LEAD THE CHANGE SERIES
Q & A with Cecilia Azorín

The 2021 AERA theme is Accepting Educational Responsibility and, invites those of us who teach in schools of education to accept greater responsibility for the inadequate preparation of educators for work in racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse P–12 schools and postsecondary institutions. For example, when educators discipline African American students at disproportionately higher rates, misdiagnose them for special education, identify too few of them for advanced placement and international baccalaureate programs, deliver to them a culturally irrelevant curriculum, teach them in culturally disdaining ways, and stereotype their families as careless and hopeless, the schools of education that produced these professionals are just as responsible as the professionals themselves. Furthermore, if scholars who study and document these trends do too little to make our findings actionable, then we, too, are contributors to the cyclical reproduction of these educational inequities.

Given the dire need for all of us to do more to dismantle oppressive systems 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??

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.

OFFICERS

Kristin Kew
Chair

Mireille Hubers
Program Chair

Na Mi Bang
Secretary/Treasurer

Jennie Weiner
Series Editor

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.

Alexandra Lamb
Production Editor

Accepting educational responsibility implies conceiving education as something that can help individuals overcome inequalities, a mechanism capable of transforming lives and positively impacting people's progress. This statement leads one to think about the social mobility that can be produced as a result of education. Harris and Jones (2020b) have recently stated that "social and educational mobility are important because they reflect the equality of opportunity in society" (p. 18). Put simply, Hargreaves (2020) defines social mobility as the chance to achieve greater success through education compared to one's parents.

When your background is humble, for example, when your father is a farmer and your mother a homemaker, becoming the first PhD of your family, and eventually, a university professor, is no easy task. I have experienced social mobility firsthand, and it has not been a bed of roses. And yet, I can say that my own social mobility was the

consequence of education and the experiences I received. Creating effective educational experiences for all children is the first step to dismantle oppressive systems. This is linked to an approach that essentially recognizes the power that education has in terms of social justice.

When I think about dismantling oppressive systems in education, a song springs to mind - "Another Brick in the Wall" released by the British group Pink Floyd in 1979. I invariably use this song as a university welcome for my students, future teachers, with whom I work on concepts such as, what is, and what is not, an effective pedagogical approach, how to capitalize on their passion for teaching, how to engage in divergent thinking and what it means to educate in an environment that responds effectively to student diversity. Another Brick in the Wall is a protest against the strict norms and rules of traditional conceptualizations of teaching and learning – a system more concerned with maintaining discipline and restricting creativity than with motivating and transmitting knowledge.

On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Declaration of Children's Rights, the United Nations declared 1979 the International Year of the Child, thus recalling our collective commitment to protect children. From that moment on, authoritarian approaches to education began to be questioned. Undoubtedly, the message this song projected not only in British society, but in the rest of the world, allowed people to dream that the change in education was possible. In reality, the argument was clear and called for a new teaching, an improvement of the school based on less control and more freedom.

In 1980, one year after its release, this song was adopted as a protest anthem among black students in South Africa who were suffering from apartheid, a system of racial segregation that divided schools and communities in a discriminatory manner and unjustly perpetuated inequalities.

Today, there are new layers of exclusion that leave childhood and youth unprotected. According to the Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2020, 4): All over the world, discrimination is based on gender, remoteness, wealth, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, displacement, incarceration, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, religion and other beliefs and attitudes; the Covid-19 pandemic has added new layers of exclusion.

Unfortunately, the continued exclusion of many merely confirms that oppressive systems are embedded in the very fabric of our societies, and are traditionally characterized by discriminating forms of oppression that directly attack the most vulnerable groups. For example, in Spain (my home country) and in many other places around the world, discrimination, stigmatization continue as does the fight to make schools more inclusive. Thus, a system of parallel schooling is currently maintained, with students attending so-called "ordinary" schools and others being relegated to "special education" schools.

