

Ronald Sultana Memorial Lecture

A Mediterranean Spirit for Education: Working for Ronald's legacy

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

I want to sincerely thank Louise, Colin and all the colleagues from the Faculty of Education for initiating the Ronald Sultana Memorial Lecture and for inviting me to deliver the inaugural address. It is a profound honour, and I am deeply moved to give this lecture.

I will get to the content shortly, but since this lecture is a tribute to Ronald, I feel I need to share first some reflections about him: reflections on what Ron was to me – both as a scholar and a friend. In fact, one of the key lessons I learned from Ronald is that the personal and political are inseparable. Talking about him as a person is, therefore, also a way to understand the scholar and his work. A good example of this is one of his final books, *Educators in the Mediterranean... Up Close and Personal*, to which I had the privilege of contributing with a chapter. A book full of biographies that become tools to understand the author and his or her context.

Like many of you, I still find it hard to believe that Ronald is no longer with us. This feeling was even more present yesterday when I landed in his beloved Malta. The joy on Ronald's face was particularly evident when he spoke about two things: first, his family – especially Roseline – and second, when he talked about Malta: its history, culture, and people.

I first met Ronald in Sheffield in 1995 at one of the annual International Conferences on Sociology of Education organized by our colleague Len Barton. These conferences were exceptional because Len allocated an hour and a half to each paper, allowing for rich discussions. At the end of that session, Ronald approached me and said, "I have to talk to you..." He then shared his dream of creating the Mediterranean Project. I was captivated by his vision, his intellect, and his extraordinary determination to bring this project to life.

From that moment, I became an “ambassador” of his project in Spain, and we developed a close and enduring friendship.

From 1995 onward, we collaborated on books, articles, conferences, and seminars – such as the *Selmun Seminar* in 1999, where I had the privilege to meet incredible scholars from the MENA region. I became aware of a pressing issue that deeply concerned him: the dominance of Northern and Western theories of development and education, which too often silenced alternative voices and critical perspectives.

Our collaboration and friendship grew stronger over time. Ronald came to Barcelona to teach, and I came to Malta to teach as well. We worked together on international projects, such as the *Globalization and Europeanisation Network in Education* with our esteemed colleagues Susan Robertson and Roger Dale. Our final joint venture was the creation of the GLOBED Master’s programme on *Education Policies for Global Development*. We began preparing the programme in 2012, and then in 2015 it was launched as an Erasmus Mundus Master’s course. Ronald played a pivotal role in GLOBED, especially in organising the annual summer schools, where we shared lectures, explored the island, enjoyed fireworks, and celebrated with food, drinks, and laughter.

There is one message Ronald often shared with our master’s students, which continues to resonate with me and that I now share with them: “*We help you understand the world as it is, so you can make it as it should be.*” This message condenses the essence of what we aimed to achieve with GLOBED: equipping students with the critical thinking skills necessary to comprehend the complexities of the world in order to envision and construct alternatives.

This is a beautiful but a complex challenge, and I feel is even more complex to respond to it without Ronald. But we have an advantage: he left us with values and tools to make this mission possible.

When I received the invitation to give this lecture, I immediately started thinking on this: how should I work (how should we work) to ensure that Ronald’s ideals and values are embedded in what we do? Second, and probably most importantly: would Ronald agree with our roadmap?

Beyond these questions, there was also something that made me think about Ronald's emotional side. As you know, Ronald had an amazing mind, but possibly he had an even more amazing soul.

The Metaphor of the Mediterranean spirit reflects his main life project and condenses Ronald's spirit. Ronald's profound attachment to the Mediterranean was evident. He was fascinated by its beauty, diversity, richness, and joy, but he also empathized deeply with its struggles, wars, and sorrows. The Mediterranean is a space of tension and contradiction—a meeting place of colonizers and the colonized, where domination and exclusion coexist. I often think this ambivalence reflected Ronald himself: his serious professionalism, influenced by British colonial heritage (as himself recognised), coexisting with his Mediterranean irreverence, laughter, and joy, especially when surrounded by friends.

