Why does Educational Research Fail?
A Reading from Historical-Cultural Theory

Felipe Jiménez[I]
René Valdés[II]

[I]Universidad de Las Américas (UDLA), Providencia – Chile
[II]Universidad Andrés Bello (UNAB), Viña del Mar – Chile

ABSTRACT – Why does Educational Research Fail? A Reading from Historical-Cultural Theory. Educational research must not only produce knowledge and academic reflection, but also contribute to solving the problems it studies. However, the conditions in which the research teams work and the current educational scenario make it difficult to carry out effective research. This essay shares meta-reflections and learning based on the experience of six qualitative investigations from a cultural-historical perspective of the activity. Mistakes and mistakes made by the research team are identified and lessons learned are presented. It is hoped that the experiences and reflections presented in this work can be useful for future research work.
Keywords: **Educational Research. Socio-Cultural Activity Theory. Migration-School.**

RESUMEN – ¿Por qué Fracasa la Investigación Educativa? Una Lectura desde la Teoría Histórico-Cultural. La investigación educativa debe no solo producir conocimiento y reflexión académica, sino que, además, debe contribuir a resolver los problemas que estudia. Sin embargo, las condiciones en que funcionan los equipos de investigación y el actual escenario educativo dificultan el desarrollo de investigaciones efectivas. Este ensayo comparte meta-reflexiones y aprendizajes basados en la experiencia de seis investigaciones cualitativas desde una perspectiva histórico-cultural de la actividad. Se identifican errores y desaciertos cometidos por el equipo de investigación y se presentan lecciones aprendidas. Se espera que las experiencias y reflexiones que se presentan en este trabajo puedan ser útiles para futuros trabajos de investigación.
Palabras-clave: **Investigación Educativa. Teoría Socio-Cultural de la Actividad. Migración-Escuela.**

Introduction

The question we will try to answer in this article: Why does education research fail? Although the question is pertinent to general education research, the reflection field that will serve as the basis to answer it, is education research on migratory phenomena in school. This is not because the proposed analyses and discussions are not comparable to other areas and educational phenomena – we think they are – but rather because the empirical evidence that supports the reflective work we present originates in investigations by our research team in this specific field of research interest.

As we have shown in previous work (Jiménez et al., 2017; Valdés et al., 2019; Valdés et al., 2022), the interest for researching various topics connected to cultural diversity and the incorporation of foreign students and families to our educational system has increased exponentially during the last 10 years and will continue to grow in the short-term with the same intensity.

Something that has deeply caught our attention when performing a global analysis of the group of educational investigations on migration and school (Jiménez et al., 2017; Valdés et al., 2022; Mora-Olate; Sanhueza Henriquez; Friz Carrillo, 2021) is the fact that the findings section does not include conclusions and discussions, or at least two central elements of them: on one hand, the methodological aspect itself, which means, the group of decisions for data production that is the basis of the obtained results; and on the other, the research work, which is a valuation or meta-reflection of the work performed by the research team. This is, at the least, a cause for concern, since it allows us to infer that these elements are not relevant enough to be made available to the scientific community and therefore, not relevant for discussion.

We consider that all research actions require a meta-reflection about the phenomena it studies (Guba; Lincoln, 2002), beyond the short-term results obtained. This is because research must become a relational space for critical reflection about the ways of producing and reproducing social order (Murillo; Duk, 2018; Sisto, 2008). We think that, on one hand, current research has a predominance of and excessive saturation of school times and spaces, due to an extractive logic that creates no contribution to the improvement of local problems that have an impact of schools (Parrilla, 2021; Echeita et al., 2014). On the other hand, in times of advanced neoliberalism, research, especially in the educational field, is shifting towards more instrumental positions that are devoid of epistemological and political considerations (Fardella, 2021; Rivas-Flores, 2021).

One of the main challenges, therefore, implies to stop researching within the schools and start researching with schools, in order to provide a more participative and democratic logic to data production. This means to make available to the scientific community the reflections that come from research work. We take the arguments of Van

Olphen and Ríos (2004) to indicate that educational research must be planned from multiplicity and cooperation. This article follows this line. Its purpose is, more than just showing specific results, to identify certain decisions made by the research team that have normally been decisions that have led the research to face specific critical events, at best, or have led the research to face certain deadlocks, at worst. In both cases there are reflections, teachings and learnings that are necessary to share, and in this way, be considered by other research teams.

