

## **Popular education and well-living: a new pedagogical narrative for a learning Planet?**

**Timothy D. Ireland**

It is just over a month since the conclusion of CONFINTEA VII, held in June in Marrakesh, Morocco. The Framework for Action which was adopted in the final plenary of the Conference, identified several Principles and Priority areas amongst which we highlight the question of gender and what it calls the 'considerable gender gap', the need to build a new social contract for education in which Adult Learning and Education (ALE) plays 'a key role' and the need to unlock the potential of ALE for climate action.

In general, the Confinteas have provided an opportunity for the international community to weigh up what has and has not been achieved in the previous decade or more and, on that basis, to agree to new signposts and guidelines for the coming years. CONFINTEA VII will perhaps go down in history as the conference which took place at one of the most delicate and critical moments in recent history, since at least the beginning of the series in 1949 and for this reason its signposts and guidelines are of the utmost importance, not just for education but for the future of humanity.

While the sanitary crisis caused by Coronavirus has gained more space in the press, the unravelling crisis which refuses to go away is that of climate change and global warming and, clearly, the two phenomena are intimately related. At times like this, education is generally indicated as part of the solution. In 2022, there is a feeling that education is no longer part of the solution but a major part of the problem: more of the same will only deepen the crisis and aggravate our problems. It was in this sense that the International Commission on the Futures of Education gave centre stage to the need for a new social contract which it defines as "an implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate for shared benefit' and "one that aims to rebuild our relationships with each other, with the planet, and with technology" (2021, p.2). Without diminishing the importance of the *Marrakesh Framework for Action*, for the field of adult learning and education, it should be read in the context of the report

of the International Commission which by its very nature is a much denser and equally more speculative document.

However, in this article I neither intend to analyse the MFA nor the Futures of Education report, although reference will be made to both. We are still digesting the MFA and *Reimagining our Futures Together* demands a much lengthier analysis. Rather I would like to point briefly to the challenges which humanity at present faces and then focus on two concepts which have become intertwined in Latin America which can perhaps help us to establish 'new signposts and guidelines' for adult educational practice or praxis in the coming years.

Over the last fifty years the field of adult learning and education has become increasingly focused – some would say obsessed – with the world of work. Whilst in industrialised countries the concern of ALE has been with skills, qualifications, and reskilling and requalifying workers for the world of work, in the less industrialised countries in which ALE is more strongly identified with compensatory schooling, that has been justified principally due to the need to provide young people and adults with those competences which are required by the labour market. Hence the dominant narrative for ALE has centred on the competitive requirements of the world of work, with a focus on the individual rather than a collective subject motivated by the imperative to increase production and profits. Both the MFA and the Futures Report – the latter rather more forcibly than the former – point to the need for a change in narrative in which reconnection with the natural world and other forms of life, other forms of knowing, other forms of living is imperative. This should perhaps be called optimistically the survival mode. The existing narrative could perhaps be described as the collective suicide mode in which humanity like a band of lemmings<sup>1</sup> charges gayly headlong towards the abyss.

At the core of this dilemma, we could situate what Hall and Tandon have designated as “knowledge democracy” (Apud Hall & Clover, 2022). This concept, as they suggest, is related to the notion of ‘decolonising knowledge’ or what we might call ‘epistemological justice’ and is based on several principles. These include the recognition of multiple epistemologies which “extend beyond the Western Eurocentric knowledge system to Indigenous knowledges

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<sup>1</sup> A lemming is a small animal similar to a mouse that travels in large groups and often follows other lemmings into dangerous situations. If a group of people does something like lemmings, they all do the same thing as someone else even though it may be stupid, harmful, or dangerous.

and other ancient place-based knowledge”, the recognition that knowledge is produced in multiple spheres and that the attempt to assert the exclusive right of academia to produce and share knowledge is yet another example of our epistemological arrogance, the recognition that marginalised, excluded and inferiorised groups produce knowledge which is a critical component in movements for social justice and, finally, that communities have a right to control their own knowledge. The Latin American concepts of ‘popular education’ and ‘well-living’ (*buen vivir*) could both be considered as constituting other forms of knowing, as being part of the movement to decolonise knowledge and as representing ways in which both popular and indigenous movements have reasserted their right to transmit and recreate their ‘other place-based knowledge’ as an essential component of education for life.