So, what might a “Mediterranean spirit for education” look like? Or, if you prefer, how a Mediterranean spirit can give us the tools to understand the world as it is to transform it into what it should be?

Many authors, beginning with Paulo Freire, have proposed educational utopias and roadmaps for social and political emancipation. Interestingly, these utopias are far from naïve; Freire's works, for example, are grounded in a robust methodology and a critical understanding of reality. We have the works by John Dewey on radical democracy or the works of the Frankfurt school on social liberation and emancipation through education... and many others.

Why, then, do we need a “Mediterranean spirit” when we already have such visionary thinkers? Perhaps because the world is changing at an unprecedented pace, and the challenges we face are immense. Drawing on Stephen Lukes' *faces of power*, we see a shift from overt forms of imposition to more sophisticated forms of ideological domination, where power operates with the consent of the oppressed. Ironically, this consent is no longer achieved through complex ideological frameworks but rather through fake news, algorithmic manipulation, and the creation of “alternative realities” that seem highly effective. Artificial intelligence has replaced organic intellectuals, operating full-time to saturate our consciousness.

The far-right, in particular, is strategically using artificial intelligence to gain power. And we can ask ourselves, why does it work? Why do so

many people buy into these narratives? Because they simplify complex realities into easily digestible explanations—offering simplistic causal relationships and conspiracy theories. This approach is seductive because it provides clarity in a world that is often difficult to understand.

This new wave of ideological colonization is infiltrating every sphere—economic policies (through neoliberalism), migration policies, gender policies, housing policies, and, of course, education policies. Consider one example: after the disastrous PISA results in 2022, the response has been to advocate a return to “back-to-basics” approaches. The crisis in schooling is framed as a crisis of educational authority, blamed on uncritical adoption of innovative practices and the excessive focus on students’ socio-emotional skills. No matter that there is little evidence supporting these claims; they are repeated and presented anecdotally as irrefutable “science.”

This is the nature of hegemony operating today, and this is the type of hegemony we must counteract. It is far from an easy task. I believe a Mediterranean spirit for education requires two foundational aspects that, would have been non-negotiable for Ronald.

The first one is An Ontological Perspective of Social Justice. The project must be rooted in social justice as its guiding principle. This is non-negotiable. Values must come first: principles such as equity, equality, human dignity, solidarity, inclusion, and diversity should serve as the foundation of this endeavor.

The second one is a New Epistemology. This involves countering the “epistemicide” of knowledge and reclaiming silenced forms of knowing. The principles of social justice—distributive justice, recognition of minority rights, and giving voice to the voiceless—are under greater threat than ever. Ideologies now intersect with algorithms in ways that destabilize the core values of human dignity, empathy, and respect. Technology and social media construct limited and fragmented informational bubbles. For many, reality itself—what is happening—may not exist outside these bubbles. Social perceptions and relationships are not only physically but also symbolically and informationally circumscribed.

This makes critical education an enormous challenge. It is no longer sufficient to present evidence of inequalities, discrimination, and exclusion. Evidence may be completely dismissed by those fascinated by

“alternative realities”, whose consciousness is continually reinforced by algorithms designed to reaffirm their biases.

The Mediterranean spirit for education must be, more than ever, a counter-hegemonic project. But do we have a roadmap? Do we know how to work? What to do? Do we have a narrative? I unfortunately think we still don't have it.

In what follows I develop a modest attempt to build on Ronald's works and ideas to describe some characteristics or dimensions of what a Mediterranean spirit for education should look like. This is, of course, an open project and certainly incomplete. It requires continuous discussion and adaptation. But I think we can find inspiration in Ronald's thinking, and also in Ronald's feelings.

