

**THE PARADOX AND POLITICS OF
DISADVANTAGE:
NARRATIVIZING CRITICAL MOMENTS OF
DISCOURSE AND PEDAGOGY**

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Amartya Sen (1999), winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, wrote in *Development as Freedom* that “focusing on human freedoms contrasts with narrower views of development, such as identifying development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise of personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance, or with social modernization” (p. 3). In attempting to refocus the intent and purpose of social development away from how it has been characterized in contemporary times, Sen holds us to account, ethically, for our participation in a globalizing project in which we are all implicated and yet whose effects we do not fully appreciate. Such ‘effects’ are ideological in that they operate at the level of structures and interstices and are encoded within complicities of normative systems of human relations. They are, consequently, inherently moral. What are the implications for education, in general, and mathematics education, in particular, when industrialization and economic growth are the foremost policy objectives of a nation state? I will explore that issue in this chapter from a philosophical standpoint and apply the issue to the development of mathematics curriculum in a setting within South Africa.

For Sen, human rights and freedoms of all kinds should lead technological, scientific and economic ‘progress’, rather than become pleasant side effects of these ‘development

instruments'. In his view, human rights, social and political freedoms (and I would include ecological rights) are the necessary "*constituent components* of development." As Sen would maintain, capitalism's rapid spread has been at the expense of much, as well as many who are often left marginalized and voiceless in the process. Capitalism has failed to provide the alluring 'rewards' for millions of people living in abject poverty who have little agency in relation to the hierarchy of access it has produced and which it serves to reproduce.

The assumption, that scientific and economic advancement will necessarily *achieve* the objectives of liberty and justice 'freely' or 'naturally', is necessarily 'dangerous'. However, our most widely shared understandings about what constitutes the 'common good' for all humanity are constructed on the basis of this assumption. Importantly, the political complexity of the association between modern scientific industrialization and that of human and environmental wellbeing is often lost. Troubling the ideological underpinnings of the large-scale development model leads us to question what this 'advancement' is towards, how is it 'better', for whom, what is lost, what is gained, at what price, and what are the ends? From a pedagogical perspective, some important questions follow: what implications does the global model of development have for the design of curricula, for the creation of educational structures and environments, for ways of choosing to engage with and construct participants within learning communities, and to what ends? Is justice a nicety or necessity of education? Does it have an intrinsic or extrinsic relationship to it?

Economic development has become the ongoing hegemonic mechanism that sustains the neo-colonial project on a global(izing) scale. Ideological assumptions underwriting the global project of development operate to monitor, inform and normalize accepted progressive discourses on education (Skovsmose & Valero, 2001). They measure and control meanings on how success and failure is constituted, on what is valued as knowledge, on who has access, on who 'they' are, on what constitutes good educational practice, on what the aims are for educational practice locally and globally. I argue that the way in which 'success' and 'disadvantage' in educational contexts is constituted is critically related to the social identities through which participants are differentially positioned (Swanson, 1998, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2006). This critical relationship is most dominantly informed by specific assumptions about what is 'good' for 'a learner'. This 'learner', within the educational stream of our progressive modernization project, is someone who most likely has been demographied and psychologized,

but also, ironically, has been dehistoricized and decontextualized from community and environment.

Conceptualizations of ‘the learner’ are most often driven by dominant Western educational discourses that normalize competition and draw on individualistic ideological investments globally. These prevailing discourses enable life opportunities for individuals within certain valued groups while delimiting opportunities for others. In so doing, they reify dominant cultural formations over localized ones, and these dominant discourses become the master print for entry or denial of access. Life opportunities are, however, beyond a question of mere ‘access.’ Normalized assumptions inhabit questions of what is valued, what is conserved and what is foreclosed in terms of being and imagining within other frames of reference. The ways in which these ideological assumptions impact on the recognition and validation of indigenous, generational or localized ways of knowing and being, and how they permit or enclose imaginative possibilities for communities to be otherwise, are all interconnected and relate directly to the (false) promise of the ends of freedom and (misconception of) wellbeing through the instrumental and material means of techno-scientific and economic ‘progress’.

