



Instructions for authors, subscriptions and further details:

<http://qre.hipatiapress.com>

## **Expanding Cycles of Collaboration and Critical Inquiry in Utopian Methodology. The 360 Education Alliance Case**

Moises Esteban-Guitart<sup>1</sup>, Antti Rajala<sup>2</sup> & Michael Cole<sup>3</sup>

- 1) Institute of Educational Research. University of Girona. Spain.
- 2) Faculty of Education. University of Oulu. School of Educational Sciences and Psychology. University of Eastern Finland. Finland.
- 3) Department of Psychology. University of California, San Diego. United States.

Date of publication: February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2023

Edition period: February 2023 – June 2023

---

To cite this article: Esteban-Guitart, M., Rajala, A., & Cole, M. (2023). Expanding Cycles of Collaboration and Critical Inquiry in Utopian Methodology. The 360 Education Alliance Case. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 12(1), 25-51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.10296>

**To link this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/qre.10296>

---

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

The terms and conditions of use are related to the Open Journal System and to [Creative Commons Attribution License \(CC-BY\)](#).

# **Expanding Cycles of Collaboration and Critical Inquiry in Utopian Methodology. The 360 Education Alliance Case**

Moises Esteban-Guitart  
*University of Girona*

Antti Rajala  
*University of Oulu*  
*University of Eastern Finland*

Michael Cole  
*University of California, San Diego*

*(Received: 21 April 2022; Accepted: 06 February 2023; Published: 28 February 2023)*

## **Abstract**

---

The article proposes and illustrates a methodological framework that aligns with the action-research models and utopian methodology in particular, although it represents a more substantial leap forward, especially regarding the distributed nature of decision making in the different processes of research/intervention, and its multiple and systematic nature (linking theory, practice and politics). It is developed through four main phases: i) collective identification of the needs and the object of the study, ii) expansive co-design of the action-research, iii) dynamic and multiagency implementation, and iv) critical and participatory reflexive evaluation. It is examined more specifically how the phases proposed here can be illustrated by an ongoing project called 360Education Alliance (“Aliança Educació 360”) conducted in the context of Catalonia, Spain. It consists of a partnership presented in January, 2018, that currently involves more than 300 entities for promoting a community vision of education based on improving equity and social justice. Some opportunities deriving from this methodology are mentioned in the conclusion, emphasizing the transversal role of self-criticism as permanent inquiry of multiple agents involved in the process, including the participants themselves.

---

**Keywords:** utopian methodology, action-research, equity, social justice, 360education

# **La Expansión de los Ciclos de Colaboración e Indagación Crítica en la Metodología Utópica. El Caso de la Alianza Educación 360**

Moises Esteban-Guitart  
*University of Girona*

Antti Rajala  
*University of Oulu*  
*University of Eastern Finland*

Michael Cole  
*University of California, San Diego*

*(Recibido: 21 de abril de 2022; Aceptado: 06 de febrero de 2023; Publicado: 28 de febrero de 2023)*

## **Resumen**

---

Se propone e ilustra en este artículo un modelo metodológico coherente con las aproximaciones de la investigación-acción y la metodología utópica en particular, a pesar de que representa un paso hacia delante, específicamente por lo que hace a la naturaleza distribuida de los procesos de decisión en los distintos procesos de intervención/investigación, así como en su naturaleza múltiple y sistemática (vinculando teoría, práctica y política). Se desarrolla a través de cuatro fases: i) identificación colectiva de necesidades y objeto de estudio, ii) co-diseño expansivo de la investigación-acción, iii) implementación dinámica y multi-agente, y iv) evaluación participativa reflexiva y crítica. Se analiza, más específicamente, como dichas fases se ilustran en un proyecto en curso llamado “Alianza Educación 360” realizado en Catalunya, España. Consiste en un partenariado presentado en enero de 2018 que en la actualidad agrupa a más de 300 entidades con el fin de promover una visión comunitaria de la educación basada en la mejora de la equidad y la justicia social. Se concluye considerando algunas oportunidades de dicha aproximación metodológica, enfatizando el carácter transversal de la auto-crítica como un proceso de indagación constante en los distintos agentes implicados, incluyendo los propios participantes.

---

**Palabras clave:** metodología utópica, investigación-acción, equidad, justicia social, educación 360

In essence, education is about striving for better futures. In particular, in times of turmoil and crises, there is a greater need than usual for a significant break with the present and past, and people are open to new alternatives and visions. The dominant educational approaches that seek efficient ways to promote well-defined learning outcomes in today's educational research and practice are increasingly called into question (Biesta, 2006; Farrell et al., 2022; Philip et al., 2019). Such approaches appear inadequate means to address today's educational challenges that defy small and incremental changes in educational institutions.

By way of contrast, several methodological frameworks have been proposed to research and promote conditions for desired futures through a transformative research approach. Action research involves a reflexive spiral of action and research that blurs the boundary between social action and knowledge generation in a manner that creates possibilities for generating and sustaining social transformation (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). It can enable collective, transformative learning and collaborative experiments for better ways of living by providing a methodology for bridging the gap between expert knowledge and stakeholder participation, and for weaving together personal, interpersonal and impersonal knowledge (Bradbury et al., 2019).

Similarly, the methodology of social design experiments (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Gutiérrez & Vossoughi, 2010) seeks a design process that promotes social transformation and social justice and positions the participants as historical actors who are capable of designing their own futures (see also Gutiérrez et al., 2019).

The difference to more conventional design-based research is that the latter is often oriented to seeking change and improvement within the confines of the existing institutions instead of seeking to change the institutions and their relations to the wider society. Similarly, Glenzer and Divecha (2020) argued that action research fails to promote sustainable change at scale unless its focus is shifted from working on and with clearly bounded functional and organizational entities to relational work across institutional boundaries.

In this paper, we contribute to this emerging line of research by introducing and discussing a methodological framework for promoting sustainable change in education across institutional boundaries (Rajala et al., *in press*). We revisit and further develop an earlier proposal by one of us for

a utopian methodology as a tool for researching, building and sustaining alternative institutional arrangements (Brown & Cole, 2001).

