World Education Association Conference Held

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Interview with Joe O’Hara, new President-elect of the World Education Research Association (WERA)

As part of the WERA conference held at the University of Manchester from September 8 to 12, Joe O’Hara gave an interview to Periódico Educación. Professor O’Hara is a Professor of Education at Dublin City University and the President-elect of the World Educational Research Association (WERA).

Thank you for this interview. The first question is: What main challenges is WERA addressing this year, and what is its relevance for citizens?

I think WERA has a whole range of challenges that it seeks to address in a general sense. To me, one of the huge, important issues of WERA is to redefine what it means to be an educational researcher. For a long time, the definition

of educational research has been dominated by people who speak English and who come from a very particular part of the world, normally what used to be called, you know, the First World or developed countries from the North. And WERA tries to challenge that and wants to say that there are multiple ways of thinking about education. There are multiple valid ways of doing education. And there are multiple valid ways of talking about education. The keynote presentation that the current President Liessel gave us on Monday really spoke to this, spoke to the challenge that we as a community of researchers have when we are trying to validate other ways of knowing, other ways of talking, other ways of including in the field of Educational Research. And to me, that is the primary contribution to citizens and to the lives of not just children but anybody working across contributing to education. There is not a privileged certain knowledge, there is not a privileged way of doing things, there is not a privileged part of the world where the knowledge generated there is worth more than something else. Somebody who is a child in Japan, or Ireland, or Spain, or Kenya, or Brazil… each of those children comes from a context, comes from a culture and comes from a space that has been doing education forever, because that is what human beings do, we are the learning being, so this is what we do. What WERA tries to do is to provide a space and give opportunities to allow new voices and different voices to be included in this conversation. And it is not easy, because most of the structures and most of the ways that we value knowledge in Education have been built over a period of time when one particular part of the world, and I will argue, one particular language dominates, which is the one language I speak (laughs). But I am very sensitive to that and I think, to me, that is what WERA does as a concept and as a practice. So, when you see people here, when you see the committees we have, when you

see the groups that we have… In a poster session yesterday, most of the poster presentations came from Japan, which is fascinating, it is really interesting, different takes on what education means, taking some of the topics that we all talk about but coming from a different space and place.

Thank you. The next question is, what does WERA offer to education, to researchers in educational sciences?

WERA offers a forum and a safe space for practitioners in education and the educational sciences to come to new understandings, create new relationships, and connect their understanding to those relationships. I think that one really important thing about our research community is that it is a community of people coming together to engage with each other. That is where the creativity of humanity is, it's in the interaction of people, it's about people talking to each other and saying: "What is this?" or "What do you do?" and connecting at that level, and from that is where creativity comes from. I think that is what WERA provides, a community, a context, and the opportunity for knowing new ways of doing things, new ways of valuing knowledge from different contexts, and allowing that to emerge and grow. The different structures in WERA have this idea, we have different research networks that can bring groups from three different countries together and gather to talk about an issue. The more diverse the countries and the more diverse the background, the better. Because from that new set of conversations, something we may be talking about forever, you get something new, you get a new community, you get a new idea, you get a set of new values. So, the WERA structures are specifically established to facilitate this type of dialogue, which for me underpins an exciting new way of thinking about Educational Sciences and thinking about Education.

Do you have any future dreams for WERA that you want to share with us?

A dream? That it grows! (laughs) I think WERA is a fantastic concept. I've been incredibly lucky to be involved in European research, and then I spent 15 years working with EERA, and I saw over that time the concept of Europe develop and the idea of being a European researcher as a real identity emerging. And it was quite profound to see that people from many different parts of the European continent began to say, "Well, OK, we do things differently but we've got this common identity." I would love to see that happen in WERA. I would love to see a sense of a global community of educational researchers understanding the particularities because it's not about making a homogeneous group saying we're all the same. Like, it's not that sort of bland, "Let's all get together and at a very low common denominator," it's saying globally we have multiple different ways of thinking and doing education and educational research. We actually create a space and create a community that allows people to do that. And the way you do that is by bringing more people in, by getting more people involved, getting them active, having bigger meetings, and not just the core group meetings, but other groups meeting together, and meetings of younger researchers globally. To me, that would be my dream. I've always been fascinated by how we train and work with incredibly high-quality younger researchers, you know, who put a huge amount of work into the development of their skills and doing their studies. Yet in many places, when they're finished, there's no career path for them, the jobs that people like me have just aren't there. You know, we've created a type of employment structure that doesn't facilitate younger researchers moving through various stages of careers. So I think it's really important for WERA to try and model, to allow and facilitate the next

generation of researchers, because with the best will in the world, people like me aren't going to be here much longer, you know, not doing this job anyway. So, we need to keep growing and developing the community. So growing the development community, making it bigger, and prioritizing early career researchers would be my idea. And be open to new ideas, be open to new things. I attended one fantastic session yesterday which was about AI, which is something that terrifies lots of people and excites loads of others. So why can't WERA be the space where we have a global conversation about AI? A conversation that includes thinking about places in the world where having access to running water or, you know, even chairs in a classroom is a challenge in education. And in other places, it's completely embedded in virtual reality, personalized learning, and symbolic artificial intelligence, all these things. So how do you create a conversation that encapsulates both ends of that spectrum when we're thinking about education? I'd like to see WERA do that. That would be my dream.

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