The promise of greater ‘wealth’ and national strength through participation in global competition is thwarted by endemic power differentials between nations and populations, situated within hierarchical ‘social divisions of labor’. Thus, capitalism could be seen to reveal a ‘paradoxical and schizophrenic’ nature (see Deleuze and Guattari, 2005) in its reliance on the ‘winner and loser’ game-playing that is recontextualized (Bernstein, 2000; Dowling, 1998) at the level of community. It is in that sense that capitalism is said to perform a ‘symbolic violence’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) on racialized, gendered and socio-psychologically pathologized bodies (such as socially constructed learners) within various educational contexts (such as classrooms), discourses and practices (of, for example, school mathematics) in diverse locations across the world. Increasing neo-liberalization of institutions and the global modernization agenda has set the terms of global economic and social participation, by increasing the monitoring and regulation of individuals, groups and targeted communities. Such measures serve to perpetuate the global neo-colonial project. The current conception of development, framed as it is as ‘economic progress’ within the neo-colonial project, has become a Truth that tolerates little resistance, that excludes a range of other possible meanings and ways of engagement, and that attempts to silence alternative voices. The more discourses on development become

increasingly foreclosed in these terms, the greater freedom and the possibilities of freedom become enclosed.

INTRODUCING IDEAS

MATHEMATICS AS IMPLICATED IN THE GLOBAL PROJECT OF DEVELOPMENT

Mathematics is deeply implicated in the global project of development. Such a realization draws our attention to the strong techno-scientific utilitarian pull that the mathematical sciences afford and their preeminence in the ‘division of labor (labour)’ (Bernstein, 2000) in the social domain. The power of the voice of the mathematical sciences is such that it casts a ‘mythologizing (mythologising) gaze’ (Dowling, 1998; 2001) that ‘recontextualizes (recontextualises)’ (Bernstein; Dowling) the social, cultural, historical and political contingencies and complexities of localized settings of mathematics education practices to the ‘regulating principles’ (Bernstein, 2000) of Western mathematical discourses. This is achieved via its mythologizing reference to the redemptive powers of techno-scientific ‘progress’ as the ‘savior’ of humanity and of the environment. Rationalist Enlightenment, instrumental in technological and scientific achievements, sustains an imagination of the West as the ‘rightful’ supremacy. In doing so, it makes possible a discourse of ‘rescue and redemption’ in relation to marginalized groups and individuals. This is very often the case in ‘developing’ contexts of the world. These ‘rescue and redemptive’ discourses are, for example, very much at play in many African contexts. They construct African people as ‘vulnerable others’ that need to be ‘uplifted’ and ‘saved’.

The mythologizing and recontextualizing gaze (Dowling, 1998; 2001) of the mathematical sciences is implicated both in the development of constructions of pedagogy and in the development of mathematical identities. Mathematical literacy goes to the core of one's citizenship in the individualistic neo-liberal parlance of Western mathematics curricular documents (see Swanson, 2008). Within the constructions of citizen made possible by the nation state, economic capacity is closely tied to 'levels of literacy', and, in particular, to levels of scientific literacy. Mathematical 'failure' is thus framed within discourses of need for the nation state. In this thinking, mathematics education is in dissonance with democracy (Skovsmose & Valero, 2001). Thus the constructed 'failure' in mathematics is inextricably informed by citizenship, intersubjective social difference discourses on race, gender, socio-economic class, ethnicity, ability, and culture, and other geo-political differences. Zevenbergen (2003), Lerman and Tsatsaroni (1998), and Dowling (1998) have provided useful discussions of how 'failure' is constituted within mathematical discourses, performing 'violence' on bodies in the context of its production and in the context of the identities it constitutes. My own work has also elaborated on this issue (Swanson, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2006). For example, in the following excerpt, in a response to Eric Gutstein (2008), I address the question of mathematics and citizenship and the oppressions this relationship generates:

Common progressivist and utilitarian rhetoric on the 'importance' of mathematics learning in schools often make claims to "good citizenship" and vocational advancement. A 'successful citizen', according to this tenet, is one that has access to the power of mathematics to 'know the world'....Yet, the politics of such 'coming to know' is most commonly denied, so that mathematics' ability to enable its knowing subjects to 'describe our world' is purportedly divorced from subjective influence and human interference: Mathematics has great utilitarian worth here, but is untainted by the messiness of politics and human

vulnerability. 'Failure', in these terms, is therefore constructed, ironically, as a condition of being an unknowing mathematical subject...