In what sense do we suggest then that the period in which we are living can be characterised as one of the most delicate and critical moments in recent history, since at least the end of the last global conflict in 1945? Whilst there are multiple factors which contribute to this situation, I intend to highlight just five although recognising that other crucial components of the crisis exist.

According to the latest report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], half the world’s population is now ‘highly vulnerable’, with the risk of whole communities being erased and many others threatened with extinction. Nothing threatens the future so inexorably as climate change. António Guterres’ warning on 18<sup>th</sup> May was equally stark: “We must end fossil fuel pollution and accelerate the renewable energy transition, before we incinerate our only home.” The extreme heat wave in Europe at the end of July with temperatures reaching record highs in different parts of the continent is just another example of the challenges which the 26<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on Climate Change (COP26), in November 2021, spelt out. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the pedagogical dimension of this emergency which demands a reset on how we think about the relation between education, development, work and the future of humanity. The ecological crisis is not a passing threat but a cumulative one. Together the pandemic and the ecological crisis oblige us to face up to the fact that the current paradigms of development are materially, ecologically, ethically and humanly unsustainable. We cannot deny that despite important international declarations and agendas, education has been slow to accept its critical role in establishing a new pedagogical narrative which challenges old models.

In Brazil and many other nations the values which are most under attack are democracy and participation which are necessarily based on dialogue – the

capacity to hear the views of others even if we disagree with them. Serious debate has been replaced by and reduced to messaging using social media as a means of reaching that part of the general public which has access to the digital media. Democracy, participation, human rights and ecological justice relate to the very heart of human existence, the capacity to learn, to create human relationships, to comprehend the value of what Freire called 'amorosity' and Illich 'conviviality' and the respect for all forms of life. Democracy, like human rights, is never definitively achieved, it has to be defended and recreated every day, and this in itself is a pedagogical process. As Yuval Harari (2020) expresses it: "A motivated and well-informed population is generally much more powerful and efficient than an ignorant and policed population". In other words, education constitutes a fundamental component of democracy.

Advances in the fields of artificial intelligence, the digital media and other technologies possess enormous potential for solving problems but at the same time, create new challenges. During the pandemic we learnt that access to digital media introduces a new dimension to inequality. In general, technology can include and exclude. Artificial intelligence is being used increasingly to spy on us, and to influence and control us. It is not by chance that Stephen Hawking, the great English physicist, considered artificial intelligence as the greatest challenge to humanity at present precisely because it challenges our very concept of humanity.

Over the last decades, we have seen what Paul Stanistreet [calls](#) the 'depoliticization of education and the grim instrumentalism of neoliberal conceptions of its purpose and value' (2021), in which the focus of education has no longer been that of preparing people for life but only for the labour market. In a similar vein, José Mujica, the former president of Uruguay, describes the process as that of transforming people into consumers and not into citizens, despite the ongoing discussion on global citizenship. The crux of the question is the relationship between the human and natural worlds, or between humanity and other forms of life. For the Brazilian Indigenous leader and philosopher [Ailton Krenak](#) (2020), 'Everything is nature. The cosmos is nature. Everything that I can think of is nature'. The world into which Indigenous people have resisted being incorporated is a world which has converted nature into 'resources' to be exploited in such a way that the market becomes 'everything that is outside/beyond us'. Krenak returns to one of the concepts to which we have delegated the power of attempting to reduce human aggressions on the planet - sustainable development - which he describes as 'a myth invented by the major corporations to justify the assault which they penetrate on our idea of nature'. The COVID-19 pandemic is not an externality but an organism of the planet, a virus, which has launched an attack on 'the

form of unsustainable life which we have adopted by our free choice'. We have developed a style of life which has become divorced from the living organism – Earth – characterized by its attempts to suppress diversity and to deny the plurality of forms of life, existence and habits.

Finally, if we recognize the cultural multiplicity of the world in which we live, with its exuberant human and bioecological diversity, with its diverse cosmologies, religions, visions of the world, belief systems and ethics, we also have to admit that we face not a universe but a pluriverse and, consequently, the replies that we, in the field of education, give to those demands cannot be unique but need to reflect our inherent diversity. To rethink our common destiny and our planetary relations implies radically rethinking how we understand the process of education and formation. This rethinking needs to include/admit/welcome the existence of other epistemologies, besides the dominant western Eurocentric liberal epistemologies.