### **Utopian Methodology as a Positive Critical Theory**

Utopian methodology was conceived as a positive critical theory that combines social critique with concrete and positive suggestions for social change. Utopian methodology is, based on the assumption of failures in intervention actions as a critical mechanism for questioning the theory, and our understanding of the world and education. In other words, critiques of own theorizing are considerate “essential goals in constructing theory as well as in reorganizing practice” (Brown & Cole, 2001, p. 42). The origin, then, of these strategies and concepts can be found in the theories and proposals that favour extending the traditional role of the researcher and the researched, among other binaries.

This is the case, for instance, of the Fifth Dimension model, in which traditional binaries – such as university vs. community, in-school vs. after-school, research vs. subject – are problematized (Cole, 2016; Cole & The Distributed Literacy Consortium, 2006; Lalueza et al., 2020). The Fifth Dimension consists of an educational after-school program established in the 1980s as a partnership between community centers and local colleges to provide activities, based on play and peer interaction, to provide rich opportunities to acquire knowledge and a wide range of skills such as digital literacy and mathematics (Cole, 2016). This implies the creation of its own culture, with its particular norms, artifacts, routines, social roles, and ecological setting, the design of small group “idiocultures” as a productive strategy to study the role of culture in learning and human development (Lecusay et al., 2008).

Utopian methodology consists, in this case, of the cyclical observation and analysis of the history of the activity system in its particular contexts and its struggle to develop and survive. The purpose is to obtain critical data linked to the design, development, implementation, eventual completion, of a cultural-historical system of activity (Rajala et al., in press).

In this paper we approach utopia by considering Deep learning as a purpose of research and intervention. Deep learning means: “helping people matter and find meaning in ways that make them and others healthy in mind and body, while improving the state of the world for all living things, with

due respect for truth, sensation, happiness, imagination, individuality, diversity, and the future” (Gee & Esteban-Guitart, 2019, p. 9).

In line with Levitas (2013), we do not understand utopia as a fixed, abstract, dreamed idea of an ideal world where everything is perfect; but rather a constant method of inquiry towards more equitable, democratic and participatory forms of research and action in education; committed to ideas of constant revision of theory and practice in collective cycles of thought and co-design. In this sense, possible futures are conceived as partial, provisional, permanently open to criticism and debate.

Wright (2010) notes that the practical achievability (possibilities of actually implementing utopian institutional designs in any current socio-historical and political circumstances) can be enhanced by designing smaller steps in the form of institutional innovations, what he calls intermediate reforms or “waystations”, that partially implement the proposed changes, with two properties.

First, this can be a way to convince people, through demonstration, the virtues, viability and desirability of such transformations. In other words, showing empirically that the alternative arrangement is possible, credible and desirable. Second, they foster the capacity for action of social, educational, community agents. Indeed, utopian methodology is intrinsically linked to human agency, as a permanent never ended critical process of improvement.

As Levitas (2000, p. 39) writes: “What is important about utopia is less what is imagined than the act of imagination itself, a process which disrupts the closure of the present.” In resistant the present, and offering opportunities to dreams open up paths of action for the future, waystations allows people to live changing situations that challenge some problematic circumstances.

Waystations that increase popular participation and bring people together in problem-solving deliberations for collective purposes are particularly salient (...) reforms that are possible within existing institutions and that pragmatically solve real problems while at the same time empowering people in ways which enlarge their scope of action in the future (Wright, 2007, p. 37).

Therefore, the process of utopian methodology is collective and participatory, which we will later see, as it is implemented under the creation of an alliance that brings together different social, educational and

community agents; and that becomes the organizational structure through which all the phases of utopian methodology are developed.

In this sense, it is worth considering the alliance as the first moment of utopia methodology with the objective, in the form of a "waystation", of promoting the involvement of different people in the field of theory, practice and politics that, collectively, seek to solve concrete problems, based on a shared, deliberative problem definition.

On the other hand, the utopian methodology is committed to a certain theoretical vision of learning and human development. We understand that human development, as a life project, is the result of participation in sociocultural contexts, including both those situations in which the learner actively participates, microsystems, and the relationships of said life contexts and activity, mesosystems, and the contexts, resources, artifacts that are generated at the macrosystem level (Cole, 2016; Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018; Gifre & Esteban-Guitart, 2012).

This ecological vision entails the assumption of a series of methodological considerations that guide both research and educational action, understood as necessary processes of the same project carried out by different social, educational and community agents.

The first methodological consideration involves the adoption of a mesogenetic methodological view. We have suggested the concept of "mesogenesis" to refer to "the time scale of the implementation of the designed intervention and the institutional partnership that constitutes its exosystem" (Cole, 2016, p. 1680).

In other words, educational action means transcending interventions focused on the classroom as the object and setting of educational practice, to design, implement and evaluate the creation of exosystems. That is: "an extension of the mesosystem embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there" (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). Applied in this fashion, a mesogenetic methodology requires a study of the lifecourse of the activities designed to promote development (Cole, 2016; Esteban-Guitart et al., in press). This is a methodological challenge that we will discuss in the final section of the article.

In a mesogenetic methodology and life span design study (Cole, 2016), any educational project is considered a dynamic process across time and settings, the investigation of which begins with its collective conception and identification of needs and shared purposes and continues through its demise. At the microlevel are the proximal setting and sociocultural practices in which learning occur. The mesolevel includes the societal ecology of the project developed through time: from its conception to its death (Cole, 2016). Finally, at the macro level, societal, political and economic changes emerge, which are linked to the meso and micro levels of the project.

The second methodological consideration involves the creation of new social, educational, and cultural practices designed to promote deep learning is carried out through the creation of an alliance, partnership, or community that integrates different social, educational, and community actors.

In tune with the underlying systemic vision, and in line with contemporary developments such as Research-Practice Partnerships in Education (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Farrell et al., 2022), the aim is to convey theory, practice and policy based on alliances that incorporate the university (theory), educational, social and community entities and agents (practice), as well as public administrations such as city councils (politics). In this article, we will discuss the “360 Education” project, which included different educational, social and community agents to design, implement and sustain educational practices.

