

PRESENTACIÓN: CAN THE ARTS CHANGE WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT HISTORY OF EDUCATION?

Eulàlia Colleldemont^α e Ian Grosvenor^β

It is a truism in the contemporary world that knowledge is fragmented. In part this is a result of how institutions organize knowledge and the emergence of separate disciplines in universities. There is an ongoing push for greater interdisciplinarity but, as Ruth Levitas writes, it is “an attempt to overcome some of these problems and return to more integrated thinking, while discursively reinforcing the primacy of disciplines”.¹ Some fifty years ago the art critic and novelist John Berger wrote in *Ways of Seeing* that “The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled”.² Berger was writing about visual material evidence from the past, but his comments can equally be applied in a more general sense to academic disciplines and the ways, for example, of how researchers that engage with the arts and humanities see the world, make sense of it, and write about it through the lens of their own discipline. Or to put it another way, what is spoken and what is written is determined by what is known and believed. This equally applies to the foundation subjects that address education as an area of study, namely history, philosophy, and sociology. It also follows, as Marc Depaepe has commented about historians of education, that the formal and informal rules, values, and norms associated with our writing of history of education, operates to privilege narratives of national pasts and marginalise or

^α Dpto de Pedagogía, Facultad de Educación, Traducción, Deportes y Psicología. Universidad de Vic - Universidad Central de Cataluña. c. Sagrada Familia. s/n. 08500. Vic, España. eulalia@uvic.cat
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1953-3504>.

^β Dept. of Education and Social Justice. School of Education. University of Birmingham. Edgbaston, Birmingham. B15 2TT, United Kingdom. i.d.grosvenor@bham.ac.uk  <https://orcid.org/ 0000-0001-8557-1272>.

¹ Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), XVI.

² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC Penguin Book, 1972), 7.

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neglect other possible narratives.³ Of course, as Berger noted, knowing “is never settled.”

Indeed, knowing needs continuous research and we believe that Seminars (or Workshops) are the best way of creating new ways of thinking, like History Workshops have done from the last century onwards. Taking that challenge into account, we organised a seminar in Vic, Catalonia in January 2025 as an introduction to the challenge posed by the question that we had chosen to raise: “Can the arts change ways of thinking about history of education?” We also believed that exploring other narratives works best when it is done in collaboration with others and ideas can freely flow. The Seminar brought together academics from different backgrounds, presentations and conversations ranged across disciplines and drew on knowledge of music and literature, explored paedagogic and psychological essays and considered the learning processes of both children and young adults. Metaphorically, as a collective we weaved a framework where papers submitted could be placed together, a frame that would offer new ways of thinking about history of education and the arts and, much like Eric Proctor’s sleeping kindergarten children, surfacing and awakening us to new possibilities.

Figure 1. *Kindergarten* by Eric Proctor A.R.A, 1917. ©



³ Ian Grosvenor, “What do they know of England who only England know: a case for an alternative narrative of the ordinary in twenty-first-century Britain”, *History of Education* 47, no. 2 (2018):148-168.

Fernand Deligny (1913-96) the French experimental educator, essayist known for his work with children with severe autism noted,

A child's drawing is not a work of art: it is a call to new circumstances. The creator of new circumstances, there is the educator struggling against all inertia. Cheer up. I advise you to maintain a personal mode of expression. Even if only to absorb this small foam of delirium that forms a bubble around every intense action.⁴

Angelo Van Gorp, in his text “The art of the possible: educational history as a radical practice”⁵ points to Deligny's advice of maintaining “a personal mode of expression” when he invited us to accept a practice of writing on history of education that allows the self to have a voice, as has been done in social work and artistic reflections. As Van Gorp claims, this is a different way to ask about the past, which connects the old and the new in a radical way. Moreover, he writes,

It is also radical because it “refuses to exclude the I”, which is why I explicitly mention the “I” in subtitles of this essay. In this respect, I draw on the versatile genre of “evocative autoethnography”, which gained momentum in social-work research in the mid-1990s through the efforts of not only academics but also artists and performers. In that sense, it is not new. Autoethnography is characterized by experimentation with “genre-bending” and “messy-text forms of representation” —an example of which is the essayistic form of this article— in response to the “conventions of third-person, silent authorship”.