"The school cannot and must not leave anyone behind; on the contrary, it must set itself up as a guarantor of the right to a truly inclusive, equitable and quality education, without exceptions."

Inclusion is a major driving force for educational reform and a central goal of the international agenda. In a recent article, we analyzed how we can help schools to review progress on their journey to becoming more inclusive and show that fostering reflection amongst teachers about the

contexts, resources and processes that underpin their work can make a difference (Azorín & Ainscow, 2020). But, how does one ensure that no one's dream is denied and keep young people on the track to a brighter and equitable future without equal education opportunities for all children? The school cannot and must not leave anyone behind; on the contrary, it must set itself up as a guarantor of the right to a truly inclusive, equitable and quality education, without exceptions. This is probably one of the main challenges and responsibilities facing educational change scholars in these complex times.

Given your focus on school networks as a strategy to enhance educators' knowledge and practice, what would be some of the major lessons the field of Educational Change can learn from your work and experience?

Nowadays, scholars are turning their attention to collaborative networking and all it entails. The inference is that educational networking as a policy mechanism is here to stay, and that networks represent a school improvement strategy with high expectations placed upon them (Azorín & Muijs, 2017). Networking is becoming ever necessary to tackle problems and establish the adjustments demanded by contemporary education. Some interconnected lessons derived from the penetration of networks in education are explained below (Azorín, 2017):

- *An opportunity for crossing boundaries*. Networks enable the creation of a whole new scenario in which connectivity is prioritized over isolation; collectiveness over individualism; and collaboration over competitiveness.
- *A strategy for building bridges*. When collaboration extends beyond schools and professionals, resources are effectively mobilized and there is an exchange of knowledge and experiences that make it possible to "learn from others".

- *A driving force behind educational change*. Networks are formed by interactive and horizontal structures that act as levers for change, leaving behind the hierarchies of the past to allow progress to gain momentum.

This way of understanding education embraces winds of change that go beyond school gates in the quest for greater collaboration. A few years ago, a couple of research stays in the United Kingdom afforded me the opportunity to see emerging networks and partnership alliances in action (Azorín & Muijs, 2018). In an attempt to promote reflection on why professional learning networks are social, political, and cultural, as well as educational (Azorín, 2019), my research in the British context offers other views of networks that focuses not only on education but also on social welfare issues and aims to target networking from a broader perspective. This results in opening up schools to the community, a topic which is not yet covered widely in educational research.

To position school networks at the forefront of research, in 2018 I co-edited a special issue based on new forms of participation and social transformation through networking in education (Azorín & Arnaiz, 2018) in the Spanish journal Profesorado. Revista de currículum y

"Networking is becoming ever necessary to tackle problems and establish the adjustments demanded by contemporary education"

formación del profesorado (see Volume 22, Number 2). This edition put the focus on the expected role of collaborative networks

in education, the new forms of participation and social transformation that appear under these modes of organization, and the need to disseminate ideas that contribute to the creation of knowledge within this fruitful line of current and future research.

Recently I edited another issue on leading networks in the School Leadership & Management journal (see Volume 40, Number 2-3), which boasts an excellent line-up of international authors. This edition explores leadership actions that support effective networking and promotes reflection about whether networks can impact positively on students or are merely used as an organizational structure that benefits teachers in terms of professional learning and support (Azorín, 2020b). Together the diverse set of articles in this compendium conclude that empirical evidence in this direction remains thin and requires further attention.

The central lesson of school networks as a strategy to enhance educator's knowledge and practice is probably that networking affords a powerful way of organizing and operating; they offer viable solutions for the future of the network society and represent a reality that is advancing towards other forms of social participation and transformation. Networks are, in essence, the constellations illuminating the next routes of educational change.

In your recent work, you argue that distributed leadership offers new opportunities to understand professional collaboration generally and in the context of professional networks specifically. What do you see as the most needed changes to policy/practice in response to this argument?