It is in this context and faced with these challenges that we turn to two closely related concepts produced and practiced in Latin America for decades but only now gaining some kind of acceptance, respectability and recognition as the Western world comes to terms with the shortcomings of its own epistemologies to fundamental alternatives to educational systems which have proven inadequate to revert the crises in which we find ourselves. It is only relatively recently that western science has recognised that Indigenous knowledges and other ancient place-based knowledge are something more than exotic practices to be studied by anthropologists. The UNESCO 2015 report *Rethinking education: Towards a global common good?* the predecessor to the Futures of Education Report, timidly makes reference to *Sumak Kawsay: An alternative view of education* (p.31, Box 3). *Reimagining our Futures Together* goes further in recognising the potential of indigenous and traditional knowledge in contributing to future educations (p, 59 and, specially, p.110 Learning with the living planet, p.124-125<sup>2</sup>).

From the Latin American perspective these two closely related concepts – popular education and well-living (*buen vivir*) – offer possible ways forward in that both contribute to a movement of decolonizing knowledge, being and power. Popular education constitutes a paradigm with the potential to offer new parameters for the international debate especially when, from the

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<sup>2</sup> Decolonizing knowledge calls for greater recognition of the validity and applicability of diverse sources of knowledge to the exigencies of the present and future. It requires a shift away from seeing indigenous epistemologies as objects to be studied rather than viable approaches to understanding and knowing the world.

inter/multicultural and pluriversal point of view, it makes possible a dialogue with other alternative paradigms or southern epistemologies equally ignored or inferiorized by the dominant powers in the West.

Popular education does not begin with Paulo Freire but he is its most eloquent exponent in the twentieth century<sup>3</sup>. For Freire, popular education is an antidote to oppression, “directed at the transformation of society, taking as its starting point the concrete/lived experience to arrive at the theoretical context, which requires epistemological curiosity, problematization, rigour, creativity, dialogue, the experience of praxis and the protagonism of the subjects” (Paludo, 2015, p.178). It constitutes an education which values daily experience and places the quality of life/well-being and collective happiness of its subjects as the goal of education: life as the ultimate curriculum. It is at the same time a right and a fundamental human need, which is part of the ontological vocation of the human being. Learning is part of our DNA as superior animals and of our programming in the Darwinian sense. Popular education is as much concerned with process as with results. It is subject to human agency, and, as process, takes as its fundamental objective that of humanizing, emancipating and making people more creative. In this sense, education is not limited to transmitting but, above all, to producing knowledge as a constituent element of the practice of liberty. Whilst intending to emancipate, education takes dialogue as its starting point and essential instrument.

Starting from our ‘unfinishedness’/incompleteness as human beings, education and learning are understood as processes which underline and underscore our whole life span. Hence the pertinence of the concept of lifelong learning and education. When refusing that fatalistic (neoliberal) thinking which denies the dream of another possible world, utopia becomes the horizon and true reality of the educator. In Freire’s words (2001, p. 52) “The world is not finished. It is always in the process of becoming”. And education as process involves logic and intellect, but also affection and sociability.

Education is never politically neutral because it serves the interests of certain segments of society whilst denying to other segments the most elementary rights. For that reason, education constitutes an intentional political act, since it presupposes a project of society which involves a commitment to liberty and freedom. In this sense, popular education is a pedagogy committed to active

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<sup>3</sup> Streck and Moretti provide a succinct historical analysis of the concept of Popular Education in their chapter "Latin America: Adult and Popular Education in Dialogue", in the Palgrave International Handbook on Adult and Lifelong Education and Learning (2018).

citizenship and political participation - an education, which values and seeks to deepen democracy, placing ethics at the centre of the search for its radicalization.

If we continue to think of education as somehow separate from life - something which can be reduced to an external process involving students, teachers, strategies, classrooms, equipment, curricula, evaluation etc. - we shall miss the big picture which is the human right to survival which can only be guaranteed if we establish a holistic understanding of rights - the rights of all forms of life to life.

