



## THINK PIECE

# Working for Living: Popular Education as/at Work for Social-ecological Justice

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### Abstract

Drawing on the working lives of popular educators who are striving for socio-economic and socio-ecological justice, we demonstrate how popular education is a form of care work which is feminised, often undervalued and unrecognised as highly skilled work. It is relational work that aims to forge solidarity with communities and the environment. Given the state of the planet, the radical transformations that are needed, and the future projection of 'work' as including the care economy in large measure, we argue that popular education is a generative site for further exploration of research into work and learning. However, to move popular education as work from the margins means to rethink the current economic system of value. Addressing the contradiction that undervalues work for life/living, popular education engages transformative action motivated by a deep sense of solidarity and a focus on imagining alternatives as an act of hope.

**Keywords:** *work and learning, popular education, care work, solidarity*

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### *Start of a day for Nonkululeko, popular educator, environmental activist, mother*

*It's still dark, when Nonkululeko walks along the busy road past the shopping mall that recently mushroomed out of a wetland. The traders lost their livelihoods when this mall was built, and she misses the morning aroma of grilled chicken and mielies<sup>1</sup>. Instead, the smell of sewerage seeping from the mall assaults her nose. Twice she has reported this sewerage to the municipality, and alerted them to children playing in it and getting sick. Nothing has been done. In the distance, an abandoned mine dump catches the rising sun. Nonkululeko thinks about her colleague, Bulelwa, who works in that area, teaching people about the dangers of the coal dust, and organising awareness campaigns. Yesterday, Bulelwa told her that the mine had offered her a job, again. This seems to be a common strategy to entice activists away from their commitments.*

*Nonkululeko wonders about the meeting she is to attend today. She hopes it will not be another waste of time and expensive transport: last week, a provincial government minister addressed them and talked and talked without even asking about the local problems. People*

*sang protest songs and chased him away. In preparation for that meeting they had spent two days studying air and water pollution. Thabo had taken them on a transect walk and they took photographs of the acid mine drainage streaming into the wetland. Nonkululeko had shared a film about coal mine pollution and they discussed why this happens; they talked about whose interests are served and who the main beneficiaries are from mining. Finally, Bulelwa had facilitated a role play in which they rehearsed how to address the minister with difficult questions and arguments for clean-up operations. They wanted their new knowledge to lead to direct action for change.*

## Introduction

Nonkululeko's life echoes that of many popular educator-activists. In other places, popular educators perform plays about stigmatised infectious diseases, women set up programmes in 'war zones' to keep children safe, others support the establishment of alternative economic activity. Much of their work emerges as they respond to immediate needs while keeping in mind the longer-term intent; while they engage locally, they also deal with the effects of global capitalism. When done well, their work is invisible as movements take hold of the struggles and speak up and out through their actions. Yet, spanning from dangerous environmental pollutants to the anger of people in power whose interests are being challenged, dealing with the insecurity of personal finances and the high expectations of people they work with, their work is very risky and difficult. Not least because it aims at transformation as it mobilises and galvanises solidarity action against a system that benefits the few. Globally, environmental activists are murdered every week, and many disappear without trace. In 2017 alone, by August, 117 had been killed (Ulmanu, Evans & Brown, 2017). In Latin America, many are women who work as full-time activists and educators for the survival of their households, communities and the environment on which all depend.

In this article we are responding, in part, to the suggestion by Willis, McKenzie and Harris (2009, p. 1) that policies, systems and programmes are failing "to adapt to the changing nature of work and society and are thereby missing a crucial opportunity to enable the growth of more sustainable and equitable communities". Instead of looking at work in the context of the formal economy, here, we focus on work undertaken in the interstices of societies. We argue that the activities of popular educators constitute highly skilled care work that can be deeply transformative. Their 'training' is often on site, involving a long process of apprenticeship through collective action with more experienced popular educator-activists.