Although an analysis of one own's research work could be performed from multiple perspectives, this research has as its staring point the historic-cultural Activity Theory. Even when a complete presentation of it escapes the possibilities of this work, a brief context of its emergence, development and current state will be enough to create the basic foundation of our analyses.

Historical - Cultural Theory as a Starting Point

We will begin by mentioning that the historic-cultural theory of activity, that can be understood today as a succession of four generations (Engeström; Sannino, 2021), began with the developments of Vygotsky in the early XX century, in an attempt to develop an alternative psychology to the hegemony at the time: the American modernist psychology. One of the main interests of Vygotsky (1962) was to demonstrate that higher order psychological processes, this is, the mind or human subjectivity, are not only internalized through an appropriation process, but that this process is measured culturally. In summary, psychology could not be thought of behind culture's back (Esteban-Guitart; Llopart, 2019). Is in this context that Vygotsky creates his well-known mediation triangle (see Figure 1) to show that the relationship between an object and a subject is never direct, but there is always the intervention of a mediation artifact created by a specific culture (Vygotsky, 1978). Language is the classic example in order to illustrate the aforementioned, since it is a psychological process that is not originally within the subject, but that is internalized and made someone's own through the intervention of a third element that may be their upbringing, schooling, among other elements or mediational practices (Vygotsky, 1979).

**Figure 1 –Vygotsky´s Mediation Triangle**
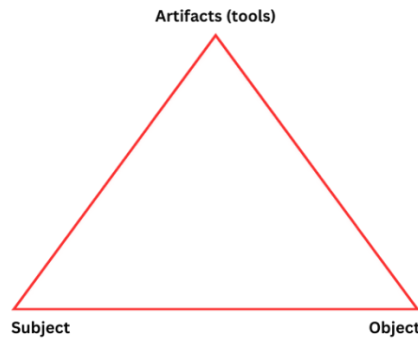
Source: Prepared by author.

As it is well known, Vygotsky died prematurely; therefore, two of his main collaborators and disciples – Luria and Leóntiev – undertook Vygotsky's historical-cultural project.

The Four Generations of the Activity Theory

Leóntiev was the first to notice that the original Vygotskyan idea was, paradoxically, individualistic because of its emphasis on the subject, when observing its implications in the developmental psychology project, specifically by testing the recent theory of proximal development. Certain inconsistencies and explanatory gaps led him to the need to expand the theory and take it a step further. This decision is considered a milestone, since it gave way to a theoretical evolution that we know today as 4 generations of the historic-cultural activity theory, that we will review briefly.

Leóntiev introduces a first variant by proposing the idea of system, showing that activity is not something that belongs to the subject, but activity is simultaneously present and distributed together with a group of elements that go beyond the subject. Therefore, the question that Leóntiev asks is: if activity cannot be reduced to the relationship established between a subject and an object through the mediation of a given artifact, then, what other elements come into play? Leóntiev's answer, a result of his experiments on logical reasoning in school, es that human activity happens in the context of 1) a specific community, 2) a community formed by people with a particular division of work and 3) a community that abides by a specific set of rules that regulate functioning of the very activity that gives origin and makes sense of the system. This new way of understanding the activity as a system is materialized in the expansion of the original Vigotskyan model (see Figure 2) and gives origin to the *second generation* of the historic-cultural activity theory.

Figure 2 – Expansion of the Vygotsky Model proposed by Leóntiev
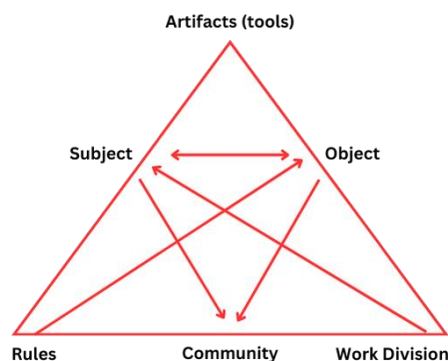
Source: Prepared by author.

The new proposal by Leóntiev significantly expands historic-cultural psychology and understands the activity system as an analysis unit. It is not only possible to identify just one combination of elements as it occurred in the original proposal by Vygotsky (subject-artifact-object), but it opens a broader range of combinations illustrated by arrows in Figure 2. Let's take an example to see the possible implications of the movement between the first and second generation of the theory.

