



Editorial: Situating the diversity of Southern African environmental education scholarship within a global conversation at a critical juncture on Earth

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The collection of papers in Volume 38 in many ways mirrors the diversity of research methodologies and teaching approaches in the contemporary field of Environmental and Sustainability Education. The seven papers remind us that, whilst environmental educators and researchers are largely in agreement over the *nature* and *causes* of the social-ecological problems that we face in sub-Saharan Africa, there is less certainty around what types of educational approaches and pedagogies are adequate to help resolve them. The papers in this volume either offer pedagogical innovations that may strengthen teaching and learning for sustainable futures, or they provide insights into the social, cultural and economic contexts in which such teaching and learning occurs.

Our southern African scholarship contributes to a global conversation around the powers, shortcomings and possibilities of education, and so it is important to reflect critically on international trends and emerging trajectories. This editorial seeks to bring this volume of the journal into a precursory conversation with two international publications that recently entered the public domain, as a kind of benchmarking exercise or ‘reflexive barometer’ of our regional work in relation to international educational developments.

The first of these publications is UNESCO’s 2021 report, entitled *Re-imagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. The report conveys a direct and urgent message that planet Earth needs a new social contract for education at a global level that will “allow us to think differently about learning and the relationships between students, teachers, knowledge, and the world” (p. 3). UNESCO idealistically reaffirms education as powerful transformative force:

Education is the foundation for the renewal and transformation of our societies. It mobilizes knowledge to help us navigate a transforming and uncertain world. The power of education lies in its capacities to connect us with the world and others, to move us beyond the spaces we already inhabit, and to expose us to new possibilities. It helps to unite us around collective endeavours; it provides the science, knowledge and innovation we need to address common challenges. Education nurtures understandings and builds capabilities that can help to ensure that our futures are more socially inclusive, economically just, and environmentally sustainable. (UNESCO, 2021, p. 10)

The UNESCO report proposes answers to three essential questions that we, as environmental educators, should continue to grapple with:

1. What should we continue doing?
2. What should we abandon?
3. What needs to be creatively reimagined?

Similar questions and responses were deliberated in 2022 during the 15th Invitational Seminar on “Challenges for environmental and sustainability education research in times of climate crisis”, hosted by Ghent University in Belgium. By the end of the seminar, the group of international delegates had identified four pressing challenges in current Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) research:

1. There is a flawed assumption that individual transformation somehow leads to social transformation.
2. Theories of change in ESE research and practice are often not explicitly named and worked on.
3. There is a need to make sharper distinctions between internal changes in educational institutions and larger societal transformations at government and planetary level.
4. There are many blind spots as to whose voices dominate our ideas and discourses of change, which in turn influence whose stories are told or not told. (Deutzkens et al., 2022, p. 64)

These pressing challenges for our field, alongside UNESCO’s three questions and call for a new social contract for education, offer a lens through which to reflect on the scholarly contributions in this volume of SAJEE.

Overview of the contributions in Volume 38

Velempini and his co-authors open the volume with an article that highlights the intersectionality of food, water, livelihoods and education. Using a systems thinking approach, they set out to identify what can be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for transforming education for sustainable futures in southern Africa. The experiences and insights shared in the article align closely with the third challenge put forward by the abovementioned ESE Invitational Seminar: they report that during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the formation of new partnerships, relationships and coalitions at community as well as at inter-governmental levels, was enabled by important interconnections across micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-systems. Velempini and colleagues conclude by identifying six ‘transformative praxis pathways’ for transforming education for sustainable futures.

The next two articles centre around approaches to teaching primary school children about their African wildlife heritage and local wildlife conservation practices. Despite their different epistemological starting points, both highlight the significance of culturally-resonant learning processes. The two case studies contribute usefully to ongoing discussions around the fourth pressing challenge identified by delegates of the 2022 ESE Seminar in Ghent, namely, the need to interrogate the “many blind spots as to whose voices

dominate our ideas and discourses of change, which in turn influence whose stories are told or not told” (Deutzkens et al., 2022, p. 64). **Bhurekeni** takes an Afrophilic ‘Philosophy for Children’ approach to Environmental Ethics Education. Using a multi-voiced and decolonial methodology, he focuses on wildlife taboos and totems to explore how heritage-based knowledges and practices in relation to wildlife conservation are understood by children in the Sebakwe resettlement area of Zimbabwe. The case study points to the value of a dialogical, Afrophilic ‘Philosophy for Children’ approach for developing children’s ethical reasoning, agency and critical, reflexive thinking skills. The case study by **Hoare, Lemayian and Higgins** reflects on a qualitative community-based study of a conservation education programme with Maasai children in Kenya. The study, which explored the potential of “transforming attitudes” to human-wildlife conflict in Kenya, was conducted in a conservation management sector that has a complex history of power, control and contestation. The authors conclude that the wider context of conservation education needs to be considered when designing learning programmes, and they reflexively conclude that “as environmental educators and researchers, we need to critically ask ourselves why we are delivering conservation education and for whom”.

