

## Sustainable learning environments and social justice

BY

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This 2013 special issue of the *Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* (Td), thanks to Prof Johan Tempelhoff's (Chief Editor-Td) proactive approach to support the development of quality research throughout the subcontinent, celebrates the centrality of sustainable learning environments in the advancement of the agenda for social justice. It is Nelson Mandela who is credited for emphasising the imperative of quality education for bringing about more equitable, respectful, democratic, free, peaceful, hopeful and prosperous communities. This observation is also enshrined in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) ending in 2015 as well as the subsequent global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) starting in 2015 ending in 2030. Prof Jonathan Jansen of the University of the Free States (UFS) has cascaded these laudable international intents for the whole of humanity into the university's policy of advancing academic excellence through and for what he calls; the human project of social justice and humanness.

The above was the theme of the 5th International Colloquium of the Sustainable Learning Environments Research team which was held from October 29 to 31, 2013 at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein. Locally papers were presented by academics and postgraduate students from the University of Venda, University of Pretoria, University of South Africa, North West University, Tshwane University of Technology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, University of the Free State and Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. There were also papers from teachers, practitioners and officials from the Departments of Education of the Free State, Northern Cape and North West Provinces of South Africa. The occasion was a truly international event where among the 111 papers which were presented over the three days; there were a few from the United States of America, Kenya, Thailand, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mozambique and South Africa.

This international spread was also true with regard to the keynote speakers who represented the best minds locally and internationally on the theme under consideration at the colloquium. For example Prof Driekie Hay (Deputy Vice Chancellor: Teaching and Learning – UFS) delivered the first keynote address in the form of the welcoming speech titled; "*Sustainable learning environments: social justice in thread.*" Through her presentation she appealed for the creation and advancement of "... *quality education*" as it was "... *the greatest social leveller when made accessible to all.*" She continued to argue that Education creates active citizens, who know their rights and are empowered to use them to hold their governments accountable and to fully participate in their economies. Active societies are those in which the democratic values of human dignity, equality and freedom for all a country's citizens are protected. The gap between poor and well to do children is growing on our continent. To

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leave this as is will continue to threaten the future stability and prosperity of our countries, particularly given the young age of many of our population. In this paper she pleaded for access to quality education for all in South Africa as without which we will never have social justice in our country.”

This line of argument was to permeate all subsequent keynote presentations as well. For example Prof Marvin Lynn, the Dean of the Faculty of Education at Indiana University South Bend in the United States of America who is also the leading scholar internationally on race and pedagogy addressed the colloquium on *“Critical Race Theory and Education: Implications for a Pedagogy for Global Transformation.”* In this talk, Marvin Lynn, showed how educational research on race might facilitate increased global understanding about our world and how we can continue to work together to improve our societies. Drawing on examples of widely publicized recent examples of racial discrimination in the US and Europe, he argues that schools must help students become literate in matters of race so that they can work effectively with others in an increasingly globalized marketplace. Another keynote speaker Ntate Moeketsi Letseka who is a Senior Lecturer in Educational Foundations at UNISA and is the Deputy Editor of Africa Education Review Journal talked about ways of engendering conducive and sustainable learning environments in the midst of negative misinformation about wars, murders, assassinations, crime and police brutality in the public media. His argument was that the practice and theory education need to return to the basic African philosophy of Ubuntu. Prof Cornelius Hagenmeier, the Director of International Relations at University of Venda provided the third keynote address titled *“The contribution of internationalisation towards the creation of sustainable learning environments which support the struggle for social justice.”* The fifth keynote address was delivered by Mr Lebusa Monyooe, who is the Director of Grant Management in South Africa at the National Research Foundation. His argument reminded and encouraged all to rethink and deepen their understanding as well as practice of basic school education, teacher education and research so as to create a better society.

The argument initiated by Prof Hay referred to above was thoroughly critiqued in Prof Maistry’s keynote address titled; *“Education for economic growth and social justice: an unsustainable fallacy in South African education.”* Prof Maistry, the Head of the Social Sciences Education Department at University of KwaZulu-Natal argued that the evolving master narrative referred to above and pursued up to thus far was erroneous because certain conditions have to be met before we can talk about salvaging all humanity through the ‘one size fit’ all solution of education. He encouraged the use of Nussbaum’s Capabilities Theory as the alternative to the above approach which he described as a futile neo-liberal unsustainable imagination. Prof Nongyao Narawat, the Founder and Director of the Multiculturalism and Education Policy Centre at Chiang Mao University in Thailand through her keynote address titled; *“Can we think of sustainable education in an environment of social injustice? The case of schooling for migrant children from Burma in Thailand”* supported Prof Maistry’s critique of the optimism regarding education as the panacea to all. She demonstrated this point by lifting examples which resonated with our South African situation from Thailand. Her argument was that certain conditions have to prevail before education can be sustainable and resulting in improved societies as argued by Prof Maistry. According to her the conditions of social justice, were a *condio sine qua non* for such.