In 1931 and with the help of Vygotsky, Luria went on a research trip to test the principles being formulated with this new approach. It is known as the Uzbekistan expedition in Central Asia. It basically consisted of visiting a group of tribes in remote rural areas, and to carry out a set of exercises with adults with various literacy levels, that included the use of logical reasoning and abstract thought. It was explained to participants that books are made with paper, and that, on the other hand, Japan is where silk is made. Then we asked them what material is used to make books in Japan. There were also exercises that sought to specifically explore categorization, the cornerstone of the logical-mathematical thought, and these consisted in giving a set of cards to the participants, with a few duplicated images (pails, saws, axes, and wheelbarrows) and the instruction to put them into groups.

In the first case, most people manufactured answers that were far from the ones desired by the researchers, who thought that participants would reply that in Japan, books are made of silk and not paper. The recurring answer from participants was that they didn't know because they had never been in Japan. Something similar occurred in the case of the categorization exercise, the recurring pattern was to set up groups that incorporated each one of the elements, and not grouping tools in differentiated categories as it was – culturally – to be expected.

The question we could ask then is, why an adult uzbek, instead of providing the expected answer, replies that they have never been in Japan? What is wrong in their reasoning? Strictly speaking there is nothing wrong, but even if we look for an explanation from the first generation of the theory, it will not be satisfactory, since searching for explanation solely on the subject (adult uzbek), in the mediating artifacts involved (instructions from the researcher) or the relationship between both is insufficient because key elements are missing.

It is here where the second generation of the theory becomes relevant, especially the importance of the community to which the subject belongs – and by opposition the ones they do not belong to – since, as the research demonstrated, the studied tribes had a reasoning that was deeply practical, anchored to the immediate experience. In fact, one of the more global main findings of this research expedition was the conjecture that abstract thought was not universal but developed in relation to the participation of people in specific social practices, being schooling the most important of them.

In continuing with our journey, the second generation of the activity theory was not void of failures, just as its predecessor. It is here where we find the figure of Engeström, who proposes a third generation of the theory (Engeström; Glăveanu, 2012), by suggesting at least two activity systems in interaction as the minimum analysis unit. In other words, Engeström proposes that it is not enough to analyze the activity systemically, but it is necessary to incorporate other systems of activity that are also present in a given human activity. The third generation of the activity emerges according to Engeström (2001, p.135) itself:

> When activity theory went international, questions of diversity and dialogue between different traditions or perspectives became increasingly serious challenges. It is these challenges that the third generation of activity theory must deal with. The third generation of activity theory needs to develop conceptual tools to understand dialogue, multiple perspectives, and networks of interacting activity systems.

The basic model is once again expanded to include at least two activity systems that interact and participate simultaneously in a shared activity. Theoretically speaking, each separate system has its own components and so, an object understood as its own result, goal, or purpose. Therefore, the challenge of these two autonomous systems, as we can see in Figure 3, is the ability to achieve the creation of a shared object between the participant systems.

Figure 3 – Third Generation of the Activity proposed by Engeström
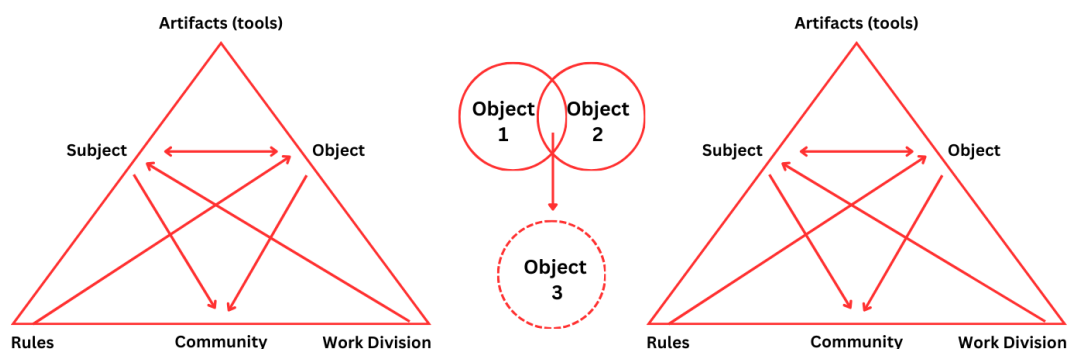
Source: Prepared by author.

With this new version of the activity theory, we become close to the objective of our work, but first we will provide some basic ideas of the fourth generation developed by Engeström and Sannino in the last 10 years.

The fourth generation is a qualitative reformulation of its three preceding versions and currently in full development (Erausquin; Funes, 2020) so to this date little empirical evidence can be found for it. The main change lies on the fact that the focus of attention is no longer an object shared by two activity systems, with a local nature, but the focus of attention now are objects of a great scale, such as, for example, poverty or the lack of housing at a global level, which requires the creation of expansive learning coalitions that provide answers to the complexity of these world problems (Engeström; Sannino, 2021).

