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ARTICLE

"If you can't measure it, it doesn't exist"? Popular education in the shadows of global reporting on adult learning and education

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ABSTRACT
Discourses on adult learning and education (ALE) and in particular the GRALE Report generally have limited coverage of popular education as part of its ecology. Given both the long history of popular education globally as a necessary approach towards affecting transformation and the socio-economic-ecological transformations that are needed, we identify the challenge of incorporating the radical approach of popular education more explicitly into ALE discourses. We proffer suggestions toward this end.

KEYWORDS
Popular education; solidarity; adult learning and education; GRALE Report; SDGs

Introduction

> Freedom without equality is exploitation: equality without freedom is oppression. Solidarity is the common root of freedom and equality (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation 1990).

In February 2017 Budget Day, members and representatives of some 15 civil society organisations and social movements came together outside the Houses of Parliament in Cape Town, South Africa, to demonstrate their anger. Banners and posters proclaimed opposition to 'a secret trillion rand nuclear deal'; they demanded a stop to the deal; they detailed how such funds would prevent the construction of millions of houses and better education and health. Passers-by hooted approval – or averted their eyes, as the calls of 'phantsi (down) trillion and nuclear deal, phantsi!' got louder. A man in a South African flag-T-shirt with a different poster that asked for the removal of the country's president picked up a megaphone and using call-and-response, invited the protesters to join in the slogan of 'down with the president'! one of his supporters responded. An organiser from one of the hosting organisations went across and requested the 'comrade' to step aside. Quietly, she invited him to desist from his call: this demonstration had a clear focus and purpose and while he and his organisation were most welcome to join in, this is not the forum for anti-party-political sloganeering. They were joined by others and a dialogue ensued. The organiser explained the strategic importance of staying focused; she contextualised the protest and reiterated

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the invitation to join in – but insisted they did not attempt to take over. This would be in breach of the collective purpose underlying this protest. A little while later, they parted, laughing together, and he handed over the megaphone and re-assumed his place behind the banner.

Eyerman and Jamison (1991) state that, ‘Social movements are not merely social dramas; they are the social action from where new knowledge including worldviews, ideologies, religions, and scientific theories originate’ (p. 14). This was a superb moment of political education and strategic learning on the picket-line, a lesson in the art of public protest and tactical action. It was a demonstration of particular knowledge and skill that were grown and nurtured in political, activist experience and struggle to balance freedom and equality. As participant-observers who share the beliefs and values of the organising body, we realised that even within the ranks of a common opposition we cannot assume agreement and strategic understanding. We also saw how swift and convincing political education on the picket line can be when offered by a skilled activist in the roles of both organiser and educator. We would argue, it was popular education in essence: rooted in the experience and interests of ordinary people, highly charged politically and deeply democratic in process, arising out of a tension defined by the dynamics of time and place and aimed at action that would further opposition to a particular issue.

Having arrived at the courthouse, some demonstrators performed a short skit for the others. The performance drew attention to how people in South Africa are ‘robbed blind’ by various government deals – and how the secret nuclear deal would seal the fate of poverty. It ended with demonstrators being invited to join in to chase the ‘boss’ and her lackey away. The performance invited laughter; it showed a well-known situation, a brief analysis and a suggested response – and offered this up for discussion. The ‘audience’ was activated – they engaged animatedly. Social movement learning includes both learning by people who are participants in social movements and learning by people outside of social movements through the impact they make (Hall and Clover 2005). This performance was a demonstration of both – as passers-by walked on, they laughed, discussing what they saw.

Moving from an illustration of popular education within civil society, we take stock of a world in which education is increasingly being defined as the means to entrench the dominant ideology of growth-led economic development, where popular education is often overlooked. This is at a time also when civil society organisations are envisaging alternatives. For example, a common refrain at both major civil society meetings of the World Social Forum (WSF) held in Montreal in August 2016 and the Association for Women in Development (AWID) conference in Bahia in September 2016, was that ‘We need systems change and climate justice’.