...Standardized testing, streaming / tracking systems in schools for mathematics and pronounced differentiated teaching practices in this subject, as well as other gate-keeping controls, ensure that a differentiated hierarchy of access is produced that emulates, assists, (re)produces, and is (re)produced by the hierarchy within capitalist relations of production. Mathematics' high status in the "social division of labour of discourses" (Bernstein, 2000) within schools and society, makes it a high stakes game to play, and its "strong grammar" (Bernstein, 2000) provides it with significant cultural caché for those with the luck and privilege to have access to it as knowing subjects and citizens. (Swanson, 2008, pp. 213-214)

The often suppressed ideological investments of mathematical discourse in various contexts align strongly with questions of ethical engagement. Questions concerning why we 'do' or 'don't' do mathematics, who has access and what kinds of mathematics are taught or not taught to whom, and why, are caught up in these considerations. The current paternalistic savior-of-Africa paradigm, supported by a 'cultural politics of benevolence' (Jefferess, 2008), and framed within a neoliberal and neocolonial economic development model, aligns, similarly, in terms of investments of power and interest, with the way in which mathematics curricula are constituted within citizenship discourses that feed off nationalisms and competitive globalization agendas. In this way such curricula perpetuate new techno-scientific hegemonies and industrialization that advance neocolonialism.

It is my contention that the power that mathematics asserts within the social domain is divisive and extensive and serves to rationalize and normalize cultural, socio-historical and geopolitical differences and inequalities rather than complicate or disrupt them. A critical

awareness of the operationalization of such networks of influence, their critical interconnections with discourses of power, the deployment of ideologies, and the way in which social hegemonies are produced on a global structural level, are aspects of the political economy of mathematics education, that are, for the most part, ignored in academic discussions. Unless there is a fuller appreciation of these complex issues, there is, I believe, little chance of cultivating a deeper understanding of how one might approach mathematics education as a moral and ethical practice. At the core of any pedagogical practice should lie the moral questions of ‘why’ and ‘for what’ and ‘for whom’ and ‘to whom’ and ‘with whom’ are we teaching this and, if so, ‘why are we teaching this way’? It should also be asked: with what and whose wisdom? What investments of power and ideology lie hidden in any single judgment to act mathematically and/or pedagogically in a chosen way? What assumptions about what is good for those engaged in mathematics education precede us without our awareness to question or to choose to act otherwise?

These are complex issues and deserve due diligence, dialogue and contemplation. I propose, somewhat tentatively, a few ideas about how we might approach the oppressions and hegemonies noted earlier. It is dangerous and unwise to focus at the micro level only. Any such focus needs to be framed within the context of macro discourses at the structural level and possibly on a global scale. Such a broad focus is crucial if we are to maintain an awareness of how dominant discourses in the social domain circulate to reproduce and sustain or change discourses and limit or enable possibilities for individuals or groups. In a paradoxical Foucauldian sense (1981), discourse permits as it dis(en)ables; it produces subjectivity as much as it allows us to thwart the oppressions it reproduces. Hegemonies of mathematics education work alongside discourses of economic development, neoliberalism, neocolonialism,

nationalisms, and social divisions such as race, ethnicity, gender, geography, ability, language, socio-economic status, sexuality, religion, cult and otherwise. Isolating any one of these issues would force us to lose a sense of their interrelatedness, complexity and the intricacies of power and influence. Keeping this in mind, I nevertheless make a case for a critical, ‘culturally-conscious’ theory of curriculum as one beginning pathway into possibilities for rethinking egalitarianism, democracy and justice in respect of a critical mathematics education. In a sense, I have already engaged to some degree with a critical, culturally-conscious approach through my earlier critiques by viewing mathematics education as a political (and moral) text. Such an approach can be viewed as a curriculum approach in acknowledging the work within the reconceptualization movement (see Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1996). In advancing a critical, culturally-conscious theory of curriculum, it is necessary to understand the work of theories of curriculum, and how they might help us in our approach towards a more purposeful and ethical engagement with mathematics education. Henderson and Kesson (2004) draw on Walker (2003) to argue:

Curriculum theories...are about ideals, values, and priorities. They employ reason and evidence, but in the service of passion. Curriculum theories can be analytical as well as partisan, but unlike scientific theories, they are not curriculum theories unless they are about ideals. Curriculum theories make ideals explicit, clarify them, work out their consequences for curriculum practice, compare them to other ideals, and justify or criticize them. (p. 60, p. xiv)

