

# Participatory video and visual literacy: Challenges and opportunities for social and educational change

***Vídeo participativo y alfabetización visual: Desafíos y  
oportunidades para el cambio social y educativo***

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ARTICLE



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## Abstract

This article addresses the participatory video as a tool for education in new digital media from a theoretical perspective, reviewing some precedents and examples. Participatory video is an educommunicative action connected to the contexts in which it is practiced, it represents a form of democratic experimentalism that questions the unidirectionality of teaching-learning processes. Two aspects that present a challenge

for current education converge in the participatory video: the need for visual and media literacy and the understanding of school and educational processes as scenarios for social transformation.

## Keywords

Visual literacy, new media, participatory video, democratic experimentalism, directionality, educational change.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In today's societies we attend the expansion of images and the visual aspects. For generations born within the digital culture, the convergence between media, devices and languages is part of their daily interactions. Visual practices such as *selfies*, *memes* or *gifs* appear and circulate interconnected through social networks and electronic platforms. The massive production and proliferation of images and visual practices in everyday, scientific and social contexts show the importance of images and collective imaginaries in today's societies as bearers and generators of cultural and symbolic value.

Throughout the history of education, advances in the audiovisual field have been valuable resources that have been incorporated into the teaching-learning process. The main reasons for their use are their capabilities to capture the attention of students and complement the explanations. The convergence between new media and social networks has caused both to become part of education, not only as support resources, but acquiring a leading role in the educational process (Muñoz Prieto, Fragueiro Barrerio & Ayuso, 2013). Technological change, digitalization processes and the emergence of new media occupy a central place among the transformations that affect education. It is a

transformation that erodes the limits of traditional identification between school and education because the first is increasingly the least privileged for the transmission of knowledge and socialization (Navarro, 2009; Peña Acuña, 2011). Education ceases to have its primary stage in school because it is destabilized by ways of understanding reality not necessarily adjusted to institutional boundaries. The reality of education can be placed in an area of experience and cultural contact, but the production and exchange of knowledge are managed by digital media and information and communication technologies (ICT). In turn, the proliferation of devices for the production and reproduction of content on the Internet, interconnected platforms and networks have taken an intersubjective, affective and socializing aspect. This leads to the multiplication of the contexts of socialization, construction of identity and transmission of knowledge and values that compete with the primary fields where these tasks were traditionally assumed, including family and school.

The constructivist perspective continues to facilitate an understanding of the processes of participation and social interaction as the foundations of a culture. It has allowed culture and education to overcome organic and overly static approaches, but constructivism must address the fact that this dialogic approach is cross-

sed by new forms of hypermediated electronic communication (Hernández Requena, 2008). Education as an area of experience and cultural contact can still be linked to the understanding of social life in reference to the spaces it is deployed. It is a positional approach that understands social life as configured according to the game of imposition and appropriation of roles in certain social spaces and in certain communicative situations. But what happens when new technologies intertwine real and virtual contexts when they converge heterogeneous times and spaces in an interconnected present? The cross-cutting issues to the curricula and to the whole of school life such as identity, interculturality, recognition of the other, the construction of autonomy and the opening to new spaces of coexistence are modified by a digital culture that responds to a general call to participation and interconnectivity.

In the relations established between the two spaces that frame the school practice, the institutional and the local space, none is prior to the other. The electronic virtual space-time questions the understanding of both according to any binary logic. The local space refers to the knowledge and ways of having students and teachers build from personal experience, cultures and particular contexts. The institutional space is that of the formalized institution. The concepts of formal and informal institution are two forms of social action. The first is that deployed by the subjects from a conscious organizational logic through consensual bureaucratic resources. The second is done by the subjects in their interactions and ordinary interlocutions without the mediation of bureaucratic regulations or documents. Institutional formalization is procedural. Social institutions are involved in processes that incline them towards formalization or informalization. The institution never

completely formalizes the heterogeneity of social relations (Martín, 2014).

