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?

Democracy is a big construct that, in many ways, is under fire by some of the current authoritarian and populist movements around the world. Democracy, in my view, is set to enable conditions for self-development for everybody. Democracy must aim to avoid any form of exclusion, discrimination, and inequality. However, I remember Basil Bernstein quote: Education can't compensate for society. And where he said education, I now say educational research. Eight years ago, Norman Denzin (2010) published The Qualitative Manifesto, with an invitation to “a call to arms.” His idea, following C. Wright Mills’, 1959, Sociological Imagination was “to join the personal with the public” and “to change society, not just interpret or write about” it.

However, I prefer to place democracy in a closer sphere: as a way of generating modes of participation and collaboration in the relationships and problems that affect us. And I try to do this in my teaching at the university, in my collaboration with schools and, above all, in the research we do with the Esbrina group. In Esbrina, we assume ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical positionalities and develop strategies in our projects to contribute to a more inclusive educational research. A research is able to educate—to affect we could say—all those who participate in the research process.

Some years ago, we decided that we could not investigate the experiences of others without first putting our own experiences under scrutiny. Under the effects of this act of ontological, epistemological, and ethical coherence, we decided to
start our studies by writing autobiographical scenes linked to the issue we try to explore. This is not a narcissistic or self-exposure experience, but a situation of disturbance, because it is an invitation to move ourselves beyond our comfort zone by exposing our doubts and expectations. Dennis Atkinson defines the idea of disturbance as being confronted with something mysterious that disturbs our mode of functioning. Sharing our positionalities amongst us and with participants and possible readers of a research project, by giving account of our biographical, epistemological, and political perspectives, we not only make transparent our assumptions, but also assume the research process from the uncertainty or the unknown.

As a consequence of this positionality, we try to make our projects inclusive, recognizing people's agency by including them—if they wish—as co-authors in the research process. This means that we try not to do research on people but with them; and to make sure the research process and results are meaningful not only for researchers and the academic community, but also, and foremost, for those involved in the very phenomena we try to understand.

You have been working on a project sponsored by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness on a project titled: Living and learning with new literacies in and outside school: Contributions for reducing school drop-out, exclusion, and abandonment among youth. What do you see to be some important contributions of this work to the field of educational change in Spain?

One of the students participating in this project shared an insight that we have put forward for debate with teachers, families, and administrators: “I pay attention to what teachers say in the classroom, I study for the exams, I answer the questions, and pass the exams, but two weeks later I am not able to remember what I studied.” The student’s statement is revealing as it questions what schools expect learning to look like. It has led us to propose alternatives to what may be the role of schools in a society that deals with competing ideas such as market preparedness, critical thinking, or facilitating experiences and ways of relating.

The Living and learning with new literacies in and outside school research also allowed us to understand that ‘real learning’—the very experience that affects youth (and teachers) and helps them to change their point of views about themselves, others, and the world—escapes, as Atkinson would say, the pedagogical norm. Because learning goes beyond cognitive and pedagogical dimensions and confronts us with the unknown. Learning is not only what occurs in the space/time between an input (teaching) and an output (assessment). Learning is a complex matter connected with life and biographical experiences, dialogical conversations, inquiry processes, or the way the (new) unconscious operates. Therefore, learning embodies new and significant challenges for educational systems.

This is not a form of theory, or a kind of manifesto. This is a response to the insights
young people shared with us during the four months we spent together writing an ethnographic report on their learning transitions and movement inside and outside schools. Young people perceived that they learn differently in different environments that they deem disconnected. What they learn at school somehow helps them to understand the outside world, but what they learn outside is not usually incorporated and considered as valuable by teachers at school. Therefore, what we try to think about with the teachers is how to get life into school, and how to bring school to life. Here it resounds what Dewey once said: that education is not a preparation for life but must be life itself.

If you ask me how all this is contributing to changing education in Spain, my answer is that I don’t know. Having said that, what I know is the change I see in teachers I have been working with for thirty years and with whom we try to generate the idea of schooling where the exploration of life—in all its dimensions—is at the heart of the learning process.

I also see how collaboration on learning from life through inquiry projects plays a fundamental role in generating meaningful learning through an in-service professional development program where teachers work in a network of more than 450 primary and secondary schools in Catalonia.