Perhaps the most recent and challenging formulation of Popular Education was that produced within the Brazilian government of President Dilma Rousseff in 2014. Entitled "The Framework of Action for Popular Education for Public Policy" the document reflects the evolution of this concept in the complex conjuncture of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seeking to demonstrate the centrality of practices of Popular Education for the formulation of participatory democratic policy. In essence it proposes popular education as a method of government. The document concludes by affirming that: "The principles of popular education can be lived not only in the spaces of public schools, hospitals and universities and faculties, but also in all those educative and formative community and private spaces, as well as those pertaining to other entities which receive public subsidies, by adopting a methodology of popular work based on dialogue between the different ways of knowing". (2014, p.62). The search for new paradigms of education represents part of the progressive disenchantment with the current western models of development and education. The reinvention of Popular Education characterises it as a critical response to European modernity. However, as Illich argued almost fifty years ago:

Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell a new powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story, one so inclusive that it gathers all the bits of our past and our present into a coherent whole, one that even shines some light into the future so that we can take the next step. . . . If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story. (Apud Springer, 2016, p.2)

Part of this 'new powerful tale' or 'alternative story' is necessarily a questioning of standard, accepted forms of knowledge, being and power. Whilst Popular Education challenges the relationships upon which learning processes are

based, the concept of 'well-living' (*buen vivir*) challenges the very nature of development and the relationships between the human and non-human worlds or between different forms of life. It represents, in the words of Donald Rojas (apud Ibañez, 2011), "an indissoluble and interdependent relationship between the universe, nature and humanity", in which the emphasis given to the quality of life should not be interpreted as the capacity to consume or possess goods. What then is the meaning of 'well-living'? Perhaps it helps if we explain what it is not! The concept of 'well-living' should not be reduced or confused with the western notion of well-being. Indeed, as Hessel and Morin (2011, p.24) point out the notion of well-being has dwindled in contemporary civilization to the strictly material sense that implies comfort, wealth and ownership. For Dávalos (2008, s.p), 'well-living' constitutes a life stripped of those parameters which are most dear to modernity and economic growth: "individualism, the search for profit, the cost-benefit relation as a social axiom, the utilization of nature, the strategic relationship between human beings, the total commodification of all spheres of human life, the violence inherent to the egoism of the consumer, etc." He adds that "although the current economic theory attributes to the Cartesian paradigm the notion of the human being as the 'lord and master of nature' and interprets nature as an externality to human history, 'good living' incorporates nature in history (...) not as a productive factor nor as a productive force but as an inherent part of social being. The central concept of 'living well' represents an alternative to the current concepts of development". The fundamental understanding of the Harmony which should exist between the way in which humans relate to the natural world, possesses profound repercussions for learning and education. The way in which knowledge was and is produced takes as its premise this relationship between humanity and nature, which represent two parts of the same unity.

"Buen vivir" or well-living, with its cosmological roots in the original peoples of the continent, has exercised an increasing influence over the way in which we think about Popular Education. Faced by the recognition that "We as human beings are making our very home uninhabitable" Fernandez concludes that Popular Education, historically involved with processes of transformation and social emancipation, identifies new meanings in the ethical, political, pedagogical and epistemological spheres in the concept of 'well-living' which enrich its efforts to achieve the liberation of the common people" (2016, p.31). In the same way as popular education understands that human beings are the subjects and protagonists of their own education, so 'well-living' converts the natural environment into a subject with rights and not an object to be exploited and utilised essentially for human ends.



If we recognise that education is not a preparation for life but life itself, then the corollary of this is that life cannot be reduced to human life. Life embraces diversity and diversity is the essence of life. It is this diversity, which must be at the heart of education, an education which is biocentric rather than anthropocentric, an education whose vital and revitalising source are those pedagogies to be learnt from indigenous people worldwide. In addition, with it must come the recognition that education is life-wide since learning is a process, which is independent of formal institutional spaces.

In many parts of the world, the ALE agenda is characterized as being an instrument which seeks to reduce and correct negative indexes: to reduce poverty, 'eradicate' illiteracy, reduce inequality (between rich and poor, whites and blacks, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, men and women, countryside and city), to correct school flow, to elevate low rates of schooling, to diminish iniquity by increasing social inclusion. This appears to reinforce the pronounced risk of the process of dehumanization, and not to achieve or develop the human potential to be more.

As humans, learning is a basic human need, essential to our survival as a species. And at the same time, we need to remember, as Hessel and Morin (2011, p.50) remind us, what a human being really is, "in our threefold nature as biological, individual and social entities". Climate change and the ecological crisis have demonstrated forcibly that learning is not a one-way process - we humans must learn from nature and this demands a new pedagogical relationship with the Planet. As Paul Belanger affirmed at the end of CONFINTEA VI, in Belém, in 2009: "The planet will only survive if it becomes a learning planet". This will require citizens of all ages to play their part and to have the humility to recognise that we, humans, are just one of the multiple forms of life, which have a right to existence on this planet and need to learn how to cohabit in what is our common home.