In this article, a reflection is proposed based on the decentralization of the school and formal education, caused by the transformations of the new media. It is pertinent to explore resources and methodologies aimed at developing visual literacy processes to critically understand the scope of these changes. Next, the use of participatory video is proposed as a dialogic and democratic methodology of action-research, aimed at the social transformation of the contexts where it is implemented. Participatory video encourages a reflexive approach to the modes of production, management and sharing of audiovisual representations. Its use in educational contexts allows the articulation between two problems that are currently associated with each other: the need for visual and media literacy and the reflexive approach to the current conditions of configuration and transmission of knowledge and values.

## **2. VISUAL ALPHABETIZATION FOR NEW ENVIRONMENTS**

The dialectic between formal and informal education is modified by the emergence of new technologies and new digital media. What Javier Echevarría (1999) called long ago as the third environment arises, this concept characterizes a new model of social space managed by new information and communication technologies. This differs significantly from the natural, urban and socio-cultural environments in which social life was traditionally developed. It is a scenario that distinguishes itself from the natural and social environments that would be characteristic of the first and second environment. The third environment is a social space under construction, artificial and unstable, driven by technolo-

gies that transform the social relations that the first two environments had as usual scenario.

The third environment is not an area separated from other spaces of social action but one that unites with them, orienting them towards new forms of socialization and individualization. It is not clearly defined on the background of other material spaces and practices. This intermediate condition is reinforced by the articulation between subjectivity, communication and economy, characteristic of contemporary capitalism (Serrano-Puche, 2016). Friendship, family, customs, work or public spaces are elements that belonged to the first and second environments and are modified by the demands of interconnectivity and economic performance that new technologies use. The interconnectivity composes a network affectivity that ends up overflowing the dualisms between the *online* and *offline* world.

Education and school are intervened by the challenges and possibilities of the third environment. Javier Echevarría (2010) pointed out the need to expand education towards this new area. If this movement is not carried out with a reflexive sense, the expansion will also occur but the ideological conditions of which knowledge, education, training and socialization are part will remain without question. The ICT technology system is configured on the convergence of different devices, media and technological subsystems. The third environment emerges from that convergence and reaches relevance in the generation of new spaces for socialization, subjectivity and educational formations. The new technologies enable not only teaching-learning processes, but also enable interrelation modalities that need to be approached from new skills and abilities. Digital transformations are not limited in the electronic field of the Internet because they expand to multimedia technologies, mobile phones, digi-

tal television or video games. Individualization, socialization and intersubjectivity contexts that were previously considered external to those are modified.

These mutations are the effect of the expansion of visual elements in contemporary societies. The massive production of images and the proliferation of visual practices show the importance of images and the imaginaries in today's societies. The paradigms linked to the cultures of reading and writing showed a knowledge of the world that coincided with the achieved by the subjects after a long learning. The immediacy of the image appears and impacts the stability of the subjective cultures in relation to the processes elaborated on the prescribed times of the text: listening and interpretation. The word is not replaced by the image, both converge in unpublished ways on the stage of digital culture (Rodríguez de la Flor, 2010).

Hence the importance of visual literacy. If the third environment emerges from images, visual production, reproduction devices and visual practices, it can be affirmed that literacy in new media and new technologies is visual literacy and vice versa<sup>1</sup>. The socialization processes are related to the community formation potentials presented by the imaginary. The images have an intersubjective character because they are inscribers of the other's presence in the social field. They participate in the processes of identity construction on the social and community background. This dimension of images and imaginary is relaunched thanks to the processes of digitalization and network socialization. Images are objects with which people interact, participate in their social and emotional life,

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1 Gregory Ulmer (2003) called "electracy" to a form of literacy in electronic media that in digital culture would be the equivalent of literacy in the culture of printing.

enable and condition their experiences. They have not completely left behind their representative dimension. However, digital technologies are intensifying the performance potential of the iconic. That is, images have the capacity to actively intervene in reality. They are less recognized today in the task of representing the world than in participating in it. In the digital world, images are not a finished form but the process of their own preparation and materialization for a variety of networks and platforms. Circulating through them, the images are not only contemplated but commented, linked and post produced. These operations are articulated with the knowledge economies and the presentation modalities of the individuals in public and private life.

