

Utopianism and Educational Processes in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Recent international policy literature on Education for Sustainable Development puts forward utopian concepts of sustainable development and transformed learning as objects for educational thinking and practice. This paper, drawing on three illustrative educational investigations with youth in a South African context, critically examines how we might engage with utopian concepts such as those put forward in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. It incorporates an engagement with other related utopian concepts such as democracy and social justice, which feature strongly in post-apartheid societal reconstruction in South Africa. The paper argues that if we are to avoid valuable utopian concepts such as democracy, sustainability, and social justice from becoming doxic knowledge, a reflexive realist orientation might best guide our educational engagements with such concepts. Such an approach to utopianism would take account of contextual realities and situated learning processes, and foster a creativity of action that is constructivist in nature, but not relativist.

Résumé

La récente documentation sur les politiques internationales de l'éducation pour un développement durable propose des concepts utopiques de développement durable et ainsi, a transformé l'apprentissage en objectifs pour une pensée et une pratique éducative. Cet article, se servant de trois études pédagogiques explicatives sur la jeunesse, dans un contexte sud-africain, étudie judicieusement comment nous pourrions nous engager dans ces concepts utopiques tels que ceux présentés dans la Décennie des Nations Unies pour l'éducation en vue du développement durable. Le texte englobe un engagement envers d'autres concepts utopiques telles la démocratie et la justice sociale, traits frappants de la reconstruction sociétale postapartheid d'Afrique du Sud. On y prétend aussi que si nous devons éviter que ces concepts utopiques telles la démocratie, la durabilité et la justice sociale ne deviennent un savoir doxologique, alors, dans un pareil contexte, une orientation réfléchie et réaliste pourrait le mieux guider nos obligations éducatives. Une approche similaire de l'utopisme tiendrait compte de réalités définies et de processus d'apprentissage contextualisés et, accueillerait une créativité d'action de nature constructiviste et non relativiste.

Keywords: utopianism, youth, education for sustainable development, reflexive realism

[Y]oung people live for everyone, as sensitive receptors of our culture, the dilemmas of time in a complex society. (Melucci, 1996, p. 128)

[W]e do not always know why we do what we do or recognize the frames of thought that underlie our own positions and actions ... this is a key feature of doxic knowledge. (Slonimsky, 2007, p. 158)

[U]topia is not necessarily a dangerous totalitarianism; it can be a means of critiquing the present and thinking about a radically different future. (Bertram, 2004, p. 295)

Introduction

South Africa¹ and its recent political transformation process, infused with hope for a better future, is often presented as a utopian form of democracy—or an icon of hope—nationally and in the contemporary global landscape. Similarly, adult hopes for youth, and youth idealism itself, is often utopian in nature, and young people are often iconized in society as the hope for the future. Recent international policy literature on Education for Sustainable Development puts forward the utopian concepts of sustainable development and transformed learning (UNESCO, 2005a) as objects for educational thinking and practice, and ethical codes such as the Earth Charter (< www.earthcharter.org >) present useful visions and guidance on how to think about and create a better world. But, the realities of the day keep such utopianism in check. Today South Africa is experiencing xenophobic violence, extreme levels of crime, and continued disenfranchisement. Iconic hopes for the youth are dashed by statements such as those made by the new leader of the African National Congress Youth League, who recently said the youth would “take up arms and kill” (Letsoalo, 2008, n.p.) to defend their chosen political icon and ideologies. The realities of high levels of dysfunctionality, poor resources, high drop out rates, and poor quality teaching in the school system in South Africa and in the majority world (UNESCO, 2005b; Taylor, 2007) temper the idealism of education for sustainable development.

This paper probes how we might engage utopianism in youth education programmes in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (or contemporary society without the United Nations label). It draws on three illustrative educational investigations with youth in a South African context, with recognition that much of the world’s youth is facing similar conditions and challenges across the spectrum of South African youth. In particular, it probes possibilities for a reflexive realist² engagement with utopianism in the context of educational initiatives that have sustainable development, democracy, and social justice as a focus. The proposal arising from this review argues that if education processes are to guide aspirations for the future with utopianism, they need to reflect a utopianism that takes account

of contextual realities and situated learning processes. This reflexive approach warns that utopian ideals (such as democracy, social justice, and sustainability), because of their idealistic, universal franchise, and wide open meanings, can easily become doxic knowledge, accepted, taken for granted, and practiced with little regard for real meaning or purpose.

Through situated learning processes that are oriented towards utopianism, but not defined by naïve interpretations of utopian ideals, it seems possible to both (a) expose the doxic nature of “utopian idealism” and (b) engage youth in meaningful learning experiences that are culturally and socially located, and which respond to a call for change in society. New social movement theorists such as Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci argue that social change needs to be seen from the perspective of a modernity radicalized by reflexivity (Delanty, 1999). A key dimension in processes such as this is the need to introduce social learning and a creativity of action that is constructivist in nature, but not relativist.