Dr Mvula who is the Chief Director in the North West Province's Education Department, presented a keynote address titled; "*Critical pedagogy as a tool for transforming learning and teaching: Education as a contested terrain.*" His argument captured very neatly and succinctly the debate referred to above by pointing out that it depends very much on one's theoretical positioning for current educational practices to make sense in particular ways. For example if you are a practitioner on the ground who has to see to it that children are provided good education, theoretical contestations which are invariably merely academic do not matter as much as seeing to it that practically teachers are in class and that learners are taught. Prof Achieng' Akuno, who is the Executive Dean of the Liberal and Professional Studies at the Technical University of Kenya, in her keynote address titled; "*Education and Training for real world: Towards sustainable Learning environments*" she gave a rousing presentation full of very practical examples of what Dr Mvula alluded to by referring to real life examples from Kenya's education policy and classroom practices. The final keynote address was presented by Mrs Matlhodi Motsepe, the President of South African Association for Science and Technology Educators (SAASTE). Her address described how SAASTE created sustainable learning environments for both teachers and learners of science and technology throughout the country. She referred to critical infrastructure to address the shortcomings of science, technology education and training system such as the libraries, computer rooms and career education centres which SAASTE provided.

The above keynote addresses were spread over the three days of the colloquium, about three per day. These continually injected critical academic energy at appropriate times to keep the conversations on the connections between the creation of sustainable learning environments and social justice alive and robust. The aim of the abovementioned Sustainable Learning Environments colloquium was to stimulate local, national and global debates on how to develop transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, interinstitutional and international research rigour and culture. This was achieved. This was an academic platform for scholars or agents of change to share their research work and respond to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to build onto the achievements of the Millennium Developments Goals, whilst ensuring that sustainability and rigour are maintained.

This colloquium was the *5<sup>th</sup> Sustainable Learning Environments Colloquium* it was the celebration of work done by students, academics, theorists, researchers, and practitioners of education and beyond. Researchers interrogated the relationship(s) that exist(s) between *sustainable learning environments* on the one hand and *social justice* on the other because there seemed to be ways in which the two though different refer to the same processes or are embedded within one another. Sustainable Learning Environments, taking their cue from the United Nations' SDGs refer to ways in which settings where education takes place, from the cradle to retirement advance the agenda for equity, social justice, freedom, peace and hope. Sustainable learning environments (SuLE) aim at enabling all learners to explore and exploit their potentialities to the fullest so that they can become contributing members of a democracy. It is only when this possibility exists that inequality; unemployment and poverty that still plague our nation can be addressed. When all people are enabled to participate meaningfully in the economic development of their country and of themselves, then sustainability of their livelihoods is ensured. One of the most potent strategies through which this can happen is through learning which is sustainable. The 5th SuLE colloquium theorised

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such learning environments and showed how they relate to processes of social justice.

Social justice was understood as being both relational and being about resources and distribution thereof. It was described as referring to respect for the other person, the environment and all objects therein. It thus is about ensuring that there is fairness in all interactions as a precondition for democracy. Social justice therefore encourages environmental sustainability as it argues for respect for the environment and its use such that subsequent generations can still be able to derive optimum benefits from it. Social justice, just like sustainable learning environment talks to issues of equity, freedom, peace and hope. For example opportunities and resources for learning have to be distributed equitably such that all people can derive benefits from such fairly irrespective of their creed, gender, disability, race or ethnicity to mention a few of these markers. Furthermore there has to be fair allocation of employment opportunities and resources to all in order to ensure freedom for all. Based on research presented at the colloquium, it was concluded that; many of the social problems and contestation are as a result of some being excluded from accessing such. That peace will thus be engendered when all have equal and fair access to resources, educational and employment opportunities. It would also be possible to inspire hope even among those who had given up if the possibility exists that in spite of their station in life they would still be eligible for descent life opportunities. Sustainable learning environments and social justice challenges hegemony in educational policies and practices, advocates educational reform and societal structures that move towards equity rather than marginalisation. The 5th SuLE colloquium was significant for all researchers and scholars who are interested in addressing the needs of others and to know how the relations of power can work to the benefit of the disadvantaged and the marginalised.

