The 2019 AERA theme is Leveraging Education Research in a Post-Truth Era: Multimodal Narratives to Democratize Evidence. How can such leveraging of educational research contribute to the democratization of evidence and to educational change?

When scholars and practitioners leverage findings from educational research, they can better understand how and why policies and organizational conditions influence reform in addition to whether or not a reform is leading to improvement. These links between scholarship and practice hold the potential to accelerate educational change, particularly so practitioners do not reinvent the wheel or make decisions in the absence of evidence. By applying findings and, at times, adopting implications from research, practitioners can learn from previous improvement efforts as documented by scholars.

As such, I aim to share findings from my research on instructional reform and leadership to multiple audiences ranging from state and district administrators to education journalists and educators on Twitter. In particular, my book with Dr. Gabriel, Making Teacher Evaluation Work (2017), addressed how teachers and leaders can weave together the best practices of evaluation and literacy instruction. Notably, the book incorporates discussion questions and tools so district and school leaders and teachers can collectively learn about enacting evaluation to improve literacy instruction.

I encourage researchers to find new ways of disseminating findings so that scholarly insights can reach diverse audiences, rather than being locked behind paywalls. By openly sharing findings, scholars can include a broader set of stakeholders in discussions around current and future research. If we share findings in these ways and raise transparency around
the research process, scholars will democratize evidence to propel educational change.

I also encourage faculty who teach in educator preparation programs to instruct aspiring teachers and leaders how to draw upon educational research and how to discern the strengths and limitations of arguments regarding reform. Further, faculty should teach aspiring teachers and leaders data literacy skills and strategies so they are well prepared to collect and analyze multiple forms of data to make decisions with the potential to drive improvement for students, schools, and communities. Notably, teachers currently graduating from educator preparation programs may become principals or district leaders in 5-20 years, so faculty should be cognizant of their influence on the quality of the leadership pipeline. In my Wallace Foundation-supported redesign work with UConn’s principal preparation program, I’ve infused coursework with current research and have created course activities and assignments that challenge students to collect and analyze evidence in schools.

Given your focus on the nature of informal coaches as change agents in schools and school systems, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

My scholarship has concentrated on how the infrastructure for coaching shapes the nature of coaches’ work and the implementation of coaching as a reform. My Spencer Foundation-supported study of the structures and activities in coaching across three educational systems revealed that coaching is more deeply institutionalized in particular contexts. This line of research underscores that system leaders’ introduction and support of coaching matter for its enactment.

I’ve devoted attention to coaches, one type of informal leader in educational organizations, as change agents because the coach role is relatively new, yet holds great potential for advancing instructional improvement efforts. For instance, my research on literacy coaches in a Northern California district found teachers tended to adopt and even embrace elements of a new, mandated reading program that were emphasized by coaches (Woulfin, 2016).

“System leaders’ introduction and support of coaching matter for its enactment.”

More recently, my research on coaches in a Connecticut urban district attends to their role as intermediaries between district leaders and their various initiatives and teachers (Woulfin, 2018). I determined that coaches’ work promoted certain branches of the superintendent’s improvement agenda (e.g., Data Use) while reflecting other aspects of the agenda (e.g., improving student attendance) to a lesser extent.

In this way, my work provides lessons on the need for leaders to create clear definitions of new roles and then to devote time to teaching others about those roles. If system leaders define roles, responsibilities, and work practices tied to coaching,
educators will begin viewing actors in those new roles and their work as appropriate and even desirable. In a forthcoming Teachers College Record paper, I describe how system leaders in charter management organizations explicitly defined coaches’ role and institute organizational routines so that principals, coaches, and teachers engaged in coaching. Moreover, these definitional activities built a foundation so informal leaders, such as coaches, could do their best work to facilitate positive change in schools and districts. Therefore, my research provides a crucial reminder that layering additional leaders and their expertise is not enough; instead, it is crucial to lay out the objectives for these leaders and how leadership practices benefit individuals in a particular setting.

Your recent work on coaching and district reform highlights the ways in which coaches’ work tends to reflect certain district priorities over others in sometimes surprising and complex ways. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice to perhaps create more coherent and effective district level change efforts?

As a result of my research and my teaching experience in a principal preparation program, I assert there are several key drivers so that districts craft and enact coherent improvement agendas. First, state policy should include capacity building for district leaders to learn about data based decision making, improvement science, and adult learning in addition to current curricular reforms. State policy should also permit districts to adopt reforms in an incremental manner. This would enable district leaders to gradually implement portions of a reform while gathering evidence on how to support educators and promote change.

Second, district leaders should create an overarching frame explicating how their set of reforms will help schools, teachers, and students progress towards goals. This frame should connect various reforms so that leaders and teachers can see the bigger goal. The frame should be accompanied by a theory of change so leaders and teachers comprehend why the district is moving in a particular direction. The frame and theory of change can work together so that leaders and teachers understand how the puzzle pieces of district initiatives fit together to drive improvement. In an Educational Administration Quarterly article with Drs. Donaldson and Gonzales (2016), we highlight the various ways district leaders framed educator evaluation policy with real consequences for principals’ work evaluating teachers in their schools.