Utopian Hopes Under Scrutiny

In 1994, South Africa achieved democracy after nearly 300 years of colonial and apartheid rule. This was a life-changing moment for those who had struggled centuries under the colonial imperialist yoke for a release from oppression and discrimination. For the country’s people, it promised political liberation and a new era of freedom from poverty and centuries of oppression and inequality. Utopianism associated with this emerging democracy, for a brief moment, seemed to offer a better quality of life for all.

Since 1994 much has been achieved, and for many life *is* better and different, but unfortunately, little has changed for the majority of people. The utopian dream of a New South Africa and its rainbow nation is under scrutiny after a first decade, as the weight of past legacies and histories (e.g., unequal access to resources and resource flows, poor quality education, discriminatory habits) and the pressure of new challenges (e.g., HIV/AIDS, increased gaps between the rich and the poor, climate change impacts) catch up with earlier idealism, euphoria, and utopianism. Do we simply “drop the dream,” or can it be engaged differently in our educational endeavours? Do we have to work harder at the dream, or should we be redefining the dream? Are there different dreams, and if so, which matter more than others? This is the “spirit of the moment” in South Africa today.

This “spirit of the moment” is not unlike that experienced at a global level in relation to the utopian concept of sustainable development since the concomitant release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change findings, and the Stern report in 2007 (Stern, 2007), which shocked the public and politicians around the world into asking serious questions about the future and direction of human development. Many critical commentators are asking whether the utopian ideal of

sustainable development is an adequate dream in the face of climate change, particularly since sustainable development has been seen to be appropriated by the market in recent years (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Bond & Guliwe, 2003; Lotz-Sisitka, 2004). This is most notable in the strategic re-alignment of economics in the West to service the economic sustainability of the rest in processes that continue to manipulate capital advantage. Do we “drop the dream,” do we redefine it, are there different dreams, and how should we deal with utopian ideals for change in the socio-ecological condition that exists at a global level? And how do we approach education, and education for sustainable development in particular, at this local/global nexus?

The “spirit of the moment” and its new challenges was recently captured by John Pilger, an internationally accomplished critical journalist who addressed youth at their graduation at Rhodes University earlier this year. At this ceremony, he was recognized with an honorary doctorate for his contributions to the cause of democracy around the world. In commenting to the local newspaper on his experience of coming to Grahamstown, where the university is located, he said that his trip was a “surreal experience, because you can see the two South Africas, the included and the excluded” (Pilger, 2008, p. 9) in the town. He further commented that racial apartheid may have been put to rest (at least to some extent), but “there is no evidence that economic apartheid and the exclusions of large numbers of South Africans has been dealt with” (p. 9). He had obviously not been in South Africa long enough to comment on the exclusions caused by inequalities in the quality of education offered to South Africa’s young people, or the causal links to the attainment of economic and other opportunities. Nor did he comment on the very serious issues facing South Africa youth today, most notably violence, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and threats associated with climate change, which are projected to affect so many of their futures.

In his speech to the graduates, he said:

[T]here are those who prefer we celebrate a system of organised forgetting: of unbridled freedom for the few and obedience for the many; of socialism for the rich and capitalism for the poor. They prefer that the demonstrable power of ordinary people is committed to what George Orwell called the memory hole. (2008, p. 25)

In this same speech, he reminded graduands that society is littered with powerful illusions, and that some of our most hopeful and noble concepts (our utopian dreams?) have become corporatized and are “given deceptive, perverse, even opposite meanings” (p. 25). “Democracy,” he said, “is now the free market.” “Economics,” he said, is “now the relegation of all human endeavour to material value, a bottom line” (p. 25). He did not talk about the utopianism associated with the discourse of sustainable development, but he did say that alternative models of thinking (pluralist hopes for the future) that relate to the majority of humanity “end up in the memory hole” (p. 25).

Of greatest significance to this paper, however, is his educational point which goes like this: “It seems to me vital that young people today equip themselves with an understanding of how this often subliminal propaganda [appropriation of utopian concepts] works in modern societies” (p. 25), because the propaganda supported by the elites and their institutions says that freedom from poverty is a freedom too far. He noted that South African graduates—the highly educated youth of South Africa—have both a “special advantage and an obligation” (p. 25). Their special advantage is that the past is still vividly present, and as members of a new privileged elite, they have an obligation to forge “the vital link between the genius of the everyday and the resourcefulness and resilience of ordinary people” (p. 25). This, he argued, would allow the young people of South Africa to finish the job started by Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko, to ensure true freedom for all people of South Africa, and to make real the opening words of the Freedom Charter, which states that “We, the people of South Africa, declare that our country belongs to everyone” (p. 25). In saying this, he expressed a hope that the youth of South Africa can rescue its dreams from the memory hole, through retaining belief in utopian-inspired dreams such as democracy and social justice, *and* situated responses in which they engage with the realities of the day.

