

Acceptance of the José Vasconcelos Award

Larry V. Hedges

I am honored to accept this award today. As an American, I feel humbled to receive an education award in Finland, a country that often leads the world in international comparative studies of academic achievement and probably has the best education system in the world.

I thank the World Cultural Council, the jury of the Council that selected me, and the University of Helsinki for recognizing me when they might have chosen any number of others.

What a privilege to be linked to José Vasconcelos, the namesake of this award. He was a man ahead of his time in the early 20th century, a man who envisioned education for all of the diverse populations of his native Mexico. He knew that education could better people's lives and acted on that principle throughout his life.

My own interest in education and how to improve it was animated by education's profound effect on my own life. I am an unlikely candidate to be here today. I was born into a poor family in California. This was not the California of beaches, movie stars or Silicon Valley. The California I grew up in was then, and still is, one of the poorest regions in the state. My father did not finish high school and earned the minimum legal wage until his retirement. When I was growing up, it wasn't just that nobody in my family or my neighborhood had gone to college, we didn't even *know* anybody who went to college. The term "college kids" was reserved for individuals remote and irrelevant to our lives.

That predictably stagnant path my life might have taken changed when I was in high school and showed some talent in mathematics. I was offered a Regents Scholarship to the University of California. The possibilities for my life and my very world suddenly grew exponentially larger. In graduate school at Stanford University, I studied both statistics and its applications in research on education.

My first professorial job was in the Department of Education at the University of Chicago in 1980, a time when education research was in disarray and there was skepticism about whether it was even possible to gain systematic knowledge about education.

Confident that education would benefit from more rigorous scientific methods for combining evidence, I began to develop them. This discipline became known as meta-analysis. It has been a satisfying focus of research throughout my career.

I never forget that a good education afforded me the satisfying life that I have with vistas stretching far beyond those of my parents. From Northwestern University in Evanston, I have the privilege of helping others boost their opportunities through education, very much in the shadow of José Vasconcelos.