While COVID-19 continues, millions of people are caught in a traumatic experience. The pandemic is causing a chronic state of uncertainty and highlighting the weaknesses of education systems to adapt to change.

At the education level, leading schools during a pandemic is a challenge of vast dimensions. Once the initial shock is over, educational leaders need to recover the helm of their schools that this unexpected virus has taken from them. In this respect, networking is becoming a good ally in the fight against COVID-19.

Prior to this period of crisis, educational research and practice had already focused on the prevalence of an important current of thought that advocates distributed leadership as a key condition for effective networking and coherent professional collaboration (Azorín, Harris & Jones, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2017). COVID-19 has accelerated networking to an unprecedented level and distributed leadership is now being used as a mechanism of coherent response to the current situation.

In education, there is a call for collaboration and leaders are being required to network. According to Harris and Jones (2020a), "most leaders will be running on empty given the myriad of challenges that COVID-19 has created for them, so distributed leadership is a necessity to survive" (p. 246).

We have argued that the adoption of a lens of distributed leadership practice within networks will afford a better understanding of how networks operate (Azorín, Harris, & Jones, 2020). In our work, from the point of view of distributed leadership and networking we provide a three-fold classification that aims to make sense of the complexities involved in changing education policies and practices:

- *Network leadership*: based on leadership through organizational connections across organizations, where the type of network dictates membership, there are no implicit barriers to entry and knowledge transfer is central to effective networking.
- *Lateral leadership*: characterized by collective agency, interdependent

decision making, collaborative action, formal and informal leadership patterns, collective ownership, fluid, interchangeable membership and releasing potential.

- *Distributed leadership*: related to leadership by expertise within, between and across organizations, inter-changeable membership according to needs, a focus on leadership practice more than leadership position, and extending or 'stretching' leadership capacity as a key purpose.

In terms of policy and practice, Harris (2012) argues that "despite decades of research on school improvement, school effectiveness and system reform, some policymakers are still selecting and implementing policies that have little, if any, independent empirical evidence supporting them" (p.5). Distributed leadership perspective would shift the knowledge base on networks "away from largely normative descriptions, self-report and over assertion to more sophisticated research designs and analytical processes that would generate more rigorous and reliable evidence" (Azorín, Harris, & Jones, 2020, p. 121). If we look at the educational research, there is empirical evidence that supports the following set of propositions about the types of leadership practices that are most prevalent and effective within networks (Azorín, Harris & Jones, in press):

1. Middle leadership supports effective networking.
2. Distributed leadership within networks enhances innovation.
3. Teacher leadership is an essential component of effective networking.
4. Collaborative practices need to be learned and practiced.
5. Formal leadership drives distributed leadership.
6. Distributed leadership patterns matter in networking activity.
7. Effective networks are communities of practice.
8. Distributed leadership provides support in networked organizations.

9. Leadership in networks is not fixed but interchangeable.
10. Effective network leaders build and sustain professional capacity.

These findings clearly demonstrate that distributed leadership is a successful approach that can support, stimulate, and enhance networking. Within this change of outlook, a good recommendation is to take note of what evidence tells us and bring in policies that include what is functioning in practice to promote reforms that go in the right direction. It is important to facilitate links that allow distributed leadership to flourish in networks at the systemic level. To make this happen, educational leaders' actions have to go beyond school limits and move towards a process of democratization and openness.

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?

One of my priorities as an educational change scholar is opening up schools to their communities and elevate these communities' importance in decision-making and policy. In education, as in many other aspects of life, it is important to recognize that context matters (Harris and

> *"Distributed leadership is a successful approach that can support, stimulate, and enhance networking."*

Jones, 2018). Schools have to reflect on the context in which they are immersed, be prepared to work in collaboration networks with neighboring allies, and to take firm

steps to open up to the world (Azorín, 2019).

