Special Issue:
Education for Sustainability in a Time of Crises

Editorial Part 1 – June 2020

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Setting the scene

There is an old and still popular saying that a crisis is an opportunity for change. The Chinese symbol for crisis is translated in Wikipedia as "danger at a point of juncture". In the year 2020, first China and then the rest of humanity have been presented with a monumental crisis: a new and lethal virus that spread fast and far, causing actions and reactions, with dramatic consequences for social and economic life around the globe.

Rebecca Solnit wrote of another crisis in her book *Hope in the Dark: The Untold Story of People Power*. In *Grounds for Hope*, a foreword to the 2015 edition (p.2), she stated: "This is an extraordinary time full of vital, transformative movements, that could not be foreseen. It's also a nightmarish time. Full engagement requires the ability to perceive both."

Sustainability educators, environmental activists and scholars have been noting multiple crisis dimensions in recent times: the economic crisis starting with the United States' financial meltdown in 2008; conflict in South America, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East; bush fires in Australia; increasing tropical cyclones hitting eastern-southern Africa; prolonged droughts and rising temperatures; water and food crises; deaths from polluted air and water. For many, the current moment in history is however characterised by much greater uncertainty, and herein lies both the trouble and perhaps also a turning point for the current moment in history. For hope, Solnit wrote, "locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty, there is room to act" (ibid., p.4).

And many are motivated to act, by the visions of dramatic change broadcast around the world, and right outside our homes. If you lived in Venice, you would have noticed the cormorants return to the canals for fish they could see for the first time in years, and been reminded of the possibility of nature in harmony with people. In other places where factory furnaces were switched off, residents saw blue skies; and noted that pollution too kills thousands each year. As governments started weighing up 'lockdown' measures to save lives, versus the continuation of structured economic activity, we recall that they make such calculations all the time – with every approval of a mining licence, every new power station and every road that replaces forest. And when authorities told people to stay at home, we saw the poorest defiantly and desperately taking to the streets, demonstrating once again that their economic activity has no safety net, that lives and livelihoods are intertwined and that any economy should be in service of people, rather than the other way round.

Educators, scientists and activists are familiar with these issues. For decades we have been calling for system changes to replace development models and practices which damage the

environment and human health, and exacerbate inequality and vulnerability, even as some benefit from them. General agreements on the need to address poverty and environmental issues through new forms of development, are reflected in United Nations conferences and summits since 1992; in countless scientific reports before and hence; and in visions like the global Sustainable Development Goals. However, there has also been apathy and denial, and a resigned acceptance that while a different reality might be nice, actually 'there is no alternative' to existing, unequal and degrading forms of development. De Sousa Santos (2018) considered this latter view as a political position so powerful that it has become an epistemological position, taking away our ability to imagine or propose anything else without being made out to be wishful or irrational. He described this global hegemony of thought as a 'cognitive empire'. His cogent analysis is at least part of the explanation why, despite the benefit of being able to witness the ravages of conventional industrial development in China, America and Europe, African governments nonetheless embraced this as the best, indeed the only way in which to save their people from poverty.

Perhaps a crisis resulting in the collapse (and exposure) of multiple inappropriate systems, can force the possibility that there must be alternatives. Solnit argued that a disaster was akin to a revolution. Scientists point to the build-up of pollutants in our atmosphere and water; the acidification of the oceans; the loss of soil fertility and insects, as other looming disasters. These crises are slower in nature than Covid19 and unless one is personally caught in the floods, fires and droughts, they are easier to ignore, despite the efforts of young people like the Swedish climate activist, Greta Thunberg, and the Congo rainforest activist, Vanessa Nakate. The Covid19 pandemic and its consequences have been harder to ignore, but from it, many have drawn parallels to other social-ecological issues.

