



Call for Papers RELA

Responsible for the world? Adult education and sustainability issues

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On December 14th 2018 Greta Thunberg, a fifteen year old Swedish girl, addressed the world leaders at the United Nations Climate Conference in Katowice (Poland) with the following words. 'You only speak of the green eternal economic growth, because you are too scared of being unpopular. You only talk of moving forward, with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess, even though the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children. But I don't care about being popular. I care about climate justice and the living planet'. Time has come for radical change, was her message. Her example inspired thousands of young people to march the streets in several continents.

The actions of the young challenge the adults¹. Climate scientists are increasingly vocal about

the necessary measures to avoid further damage. Bruno Latour, a widely known philosopher of science, claims that humanity has to come 'Down to Earth' (2018a). Politicians do not know very well how to react in the first place: take the young seriously, try to recuperate the new mass movement or deny the relevance of their claims². However, most observers agree about one thing: there is no way to escape the debate and the taking of necessary, urgent measures any longer. Also the role of education is discussed intensively, particularly the role of school education. But also adult education can play an important role in deepening and furthering the debate. The broad societal awakening on sustainability issues raises questions on what role adult education and adult educators have been playing until now, and what role they can play in the future.

A brief analysis of the international literature on adult education related to environmental and sustainability issues informs us that there is still 'a relatively small, but growing body of work' (Griswold, 2017, p. 9). An important reason for the relatively limited attention for sustainability issues among researchers in adult education is the fact that policies on lifelong learning have in the previous two decades been diverted towards a neo-liberal economic agenda. According to Catherine Casey and Lily Asamoah 'the neo-liberal, human capital oriented model of lifelong learning has achieved a powerful hold in the field of education and lifelong learning' (2016, p. 593). In a similar way, Victoria Orlovic Lovren and Katharina Popovic argue that, 'both sustainability and lifelong learning serve as terms and conceptions that are turned into general slogans, promoted as policy instruments, typically for the end purpose of enhancing economic competitiveness ..' (2018, p. 13). They furthermore claim that,

¹ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/europe-climate-change-protests-teens>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVeYOPJZ8oc>

in spite of the fact that adult education and sustainability issues are natural allies, ‘it is difficult if not impossible, to discuss what the role of adult education is – and whether it is considered an inherent part of the education goals that will lead to sustainability’ (ibid., p. 2). But as Milana, Rasmussen and Holford (2016) indicate adult education has often also been a driver of radical social and political movements. It is possible then that adult education contributes to an ontology that moves away from economic growth and an essentially anthropocentric approach. Milana, Rasmussen and Holford (2016) refer among others to Seghezze (2009) who searches for linking sustainability to issues of social justice and alternative notions of time, space and territory. Likewise, Latour (2018b, p. 253) calls for a ‘recognition of the grounded, territorialized reality of our existence on Earth’. For Latour we are experiencing a shift from a society in which the collective ‘we’ was based on the importance of modernization and emancipation to a society in which explicitation and attachments become crucial. As Latour writes: ‘as we moved on, through our technologies, through our scientific inquiries, through the extension of our global empires, we rendered more and more explicit the fragility of the life support systems that make our “spheres of existence” possible’ (Latour, 2004, p. 3).

So, important work needs to be done, both theoretically and empirically, if adult education research and theorizing wants to play a significant role in the societal and policy debate on issues of sustainability. Canadian scholars have made an important beginning in research in this field that could be inspiring for policy makers and practitioners. Pierre Walter (2009) has distinguished between four different philosophies of environmental adult education: liberal, progressive, behaviorist and humanistic. Darlene Clover and Robert Hill (2013) distinguish four ways in which adult education can relate to environmental issues. First, by relating educational activities to actions of social movements. Second, by studying the documents that have been published by international organizations such as UNESCO, at the occasion of international conferences (Bélem, Beijing). Third, to create a link between gender (in)equality and issues of sustainability, since women have a crucial role to play in that respect, particularly in development contexts. But also European scholars, have paid increased attention to the relationship between (adult)education and sustainability. Interesting contributions in this respect can be found in the journal ‘Environmental Education Research’, where attention is paid to (adult-)education research in Germany, the Scandinavian countries and the Benelux-countries. For an overview see (Van Poeck, Wals & König, 2018). Also attention has been paid to processes of social learning in connection with sustainability (see: Wals, 2007). An interesting and recent development in the literature on sustainability education is the search for a navigational approach to educational practices (Decuyper et al., 2019). The focus of this approach is neither instrumental (focused on problem-solving) nor emancipatory (focused on individual transformation) but on the situated attachments people maintain while taking care for a specific, designated place (a shoreline, a brownfield, a park etc.). Learning to navigate points then to the triple capacity of becoming sensitive to the heterogeneity of human and non-human entanglements, of becoming able to slow down one’s habits of orientation and of engaging oneself to formulate propositions about what these situated practices need in order to thrive and prosper

Our aim with this special issue is to move the reflection and debate one step further, while connecting sustainability to issues of social justice and to alternative notions of time, space and education Hence, the research question we suggest for the contributions to this special issue is: ‘What is the contribution of adult education



research and practice to the renewal of the sustainability debate?’ We invite theoretical, empirical and policy oriented papers by the 1st of November 2019. The publication of the special issue is planned in June 2020. Papers accepted at an earlier stage will be published online beforehand. Contributions should be sent to the editors of this issue: danny.wildemeersch@kuleuven.be; joke.vandenabeele@kuleuven.be.

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