To open the debate, what curriculum, then, should be undertaken in the mathematics education context to support *an ideal*, and *which* ideal? If *the ideal* centers around a purpose of/for education, as Gert Biesta (2009) reminds us, then it might well be advisable to look at issues of democracy, justice and egalitarianism as offering worthy purpose, even a ‘critical responsibility’,

in the Freirian (1999) sense through conscientization, as long as this is not through a singularly anthropomorphic lens of social justice that is carried out narrowly and unholistically at the expense of urgently important ecological justice considerations (Bowers, 2001; Bowers and Apffel-Marglin, 2005). Bishop (1990), amongst others, has written of the hegemony of mathematics education as a form of Western imperialism. Powell and Frankenstein (1997), and others, have addressed the issues of Eurocentricism in dominant mathematics education practices throughout the world. From a strongly sociological position, different in many ways to the perspectives of Bishop and that of Powell and Frankenstein, Dowling (1998) has also addressed the power of mathematics and its divisiveness through its various discursive elaborations in contexts. Skovsmose and Valero (2001) address mathematics education in terms of its critical relationship with democracy and the need for a transformative pedagogy. 'Mathematics for Social Justice' has also gained momentum (see Gutstein, 2008), whilst D'Ambrosia (1997, 2001, 2006) has inspired the Ethnomathematics movement as an approach that might be used for resisting the hegemony of Western mathematics education. Specifically, ethnomathematics is said to lie "on the borderline between the history of mathematics and cultural anthropology" (D'Ambrosio, 1997, p. 13). Like ethnomathematics, 'Everyday Mathematics' is said to exist in the social habits of people throughout the world. While they are not without ambiguity and problem, these approaches offer valuable insights and practical approaches that highlight the cultural investment that other approaches often oppressively endorse as 'culturally neutral' and objective. Such 'culturally conscious' approaches, even as they are fraught with contradiction and paradox (see Dowling, 1998, for a critique of Ethnomathematics), nevertheless, draw attention to the implicatedness of Western mathematics in divisive social structures. In these structures, economic and ideological models become hidden curricula.

Another potentially promising approach that reflects a cultural consciousness is a ‘culturally-responsive’ mathematics education. Drawing on Ethnomathematical thinking and aspiration, it bears witness to mathematical practices as value-laden (Bishop, 2001) and to relationships within classrooms as culturally-informed. There is a sense of reciprocity; a sense of cultural relationality in terms of what is learned and how it is constituted. It is within this line of thinking that Barta and Bremner (2009) recognize that “mathematics in practice becomes an issue of identity as well as cognitive process” (p. 91). They note that “[s]ome aspects of culturally embedded mathematical knowledge are amenable to formal description, but do not fully capture the mathematical competencies of the people who use that knowledge” (p. 91). These competencies are drawn from the social, physical, historical as well as political contexts in which various groups live. The paradox of culturally-responsive pedagogy and its double-bind, however, lies in the very hegemony that it wishes to address. Children of the First Nations of Canada’s indigenous groups, and other marginalized indigenous groups throughout the world, need to be constituted as ‘other’, as different, to support an approach whose ultimate objective is for emancipation, democracy and egalitarianism. Donald (2009) speaks of these “civilizational frontiers” as “unquestioned” and “a naturalized idiosyncrasy of Canadian society”. Such an idiosyncrasy maintains and reproduces the “socio-spatial separation of Canadian (insiders) and Aboriginal (outsiders)” (p. 23) that need to be ‘included’ or ‘responded to’, or that the insiders (as the controllers of educational discourse, curriculum and policy) need ‘to be responsive to.’ As Donald notes, “Aboriginal peoples and their ways have been reduced to an existence *outside* of Euro-Western civilization” (ibid.). The difficulty is that for any group of marginalized peoples, ‘cultural difference’ is inevitably a socio-historical construction. What becomes ‘relevant’ for these students to learn based on conceptions of their culture is also somewhat problematic. Who

decides what is relevant to learn for whom, and how do these decisions position them as learners or knowers in the social domain within prevailing power relations and discourses of difference?

Each curriculum approach, including culturally-conscious ones, to mathematics education, is fraught with contradiction, ambiguity and paradox. Without a critical consciousness and language of resistance we may be forced to or unwittingly rely on uncontested assumptions as truth that we are disempowered to contest. Because of the significant power of influence that mathematics commands in the social domain, it is even more important to develop a language of empowerment to critique, question and contest such influence where it does not serve the ends of worthy human ideals, ones that encompass social justice and democracy. Noting and acknowledging the way in which mathematics education is implicated in socio-historical and contemporary investments of power, geopolitically, recognizing the ideologies it supports and operationalizes, and the oppressions it sustains, is crucial to the development of a disposition that seeks more democratic and more ethically just curriculum approaches to mathematics education.