Popular education thrives in times of heightened socio-economic and political contestation. Across many parts of the world, protest actions are taking place on vast scales in opposition to poverty, racism, misogyny, war, climate injustice, amongst others. We live in the ‘time of monsters’[1], as Antonio Gramsci put it, in which every person is pitched against the other in competition driven by individualism at all costs, in a life-denying ideology that creates conditions that enforce and celebrate isolation and alienation. For this, ‘we have destroyed the essence of humanity: our connectedness' (Monbiot 2014). This is precisely a time when social activists, artists and popular educators respond with creativity and decisiveness to re-create connection and solidarity. Popular education is once more an essential, but often marginal, part of the ecology of adult learning and education.

We turn now to discuss briefly the state of adult learning and education (ALE) and in particular the recent GRALE Report (UIL 2016a, 2016b) before we draw on experience in and theory of popular education as a social practice that attempts to forge solidarity amongst and across communities in order to find hope and learn to sustain life. Given the long history of popular education, all over the world, as a necessary approach towards affecting transformation and the dire need not simply to ameliorate an unjust world, we identify the challenge of incorporating the vibrant world of popular education more explicitly into ALE discourses and reporting.

Adult learning and education (ALE)

UNESCO through the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) plays a significant role in sustaining a holistic focus on adult learning and education within a lifelong learning philosophy and approach. It has played an important role in lobbying within UNESCO to ensure that lifelong learning has been taken up towards the 2030 Agenda and in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as a cross-cutting issue, but particularly in Goal 4.

The SDGs are not without their critics. When the UNESCO Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted, critics suggested the SDGs 'aim to save the world without transforming it'. Like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) before them, they reflect the priorities of the world's most powerful and affluent countries while prescribing goals for 'the South' (Muchhala and Sengupta 2014). Hickel (2015) argues that the SDGs are toothless, undermined by their devotion to growth: 'They fail to accept that mass impoverishment is the product of extreme wealth accumulation and overconsumption by a few, which entails processes of enclosure, extraction, and exploitation along the way'. These views illustrate the political contestations within the SDGs; also those related to the socio-economic purposes of education and training.

Questions about the roles and effectiveness of ALE are being raised sharply particularly in the light of the political developments in both the United Kingdom (UK) with the BREXIT vote to exit the European Union and the USA's presidential election. Tuckett (2017) recently described the demise of 'life wide' ALE in the UK with the withdrawal of public support for liberal education; the demise of convivial and cooperative social spaces for learning; the marketisation and commodification of ALE (Fejes and Olesen 2016); the narrowing of the adult curriculum to a 'qualifications factory'; and the abject failure to contribute effectively to the UK referendum debates then, and for that matter, now. Tuckett believes that 'The rise of populist authoritarianism is a direct threat to adult learning' (Email communications between Alan Tuckett and Shirley Walters, 8/1/17; 20/2/17).

Within the UNESCO framework, the importance of lifelong learning (LLL) as a humanistic, rights-based, holistic and sector-wide approach to learning is widely recognised. As the Concept Note of UNESCO Institute of Lifelong Learning (UIL 2016c) states, this recognition is no longer confined to specific countries or regions but also informs global education plans. UIL asserts that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Education 2030 Framework for Action 'represents a significant step forward in positioning LLL as a main driver of health, economic growth, employment, sustainable consumption and production, and environmental awareness' (p. 1). While LLL has an important role to play in achieving all of the SDGs, it is at the centre of SDG Goal 4 which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote LLL opportunities for all.

The formulation of the SDGs can be seen as both a great achievement within the global community and 'too little too late', depending on your perspective. They carry within them hope for some, and for others, scepticism – 'hope' because at last sustainable development is agreed to be the most critical frame for the UN to reference as it tackles global issues; scepticism because in the views of some analysts like Hickel (2015), 'The SDGs fail us …. They offer to tinker with the global economic system in a well-meaning bid to make it all seem a bit less violent. But this is not a time for tinkering'.

