

LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

Q&A with Viviane Robinson

The 2015 American Educational Research Association (AERA) theme is "Toward Justice: Culture, Language, and Heritage in Education Research and Praxis" What are key accomplishments, limitations, and possibilities of education research to advance justice?

I think a major accomplishment of educational researchers is that they have put issues of social justice very squarely on the research agenda. They have also contributed, along with community activists, and various civil and human rights movements, to putting issues of social justice on policy and political agendas. Researchers have developed a wide range of theories to describe and explain social justice issues, many of which have their origins in either Habermasian or Marxist versions of critical theory. Each of those theories has social transformational intentions at its heart. However, I think that the contribution of those theories to the realization of transformative practices and outcomes has been far less than anticipated. In addition to the enormous complexity of the challenge, I think part of the problem lies in

the limited utility of those theories for guiding the learning and change that is required for transformative change.

In 1994 I published an article entitled *The Practical Promise of Critical Theory*,¹ in which I argued that it had limited practical promise and tried to explain why in terms of the gap between its grand scope and ambition on the one hand, and its failure to specify and demonstrate a theory and practice of improvement on the other. Obviously, there are exceptions like Paulo Freire's work, but in the article I also drew attention to other resources in social psychology, including the work of Chris Argyris, which provide powerful insights and tools into the actual practice of transformation and improvement.

This speaks to another reason for the limited contribution of educational research to the social justice agenda – the strong division between those with a social psychological background and those with a more sociological and political background - a division that is also institutionalized within AERA itself. When cognitive and behavioral change is required to

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achieve transformative change, whether at group, organizational or societal level, educational researchers with transformative intentions should access those disciplines which can provide the tools that advance their practical agendas. In addition, we need to recognize that the proportion of educational researchers who write and speak *about* educational transformation is far greater than those who are *doing* the work of transformation. Strong traditions of intervention research and of research training in intervention are needed to convert transformative agendas into more transformative practice and outcomes. This will not happen without developing and nurturing educational researchers who are also skilled interventionists.

One of the more positive contributions of educational research to the social justice agenda is the increasing accumulation and use of knowledge, in, for example, the What Works Clearinghouse,² and Best Evidence Syntheses,³ about the conditions under which particular interventions work. However, I think the disciplinary divide between social psychological interventions, from which such evidence is typically derived, and more sociological/ political approaches has prevented the wider use of that evidence for transformative purposes.

Education is a field where there is no shortage of good ideas, many of which, under certain conditions, will be very effective for improving a range of educational outcomes. Just look at the vast array of school reform and instructional initiatives which have been evaluated as effective in certain research contexts. But the challenge that we have now is that we are very bad at scaling up and implementation. While we can create pockets of excellence in a single school, or in a district, there is an enormous gap between those pockets of excellence and our ability to learn from, disseminate, and spread that excellence. The big challenge is the process of change and the quality of implementation. The work of the

Carnegie Foundation and Tony Bryk on improvement science,⁴ which involves investigating specific problems of practice, conducting local experiments, and then scaling up the learning, is a fruitful new approach to the problem and is helping us to rethink the idea of what implementation actually involves.

You have led one of the most definitive studies to date on the effects of school leadership on student outcomes. What practices from school principals have the largest impact on student learning and why?

Our study⁵ asked: "What are the effects of particular types of leadership practice on student outcomes?" There were two meta-analyses conducted to answer this question. The first one compared the average effects of two broadly different types of leadership; instructional and transformational. The evidence showed that, on average, instructional leadership is associated with considerably stronger effects on student outcomes than transformational leadership. We also noted the overlap between these two theories in the more recent studies. Every year for about three years I would meet with Ken Leithwood at AERA to discuss our research and the shifts I had noticed in his work on transformational leadership in education. He was increasingly moving away from the business origins of transformational leadership to incorporate more survey items that assessed leaders' influence on the work of teaching and learning. Transformational and instructional leadership were coming together.

We concluded from the first meta-analysis, that, on average, instructional leadership is stronger than transformational leadership, but that conclusion is so abstract it's not much help to leaders and policy makers. So we got much more fine-grained in the second meta-analysis and estimated the average effects of different types of leadership practice. Two rather surprising findings emerged. First, the impact of

some specific leadership practices on student outcomes was larger than had been previously recognized. Secondly, some of those practices have important and substantial effects, the most powerful being promoting and participating in teaching and learning.