We will first address our research approach, then outline the conceptual framework with a discussion of 'popular education' as a distinct approach to (adult) education, characterised by a radical belief in social justice. Next, we elaborate our understanding of work as oriented towards creating and supporting life. We do so by drawing on the sustainable livelihoods perspective and literature around 'care work'. We then elaborate popular education as work with examples of popular education as/at work. We focus particularly on that aspect of popular education which 'forges solidarity' which, we argue, makes the work of popular educators transformative. We close with an argument for why we believe understanding the work of popular educator-

activists, with its focus on building solidarity and its explicit outlook towards alternative futures, is relevant within the contemporary researching work and learning frame.

## Research approach

This paper builds on our individual and collective involvement over several years as popular educators and scholar-activists. More specifically, we draw on our deep engagement with a research and publishing process which culminated in the book *Forging Solidarity: Popular education at work* (Von Kotze & Walters, 2017). Over an eighteen-month period, 26 popular educator-activists from eight countries participated actively in the co-creation of the book through two writing workshops, a public seminar and supported, collaborative and individual writing of chapters. The book was part of an research project that began in 2014, *Re-membering Traditions of Popular Education in South Africa*.<sup>2</sup>

Animating the book's narratives of popular educators at work was a two-fold question: in what ways are popular educators in the Global South, and particularly in South Africa, responding to various economic, political, cultural and environmental conditions? And in so doing, are they planting seeds of hope for and imaginings of alternative futures which can connect individuals and communities locally and globally to achieve economic, ecological and social justice?

## Conceptual framework

### What and why of popular education

Popular education thrives in times of heightened socio-economic and political contestation and in opposition to poverty, racism, misogyny, war, and climate injustice, amongst other injustices. This is precisely when activists and/as popular educators drawing on art (Clover, 2012; Von Kotze, 2017) and social movement learning (Hall et al., 2012) respond with creativity and decisiveness to re-create connection and solidarity. The work of social activists, artists and popular educators is an essential, but often forgotten, part of the ecology of work and learning.

Popular education means different things to different people.<sup>3</sup> We concur with Martin (1999, p. 4) who argued 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 ‘voices’ to ‘speak up and out’; and
- Action and reflection – what Paulo Freire called ‘praxis’.

Popular education is not about identifying skills deficits in order to better prepare individuals for the marketplace. Rather, it seeks to draw on the collective knowledge and experiences of life's struggles and activism, on historical understandings, in order to develop coherent theory and practice to challenge the individualised, commodified, socio-economic world. Here, economics is part of the lived realities of what Hart (2002, p. 199) called "the viewpoint of the 'survivors' of the war against subsistence".

Popular educators see one of their most important challenges as engaging people critically with the ideas and analyses of power that shape everyday reality in unequal, uncaring and unjust ways. Understanding this is the basis for joining a struggle to resist and effect change. The difficulty begins with making visible what appears normal and natural, then surfacing and naming interests and powers that shape and maintain those conditions. Structural and systems changes require collective struggle. The learning that occurs in struggle may alter people's understanding fundamentally, as they experience their own agency and collective power in affecting change. Cullors and Ross (2017), two of the founders of #blacklivesmatter, reflected on how being part of a movement that challenges oppression builds a sense of hope and belonging amongst the youth involved in the movement.

### **Forging solidarity**

The vignette of Nonkululeko opening this paper exemplifies the work of popular education as work that builds solidarity and nurtures hope through imagining alternative futures. *Forging Solidarity: Popular Education at Work* (Von Kotze & Walters, 2017) offers an array of such examples where 'forging solidarity' is the primary focus of the educational endeavour. Many of the chapters reveal practices as conscious efforts to build more collective political praxis in contrast to the dominant ideology of competitive individualism in our society.

Solidarity has many possible meanings and can be idealised because, as Gaztambide-Fernández (2012, p. 46) suggested, it has been appropriated, diluted or substituted with concepts such as 'social capital' and 'social cohesion'. Kip (2016, p. 318) concurred: as a result of the tensions among different interpretations, invocations of solidarity "have been marked by ambiguity; descriptive and prescriptive aspects blur together". We agree with Waterman (in Landy Darcy & Gutiérrez, 2014) that "solidarity is a relationship forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression". Thus, what enables solidarity is a sense of common resistance. Deshpande (2017, p. 119) explained the collaboration between theatre groups in India and Palestine as solidarity that has nothing to do with charity or aid, nor is it an erasure of complicity. Rather, solidarity is a reaction to a condition which afflicts certain 'others' independently of their personal or social character. When we see our fate in the fate of the other, the reciprocal relation acknowledges "the possibility that one is or could be confronted with the same situation as the other, it means that his (sic) fate affects me in a significant way" (Grieves & Clark, 2015, p. 293).