Visual literacy provides tools to interpret images. This curricular objective falls short when it uses only the semiotic theories of the sign. Digital images answer the opposition between word and image, between linguistic expression and plastic expression. They disrupt the capacities that, based on this hierarchy, place thought and logos closer to the word than to the image and the sensitive knowledge of the world in a secondary position. The dialectic between images and words is intensified in the digital visual culture. Therefore, terms such as visual literacy do not offer the resolution of that dilemma but underline its complexity. A process of visual literacy goes beyond the development of analytical tools for reading and interpreting images and visual events (Elkins, 2007).

It must also be concerned with addressing the ideological order that conditions these forms of reading and determines which are the subjects and social places where it is legitimate to look and from which it is normative to look away. Visual literacy is a process that serves to show views (Mitchell, 2003). It generates estrangement regarding the visuality in which subjects

build their image and identity, as well as ways of knowing the world and recognizing others. There is always a margin to oppose or change the meaning of its demands.

The images do not expect to be explained from methodologies and models of linguistic analysis. They are complex objects that are thought, known, taught and learned as in spoken and written language but with their own ways of producing sociability and meaning. The images come alive every time they are represented and interact with researchers, students and with the image pedagogies that they want to undertake (Dussel & Priem, 2017).

### **3. PARTICIPATORY VIDEO AS A COLLECTIVE SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION TOOL**

The exploration of the educational potentials of cinema and video play a critical role in this task. This presents an additional challenge to the one already posed by the uses of the kinematic image in a literary sense because the drifts of the digital visual culture point towards blurring the boundaries between specific media. The third environment is also the scenario where the media hybridize with each other and the audiovisual content materializes in a variety of production and reproduction devices (Jenkins, 2008). The differences between producers, consumers, transmitters and receivers of images tend to be diluted. These drifts open new possibilities for education and visual literacy but also pose new challenges. For example, the film pedagogy (Giroux, 2011) sought to put together a critical response from students to the public sphere in which a film is received and on which it projects certain values and identification models. These types of proposals leave out the specific potentials of a medium, in this case the cinematographic one. The question of

how education should resort to cinema needs to combine the problem of what is the most appropriate methodology to articulate a critical thought with the specific implications of the cinematographic medium for education and thought (Decoster & Vansielegem, 2014).

This effort must meet the trends of media hybridization in which viewers and users are immersed. The critical and educational potentials of digital visual culture may be appropriate to show the visual order that composes it. Participatory video can be taken as a pedagogical tool to critically approach the images and the imaginary that surround us and to relaunch the processes of visual literacy towards the objective of constructing other forms of representation and recognition. Articulated within a collaborative methodology, its use enables the development of affinities and the sharing of different existential experiences. It can be used to introduce a theme, confront experiences and ideas, present facts or procedures that cannot be observed live and analyze or synthesize issues that interest a social and educational community.

The participatory video is a tool for visual literacy, the enrichment of imaginary and the critical approach to social reality through collective creation. It works as an educommunicative resource that provides students with tools to reflectively analyze media texts and to incorporate new media into the school. This also means integrating, revaluing and changing the meaning of their daily culture, in which audiovisual media play an increasingly relevant role.

The educational and critical scope of participatory video practices lies in the fact that it allows the creation of images from local collective spaces. With this, the processes it promotes extend beyond the work of creating a finished visual product. Participatory audiovisual methodologies explore constructivist epistemologies whe-

re the study subjects cease to be the object of the researcher's gaze to become protagonists of the story of their experiences and of the community, with the use of participatory video often in documentary form (Sucari, 2017). The social relationships that are generated in the process, the visual literacy models that are implemented or the collective presentation of the videos are key elements. Generating knowledge about the participatory video fulfills a double function. First, to claim subaltern cultural practices that are left out of both the school and the school institution as well as the hegemonic media discourse to place themselves in the place of the experience of specific groups in the face of the global homogenization of the imaginary. Second, attend to social communication practices that overflow the logic of the instrumental effectiveness of communication, putting into crisis the communicational models based on the traditional separation between emitter and receiver to articulate with other social, artistic, educational and social mobilization processes.