In the following section I provide situated examples of lived experience of the potentially oppressive nature of mathematical discourse in a political context. The examples offer a narrative rendering of the issues of ideology and ethical obligation. In the first excerpt, the context is a historical missionary school in a township or informal settlement in the Cape Province of South Africa, a community in which I engaged in my inquiry. The excerpt highlights ethical dilemmas and exemplifies ideologically-informed assumptions about what is 'good' for an impoverished community, both mathematically and politically-speaking. The excerpt is drawn from a narrative piece, *Fishes and Loaves: A Parable of 'Failure.'* The use of biblical language, therefore, is a metaphorical elaboration of the parable, and is commensurate with the Christian context of the local schooling community.

This excerpt is drawn from my doctoral research (Swanson, 2004) in a postapartheid context. Another version of parts of this excerpt appear in Swanson (2007a). Similar in much of its purposes, sentiments and effect to *narrative inquiry* (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 1991), I developed a methodological approach to my research, which I most often refer to as ‘critical narrative engagement’ or ‘reflexive rhizomatic narrative.’ Through ‘moments of articulation’ (Swanson, 2004), greater critical rhizomatic depth becomes possible through such a methodological approach that exceeds the boundaries of a more canalized, formally structured research project. It is flagrantly subjective in recognizing the impossibility of ‘objectivity’. It aims for authenticity, while recognizing the socially-constructed nature of ‘truth.’ Unlike more positivist qualitative research approaches, critical narrative methodologies are more able to capture nuance, ambiguity and contradiction, and address dilemma, the unexpected, the ethically fraught, while captivating audience and offering ethically-charged insights that are of a deeply human, heartfelt and soulful nature. Rather than seeking packaged ‘solutions’ as in many other scientific qualitative research approaches that often further neocolonial methodological approaches, narrative methodologies emphasize reflection and contemplativeness. They aesthetically and insightfully seek to bring the personal into the political, connecting the momentary and localized with the broader social domain, the universal and the global. Deep levels of reflexive engagement become possible with critical narrative rendering as a research objective.

APPLYING IDEAS

A NARRATIVE UNFOLDING: IMPLICATIONS AND IMPLICATEDNESS OF PRACTICE

And so it came to be that I found myself in the midst of “the multitudes”, a class of fifty grade 7 children from this informal settlement school. Their teacher had *already* abandoned them for more than three weeks, but they came to school nonetheless. And I can only assert that they were compelled to come, NOT by the promise of pedagogic empowerment, because the paucity (or non-existence) of subject-based knowledge mitigated against this, BUT by a sense of commonality, of community and the knowledge of a “place of belonging”.

Behind the skull of Apartheid, lurks vestiges of the old, so-called Bantu Education, an “impoverished” form of the *already* limited Christian National Education with which we were all indoctrinated, as children of the Apartheid state. Bantu education was imposed on black African and so-called “colored” children...the future “hewers of wood and drawers of water”, as the Nationalist government liked to refer to Black labor in those days. This biblical reference of woodcutters and water carriers was, at that time, a hallmark of an ideology, which viewed black African people as inferior and only capable of menial labor ... and *the legacy of the system remains*.

“Would you like me to teach you some mathematics?” I offered. “Ja, asseblief, mevrou! Ons sal baie daarvan hou! Ja, asseblief mevrou!” (“Yes please ma’am, we would like that very much!”). They began to dance in their desks with excitement at the prospect of learning something... something *new* perhaps?, perhaps learning something *differently*?, learning something from *me*?, or perhaps just learning *something...anything*... I was moved and heartened and I began to bless and break the bread of my mathematical knowledge, my own

empowerment, and divide it with affection and compassion and I broke of this body to give of the light and joy of this subject I loved so much offering it in tasty morsels. This was *surely more* than mere fishes and loaves!!

And I saw those glimmers of light, the kindled glow turn from inward to outward, and flickers of understanding pass across the intent faces of these psychologically-abandoned, pedagogically-abandoned children. And after a while, the children began to answer my questions and even *to ask* questions and participate in the discussion, giving meaning through their bodies, giving back unsparingly of their enthusiasm. I was greatly heartened as I saw this as tremendous “advancement” in such a short time. For children that I had witnessed as having been exposed to nothing but transmission, rote-learning and proceduralism, (on the occasions when they were exposed to subject learning in the classroom at all), this was an “opening of minds”, an “awakening of spirits”, a “pedagogic achievement”, a “progressivist success”.

I was elated, ecstatic! I was performing a miracle. I was proving that the miracle was possible; that my miracle could set a spark in the dry veldt of despair and disillusionment and would Light the Dark and heal my whole country with a Sanctifying Fire. And just when we were about to consecrate the communion of Mathematical Thought, there was a Divine Visitation. The door swung open and a child entered. He handed me a crumpled white bag and was gone as suddenly as he had come.