A contemporary document relevant to this discussion, which also comes from UNESCO, is *Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good?* (UNESCO 2015). This is a contribution to re-visioning education in a changing world and builds on UNESCO's main task as a global observatory of social transformation. Its purpose is to stimulate public policy debate focused specifically on education for a rapidly changing world. The book adopts two central categories: a humanistic vision of education and education as a common good, beyond the notion of public good. These two concepts, Torres (2016) believes, may be of help to rethink ALE within new social realities such as increased life expectancy of the population worldwide and the lifelong learning paradigm. However, she states that ALE is largely absent in the document and 'has a marginal place in Goal 4 of the SDGs'.

Another document from UNESCO, but which conveys a different message about ALE, is the third *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE III) *Report* (UIL 2016b) It provides 'powerful data and practical examples showing that adult learning and education helps individuals become and stay healthier, improve their economic prospects, and be more informed and active citizens, no matter where in the world they live' (UIL 2016b, p. 8). The GRALE Report makes a bid for a holistic understanding of ALE by including as much data as possible on health and wellbeing, adult literacy and basic education, workplace education and training, social, civic and community life. It attempts to thread together in interlinked ways, worlds that are so often kept apart through the structures of financing and governance of ALE. It is an advocacy document towards a collective conceptual understanding and approach to a humanistic, rights-based, holistic and sector-wide approach to ALE.

The downside of the document however, is that the data are from countries who are self-reporting; many are not using the same definition of ALE, with some still equating ALE with literacy. The data in the report are hard to comprehend fully and require further elaboration if the report is to stand up to scrutiny. Furthermore, the worlds of social movement learning and popular education are not addressed explicitly in the documents–not surprisingly, since such data are rarely generated through desk-top study but require on-the-ground engagement with participants in educating/learning action processes. This limitation is alluded to in GRALE 111 (2016b: 108) when it is stated that, ‘In particular further work is needed to examine the causal effects of ALE on factors like political engagement, social cohesion and civic society’. Our argument is that this limitation needs collective attention and imagination if we are to help elaborate more fully on the 2030 Agenda ‘to sustain life’. We turn now to a discussion of popular education in order to imagine how this limitation may be ameliorated in future.

What and why of popular education

Popular education means different things to different people. Definitions of popular education range widely from employing participatory methods for personal development, to skills development in poor communities, to acting as part of overtly political anti-capitalist projects (von Kotze et al. 2016). In the GRALE Report (UIL 2016b, p.106), there is a chapter on ‘Social, civic and community life’ where individuals’ learning gains are described as literacy and numeracy, practical skills, life skills, and cultural learning. In the benefits to communities and societies, the report identifies social cohesion, integration and inclusion; social capital; participation in social, civic and community activities; learning communities i.e. ethical economies, ecological awareness and environmental sustainability. These are all important outcomes of forms of community adult education. In addition, the chapter highlights what in Sweden is referred to as popular adult education and in particular the study circles which have played a significant role in Sweden’s ‘system of democracy as dialogue’ (ibid: 112). There is also a brief mention that ‘In some countries, popular adult education has long been associated with struggles for social transformation. Building on the work of Paulo Freire, popular education has been advocated as a political, social and educational process’ (ibid: 112).

It is this latter tradition with which we are most concerned, particularly since, as Kane (1999, p. 56) lamented, ‘it has been reduced to a de-politicised, if not outright reactionary technicism in which “popular” simply means that the target group is the poorest sector’ (p. 56). We concur with Martin (1999, p. 4) when he argues that popular education is ‘rooted in the interests, aspirations and struggles of ordinary people’, ‘is overtly political and critical of the status quo’ and committed to ‘progressive social and political change’. It is both a theory and a practice of social action, underpinned by the following key principles:

- Socio-ecological justice, both in process and in proposed outcomes;
- Grounded in the daily social, economic, political and cultural reality of people whose experiences throw up the questions and contradictions they wish to examine and reflect on in order to change them;
- Dialogue: all participants engage in dialogue and analysis and in the process develop their ‘voice’ to ‘speak up and out’;

- Action and reflection – what Freire called ‘praxis’: the purpose of learning to ‘read the world’ is to change it.