The third methodological consideration is ontological. It involves assuming the situated, hybrid and changing character of human experience, which means transforming the focus from “being” (traditional methodological framework of input –independent variables– and output –dependent variables–) to “becoming”. What Akkerman et al. (2021) recently referred to as: “ontological synchronization”, that is: “continuous attunement to what is happening and matters at hand, and what future is being generated, including what values and judgments researchers themselves perpetuate in society” (p. 416).

An ontology that is proposed under the principles of "actuality" which means taking into account the present situation and circumstances of the people and contexts under study, recognizing their historicity, the agency of people, "and contingency in people's meaningful movement in motion" (Akkerman et al., 2021, p. 422).



This encourages us to describe the social, political, and cultural conditions and consequences of research; as well as the impact on people's lives, and their particular experiences.

On the other hand, “the principle of generativity means responsivity to what future is in the making, in the sense of caring about what is given life and put into the world with potential to develop further, although in unpredictable ways” (Akkerman et al., 2021, p. 422). The very notion of utopia is, in fact, committed to responsibility and care for the future based on the design of institutional changes, with new activities that promote learning and personal development. That is to say, to adopt what Valsiner (2020) refers to with the term “Forward-Oriented Methodology” where research and action are situated in the ongoing co-creation of activities oriented by future imagination.

In the initial formulation of a utopian methodology (Brown & Cole, 2001), four phases linked to utopian methodology were suggested, namely:

1. Researchers identify problematic areas in their own community;
2. The researchers enter into joint activity with community members to create an alternative set of practices that constitute a hypothesis about changes needed to overcome the problem;
3. Evaluation of the implementation of the hypothesized alternative practices implemented, and
4. “Dealing with failure”, that is to say, analyze the process of failures of the activity created in terms of its sustainability, and to document the ways in which institutions extrude them over time through “business as usual” (p. 59).

Taking the concepts considered previously (mesogenetic methodology, forward-oriented methodology), here we suggest a revised formulation of these iterative phases (see Figure 1).

### **Four Phases of a Utopian Methodology Approach**

Here we propose a cyclical inquiry process which, we suggest, illustrate the participatory and collaborative nature of the approaches described above, and represent a reactualization of the utopian methodology. This process is developed through four main phases: i) collective identification of the needs and the object of the study, ii) expansive co-design of the action-research, iii)

dynamic and multiagency implementation, and iv) critical and participatory reflexive evaluation (see Figure 1).

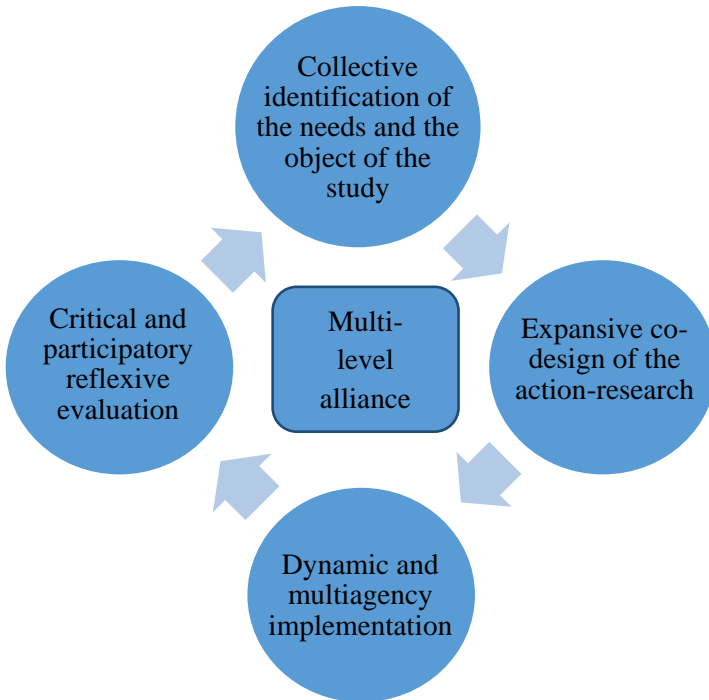


Figure 1. Cyclical procedure of utopian methodology

### **Phase 1. Collective Identification of the Needs and the Object of the Study**

The first step is to create an alliance or partnership in which the university (theory), professional agents (practice) and public political sphere must be represented. This ensures that the research or intervention takes place at three levels, namely: the *micro* level (for example, the classroom, the professional context or the community association); the *meso* level (defined above); and the *macro* level (the political sphere through, for example, the involvement

of local councils via specific government intervention) (Gifre & Esteban-Guitart, 2012). An underlying idea is that the community itself is a potential resource, in addition to the *microresources* available in the context of, for example, a classroom with its computers, blackboards, books and school materials. From this distributed and multiple perspective, the relationship between two or more contexts of life and activity (for example relationships between family-school-university) can also be considered as research/intervention resources—*mesoresources*—while legislation, laws and political ordinances are considered as *macroresources*, susceptible to being generated by or incorporated into any given research-action project (Acosta & Esteban-Guitart, 2010).

It is recommended that an initial physical artefact is produced that enables the various entities and agents to join the proposal; for example, a manifesto involving shared core ideas, which can be used as the starting point for the collective phase of identifying the needs and/or problems that will become the object of study. In that regard, a particular goal for civic action can be considered the initial shared purpose for the activity that can unite the many agents and institutional partners, a kind of a utopic-concrete aim to join and stimulate the collective efforts of participants at multiple levels. Hence, unlike conventional research/intervention in which the researcher is the one normally charged with identifying the problem areas, or making the initial diagnosis of needs, here it is the working group—the alliance—who participates collectively to carry out this task.

## **Phase 2. Expansive Co-Design of the Action-Research**

The work in this phase is shared and develops throughout the alliance partnership, although there may be a division of labour depending on the professional context of each participating organization. In the case of design, although procedures used in other contexts may be used as starting points, the alliance re-contextualizes them and decides how to put them into action. Again, it is the alliance, with the various stakeholders represented, that has the responsibility of carrying out the design, which they do together with the population or participants whose usual role of passive receptors is transformed: they are now active participants in the project. This is what is meant by collaborative design or co-design. Applied in the specific field of educational contexts, Penuel et al. (2007, p. 51) defined co-design as “a

highly-facilitated, team-based process in which teachers, researchers, and developers work together in defined roles to design an educational innovation, realize the design in one or more prototypes, and evaluate each prototype's significance for addressing a concrete educational need." It should be mentioned that, in their initial conceptualization, Penuel et al. (2007) describe how the role of teachers is broadened as their agency is expanded in the processes aimed at improving teaching-learning.