I also see the work done in another network of teachers called “the Restless Schools Network,” where teachers meet from time to time to share their experiences, doubts, and discoveries for the purpose of generating shared pedagogical knowledge and school transformations.

It is from these encounters that I can talk about the possible contributions of the work we do in the Living and learning with new literacies in and outside school research. However, as in other contexts, what research brings to schools only affects them if the researchers leave the University and walk along with the teachers.

Given your focus on how young people learn in multi-sited environments and on how young people learn “in and out of secondary school,” what would be some major lessons we can learn from local and global educational changes that bring these into consideration?

Institutional pedagogy has a narrower understanding of learning, which in a school context tends to be based on the prescribed curriculum. Our research, therefore, disrupted young people’s established relationship with the high school as we invited them to reflect critically on the role of learning in their lives. This invitation encouraged their participation and involvement as well as made it possible for some lessons for promoting educational change to emerge.

Firstly, the movement of doing a series of ethnographies with young people demanded the researcher(s) move past an adult-centered mode of understanding the relationship with life of a group of students and the ways in which their social worlds are molded and influenced. This position forced us to build a research project based on participation and collaboration with youth, while using different methods to generate their own evidence and build their (and our) ethnographic accounts—a
situation that could be extrapolated to the role of teachers and their relation with students.

Secondly, it seemed relevant to revisit the importance of the ethical issues involved in doing research with young people who have materialized in moments such as: young people’s own independence to make decisions during the process, and as a result to pay attention to the kind of relational modes that occur over the course of the project.

Thirdly, the collaborative design with young people participating in our project destabilized the eye of the ethnographer and redistributed the expertise in each group among the two university researchers, the six (or more) young participants and, in some cases, the collaborating teachers as well. Perhaps opening the investigation up to a collective is a key step for developing a mobile methodology. Something similar could take place at school if teachers decide that teaching is not necessary an individual act.

Fourthly, the group approach forced the university researchers to confront their underlying assumptions about learning while negotiating the terms of the inquiry with the younger collaborators (themes that we wished to develop didn’t always resonate with them, for example) and created a more fertile environment for exchanging ideas, observations, and analyses. This is an invitation to be open to the unknown in any process of change.

Finally, we understood that young people’s learning experiences transit beyond the school walls and move without contention through their social relations in extracurricular activities, social networks, personal hobbies, home, and so on. Our goal, therefore, was to carry out research where the focus is on how to capture some of the consequences of the juxtapositions of all these sites. This displacement suggests, and could be translated into a process of change, the necessity of being open and flexible and not encapsulate the complexity of reality in our predesigned narrow frames.

Young people (students) are the focus of educational change for improvement. What are the key needs of young people at this time and what might the field of educational change prioritize to meet these needs?

My first consideration is that it is not possible to generalize when talking about young people’s needs. I can only talk about what I know from the research we have done, and from my teaching experiences with young people at the University. Let me share with you some of the insights young people shared with us during the research process. Maybe there we could identify some of their needs.

We confirmed that adults don’t understand youth language and expectations. It is not a question of jargon, but of what is valuable and meaningful for them. This was the reason why we try to build a young perspective before entering the field. To situate ourselves into the youth logic we had a long conversation with a young senior in high school, who helped us with the language we had to use, the position young people could have regarding the subject of the research, and the climate of relationship that we could favor.

In Catalonia, at the end of secondary school, students should develop a thematic research project. In some cases, teachers
decide on the topic and the methodology; in others, students are invited to find their own interest and to develop a proper methodological strategy. However, the ethnographic research offered students a different approach to those high schools suggested to them. From the very beginning, there was an ongoing participatory project, where adults were also researchers breaking the dominant binary of you-us positionality. On the other hand, the research was not about something external to youth life. On the contrary, it was about their learning paths and how they were affected by the different forms and places for learning.

The students appreciated the opportunity of demystifying the gap between learning inside and outside of school. They discovered that everything is connected as a whole and talked about the necessity of exploring how these pieces fit together and disengage. One of the consequences of this discovery was their necessity of having opportunities to transit from abstract to embodied experiences of knowledge.

The students also expressed the need to move the organization of the learning time beyond factory-like production terms, to consider learning that takes longer time for situating and understanding new topics, and to move from searching the location of information to generating meaningful knowledge.