Looking, painting, digging, criticising and, at the end, being touched by cultural learning provoked by the “established thinkers”, is one possible way of opening new opportunities of learning for today's academic historian. Acknowledging this, we bring together a set of articles which will explore new ways of thinking about history of education through the lens of the arts in order to understand the impact of “the cultural turn” in education. Different examples of how cultural learning through

⁴ Fernand Deligny, “Los vagabundos eficaces”, in *Cartas a un trabajo social* (México: Cactus, 2021), 20.

⁵ Included in the Issue Can the arts change ways of thinking about history of education? *Historia y Memoria de la Educación*, no. 23 (2026).

art has been conducted in the past, were analysed in a special issue of the journal *History and Memory of Education*, no. 5 (2017): “Elementos artísticos en la historia de la educación: las prácticas artísticas en los espacios educativos”.⁶ Analysing the articles in this special issue, as well as associated articles published in journals like *Paedagogica Historica* or the *History of Education & Children’s Literature* journal, we can observe an underlying trend and pattern characterized by the creation of complementary questions and answers in history of education research.

With the aim of surfacing these complementary questions and answers, what we propose is to develop another line of inquiry which is based on how cultural learning through the arts has shaped different ways of thinking about the history of education. To this end, we want to dig deeper into the questions associated with the epistemological and methodological issues that have arisen from history of education’s use of art-based sources or art-based research.

Following this idea, we proposed the special issue with the following two aims:

- To consider how different reflections associated with the arts can help us understand new ways of conceiving history of education research.
- To explore different ways of approaching sources of evidence, notably “artist” produced evidence, to build new narratives of history of education.

Based on this proposal and the collaborative involvement of academics from different parts of Europe we will join a tradition initiated in the late 1960s, when William van der Eyken and Barry Turner wrote *Adventures in Education*. Their book was “an exercise in the archaeology of education” an attempt to explore in depth various experiments started by educational pioneers, and to examine how far, and why, they succeeded or failed. One of the “adventures” they document relates to the work of two English educators committed to promoting the idea of the child

⁶ *History and Memory of Education*, no. 5 (2017): “Elementos artísticos en la historia de la educación: las prácticas artísticas en los espacios educativos. Access: <https://revistas.uned.es/index.php/HMe/issue/view/978/196> .

as artist.⁷ This idea also intrigued the art educator and anarchist Herbert Read who explored the connection between the child as artist and the purpose of education. For Read the purpose of education was about:

[...] teaching children [...] how to make sounds, images, movements, tools and utensils [...] All faculties, of thought, logic, memory, sensibility and intellect, are involved in such processes, and no aspect of education is excluded in such processes. And they are all processes which involve art, for art is nothing but the good making of sounds, images, etc. The aim of education is therefore the creation of artists —of people efficient in the various modes of expression.⁸

Jump forward nearly seventy years and we find similar ideas being presented in educational discourse under the heading of “Cultural Learning”:

Culture is the way we come to know the world, individually and collectively [...] Cultural learning involves diverse practice and encompasses the arts, heritage and knowledge valued by individuals, cultures, and communities [...] Through cultural learning young people [...] are empowered by the act of self-expression.⁹

Read’s “making of sounds, images, etc.” involved both acts of self-expression and of artistic cultural production. For Read the site of production was the state school system. For those who later promoted “cultural learning” the site of artistic production was not confined to state school systems but extended to dispersed sites of informal education —libraries, museums, community centres, heritage sites and places of religious worship.

Such has been the transformative power of the emergence of “cultural learning” that it informed the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme with its concern about learning through and about culture as a means to promote affective forms of

⁷ The artists were Marion Richardson and Robin Tanner, see Willem Van der Eyken and Barry Turner, *Adventures in Education* (London: Allan Lane, 1969), 97-124.