However, we think this approach is somewhat limited on two levels. First, it reduces the processes of co-design to the educational-school environment. Secondly, it does not take into account other levels which we consider to be relevant in this process (such as the participation of the students themselves, and that of other agents such as political or municipal actors). These points are, in fact, recognized in the previously referenced Research-Practice Partnership (Penuel, 2017). Incorporating the voices of participants in the co-design processes (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018), such as those of the students in the improvement of teaching-learning processes (in addition to the participation of teachers and academics), enhances their involvement, their agency, and their contribution to the task; thus dispensing with the merely passive role that the participants had previously played as "recipients of something" in traditional approaches to research or intervention. It is in this sense that we speak of "expansive co-design" in order to incorporate, on the one hand, the participants in the process, as well as the multiple levels of agents involved in the alliance: theory (academia), practice (professional world, community) and public policy.

### **Phase 3. Dynamic and Multi-Agency Implementation**

By dynamic implementation we refer to the potentially changing nature of the ongoing action-project in response to emerging results and/or problems. It should be remembered here that the assumed ontology—previously referred to as "ontological synchronization"—is linked to capturing the contingency of educational and human processes, rather than focusing on isolated, definitive phenomena. Therefore, once again, the methodological nature of utopia entails recognizing and incorporating the process of constant co-construction in the project and study, also in the implementation processes of educational actions or projects. On the other hand, by multi-agency, we refer to the distributed and shared responsibility for the implementation, once

again, on the part of all the agents involved, including the participants themselves. In this sense, at least, it is expected that the theoretical, practical and political levels are represented in the alliance, as well as offering participatory channels so that the learners can also participate in the implementation processes, through co-design situations, as previously referenced.

#### **Phase 4. Critical and Participatory Reflexive Evaluation**

Finally, the evaluation, as with the previous processes, is also participative and carried out by the various agents involved in the alliance. It is ‘critical’ because, at the very least, it points out the positive aspects, the aspects that have room for improvement, and the projected strategies for improvement. It is ‘participatory’ because, once again, it involves the participation of the various members of the participating groups in the research and/or evaluation, or at least a representation from each one, if some cannot attend. It is expected that in this evaluation the "failures" will be assumed as elements for continuous improvement, as well as to maintain self-criticism, consubstantial to the utopian methodology, and prevent the changes and transformations designed from ending up being absorbed by the institutions according to traditional dynamics, and thereby hindering the processes of improvement and transformation.

#### **360Education (“Educació 360”). An Illustrative Example of the Four Phases of a Revised Utopian Methodology**

The 360Education alliance<sup>1</sup> was officially presented in January, 2018. It is a partnership promoted by three organizations: the Jaume Bofill Foundation, the Catalonia Teachers Federation for a Pedagogical Renewal (*Federación de Movimientos de Renovación Pedagógica de Cataluña*, FMRPC), the Council of the Province of Barcelona (*Diputació de Barcelona*), and subsequently, since 2019, the Council of the Province of Girona (*Diputació de Girona*) in Catalonia, Spain. It currently involves more than 300 entities: 150 local councils; various networks of educational centers, teachers and professionals; voluntary sector organizations and sports and musical associations, as well as research groups and institutes from different universities.

The utopian vision of the alliance is to bring together, within local communities, educational occasions, spaces, learning experiences and agents, in order to offer more and better educational opportunities for everyone, with no exclusions. It is, therefore, an educational, social and political initiative, based on a broad and connected vision of learning and the educational act—defined not only as life-long, but also life-wide and life-deep learning (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2018; Gee & Esteban-Guitart, 2019; Ito et al., 2013)—hence the metaphor of the 360° view, or all-round, full-time education (Carbonell, 2016; Sintés, 2015).

### **Phase 1. Collective Identification of the Needs and the Object of the Study**

Although new agents may continue to join, once the alliance was initially set up, a collective process to identify needs (as well as a review of scientific documents) was carried out based on a participatory process led by the representatives from the different member entities. This is an important difference from the phases initially suggested in the utopian methodology, since initially it was the researcher who identified problematic areas of research (Brown & Cole, 2001). In the case of the example we are describing, due to the variety of local contexts involved, the identification of needs took place at two levels. The first part was carried out within the framework of the alliance and then, this was re-contextualized in each particular local context, from the creation of local educational ecosystems formed, in each town, city or specific territory, by different social, educational and political agents. In the first level, more broadly, a group of people was created from three entities who promoted the initiative: Bofill Foundation, FMRPC, and the Council of the Province of Barcelona. A director of the alliance was proposed, Carles Barba, who directed the alliance since its creation to 2019, who was substituted by Fathia Benhammou because of Barba's retirement. This initial core group was composed by seven people from three entities above mentioned.

After a deliberative process, the following needs were identified:

- There are difficulties in adapting formal educational practice to changes in society and the emerging forms of learning in contemporary societies. A 'crisis of identity' regarding school as an institution was identified due, in part, to the dissonance between

what happens in learners' lives and what happens in schools; or between their daily practices and educational practice (Coll, 2009, 2013; Esteban-Guitart, 2016; Esteban-Guitart et al., 2017; Ito et al., 2013).

- There is a lack of recognition of the educational opportunities, services and resources found outside the formal system.
- There are dysfunctions and difficulties in the use of time: timetables and calendars (Sintes, 2015).
- There is unequal access to educational opportunities. In particular, more inequalities occur in non-school time (extracurricular activities, literacy activities in the family context, summer camps, weekend trips and daytrips, pre-school educational activities). It has been estimated that 12-year-olds from middle class families have accumulated 6,000 more hours of learning than children from families of low socioeconomic status (Russell, Hildreth and Stevens, 2016). Moreover, participation in extracurricular activities is estimated to produce a gain of two months over the average progress of students in a school year (González, 2016).
- Educational discourse is limited. Educational policy focuses on school policy, class time, teachers, curriculum and students.
- Formal institutions of teaching and learning do not usually foster the contextualization of learning, i.e., the connections between the learners' interests, relationships, curricular areas, future opportunities and professional careers (Esteban-Guitart et al., 2020; Llopert & Esteban-Guitart, 2017; Ito et al., 2013).