A cloud passed over the sun and, through the broken panes of the classroom window, the streaks of golden sunlight dulled and disappeared. The atmosphere cooled; the mood of the children changed....And then there seemed to be a movement, indiscernible at first, and then ever increasing, a spiraling force drawing the atmosphere inwards, like a vortex, deep, downwards into what I was holding, *a crumpled plastic bag!* The children began to move around

in their desks in agitation. They were no longer focusing on the mathematics we had been doing; just the bag in my hands. The moment of Mathematical Mastery, of Conceptual Glory was shattered!

At that moment, I did not know what was happening around me. *I* was now the one without immediate understanding, although, on a deeper level, having grown up in Apartheid South Africa, I recognized this as a ‘possibility of context’ all too well! Nevertheless, I must have shown shock and confusion in my face. “Dis die Appeal, mevrou! Dis die Skool Appeal, dis ons kos van die Appeal af!” (“It is the Appeal, ma’am, the School Appeal. It is our food from the Appeal,”) they let me know, moving from their desks in an agitated dance towards me towards the bag. “Watter ‘Appeal’ is hierdie?” (“What Appeal is this?”) I asked in confusion. And they told me in Afrikaans: “It is the white people, ma’am, that give us our school lunch. It comes from the children in the privileged schools, ma’am. It is for us, ma’am.” Their hands began to touch on the sides of the open bag, to touch my hands, to look inside the bag. Was there enough food today, perhaps? No never enough! I looked into the bag and saw a few sandwiches and fruit... white children’s discarded lunches that had been collected for the day and brought to the school under the guise of “assistance” from the surrounding community. “Asseblief, mevrou, gee vir my. Ek is so baie honger vandag!” (Please, ma’am, give it to me. I am so hungry today), they told me, competing with each other to gain my attention or to catch my eye, so that I may take pity on them over the next. I realized that I had the impossible task of having to decide who eats and who goes hungry that day. Everything had seemed to change...or had it? I had offered to teach these children mathematics; now I was expected, to preside as judge and jury over their bodies. I was no ‘liberator’ or Great Redeemer, but an *accomplice* coerced into the discourse and practice of Oppression!

The rules of the discourse of mathematics had shifted to a new discourse whose dominant and uncontested rules won the day. Instead of providing these children with empowerment through access to the “regulating principles” of school mathematics, I was trying to bricolage some moments of pedagogic meaning draw some understanding from the context to enable a way forward; impossible! I realized with an Illuminating Light, that I was *no* Messiah. I could not provide the miracle of “fishes and loaves”. Just as I was not able to perform it pedagogically, so I could not break up the sandwiches and divide the fruit equitably among 50 children so that they all may be satiated. Some would have to starve and who would those be?

For a fleeting moment, I heard the voice of the progressive mathematics educator: “Draw on the life experiences of the children to help them concretize their mathematical thinking and see relationships between mathematics and real life, to see the relevance of mathematics to the real world.” In this context, under these circumstances, what utter useless rhetorical nonsense! The children already *knew* that the principles of divisibility would not work here, just as I knew my inadequacy in providing the Miracle of Divine Multiplication.

White chalk dust from my fingers billowed in a fine mist as the movement of small black hands over mine disturbed it. For a moment it clouded the view of the contents of the bag and I thought I saw through the mist, the *skull of my country* looking back at me, and in it was *my own skull*. I had tried to provide a skin over that skull, to give it substance and embodiment through my own mathematical empowerment in a context where pedagogic possibilities are reduced to the rules of “poverty”. What did I think I was going to do? What Messiah did I think I was? Was I going to “uplift” this community, provide their children with the pedagogic promise of something “better” than fishes and loaves? What “good” did the patronizing offer of food for “disadvantaged learners” do for this community’s educational, political and socio-economic

empowerment? In what way did my actions or those of the other do-gooders address the structural and material conditions of the lives of the children and people of this settlement community?

I began to divide out the fare in the classroom, desperately trying to find some rule of fairness to apply to an unjust task, ever aware that the broader injustice lay outside of the classroom, impinging on it....The school classroom, intentioned as a place of *pedagogic empowerment*, became a place of *pedagogic impoverishment* and one where the throttling rules of poverty reproduced themselves and were well learned and established!

