CHAPTER 9

A PEDAGOGY OF CONFLICT AND DIALOGUE

1. INTRODUCTION

In this research I have traveled a journey from the imagined hypothetical situation of a particular theoretical landscape, begun in a university lecture room, to a school mathematics classroom where a situation was arranged. A brief stay with one student teacher in this arranged situation led to the production of a variety of data. These data were organised into a crucial educational case description. Through this description it was possible to invite an interested outsider to participate in the visit to this mathematics classroom, and to produce an analysis. Five dual-concept themes emerged from the analysis. These themes, underpinned by the notion of complementarity, were cast in another sketch that charts the beginnings of perhaps quite a different theoretical landscape.

In this last chapter, I have arrived at a final destination in this journey for now. The search for new ideas, which emerge from this journey, and my reflections on the journey, inspires an attempt to put forward a pedagogy for mathematics education, particularly one that embeds a critical perspective. This search has yielded two main components in this pedagogy: conflict and dialogue. The principle that both separates and weaves together conflict and dialogue into a pedagogy is once again that of complementarity. The possibility to move toward a pedagogy and its components of conflict and dialogue, and the emergence of complementarity arose from the methodology and process of producing a crucial description of a mathematics classroom, which served as our laboratory for curriculum thinking and development. Cognisance has to be taken of the context in which this laboratory was set up in my research journey as I seek to remember that we are in the unique situation of a post-apartheid, democratic South Africa, although the pangs of apartheid have not subsided.

In this concluding chapter, any attempt at prescription will render a contradiction to this landscape of theory, practice and research which integrates a critical perspective. Instead, I attempt to theorise a pedagogy of conflict and dialogue, underpinned by the principle of complementarity, by addressing the question: why are conflict and dialogue necessary (but by no means sufficient) components in a pedagogy that integrates a critical perspective in mathematics education? Indeed, why theorise a pedagogy in the first place? And why is complementarity an essential
principle in a pedagogy of conflict and dialogue? Finally, why are crucial descriptions necessary in this search for a pedagogy of conflict and dialogue?

2. PEDAGOGY, THEORY AND PRACTICE

There is no doubt that critical pedagogy has developed a considerable literature. However, in mathematics education, writing in critical pedagogy is rather limited and arguably on the margins rather than at the centre in both research and practice. Mathematics educators have been inspired by and borrowed from the general critical education field. For example, Skovsmose (1994) draws on the work of critical theorists in Europe; and Frankenstein (1987) underpins her work with that of Freire. In general though, even critical pedagogy has not become entrenched in the centre of attitudes and thinking within the mainstream in schools nor has it been taken up by the large majority of teachers. This is not to discount some excellent efforts at developing democratic schools, described for example, by Apple and Beane (1995). Part of the reason for this may be that expositions of critical pedagogy have failed in the main, to take account of the current actual situation in a way that validates teachers’ and schools’ struggles with deeply entrenched forms of authority, structure, differentiation and disciplinary education obligations as they try to think, create and work in an arranged situation in which democracy, freedom, equity and context are valued. Ellsworth (1989) has shown this in her aptly titled critical paper “Why doesn’t this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy” which was developed from reflections on her classroom practices. Her critique is supported in this research. To take a step forward we need to rework critical pedagogy so that it emanates from and resonates with the lives and experiences of teachers, pupils and schools; and we need to develop it both in opposition to, and in co-operation with existing forms and functions of mathematics education. A critical pedagogy has to recognise that there are such things as mathematics classrooms and teachers of mathematics.

The term pedagogy is used in a number of different ways but its ordinary dictionary meaning refers to the practice, principles, art or science of teaching. In this respect, pedagogy seems to contain some element of prescription. This is however, not the entire meaning that can be drawn from the pedagogy expounded by leading proponents of critical pedagogy such as Freire (1972) in his well known Pedagogy of the Oppressed, or Giroux (1997) who writes of ‘Postmodern Pedagogy’. Clearly, from such works pedagogy cannot be interpreted as a teaching method but rather also as a philosophy or theory (Aronowitz, 1993). Nevertheless, a pedagogy is a pedagogy and not a theory or philosophy precisely because it is meant, at the very least, to make suggestions or offer some guidance for action and reflection in the classroom. What cannot be escaped is that there is some telling about what educators should do or could do in the name of a critical education. This telling however, in much of the critical pedagogical literature, does not typically provide detailed descriptions of classrooms, and when they do, they do not try to take a totality of the experiences of classrooms and schools into account and the shifts required. This is a fundamental and difficult problem in critical education (and