Only 22 full papers from the whole colloquium were considered for publication in this volume of the special issue of the Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa after a rigorous double blind peer review process. Five focuses seemed to emerge from these 22 papers. Some paper coalesced around issues of transdisciplinarity with regard to higher education, while others focused on the similar issues with regard to the whole General Education and Training band, spanning Foundation, Intermediate and Senior Phases to Further Education and Training (schooling phases). The other papers talked about and to critical issues of; sexuality across all the bands while others problematised issues of rurality. The whole volume is finally concluded by reflections in terms of theory and empirical research relating to issues of inclusivity in the creation of sustainable learning environments based on and aimed at social justice.

Sechaba Mahlomaholo initiates the debate with his paper titled; “*On bricolage and the creation of sustainable postgraduate learning environments*”. This paper argues for the transdisciplinary approach when conducting research. This transdisciplinarity is theorised as bricolage which recognises that research is not one thing, but that research is multi-layered and multidimensional and that all these dynamics have to be brought together if the findings are to be meaningful and contributing towards the creation of sustainable learning environments which are also socially just. To demonstrate his point Sechaba Mahlomaholo uses empirical data from the Sustainable Learning Environments research team showing how the team has managed to create such an environment for the successful supervision of their 28 PhD and 22 MEd students who pursue diverse research questions, using different methods and settings,

but being able to share ideas, experiences and knowledge as they create sustainable learning environments in their respective sites. Using the same empirical data Milton Nkoane in his paper titled; *“Creating sustainable postgraduate supervision learning environments through critical emancipatory research”* shows how important transformatory theoretical framing is in the creation of sustainable postgraduate learning environments. His argument is that this framing provides the supervisors and the students with the vocabulary and positioning to empower one another by contesting the hegemony of the dominant discourses in research which sees the students as blank and at the mercy of the supervisor. His approach is also multidisciplinary as it affirms that research is and should not be uni-linear, but that it should provide spaces for a multiplicity of voices and theoretical framing which can be afforded by critical emancipatory approach.

Still on the matter of transdisciplinarity in research approach, Mathabo Khau, Naydene de Lange and Logan Athiemoolam through their paper titled; *“Using participatory and visual arts-based methodologies to promote sustainable teaching and learning ecologies: Through the eyes of pre-service teachers”* highlight the same point being made by Sechaba and Milton. In their case they insert visual and participatory methodologies in their research in order to enhance the diversity of voices beyond the conventional formal ones in order to enable people who do not normally prefer written and/or spoken word to express themselves through pictures and other non-conventional research materials. From their perspectives, it is not enough to listen to one mode of voices, but that it is essential to listen to this multiplicity of voices which are transdisciplinary ranging from the arts, the humanities and the natural sciences. It is only when there is this recognition of diversity of ways of expressing, hence being that knowledge can be socially just and sustainable. Molaudi Tshelane through his paper titled; *“Participatory action research and the construction of academic identity among postgraduate research students”* clarifies what bricolage means by integrating various theoretical frameworks such as critical emancipatory and participatory action research to show how socially just and sustainable learning environments can be created for postgraduate students through emphasis on issues of commitment and genuine service to the community in research. The argument in favour of diversity, multi-layered and multidimensionality in research is further emphasised by Juliet Ramohai in her paper titled; *“Towards social sustainability in higher education: Enhancing students’ solidarity and togetherness through collaborative projects in racially diverse learning environments.”* Her paper shifts focus from the method of research and/or teaching to diversity in terms of social and ethnic background. However she still discusses the ways in which transdisciplinarity makes it possible to foster unity in diversity among students if one is mindful of their different ways of making sense of the world in research and teaching.