The first characteristic of the Mediterranean spirit for education should be developing Activism Against Banking Conceptions of Education. Paulo Freire used the concept of banking education to describe dominant, mainstream methods of transmitting worldviews. Banking education has three main characteristics:

- a. **The Power Dynamic:** It creates a hierarchical relationship in which the educator deposits knowledge into the learner, reinforcing power imbalances. This is precisely what the "back-to-basics" movement promotes: acts of depositing knowledge.
- b. **A Prescriptive Model:** It imposes fixed solutions that aim to reshape the consciousness of the oppressed to align with hegemonic norms.
- c. **The Exclusion of Alternative Knowledge:** It actively rejects and suppresses diverse voices and perspectives.

Counteracting these forms of education requires activism on three fronts: a) opposing pedagogies that deposit knowledge uncritically, b) exposing how domination operates and saturates consciousness, and c) amplifying silenced perspectives. This was one of Ronald's greatest concerns: creating spaces where marginalised and silenced voices could be heard and valued.

We have clear examples in education and development where we can witness banking conceptions of education. It is not difficult to think of the World Bank, the OECD or other international organizations: they prescribe solutions and transform consciences to the extent that the receivers adjust their needs to their solution formulas. Rather than identifying solutions to existing problems, these agents are often “solution carriers” in search of problems. In other words, there are mechanisms by which these organisations are able to establish specific frames of policymaking (the WB gives credits only if countries carry out their ‘best policies’; the OECD uses PISA to put certain education problems as central: such as school autonomy or students’ entrepreneurialism...).

Let me give you another example. To take one of the main areas of Ronald’s research, career guidance and youth training: we can recognise that one of the main aspects that defines new banking conceptions of education is the centrality of skills. The need to train flexible workers for the global economy may be behind the super-stress on SKILLS (Skills, skills, skills... as Tony Blair talked about Education, education, education in the early 2000s). We hear constantly how education systems must focus on helping students to develop skills on problem-solving, critical thinking and ‘practical’ and transferable competences.

But the implication of a skills centered education is that it alters the pedagogic relationship between transmission and acquisition. As Bernstein reminded us, pedagogic modalities change when the social base changes. And he wrote that the new requirements of work and life produced a model of generic performance, which is functional to flexible capitalism. So, if invisible pedagogies gave importance to the process of learning and gave the control over the process of acquisition to the learner, flexible capitalism focuses on the output. The new requirements of work and life imply continuous performance and it is guided by short-termism.

Under these circumstances it is considered that a new vital ability must be developed: ‘trainability’, the ability to profit from continuous pedagogic re-formations and so cope with the new requirements of ‘work’ and ‘life’¹.

¹ Bernstein, B. (1996) *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity. Theory, Research, Critique*. London: Taylor and Francis, p.72.

A generic pedagogic model allows for constant and intermittent pedagogies, which produce uncertainty, emptiness and precariousness. It is not only that people can lose their jobs, but also their professional identities. So, to 'survive' it is necessary to show constantly everyone's disposition to be taught and trained.

This skills centrality includes attitudinal and behavioural aspects as important assets, but only as functional and instrumental to capitalism, not as a means of critical thinking and emancipation or as an ability for youth to be empowered and free to construct their life and professional projects. These were the principles from which Ronald understood career guidance. Career guidance is not 'informing the subject', is not guiding the project about which training they need to work. Career guidance for Ronald was based on empowering the subject, on giving them the possibility to freely construct their projects in a context of so many systemic pressures.

The second dimension of the Mediterranean spirit for education is that *Education for Social Justice is Education With, Not Education To*.

A key characteristic of the Mediterranean spirit for education is its collaborative nature. Education for social justice must be education *with* the people, not *to* them. Ronald exemplified this principle in his work. His research on career guidance² or in girls' education in Palestine or Egypt³ demonstrated that the voices and lived experiences of those he studied were essential to constructing political alternatives. An illustrative example of this approach was his way of understanding ethnographic work. In his article *Ethnography and the politics of absence*⁴ he reflects on the politics of silences. What is not said, what is absent, must be ethnographically considered as part of the fieldwork. That is to me a clear sign of commitment with the subject, of treating his/her silences and absences as a voluntary acts of silence, not as omissions.