The conception of audiovisuals from a participatory and social perspective is not new, it appears after the arrival of digital technology. The first experiences of participatory video have an important historical journey, its beginnings date from the end of the 60s in the Canadian state of *Newfoundland* and were the work of Don Snowden, pioneer in the use of the media with a community approach (Crocker, 2003). These concerns can be traced back to the *Kino Pravda* of Dziga Vertov and even to the cinematographic section of the Pedagogical Missions during the period of the Second Spanish Republic (Castro, 2016)<sup>2</sup>. From the popularization of affordable video cameras and play-

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2 Not forgetting the relationships of participatory video with the history of the documentary genre. Ortuño (2013) and Yang (2016) contribute other genealogies of participatory video.

back devices, guerrilla television, community video groups or independent video collectives developed their activities in the United States, Canada and Europe<sup>3</sup>.

Since then, various initiatives have promoted participatory video processes in a variety of contexts. Its general purpose is to generate situations of contextual communication in which actors and social groups, often silenced, find a margin to consciously develop their own mediations (Tripp, 2012).

The practices around participatory video intersect with those of the community film that discussed the commercial imperatives of the film industry from the 1970s (Malik, Chapain & Comunian, 2017). Both want to go beyond the criticism of the mass media to achieve alternative production and visual consumption practices. Media practices should be politicized, oriented towards the autonomy of the public sphere and the creation of social and communicative interaction devices that are resistant to imposed mediations. To the extent that people are able to develop local media initiatives that they recognize as their own, the two practices can converge in the field of community media. Unlike community cinema, the participatory video provides participants with control of the production process. These will find the possibility to express, represent and empower themselves for individual and collective exploration on the horizon of social change (Lunch & Lunch, 2006; Montero Sánchez & Moreno Domínguez, 2015). The investigation of the economic and sociocultural conditions becomes an active intervention with the objective of modifying them

and questioning the order of representation that sustains them.

It is not our intention to analyze these differences, but it is worth noting that the participatory video presents a vocation for democratic experimentalism and social emancipation, as well as proposals that appropriate locally from other media such as radio or social networks. Democratic experimentalism comes from the North American pragmatist tradition, specifically from Dewey's conception of democracy, which he understands as a process of participatory experimentation and learning (Ford, 2009). It is about the search for alternatives to formal democracy from the conviction that solutions based on privatization and deregulation impoverish the quality of democracies. Democratic experimentalism would be the framework that enables attempts at integration between the production of images, texts, objects and the production of political forms committed to the democratization of representations, mediations and resources<sup>4</sup>. If education is a matter of public interest, it should be addressed collectively as a public issue in participatory situations oriented and built for this purpose. Can a resource like the participatory video generate such communicational contexts? Can situations be generated from the educational field in which the potential democratizers of these media practices can be explored?

Educational theory and practice must develop their own strategies to explore the critical contents that these transformations suggest. Participatory video does not only invite to convert the projection room into a school, but to

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3 The Video-Nou group, which starts its activities around 1977 can be considered the first independent video collective in the history of audiovisuals in Spain (Ameller, 1999).

4 Reinaldo Laddaga (2010) defines that democratic experimentalism allows us to test the articulation between the generation of political forms, the democratization of the media and the autonomous production of images and texts. The example to which it refers is *La Comuna* (París, 1871) (2000) of Peter Watkins.

turn the school into a laboratory of production of images and the classroom into a place for education from an autonomous and responsible perspective in a communicational and educational context. The visual literacy process finds a promising version here since experimentation with audiovisual creation devices is added in its connection to the critical reading of images with a socio-cultural context modeled by particular socio-economic and ideological conditions. Participatory video is a process of collective creation of audiovisual content developed by the protagonists of their own reality. It is a video process without previous script, recursively developed in iterative filming and re-view cycles that creates its own narratives and links them to the social reality that the participating communities wish to communicate (Johansson, 1999). With the participatory video we refer to a set of techniques that allow a group or community to participate “in the formation and creation of their own film, an accessible video that brings people together to explore themes, representation concerns or simply as a creative space to tell stories” (Lunch & Lunch, 2006, p. 10). It engages a group of people in the elucidation of their social situation, their needs and capacities, making these personal, social, political and cultural concerns converge. It is a participatory research tool that promotes practices aimed at identifying the social problems of a specific community and exploring the ways in which its capacity for representation and decision-making can be intensified. (de Lange & Mitchell, 2012; White, 2003).

