Introduction

Public schools for educational transformation in the Knowledge Society
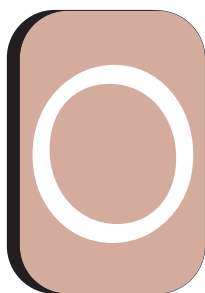
Escuelas públicas para la transformación en la Sociedad del Conocimiento

Guest-edited special issue:
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On a global scale, educational transformation has become increasingly important given the need to acquire 21st century skills and competencies that will be required from future citizens. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the rapid pace of technological developments, that challenge dominant educational models and practices. At the same time, there is increased emphasis on testing and performance standards used by the education system to evaluate students. The socio-political agenda for education is being challenged as a result of the delivery of an education that is framed within neoliberalism and commercial interests. This is evidenced by the emergence of more private schools in many countries. This raises questions about the role of public schools in our societies and their potential to promote social development. Public schools are facing several challenges and difficulties in making necessary transformations towards new models of education that generate student's engagement as knowledge builders in the so-called Knowledge Society (Erstad et al., 2016).

There seems to be a consensus on the need to build an educational system that pursues equity, comprised by schools that respond to the literacy needs in the knowledge society, and that contributes to forming a critical citizenry, that is supportive and committed with the common good. However, despite the constant call to "rethink education" in recent decades, school grammar remains unchanged in most institutions. Along with this, the determination to create schools that respond to the need for transformation of the present times is not becoming a reality. Why is it so complex to remove the foundations of the school and the educational systems?

These questions are not new, but paradoxically they make more sense today than ever before. As early as the 1930s, the book "Dare the school build a new social order" (Counts, 1932) was published, and recently Michael Apple questioned the structure and meaning of school education with the book "Can education change society?" (Apple, 2013). Today we know that education can be a means for social emancipation and a device for the gradual transformation of society. But we also know that schools are a reflection of the forms of oppression that exist beyond its walls and therefore, a device for the reproduction of inequality and the promotion of the status quo.

Three fundamental cornerstones for the transformation of educational systems around the world are related to the reduction of social and educational inequalities; the creation of connections between educational and learning situations and the communities and realities outside schools; and the promotion of a critical and dialogic media literacy.

Regarding social and educational inequality, social exclusion is present outside schools, but educational ecosystems reproduce this exclusion, from policies that generate school segregation (Bonal & Zancajo, 2018) to the consolidation of cultures and school environments that reproduce many forms of exclusion. At the same time, schools can become an instrument for social mobility, educating in democratic values and social emancipation. One of the focuses of the latest research on educational transformation is the possibility to generate transformative spaces in schools (Lipman, 2011).

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In terms of connected learning, the new learning ecology entails an exponential increase in environments and opportunities for learning, both virtual and face-to-face. This has great educational potential, if we generate networks that allow students to participate in transformative experiences: subjective experiences connected with reality that open up new possibilities of understanding for people (Valdés et al., 2015). This new ecology of learning is proposed from a community perspective based on care and solidarity, that questions the individualism and competitiveness that are still fostered in many schools.

In relation to the challenge of promoting critical media literacy, the need for schools to stop understanding and using digital media as mere tools to do schoolwork is becoming increasingly clear, since this narrow view of digital technologies is becoming an obstacle for social and educational transformation (Sancho et al., 2019). However, school initiatives are gradually emerging that are based on the transformative power of understanding and using digital media, especially from a critical and dialogic approach to media literacy or educommunication (Barbas, 2012).

For this reason, in this special issue we called for papers based on empirical works carried out in schools around the world that pursue the transformation of the educational model and the prevailing social order, through initiatives promoted from educational communities. Initiatives that seek to generate spaces to "read the world" critically and contribute to shaping the society in which they would like to live (Freire, 1984; Amin, 2008).

This special issue collects research projects carried out in educational contexts where transformation is promoted from seven different countries, involving educational stakeholders and the institutions and systems to which they belong.

The first article, entitled "Educational practices to transform and connect schools and communities" (Erstad, Miño & Rivera-Vargas, 2021), analyzes three initiatives for educational transformation implemented in public secondary schools from Norway, Chile and Spain. Through ethnographic and relational research, their main objective was to understand in depth how these initiatives contribute to generate connected practices that involve teachers, students and communities in the discussion about the type of society they would like to live in the future. The results indicate that fostering a transformative agency in secondary schools has the potential to involve students in the understanding of contemporary social issues.

Secondly, the article entitled "The challenge of inclusive dialogic teaching in public secondary school" addresses the challenge of promoting more inclusive public schools that address the needs of the Knowledge Society in the 21st century. Through a discourse analysis of the dialogic sessions carried out, the results of this study show that dialogic teaching is developed gradually and even when the position of teachers becomes more inclusive and attractive to students, this change does not necessarily represent a radical change in student-centered teaching methods.

Next, the third article entitled "STEAM projects with KIKS format for the development of key competences" addresses a study that aimed to analyze the relationships between learning based on STEAM projects with KIKS (Kids Inspire Kids for STEAM) and the overall development of key competencies. Through qualitative research

based on classroom observations and interviews with KIKS students, teachers and trainers, the results reveal that project-based learning essentially favors the development of mathematical competence and competence in science, technology and engineering, while the KIKS format enhances literacy and multilingual skills.

The fourth article, entitled "Aggressiveness, instability and socio-emotional education in an inclusive environment", analyzes the impact of a socio-emotional education program on aggressiveness and emotional instability in students aged between 7 and 12 years of age in Primary Education in Valencia (Spain). Through an experimental study, the results show a substantive impact of the program in terms of reducing aggressiveness and emotional instability of the student body.

Finally, the article entitled "ICT and knowledge management in Teaching and Engineering students" analyzes the key processes of knowledge management in students of the Faculty of Education and the School of Engineering in a Spanish university. At the same time, it evaluates to what extent ICTs serve to support these processes. Through the implementation of a questionnaire given to students, the results show differentiated patterns in the use of technology and in the perception of knowledge management based on gender, age and qualifications.

By raising key questions about education and knowledge development in contemporary societies this special issue intends to contribute to the ongoing debate, both in the political and research fields, concerning how to deal with transformation within our education systems and practices. Some common themes in the contributions of this special issue relate to transformation both within and beyond public schools, as institutions for teaching and learning and within specific subject domains. In particular, this relates to ways of developing more inclusive public schools with a diverse student population, and ways of connecting schools and communities away from conceptions of learning that are only defined within formal settings and engaging students in their own learning processes in multiple ways. This also deals with the struggles and tensions both teachers and students are facing when engaging in such practices and activities to generate and share knowledge. The articles also deal with key competences and emotional well-being of students in our schools today. Another common issue involves the diversity of ways in which technologies can be included and embedded in learning practices in schools, communities and beyond. This special issue is one more example of the difficulty of conducting research on practices and initiatives that promote significant transformations in schools, but also of the existence of educational actors that generate changes in various directions.

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