⁸ Herbert Read, *Education through Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943), 11.

⁹ See <https://www.culturallearningalliance.org.uk> 2001.

belonging and “the personal development of citizens, enabling them to find their place in society”. The Programme challenged scholars to contribute to “the building of inclusive, innovative and reflective societies”. Its vision being to produce a Europe comprised of reflective societies, able to critically explore its “historical, cultural and normative roots” and whose citizens would produce a Europe united by its diversity.¹⁰ This brings us to the role of ethics in historical research, but especially ethical issues focused on childhood. As Núria Padrós and Josep Casanovas write in their article “La expresión artística infantil en tiempos de guerra: un reto para la investigación histórico-educativa”¹¹ the ethics of research can still be a challenge in European research:

Así pues, más allá de la obtención de los permisos para realizar la investigación y cumplimentar los protocolos, es necesario una reflexión profunda sobre el impacto que ésta puede tener. Una reflexión que debe ir más allá de considerar los aspectos éticos en la planificación previa o en los inicios del proyecto, para integrarse en la toma de decisiones durante todo el proceso, desde la ideación hasta la difusión y las repercusiones sociales del trabajo, pausando, si es necesario, el avance del proyecto cuando aparecen dilemas éticos. En este sentido es interesante el enfoque *ethics in practice* que considera que durante toda la investigación pueden surgir retos o dilemas éticos y que, cuando la persona investigadora se encuentra en estos momentos de confusión, es necesaria la reflexión, así como el hecho de explicitar y articular qué aspectos se han priorizado o cómo y con qué propósito se han tomado las decisiones. Siguiendo estas recomendaciones éticas, en consecuencia, se exponen las dudas, criterios y decisiones adoptadas durante todo el proceso de investigación.

As they argue, we have some protocols, we have some rules, we have some examples, but these don't easily address the questions raised when we are struggling with the children's productions and the children's experiences that are derived from a significant personal involvement with

¹⁰ European Commission: Horizon 2020. *Europe in a changing world – inclusive, innovative and reflective societies*. 2013. Access: <http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/>.

¹¹ Included in the Issue Can the arts change ways of thinking about history of education? *Historia y Memoria de la Educación*, no. 23 (2026).

reality. Emotions are still seen as a “danger area” in history of education, and the ethics of focusing on the emotions is, if possible, more alien to us as historians. Yet, Laura Ford’s sculpture evokes and moves our feelings: there is something which transcends the individual, and this is the capacity of crying.

Figure 2. Laura Ford ‘Weeping Girl’ 2008. ©¹² Photograph by Ian Grosvenor



When looking at the analysis of the data undertaken by Antonio Francisco Canales in “Memorias Sentimentales de la Escuela en la literatura: Zweig, Pla, Camus y Giménez”¹³ an exercise in understanding the emotions is a key to being precise with the data as we can notice within the next text:

Pero más allá de los topos pedagógicos, basta con continuar la lectura para darse cuenta de que la insatisfacción de Zweig con su escuela no responde a las razones habituales de la crítica

¹² See <https://www.jupiterartland.org/art/laura-ford-weeping-girls/>.

¹³ Included in the Issue Can the arts change ways of thinking about history of education? *Historia y Memoria de la Educación*, no. 23 (2026).

progresista. El mundo real, la vida y los intereses personales tienen poco que ver para el joven Zweig con lo que comúnmente entendemos por tal cosa en la actualidad, sino nada más y nada menos que con el Arte con mayúsculas. Zweig critica al Gymnasium no por culturalista, sino porque no le basta, porque no es lo suficientemente culto para su espíritu excelso anhelante de cultura. Zweig se describe a sí mismo y a sus compañeros como poseídos por un fanatismo artístico que los llevaba a situarse en la vanguardia de la poesía del momento y a su propia persona como presa de un nerviosismo febril en la búsqueda del Arte. En estas circunstancias, no resulta extraño que llegara un momento en que “la escuela sólo conseguía molestarnos y asquearnos” (p. 61). El Gymnasium vienes se mostraba para Zweig incapaz de responder a las necesidades de aprendizaje de sus estudiantes: “nuestro afán de aprender que estaba estancado, nuestra curiosidad intelectual, artística y de ocio, que en la escuela no encontraba alimento alguno, nos lanzó a una búsqueda apasionada de todo aquello que se producía muros afuera” (p. 61).

