

**Education and Climate Change: Living and Learning in Interesting Times**

By David Selby & Fumiyo Kagawa

Review by John Barry

This is an extremely timely volume which takes the dominant global political issue of the day - climate change (with the exception of the current economic crisis) - and examines it from the point of view of education and learning. It brings together 12 chapters (of varying quality it has to be said, but containing some outstanding and important contributions) and includes an impressive range of authors, impressive not only in their intellectual standing in the field, but also being a genuinely global range of authors, many of whom are also active outside the classroom on civil society and political activities on climate change and sustainability issues.

Topics covered range from: the centrality of ‘climate injustice’ as a central element of climate change education (Lotz-Sisitika, chapter 4); the contribution of anti-racist education (Sefa Dei, chapter 5); the connection between citizenship education and practice (Davies & Pitt, chapter 7); faith and interfaith educational and learning experience, and the importance of values as well as scientific facts (Toh & Cavagas, chapter 10); public health (Richardson & Wade, chapter 11); emergency/post-disaster education (Kagawa, chapter 6); adult and lifelong learning (Clover and Hall, chapter 9); the centrality of systems, ecological and emotionally-based thinking (Reed, chapter 8); the direct questioning of dominant understandings of ‘development’ and consumerism (González-Gaudiano & Meira-Cartea, chapter 1); and the difficult process of preparing people for economic contraction and energy descent as inevitable consequences of successfully dealing with climate change (Selby, chapter 2). An innovative, enjoyable and informative feature of the book is that the editors asked contributors to include scenarios at the end of their chapters, either depicting how social learning may happen in a context of runaway climate change or in a context where the climate threat is being dealt with (2010:6).

Kagawa’s chapter also echoes this theme of ‘hope’ as a key dimension of education in the context of and in relation to climate change. As she puts it, ‘[c]ultivating a sense of hope becomes particularly important especially when life will be full of incremental and slow decline...as well as the sudden onset of
extreme weather-related disasters’ (2010:117). As someone only too familiar with the often depressing and negative empirical evidence for the worsening global ecological crisis and climate change in particular (I sometimes find myself looking for either a bottle of whiskey, a razorblade or a holy book at times!), her call for making hope central is important, as is her (and other contributors to this volume, Davies & Pitt, in Selby & Kagawa, 2010:138) recognition that learning about climate change is not an ‘intellectual issue’ alone, but can raise psycho-social needs (2010:117) and expose vulnerabilities that need to be attended. This is particularly important when one also considers the important point Selby makes in pointing out the inconvenient truth of climate change as ‘a crisis arising from a disconnect from the web of life, especially among privileged populations and hence, a crisis of exploitation and violence coupled with denial’ (2010:38; emphasis added).

It is also clear that the current formal institutions of education and learning (schools and universities) are not ‘fit for purpose’ for life and learning in a climate changed world. Different contributors suggest ideas of more ‘active forms of learning’: engaged and place-based research and learning, i.e. active ‘doing’; acting and participating as well as passively receiving knowledge; and an emphasis on informal networks of ‘communities of learners’ (2010:8). Such education and learning in the context of climate change needs to be thoroughly interdisciplinary and integrate a variety of knowledges, including indigenous and non-Western and non-scientific knowledges, experiences and practices.

All in all, this book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the multidimensional problem of climate change as the dominant issue of the 21st century. It is inevitable that we are in a world affected by climate change and at the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel age. As this volume eloquently points out, education and learning in their widest senses are central to help us cope with these inevitable transitions, if we are to ‘manage’ that transition and create a sustainable low carbon, high well-being livelihoods for all people on the planet. As one of the contributors (Reed, chapter 8) quotes from Mathew Fox: ‘Our species is at a crossroads. Time is running out. We must re-invent the way we are living on earth. Education and learning are a deep and essential part of this change’ (2010:141). The editors rightly also note that ‘[e]ducation can only help allay a threatening condition by addressing root causes’ (Selby & Kagawa, 2010:242). And this brings to mind a (hopefully helpful) and evocative way to sum up the challenge and opportunities ahead in relation to climate change and this is that if there are ‘automatic’ or ‘technological’ solutions – they will require action, mobilisation
and agency on behalf of citizens across the planet. And it will require major political, economic, and deeper and more difficult cultural and psychological change. The evocative phrase that sums up the challenge and opportunity of climate change and also this book, is the slogan of the Industrial Workers of the World in the early 20th century which is perhaps even more relevant today: ‘Educate, agitate, organise’.


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