Unlike dominant global models of education, popular education is not about identifying skills deficits in order to better prepare individuals for the marketplace but rather, it seeks to draw on the collective knowledge and experiences of life struggles and activism, on historical and culturally specific understandings, in order to develop coherent theory and practice to challenge the individualised, commodified, social world. Here, economics is part of the lived realities for daily survival of participating learners and educators. Popular education assumes a view from below.

At best, popular education is embedded within a popular democratic politics rather than a populist one. What do we mean by this? Kipfer (2016) states that authoritarian populism operates with a profoundly anti-democratic conception of ‘the people’. He argues (Kipfer 2016, p.314) that one of the distinct features of recent right-wing populism is its close connection to economic liberalism. Furthermore, that the rise of today’s right-wing populism can be explained with reference to complex relationships among and between economic restructuring, socio-political struggle and ideology. Popular democracy combines claims to ‘the people’ with concrete references to movements e.g. labour, feminist, ecology and social groups like workers, students, migrants, oppressed and so forth.

For popular educators, people are organised from below through open-ended forms of egalitarian decision-making. Hence, radical popular educators see as one of their most important challenges the critical awakening of people to the ideas and forces of power that shape everyday reality in unequal and unjust ways, as this is the basis for joining a struggle to resist and affect change. The difficulty begins with making visible what appears as normal and ‘natural’, then analysing interests and powers that shape and maintain those conditions, and realising they are constructed and therefore changeable, planning action. The second step in popular education is to help people realise that such change requires a collective struggle. The learning that happens in the struggle, as illustrated in our example in the introduction, may fundamentally alter people’s thinking as they recognise they are, indeed, able to affect change. They acknowledge their interdependence with each other and usually experience this as positive and empowering. As Carpenter (2017) notes, ‘To transform our relations amongst ourselves and with our planet, we must be hell-bent on a praxis that confronts our own limitations, that is based in generosity and humility, and that is committed to the revolutionary potential of learning. We must think about how we think, together’. This interdependence asserts mutuality, reciprocity, as fundamental values that make up both our humanity and collective survival. Furthermore, African thought leaders, Chilisa and Malunga (2013) remind us, ‘The wellness reflected in the relationship between people extends also to non-living things, emphasising that evaluation from an African perspective should include a holistic approach that links an intervention to the sustainability of the ecosystem and environment around it’.

Popular education includes a utopian dimension; it is a medium for dreaming, for imagining other futures, alternatives that are to be created (Freire 2014). Freire (1972, pp. 39–40) proposes that as a moment in a historical process, the announced reality (in popular education) 'is already present in the act of denunciation and annunciation'. He (Freire, 2014, p. 33) insists that

> Reality can be transformed and must be transformed. The fact is that my dreams remain alive; the power of my dreams leads me to say … please do not give up. Do not allow this new ideology of fatalism to kill your need to dream. Without dreams there is no life, without dreams there is no human existence, without dreams there are no more human beings.

A popular education that acknowledges the connectedness and interdependence of all living things, and the mutual obligation to respect (rather than simply use and exploit) the living and the spirit world is one means - and indeed an end - towards turning the dream into reality. Rejecting heroic individualism, we value, instead, ethics of mutuality, friendship and strategies of collectivity. Yet, as Freire (1972) warned, utopian hope is engagement full of risk as it involves 'having faith in the people, solidarity with them' (p. 47).

Alternative futures

Given the dire warnings for the future of life on the planet, there are many initiatives globally to re-vision how to sustain life of all sentient beings. At the AWID Conference, 1500 people from over 135 countries were assisted by an NGO, The Fearless Collective, to envisage what a feminist village of the future could look like. There were mapmaking workshops where participants collectively wove visionary feminist strategies and systems, institutions and cultures of the future – they explored themes of governance and economies, pleasure and sexualities, environment and nature, religion and spirituality through collective imaginings. They used feminist popular education methodologies where all participated and played, performed, peered and poked at possibilities. Participants left Brazil inspired that indeed 'another world is possible'.

