Chapter 2
In Conversation with Alan Bishop

Philip Clarkson

Doing a graduate psychology course with Jerome Bruner switched me on. I thought to myself, we should be doing more of this stuff (research) in education, and in mathematics education. Gee! You know! Why are just psychologists doing this stuff? Sooo I took on various tutoring jobs just to check out some things. I tutored at a mental hospital. I taught and then tutored in schools in a black part of Boston in a program that Harvard ran with gifted black kids. I also taught in ‘normal’ classes in middle years. This really got me interested in research on teachers in the classroom.

(Bishop reflecting on his time in Boston in the mid 1960s)

Alan was born in 1937, just before the Second World War commenced. His father was a mathematics teacher, who progressed to be a foundation principal of a new Grammar School in London. Alan’s mother was a seamstress, who – not unusual for that time – concentrated on making a home for her husband and only child. One of the great joys of the family was music. His father played the violin for public performance in a trio, and his mother played the cello. Both gave Alan much active encouragement to develop his own musicality.

Alan sat for his 11 plus examination and scored enough to go to the University College School in London, a public school linked, originally, to London University. At school he chose to take a lot of mathematics and science, a lot of music and sport, all of which he has continued with throughout his life. Towards the end of secondary school, Alan successfully auditioned and subsequently played the bassoon for 2 years in the National Youth Orchestra. Clearly he had a wonderful, although for a young man, a difficult decision to make in those final years of schooling: would he concentrate on his music or mathematics? Taking the advice of a visiting musician from Holland, “Do you really want to enjoy your music? Then stay an amateur”,

This chapter is mainly based on a number of conversations I had with Alan Bishop during April and May of 2008. But my conversation with Alan started with a brief question to him at a seminar he gave at Monash University in 1977. It continues through to today, in many and various locations including on golf courses, although those times should happen more regularly. Clearly the assertions and interpretations in this chapter are mine, although the dates and events have been checked with Alan.

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Alan choose to continue his studies in mathematics, with music and of course sport as his second level studies.

At the conclusion of his secondary education in 1956, Alan chose to complete 2 years of national service. He entered the air force and spent most of that time as an air-radar fitter, which essentially meant trouble shooting the huge analogue computers then in use for navigation. This was Alan’s first introduction to computers, and since this was 20 years or more before computer technology became widely available in society, he was considerably ahead of the game. On completing national service he presented himself for an interview at Southampton University, a normal part of the selection process. During the 30 minute interview, the Professor of Physics was far more interested in learning what Alan knew about computers, regarding his application for selection as a mere formality.

Alan had chosen to apply for Southampton since while concentrating on mathematics in his program, there would also be opportunity for music and sport as well. During his first year of study, he had the great fortune to meet up with Jenny, a talented linguist. They subsequently married, and still are supporting each other. His tutor turned out to be Bill Cockcroft, well known later for writing the Cockcroft Report in 1982, which advised the British government on strategies for revamping school mathematics. Interestingly it was just as much their common interest in jazz that sealed the beginning of a long friendship between Bill and Alan.

The notion of becoming a teacher had formed for Alan in his senior years in secondary school. He chose to pursue this interest by moving to Loughborough College on graduation from Southampton, since there he could undertake a 1 year Diploma in Education, not just for mathematics teaching but also in Physical Education. Alan was still in contact with Bill Cockcroft who suggested on the completion of his Diploma that he should apply for scholarships that would allow him to study in the United States, and incidentally get to know something of the interesting curriculum moves being made there with the so called “new math”. Alan did win a scholarship through the Ford Foundation, so he and Jenny, now married, were off to Harvard University in the United States to complete an MA in Teaching. Although the scholarship was for 1 year, they stretched it out for 2 years, supplementing the scholarship monies with tutoring. They managed to stay for a third year by taking on full time school teaching in a local high school. Hence while taking classes with the likes of Jerome Bruner, Alan was teaching the new School Mathematics Study Group (SMSG) mathematics in high school, a wonderful preparation for his then glimmering idea of becoming a researcher in education. This glimmer of an idea is captured by the statement from Alan at the head of this chapter. It was at Harvard he started to see the possibility, and the excitement that can be generated, of doing good research.

Heading back to England after their stay in the United States, Alan rejected various school teaching jobs at top public schools, some of whom were teaching the new School Mathematics Project (SMP) mathematics curriculum, which would have ensured him a stable and well provided professional life. He was clearly well qualified for such jobs. But he rejected these lucrative offers, preferring instead to pursue this dream of researching in education. Hence he applied for and was appointed to