² Sultana, R. G. (Ed.). (2017). *Career guidance and livelihood planning across the Mediterranean: Challenging transitions in South Europe and the MENA region* (1st ed.). Sense Publishers.

³ Sultana, R. G. (2008). *The Girls' Education Initiative in Egypt* (Learning Series on Educational Innovation in the Middle East and North Africa). UNICEF Regional Office for the Middle East and North Africa.

⁴ Sultana, R. G. (1992). *Ethnography and the politics of absence*. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 5(1), 19–27.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0951839920050104>.

Highly related with this are conceptions of instrumental rationality of the subject in banking education. We know that human rationality is a complex question, that focuses many philosophical debates and is subject to significant controversies. Debates on human rationality are crucial in the social sciences and have significant epistemological and methodological implications for understanding human action and actors' social practices. This complexity, however, is reduced by banking education policy to instrumental rationality, to actors as utility maximisers, ignoring rationality as a complex product resulting from group identity or even heuristics. Actors' rationality is understood by banking education as utility maximisation, based on costs and benefits.

The implications of this conceptualization are important, because they are embedded in policy designs. For instance, funding education policies may occasionally consider that a certain cost of basic education is feasible, because the benefits of investing in education overcome its costs. So, if we charge a small fee to the poor, they will not drop out. But costs and benefits may be a useless information if everyday life survival is necessary. Agents may have many practical reasons (as Bourdieu states), which differ from instrumental rationality, and these reasons may explain many unexpected or even non-desirable policy outcomes.

Actors show a great range of rational responses, that need to be understood when designing specific policies. Without understanding them the risk of policy failure is high and so are the negative effects on education inequalities.

Education with requires deeply listening to and valuing learners' perspectives, engaging them as partners in the process of building knowledge and understanding their practical reasons. This collaborative approach ensures that education becomes a transformative and participatory act. Without it, education has the risk of becoming an act of symbolic violence, indistinguishable from hegemonic practices that perpetuate systems of power.

The third element of the Mediterranean spirit for education is *Inclusion Through Diversity*

True inclusion can only be achieved through diversity. The Mediterranean, with its rich array of cultures, languages, and histories, embodies this principle perfectly. Ronald deeply valued diversity, as

reflected in his video *A Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*.⁵ For him, diversity was not a superficial or folkloric idea but a fundamental right – the right to recognition and full citizenship.

This task is monumental in today's context. Misinformation machines generate fear of the "other," while systems of criminalizing minorities – linguistic, ethnic, or religious – are persistent and difficult to dismantle.

Ronald recognised the urgency of redefining humanity and fostering critical thinking. As he wrote in his video:

"We are now indeed at a loss, living in an interregnum, when old social forms are giving way, but new ones have yet to take shape."

Quoting Yeats, he added:

*"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity."*

This is the challenging context in which we must work for recognition, a world where the worst have intense conviction, while the best are plagued by uncertainty.

I think Ronald's perspective closely aligns with Nancy Fraser's conceptualisation of recognition as a cultural right⁶, contrasting sharply with the identity politics approach. While identity politics often focus on affirming specific group identities, Fraser views recognition through the lens of status equality, emphasising the structural conditions necessary for all individuals and groups to participate as peers in social life. For Fraser, recognition is not about affirming or valorising cultural identities but about addressing the societal arrangements that enable or hinder equal participation.

⁵ See

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uo0NmrcEYLs&ab_channel=TristramHooley%28Careerandcareerguidance%29

⁶ Fraser, N. (2000). *Rethinking Recognition* (New Left Review 3, May–June, 107–120).

