope to see more work in this area, as it honors the collective insights and expertise of educators and has the potential to expand our understanding of educational change.

References


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Matt Stier is a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Leadership at the University of Iowa. As a former high school science educator and teacher leader, he is passionate about supporting the work of educators and promoting educational equity for students. His research focuses on teacher leadership, particularly why teachers engage in leadership and how policy and organizational features influence teacher leadership initiatives within schools. Matt received a bachelor’s degree in Biology from Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota and a master’s in Science Education from the University of Northern Iowa.