When I talk about this, I ask people why they think that dimension is so powerful and the answer I get is about the influence of leadership modeling. People say “well if the busy leader can spend time learning with the teachers, then it must be important.” In my view, an additional more powerful explanation of this effect goes like this: if leaders are involved with their teachers in learning – maybe in a school-based collaborative inquiry into why students don’t like a particular subject, or why they are skipping school – they are also learning the conditions that need to be in place for teachers to implement and continue to learn. This means that if the teachers need different resources, different forms of classroom organization, if they don’t have time to meet, or if they have difficulties with team work, the leader is not only aware of the difficulties and how they prevent change, but also feels greater responsibility for helping the teachers to overcome them. That’s why I think that the practice of participating as a learner with teachers is so powerful.

Since the publication of this study there has been some really important work done by Jason Grissom and Susanna Loeb.⁶ They published a terrific study in which they took instructional leadership practices and examined why those practices had powerful effects in some schools and not others. Doing a wonderful combination of qualitative and quantitative work, they discovered that instructional leadership practices had different effects depending on whether leaders used a compliance or a developmental approach. Leaders who visited classrooms for the purposes of monitoring what was happening in those classrooms, produced negative effects. Leaders who visited classrooms to support teachers’ learning and development, produced

positive effects. So if leaders or policy makers take a behaviorist or a compliance approach – “you must visit classrooms”, “you must give teachers feedback” – without understanding the underlying principles behind those leadership effects, they can make things worse. Increased visiting and feedback might be unhelpful and reduce trust if it is motivated by a surveillance or compliance purpose, rather than by a developmental and collaborative purpose.

So there are two major takeaways here. Leaders can make a bigger difference to student outcomes than previously thought, and we can identify the relative average impacts on student outcomes, of various types of leadership practice.

How would you go about developing the capacity of leaders to substantially improve student outcomes across entire educational systems?

Well, this is a very big challenge. My starting point is the capabilities that leaders need. And from there, how to get those capabilities reflected in a joined-up process of leadership selection and development. A process of leadership selection and capability building that is evidence-based and joined up would be a huge start.

Three capabilities are required in order to be an instructional leader.⁷ The first one is using deep leadership content knowledge. I think we’ve underestimated the knowledge component of educational leadership. Given the new policy agendas about all students succeeding on intellectually challenging tasks, a considerable depth of content knowledge about pedagogy, assessment and curriculum is needed. Leadership content knowledge enables you to talk educationally! If you can’t talk educationally, you will probably end up being managerialist. Let me give you an example. I have some transcripts from school leaders in New Zealand of their conversations with teachers about whom they have some concerns about their practice. I’m

reading too many transcripts where leaders talk to teachers like this: "You need to be aware that when senior management comes into your classroom, they expect to see the learning objectives written up on the board." Now, that's a managerial reason, it's not an educational reason. And I think leaders are forced into being managerial if they don't have enough educational knowledge to provide an educational rationale for their point of view. There's a link between your knowledge and your ability to engage collaboratively. Collaborative engagement isn't content free, it's not just pure process, and if we don't have the deep content and the rationales so that we can debate why we want to have the students knowing the lesson objectives and success criteria, then we are going to have nothing but compliance and managerialism. It's not because they are nasty power-hungry people, it's often because they don't know enough.

The second capability which would inform my joined up system of leadership selection and development is the ability to build relational trust. None of the adult-adult, or adult-student relationships are going to work if you can't develop trust. That's where my research program is focused at the moment, anchored in the intervention work of Argyris and Schon. We have a lot of evidence about how leaders struggle in that domain. It's not that they can't build relationships, they are terrific at relationships, but that's not what the work is. The work is building relationships while tackling the tough stuff of improvement, and it's this that they can't do well enough. Often leaders don't know how to build relational trust in teams that are tackling tough stuff, like variation in the quality of teaching practice within their school or team.⁸

The third capability is complex problem-solving, which for me is all about context. Context is the conditions or constraints you need to take into account when solving any particular problem or making any particular decision.

Context is not just school size, type and student ethnicity and socio-economic status. Context is problem specific and leaders need to have the ability to articulate and lead a process of formulating the constraints that constitute the context of any particular problem. Once those constraints are identified, then the problem solving process involves seeking to take them all into account, recognizing that they are likely to be in considerable tension and thus never completely satisfied. We are now developing tools to help leaders with this approach to problem-solving. In those workshops we help leaders to recognize and interrupt any tendency to reach for the "quick fix" without having done the analytic work of identifying relevant constraints and the tensions between them.