Memories are linked to emotions, social class and education, but the roles we are allowed to play in the world as a leader, as a critical friend, as a nonconformist or as a victim is also shaped by memories.

That said, it is important to acknowledge that for some commentators there is a danger in using the term “cultural learning” to describe the acquisition and development of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, and wisdom by cultural means, or in a cultural context, or to a cultural end as it reinforces the “separateness” of culture from mainstream education and learning. Educationists and scholars of Cultural Studies and of Museums Studies have written widely about cultures of learning and learning about/through culture¹⁴ while the term “cultural learning” has also been used by anthropologists in their studies of acculturation, and by scholars who study animal behaviours.¹⁵ It is important also to note what Michel Foucault said in *The Order of Things* with

¹⁴ Christine Hall and Pat Thomson, “Creative partnerships? Cultural Policy and Inclusive Arts Practice in One Primary School”, *British Educational Research Journal*, 33, no.3 (2007): 315-329.

¹⁵ Michael Cole, John Gay, Joseph A. Glick and Donald Sharp, *The Cultural Context of Learning and Thinking: An Exploration in Experimental Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

reference to Borges's imagined Chinese encyclopaedia, that the culturally constructed terms we use shape our mental and material ordering and experience of the world.¹⁶ Indeed, cultural meanings, as Stuart Hall wrote, are not only "in the head" they "organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct, and consequently have real, practical effects".¹⁷ In short, there is a danger that cultural learning and all its associated dimensions have created a conceptual silo which has created barriers between academic disciplines and has limited the exchange of knowledge and understanding as documented in the National Campaign for the Arts in 2008.¹⁸ Nevertheless "cultural learning" continues to have traction and arts and heritage-based projects continue to flourish. An engagement which can be traced back to the 20th century, namely during the inter-war period in Europe and during the Second Republic in Spain and still persists into the present.

However, to avoid falling into the trap of nostalgia and seeing children's spaces and places as the pedagogical centres of cultural learning is to look beyond the material world and instead understand the various influences that shape children's cultural imaginations. Central to these imaginations are the artefacts which are part of their lives as Mariona Genís has explored in the article "Imaginarios estéticos infantiles en la arquitectura de los espacios de juego. La Wendy house como caso de estudio".¹⁹ An analysis which requires a multifactorial approach: the architecture, social position, knowledge of how children learn and as a consequence our access to the learning atmosphere:

La *Wendy House*, como tipo de espacio, tiene, en este periodo inicial del siglo XX, los tres indicadores definidos al principio del artículo como elementos o características arquitectónicas que influyen en la creación de un imaginario estético en la infancia: un vínculo de la arquitectura con el lugar y el entorno, una escala

¹⁶ Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1971).

¹⁷ Stuart Hall, *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1997), 4.

¹⁸ National Campaign for the Arts, *Response to Culture and Learning: Towards a New Agenda*. London. February 2008. Accessed March 2025. https://www.cpexposed.com/sites/default/files/documents/CP_DEMOS_CultureLearningPaper_Feb08.pdf.

¹⁹ Included in the Issue Can the arts change ways of thinking about history of education? *Historia y Memoria de la Educación*, no. 23 (2026).

propia de la infancia y una riqueza formal y material con la capacidad de crear una escenografía simbólica. Su auge, además, coincide con el contexto histórico descrito en el apartado anterior, en el que la arquitectura pone a la infancia en el centro de algunas de sus renovaciones estilísticas.