The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, for example, argued that "recovery from the Covid19 crisis is an opportunity to tackle the global climate emergency, and build a better world for all" (2020). A former high commissioner for refugees, Guterres believes this is a time for leaders "to think big and more generously". He warns that "the world is on track for devastating climate disruption from which no-one can self-isolate" and that human health depends on planetary health. On Earth Day 2020 he called for "a response stronger than any seen before to safeguard lives and livelihoods", to build more sustainable and inclusive economies and societies and a more prosperous and resilient world.

There is no shortage of ideas on how to attempt such changes. System scientists like Daniel C. Wahl (2016) have called for regenerative and restorative actions to heal the land and societies' relationship to it; resource economist James Blignaut (2019) argued that shifts in accounting systems can unlock resources for a land restoration drive that is vital for food security, but would also create paid work for many who are without a livelihood. Raworth (2017) and Fioramenti (2017) have provided various case examples on how greater equality, wealth and well-being can be created by investing in regenerative activities and circular economies. These are some of the concepts now being considered as academic think tanks come together to advise governments on ways in which to 'build back better'. Radically new thinking is certainly needed; in the wake of the US 2008 financial collapse, which set off another global crisis, the recovery measures simply replaced the very conditions that led to the crisis in the first place.

Many are pointing out the importance of setting aside vested interests, of cooperation within and between countries, and of greater social solidarity with the poor in the spirit of *ubuntu* ('I am because we are'). This coalesces with a growing recognition that in many respects the Global North can learn from the Global South, where people have had to weather systemic risks for longer and with fewer resources. Ingenuity in the Global South often relates to local scale, doing more with less, living frugally but healthily and with a spirit of generosity and solidarity. De Sousa Santos argued that the "epistemologies of the South" are coming of age, that we are seeing the end of the cognitive empire which privileged one way of understanding civilisation and development to the exclusion of all others. He does importantly caution, however, that "in spite of resorting to the North-South dichotomy, the epistemologies of the South are not the symmetrical opposite of the epistemologies of the North, in the sense of opposing one single valid knowledge against another one" (2018, p.v). He noted that "struggle mobilizes multiple kinds of knowledge" (p.viii) and that the reinterpretation of the world that is needed before we can change it, cannot be done from one single source of knowledge.

What are the pedagogical implications? Many educators are familiar with the challenge and the value of working with knowledge that is, in the words of learning scientist Yrjö Engeström (2016), "not yet there". They have embraced an approach to education that involves processes of acquiring already available knowledge, but also learning to participate in the development of *new* knowledge (Sfard, 1998) that at times involves a critique and un-learning of unhelpful patterns of thinking and doing, what community educator Paulo Freire (2007) and other struggle icons like Steve Biko called 'conscientisation'. In relation to university education, Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2016) have spoken evocatively of "transformative, transgressive approaches to social learning [and] unlocking disruptive pedagogy and epistemic disobedience".

The work of De Sousa Santos warns scholars and educators to consider the adequacy of the epistemological framings within which we teach and research. Charting the way forward may thus also require us to look back, to consider the almost-forgotten wisdom from earlier times. We certainly need to think through how modern technology can be shared and shaped more collectively, rather than being the sole remit and in the interest of narrow economic interests. As schools and universities have been forced to teach remotely, educators have been confronted with digital divides among learners. How to reach students at home and in isolated communities have become key matters of concern.

"It doesn't come this far"
– Introducing the first papers of Volume 36

"It doesn't come this far" was an old man's assessment of the novel coronavirus, in rural Limpopo Province, South Africa, in May 2020. He was being interviewed by a reporter from the News24 channel, while masked health care workers moved down his street, screening and testing residents. They found him fit, despite his advanced age. "It can happen to those who are using the airlines and then come back," he explained about the Covid19 infection. "But here we don't use the airlines. We are travelling in taxis [a mini-bus for shared transport]."

