



LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES

Q & A with Patricia Virella

The 2022 AERA theme is Cultivating Equitable Education Systems for the 21st Century and charges researchers and practitioners with dismantling oppressive education systems and replacing them with anti-racist, equity, and justice-oriented systems.

To achieve these goals, researchers must engage in new methodologies, cross-disciplinary thinking, global perspectives, and community partnerships to respond to the challenges of the 21st century including the COVID-19 Pandemic and systemic racism among other persistent inequities.

Given the dire need for all of us to do more to dismantle oppressive systems and reimagine new ways of thinking and doing in our own institutions and education more broadly, what specific responsibility do educational change scholars have in this space? What steps are you taking to heed this call?

I think, for me, the idea of dismantling oppressive systems comes with a collective agreement that the systems in place ARE, in fact, oppressive in nature. I've observed, in some of the research I've read, researchers ignoring this important and blatant fact in their work. For me, when I am writing or teaching, I always try to embed something that addresses oppressive systems and include how equity, diversity, and inclusion

should be part of school leadership or research implementation to encourage change. I draw on a variety of texts such as the canon of critical

education work as well as *Courageous Conversations* by Singleton (2014), bell hooks, Toni Morrison and Paulo Friere. I also talk a lot with my dear friend [Jonathan Foy](#) who is on the ground continuously challenging what equity and inclusion looks like in the NYC Public Schools. He always tells me that I have to enter into the conversations around equity with a genuine curiosity and understanding that this work is progressive and demands careful attention to how we move the needle. As a collective group of scholars, we have to all agree that educational change happens through risks and bold actions. Audre Lorde (2018) said "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house." Change cannot happen if we continue to do the same things as a field. Meaning, if we are seeking true social justice and liberation, we must liberate and open up the ways we research, where we research, and admit to the white supremacist nature of academe. I recently read an article about how a librarian developed

citation templates for Indigenous oral teachings (Kornei, 2021). This is the change and inclusion we need to move the field along, inclusion of the diverse ways people make meaning of the world to capture it authentically in our research. Furthermore, there is no change if scholars use

AERA SIG | Educational Change

Educational Change SIG adopts an interdisciplinary and international approach to understanding many aspects of educational change, including large-scale reform, school-initiated change, school improvement, and classroom-level change.

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Lead the Change series, featuring renowned educational change experts from around the globe, serves to highlight promising research and practice, to offer expert insight on small- and large-scale educational change, and to spark collaboration within our SIG.

methodologies that maintain the status-quo of our inequitable society. One example is when I work with other scholars and they may say “but I’m not a critical scholar,” my response to them is “but are you here to transform this system?” Criticality is one element, and equity is much bigger than one element, and they are not mutually exclusive. But also, isn’t our job as scholars to always be critical and examine the world so we can make dutiful change? Equity is necessary because some population will always be excluded, thus you cannot rest on one identification or classification as a researcher (i.e.: a critical scholar). We must always fight to bring the oppressed as Freire (1970) said and stoke the fires of liberation. Otherwise, as a scholar, you are helping to maintain the systems of oppression designed for exclusion. Change takes bold risks and equity and inclusion must be at the heart of the work researchers, policymakers, and leaders do.

Given some of your work examining educational policymaking in Puerto Rico, what are some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

I love researching Puerto Rico because there is so much happening on the island that needs to be highlighted, and there is a huge gap in the literature that uses Puerto Rico as the setting. Most people have no idea that Puerto Rico is the 3rd biggest US school district if you add the territories to the continental rankings. Puerto Rico is a geopolitically and socio-politically complex space given its political status with the United States as an unincorporated territory. This complexity makes Puerto Rico appear to be a very different context than any stateside school district, but there are many similarities to New York, Chicago and L.A. school districts. Thus, the field can learn from Puerto Rico’s education system. Specifically, we need to understand the challenges, the oppression, the

bountiful culture and the fight for authenticity in the face of neoliberalism - which I believe many urban districts are constantly battling. One thing I think educational change as a field can learn from my work is how policies implemented in Puerto Rico affect a population in an unincorporated territory that is clearly delineated as a “postcolonial” space, and yet still has many of the functions of being under colonial rule. That complexity, in and of itself, is something we can learn from. As a field, we’re narrowing our scope in deleterious ways by not looking at where these policies are

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taking place and where there are spaces of experimentation that can further educational change. Finally, the rich traditions, history, and orgullo (pride in Spanish - but we always say orgullo in PR) of Puerto Rico should be seen as strengths, and researchers should consider how these strengths support

students in Puerto Rico. There's a lot we can learn from Puerto Rico and by not studying it, it leaves a blind spot in understanding educational change across the entirety of the United States and its territories as well as globally.

In some of your recent work examining equity-oriented principal leadership during a crisis, you highlight the importance of an equity-orientation from both individuals and systems in order to fully support students. In the current political climate, how might districts support the development of equity-oriented leaders?