Engaging Situated Responses and Wider Utopian Ideals

The challenge posed by Pilger is a “big ask” as it requires young people to engage with wider concepts and ideals (e.g., the utopian concepts of democracy, social justice, and sustainability), and situated knowledges³ and experience in a context where naïve and totalitarian interpretations of utopian ideals are no longer possible.

To examine this in a little more depth, I reflect on three South African case stories of educational investigations involving youth, that are oriented towards the utopian ideals of democracy, social justice, and sustainability. The educational research cases are positive examples of a phenomenon and were selected for their illustrative value—particularly for the way in which they were able to demonstrate how young people can become engaged with wider concepts and ideals (e.g., democracy, social justice, sustainability) *and* situated knowledges and experience. Two of the studies (by Katie Farrington and Pat Hoffmann) were conducted at the Masters degree level at Rhodes University in the Environmental Education and Sustainability research programme, although this was not a defining criterion for selection of the cases. All of the case studies involve South African youth whose identities, practices, and futures are shaped by and in a complex and ever-changing context, explained by Farrington (2008) and Craine Soudien (2004) below:

Over the past twelve years, youth in South Africa have had to adapt to a rapidly transforming and modernising society. Change has been pronounced partic-

ularly in the political, educational and social domains. Youth at school leaving age are also experiencing a shift away from the formal structures of education and family into adult roles which allow more scope for individual choice and freedom of expression. They are engaging with the contradictions of living in local communities amidst joblessness and poverty, whilst at the same time, adapting to a developing individualism and associated freedom of choice... The perceptions and concerns of the youth in post-apartheid South Africa appear to have been largely overlooked in the contesting developments of an emerging social democracy and the need for cultural and political redress. (Farrington, 2008, p. 179)

In an article entitled “Fighting for a normal life: Becoming a young adult in the New South Africa,” Soudien comments on the state of flux and the various complex challenges that are facing youth in a “new” South Africa. He states that for most, growing up in South Africa is a “dream denied, if not betrayed” (2004, p. 53). He explains how, “inspired by the vision of the new South Africa, the hope and faith of youth are tested each day as they and their parents struggle to make ends meet” (p. 53), and that “certainty is replaced by uncertainty, and the speed of change is accelerating constantly ... Global and local ideologies are increasingly interwoven” (p. 59). He states that youth identities in South Africa are under construction as utopian categories are constantly tested by historical legacies and the realities of the day, and are found ambivalent and wanting. These perspectives and complexities surrounding the experiences of youth are reflected in the stories below, and in the educator researchers’ efforts to accommodate changing cultures, socio-cultural conditions, and contextual realities, while still being guided by utopian ideals (democracy, social justice, and sustainability).

Story 1: Hip-Hop Music, Pedagogy, and Paradox

This story draws on the research of Adam Haupt (2004), whose interest is the way in which subjects are able to engage with hegemony as active agents within the context of global capitalism and post-apartheid South Africa (i.e., democratization). He identifies two different types of Cape Flats hip-hop music, which he distinguishes as “conscious hip-hop” and “commercial and politically diluted spin-off gangsta rap” (2004, p. 215). He questions the trend in the latter form of hip-hop towards the mainstream, and its appropriation within the broader frame of American cultural and economic imperialism. He argues that little hip-hop music of the gansta rap variety shows any attempt to engage critically with structures of domination, which has made the music an “exploitable commodity,” as the messages pose “no significant threat to hegemony” (p. 215).

He explains further that “conscious” hip-hop has potential as an “insurgent pedagogy,” as it remains true to the concept of knowledge of self and critical commentaries of society. He points to the significance of this form of hip-hop as a “tool for reworking local identity all over the world” (p. 219), as well as for community activism. He cites an example of a hip-hop radio show on Cape

Town Bush Radio that provides listeners with opportunities to debate topical issues such as HIV/AIDS or globalization through an “open mic,” which later developed to a programme called HIV Hop, geared towards looking at how to use hip-hop to educate young people about HIV and AIDS.

In his reflections on these two types of hip-hop and the mechanisms through which hip-hop works, Haupt draws on Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s (2000) analysis of Empire to explain that hip-hop as insurgent pedagogy is only possible within the paradox that “the only strategy available to the struggles [for democracy in this case] is that of a constituent counterpower that emerges from within Empire” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 58-59). He sees the need for a constant recognition of, and engagement with, paradox in “making our way through a transition saturated with paradoxes, demanding reflexive responses” (Haupt, 2004, p. 225).