The Wendy House nevertheless remains both a symbolic site of belonging and exclusion.

Belonging is also central to Geert Thyssen and Elin Eriksen Ødegaard article “Urban-Coastal Art and Embodied Re-Membering of Education: Reading “StreetWise” and “One Ocean-Ocean Portrait” through One Another as Cases of Collaborative, Artivist Storying”²⁰ because with their works

[...] doing history” of education arguably always is “a political act” that, whether consciously or not, “combines the art of activism with the power of storytelling”. Our aim here is to explore art and education and related senses of belonging, not to reify a past assumed to “have” simply “been” but also recover past(s) that “might yet have been”, if one opens oneself up to “immersion [...] in the currents of the lifeworld”, to becoming “attuned” or “responsive”/“responsible” to phenomena whose conditions of possibility have (so far) been meeting constraints. This implies “embodied commitment” to “un/doing archives” complicit in their “erasure”. Such commitment invites “new possible histories ... through which [all, “non/human”] time-beings might find a way to endure”. Ecological work indeed.

Learning in StreetWise is also another space of discovery. Nevertheless, is it a place where learning, politics, and aesthetics show a different route in the history of education? They explain

Street artists historically marginalised in discourse of artistry, like often young children (among exceptions being Italy’s Reggio Emilia early childhood education discourse), share a profound kinship through experiences of exclusion (for instance from the eulogies reserved to those invited to galleries, theatres and

²⁰ Included in the Issue Can the arts change ways of thinking about history of education? *Historia y Memoria de la Educación*, no. 23 (2026).

concert halls) and resilience of their creative expressions. Historically, both groups have been overlooked in conventional narratives of art, street artists often having been dismissed as mere beggars/wanderers, and young artists as naïve imitators of adult creativity. Tim Ingold's concept of history as entangled journeying, whereby the world as a story is continually reimagined and reworked resonates deeply with the artistic trajectories of being an artist queering publicness, being an artist working with children, and being an artist as a child. This aligns with Karen Barad's notion of historicity and embodied re-membering, emphasising that current creative performances of street artists and young children as ocean painters, constitute (re)iterations of broader conversations/disputes about belonging, autonomy and respect. Both groups challenge societal norms and assert their rights to artistic expression. They are bound by sharing intimate relationships with outdoor places, urban, rural or coastal, defiance of established artistic hierarchies, and assertion of their voices in the broader ecology of human and children's rights. Recognising this, we not only validate their creative potentials but also advocate for the rights of all artists to be recognised and celebrated.

Berger followed *Ways of Seeing* (1972) with *About Looking* (1980) and *Another Way of Telling* (1982).²¹ The focus for the two books remained the same—making sense in the present of material evidence of the past, even though “what we know is never settled”. It should come as no surprise therefore that in the present moment the decolonization movement within the academy and beyond offers a clear challenge to Western epistemic knowledge in favour of “other ways of being, thinking, knowing, sensing, feeling, doing and living”.²² The present collection of themed essays has in part been commissioned to respond to this challenge. Contributors have been asked to embrace the cultural in education and explore regimes of knowledge associated with histories of education in the past and the ongoing present, to engage with the material evidence and

²¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC Penguin Book, 1972).
 John Berger, *About Looking* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1980).
 John Berger, *Another Way of Telling* (London: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1982).

²² Carol Azumah Dennis, “Decolonising Education: A Pedagogic Intervention”, in *Decolonising the University*, ed. G. K. Bhambra *et al.* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 199.

pedagogical practices of past “sounds, images, movements, tools and utensils” and acts of self-expression and of artistic production, and to interrogate, critique and decentre hegemonic ways of thinking embedded within the historiographies of history of education. It is a collective effort to produce an attitude that will bring together what belongs together and offer new ways of thinking, knowing, sensing, feeling, and doing history of education. It is about rescuing educational pasts from dominant narratives in the present.