Third, in alignment with tenets of organizational and adult learning theories,
district leaders should create routines for learning from and with school leaders about the complex work of improvement. While studying instructional reform in urban districts, I have observed district and school leaders conducting routines applying practices from City, et al.’s (2011) book Instructional Rounds. Yet, I also recommend that district leaders shadow school leaders or set up focus groups with different types of educators to garner fine-grained details on the daily work of principals, coaches, and teachers. Subsequently, district leaders should draw upon this evidence to identify appropriate next steps to catalyze change.

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*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?

Educational Change members can support practitioners’ engagement in transformation in multiple ways. On one hand, scholars can produce research on various dimensions of implementing reform, and they can disseminate insights on Twitter/social media, podcasts, blogs, and Op-Eds in addition to peer-reviewed publications. On the other hand, scholars can engage in mutualistic research alongside practitioners. This research can respond to current questions and can support practitioners in thinking deeply about the root cause of particular problems and evidence on how and why reform is (or is not) occurring.

With the goal of assisting transformation in educational systems, I currently use a research-practice partnership (RPP) approach to conduct rigorous and relevant research on change efforts. As described in this piece, I support change agents by adopting a coaching stance which entails observing, listening, and asking questions. Notably, when researchers provide feedback and encourage reflection, this coaching increases the capacity of change agents, enabling them to support other educators in tackling reforms.

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

I am excited that the field of Educational Change is evolving to use multiple theoretical frameworks and methods to explore key issues in school systems. I anticipate that scholars will gather data from a broader range of stakeholders to answer pressing questions about stability and change in educational organizations. For instance, to better understand the enactment of technology reforms in schools, it could be useful to collect data on students’ uses of devices and online programs. To better understand the implementation of special education policy, it could be beneficial to collect data on parents’
experiences. And, to grapple with issues of teacher retention, it could be useful to collect data from teachers’ partners and family to ascertain the stresses and challenges of teachers’ work. My colleagues, doctoral students, and I are eager to grapple with these questions and others to provide insights to policymakers, reformers, practitioners, and the scholarly community.

Over the next 5-10 years, I foresee Educational Change scholars tackling questions about locally specific change efforts, teachers as activists, and alternative forms of professional development. First, due to policymakers altering the mandates of NCLB and Race to the Top, districts are now much more in control of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and leadership. As such, it is vital that Educational Change scholars track bottom-up change as districts design structures, draft plans, and carry out activities, particularly those regarding teaching and learning, in locally specific ways.

Second, during this particular social and political moment, teachers across the United States are rising up, resisting dire budget cuts and a new wave of nationalism. I encourage scholars to conduct research illuminating teachers’ beliefs and practices associated with activism. This would include how teachers engage with unions around pay issues and how teachers advocate on behalf of undocumented students. Additionally, it will be important to determine how teachers’ activism on these political issues influence their dispositions towards changing other facets of schooling.

Third, teachers currently engage in a range of professional development activities—from mandated district sessions on new curricula and school retreats to conferences, Ed Camps, and reading blogs. Since capacity building is a potent instrument in change efforts, it will be beneficial for scholars to pay greater attention to teachers’ alternative learning opportunities. That is, how do different types of teachers at different grade levels or in different types of districts gain exposure to ideas about reform through formal and informal channels which may be in-person or online? How do teachers make decisions about whether to participate in alternative (and oftentimes entirely voluntary) professional development? How do various alternative professional development activities influence reform efforts in different types of district and school contexts? And, what are the characteristics of quality alternative professional development making a difference in classrooms, schools, and districts? The answers to these questions can be used to design more effective professional learning opportunities for educators and foster meaningful improvement in educational organizations.

“It is vital that Educational Change scholars track bottom-up change as districts design structures, draft plans, and carry out activities.”
References


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Dr. Sarah L. Woulfin is an associate professor in the University of Connecticut’s Department of Educational Leadership who studies the implementation of instructional policy. Using lenses from organizational sociology, she investigates how policies and organizational conditions influence the work of teachers, coaches, principals, and district administrators. She has conducted several studies of instructional coaching across multiple states and educational systems. She has adopted a research-practice partnership approach to engage in mutualistic qualitative research with district leaders. Dr. Woulfin’s work has been published in AERJ, AJE, EAQ, EEPA, Urban Education, and other outlets. In her doctoral work at the University of California-Berkeley, she focused on policy implementation and institutional theory.

As a former urban public school teacher and reading coach, she was dedicated to strengthening students’ literacy skills to promote educational equity. As a scholar, her commitment to raising the quality of instruction motivates her research on how policy influences—and is influenced by—administrators, coaches, and teachers.