In this research project, it is possible to read that the researcher (Haupt, 2004) draws at least some of his inspiration and analytical orientation from the utopian ideal of democracy, while simultaneously practicing scepticism of universalism (through use of Hardt & Negri’s critique of Empire). While he consciously writes about his scepticism, he does not explicitly mention his affiliation to democratic ideals—this appears to be read as a taken-for-granted ideal worth striving for. He is also clearly suspicious of global capitalist influences and appropriations of hip-hop music and culture. Through careful contextual differentiation, however, he is able to identify “conscious” hip-hop practices that are oriented *towards* social critique and democracy. In doing this, he identifies the insurgent pedagogy potential of “conscious” hip-hop practices that are effectively constituted as a “constituent counterpower” to appropriations of the democratic ideal (although he does not state this directly). He recognizes the paradoxical context in which hip-hop practices are located, and identifies and articulates a need for reflexivity. In his analysis, such reflexivity is oriented towards deeper and more critical engagements with appropriations of utopian ideals, *and* with situated practices that have social change potential.

Story 2: Environmental Auditing Activities with Youth and their Teachers

This story draws on the research of Pat Hoffmann (2005), whose interest is ecological sustainability and learning. She reports on different processes of environmental auditing observed in a *Schools and Sustainability* education programme. The research is located in the context of educational transformation in South Africa, where environment, social justice, and human rights are related in the ideal of achieving redress, equity, and democracy. All of the auditing activities examined enabled teachers and learners to explore their local contexts and investigate environmental risks in or near their schools and communities.

In observing *how* environmental auditing practices take place in various

teaching and learning contexts involving teachers and youth, she distinguishes different types of auditing practices which include:

- impression-based audits which relied on knowledge construction of environmental issues based on the (inter) subjective impressions of youth and teachers,
- evidence-generating audits which were designed to construct knowledge of environmental issues through meaning making based on empirical-experiential data collection using methods such as counting, measuring, describing, categorizing, and so on, and
- actualizing audits which were oriented towards making the invisible effects of a phenomena (e.g., pollution) more visible through methods that actualized those effects (e.g., science tests that make coliform bacteria visible).

Hoffmann (2005) reports that of the audits examined in her educational research, “some seemed more effective at auditing certain kinds of risks than others” (p. 122). She explains that “the impression-based audits appeared to be better suited to auditing visible risks, such as air pollution, poor waste management and the state of the school toilet. They were less effective at auditing risks that were difficult to detect by sight or other senses” (p. 122). They also seemed to be an effective method of documenting what the youth thought they knew about the world (transient realities). Impression-based audits and actualizing audits, on the other hand, “were also effective at auditing risks that were less apparent, such as the presence of coliform bacteria on hands, wasteful water consumption practices at school and water pollution in the local river” (p. 122). Such audits required learners to provide empirical evidence of their impressions of issues (in the case of evidence-generating audits), and in demonstrations of the existence of invisible phenomena (in the case of actualizing audits).

She explains how the different auditing practices observed were influenced by naïve interpretations of constructivism, views of reality as socially constructed and relative, and the sometimes paradoxical feature that moral impulses of teachers and youth overshadow in-depth examination of issues and lead to superficial and incomplete accounts of sustainability issues and risks.

This study, like the study of Haupt (2004), was guided by a utopian notion of sustainability, i.e., the assumption that it is possible to audit and understand risk in order to respond and contribute to learning for sustainability (through improved environmental management and health risk management), and that is possible to provide a critical perspective on practice in order to inform (better) practice guided by the idealistic notion of sustainability. Like in the Haupt (2004) study, Hoffmann carefully differentiated pluralist practices that were evident in the particular contexts, with a view to identifying which would be more useful and effective in response to the issues and risks under

study, and the wider concept of a (more) sustainable world. She also identified paradoxes that required reflexivity, and argued for more situated engagements with issues (using tools such as measurements, observations, science tests, and so on), which provided a “distanciation mechanism” (a detour via detachment) (Hoffmann, 2005, p. 136, citing Elias, 1987) from experience and existing knowledge to enable more balanced processes between involvement and detachment as these were seen to be significant for learning. Her study shows that this process has potential for a deeper, more complex, and reality-congruent grasp of the issues being investigated in different contexts, and that such reflexive practice is required if the utopian ideals of sustainability are to be pursued in educational settings. This, she argues, is necessary to counter superficial and emotionally inspired appropriations of sustainability, or what Norbert Elias (1987) refers to as a “fantasy-orientation” that occurs when individual and inter-subjective moral impulses dominate the educational activity, or when superficial and inadequate interpretations of learning are employed in the development of educational activities.