However, solidarity cannot be simply declared a political relationship; it has to be created. This may involve, for example, taking an 'inventory' of who we are in relation to others, at a particular point. It means entering into an ongoing dialogue and negotiation that is mindful of power differentials and common or disparate purposes. This 'forging' process involves

being prepared to give (up) and be open to re-moulding as part of a solidarity grouping. It is a slow, sometimes painful, but also energising process that requires careful strategising, patient mobilising, critical engaging and active experimentation; nowadays this is often combined with savvy media campaigns. Robins (2014) called this ‘slow activism’. He showed how much the media focuses on extreme forms of brutality, the politics of the barricades that often mirror the very violence to be rejected. Everyday oppression and suffering is not newsworthy; the structural conditions that lead to a protest do not make headlines. Education and learning are crucial parts of the slow, often invisible work of mobilising and organising, so that participants understand the causes of suffering as structural violence rather than individual deficits. What builds collective power, according to activist Zackie Achmat, is the work one does 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).

### **Work for living**

A livelihood approach to work is people-centred; it acknowledges and values mutuality and interdependence and hence is oriented towards the collective. It focuses particularly on all the diverse activities necessary for daily living, including building relationships, caring for others and the earth, and mobilising for action (Von Kotze, 2009). Here, work is “work that is expended in the creation, re-creation and maintenance of immediate life” (Bennholdt-Thomsen & Mies, 1999, p. 20).

The care economy builds on conceptualisations of work for living (not *a* living). In a lecture, Ghosh (7 September 2017) elaborated that ‘care work’ concerns everything that helps others to function. It is primarily relational work that is essential to the functioning of families, communities and society as a whole. Because care work is highly gendered and involves emotional labour, there is potential for overwork and exploitation. It is often highly skilled and precarious, but these dimensions are seldom taken into account. It is work that refuses to polarise ecological and social well-being and therefore includes the work required for deep sustainability that is just and democratic in the face of changing socio-ecological systems.

Care work has a contradictory position with respect to the mainstream economy: it is central to the ‘apparent’ functionality of the capitalist system; however, it is marginalised in capitalist logic of value. It can therefore be referred to as an externalised cost: as with the exploitation of natural resources, care work is barely recognised in its contribution to the economy. We argue that it is this contradiction in the idea of work that popular education confronts at multiple levels. This makes it transformative, as we illustrate below.

### **Popular educators at work**

Nonkululeko’s environmental justice activism has many of the characteristics of care work as described by Ghosh. She is both ‘the Earth’s comrade’ (Burt & Lusithi, 2017) and a caretaker for her family and community. Her work is grounded in the everyday socio-economic, ecological, political and cultural realities of people and it is deeply relational. She sends out a strong signal

that care work is not simply about concern for a messed-up present but involves the creation of an-other future. She is working to raise the consciousness of community members about the degradation of the environment, its causes, its effects on health and livelihoods as well as nature, with hope that there is another way to live – yet ‘officially’ she exists, at most, as part of the statistics of the unemployed (and unemployable).

Nonkululeko is an organiser and an educator with multiple and diverse capabilities. Given the ‘slow violence’ (Nixon, 2011) of environmental degradation, her knowledge and social practices are crucially important. The environmental crisis is directly linked to the current economic system where humans and the earth are little more than resources for a market, and a political system that props up this market, whose sole logic is based on the criteria of efficiency to maximise growth. Here, suggested De Sousa Santos (2006), only the criterion of efficiency is seen to have any value. Environmental justice activists who are struggling for food security and access to clean water and energy are needed in their droves to reveal this slow violence, and they need courage and agency to imagine different livelihoods based on a value of caring for ourselves and the earth. Nonkululeko works long hours against many odds, in solidarity with members of the community, and her family; yet she is most probably viewed by many in the formal economy as ‘unskilled’. Importantly, her knowledge emerges from the struggles she engages in and is nurtured directly through precipitating and responding to particular challenges within specific contexts and power relations. Her practices show the ability to adapt and innovate, negotiate and support, where necessary, in response to rapidly emerging new conditions and needs. She demonstrates what Chambers (2017, p. 153) has demanded:

More and more we have to think, live, work, and learn in and through the paradigm of complexity, adopting and adapting its words and concepts, values and principles, methods and procedures, behaviours and attitudes, relationships and mindsets. This means countering and transcending much current practice. The new professionalism of practice has to combine knowing better with doing better.

Grandma Jane is another activist. She was introduced to us by Makan (2017, p. 95) who told of the struggles in Blikkiesdorp (a real place name, meaning ‘tin can town’ in Afrikaans). Grandma Jane lives in an emergency housing site on the outskirts of Cape Town which began with forced removals for a global sporting event that took place in 2010 in South Africa. Rows and rows of one-roomed tin houses stretch as far as the eye can see, with not a tree in sight. Grandma Jane is a leader in the Joint Committee, an organisation fighting for decent housing. Years after the famous soccer tournament, residents feel unsafe in the face of limited police security, unemployed youth being recruited into gangs, and the common occurrence of gender-based violence. Dysfunctional sanitation systems and compromised health are the norm.

Struggles escalated in 2015 when residents were told that Cape Town International Airport planned to build a new runway and the residents of Blikkiesdorp might have to move. The questions arose: where were they to be moved to now, would it be more or less decent,

and why was their move only in response to infrastructural development demands? Grandma Jane invited a local activist organisation, Right2Know, to support the building of leadership capacity in the Joint Committee. Through Right2Know they met with other activists, learnt how to structure press releases and to participate critically in the environmental impact study for the proposed airport development. The collective decided on a process of engagement with all stakeholders, moving methodically up the decision-making ladder until they got answers from the local municipality about their future.

Like Nonkululeko, Grandma Jane is an organiser and educator. In the process of struggle, she and the committee learnt the value of sharing technical information so that it becomes useful knowledge for local people, and to use such knowledge in negotiations with powerful officials and interests. This process resonates with Freire's (1972) argument that knowledge is a dialogical act; a political act of knowing (Makan, 2017, p. 103). Grandma Jane's story also highlights the solidarity that is possible between educators and activists from different geographical and social class locations where everyone is learning 'on the job' through a slow process of listening deeply and compassionately, learning from others' perspectives, and producing meaning together. Here, solidarity is expressed as a social justice NGO accompanies community-based educators and activists, with each bringing their expertise and experience, working dialogically as political allies in the interests of greater socio-economic and ecological justice.

## **Pulling threads together**

The vignettes of Nonkululeko and Grandma Jane show that popular education is work for dignity, for justice, and for living, even if it is largely unrecognised as work and mostly unpaid. We suggest that this work can be seen as part of the care economy: "Care is the pillar of the well-being economy", run by all caretakers, such as parents, garbage collectors and environmentalists (Fioramonti, 2017, p. 208). Ironically, much of this work is undertaken by those who can least afford to expend time and energy on education and activism, being preoccupied with concerns and actions for daily food security. Yet, these workers are driven by an understanding of the interdependence of people and the environment and the conviction that they must lead actions to confront the abuse and exploitation, the violence and destruction, for the sake of survival for all.

Ghosh (7 September 2017) has argued that much of the work in the future will be within the care economy. This raises major issues for the future of work and society. It also emphasises the importance of trying to understand more deeply what 'work and learning' mean within the care economy, particularly that which is concerned with socio-ecological justice.