Finally, it should be acknowledged that each of the essays were conceived, produced and delivered at a time where the number of democracies around the world has fallen as authoritarianism has grown, Neo-liberalism and global capitalism have combined to produce conditions in which discord and social polarisation have flourished and in political discourse and practice there has been a growing ascendancy of the radical right, with its nationalist, racist and xenophobic discourse that identifies both internal and external enemies.²³ Nevertheless, as the philosopher Jason Stanley writes, “democracy encourages an open-ended search for truth, and seeks to include new perspectives, narratives and data”.²⁴ Indeed, practicing democracy, as John Dewey said in his address *Creative Democracy - The Task Before Us*, can “be accomplished only by inventive effort and creative activity”.²⁵

Notas sobre los autores

EULÀLIA COLLELDEMONT is an associate professor in Educational Studies at the University of Vic – Central University of Catalonia (UVic-UCC), where she teaches history of education and educational heritage at undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral levels. She has developed her research and knowledge transfer as an active member of the Educational

²³ See Agnieszka Pasieka, *Living Right. Far-Right Youth Activists in Contemporary Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024); Richard Seymour, *Disaster Nationalism. The Downfall of Liberal Civilisation* (London: Verso, 2024); UNESCO *Rethinking Our Futures Together* (2021) <https://courier.unesco.org/en/articles/rethinking-our-futures-together>, accessed March 2025.

²⁴ Jason Stanley, *Erasing History. How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future* (London: Footnote Press, 2024), 174.

²⁵ John Dewey, “Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us”, *John Dewey and the Promise of America, Progressive Education Booklet*, no. 14, (Columbus, Ohio: American Education Press, 1939), 13.

Research Group (GREUV, 2021 SGR 01460), where she is currently leading a research line on “education history”. Her research interests are focused on education history, aesthetic education and educational heritage, disciplines to which she has contributed with writing and reviewing academic articles and chapters for prestigious journals and books and supervising five doctoral theses (one of them in progress). Her research contribution to these fields also includes the leadership of four national competitive research projects and one knowledge transfer national project, together with the participation in five international and three national competitive research projects and one knowledge transfer national project. Since 2022, she is a member of the international network “History of Educational Ecologies (HEC)” and has become a Research Fellow at RPTU, Campus Landau (Rheinland-Pfälzische Technische Universität Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany). Besides she is a Corresponding International Member of the Domus Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Histories of Education and Childhood at the University of Birmingham. Throughout her career as a scholar, she has promoted numerous cultural initiatives within the UVic-UCC, including the creation of the Virtual Pedagogical Museum, of which she was director until the academic year 2021-2022, as well as activities for the recovery of institutional memory.

IAN GROSVENOR is Emeritus professor of Urban Educational History at the University of Birmingham, England. Current research focuses on education, activism and art; education and the ecological turn; and cultural learning and community engagement. Books include *Assimilating Identities. Racism and Education in Post 1945 Britain* (1997), *Silences and Images. The Social History of the Classroom* (1999) with Martin Lawn and Kate Rousmaniere, *The School I'd Like* (2003), *School* (2008) and *The School I'd Like Revisited* (2015) all with Catherine Burke, *Materialities of Schooling* (2005) with Martin Lawn, *Children and Youth at Risk* (2009) with Christine Mayer and Ingrid Lohmann, the *Black Box of Schooling* (2011) with Sjaak Braster and Maria Mar del Pozo Andrés and *Making Education: Governance by Design* (2018) with Lisa Rasmussen. With Tim Allender, Inés Dussel and Karin Priem he is editor of the De Gruyter book series *Appearances – Studies in Visual Research*. Between 2014 and 2021 he was Director of the Voices of War and Peace First World War Engagement Centre. Previous roles include Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor for Cultural Engagement and Head of the School of Education, University of

Birmingham, Secretary General of the European Educational Research Association [EERA], founding convenor of EERA's Network 17 History of Education, and Managing Editor of *Paedagogica Historica*, 2008-2020. He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

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