As indicated at the beginning of this article, although the most recent international documents reveal a symbolic but growing opening to other forms of knowing and knowledge, the central debate remains anchored in essentially occidental and Eurocentric epistemologies regarding the relationship between education, sustainable development and interdependence in a finite planet. In order to represent the diverse ways of conceiving processes of development and education, we understand that it is essential to pluriversalise instead of universalising the debate concerning a new educational agenda capable of providing answers to the multiple challenges which the world is facing. In this way it may be possible to stimulate a discussion which is more intercultural than multicultural and to articulate a diversity of solutions and replies to those

same problems in order not to reproduce that universalism in which only one decides in the name of all, without recognising the epistemic diversity of the universe.

The inclusion of new epistemological nuances would open the perspective for an agenda based on an increasingly holistic and less anthropocentric vision, in which humans and nature would no longer be competitors, but partners, in that they share the same rights within a process of coexistence and cooperation which contemplates their necessities within the limits established by the ecosystem.

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## **Popular education and well-living: a new pedagogical narrative for a learning Planet?**

Timothy D. Ireland

### **Abstract**

In the wake of CONFINTEA VII, this article points briefly to the challenges which humanity at present faces and then focuses on two concepts which have become intertwined in Latin America which can perhaps help us to establish 'new signposts and guidelines' for adult educational practice or praxis in the coming years. The Latin American concepts of 'popular education' and 'well-living' (*buen vivir*) could both be considered as constituting other forms of knowing, as being part of the movement to decolonise knowledge and as representing ways in which both popular and indigenous movements have reasserted their right to transmit and recreate their 'other place-based knowledge' as an essential component of education for life. Both are related to the notion of 'decolonising knowledge' or what we might call 'epistemological justice' or 'knowledge democracy'.

### **Key words**

Popular education; well-living (*buen vivir*); epistemological justice; adult learning and education; diversity.

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## **L'éducation populaire et le bien-vivre : un nouveau récit pédagogique pour une planète apprenante ?**

Timothy D. Ireland

### **Résumé**

Dans le sillage de la CONFINTEA VII, cet article évoque brièvement les défis auxquels l'humanité est actuellement confrontée et se concentre ensuite sur deux concepts qui se sont entremêlés en Amérique latine et qui peuvent peut-être nous aider à établir de nouveaux indicateurs et de nouvelles lignes directrices pour la pratique ou la praxis de l'éducation des adultes dans les années à venir. Les concepts latino-américains d'éducation populaire et de bien-vivre (*buen vivir*) peuvent tous deux être considérés comme constituant d'autres formes de savoir, comme faisant partie du mouvement de décolonisation du savoir et comme représentant des façons dont les mouvements populaires et indigènes ont réaffirmé leur droit de transmettre et de recréer leur savoir ancré dans le lieu en tant que composante essentielle de l'éducation à la vie. Ces deux

aspects sont liés à la notion de décolonisation des connaissances, ou à ce que nous pourrions appeler la justice épistémologique ou la démocratie du savoir.

### **Mots clés**

éducation populaire, bien-vivre (buen vivir), justice épistémologique, apprentissage et éducation des adultes, diversité.

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## **Educación popular y buen vivir: ¿una nueva narrativa pedagógica para un Planeta que aprende?**

Timothy D. Ireland

### **Resumen**

A raíz de la CONFINTEA VII, este artículo señala brevemente los desafíos que enfrenta la humanidad en la actualidad y luego se centra en dos conceptos que se han entrelazado en América Latina y que tal vez puedan ayudarnos a establecer nuevas señales y directrices para la práctica o praxis de la educación de adultos en los próximos años. Los conceptos latinoamericanos de educación popular y buen vivir podrían considerarse como constitutivos de otras formas de conocimiento, como parte del movimiento de descolonización del saber y como formas en que los movimientos populares e indígenas han reafirmado su derecho a transmitir y recrear sus saberes anclados en el lugar como componente esencial de la educación para la vida. Ambos están relacionados con la noción de descolonización del conocimiento, o lo que podríamos llamar justicia epistemológica o democracia del conocimiento.

### **Palabras clave**

Educación popular, buen vivir, justicia epistemológica, aprendizaje y educación de adultos, diversidad.