I think this is a very interesting question because what I find is that districts generally have a very clear sense, at least on paper, of what they want as far as equity in their districts. They have a mission statement that talks about equity oriented pedagogical practices or disability services for their students, or they may have diverse curricula that includes lgbtqia+ perspectives as well as diverse racial and cultural perspectives. But where I don't see

districts going far enough is in how they help their leaders to enact equity-oriented leadership practices. That really comes down to the individual leaders and what their values are and how those values come out in their leadership.

For example, I found in my research that school leaders act equitably based on their values and beliefs about social justice in schools. The data suggested that the equity-oriented responses were not driven from district initiatives or even what the principals learned in their preparation programs. This is inherently problematic because, in my mind, equity should always be part of a leader's lens. So, what you see is a disconnect between an espoused theory of equity and a theory in action or use – of principals who lead equitably. This disconnect explains a little of why I saw so much variance in how leaders responded to a crisis in equity-oriented ways. I argue that again, as a field, we need to prepare leaders through an equity-oriented lens and develop their ability to execute equity-oriented leadership in concretized actions and activities.

“Equity should always be part of a leader’s lens.”

If school leaders don't believe in equity-oriented leadership, that's not a viable option because our children live in a diverse world and deserve an equity-oriented learning experience and setting. Thus, one thing I'm currently working on, and I'm very excited about, is how we train leaders in an equity-oriented leadership model that moves away from simply focusing on their personal values. Equity situated transformation is about the district getting clear about what an equity-oriented leader does, how they respond to crises, and how they respond to the day-to-day challenges of leading a school. Also, it's important for districts to give leaders, who are equity-oriented and doing the work in this space, trust to continue on the path they are on and perhaps

even become models of what equity-oriented leadership concretely looks like.

In one study (Virella & Woulfin, 2021), I found the highest level of equity orientation was this idea of modeling equity so the leader is showing the faculty and the district what equity looks like. This framing is based in Galloway and Ishimaru's (2017) work. One participant was incredibly bold and challenged the district's equity orientation calling attention to the fact that the mission statement in her district said that they are an equity-oriented mission-driven school; however, when the participant looked at, and peeled back, the layers of what that looks like in their schools it was just lip service. And so, instead of being chastised by the district for questioning the status quo, this leader was bolstered by the district and ended up leading an entirely new school under this equity-oriented model.

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 think about this a lot because the work that I do specifically, researching how equity-oriented leadership intersects with crisis leadership in schools, is incredibly difficult. I think oftentimes scholars walk into schools to encourage diversity, equity, inclusion, and access and yet this may be the first time these difficult conversations are happening for those schools. And so, how do researchers and leaders, as a collective, debrief and share best practices and really think about both the impact we're having on the schools and the emotional and cognitive toll this work has on us? As a Black woman who is an Afro-Latina doing this type of equity work and having these difficult conversations, I'm confronting racism right at the head. It is not always blatant racism, but rather passive aggressive racism because the participants are disengaged from learning about the nuance of POC, or they don't find value in the culture of POC, or they have a Eurocentric notion of what intellectual curiosity looks like and how that appears in students.

There are times where as a group of scholars we have to find a way for us to unpack what's happening so that we can keep marshaling change in schools.

It's particularly important for scholars to support the next generation as they navigate the academy. One way I've found to do this is to create an authentic community. I have been very fortunate to work with professors such as Dr. Sarah Woulfin, Dr. Ramon Goings, Dr. Monica Byrne-Jimenez, Dr. Roman Liera, Dr. Jennie Weiner, and Dr. Blanca Vega to name a few who help me develop my writing so I can be my authentic self. To pay this forward, I have developed <http://myacademicwritingroutine.com/> to support future scholars who are championing to make the world more equitable and bring out voices of the subaltern. It is also a space to learn how to develop writing routines with academia in mind and break down the Ivory Tower (Freire, 1970) where so many of us are held back or kept away. I want this space to be a place where scholars can converge, learn from one another and feel they can do the work that they feel will transform and liberate their field.

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

Right now, I think there's a lot of opportunity for educational change and there are some discourses around racial and social justice, equity, and inclusion across scholars and school communities. There is great work discussing decolonizing educational research from Leigh Patel in her book *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability* (Patel, 2015) and from Venus Evans-Winters (2020), and *Introduction to Intersectional Qualitative Research* (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). These are important because we must challenge white, Eurocentric research methods. We also need to bolster voices like Rosa L. Rivera-McCutchen who wrote *Radical Care: Leading for Justice in Urban Schools* (2021). So, this path of research excites me, but what I worry about is the way that education, as a field, has ebbs and flows. When I look at the research and I see how much large urban districts are surveyed, researched, and quantified, I worry that, as scholars, we are

researching for our benefit and not researching for the greater good of the children in urban communities, for the families who have to go through so much to get a fair shake because of the rampant racism in our country. What I hope to see in the future is scholars en masse asking, how does this research help to dismantle these oppressive systems? I want that to be on the minds of all researchers, not just critical scholars, not just ed change scholars. We need to be really thinking, not necessarily about the scholarly metrics of our work, but of the possibility of transformation and liberation of schools and children as Paulo Freire would see it. Researchers, leaders, and policy makers must help to liberate oppressed communities and honor their inherent value.

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