In closing this section, we address the principles that summarize and characterize different generations of the activity theory transversally. We will describe them in a concise way in order to delve into them in the field work analysis section.

Basic Principles of the Historic-Cultural Activity Theory

As we have seen throughout this section, the activity theory has not stayed static in time, but on the contrary, it has changed and made its analysis unit increasingly complex: from the mediated action in the first generation (Engeström; Engeström, 1986), to the relationship between different activity systems (Engeström, 2001), to the generation of heterogenous coalitions (Engeström; Sannino, 2021). Now, and independently of its different generations, the theory of activity presents, according to Engeström (2001), a set of basic principles that we will now review briefly:

The first principle refers precisely to that which gives origin to the third generation of the theory: the analysis unit is an activity sys-

tem in interaction with at least another one, this is, two interconnected systems around a shared activity. An adequate understanding of the activity is achieved when actions and features of each of the systems involved in the activity are considered. The risk of not incorporating all involved systems is to arrive at partial understandings that can lead to erroneous decision making and interventions.

The second principle, considering the existence of a community in the system, is the presence of a multiplicity of voices. An activity system always includes multiple points of view, perspectives, traditions, and interests, usually crystallized in specific learnings and specific ways of action of its members. Therefore, an adequate understanding of activity requires considering and incorporating this diversity of voices in order to obtain a choral perspective of the community members, which is the basis of the system.

The third principle is historicity. The activity systems take form and transform during long periods of time. Its tensions and expansion and transformation possibilities can only be understood in contrast to its own history. The ethos of a given system, its usual functioning form, as we saw in the previous principle, has an historic explanation that we need to attend to. Similarly, to the previous principles, not considering the history behind functioning and actions performed by a system in the here and now, can lead to a distorted identification of the explanatory factors of said system.

The fourth principle are contradictions as sources of change and development. Every activity system is in constant dynamism, in relation to the changes to its own structure: the incorporation of new mediating artifacts, the change in the rules regulating interactions, the incorporation and/or exit of new members of the community, even the establishing of a new object, goal or purpose. All of these changes could eventually generate internal contradictions. Now, contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts. Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions inside and between activity systems, and these tensions are not only expected, but necessary, since they also allow the implementation of the necessary changes so the system can adapt to a new configuration. Contradictions must not be interpreted, therefore, as weaknesses that must be corrected, but as resources for the development and adaptation of a system.

Finally, the fifth and last principle is that activity systems contain, within their own nature, abilities and resources to successfully address contradictions, tensions, and threats that could arise as a result of its dynamism, and that those said resources allow for transformations and learnings of the activity systems. Activity systems achieve expansive learning when they are capable of relinquishing of a specific way to do things, of a specific cultural framework, and go beyond it, causing for the system to expand its limits and give way to a new, more complex activity framework.

The Pandemic as an Opportunity for Reflection and Introspection of the Investigative Practice

As in most countries, the pandemic and its corresponding sanitary crisis led the authorities to make the decision to close schools and develop an unprecedented, never seen before telematic educational process. This decision undoubtedly had strong repercusions in non-educational fields, research being one of them. For our research team, it initially implied a total paralyzation in data production and later, as most research teams did, explore virtual ways in which to perform our field work. We were able to achieve this purpose mostly through interviews and focus groups through video calls. Now then, and considering that this allowed the unprecedented gathering of people from different regions and locations in the country that otherwise would have not been possible, especially because of the costs, distance and time involved, this new format left the research team with a rather bad taste in our mouth, since it prevented us from doing what has always been the most significant element of educational investigation for us: the possibility of going into the schools, the chance of researching with the schools.

Because of the aforementioned we decided to indefinitely suspend the telematic research and we resolved to take this as an opportunity to develop self-reflection and introspection work about different cases from our last years of work. Without a doubt, it was the right decision and an enriching experience that allowed us to initiate new research processes.

This research process was based on a group of investigations of qualitative methodology and ethnographic nature that we have carried out in the last eight years and that can be represented by a set of publications (author, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022). During the 2016-2018 period, we studied the welcoming devices for the inclusion of migrant communities; during the 2017-2018 period, we studied leadership practices in inclusive schools; during the 2019-2022 period, we explored linguistic welcoming devices for non-spanish speaking communities; during the 2020-2022 period, we studied leadership practices in inclusive schools that had good school efficacy indicators in two regions of the country; currently (2023 - to date) we are developing two studies: one on migrant policy analysis and its impact in schools; and another one on school leadership for inclusion in different regions of the country.

