Critical pedagogies of place: Educators' personal and professional experiences of social (in)justice

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers are generally defined by the content they teach.
- Attention to how context shapes teachers' personal and professional identities is often ignored.
- Preoccupation with teachers' roles and responsibilities often eclipse their rights.
- Contexts can affect teachers' pedagogic styles.

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ABSTRACT

Participating in the education system of a foreign country, or within a new political dispensation presents various challenges for teachers. Understanding the challenges that teachers face as a result of relocation to new geographical and political contexts urges analyzing the contexts, which influence teachers' personal and pedagogic identities. Drawing on Buell's (1995) insights on place and identity; and Fraser's (2008) conceptions of social justice, this paper explores how teachers from South Africa, India, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo reinvent their identities in order to enact their professional and personal lives within different geo-political and socio-cultural contexts.

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1. Introduction

Annually, I serve as a guest supervisor for the University of Johannesburg. Serving in this role requires me to observe English language lessons, and to provide critical feedback to final year Bachelor of Education Degree students during their school-based practice experience module. While serving in the capacity as guest supervisor, in August 2009, I observed an English Language lesson being delivered by one of the student teachers based at a school on the East of Johannesburg. A class comprising approximately 40 learners shared photocopies of pages from George Orwell's novel, *Animal Farm*. Apart from my being struck by the scarcity of resources, the taken-for–granted normalcy with which the student teacher asked the class to read and repeat excerpts — e.g. ' … the best human being is a dead human being …' left me feeling unsettled by the message transmitted through the non-engagement with this politically laden text. In our post lesson reflections I asked the student teacher why he had worked through the text in such a literal manner and had not reflected on the novel as political satire. He confided that he was afraid to teach in a politically incendiary manner. He told me that he is a refugee. He had fled Zimbabwe because of the political and economic upheaval in the country. Thus, resorting to a pedagogy of self-censorship was the safest way to teach. His fear emanated from the 2008 xenophobic attacks, which had resulted in the killing of a Mozambican refugee in the vicinity of the school. A wave of brutal xenophobic attacks swept through several townships in Johannesburg, making international headlines. (Perumal, 2013).

Although his response did not address why he had made the students repeat phrases that valorized violence within an already crime-ridden country, his adoption of epistemic avoidance that was borne out of his fear of possible xenophobic attacks sparked my interest in how place shapes pedagogy and teachers' personal and professional performance and dispositions. Globalization, forced

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and voluntary migration, and immigration have resulted in increased teacher mobility (Kirk, 2010; Manik, 2014; Sharma, 2012). This phenomenon has seen an increase in the employment of foreign teachers in the South African educational system. Furthermore, the demolition of Apartheid policies have allowed for racial desegregation. This means that teachers are at liberty to seek employment in schools that were previously designated along racially exclusive lines. Against this background, this articles aims to:

(i) explore the biographical and geographical identities, ideologies and pedagogies that this diverse teacher cohort brings to the post Apartheid South African educational landscape;

(ii) explore the varying experiences and interpretations of social (in)justice that they experience by virtue of their race, nationality, language, and socio-economic status; and

(iii) examine the strategies that they employ to navigate the challenges that their contextual situatedness present them with.

2. Connecting critical pedagogy and place

People across time and cultures organically share examples of important places or safe places or foreign places with one another and offer riveting descriptions of favorite places, or strange places (Raill, 2009). Tuan (2001) contends that place is often the starting point for articulating cultural meaning and awareness and is central to human emotional attachment. Rhetorical connotations of place also permeate our language — we may have experienced being 'put in place' or 'feeling out of place'. One of the migrant participants in this study repeatedly mentioned: 'not being given pride of place'. It is therefore necessary that a definition of place captures its multiple nature and multidisciplinary connotations while still being responsive to the specific context of its use in education (Manzo & Perkins, 2006, p. 335). Buell (1995) contends that the concept of place points in at least three directions:

(i) *toward environmental materiality*: This often encompasses the ecology and the built and social environments of a given location, but also the specific continuity of the surroundings - that is, the things that are noticeable to, or important to a person. The environmental materiality of a place - the foods in season, the availability or absence of water, etc. — contributes to adapting to an ecologically sound life.