Whereas the old man seemed well informed, if perhaps not cautious enough, many have struggled to make sense of the information that reached them in one form or another, while others have not been reached by any information at all. The need for educators with an ability to interpret uncertain scientific information, and apply social insights, in ways that enhance the decision-making of rural and peri-urban communities, has been patently obvious. It has also been obvious that in this particular crisis, the essential workers are the health workers and child minders, the farmers and food vendors, waste collectors and waste sorters, caretakers of people and planetary processes.

In a Think Piece first presented at the 2018 *Researching Work and Learning Conference* (RWL10) in South Africa, authors Jane Burt, Anna James, Shirley Walters and Astrid von Kotze open this Special Edition of SAJEE by reflecting on the community educator as a vital care worker. Burt and her co-authors walk in the footsteps of a community education activist, highlighting the exceptional motivation of these activists to create better conditions for their families and communities, in the face of many daunting challenges: pollution from the same industries that provide some jobs, lack of sanitation due to poor service delivery, water shortages exacerbated by climate change among many others. Communities need to take own action and to engage other role players for assistance.

The community educator that Burt et al. describe, is someone willing and able to educate community members from all walks of life, while also supporting them to engage through appropriate activism with the authorities, without whose support, individual awareness of problems of waste and sanitation, will have limited impacts. Community educators seem to play multiple connected roles, as educators and activists, which are particularly important in keeping alive alternative development options. As Solnit pointed out in her 2015 *Grounds for Hope*, "popular power has continued to be a profound force for change". If we are to build back, better and differently, the insights of on-the-ground networkers, caretakers and problem-solvers would seem to be vital in co-constructing a way forward – alongside and within those academic think tanks. De Sousa Santos (2018) talked of the need for scholarship from the rearguard, within the struggle.

If the governance of cities, community health, and therefore ultimately, economic sustainability, all depend on the actions of citizens who in turn benefit from community-based education, and if their lived experience is important in helping to chart a way forward to new forms of development, it is ironic that the work of the community educator is so deeply undervalued. Burt et al. point out that conventional ways of valuing work, through financial compensation, status and prestige, are not given to these care workers. Nina Hunter (2005) found that women's unpaid care work in South Africa was worth between ZAR585 and ZAR7 619 per month per person, with an estimated mean of ZAR4 395. This is much more than the social grants issued to mothers and grandmothers.

Ghosh (2017, in Burt et al.) postulated that "much of the work in the future will be within the care economy", which, Burt and co-authors argue, "raises major issues for the future of work and society" and the need "to understand more deeply what 'work and learning' mean within the care economy, particularly that which is concerned with socio-ecological justice". Raworth (2017) proposed that the economy is so much more than the market; along with

wise governance, the processes that sustain households and the commons (including nature) should be more highly valued for the ways in which they support market-based economic activity. It is for this reason that many have called for the post-Covid period to be one in which we 'build back better' by creating economic activities that will benefit all and not only those who are already in a powerful position to dictate the terms, while taking better care of our relationship to nature and natural resources.

Education will be vital in such efforts, including education that mobilises what is already known among people, and place-based knowledge that might be helpful in charting the way forward. In his research paper on indigenous knowledge, food security and the protection of nature in Chimanimani district of Zimbawe, Pindai Sithole demonstrates that farmers here still have considerable indigenous, place-based knowledge about crop management and storage practices that increase food security. He argues that these local practices are less likely than commercial products to cause health problems; they also make households less dependent on markets and thus, more resilient in the face of climate change and other challenges. Interestingly, Sithole found that social bonds are vital for the survival of this knowledge, which in turn also strengthens such bonds. While community educators are often the ones to surface, treasure and share such sustaining local knowledge and practices, Sithole calls for it to be formally recognised and supported with financial investments in research and dissemination, and included in formal education.

Sithole's paper thus echoes the calls in the 2019 Special Issue of SAJEE, which focused on a theme of 'Landscape, memory and learning to change in changing worlds: Contemplating intergenerational learning and traditional knowledge practices within social-ecological landscapes of change', the title of a curated collection of case studies from four continents by O'Donoghue, Sandoval-Rivera and Payyappallimana (2019). Several authors (including Sandoval-Rivera; Shava & Masuku; Mandikonza; and Ndlovu, James & Govender) argued that indigenous, traditional and intergenerational knowledge need to feature in school and post-school educational institutions.