The difficulty of defining what the participatory video is that there are almost as many definitions as experiences and that each one focuses on some aspect linked to the experience lived. This shows that its most notable feature is the ability to connect with local and defined realities. On the background of this difficulty,

we gather below some of the most relevant cases in which the use of participatory video is explicitly articulated with these realities. One of the organizations dedicated to the development of participatory video is *Insightshare* (<https://insightshare.org/>), it is dedicated to using participatory video in international development projects as a research, implementation and evaluation tool, social justice and human rights. *Zalab TV* (<http://www.zalab.org/en/projects/zalab-tv-2/>), is an international Internet television channel focused on producing and disseminating participatory video proposals. We also mention organizations such as *Quepo Video Social* (<http://www.quepo.org/?lang=en>), it is an activist collective from Barcelona focused on the production of social video to re-elaborate the communication based on the collective sense as a framework for the common good and citizen empowerment. In a similar line is the *Colectivo Circes* (<http://colectivocirces.blogspot.com/>), it is focused on the organization of video workshops with individuals experiencing conflicts, discrimination and social exclusion for economic, cultural or gender reasons. The *Asociación Wanadi* (<http://www.wanadi.org/>) has collaborated with different social organizations in Spain, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Palestine. This has used audiovisual resources as a transformative tool through media training workshops and community reporting, developing socio-educational and artistic proposals to boost disadvantaged areas and promote the development in cooperative social networks. The alliance between the enhancement of the democratic use of audiovisual media with the promotion of social activism processes is the objective of *The Rights Exposure Project* (<http://therightsexposureproject.com/>). They are especially notable for their attention to the realities and problems of education and school. Initiatives such as those of the *La Cosecha* association (<http://www.lacosechaweb.com/>) are



highlighted. Another example of participatory video as a tool for socio-educational integration is the project that the *Asociació Cultural La Bretxa* implemented in the IES Badalona Nou (Espinosa, 2012), the experience of action research with international students in the San Lorenzo de Castellón neighborhood (Boni & Millán, 2016) and with economically disadvantaged youth in Quart de Poblet (Boni, López-Fogués, Millán & Belda-Miquel, 2017). Or in a very different context, its use to demonstrate, prevent and combat gender violence within South African schools (de Lange & Geldenhuys 2012)

The use of participatory video in these areas is linked to an education with a transformative vocation. The educational process unfolds on an endogenous development, built from the center of the communities that are educated to respond to their needs and not to those of the economic and political system that governs them (Freire, 1970). For this, the main tool available to the facilitator or educator is to promote an egalitarian dialogue based on the ability to listen and respect the differences. The conception of the educational process as a communicative dialogue raises the problem of how to highlight the positions from which the participants state their ideas and approaches.

The confidence in the rational communicative dialogue is established on the invisibility of these positions and their processes of identification, leaving the unequal relations of power on which it is based (Ellsworth, 2005). Both a film and a curriculum fail to demonstrate the positions of the public and students. The task of showing those positions becomes paradoxical. The pedagogical model is universalized and is applicable above any specificity if differences are intensified in order to question those frameworks through rational dialogue. Through the concept of directionality mode, Ellsworth studies the structure of the symbolic, social and

narrative relationships that arise between filmic texts and the scope of action that spectators have.

These relationships are never linear. The positions that the film imagines for its viewers are not completely reciprocated by them. An area of indetermination that Ellsworth moves to education, curriculum and classroom relationships is formed. The experience of uncertainty that unfolds both in the encounter between spectators and filmic texts and in the encounter between students and curriculum is crossed by socioeconomic, racial and gender antagonisms. This uncertainty becomes a pedagogical resource that demands a participatory and localized approach (Castro, 2016; Padró, 2011). The screenplay of the film and its technical-formal solutions are managed regardless of the specific conditions of the production and reception process. Likewise, the curriculum and the distribution of positions in the teaching-learning processes are beyond the context where they are implemented. The participatory video explores these contradictions as it consciously converges the process of making an audiovisual object with the needs and possibilities of a specific context. With this, it separates itself from the tendencies towards universalization to which the rational dialogue is precipitated. The critical force focuses on the distribution of roles within the processes of production and reception of the performances (Hazel, 2016; Whiting, Symon, Roby & Chama-kotis, 2018). In the educational field, this process will also move towards the elucidation of teaching positions, the concrete conditions of access to knowledge and the construction of identity and coexistence.