Ziervogel and Pallitt’s article turns our attention to higher education and the potential of a student video project to develop climate change literacy. Their project’s carefully designed pedagogy was guided by an ‘authentic learning’ approach that requires collaboration and self-reflection in an authentic learning context. Besides developing filmmaking, research and fieldwork skills, the third-year university students reported gaining deeper understandings of the concept of vulnerability and were able to locate themselves as embodied, ethical agents in relation to climate change and water scarcity in Cape Town, South Africa.

Bopape reports on an exploratory qualitative case study of three primary schools in South Africa’s Gauteng province. She undertook a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) to understand the schools’ greening efforts within their wider socio-economic context. Bopape’s findings confirm well-documented but important trends in school greening efforts across the region, most especially regarding access to, and management of, resources (natural and financial). She further notes how school greening initiatives are influenced by macro contextual factors such as poverty, environmental pollution and ineffective management of non-renewable resources.

James offers an insightful review of the recently published book, *Teaching and Learning for Change: Education and sustainability in South Africa*, edited by Schudel, Songqwaru, Tshiningayamwe and Lotz-Sisitka. James applauds the book for its careful distillation of over 10 years of research and innovation in the Fundisa for Change programme, and she encourages readers to draw on it as a resource for “building ethically, politically, scientifically rigorous teaching practice”. James outlines the four main sections of the book, reflecting on the contributions and challenges raised by researchers across the numerous chapters.

Preston's article is a response to an earlier paper by Kulundu-Bolus, McGarry and Lotz-Sisitka that was published in Volume 36 of this journal (2020). Working with their metaphor of 'call and response' in environmental and sustainability education, Preston offers her South African case study as a response to their call for "an approach to learning and education that is contextually responsive, adaptive and moves towards solidarity in this time of crisis" (2020, p. 113). Through a series of five vignettes from a four-year action research project, Preston shows how multimodal arts-based interventions can arouse and sustain community interest and involvement in environmental issues. She names this pedagogic approach 'transgressive eco arts-based pedagogy' (TEAP) and offers it as "a contribution to the conversation about learning, living and leading for sustained futures".

We conclude Volume 38 with an article by **Schramm, Salmones and Robischon** that offers a statistical basis from which to consider young people's attitudes towards the environment, as developed through the Handprint Initiative. The handprint concept, coined in India in 2007, has become an influential concept globally, including in many southern African countries. Schramm and her co-authors conducted a survey with 548 secondary school learners from South Mexico City. Their research instrument was a questionnaire designed to identify five environmental attitudes: ecocentrism, eco-apathy, pessimism, naturalism and scientism. The questionnaire was based on earlier research instruments and the pilot study sought to refine the drafted instrument for wider use in the Handprint Initiative.

The seven research papers in this issue of the *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education* (SAJEE) contribute to a global conversation around what type of education is needed for a viable future. None offers a complete picture, and not all the educational orientations, assumptions and pedagogies put forward here are compatible with one another. It is important and necessary now, more than ever, that we review the diversity of environmental education praxis with clarity, wisdom, generosity, criticality and seriousness. This is because the consequences of our current theoretical and methodological debates far exceed the boundaries of academia. The polycrisis into which our educational praxis currently speaks – and hopefully intervenes – has been summarised by UNESCO (2021, p. 8) as follows:

Widening social and economic inequality, climate change, biodiversity loss, resource use that exceeds planetary boundaries, democratic backsliding, disruptive technological automation, and violence are the hallmarks of our current historical juncture. ... A global pandemic has further highlighted our many fragilities. These crises and challenges constrain our individual and collective human rights. And they are largely the result of human choices and actions. They derive from social, political, and economic systems of our creation, where the short-term is prioritized over the long-term, and the interests of the few allowed to override the interests of the many.

Commitments that we make this year regarding what types of educational approaches should be strengthened, abandoned, or creatively reimagined, and why, have very direct

and practical implications for the peoples of Africa, the world, and indeed for all forms of life on Earth.

References

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