During all these years, we have actively worked (and with much joy and gratification) with school communities in an attempt to materialize participatory educational research with the schools. However, what we want to share are the mistakes and errors; and with them our main lessons. We will present our reflections in the order they occurred and therefore not in the order in which the principles have been originally organized by Engeström (2001).

About Historicity of Schools and Excessive Presentism

Something that has characterized our attitude not only in one, but several investigations we have carried out, has been the presentism that features an involuntary lack of interest in knowing some historical elements of schools with which we have worked and the locations and neighborhoods in which they are situated. Although in the majority of investigations we have developed there have been questions or procedures so that specific participants can contribute a few more biographic and contextual elements, the truth is that, in the majority of situations, they have turned to be rather peripheral elements and, in most cases, have appeared late in the process.

This presentism has translated in simple terms in the usual generation of a work plan or schedule, then developing the application of selected techniques for data production, usually individual interviews, group discussions and observation/participation of some spaces and/or activities. We think that, as a result of our introspective process, this is a serious ethnographic mistake (Contreras et al., 2016). This is mainly because presentism entails the problem of generating partial portraits and mythological representations of schools which distort the possibility of research offering a more holistic approach to schools. Although the development of school biographies can go to the other extreme of becoming an obsessive and unending process, it is true that, at least, an attempt to have a composition with the greatest possible number of cultural elements should be made (Díaz de Rada, 2013).

One of the main conclusions of a research carried out by Engeström and their team in a peripheral school in Helsinki in Finland (Engeström, 2016) was that in order to understand teacher problems, in this case, migrant and refugee students' apathy, it was necessary to develop cyclic research, where the first work phase was precisely a deep ethnographic immersion that would allow the research team to track – genealogically speaking – school apathy that affected teachers in that specific school.

If presentism entails the problem of partial and superficial portraits, said portraits entail, in turn, the problem of offering in the corresponding cases, solutions or recommendations that are far from being useful to solve the problems faced by the school in a given subject. Let's review the following example:

During the 2017-2018 period, we studied the practices of leadership teams in two schools with inclusive educational projects that were beginning to welcome migrant communities: according to a survey previously applied and validated, the first school had a high inclusive culture, and the second school had a low inclusive culture. With this information at the basis, we performed a group of ethnographic techniques and concluded that leadership practices were different both in approach (pedagogical vs. coexistence) and in the responsibility of implementation (principal vs. technical pedagogical unit chief).

The first intuition, therefore, was that a school was better – the one that had a high inclusive culture – than the other. However, here we find a relevant mistake: we didn't give enough explanatory importance to historicity. Both schools were in completely different phases and trajectories (Bellei et al., 2014). In other words, they worked for different purposes according to the concerns and priorities of each institution.

According to the sociocultural focus of practice communities, the context, the situation, and the age are components of the practice (Wenger, 2001) and, therefore, reveal the maturity and the complexity of school actions. Therefore, we cannot only look at isolated actions without considering its historical and sociocultural context. The school that we considered good was in a stage where they were looking to develop curricular learning based on good interpersonal relationships, with a stable leadership team, and therefore their actions were along those lines. In the case of the school that we considered deficient, their efforts were focused on the improvement of human relationships, since they had gone through three different principals in five years and therefore school climate was fragmented: in this sense, their school practices were focused on school climate and were, therefore, completely coherent with their context.

Therefore, the problem is judging both schools from a perspective of excessive presentism without paying attention to history as modeling school practices. The school phases condition their goals and means. This consideration could even work to question the constant modelization and standardizing of the school system and understand that, both schools, from their own history, were doing the best they could to meet their immediate needs. A school is also an age, so understanding their history should be the minimum standard before venturing simplistic and complacent explanations.

About the Multiplicity of Voces and the Pre-eminence of Adultcentrism

A usual mistake in our first investigations has been to get to know schools and different problems associated to the migrant phenomenon through authorized voices of actors in positions of privilege in the school organizational chart and that possess hegemonic accounts regarding different situations. This is how most of our research has begun by interviewing and meeting the school principal, or in some cases, the leadership team. They have described the way in which different schools we have worked with have become multicultural spaces, sometimes very slowly and others in a very accelerated manner. Counselors, inspectors, or staff in charge of the technical pedagogical unit have narrated how the nationalities of students and their families have been changing and how this has generated new challenges and new problems for the educational community.