Having identified these general needs, the next thing to consider is equity—understood in terms of access to educational opportunities and linking these opportunities to the interests and needs of the learners—which is the problem at issue. Given the general nature of this problem, and that solving it is the overall goal of the alliance, it was necessary to recalibrate the needs for the various specific local contexts, as well as the objectives considered relevant in the light of these specific needs. This took place on another local level, of a particular town or city, integrating various entities in the community, for example, local councils (town hall), families, educational centres and civic associations and the voluntary sector. What we previously referred to as a local educational ecosystem. Each specific context has, in fact, its own needs, actors and agents. Thus, using the horizontal logic that

underlies the multi-distributed paradigm, it is these actors and agents in the local area who re-contextualize the needs and draw up specific objectives. Participants, therefore, were diverse in each territory. A working group of 5-10 people was created in each local context, depending on the agents involved to coordinate the work. For instance, in the municipality of Celrà a group of 6 people created composed by the councilor of education; the councilor of communication, civic participation, and new technologies, and the educational technician of the municipality of Celrà; a member of the families of one of the two public schools of the town, and one member of the families' association of the public institute (upper secondary education), a researcher-professor from the University of Girona.

## **Phase 2. Expansive Co-Design of the Action-Research**

There are also two interrelated levels that stand out in the co-design processes, at least in the illustrative example considered here. One is the “macro” level of the alliance, promoted by the three leading institutions mentioned earlier; the other is the local level, where action is taken in the different municipal settings. At the macro level, the contribution to the co-design by the alliance is based on three specific actions. The first aims to promote 360Education experiences by recognising existing practices and following their progress via what we might call “co-laboratories”, that is, forums of exchange and collaboration between different institutions. Specifically, the alliance organizes different calls for 360Education interventions within the territory, and begins a process of collaboration with different local councils by setting up sessions with local experts in order to build and share the 360° perspective (see Table 1). That is, three “co-laboratories”: two with municipal specialists, and one with educational centres to incorporate this perspective into the formal sphere. Another co-design process results in the systematization of knowledge, methodology and research which provides a better understanding of the practices of 360Education. Finally, and again using a participatory methodology involving multiple agents and actors, 36 proposals were drawn up and presented to local councils, regardless of their political hue, for inclusion in their plans of action. The objective was for public policy to incorporate the 360Education perspective, and for it to become a central strategy, unaffected by political differences, since this initiative is unconnected to any specific



political party. In this case, the document emerged after five work sessions held during the months of April and June, 2018, with the involvement of more than sixty people from the technical and political areas of the different local councils, teaching teams from educational centers and managers of socio-educational and cultural entities (Barba et al., 2018). Subsequently, in the specific case of the Girona region, between 2020-2021 a total of 14 educational strategic plans were developed, led by 14 town councils, with the collaboration and participation of professors from the University of Girona, as well as different social, cultural and educational agents from each territory.

Basically, these Education 360 strategic plans or projects answer three questions: Where are we? Description of the local educational ecosystem that includes the social, educational and community opportunities of the municipality; Where do we want to be? In which the strategic lines and participatory processes that have led to its preparation are described; as well as: How do we get there? In which specific objectives and action plans linked to the different strategic lines are attached, as well as proposals for their evaluation. Thanks to the public financing of the Diputació de Girona, it is expected that the different proposals for action can be implemented from the year 2022.

Despite the diversity of these strategic educational plans or projects, all of them share participatory process in their design, as well as highlighting four more prioritized lines by the municipalities, namely: coordination and networking of the different agents that make up the local educational ecosystem, equity in access to activities and measures to counteract educational inequalities, the expansion of the offer of socio-educational activities and the incorporation of diversities of all kinds (economic, social, cultural, intellectual) in the educational projects, as well as the educational role and empowerment of families.

For example, the municipality of Celrà (a municipality located in the northeast of the Gironés region, in Catalonia, which had 5,606 inhabitants in 2021), joined the Education 360 Alliance during the 2018-2019 academic year. On July 10, 2018, a meeting was held with social, community, cultural, and artistic entities of the municipality. On October 17 of the same year with professionals from the educational field. On February 20, 2019, citizens, families and interested persons were summoned. The objective of these initial meetings was to publicize the education 360 alliance, as well as to identify the needs of the different groups. Subsequently, a participatory day

was organized with the purpose of agreeing on strategic lines, objectives, needs and initial actions. The conference was held on February 15, 2020 and a total of 50 people from different fields participated. From this participatory process, three strategic lines were identified: to agree on a municipal value in which the different social, educational and community agents of the municipality were trained; develop a 360 digital portal that would make it possible to provide visibility and recognize the educational offer made by entities, schools, associations, citizens; and recover public space as a play space for children. In the case of the first strategic line, for example, a questionnaire was developed during the 2020-2021 academic year to identify a shared concern-theme-value. A total of 21 entities, agents or actors from the municipality participated, with coeducation being the topic chosen to address.

Table 1

*Timeline of some 360Education CALLs and activities*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Activity (with link for further information)</b>
January 29, 2018	Public presentation of the alliance. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIgpLkaTSCI">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KIgpLkaTSCI</a>
January 29, 2018	Public presentation of the “Communities who educate” call. <a href="https://www.educacio360.cat/crida/">https://www.educacio360.cat/crida/</a> <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEbS0dvQOKM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEbS0dvQOKM</a>
September 19, 2018	Presentation of local policies based on 360Education. <a href="https://www.educacio360.cat/segueix-en-directe-lacte-de-presentacio-de-les-propostes-de-politica-municipal/">https://www.educacio360.cat/segueix-en-directe-lacte-de-presentacio-de-les-propostes-de-politica-municipal/</a>
January 7, 2019	Public presentation of the “360 Educational Centers” call. <a href="https://www.educacio360.cat/crida-centres-educatius-360/">https://www.educacio360.cat/crida-centres-educatius-360/</a>
November 27, 2020	Formation on 360Education Strategic Plans (territory of Girona). <a href="https://www.fundaciosergi.org/leducacio-360-als-municipis-gironins/">https://www.fundaciosergi.org/leducacio-360-als-municipis-gironins/</a>
January 31, 2023	Public presentation of “city curriculums” call. <a href="https://www.educacio360.cat/acte-de-presentacio-de-la-crida-curriculums-de-ciutat-una-oportunitat-per-connectar-les-experiencies-educatives-del-territori/">https://www.educacio360.cat/acte-de-presentacio-de-la-crida-curriculums-de-ciutat-una-oportunitat-per-connectar-les-experiencies-educatives-del-territori/</a>