The second focus of the papers in this volume is on how to create sustainable learning environments in the GET band as discussed earlier. Moeketsi Tlali taking the cue from higher education discussions above shows how the learning of physical science at high school can be enhanced if there is a multiplicity of teaching approaches adopted. In his paper titled; *“Enhancing synergy: a strategic interrogation of the intersection between social justice and creation of sustainable learning environments”* he shows how the teaching of physical science can be more effective and meaningful if it is imbued with the service learning principles. That is, while learners learn they should also provide meaningful service to the solution of real life problems in the communities. According to Moeketsi learning is thus transdisciplinary going beyond adopting purely conventional natural sciences approaches to include the human and

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social sciences approaches of service learning. Corene de Wet and Lynette Jacobs in their paper titled; *“South African teachers’ exposure to workplace bullying”* Corene de Wet and Lynette Jacobs also suggest a multiplicity of strategies to deal with the problem of bullying of teachers in their places of work. The study identifies at least 42 different ways through which this scourge manifests itself and then conclude by adopting a transdisciplinary approaches to the resolution of all these including at least policy and institutional practical measures to deal with such. Tshele Moloi in his paper; *“An analysis of challenges in the teaching of problem solving in a grade 10 mathematics class”* proposes a transdisciplinary approach to the curriculum of mathematics at school. His argument is that while mathematics may be said to be representing conventional and mainstream knowledge, it would help learners best if their community cultural wealth irrespective of their station in life would also be included in their curriculum because it is only when learners see themselves and their own knowledge reflected in what they learn that their performance will improve significantly.

Simon E Akpo and Loyiso C Jita through their paper titled; *“The Influence of Selected Teacher Inputs on Students’ Academic Achievement in the Junior Secondary School Certificate Mathematics in Namibia”* also shows that learner performance is not an isolated experience but that it is always linked to the teachers’ qualifications, subject specialisation and teaching experiences. Thus in order to respond to such challenges, a transdisciplinary approach going beyond understanding the learner (Psychology of Learning) including understanding the teacher and his/her interaction with learning (Curriculum and Teaching Methods as well as Sociology of Learning among others) are very crucial. Social justice in the creation of a sustainable learning environment implies targeting many areas for intervention in a transdisciplinary way. Jannie Pretorius and Christo van Wyk continue in the same vein as above by showing that crossing the boundaries and integrating knowledges from seemingly diverse disciplinary traditions is crucial if learner performance is to be enhanced. In their paper titled; *“The utilisation of the performances of Neil Diamond for improving the classroom practices of educators: an educational appreciation”* their transdisciplinary approach involves using strategies from the popular cultural music to enhance classroom practices of teachers in teaching natural science subjects like life sciences. In this way sustainable learning environments are theorised in transdisciplinary terms to include the social justice dimension as well. Stephan du Toit and Gawie du Toit in their paper titled; *“Learner metacognition and mathematics achievement during problem-solving in a mathematics classroom”* also show the value of transdisciplinarity in understanding and facilitating learner performance in mathematics. According to their findings learner performance includes understanding of mathematics and also understanding one’s own understanding of mathematics. This implies going beyond oneself and holding oneself as an object constant from outside oneself in order to understand how one came to know and perform on particular and identified mathematics tasks. Kevin LG Teise through his paper titled; *“Realising a Socially Sustainable South African Society through Cooperative Learning”* concludes the discussion by this group of papers which focus of the GET band by demonstrating how important cooperative learning is in enhancing the understanding and practice of what social sustainability is. His transdisciplinary approach includes understanding and bringing together the ways of knowing and of being of learners from different cultural social and economic background to learn, play and generally be together.

The third focus of the papers on transdisciplinarity as the proverbial golden thread, is around issues of sexuality at both the GET and higher education bands. Tamsyn C Eccles and Dennis Francis in their paper titled; *“No ring, no such thing”: Teacher positioning on the teaching*

*of sexuality education in Life Orientation*” show how contradictory knowledge forms are used to enhance the understanding of the other. The teacher encourages abstinence by teaching sexuality, this represents transdisciplinarity in this paper because dimetrically opposing knowledge form of abstinence as the outcome is facilitated through the knowledge form of sexuality. This defies the conventional approach of sticking to the knowledge form of that which one wants to teach. Sustainable learning environment is created through a socially just knowledge which enables learners to protect their lives through knowledge of what abstinence entails. Mathabo Khau through her paper titled; “*Understanding gender, sexuality and HIV risk in HEIs: Narratives of international post-graduate students*” while still exploring issues of sexuality shifts the focus a little to talk about it in higher education instead of in the GET band. Hers is a story based on the effect of multiple relationships among higher education students requiring multiple identities among them as well as a strategy of surviving loneliness of extended periods of study away from regular partners and spouses. Transdisciplinarity for her involves knowing about diverse contexts and identities containing the same students where their multiple identities are on display. Christa Beyers concludes the discussion on issues of sexuality through her paper titled; “*In search of healthy sexuality: The gap between what youth want and what teachers think they need.*” The papers traverses two theoretical terrains, one being that of adults and what they want and the other being that of children and what they want. Christa’s argument is on bridging this knowledge divide requiring her to be in two worlds at the same time in order to be able to reconcile them for purposes of social justice in terms of the health of the learners and sustainability of learning environments away from diseases.