At the same time, in another very different community school, a few kilometers away, children were learning mathematics with a breathless urgency! “Die kleinjies moet eers kry,” I said. (The little ones must be offered first) It was all I could think of. Was I trying to salve my own conscience because I could not find a fairer rule? Those respondents to the School Appeal who had donated the lunches, did they salve their conscience for the day? Could they see inside the classroom and view how their neo-liberal actions had played out? How teaching had been interrupted to satisfy more immediate needs in ways which reinforced dependency and held these people to their poverty. Had this helped to *uplift* a “disadvantaged community” or *establish* it? Was it facilitating Africanisation and empowerment? Or was it merely “fishes and loaves”, a parable of “failure”.

ROOTS/ROUTES

In the second reflexive narrative, *Roots/Routes*, I attend to the ‘construction of disadvantage’ and the perpetuation of deficit discourses in contexts of constructed and lived poverty. This excerpt is drawn from my doctoral dissertation, and a version of it appears in Swanson (2007b) and another

in Swanson (2009). In this excerpt, through a critical moment of research engagement, I address the ‘blame’ paradigm and its unethical investment in oppressive pedagogies. Caught in the dictates of the progress model, identities are framed in situated contexts by the dominant discourses from the social domain that perform symbolic violence, delimiting opportunities for transcendence. I attend to my own complicity in the ideological assumptions of this project and my perpetuation of the oppressive discourses it sustains.

In the same informal settlement school, I am speaking to the principal in his office. In the words I use in the narrative: I want to ask him, why it is, that, from my perspective, I have not *really* evidenced any real attempt to engage in any progressive education practices within these classrooms; why I have seen *so much* rote learning when any pedagogic learning took place at all; or why I have seen, from my perspective, so much apparent indifference; why it is that corporal punishment is still used here, when it has been made *illegal* to engage in physically punitive practices in South African schools; why so many of the teachers are so seldom *in* the classroom when the then National Minister of Education has made urgent and repeated appeals to teachers across the country to take their jobs seriously for the country’s sake, for the sake of our youth and the future generation of South Africa now in creation? Where does the proverbial ‘buck stop’, who is responsible, who cares, why not, and how can we make a difference? I want to ask him why he closes the school early so frequently, causing very small children to have to walk home alone, often unescorted back to their homes in the informal settlement where they are not attended to or protected because their parents or caretakers are at work? Where does his responsibility to the community end or where does it start? Why does he use class time to have meetings with his staff, and why so frequently is learning interrupted for apparently, *from my*

perspective, inconsequential issues? Why does he legitimize teachers' missing classes by engaging in these practices himself? Why can't meetings take place after school?

As I asked these questions in my mind, I am angry and my mental discourse is one of judgment and blame. At that moment, a bullying incident occurs in the playground outside the window of the principal's office that helps me attend to my own perspective and reveal the source of the 'blame paradigm'. I continue:

At that moment...and it was not an epiphany but a slow blurred form taking root...re-rooting in my mind. It was a slow re-realization of what I had done by wanting to 'speak out' and to tell this principal that I thought it was 'just not good enough'....It was a re-cognition of my *own* voice of violence of what brutality I had done in feeding into the discourse on "disadvantage". I re-realized that my thoughts, framed within the discursive roots of my socialization, my education and knowledge, my own perceived empowerment as an adult, and my experience of teaching within the context of privilege—which, through the temporal and spatial, defines the moment and place of poverty, subordination and oppression—had established that 'disadvantage' as 'plain to see'.

I began to re-realize that in my initial thought-words of anger, I had been taking on the colonizing voice which produces the deficit, and that creates, validates and establishes 'the problem' from outside from a place out there that can speak unmonitored by its own surveillance. I had been doing the same thing as that which I had surveyed in the courtyard. I was producing and reproducing the very conditions that produced the bully/ bullying in the first place, ensuring its reproduction through my own voyeuristic perspective and reproductive deficit language, albeit a silent language of thoughts.

I too had become a bully. I was complicit with a system or discourse and a well-entrenched paradigm of thinking that constructs “the problem”, establishes the ‘truth’ on ‘deficit’, and *lays blame*.

I realize that my vantage point was at fault. That, in the contexts in which I had practiced my profession as a secondary school mathematics teacher in independent schools, the practices I was criticizing now would not have been possible; that teaching time was sacred, important, urgent and that time was of the essence, a resource of which there was never enough. From *this* vantage point, I notice the inversion and the contradictions.