### **Phase 3. Dynamic and Multi-Agency Implementation**

The implementation of the 360Education project is profoundly diverse, given its situated, contextualized, dynamic and multi-agency nature. The alliance carried out initially in the 2018-2019 eleven experiences, ten in the province of Barcelona, and one in the province of Girona, as well as participating in thirty projects run by various sociocultural entities in the territory. One of these, by way of example, was the project *Itinerarios360* [Itineraries360], designed to personalize learning in the neighbourhood of *La Mina*, in Barcelona. It consisted of developing a shared work focusing on four areas: resilience, educational conditions, teaching/learning processes and school competencies. The aim was to contribute to the socio-educational success of young people at risk of social exclusion. To this end, two-member teams were proposed, made up of a school representative and a social representative who, together with one child, agreed on objectives and plans of action. In another example, in this case in the city of Sabadell, the city council linked its educational centres with the local surroundings using municipal resources (companies, entities and various institutions) with the aim of expanding learning opportunities outside of school hours. It can now offer a catalogue of various activities involving science & technology, art, consumer education, health, history and heritage, among others. In order to lower the economic barrier for students with economic difficulties, grants are made available to the centers, which makes it possible for them to subsidize the cost. A total of 63 entities participate, with more than 200 activities on offer, some of them free, with 100,000 places each academic year.

To sustain and manage the governance of the alliance, the two levels described above were necessary. First, the core group composed of two-three members of each entity, that is, Bofill Foundation, FMRPC, and *Diputació de Barcelona*. In addition, different working groups were created in each local context. Depending on the context, participants came from municipalities, universities, educational centers, and other entities such as family associations. The contacts between the alliance and participants are through webpage, and different annual conferences. Furthermore, each territory (for example, Girona) has its regular meetings, conferences, and coordinated group led by FMRPC of Girona territory, Ser.Gi Foundation, the University of Girona, and the *Diputació de Girona*.

#### **Phase 4. Critical and Participatory Reflexive Evaluation**

As in the processes described above, the evaluation of the projects is carried out at two levels. First, the alliance itself constantly assesses the challenges and problems involved in the 360Education project. Secondly, at the local level, the entities participating in the different activities, programs or projects in the territory carry out processes of evaluation and assessment. At the “macro” level of the alliance, the three promoting entities, along with representatives from the various organizations involved, all take part in the critical and participatory evaluation. Some of their conclusions for the year 2018 are as follows:

- A better evaluation of the impact of the various 360Education experiences and interventions is necessary.
- Beyond offering a wide range of experiences, which can be consulted on the alliance’s website, what is also needed is to delve deeper into the co-laboratory or collective intelligence processes in order to create and exchange more ideas and proposals and, above all, to arrive at processes of synergy by building something together.
- The alliance calls for greater political, legislative and economic involvement by the Generalitat de Catalunya [autonomous government of Catalonia]. As previously stated, the strategy consists of showing, in a bottom-up approach, the realities of 360Education so that they can then be integrated into the political and economic agenda of public policy.
- Systems of accreditation and evaluation should be sought for non-regulated educational activities (extracurricular activities, leisure and free time).
- In many of the experiences, the features and resources of social and digital media are not sufficiently exploited, which is not the case in other alliances (Ito et al., 2013).
- Almost exclusively, the projects focus on children and young people; the range of the population participating needs to be broadened.
- It is necessary to look further into the processes of educational personalization, at the pedagogical level (connecting learning experiences) as well as the community level, given that the shared central tenet of the 360 perspective is that the notion of personal

learning itineraries is the focus and object of both study and intervention.

These critical evaluations or assessments, added to those resulting from the various specific experiences, feed back into the work towards negotiating new objectives and proposals for co-design and implementation, in the cyclical process that is represented in Figure 1.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

Similar to other action-research approaches, utopian methodology strives to engage a range of participants and stakeholders in the research process, not just researchers, from different organizations in the process of collaboratively co-designing solutions to identified problems. Moreover, a focus is on persistent and complex problems of practice from multiple viewpoints that require a commitment to iterative (collaborative design) for systemic change, where “system” refers to bounded network, and learning ecosystems in communities to challenge persistent educational problems naming and challenging disrupting historical inequities, social injustices, and changing institutional relationships (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016; Bang et al., 2015; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Penuel et al., 2020). Methodology, a concern, then, is with developing both knowledge-theory-understanding and practical tools through systematic critical “cycles of reflective practice” (Brown & Cole, 2001) or “cycles of critical inquiry.”

However, the highly polyphonic nature of these participative projects, in which so many different entities coincide, with different aims, languages, and interests, means that more working time and long-term commitment on the part of researchers is required in the implementation of the research project, compared to other strategies or research/interventions. This seems to us the main limitation of what we have presented here as the revised utopian methodology.

In that regard, based on the experience of the 360Education alliance described in this article, we highlight two conclusions. First, the participatory work needs to be organized into different levels, since the multiplicity of entities and agents involved makes working outside a systemic organization by levels unviable. Specifically, we have identified a “macro” level with, in this case, the promoters of the alliance and representatives of the associated entities. At this “macro” level, what is needed at the very least is the presence

of the members of the theoretical dimensions (for example, university), the practical dimensions (schools, institutes, associations) and political dimensions (in this case, the *Diputació de Barcelona*, the *Diputació de Girona*, for example), and, in addition, another “local” level comprising the different entities of the town or city where the intervention takes place (the “local educational ecosystem”). At this level, we also recommend that links be established between the theory/practice dimensions and the political dimensions, in line with the work on “Research-practice partnerships” (Coburn & Penuel, 2016; Penuel, 2017), for example, which include the participation of the Local Council, families, learners and the educational, social and cultural entities of the territory, along with the support and collaboration of the alliance.