'Futures work', or exploring possibilities in potential futures, is another arena of popular education as work that is transformative. Activist educators kindle anticipatory hope, imagining different ways of organising and being together. As De Sousa Santos (2006) argued, in the face of capitalism's rejection of alternatives, it is more important to affirm the possibility of alternatives than to define them. Part of activists' responsibility is to light the fire of resistance to injustice and to keep it burning. For this, they require an ever-evolving

idea of what that alternative might look like. Gorz (1980, p. 4) asked: “Will it be a capitalism adapted to ecological constraints; or a social, economic, and cultural revolution that abolishes the constraints of capitalism and, in so doing, establishes a new relationship between the individual and society and between people and nature?” There are many ways of imagining radically different futures. Gorz (*ibid.*, p. 8) projected a wishful picture of people spending no more than 20% of their time in necessary employment, and the rest in constructing their world. Popular education is arguably more strongly focussed on critical analysis and collective struggle against the status quo, than on the work of imagining and future-building. But utopia is perhaps best viewed not as a place and time, but as a process of becoming – we make the road by walking (Horton & Freire, 1990), looking for emergent possibilities and opportunities and harnessing those, with others, towards constructing alternatives.

## **Popular education as/at work?**

In summary, we argue four main points. Firstly, that popular education is a form of work that is highly skilled but undervalued and rarely recognised and remunerated accordingly. The essence of this work is relational; it is revealing as transformational praxis. As a form of education it is about learning for living and not only for upskilling to make a living; it is work that nurtures hope by keeping alive an ever-evolving yearning for alternative futures.

Secondly, we argue that given the state of the planet, the radical socio-economic-ecological transformations that are needed and the future projection of ‘work’ as including the care economy in large measure, popular education is a generative site for further exploration of research into work and learning. We have argued that the work of popular education is not widely acknowledged. However, to move popular education work from the ‘margins’ means to rethink the current system of value. Through addressing the contradiction that is the undervaluing of work for life, popular education implies transformative action that comes with care work that is motivated by a deep sense of solidarity and a focus on imagining alternatives as an act of hope. The transformational nature of this work mirrors back onto other categories of work and asks: how does this work contribute to living? It implies that care work is embraced by all as citizens of the planet not only those majorities who are primarily bearing the cost of the de-humanising effects of capitalism, while contributing much less, in comparison, to the degradation of our world.

Thirdly, it is essential to shift how educators in further and higher education think about work in the context of our socio ecological crisis and how we support, recognise and learn from those who do work for living. Instead of only focusing on cognitive and technical knowledge, we need to acknowledge the importance of relational and emotional knowledge mobilised by care workers (environmental activists, justice activists, popular educators, mothers, carers) towards human survival within a sustainable planet.

Fourthly, any environmental work is political work. Popular education has a long history of unearthing and challenging power relations and systems that maintain and support the status quo and mobilising and organising struggles for collective change. Within ecological movements we can learn from spaces described by Salleh (in Pellow, 2018, p. 481). as “the



breath-taking spectrum of ecofeminist social movement actions, movements, protests, conferences, artistry, research, writings, and myriad publications by women from all corners of the earth...”

In particular, environmental work can become more attuned to pedagogies that have long existed: embracing ‘heads, hearts and hands’, acknowledging and incorporating realities of trauma, working across all phases of life. This is about acknowledging popular education as work and bringing the work of popular educators to the service of environmental workers.

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## Endnotes

1. South African word for ‘corn’.
2. The research for this article was supported by the South African based National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences (NIHSS). The research was located at the University of the Western Cape and worked across universities and civil society organisations. The project aimed to uncover and recover forgotten traditions of popular education that generate knowledge within oppositional social movements and other civil society organisations. See [www.populareducation.co.za](http://www.populareducation.co.za) for further background information.
3. Definitions of popular education range from employing participatory methods for individual development, often referred to as ‘empowerment’, to acting as part of overtly political anti-capitalist projects (Von Kotze, Walters & Lockett, 2016). Increasingly, as Liam 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”.

## Notes on the contributors and their contributions

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### Percentage contribution

Areas of contribution	Author	Percentage contribution
Conception or design of the paper, theory or key argument	Burt	25 %
	James	25 %
	Walters	25 %
	Von Kotze	25 %
Drafting the paper	Burt	25 %
	James	25 %
	Walters	25 %
	Von Kotze	25 %
Critical review of paper	Burt	25 %
	James	25 %
	Walters	25 %
	Von Kotze	25 %

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