Story 3: Place-Based Explorations of Local Environments

This story draws on the research of Katie Farrington (2008), whose interest is “the use of place-based activities to enhance youth engagement with local environments” (p. 179). The wider purpose was to strengthen “meaningful education and social processes” (p. 179), and so strengthen participation of youth in society and their environments (i.e., enhance democratic participation). In contextualizing the study, Farrington reflects on the problem that little has been done in South Africa to include youth in “decision making at the local, regional and local level” (p. 182). She reports on different place-based activities undertaken with a group of youth in the Makana district in South Africa. Through these activities, in which a group of youth used mapping, photographs, transect walks, and dialogue to engage in various expressions of their engagement with local environments, she identifies that youth:

- have multiple and multi-layered identifications with place which are influenced by their mode of transport (i.e., walking in this instance); their environmental concerns (linked to the well-being of the inhabitants of their communities in this instance); their responsibilities, peer interactions, and desires for solitude or company; and cultural experiences of place,
- engage in locally constituted “place making” (p. 198) actions that were reliant on safety and trust and other contingent factors, and
- have changing (sometimes paradoxical but not unreconcilable) attachments to place, influenced by the hybrid intersection of global, urban, and capital aspirations and fashions and attachments to local social and physical environments, and growing freedoms of choice.

Farrington reflects that “the ease with which the young adults were able to maintain multiple identifications within global cultures (which stress change, opportunity and flexibility) and local cultures (which offer security and stability) appeared relatively effortless” (2008, p. 200).

The research provides examples of place-based activities that enabled the youth in Mary Waters (the school where she was working) to reflect, and reflect on, the hybrid influences of the global and the local that shape their identities, experiences of, and participation in local contexts. Farrington argues that identifications with places are *socially situated* and include influences of global media and ideologies, but are simultaneously “grounded in a general sense by their social and embodied interactions within their communities, families and peer groups” (p. 183). As such, she argues that youth in South Africa are “not the passive victims of the structural forces of globalisation, but are actively engaged in the world and with the circumstances and conditions that surround them” (p. 183, citing Strelitz, 2002). She sees this research as “sitting well” with the “shifts that are being made within research approaches towards greater acknowledgement of people in their social contexts” (p. 202), and she notes further that “the development of participatory processes involving the youth is crucial for a smoother transition to their inclusion as responsible citizens for the environment in future” (p. 202).

This research, like in the other two cases reported above, appears to have been guided by some aspects of wider utopian ideals of democracy, social justice, and sustainability. Through careful differentiation and reflexive engagement of youth perspectives with the young adults with whom she worked, Farrington’s research does not assume that there is one way of engaging these ideals, but rather that it is necessary to be inclusive in defining such ideals. In considering sustainability, she asks: “To what extent is space for the inclusion of different environmental perspectives encouraged in post-apartheid South Africa, when conventional environmental practice is dogged with preservationist narratives?” (p. 202). She argues that if ideals such as environmental improvement or participation in society are to be pursued, they need to take account of identifications of young adults that are related to daily social interactions and concerns, but which also allow for wider experimentation with local/global interchanges and socio-cultural expressions and relations with places. Farrington’s research provides new ways in which to think about the problem introduced into education by the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (reconciling environmental, social, cultural, and economic priorities in societies in educational practice), when she notes how the structural disadvantages affecting many of South Africa’s young adults makes it “more challenging to prioritise environmental reflection, alongside the personal immediate needs of poverty alleviation, social and physical security, health, education and employment” (p. 203).

Discussion of the Three Stories

All three stories were inspired by apparent interest in notions of democracy, social justice, and/or sustainability. None of the studies debated whether democracy, social justice, or sustainability were possible achievements for society or whether they were in fact ideals worth striving for. Haupt (2004) debates how to engage with such ideals in a context of Empire and appropriation of ideals. Farrington (2008) deliberates on the complexity of the combination of ideals and which are more likely to be pursued in contexts of historical disadvantage. Like the Pilger address, all were oriented towards working out how these utopian ideals might be (better) achieved in different contexts, and how youth might be (more) involved in the process.

In all three stories, the following processes appeared significant in the educational space that exists between utopian ideal and situated engagement. All three researchers appear to have used utopian ideals (democracy, social justice, and/or sustainability) as tools for their own reflexivity in considering what was taking place in the contexts under study (more or less explicitly), and for establishing the meaning and purpose of their educationally oriented research practices. This allowed them to constitute various reflexive realist differentiations and explanations of practice in youth educational environments. In Haupt's (2004) study, he used democracy and social justice as tools for reflexivity. He was willing to recognize and engage paradoxes, examine practices critically in context, and differentiate (more appropriate) situated and contextual responses in relation to the wider project of social change, social justice, and democracy.