The second conclusion is that the work within the network, essential within the framework of the 360 Education, implies being able to articulate the specific functions and roles of the intervention/research ecosystem. Even if there is participation in the different processes and phases of the project, this participation may vary according to the nature, function and role of the various entities involved. For example, we believe that the responsibility of the smooth running of the local network should be that of the local councils, in their role as public entities responsible for the welfare and quality of life of their citizens, and as providers of services, resources and opportunities. In any case, the issue of leadership, which is porous and distributed (Timperley, 2005), is itself another issue that is subject to greater understanding and development. In any case, it seems necessary to clearly define and describe the role and contributions of partners, particularly their expertise and particular contribution and how it can be integrated into the alliance, and the research (Penuel et al., 2020).

In terms of methodology, the mesogenetic approach assumed involves considering both the intervention and the research process (collecting data) a collective effort. Although the university leads the processes of knowledge construction, through doctoral theses that evaluate, for example, the impact of the actions, shared elements are required through which the alliance, and the different participating local educational ecosystems, can document, make visible, share and analyze their practices. To this end, this web page was created: <https://www.educacio360.cat>, which serves to disseminate the calls of the alliance (“Calls”), the people who are part of it (“Who we are”), the

most outstanding news (“News”), as well as derivative productions in the form of studies, videos, articles, etc. (“Resources”).

In short, we have proposed in this article four phases of a utopian methodology approach. This development is in line with the action-research models (Whyte, 1991) although, in our opinion, it represents a more substantial leap forward, especially regarding the distributed nature of decision making in the different processes of research/intervention, and its multiple and systemic nature (linking theory, practice and politics). The key elements of the methodology proposed here are: a) a varied range of projects and research/intervention strategies based on collaboration and participation by the various agents involved throughout the cyclical processes of collective identification of needs and problems, b) an expansive co-design of research/intervention, c) a dynamic and multi-agency implementation, and d) a critical and participatory evaluation. The example of the 360Education alliance is an illustration of these processes in action.

However, more research is needed to document the conditions that favour the processes described above and are presented in Figure 1. We believe there is a need to document systemic research/interventions that are coherent with the utopian methodology, in order to deepen our understanding of the conditions required to satisfactorily implement educational projects of this kind, despite the fact that the highly situated nature of such interventions makes it difficult to generalize, beyond the proposal of general principles and phases such as those we have described here.

### **Funding**

This article is inspired by ongoing discussions and collaborative activities amongst a diverse group of scholars communicating as part of the Regenerating CHAT research network, funded by the Spencer Foundation. Rajala thanks the Academy of Finland project no. 331413 for the financial support for preparing the article. Esteban-Guitart thanks the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation (MCIN), the Spanish State Research Agency (AEI), and the European Regional Development Fund (European Union) [Grant number: PID2021-127143NB-I00] and the financial support from the 2021 ICREA-Academia Award of Catalan Government.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the 360Education Alliance: <https://www.educacio360.cat>

## References

- Acosta, J. & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2010). Geografías psicológicas de los recursos educativos. *Educación y Desarrollo Social*, 4(2), 119-129.
- Akkerman, S. F., Bakker, A., and Pennuel, W. R. (2021). Relevance of Educational Research: An Ontological Conceptualization. *Educational Researcher*, 50(6), 416-424.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211028239>
- Bang, M. & Vossoughi, S. (2016). Participatory design research and educational justice: Studying learning and relations within Social change making. *Cognition and Instruction*, 34(3), 173-193.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07370008.2016.1181879>
- Bang, M. Faber, L., Gurneau, J. Marin, A., & Soto, C. (2015). Community-Based Design Research: Learning Across Generations and Strategic Transformations of Institutional Relations Toward Axiological Innovations. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 23(1), 28-41.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2015.1087572>
- Barba, C., Brugué, J., Collet, J., & Cuevas, J. (2018). *Connectant la comunitat per generar més i millors oportunitats educatives. Propostes de política municipal*. Fundació Bofill.
- Biesta, G. J. J. (2006). *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future*. Paradigm.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513–531.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.32.7.513>
- Brown, K., & Cole, M. (2001). A utopian methodology as a tool for cultural and critical psychologies: Toward a positive critical theory. In M. Packer & M. Tappan (Eds.), *Cultural and critical perspectives on human development* (pp. 41–66). Suny Press.
- Bradbury, H., Waddell, S., O’ Brien, K., Apgar, M., Teehankee, B., Fazey, I. (2019). A call to Action Research for Transformations: The times



- demand it (Editorial, Special Issue on Action Research and Climate Transformations). *Action Research*, 17(1), 3–10.
- Carbonell, J. (2016). *Cap a una educació a temps complet. Repensar els horaris i la jornada escolar per ampliar les oportunitats educatives*. Fundació Bofill.
- Coburn, C. E. & Penuel, W. R. (2016). Research-practice partnerships in education: Outcomes, dynamics and open questions. *Educational Researcher*, 45(1), 48-54.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16631750>
- Cole, M. (2016). Designing for development: Across the scales of time. *Developmental Psychology*, 52(11), 1679-1689.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/dev00000156>
- Cole, M., & The Distributed Literacy Consortium (Eds.) (2006). *The Fifth Dimension. An afterschool program built on diversity*. Russell Sage.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X16631750>
- Coll, C. (2009). Enseñar y aprender en el siglo XXI: el sentido de los aprendizajes escolares. En A. Marchesi, J. C. Tedesco y C. Coll (coords.), *Calidad, equidad y reformas en la enseñanza* (pp. 101-112). OEI/Fundación Santillana.
- Coll, C. (2013). El currículo escolar en el marco de la nueva ecología del aprendizaje. *Aula de Innovación Educativa*, 219, 31-36.
- Esteban-Guitart, M. (2016). *Funds of Identity. Connecting Meaningful Learning Experiences in and out of School*. Cambridge University Press.
- Esteban-Guitart, M., Coll, C., & Penuel, W. (2018). Learning across settings and time in the Digital Age. *Digital Education Review*, 33, 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1344/der.2018.33.%25p>
- Esteban-Guitart, M., Serra, J. M., & Vila, I. (2017). Informationalism and informalization of learning in 21<sup>st</sup> century. A qualitative study on meaningful learning experiences. *Social and Education History*, 6(1), 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.17583/hse.2017.2111>
- Esteban-Guitart, M., DiGiacomo, D., Penuel, W., & Ito, M. (2020). Principios, aplicaciones y retos del aprendizaje conectado. *Contextos Educativos*, 26, 157-176. <https://doi.org/10.18172/con.3966>
- Esteban-Guitart, M., Iglesias, E., Serra, J. M., & Subero, D. (in press). Community Funds of Knowledge and Identity: A Mesogenetic