As we have seen in the description of principles, what characterizes a system is precisely the fact of being a community formed by a

diversity of subjects, but that not necessarily have the same point of view regarding various elements of the system. The multiplicity of voices seeks, therefore, that a system can have a shared vision of one-self, a relatively stable identity, but that requires including not only hegemonic and authorized voices.

It's been usual in data production planning to leave out actors and its voices, being students and their families the most traditionally marginalized from our research. In the case of families, they often do not have much detail, they usually present information gaps and the majority of times they are obliging narrations for the research team, so they tend to confirm the official accounts. This happens because their time availability usually does not match the hours where we visit the schools, and because in general our experience has been that, in comparison, when interviewing mothers and fathers, our sensation is that their accounts do not enjoy the same richness than those of official voices. In the case of students, something similar has happened: our insistence in applying adult-centered techniques (such as individual and/or group interviews) has led us to the hurried conclusion that boys and girls do not contribute significantly to the purposes of the investigation.

However, here we have identified an important problem. The fact is that families and students don't have lesser quality accounts or less interesting or attractive for the eyes of our research team, but methodologically speaking, we haven't made the right decisions, we haven't used the techniques that allow to extract the richness contained in their corresponding knowledges. Working with families and students was for us, according to Jackson (2001), one of the many ways to waste time in educational research. As other teams have acknowledged, this clearly shows the need to update and strengthen methodological competences in members of our team (Guizardi et al., 2017). Let's review an example.

In a school in the city of Quilicura, in the Metropolitan Region, we had the opportunity, after working very hard to convince the principal, to participate (and not only observe) the interactive groups taking place as part of the Learning Communities project. The fact that some of our team members were able to go through the experience as monitors and collaborate in adding more dynamism to the activities that different heterogenous groups of students performed in Math class, was assessed as one of the most impactful experiences for us in terms of field work. Since this school had resolved the problem of the lack of family members to act as monitors, resorting to higher level students, we decided to interview a group of them. However, our disappointment was such, in terms of the expected quality and level of depth of the answers, that we decided to accelerate the ending of the group interview, not consider new interviews, and even not contemplate the data for analysis. Our methodological blunder led us, in addition, to a very delicate subject, which is, that there are knowledges that are more relevant than others and therefore they can be organized hierarchically, something that thanks to the developments of

the knowledge funds approach (Brito; Subero; Esteban-Guitart, 2018) we have been slowly correcting, both theoretically and empirically.

Accounting for the multiplicity of voices of a system, necessary to avoid building partial narrations about the work of schools, requires having a broad set of methodological strategies that are sensitive to the diversity of voices and actors of an educational community.

About Two Activity Systems as an Analysis Unit

One of the most revealing situations that we experienced as a research team was the fact of acknowledging that each of the schools participating in our investigations were not only activity systems, but that our own team was, in the end, an activity system in itself, an activity system formed by a small community of researchers from different disciplines (psychologists, educators, among others), a set of rules that guides the different activities of our work; a specific work division where one focused on knowledge production, others focused, for example, in extension activities and the promotion of said knowledge. Through a group of artifacts, such as computers, mobile phones, and scientific articles, among others, we shared the same objective that was the understanding of the migrant phenomenon in Chile. The problem is that this acknowledgement, that we were all different activity systems, came late. Had it occurred while we were developing our work with the specific schools, we would have avoided certain mistakes that, in some cases, came a very high cost.

For example, this is the case of the work we did for the H.V School in the Metropolitan Region where, after performing extensive field work and developing a valuable relationship with the school, we were not able to do the final part of our work which meant an early closing and an abrupt and not well-planned end to our participation.

The proposal for the end of the process that we had been developing was to suggest three experiences / activities that would allow to improve or resolve some problems associated to the presence of foreign students. The first of them was the launch of a school mediation program in order to decrease the levels of conflict among peers and at the same time to improve school climate. The second one consisted of proposing the implementation of interactive groups in the light of the experience of the Quilicura school; to pilot an exploratory version for the learning of the common language. Finally, we proposed, on the basis of observations made to the functioning of the device, to create a work and progress matrix in the welcoming classroom developed by a schoolteacher of Haitian origin. Our proposal was that the school could choose one of them, implement the improvement experience and we would take on an accompaniment and advisory role to the implementation. However, the purpose of the school was different: the school expected our research team to implement a concrete work proposal. Therefore, there was no agreement between the school and the research team in relation to the purpose of our presence in the school and the scope of our participation, although we all shared the

same diagnosis of the situation. We can illustrate this with an e-mail sent to us from the chief of the technical-pedagogical unit of the school, prior to the submission of our proposal:

Dear R and F:
[…] this year the enrollment of migrant students has increased significantly, with a majority of Haitians, so I eagerly await the feedback that you can offer since we don't have the time to continue to try new strategies and methodologies, we need to find the most adequate way in which to respond to these boys and girls (field note from e-mail, school 2).