The fourth focus of papers in this special issue is on sustainable learning in rural settings. First Dipane Hlalele in his paper titled; “*Sustainable rural learning ecologies- a prolegomenon traversing transcendence of discursive notions of sustainability, social justice, development and food sovereignty*” crosses a number of knowledge terrains including sustainability, social justice and food sovereignty among others to make a plea for an appropriate language recognising the connectedness between natural and physical environments on the one hand and the social and human environments on the other. Dipane argues that a science which does not recognise this connection is bound to be socially unjust especially to the rural settings and the people therein. To conclude the discussion of this focus Lekhooe Letsie through his paper titled; “*Future Rural School Science Teachers - Where are you?*” makes the finding that learners of the natural and life sciences in rural settings are not interested in taking up positions as teachers in the future in spite they being provided with bursaries to do so. Lekhooe arrived at this conclusion after considering knowledges about rurality, preferences of rural learners when it comes to their future careers as well as of learners of natural and life sciences.

The last group of papers in this special issue focus on problems of inclusivity as a social justice matter. To initiate the discussion Victor S Moeketsi in a paper titled; “*In between hope and hopelessness in contemporary spaces: a case of E.S Segoete’s novel, Monono ke mohodi ke mourwane*” explores through fiction the meaning of life for all humanity especially those coming from poor and marginalised backgrounds. For this author to make any meaningful interpretation of issues of hope and hopelessness he traverses the terrain of fiction and reality and also moves into the terrain of psychology in order to understand how identity is formulated especially under adverse socio-economic conditions. Finally he draws as lessons for us all with regard to how we should educate the young for better life in the future where they can be

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included and move with ease across contexts without losing who they are. Sustainable learning environments are thus created based on the lessons from diverse and transdisciplinary knowledge bases. Thapelo Mamiala adds his voice to the debate on the matter of inclusivity by using materials from the popular print media talking about beliefs in order to use that as basis for the learning of physical sciences. The paper he authored titled; *“Multiple beliefs, explanations and their utility in enhancing a sustainable learning environment in school science lessons”* thus is transdisciplinary in terms of the materials it handles, the aims it tries to operationalise and the diverse knowledge forms it brings to bear towards the creation of sustainable learning environments. Anastasia Sara Motsei through her paper titled; *“Intercultural communication problems relating to translation from English into Sesotho”* seeks social inclusion of all in the production, dissemination and interpretation of knowledge and information through accurate forms of translation from and to different language cultures. According to her, if this ideal can be realised then social justice will be achieved. Social justice therefore implies the creation of a sustainable learning environment where accurate knowledge is shared and owned irrespective of one’s language base. Anastasia is transdisciplinary in her approach as she had to know different languages as well as their structures which in many instances are totally different from one another. This she does in order to achieve the aim of her study.

Ts’eliso Makoelle’s paper titled; *“Pedagogy of inclusion: a quest for social justice and sustainable inclusive learning environments”* brings the discussion on inclusivity in this group of papers to a climax by interrogating and problematising this notion. His transdisciplinarity involves looking at the concept from many philosophical lenses to arrive at the conclusion that the concept is not adequately theorised and that sometimes there are many discrepancies between theorising and applying it in practice. The idea of an inclusive and sustainable learning environment for social justice, according to Ts’eliso is not a simple and straight forward process. Finally, Tendayi Marovah through his paper titled; *“Citizenship education and human capabilities: Lynchpin for sustainable learning environment and social justice”* brings to a halt the argument of transdisciplinarity achieved through the creation of sustainable learning environment for social justice by exploring the ideas of democratic citizenship. Marovah had to interrogate literature from as diverse disciplinary sources as social justice, citizenship education, capabilities theory, ubuntu and sustainable learning environments, to mention a few to develop an understanding of a social just higher education.

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