- Approach to Education. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12451>
- Farrell, C., Penuel, W., Allen, A., Anderson, E., Bohannon, A., Coburn, C., Brown, S. (2022). Learning at the boundaries of research and practice: a framework for understanding research-practice partnerships. *Educational Researcher*.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X211069073>
- Gee, J. & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2019). Designing for deep learning in the context of digital and social media. *Communicar*, 58, 9-18.  
<https://doi.org/10.3916/C58-2019-01>
- Gifre, M. & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2012). Consideraciones educativas de la perspectiva ecológica de Urie Bronfenbrenner. *Contextos Educativos*, 15, 79-92. <https://doi.org/10.18172/con.656>
- Glenzer, K., & Divecha, S. (2020). Upscaling community transformation, *Action Research*, 18(4) 407–413
- González, S. (2016). *Quin impacte tenen les activitats extraescolars sobre els aprenentatges dels infants i joves?* Fundació Bofill.
- Gutiérrez, K. D., Becker, B. L., Espinoza, M. L., Cortes, K. L., Cortez, A., Lizárraga, J. R., ... & Yin, P. (2019). Youth as historical actors in the production of possible futures. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 26(4), 291-308.
- Gutiérrez, K. D. & Jurow, S. (2016). Social design experiments: Toward equity by design. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 25(4), 565-598.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2016.1204548>
- Ito, M., Gutiérrez, K., Livingstone, S., Penuel, W., et al. (2013). *Connected learning: An agenda for research and design*. Digital Media and Learning Research Hub.
- Laluzea, J. L., Sánchez-Busqués, S., & García-Romero, D. (2020). Following the trail of the 5<sup>th</sup> dimension: Learning from contradictions in a university-community partnership. *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 27(2), 132-139. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10749039.2019.1611859>
- Lecusay, R., Rossen, L., & Cole, M. (2008). Cultural-historical activity theory and the zone of proximal development in the study of idioculture design and implementation. *Cognitive Systems Research*, 9(1-2), 92-103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogsys.2007.06.012>
- Levitas, R. (2000). For Utopia: The (limits of the) Utopian function on late capitalist society. *Critical Review of International Social and*

*Political Philosophy*, 30(2-3), 25-43.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230008403311>

- Levitas, R. (2013). *Utopia as method: The imaginary reconstitution of society*. Springer.
- Llopart, M. & Esteban-Guitart, M. (2017). Strategies and resources for contextualising the curriculum based on the funds of knowledge approach: A literature review. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 44, 255-274. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-017-0237-8>
- Penuel, W. R. (2017). Research-practice partnerships as a strategy for promoting equitable science teaching and learning through leveraging everyday science. *Science Education*, 101(4), 520-525. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sc.21285>
- Penuel, W. R., Roschelle, J., & Shechtman, N. (2007). Designing formative assessment software with teachers: An analysis of the co-design process. *Research and Practice in Technology Enhanced Learning*, 2(1), 51–74. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793206807000300>
- Penuel, W. R., Riedy, R., Barber, M. S., Peurach, D. J., LeBouef, W. A., & Clark, T. (2020). Principles of collaborative education research with stakeholders: Toward requirements for a new research and development infrastructure. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(5), 627-674. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654320938126>
- Philip, T. M., Souto-Manning, M., Anderson, L., Horn, I., Carter Andrews, D. J., Stillan, J., and Varghese, M. (2019). Making Justice Peripheral by Constructing Practice as "Core": How the Increasing Prominence of Core Practices Challenges Teacher Education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(3), 251-264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487118798324>
- Rajala, A., Cole, M., & Esteban-Guitart, M. (in press). Utopian methodology: Researching educational interventions to promote equity over multiple timescales. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2022.2144736>
- Russell, C. A., Hildreth, J. L., & Stevens, P. (2016). *ExpandedED schools national demonstration: Lessons for scale and sustainability*. Policy Studies Associates.
- Sintes, E. (2015). *Escola a temps complet. Cap a un model d'educació compartida*. Fundació Bofill.

- Somekh, B., & Zeichner, K. (2009). Action research for educational reform: Remodelling action research theories and practices in local contexts. *Educational Action Research*, 17(1), 5-21.
- Timperley, H. (2005). Distributed leadership: developing theory from practice. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 37(4), 395-420.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270500038545>
- Valsiner, J. (2020). Beyond methods to open-systemic methodology in contemporary cultural psychologies. In B. Wagoner & K. Carriere (Eds.), *Where Culture and Mind Meet* (pp. 145-180). Information Age Publishing.
- Whyte, W. F. E. (1991). *Participatory action research*. Sage.
- Wright, E. O. (2007). Guidelines for envisioning real utopias. *Soundings*, 36, 26-39. <https://doi.org/10.3898/136266207820465778>
- Wright, E. O. (2010). *Envisioning real utopias*. Verso.

**Moises Esteban-Guitart** is Professor of the Department of Psychology and Director of the Institute of Educational Research at the University of Girona, Spain.

**Antti Rajala** is Senior Researcher at the School of Educational Sciences and Psychology, University of Eastern Finland

**Michael Cole** is Professor Emeritus and Director Emeritus of Laboratory for Comparative Human Cognition at University of California San Diego, United States.

**Contact Address:** Moises Esteban-Guitart, University of Girona, Institute of Educational Research., Plaça de Sant Domènec, 9, 17004 Girona, Spain.  
Email: [moises.esteban@udg.edu](mailto:moises.esteban@udg.edu)