Was it posible that as a research team, we could have provided some light on the most adequate form, through feedback?

Analyzing this theoretically, what becomes evident is that the school as an activity system had a very clear object-purpose: that an external agent solved the internal problems of the school in this subject; and us, as a research team, also had a very clear object-purpose: to try a collaborative advising model. Although it could be expected for each system to have its own object, the problem is that out of the work of both activity systems, a third object never emerged, as it was necessary, a shared purpose to give sense to each one of them. The result was that the relationship began to deteriorate and dilute in time as the school did not find in us an agent to improve the language acquisition problem and we did not find in the school the interest of developing collaborative work. Each activity system stayed firm in their object-purpose without the occurrence of a negotiation process, so the relationship came to a deadlock – as it is said in chess, we got stuck on the board. Had we become aware that our team was also an activity system and that without the construction of a third object there was no chance of progress, we would have saved much time, effort, and unnecessary internal discussions.

About Contradictions as a Development Driving Force

If we have learned something about this introspective process is not only the importance of creating a shared purpose, a third object, but also the importance that this third object considers the original purposes of the investigation. It would seem a logical affirmation, but part of our reflections shows us that this is something we should not take for granted. In the current context of a profound legitimacy crisis of education research and an increasing distrust of research teams on the school's part, finding schools that are willing to participate in research becomes rarer each day. And as we have shown in previous work (Jiménez; Valdés-Morales; Aguilera-Valdivia, 2018), this happens because field work is seen as an experience that does not result in contributions to the school, but on the contrary, a loss and excessive consumption of time, and in the case of in-depth investigations, the deterioration of the participant school actors.

And what should we contribute to schools? This question has its own tensions. A situation that has generated fragility in research purposes, both in the selection of schools and field work, is the current

double mandate that schools have to be inclusive, on one hand, and to obtain good school efficacy indicators in standardized tests, on the other. In one way or another, this contradiction, this dynamism, generates contradictions for the schools, but also to us as researchers. Let's review a recent example.

During the first semester of 2021, while we carried out online interviews because of the sanitary confinement, the principal of an inclusive school in Santiago de Chile told us she agreed with standardized tests, since they were information tools and that even she as a principal exercises leadership narrative based on goals, results, a focus on the task and accountability to interpret and address the demands of a school system with neoliberal principles. She also mentioned that standardized tests were necessary for school improvement and that inclusion should necessarily imply excellence. These accounts caused tension in our research team, because on one hand, they were not part of our belief system as education professionals and on the other hand, because of the lack of empirical evidence to back up these affirmations. But also, this is a very typical tension in chilean schools, and therefore we cannot forget that leadership teams cannot completely disregard standardized tests, due to their pre-eminence as a criterion for evaluating the quality of education. How can education research become a part, therefore, of the implementation of change in tense scenarios? How to innovate when what is rooted persists and remains? How to interpret these contradictions that belong to the schools but that also belong to us?

About the Abilities and Resources of the Schools

Finally, another revealing purpose is that activity systems contain ample possibilities to successfully address contradictions and threats. Many of the procedures are generally found in school cultures and the role of investigation then, as a second system that converges to harmonize a third system, must be capable of dynamizing these resources and generate expansive transformations and learning in the educational communities.

An experience from the Engeström team in a school located in a favela in Sao Paulo, Brazil (Sannino; Engeström; Lemos, 2016), perfectly illustrates the aforementioned. The school was located by a river that would overflow during certain seasons of the year, generating access difficulties, constant absenteeism, teachers' tardiness, among other problems. Local authorities considered the educational community as a part of the solution, since it had resources that were not available in other organizations related to the river overflow. In this way, the team led an initiative of learning investigative intervention based on problems which allowed, throughout the process, to find answers and solutions to the different problems related to the flooding. Through practical experiments, a curricular addressing of the associated topics, training on recycling and movie sessions, the school was

able to contribute to solving the problems associated to flooding and the river overflow.