Schools are no longer expected to merely provide an educational function or service, but to safeguard the well-being of their students and, despite the pandemic, ensure continuity of learning. They are asked to take a step forward, to foster rapprochement with their local community, neighborhood, various educational and social agents, volunteer networks, and associations (Azorín & Muijs, 2018). In the 21st century, it does not make sense to live disconnected from what is happening around us. It is vital to open up and remove the barriers that still make it difficult for millions of people to benefit from the improvement provided by the different connections they have in educational and social spheres.

Similarly, the construction of a "school without walls" could be supported, both physically and pedagogically; a renewed institution capable of transcending its own rules and questioning its own practices and relations with its surroundings. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, reimagining schooling in that sense is a reminder that the call for collaboration and networking should not be delayed any longer. Below are 7 important factors that educational change scholars could bear in mind to support the transformation of education when they engaged in and with different school settings:

"Educational change scholars' work is to connect theory, policy, and practice, clarifying the meaning of what they do so that others can replicate it."

1. Communicate to share and exchange information.
2. Connect to learn from others.
3. Collaborate together for a common purpose.
4. Create new knowledge.
5. Co-lead for distributed leadership to flourish.
6. Circulate ideas that allow the dissemination of innovations.
7. Catalyze the change of cultures, policies and practices.

Educational change scholars act as links that bring the value of ideas and are able to initiate social movements that enable the transformation of educational systems for the improvement of their countries. This is often done through the use of evidence-supported knowledge and advice about practices that work. Their work is to connect theory, policy, and practice, clarifying the meaning of what they do so that others can replicate it.

In short, I have published numerous results of research projects and experiences of educational innovation carried out in schools with which I had the opportunity to collaborate very closely. Often, when I share the trends in scientific literature and the proposals of some schools with others, the professionals working in them say they were unaware this knowledge was available. I have learned from these experiences how relevant it is that ideas travel from one school to another. When we know that something has worked in one school it is easier for another to want to put something similar into practice, while adapting it to its own reality. The educational change scholar has the capacity to make this possible. In summary, the interconnection between the different educational and social agents involved in the school, as well as the dissemination of their practices, is part of the formula for educational change.

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

Unquestionably, 2020 has been a turning point, a before and after in people's lives. The pandemic has marked the end of the educational journey of the previous decades. Hargreaves and Fullan (2020) recently stated that "educational reform in the postpandemic age must be transformational and not seek to return to normal" (p. 327). Beyond the COVID-19 supernova (Azorín (2020a) "we need to come out of this crisis as a stronger society, with a fairer and more supportive educational system that really can change lives. Otherwise, we will have missed out on an opportunity" (p. 388).

In the coming years, educational change is going to take huge strides in terms of networking, leadership and innovation.

First, the monitoring of collaborative networks that have sprung up in education and society, especially in these uncertain times, needs to be researched. Since the beginning of the pandemic "the chains of favors have multiplied with initiatives of support and help towards the most vulnerable" (Azorín, 2020a, p. 383). If networks are at the front-line of the crisis, where formal and informal groups connected by social ties have emerged in force.

Second, Harris and Jones (2020a) state that "a new chapter is being written about school leadership in disruptive times that will possibly overtake and overshadow all that was written before on the topic" (p. 246). At the school level, there is no single person able to respond to all the demands and challenges deriving from COVID-19. In contrast, many actors are playing crucial roles at this moment and distributed leadership is positioning itself as a viable strategy for the present and future of education (Azorín, Harris, &Jones, in press).

Third, within this uncertain atmosphere, it is worth asking if COVID-19 can act as a channel for innovation and change in education. I agree with Fullan and Quinn (2020), who conclude, "Our sense is that there are many people (students, teachers, parents and others) who see a dire need for improvement in learning systems and are willing to work toward that end. With the right combination of action positive system change could occur at a more rapid rate than at any time in the past century" (p. 22).