But such a curriculum change is not without challenge, as is evident in the research by Maxwell Opuku and Angela James, who investigated the challenges that culturally-specific environmental ethics from Akan might encounter if introduced in schools in Ghana. Their findings (published here in Volume 36) include a sense among educators and young people that this context-specific knowledge, with a highly spiritual component (including beliefs in nature spirits) may be a step backward, in the face of the benefits of modern scientific knowledge. The Think Piece by Pesanayi, O'Donoghue and Shava in Volume 35 ('Situating Education for Sustainable Development in southern African philosophy and contexts of social-ecological change to enhance curriculum relevance and the common good') makes it clear that educators need a sophisticated approach to support learners in engaging with multiple knowledge forms in the face of uncertain futures. This most recent collection of indigenous knowledge related papers, started in 2019, is rounded off in Volume 36 with the papers from Ghana (Opuku & James) and Zimbabwe (Sithole) in this issue. Scholars interested in this topic are encouraged to refer back to Volume 35, and indeed to several other SAJEE issues over the 38 years of the Journal's existence.

Over the years but particularly in the past decade, authors have highlighted institutional challenges including structural issues, that make the educator's work that much harder. In this issue, Dianne Sennoga and Fathima Ahmed report on recent shifts that have taken place in businesses, in response to the legislation that requires them to report on environmental performance. On some levels the findings are very positive: 96% of the companies sampled in the South African city of Durban say that they are adapting to "mainstreaming environmental issues in business" and many have undertaken environmental training for staff. The carefully designed questionnaire survey on which the paper is based, also provides a deeper analysis: Sennoga and Ahmed found that only 68% of companies report that they are "proactive"; while only 38% allocate more than ZAR60 000 per annum to the environmental training they commit to. This training was found to be mostly linked to health and safety; to be of limited duration; and to be directed almost exclusively at entry-level staff, office workers and temporary staff, rather than management or senior management. The extent to which such training can therefore result in more profound shifts in how the companies do business – the kind of shift that might be part of the call for 'building back better' – will be limited and will certainly encounter challenges if business leaders are not part of a deeper conversation around sustainability.

In another paper on institutional changes, Wilma van Staden writes about curriculum change at South African agricultural training colleges in response to the climate crisis. Van Staden also paints a mixed picture that includes institutional inertia, despite agreement that 'climate smart' agriculture would be a good addition to the curriculum, given how many farmers face droughts, floods and unpredictable seasons. The author positions the sustainability educator as an institutional change agent, who introduces tools and processes to help the role players in the activity system recognise contradictions and work towards overcoming them. Her research shows that this careful attention to change processes can bring about small changes, around which bigger changes may follow. It is a method and process inspiring hope that more is possible.

This introduction to the first five papers of Volume 36, provides a snapshot of formal and informal sectors, schools, post-school and community education contexts, and workplaces, where educators and researchers are at work to understand better the need for and nature of social change and learning processes. All believe that education and training have vital roles to play; and each paper makes a unique and valuable contribution to better understanding how education and educational scholarship can help humanity live in greater, shared security and well-being on this precious planet.

This is the first part of a two-part editorial; the second half will be published with the next group of papers in Volume 36, which, unlike the first five introduced here, will have been written during the Covid19 pandemic. We look forward to further contributions to the various scholarly conversations introduced here, and those many pertinent topics not yet touched on. Submissions are still open, but please submit a full paper by 30 June 2020.

Research papers, including systematic reviews of existing research; short viewpoints; and in-depth think pieces, are welcome. SAJEE is an accredited academic journal and all full papers will be submitted for double-blind peer review. Find the Author Guidelines here.

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