(ii) *toward social perception or construction*: The social environment which refers to the expectations, experiences, approvals and condemnations of others also shape the behavior of an individual. Dewey (1916/2007) describes democracy as a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. Dewey (1916/2007) grounds democracy in environmental materiality: democracy must begin at home. Its home is the neighborly community.

(iii) *toward individual affect or bond*: Place also signifies for people (positive and negative) individual emotional bonds, and societies (positive and negative) social constructions. The differentiation of individual and social roles in shaping place in Buell's (1995) definition acknowledges the tensions inherent in ideas of place. Bannister and Fyfe (2001) who have written about the role of fear in shaping place contend that fear influences the locations people do or do not go to, and therefore the environments and experiences they are open to.

The connection between place and pedagogy can be divided into roughly two branches: namely, placed-based education and a critical pedagogy of place. Place-based education developed within a rural context, and has become synonymous with environmental/ eco-justice education, the intention being to forge connections between students and their surrounding environment.

Critical pedagogies of place draw attention to the role that power plays in defining and creating place; and in shaping individual's statuses within spatial locations. This means that relationships of power and domination are inscribed in material spaces because places are social constructions shaped by ideologies, hierarchies and experiences. An individual's spatial location has the potential to determine one's destiny. Articulating a critical pedagogy of place is therefore a response to educational reform policies and practices that ignore the role that place/context plays in how teaching and learning is interpreted, implemented and experienced (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 3; Halsey, 2006; McLaren, 1997; Page, 2006; Somerville, Davies, Power, Gannon and de Carteret, 2011). The discourse on critical pedagogies of place encourages those that are disenfranchised to seek, create, and use place as a site for resistance. Critical pedagogies of place encompass mental and physical decolonization. It involves creating spaces for minorities in civil society to claim the right to political, social and economic recognition, representation and contribution.

Haymes (1995) argues for a pedagogy where "territory" and "marginality" can be resisted and where emancipation from oppression can become possible. Critical pedagogies of place recognize the importance of people articulating their own stories so that they can be both affirmed and challenged. It also helps to appreciate how individual stories are connected to larger global patterns of domination and resistance. Making the connection between the individual and the global is consistent with Fraser's (2008), and Ratts and Pedersen's (2014) exposition about the discourse on social justice being cognizant of micro and macro level processes.

Two central concepts that emerge from placed-based pedagogy and critical pedagogies of place are: reinhabitation and decolonization. (i) Reinhabitation involves affirming and creating cultural knowledge that protects people and place; and (ii) decolonization involves recognizing ways of thinking that injure and exploit people and place (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 9). For the purposes of this paper I have extended the concept of reinhabitation to mean also de-territorializing place. In the context of Apartheid South Africa where racial segregation by virtue of the Group Areas Act restricted marginalized racial groups from entering and living in certain areas, reinhabitation/de-territorialization can translate to making physical entry into and living in previously forbidden places - taking back/ reclaiming the land. I extend the concept of decolonization to beyond a mere critical recognition and thinking about ways that injure and exploit people and place. I highlight the tangible enactments of decolonization that the participants make within the contexts that they are located through their personal, professional and pedagogical incursions; interruptions, interventions and revolutions.

Crucial to this paper is unpacking the prevailing conceptions of resistance (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). Miller (1997, p. 32) argues that most studies of resistance are problematic because "they dichotomize the population into the powerful and the powerless." Dichotomizing resisters and dominators ignores the complexity of resistance and ignores the existence of multiple systems of hierarchy. It ignores the possibility that individuals can be simultaneously powerful/agentic, and powerless/oppressed within different systems. According to Fisher and Davis (1993, p. 6), because many feminist writers have focused on women's oppression, for example, they unintentionally.

… run the risk of victimizing women by representing them as the passive objects of monolithic systems of oppression. This