Misrecognition, therefore, constitutes a form of social injustice because it denies individuals or groups the status they need for equal engagement in society. This injustice cannot be addressed in isolation; it is intrinsically linked to economic and material injustices, which Fraser terms maldistribution. Misrecognition and maldistribution often intersect, reinforcing each other in ways that increase inequality. Addressing one without tackling the other risks leaving the underlying structures of oppression and exclusion intact.

This interrelation highlights the need to approach recognition and redistribution not as competing priorities but as inseparable objectives. A comprehensive response to injustice must integrate these dimensions, ensuring that cultural, social, and economic inequalities are dismantled together to foster genuine equality and inclusion.

The final element of a Mediterranean spirit for education is the need to construct a Collective Project.

Collective action is always fundamental for change, but I would say today is essential to counter neo-fascism and extreme forms of possessive individualism. Achieving this requires not just shared values but also strategic and tactical action. For Gramsci, counterhegemony is never spontaneous; it is a deliberate political project that demands strategy and tactics.

This goal is urgent yet elusive. It is perplexing why this remains so, given the pressing challenges we face: the rise of xenophobia, racism, exclusion, and oppression. Despite this, the possibility of a unified vision for social justice often seems out of reach.

Political struggles have always faced divisions, but today's challenges are worse because of trivial disputes that weaken the potential for collective action. Identity politics often fragments our shared struggles, diluting them into individualised claims. This fragmentation distracts from bigger, systemic problems, making it harder to unite around common goals.

Meanwhile, the far right has become very skilled at taking over language, reshaping words like *progress* and *equity* to fit its agenda. By doing this, they make harmful ideas seem fair or forward-thinking, confusing the public and gaining support. This ability to twist the meaning of important concepts reinforces their influence.

On the other hand, the left often avoids talking about important topics like *security* or *freedom*, fearing they are too tied to conservative ideas. This hesitation leaves these concepts in the hands of the right, who use them to push their own narratives. For example, the right talks about security in ways that justify exclusion or fear, while the left misses the chance to redefine it as something rooted in care, equality, and shared well-being. Similarly, freedom is often presented as an excuse for selfishness and private property, while the left usually fails to convince the public opinion that personal freedom cannot be realised at the expense of other's freedoms or that freedom can only be achieved by means of mutual support.

To move forward, the left needs to reclaim these ideas and show how they align with progressive values. By addressing people's real concerns—like safety, identity, and belonging—without falling into divisive rhetoric, the left can create a stronger, united vision for change. This is key to rebuilding the power of collective action.

In Gramscian terms, this counterhegemonic project requires a cultural battle—the creation of narratives and ideas that challenge the dominant social order. This battle is not just theoretical; it is a practical effort to reshape collective consciousness, dismantle rooted ideologies, and offer alternative ways of understanding the world.

At its core, this is an educational project. It highlights the inherently political nature of education, rooted in enlightenment ideals and a commitment to social justice. Yet, achieving this is far from simple. Schools and cultural institutions increasingly operate under strict scrutiny, where any form of political engagement risks being labelled as indoctrination. Meanwhile, true indoctrination often flourishes in unregulated spaces like social media, where 'alternative realities' succeed, and critical thinking is eroded.

In this context, citizenship education becomes more important than ever. It must go beyond traditional teaching to become a transformative practice, equipping students with the tools to critically analyze ideologies, question power structures, and think independently. This is not just about knowledge; it is about fostering the capacity to challenge and change the status quo.

However, this responsibility cannot fall exclusively on schools. It requires a collective effort, with schools working alongside local governments, civil society organisations, and grassroots movements. Such alliances are essential for building a robust framework of critical citizenship education—one that empowers individuals and communities to struggle for emancipation and a more just society.

These are some of the elements that I believe embody a Mediterranean spirit for education. Nothing will be the same without Ronald in this project. But his ideas and values remain among us. And possibly, what he would not forgive us is to stop dreaming in a different world. He would not forgive us to withdraw from the fight to make the world as it should be. Let's then keep him with us by working for a Mediterranean spirit for education.