In Hoffmann's (2005) study, she used sustainability and democracy as "tools" for reflexivity. She was willing to recognize pluralist practices and their diverse potential, uncover moral paradoxes, and suggest strategies for stronger situated learning practices. In Farrington's (2008) research, she used social justice, democracy, and sustainability as "tools" for reflexivity, and was willing to recognize and engage youth in investigating evidence of paradoxes and hybrid identities, provide them with opportunities for examining their practices in context, and work with them to identify situated and contextual responses to what they considered to be concerns. While the first two studies (Haupt, 2004; Hoffmann, 2005) were investigations differentiating more reflexive educational practices inspired by utopian ideals, the third study (Farrington, 2008) both reflected on and modelled educational practices of a reflexive, situated, and inspired nature. It would seem that working with utopian concepts (of democracy, social justice, and sustainability, even if not explicitly stated) provides a "route map" or "useful fictions" for reflexive engagement with contextual practices and realities, and tools for differentiating out various dimensions and dynamics of practices that are socially situated and broadly reflexively realist in nature and orientation.

These three stories point to how we might consider more critically

reflexive and engaged educational work in the contemporary society (or in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development) where sustainable development, democracy, and social justice function as utopian ideals in educational discourses and practice. As noted in a previous paper:

Today, few educators would dispute that learning arises in diverse socio-cultural contexts of meaning-making interaction. As such, learning can strengthen social relationships across school and community and has the potential to develop as reflexive praxis in response to environment and health risks in a local context. ... It is difficult to conceive of any human learning interactions that are not social processes of engaged meaning making either by learners as social agents in context or from the point of view of what is learned relating to social life in a world of interdependent living things. (O'Donoghue, Lotz-Sistika, Asafo-Adjei, Kota & Hanisi 2007, p. 435)

What we did not deliberate in this earlier paper was what provides the purpose and impetus for reflexive responses and learning in a world of interdependent living things. This paper argues that utopian ideals appear to have the potential to provide “useful fictions” to engage or guide such reflexivity purposefully and with social change intent. They appear to provide useful tools or fictions that allow for distancing, differentiations, and engagements that are not simply relativist or (only) locally defined.

Wider Discussions Historicizing Utopianism

While this paper so far has considered the challenge facing contemporary educators, it has not critically probed the history of utopianism in society or why utopian ideals have come to hold such significance and prominence in new social movement contexts today. Pilger's and the three researchers' histories (South African social/education activists) and the history of the utopian idealism that exists in society today in the discourses of democracy, social justice, and sustainable development have not been examined. While I am not able to report on the individual histories of Pilger or the three researchers, I comment more widely on the history of utopianism in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of how we might engage utopian concepts in educational practices in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and beyond.

Pilger's address to the students at Rhodes University has many references to the utopian icons of hope that constituted the utopian politics and theory of the post-1960s new social movements, and the construction of a “new South Africa” in the run up to the 1990s, most notably the ideal of achieving freedom, equity, and social justice through democracy. Pilger's early experiences were formed and shaped in the 1960s, and the three researchers have similarly been engaged in their youthful years in a changing era involving the move to democracy and sustainability in South Africa. Today's youth not only

have the 1960s or 1980s ideals of democracy and freedom on their agendas, but also a more pronounced utopianism concerned with sustainability of the planet and its people, and associated issues of global (and local) social justice. In South Africa there has been a direct coupling of these different utopian ideals in post-apartheid policy, where environmental concerns are seen to be social justice concerns (and vice versa), and attending to both are implicated in the democratic project, hence their emphasis in the three investigations briefly reviewed above. With social and critical realist understandings of ontology and empiricism, we can see that the points made by Pilger and the three researchers are not simply the views of individuals, but are reflective of the wider project of transforming society (and education) at a global and national level. In his address to the group of graduating youth, Pilger challenges them to use their skills, talents, and knowledge to participate in rescuing South Africa's dreams from the memory hole, just as the three researchers are interested in finding out how we might better mobilize the skills, talents, and knowledge of youth to build a more just, sustainable, and democratic future for current and future generations.