On the contrary, our brief experience with the LBO school in the Region of Valparaíso can be used as a counterexample. We arrived at this school since the area in which is located had received many families of Haitian origin lately, to work in the seasonal fruit picking work. These were families with young children of pre-school age that had enrolled their children in this school, one of the oldest public schools in this municipality. In a first encounter with the principal, she mentioned that, although they had added an interpreter to facilitate the communication between the schools and the families, they had not implemented any strategies in particular to favor language learning in students, since immersion alone was enough to achieve this purpose. Our experience in other schools indicated that this could be a mistaken decision, since immersion must be accompanied by other specific strategies such as incorporating translators into the classrooms, implementing welcoming classrooms or launching spanish as second language programs.

Our mistake in this case was the fact that we did not trust the decision of the school to address the issue of linguistic diversity, assuming that the school did not have the experience and the resources to handle it successfully, and that precisely our role as an expert team on welcoming devices, could be an opportunity to redirect the work done by the school through trainings on the matter. Basically, we tried to convince their principal of the convenience of implementing one of our proposals for language learning for the students that were non-spanish speakers. As it can be observed in this experience, as a team we went from an open disposition to the development of collaborative processes with previous schools, to an attitude where our knowledge and experience was, apparently, significantly above the knowledge and experience of the own school.

As it could be expected, this paternalistic and expert attitude towards the school on our team's part, caused the work with this specific school not to prosper, since a second meeting with this principal could never be arranged, even despite our insistence.

Conclusions

The objective of this work was to share meta-reflections and learnings based on the experience of six qualitative investigations from a historic-cultural perspective of the activity. We identified errors and mistakes made by our own research team and therefore we present the learned lessons. We hope that the experiences, learnings, and reflections that were expressed are useful to the planning and implementation of new educational investigations.

Nobody could deny that nowadays, education research of academic nature is going through a profound legitimacy crisis in schools, precisely because extractivist and utilitarist formats of research have been privileged. It has therefore been us, education research scholars,

who have made our work so that today it is very difficult to find schools that are willing to sacrifice their time, share their resources and professionals, grant us access to their more intimate spaces in their schools, without receiving practically anything in return. As we have mentioned previously (Valdés et al., 2019; Valdés et al., 2022) and have corroborated again, the ethnographic aspect is not only about implementing techniques developed by anthropology that, as we all assume, allow to produce better quality data; there is a forgotten dimension of ethnography and that has to do precisely with the affective bond that is developed with specific participants of an investigation. This relationship needs, of course, to be developed purposefully, respected, and cared for, as muchas possible. Arriving late to scheduled activities or cancelling at the last minute, not submitting reports or providing feedback on the agreed due dates, for example, are ways in which the affective relationship, the relational dimension of the research, has been forgotten and has lost relevance.

Educational research in cultural diversity contexts in Chile and other Latin American countries is an emerging field that has gained greater relevance in academia and has become a very productive area of work. However, there are still tensions and challenges that persist in this field. Some studies have demonstrated that a great part of knowledge produced in this field has not moved into schools and communities, which indicates that not all that is known in research is known by schools (Sánchez-Teruel; Robles-Bello, 2013). In addition, a trend towards theoretical research has been identified, which suggests the need to advance towards a more transforming investigation in collaboration with schools. Other research has suggested the lack of information about inclusive educational good practices and the little interdisciplinarity in the investigation (Hernández et al., 2019).

In this context, it is fundamental to incorporate students and families as key actors in educational research about migration, school, and other related topics. To exclude these groups can result is biased and distorted knowledge of the problem. Therefore, it is important that educational research is inclusive and not disconnected from excluded people. But above all, this is about research teams performing meta-reflections about their own research practice. This means, for example, to explicitly share a reflection about methodological decisions, since it would make available to the scientific community the tensions that emerge from the work with educational communities.

As we have shown throughout this work, acknowledging mistakes and errors, illustrated in this case with the principles of the historic-cultural theory, not only contributes to the development of a more reflective practice by the research teams and the development of educational research that is more connected to the communities in which research takes place, but also to regain the necessary trust to continue to contribute from the specificity of our work to the improvement of the educational experience.

In closing, we would like to mention that the intention of this work is to highlight the importance of the fact that research teams not only generate knowledge about the topics they study, but also about the research process itself and the group of decisions that the investigative work entails. We hope to contribute to this[1].

Note

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Felipe Jiménez is a researcher at the Health and Social Sciences Department at Universidad de Las Américas (UDLA), Santiago, Chile.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1081-9250
E-mail: fjimenezv@udla.cl

René Valdés is a researcher at the Education and Social Sciences Department at Universidad Andrés Bello, Viña del Mar, Chile.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4242-9748
E-mail: rene.valdes@unab.cl