In any case, surely the above ideas can serve as beacons to illuminate the change in education that is so needed and will mark the new coordinates on which we will continue to teach, write and research.

References

Azorín, C. (2017). Redes de colaboración entre escuelas inglesas para la mejora de la inclusión socioeducativa. *Profesorado. Revista de currículum y formación del profesorado, Número Extraordinario*, 29-48.

Azorín, C. (2019). The emergence of professional learning networks in Spain. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 4*(1), 36-51.

Azorín, C. (2020a). Beyond COVID-19 supernova. Is another education coming? *Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 5(3-4),* 381-390.

Azorín, C. (2020b). Leading networks. *School Leadership & Management, 40*(2-3), 105-110.

Azorín, C. and Ainscow, M. (2020). Guiding schools on their journey towards inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 24*(1), 58-76.

Azorín, C. and Arnaiz, P. (2018). Redes de colaboración en educación. Nuevas formas de participación y transformación social. *Profesorado. Revista de currículum y formación del profesorado, 22*(2), 1-6.

Azorín, C. and Muijs, D. (2017). Networks and collaboration in Spanish education policy. *Educational Research, 59*(3), 273-296.

Azorín, C. and Muijs, D. (2018). Redes de colaboración en educación. Evidencias recogidas en escuelas de Southampton. *Profesorado. Revista de currículum y formación del profesorado, 22*(2), 7-27.

Azorín, C., Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2020). Taking a distributed perspective on leading professional learning networks. *School Leadership & Management*, *40*(2-3), 111-127.

Azorín, C., Harris, A. and Jones, M. (in press). Future Leadership. Distributed Leadership and Networking: Exploring the Evidence Base. In

D. Netolicky (Ed.), *Future Alternatives for Educational Leadership.* Routledge.

Fullan, M. and Quinn, J. (2020). *Education Reimagined: The Future of Learning,* available at: https://edudownloads.azureedge.net/msdownloads/Microsoft-EducationReimagined-Paper.pdf (accessed 27 November 2020).

Hargreaves, A. (2020). Moving: A Memoir of Education and Social Mobility. Bloomington, United States: Solution Tree Press.

Hargreaves, A. and Fullan, M. (2020). *Professional capital after the pandemic: revisiting and revising classic understandings of teachers' work. Journal of Professional Capital and Community, 5(3-4),* 327-336.

Harris, A. (2012). *Lead the change series Q&A with Alma Harris.* AERA Educational Change Special Interest Group, 20, 6.

Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2017). Professional learning communities: A strategy for school and system improvement? *Wales Journal Education, 19*(1), 331-333.

Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2018). Why context matters: A comparative perspective on education reform and policy implementation. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice, 17,* 195-207.

Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2020a). COVID 19 -school leadership in disruptive times. *School Leadership & Management, 40*(4), 243-247.

Harris, A. and Jones, M. (2020b). *System Recall. Leading for Equity and Excellence in Education.* Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin.

UNESCO (2020). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020. Inclusion and education: all means all.* Paris: UNESCO.

CECILIA AZORÍN

Dr. Cecilia Azorín (https://ceciliaazorin.com/) is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Education, University of Murcia, Spain. She is Associate Editor of "Research in Educational Administration & Leadership" journal and member of the Editorial Boards of "School Leadership & Management", and the "Journal of Professional Capital and Community". Cecilia has been visiting scholar at the *Centre for Equity in Education* (University of Manchester) and at the *Centre for Research in Inclusion* (University of Southampton). She has received the AERA Conference prize Michael Fullan Emerging Scholar Award in Professional Capital and Community (2019). Currently, she is a country lead (Spain) in an Erasmus+ KA2 Project, an international comparative study of all age schools (Wales/Spain/Iceland). Cecilia is an active researcher in the field of school effectiveness and school improvement. Her areas of expertise include: educational leadership, professional learning networks and inclusion. She can be reached at cmaria.azorin@um.es and @CeciliaAzorin