Another example of a systematic approach to both envisioning the future and transitioning towards is described by Paul Raskin, a theoretical physicist, in *Journey to Earthland* (Raskin 2016). After arguing for the urgency of the contemporary conjuncture, and his initial concern that the SDGs would become 'another toothless edict, lacking the political commitment and financial resources needed to convert good intention into facts on the ground' (p. 40), he describes the impatience of nascent global citizen movements that have the potential to galvanise and give leadership within global communities, in alliance with forward-looking governments, businesses and civil society organisations. He is clear that the realisation of the promise of the 2030 Agenda will only occur through popular ferment in alliance with progressive forces. We concur with this but insist that the approach to organising must be infused with a popular, not populist, democratic ethos.

Forging solidarity: popular education at work

There is a long history of people's resistance to oppression and exploitation around the world. Popular education initiatives cannot be separated from political conditions where local/global ideas and practices rise and fall. The history of systematic education initiatives in the search for alternatives has been an ongoing process albeit with interruptions, pauses, varying pulses and intensities, and different strands. In our recent book (von Kotze and Walters 2017) a rich array of examples are described where ‘forging solidarity’ is the primary focus. These are practices where there is a conscious effort to build more collective political praxis in contrast to the dominant, ideology of competitive individualism.

Solidarity has many possible meanings because, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2012, p.46) suggests, it is idealised. Crowther and Shaw (2017) allude to the different meanings ascribed to solidarity, as the term has morphed ‘into diluted or substitute concepts such as “social capital” and “social cohesion”’. Deshpande (2017) articulates clearly that solidarity has nothing to do with charity. Naidoo (2017) talking about her participation on the Women’s Boat to Gaza, asserts that ‘even as we have choice, the possibility to not hear and not see the injustices next door or far away, is not an option’ (p. 49). The defining principles of solidarity are clearly articulated here: a collective stand against structural injustice, an emerging political relation with/to others in opposition to powerful authorities that oppress and exploit.

However, solidarity cannot be simply declared – it is a political relationship that has to be created, forged. We contend that the forging process involves the preparedness to give (up) and be open to re-moulding as part of a solidarity grouping. This is a slow, sometimes painful, but also energising, process that involves careful strategising, patient mobilising, critical engaging, active experimenting, nowadays combined with savvy media campaigns. Robins (2014) calls this ‘slow activism’: he shows how media focus on extreme forms of brutality, the politics of the barricades that often reflect the very violence that is to be rejected. Everyday oppression and suffering are not newsworthy; the structural conditions that lead to a protest do not make headlines. Behind a demonstration, such as the one described in the introduction is slow, often invisible work, a crucial part of which is education and learning; analysis that shows the causes of suffering as structural violence rather than individual deficit, deciding strategically that a focus on the silence surrounding huge financial decisions would garner more support than a focus on nuclear as opposed to renewable energy because the data are not accessible to many people. What builds power, says activist Zackie Achmat, is the work you do before a protest: ‘the leafleting, the poster work, the house meetings, the mobilisation that you do in the community, the media [briefing] leading up to it, the media posting that reinforces it, and the day-to-day work in the community’ (cited in Robins 2014, p. 100) All of these small acts include learning and many are learned through deliberate education.

Popular education is integral to forging solidarity which is a slow, careful, step-by-step sustained process in which relationships are nurtured with care; where caring work is acknowledged as essential, although it is largely invisible. Critical reflexivity is crucial, as Cornell (2017) warns, especially as the use of the colonisers’ language skews power relations. Forging solidarity is both a means to an end and an end in and of itself. It requires the skilful and artful use of pedagogies of solidarity by social activists and adult educators (Freire 2014).

If you can’t measure it, it doesn’t exist?