Above all we learned that young people are unstoppable in their involvement, assume challenges with enthusiasm, and open themselves to other ways of knowing when we trust them, when we recognize their agency, when we give them space to make decisions and get involved in the learning process.

What do you think are the most important issues in educational change today? What excites you about the educational change field?

As I mentioned above, I am accompanying a process of educational transformation (I prefer the radicality of this notion more than the term educational change), where more than 450 primary and secondary schools are participating. The purpose of this project is to generate a bottom-up collaborative process of in-service teacher education where teachers can be the agents of the school change, generate integrative learning experiences thorough inquiry-based projects, and change the notion and the practice of assessment. In this experience we are learning that when teachers set out to relate to learning through inquiry-based projects, they do so from two positions: adopting it as a way of doing that does not affect their conceptions and thus ends up becoming a routine; or realizing the challenge posed to their ideas about pedagogical relations, teaching, and learning. When teachers understand what this inquiry-based learning entails, their imagination is unleashed and they become the ones who see the benefits in moving in multiple and imaginative directions.

Some colleagues relate the inquiry-based projects orientation to the hegemony of a neoliberal vision of society that is reflected in the economy—and in education. This results turning people’s lives. This change is a product that must be measured, just like a company’s performance. But a school is not a company. It’s a place for life in company—a place where people learn how to look differently at themselves, others, and their surroundings.
And they do so by exploring the relationships that weave these worlds of which they are a part, based on what is emerging and not only on what exists. How these transitions are taking place is one of the focal points I invite to explore.

Part of my job is to teach at the university where, together with my students and some colleagues, we explore what it means to invite young people to the adventure of learning about what we do not know and what we have not determined beforehand. We do so through processes of inquiry that we carry out and visualize together. The same can guide the life of a classroom with three-year-old learners as it can with students in secondary school. But you can’t do this from 9:00 to 10:00 in the morning, twice a week. It takes more time. Adults must get moving—be willing to keep learning, take risks, and dare to put themselves at risk by sharing with their colleagues the doubts and tensions they face. Exploring how to generate alternatives to the constrains of schooling is another focus of educational transformation.

Finally, I would like to bring forth the words of Recalcati (2016), a psychoanalyst whose work allows me to think about education and people’s relationships from different frameworks. Recalcati suggests that the meaning of school and university “is the humanization of life and making possible the encounter with the erotic dimension of knowledge.” To make this encounter possible, it is necessary to open oneself to the surprise, to the unexpected, to the unheard of, to the unknown. But this is not promoted or achieved because it is accepted that the homogenizing bureaucratic structures are imposed on the subjects, and that the disciplinary environments act as frameworks of power that guide and organize the relationships and control of spaces and time for learning. How to imagine alternatives to the bureaucratization of the school structures and relationships is one of the challenges for educational transformation today.

References


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Professor Hernández-Hernández’ bio:

There are several epiphanic episodes in my work trajectory. When I finished my degree in Psychology, a colleague asked me a question that I considered as epiphany: “How do you want to project your social commitment professionally?” He emphasized the idea of considering others and what is beneficial for the common good in my future agenda. This question has resonated with me throughout my career. My first work was as an educational psychologist, working in a small town close to Barcelona, where I was surrounded by like-minded people who believed that school should be considered as part of a network, where social agents generate alternatives to social problems in a collaborative manner.

Later, I was critically involved in the process of transformation of schooling promoted by the educational reform of 1990, fostered by the Spanish government and run by the Socialist Party. At that time, I was collaborating with the Institute of Sciences Education of the University of Barcelona. One day, during one of the conversation sessions we had, a group of four teachers from an elementary school asked me a question that generated my second epiphanic movement: “Are we helping children to learn in an integrated manner?” Answering this question took us five years of action research processes, classroom observations, multiple conversations, and over all, experimenting a way of teaching and learning to promote children’s processes of inquiry based on their involvement on what they learn (Hernández & Ventura, 2009).

Since then, learning has been the focus of my interest with colleagues of the research group Esbrina (http://esbrina.eu/en/home/). During these years we have explored how primary-school children (Hernández, 2010), primary-school teachers in their first five years of profession (Sancho-Gil & Hernández, 2016), high school students (Hernández-Hernández, 2017), and now, secondary school teachers learn. In parallel, I try to promote meaningful experiences of learning through inquiry and to integrate projects, which bring life to the schools and promote learning as a lived and embodied experience.

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