We also need to develop performance assessments around the three capabilities I just talked about. If you develop performance assessments, you have standards that are transparent, and that enable rigorous evaluation of the development of individuals and the effectiveness of the approach to capability building.

What do you see as the most promising developments and key unaddressed issues in education leadership theory and research?

For me the most promising development in leadership research is the focus on leadership practices and the shift away from style. And the second thing is the focus on trying to learn more about the connection, indirect of course, between leadership and student outcomes.

As for the unaddressed issues, we have an extremely rich literature on teacher expectations of students and I think we need to start as leadership researchers to develop research programs on leaders' expectations of teachers. One of our biggest challenges is undesirable variation in teaching and leadership practice. As I talk to principals about this, it seems to me that it's just taken for granted. Let's say you're a

school leader genuinely committed to social justice goals. Now, as I'm understanding the school improvement literature, you're not going to get there unless you are absolutely focused on ensuring that close to 90% of the lessons experienced by underserved students are high quality learning opportunities. Some of my colleagues did a small study in some high schools in New Zealand where they used standards to observe literacy practices in secondary schools in English, math and science. It was a small sample, so there are some methodological caveats. But in terms of what we know about subject specific teaching of literacy in high schools, somewhere between 30 and 40 percent of the lessons were demonstrating good literacy teaching practices.

Now, with middle-class students it doesn't matter much, but with students whose only opportunity to access the secondary school English, math and science curriculum is at school, that's not good enough. So if you're a principal and you are genuinely committed to equity goals, what I want to know is: Do principals understand that they've got to lift the school from, say 50% of the lessons being okay, to 90% of them being excellent learning opportunities? If we are serious about reaching equity goals that's what we are talking about. Now, I don't know that we train leaders to do that and I don't know that leaders expect to lead that way. That job is a completely different job from just leading a school. And I suspect that many current leaders, including those who espouse social justice goals, wouldn't want that job.

In your view, what are the most important achievements of public education in New Zealand and where would you like to see public education in the country moving forward?

One of the things I'm proudest about in New Zealand is that we have a strong national public education system. We have less than five

percent of students in independent schools and I think that's terrific. Increasing numbers are in catholic schools, but they are integrated into the state system and they operate as state schools with a special character. There are always threats to that, the latest one being a pre-election agreement that our current Prime Minister made to form a coalition with the leader of a right wing minority, who wanted charter schools introduced. As far as I know, there was very little policy development work and very little public debate and real engagement with the range of available evidence about the effectiveness of charter schools. So I'm afraid charter schools are entering into our system and I just hope that there is a rigorous evaluation around what those schools are actually delivering in comparison to similar state schools.

The second major achievement of our system is that, thanks largely to a grassroots movement by Maori leaders, we have a pathway of Maori immersion in education in New Zealand which is now supported by the state. After a long struggle, the state is now committed to publicly maintaining these pre-schools and schools as culturally and linguistically Maori. It's been an enormous struggle and it still is, but the structure is there and the political and regulatory acceptance of it is in place. There are serious challenges around resourcing and capability, including leadership capability and not nearly enough attention to those problems, but I think that has been a truly transformative process led by grass roots Maori leaders and communities, with the politicians eventually embracing this bi-cultural approach to schooling pathways.

The third achievement is teacher professionalism in New Zealand. Our national curriculum is probably less than 20 pages. It only provides guidelines. We don't call the textbook the curriculum, nor do we have textbooks in the way that many districts in the United States have. Teachers develop their own

unit and lesson plans and align them to the broad objectives of our national curriculum. That of course has a downside, but I think it is stronger than a system that writes a script for teachers and expects them to implement it. Notice that I haven't said that I see New Zealand's radical self-management system as one of its achievements. I think it's been a recipe for the entrenchment of inequities which the government has been forced to address over the last 10 to 20 years. School self-management has advantages for some and massive disadvantages for others. I'm not saying self-management is a disaster, but it's not something I would want other systems to emulate because it doesn't address the fundamental problem of achieving a transformative agenda which is about capability and access. The biggest problem in education is not that people don't have choices or principals don't have choice about what color to paint their roof or how to organize their budget. They can be given discretion without going down the radical self-management line that we have adopted. We are now trying to develop a notion of communities of schools to bring isolated schools together to form something which creates a much stronger collective base, and a much stronger local infrastructure to support our self-managing schools. That is a potentially exciting new development to try to redress some of the real limitations of our self-

managing system without going down a recentralizing path.

NOTES

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