The participatory video enables to work on a dialogic image whose model does not fit universalist ideals, taking its application in a production and reception context. Audiovisual practi-

ce has traditionally been approached from the representation paradigm. The mutations of the digital image put this model in crisis to open up to dynamics of dialogic and collective thinking in which audiovisual discursive rhetorics are subject to public discussion in reference to the social conditions that model the processes of media production and reception (Montero Sánchez, 2013). Audiovisual discourse is reconfigured as a framework in which collective, heterogeneous and localized interests are found (Lenette, 2019).

The participatory video is located within these transformations. In the field of education, it becomes a resource to open spaces for dialogue and collective interpretation that can disrupt the drifts towards the normative reproduction of institutionalized educational contexts (Anderson, 2017). It is also a tool to deepen a conception of visual literacy as a critical exercise capable of recognizing in the images the traces of power, inequality and ideology. The relationships between communication and education are plotted in unpublished ways based on the sociability generated by the new technologies. Within the framework of these relationships, participatory video will be defined as an educommunicative action with a dialogic and emancipatory character in which the positions and motivations of the participants are exposed and discussed (Mistry, Bignante & Bernardi, 2016; Nagamini & Aguaded, 2018). It will be composed as a practice oriented towards the collaborative construction of knowledge and towards the disposition for the exercise of citizenship, with the condition that educational policies and methodologies assume the challenge of developing processes for the acquisition of media skills and tools for visual literacy.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The participatory video is an instrument for social intervention, diffusion of problems and mediation of conflicts and interests. In its application to educational processes, it develops models of meaning construction within the framework of educational-communicative action because it brings together communicative practices with the empowerment of communities in social and educational contexts. These practices are characterized by establishing a close relationship between the educational component of media production, the objective of presenting problems not addressed by the media and by the participatory dimension of the communities involved in the processes of production, editing and dissemination of audiovisual elements. The participatory video is oriented to the transmission of experiences and knowledge positioned and appropriate at the collective level. Political awareness through images makes it a fruitful resource for groups focused on social change (Montero Sánchez & Moreno Domínguez, 2014). If the relevance of images and visual elements in contemporary societies is increasing, the use of participatory video in the school must know how to mix their social concerns with the appropriate use of audiovisual technologies and focus on visual, critical and reflective literacy.

In this article, it has been proposed to articulate the promotion of democratic participation and shared learning with the development of visual literacy processes that address the current transformations of the image and audiovisual media, especially in educational contexts. Participatory video is a valuable resource to plot the production of knowledge and social changes with the conscious appropriation of audiovisual representation processes. It is located within the union of democratic knowledge and action

research by fostering reflexive, collective and situated learning, proper for this methodology (Feldman & Rowell, 2019). With the complexity of contemporary visual culture, education and school lose their importance as centers for the transmission of knowledge and values. It is not about recovering that lost position but understanding the challenges that this new situation poses. The fact that the configuration conditions of the forms of knowledge, identity and socialization are being modified by the power of the new media demands the opening of spaces of reflexivity in which it is possible to generate critical and autonomous knowledge to control their own audiovisual representations. It is on this axis that we have located the resource for the participatory video.

Maybe in post-media culture we are all producers of content, not only spectators but prosumers, but what are the conditions by which we participate in this new culture? What are the models of identity, socialization and recognition of the other that are promulgated? What role do school and education play in these processes? At what point are they located between the ins-

titutional and local school spaces? If one of the goals of education is to put students in a position to elucidate their social and personal determinants, it is worth asking whether the media culture facilitates the achievement of that objective or rather cancels the critical distance that would allow them to become protagonists of their own learning, their representations and their vital experiences. This perspective is linked to the development of visual literacy processes that provide the tools to distinguish between images and clarify the models of subjectivity and life in common that digital visual culture occupies. We have highlighted the participatory video as one of the strategies we consider most promising to address such process. It is a tool for an action-research methodology and democratic participation that promotes experimental learning, social emancipation and educational change through which is possible to design methodologies for visual literacy and criticism of audiovisual representations. This set of objectives reflects the most urgent challenges that school and education face today.

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