In a context of privilege, material resources are endless, paper, equipment, classroom space, computers, libraries, photocopy machines, photocopy assistants, new technology, availability of resource materials, curriculum materials, pedagogic assistance, all within a community of Pedagogic Knowledge Experts, but time was a precious and limited resource, urgent, sought after, coveted. Here it was the opposite—confined space, discomfort, lack of privacy, lack of expertise, lack of pedagogic support, noise, dust, the smell of dust; too many bodies, huddled bodies, wriggling; no space to think, no space to prepare but all the time in the world; in a sort of time-warp; in a mental, psychological, sociological, human landscape of *foreverness*.

These are the power principles that inform not only the political gaze from the perspective of the self, but also control the distributions of the spatial/temporal dichotomy and that define the political economy of context by assisting in the production of the poverty/ privilege hierarchy, and which define the roles of subjects in context.

These are the principles of the politics of context that either delimit or allow spaces of possibility in accordance with the social division of labor of discourses (Bernstein, 2000) in the

social domain in which the discourses of context are invested discourses which depend/ suspend entirely on the stringently policed rules of relations of power.

This is how the principles of 'progress' operate across the temporal and spatial, in the race towards 'future advancement'. And defined by its own rules, it ensures *very few* 'winners', and *many* 'losers'!

I hear the deficit voices again...bullying voices...some voices of educationalists, specialists, and well-known people in authority in South African Education; people in the 'new arena' of post-liberation education; people I interviewed. "The problem lies with our teachers...they are underqualified, demotivated, lacking experience and expertise and there is not enough of them. Our failures in mathematics can be directly attributed to the teachers; *they* are our problem."

I realize that in my own way, I was feeding into this, re-creating this monster, re-establishing this deficit discourse. I realize that in creating the teachers, principal and their pedagogic practices in this 'disadvantaged community' as *lacking*, as the 'real problem', it was an escape, a way of not facing up to not understanding, not seeing the source of power and how it threads its way into the repressive web.

Yes, I had become the bully. And the bully in the courtyard was as much, if not more, my *victim* of constructed "disadvantage" and the pedagogy of pain and poverty that it produces, as she was a bully in herself. The principal was a victim of it too, and I had not even *begun* to imagine the strangulating and delimiting conditions that this discourse served to produce and in which he was constrained to operate. This was the 'pedagogizing of difference' indeed, and a discourse in which I had participated. This was how the construction of disadvantage begot pedagogic and contextually produced disadvantage.

The principal came back into the room, looking a little harassed. A ‘sideshow’ had interrupted our ‘performance’ and had seemed to detract from ‘the conversation’. But, in fact, it was a critical fragment of the whole; a necessary contribution to understanding the resolution of the narrative, and in which our initial ‘polite’ conversation preceding ‘the sideshow’ had been the essential exposition. I, myself, had moved through several modes of *looking*, premised by various experiential podiums of perspective. Consequently, when I had been angry and critical my vantage point had been the context of privilege in which I had gained much (although not all) of my teaching experience. When I had overcome my anger and realized my role in the co-constructed authorship of power .I had returned to my early youth and to remembering, remembering what it was like to be bullied and to feel the hand of violence and the voice of humiliation, and it was only *then* that I could begin to understand-feel with a *deeper listening*.

It had required a range of senses as it had required a shift in perspective. I had moved from a ‘looking on’ and the voyeuristic power instantiated in perspectives of ‘seeing’, to a ‘listening to’, where the eyes are quieted by the sights and sounds within darkened silence, and the sense of hearing is peaked tuning *into* silence.

This had been my route. Instead of trying to find the “root of the problem” and trying to “root out the problem”, like a cancer from living tissue, instead I was moving towards searching for “*the source*”. The source of the problem lay silently *behind* the construction of “the problem” itself and threaded its way, like a tributary, to my very doorstep. .I too was complicit, a collaborator of deficit discourse, a root of ‘the problem’s’ routedness. Now I became responsible as well, through acknowledging that responsibility.

The I-you dichotomy (see Buber, 1996, for “I-Thou” relationship) had been broken by the emergence of a new bond of responsibility...a *humbling togetherness!* I needed to *listen*

collaboratively to that “source” in collectively finding a way together of “re-sourcing” towards non-improvement, other possibilities and mutual healing.

On yet another level of perception, both ocular and audible, I realize that in my criticism of the principal, I had been *not only* engaging in the reproduction of master narratives on poverty and deficit that lays the blame on the victim and not the discursive power base that establishes it, *but also* in the reproductive (re)creation of ‘Truth’, or verisimilitude....and that the ‘truth’ about the black teachers in South Africa was an act in the creation of a simulacrum. Where to now in re-routing towards re-sourcing the discourse?

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