

Conceptualising research in diverse and complex educational contexts.

This WERA Doctoral and Early Career Network symposium examines how educational research contexts are defined, bounded, and represented. It addresses the limitations of simplified contextual definitions in capturing complex social, cultural, political, and institutional dynamics. Five papers from Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, Spain, and the United States explore how researchers conceptualise context while balancing complexity and transferability.

Context as Lived Relation: Rethinking Educational Research Through Educator Experiences

Edith Middleton

This paper reconsiders how “context” is conceptualized in educational research by examining how educators experience mentorship across their professional lives. Educational research often defines context through bounded categories, which flatten the relational and affective complexity of lived experience. Guided by posthuman and relational perspectives, context is conceptualized as an emergent field of entanglements rather than a stable container that draws on relationships and interactions with places, texts, institutional structures, and material environments (Braidotti, 2013; Kimmerer, 2020). Context is positioned as something actively assembled through ongoing relations among human and more-than-human actors. This shift has methodological and interpretive implications because it requires tracing how meaning and professional support emerge across time, space, and material conditions, rather than within predefined sites. Thus offering a more precise and expansive way of conceptualizing context in research.

Singapore as a Multilayered Educational Research Context: Boundaries, Complexity, and Transferability

Dr Yvonne Seng

Educational research in Singapore unfolds in schools, classrooms, and communities where lives and relationships matter alongside policies and structures (Biesta, 2015). Rather than treating Singapore as a uniform case, this paper conceptualizes context as a multilayered web of national policies, school practices, professional cultures, and everyday experiences of students and educators within a centralized yet autonomy-oriented system (Kwek et al., 2023). Defining context requires decisions about inclusion, boundaries, and what may be silenced when complexity is reduced to policy narratives. While central governance, curriculum coherence, and examinations provide macro-level boundaries, reforms such as Full Subject-Based Banding and Learn for Life are enacted differently across schools and classrooms. The paper argues that lived complexity

strengthens transferability when contextual assumptions and mediating conditions are made explicit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Doing Educational Research with Communities: A Canadian Perspective

Dr Emily Dobrich

Worldwide, community-based research approaches have been flourishing due to their potential to reduce inequalities, promote social and epistemic justice, support knowledge democracies and create transformative social impact. However, educational researchers crossing borders into community contexts must be prepared to navigate complex social, political and cultural power dynamics (Biney, 2024). Meaningful academic-community partnerships require trust to bridge academic and community knowledge cultures (Chapel, 2025). Moreover, educational researchers must work *with* communities to co-create knowledge and respect community voices. This paper presents critical considerations for early-career researchers aspiring to work in community contexts: *How do educational researchers negotiate boundaries and transference between academic and community contexts to do meaningful research with communities?* Drawing upon decolonizing methodologies (Smith, 2021) the paper shares project examples from the Canadian context to encourage thinking more deeply and carefully about engaging with community contexts.

Educational Success Beyond Context: Evidence from Successful Educational Actions in Vulnerable Schools

Dr Garazi López de Aguilera

Some literature states that educational performance depends on context, claiming factors such as SES determine performance (Bourdieu, 1979). However, there is much research showing that after implementing Successful Educational Actions (SEA), student performance improves, even in schools with over 90% immigrant or low SES students (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2023; Flecha et al., 2025). The REVERS-ED project (Horizon Europe) provides qualitative and quantitative data on the longitudinal impacts of SEA in diverse schools worldwide. This paper analyzes four Spanish schools located in some of the most vulnerable neighbourhoods. Improvements in students' results in standardized tests relate to the rigorous implementation of SEA and, in several cases, results surpass regional averages. Findings provide evidence that educational success does not depend on students' background, but on the educational actions implemented in schools. They also demonstrate the universal and transferable character of SEA.

Beyond Survival? Diverse Journeys to an Academic Life after Doctoral Education

Dr Gordon Tsui & Dr Hayes Tang

Literature reveals growing stress and tensions in doctoral employment within academia due to overproduction of doctorates relative to available positions (Yang & Fumasoli, 2024). Fierce competition and productivity demands on CVs make securing academic roles increasingly difficult (Chen et al., 2023; Young et al., 2020). This raises the question: are there diverse pathways to academic life after doctoral education? Drawing on workshops with doctoral students and academics at two universities in Hong Kong, this presentation explores pathways for doctorates to pursue an academic life outside academia. We argue that being an academic beyond the university enables application of doctoral expertise, positioning doctorates as public intellectuals and contributing to an intellectual society. Doctorates should not merely 'survive' but truly 'live' as academics. Exploring diverse post-doctoral pathways offers a realistic approach in today's landscape.