Benjamin Bertram (2004) provides a useful historicizing discussion on the utopian impulse which, he argues, provided the impetus for the establishment of various new social movements in the 1960s. He notes, too, that utopian impulses are powerful in liberation politics and social change movements to the present day (Bertram, 2004; see also Melucci, 1996). The roots of the apartheid struggle, the green movement, the wider democratic and human rights movements, gay and lesbian rights movements, and so on can all be traced most explicitly to the post-war imagination of a new society in the West, but has roots further back in the Enlightenment idealism of the modernist revolution (before its appropriation by Empire), and in the critical humanist ideals of the Freedom Charter in South Africa. Utopia today can still be seen to be a lucid ideology associated with the image of a new society, although it is tinged with a new cynicism and call for reflexivity (as in the Pilger address). Many of the radical political and essentially utopian proposals such as democracy or sustainability are based on "the utopian view that radical systemic change is extremely desirable if not imminent" (Bertram, 2004, p. 278), casting them in the frame of an immediate impetus for change. As Pilger argues, and as the three researchers (Haupt, 2004; Hoffmann, 2005; Farrington, 2008) all demonstrate, simply "implementing" this impetus for change through ideological transmission (i.e., education *for* something in a narrow sense) is not an adequate orientation for education or social change in the contemporary social context. Their research shows that potential appropriations of utopian ideals need to be critically reviewed, identified, differentiated out, and addressed through giving attention to paradoxes and reflexively constituted situated responses. Farrington's (2008) research demonstrates that this can be done through co-engaged participation in educational settings.

Thus, while acknowledging that such utopian desires are still prominent in societies today, particularly in new social movements, Bertram (2004) argues that such utopian ideologies have become hard to maintain amid a crisis of representation. He states that socialist utopianism in particular has been pushed into the margins as perspectival or molecular formations have taken centre stage, influenced by the spread and influence of global capitalism and post-modernism. He argues, however, that Utopia still enjoys a strong presence in critical theory, even though it has been attacked for being a totalizing discourse by critical post-modernists such as Jean Baudrillard (1988), who warned of a consensus being formed that “the US is utopia achieved” (p. 77). Such critiques of utopian ideals alert teachers and researchers to examine doxic knowledge of such concepts. It requires us to think deeply and carefully about sustainable development if we are using it to guide educational practice, as in Hoffmann’s (2005) and Farrington’s (2008) research. It requires us to examine appropriations of practices which emerge in the name of democracy and youth culture, as in Haupt’s (2004) and Farrington’s (2008) research. And it requires us to investigate the histories and experiences of youth in relation to such ideals, as in Farrington’s (2008) and Hoffmann’s (2005) research. Pilger indicates in his address that utopian ideals can easily function as doxic knowledge as they are appropriated to act on the unconscious libidinal desires of consumerism, and in the (often) unconscious ideological positions of class, race, or tribal forms of conflict. This requires educators to develop skills to work with utopian ideals to guide their practice, and, at the same time, to examine these utopian ideals and how they are potentially appropriated, i.e., they need to take a reflexive and sceptical stance to these utopian ideals.

Friedrich Engels (1978) noted many years ago that the difficult position of utopian thought is that it attempts to solve problems without genuine social struggle, and Utopia remains caught in the web of ideology. The Marxist tradition therefore saw Utopia as a vital and productive contradiction which is necessarily located in the gap between consciousness and praxis, pushing people to think in terms of gaps, tensions, incongruities, and difference (Bertram, 2004). In the three cases discussed above, all of the researchers surfaced and recognized paradoxes at work in the youth education contexts they were engaging, but also hybrids and more complex political, economic, socio-cultural, and socio-ecological formations affecting identity and agency of young adults. Bertram (2004) explains that in the 1960s it was easier for intellectuals to think they were challenging a larger cultural and economic system, but when the “New Left” gave way to “new social movements,” the construction of a utopian ideal was replaced by a resistance to totalizing discourses, and an uncertainty about what actually constituted “useful fictions.” This paper, through considering Pilger’s critique of South African society, the challenge facing its youth, and three case stories of educational research engaging youth issues and utopian ideals, has argued that it is still both

necessary and useful to challenge a larger cultural and economic system through utopian ideals, but this involves being reflexive and critical of these ideals at the same time.

The utopian hope for the future inherited from early Enlightenment, and from the euphoria of the 1960s, is that anything is possible and that education has a role to play in shaping creative agency necessary for re-imagined practices and alternatives that are not just rhetorical markings of utopian discourses. Ernesto Laclau has argued that an anti-essentialist and paradoxical Utopia that is utopian, while allowing for deconstruction of its positive will to totality, is important to the pragmatic new social movements of the post-Cold War era (Laclau, 1990). The perspectives of Pilger referred to in this paper, the citations opening this paper (Bertram, 2004; Melucci, 1996; Slonimsky, 2007), and the three case studies shared above all argue this point. Seeing utopian ideals as “useful tools” or “useful fictions” that are open for reflexive examination (i.e., exposing of doxic knowledge), and situated differentiation and action, could not exist without the concepts of unity and totality that utopianism describes.