Popular education is included as a possibility within the definition of ALE as used in the GRALE 111 Report. But the nature of the report means that ALE which focuses on social movement learning and popular education and that aims at (structural) transformation rather than simply ‘repair work’ is limited. Popular education seeks, together with others, to abolish unjust practices or institutions. It calls on participants to share the commitment to a socially just cause. This commitment entails positive collective moral obligations. These, we would contend, are not necessarily foundational to the SDGs, nor are there clear commitments to fundamental shifts in power relations within and between nations or regions. Therefore, the challenge is to find the political will for real change that radically alters power relations and wealth distribution if there is to be any hope of ‘sustaining life’.

If the understanding of the SDGs is to sustain life and living, it requires a fundamental shift away from patriarchal hierarchies and development that is still seen as synonymous with ‘growth’. The principles of radical popular education point to systems change and environmental justice. This means questioning the very notion of ‘sustainable development’ in order to contest the dominant thinking. We are persuaded by Hickel (2015) who points to the fundamental contradictions in the SDGs. As he says,

> What we need is to tackle the irrationality of endless growth head-on, pointing out that capitalist growth — as measured by GDP — is not the solution to poverty and ecological crisis, but the primary cause. And we need a saner measure of human progress — one that gears us not toward more extraction and consumption by the world’s elite, but more fairness, more equality, more well-being, more sharing, to the benefit of the vast majority of humanity (no page number).

We need radical alternatives - this is the work of popular educators, activists, scientists.

As educators, researchers and ALE policymakers we need to be learners ourselves through participating in imaginative, intellectually challenging, participatory workshops with, for example, the Fearless Collective, who encourage us to be insubordinate; to think in new ways as Govender (2007) demonstrates, with love and courage. We need to be on the picket lines, as we were in Cape Town recently, as part of local/global movements which Raskin (2016) suggests should ‘combine “idealism and realism” in ways that reinforce our hope with scientific rigor’ as we co-create futures.

We need also to learn to overcome the limitation in studies of ALE so that popular education practices which challenge the status quo are accepted as an essential part of the ecology of adult learning and education. At the mid-term Confintea Review held in the Korean city of Suwon in October 2017, the question was raised (Walters 2017) as to the limited presence of popular education in the GRALE 111 Report. There was no definitive answer given to its ‘shadow presence’ but there was a suggestion that given the strong commitment to the need to be able to ‘measure’ forms of ALE, and the fact that popular education is difficult to quantify through conventional research methods, it would take great imagination to include this vast terrain of ALE in future global reports. There was one creative suggestion from the floor that researchers could potentially create a kind of ALE ‘Wikipedia’ to encourage self-reporting on forms of ALE that are difficult to quantify. These and other suggestions of establishing research partnerships with civil society organisations like the International Council for Adult Education (ICAE) or members of the university-based Popular Education Network (PEN), in order to access hard to find data on social movement learning and popular education, are innovations worthy of exploration. Recognising the limitations of available funding, this would require a dedicated budget with a team of researchers working with a representative sample of countries, with in-country partners, trawling literature, undertaking a sample of interviews, possibly honing in on particularly significant themes. Given the goal for the inter-sectoral SDGs, one such theme could be socio-ecological justice struggles which could be mined for ALE data and in this way a start could be made to overcome a limitation identified in the recent GRALE Report.

Moving popular education out of the shadows of global reporting on ALE through challenging conventional research approaches and understandings which may suggest 'that if you can't measure it, it does not exist', will help to strengthen the GRALE Reports going forward. The reports will become more representative of the field as a whole and will help deepen understanding that ALE is implicated across all focal areas of the SDGs, and is essential to sustaining life.

In conclusion, given UIL's important commitment to a humanistic, holistic approach to lifelong learning and ALE we hope that they will be able to take up the challenge offered here when compiling the GRALE 4 report.

Notes

1. A quote by Antonio Gramsci which is being used in contemporary times in response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the USA. Trump's campaign for the presidency was grounded in fear of the "other".

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