Conclusion

Utopia is likely to remain a shaping presence on education, as reflected in the documents and intentions of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2005a), the Earth Charter (< www.earthcharter.org >) in aspirations for the future of youth in society (Melucci, 1996), and in the hopes for social justice, equity, and democracy in South Africa (Mhone & Edigheiji, 2003). Much of the excitement of critical theory in the past 50 years has been generated by the utopian feeling that anything is possible (Bertram, 2004). Pilger clearly has hopes that South Africa’s youth can rescue her dreams from the memory hole, as do the arguments for involving youth in change-oriented sustainability learning practices outlined in the three short stories contained in this paper. The United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development documentation (UNESCO, 2005a) likewise has hopes that education can be re-invented with a stronger values foundation oriented towards utopian ideals, and the Earth Charter has hopes that peace, democracy, sustainability, human rights, and social justice will prevail. As Melucci (1996) stated, “young people live for everyone” (p. 129)—they are the sensitive receptors of our culture. He explains:

Hope, as motivating force, must relate to the now-time: this is what young people affirm through their specific forms of action. All current forms of youth social and civic participation, of voluntary action, of cultural innovation, as they are born and grow proclaim the following: We want to experience what is possible to accomplish and what we do must be meaningful in itself ... we want ... to create meaning within a more general compass, as part of a global dimen-

sion ... If goals are no longer projected into the future, then they are to be specified principally as the ability to adopt an authentic relation to oneself and to others. Here it should be the task of adults to meet the young and recreate the space for initiation. (Melucci, 1996, p. 129)

In considering how young people “live for everyone” through their participation in society, Melucci (incompletely) argues a role for educators. While he points to the local and global relation and the utopianism and situated learning interfaces in young adults’ learning and action, he does not point to *how* educators might tackle the task he sets for them, which he sees as “meeting the young and recreating the space for initiation” (p. 129).

This paper has argued that a reflexive realist engagement with utopianism in education (as demonstrated by Haupt (2004), Hoffmann (2005), and Farrington (2008)), has potential for engaged youth practices in contemporary society (also in the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development) that can take account of the appropriations of utopian ideals referred to by Pilger, while allowing youth to participate in rescuing dreams from the memory hole. As indicated in the opening citations, Utopia is not necessarily a dangerous totalitarianism; it *can* be a means of critiquing the present and thinking about a radically different future (Bertram, 2004), *but* this requires a reflexivity in education that takes account of utopianist ideals becoming doxic and appropriated, and a recognition of paradox, and careful differentiation of what might be constituted as better practices in various contexts. Such a process, as shown by Farrington (2008), can be participatory in nature and can involve youth in co-defining the future with purpose.

Final Note

Readers might also consider that while it is not possible to generalize from a paper such as this, South Africa can be seen as a metaphorical microcosm of the globe. The world is yet to experience the end of global apartheid and the increasingly unequal divisions that exist between rich and poor at a planetary level. The wider issues affecting South African young adults touched on in this paper (i.e., a search for participation, democracy, sustainability, and social justice) are not dissimilar to those affecting young people in the majority world. In the widest sense, their educators are likely to be confronted with similar challenges to those affecting the educator researchers referred to in this paper.

Notes

- ¹ South Africa can also be viewed as a “microcosm” of the world, where a poor majority live side-by-side with a rich minority. As such, the emphasis on South Africa in this paper can serve as a metaphor to a phenomenon of “global apartheid” and its consequences at a planetary scale.
- ² Reflexive realism can be understood as constructivist realism in which reality, the sign system, and the interpreter interact (Delanty, 2005, p. 152). This form of realism recognizes human capacity to construct changed social and natural worlds. It is not a positivist form of realism which relies on correspondence between views of reality and what exists, but also recognizes that which exists outside our perception or knowledge of it, as in forms of social and critical realism.
- ³ I use the term *knowledges* here to denote the pluralist nature of knowledge that exists in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

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In writing this paper I acknowledge the research undertaken by the three researchers whose work I have selected for review here (Haupt 2004; Hoffmann, 2005; Farrington, 2008). Without such reflexive realist, rigorous, and path-finding contextual studies, it would not have been possible for me to develop the argument of this paper. Only after contemplating Pilger’s message, the three studies in relation to each other and to the wider ideals that still exist at the start of the 21st century and in South Africa, and Bertram’s comment on utopianism cited in the opening section of this paper, was I able to reconcile the complex problem of utopianism inscribed in the discourse of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, the Earth Charter, and the ideals for change that remain critical to the future of youth in South Africa today, and indeed globally. I thank them for their inspirational work, and hope that I have represented their work adequately here. I am fully aware of the fact that I was not able to do full justice to the depth and complexity of insight contained in each of the individual studies and would refer readers to the original papers for more detail. I also thank my colleague Rob O’Donoghue for his continued and engaged conversations, many of which have contributed to this paper.

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