

## Book Review

### *Pedagogy in poverty: Lessons from twenty years of curriculum reform in South Africa* (2018)

by Ursula Hoadley

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Ursula Hoadley's magisterial *Pedagogy in poverty: Lessons from twenty years of curriculum reform in South Africa* provides a deeply insightful account of what we have learnt about the powers of pedagogy in the attempt to redress educational inequality in South Africa. The book is not the musings of some professor on the subject; every page speaks from a position of engaging with the empirical research, analytical work, and tracking of effects over an extended period of time. The focus of Hoadley's book is a central issue, not only in South Africa, but across the world, wherever there is hope that we can use pedagogy to address historical legacies of inequality and discrimination. What are the powers of pedagogy? What can pedagogy actually do? How effective can pedagogy be in the attempt to transform education as a whole? South African reformers engaged seriously with these questions over twenty years and tried to use pedagogic reform as a weapon of transformation, and, when one effort failed, they tried another, and then another, leaving behind one of the most instructive national accounts of the powers (or lack of them) of pedagogy in the world. The South African case is one of the most fascinating accounts in the world, given the systemic legacy of apartheid and the radical attempt to use educational transformation to address the legacy and Hoadley's book is the best account we have of this struggle. Much of the research used is her own, done over the last decade and a half by spending months in various schools across the country collecting data from classrooms and schools. The classroom data was analysed through innovative analytical tools that got at how pedagogy actually worked rather than taking an ideological line on what good pedagogy is.

In early post-apartheid South Africa, flush from a democratic victory, an ideological distinction was made between teacher centred education (which was dictatorial) and learner centred education (which was democratic) and a move was made to enforce more freedom, integration, and equality within the classroom between teacher and learner, between subjects,

and expanding outwards to schools caught in different socio-economic areas. It took the form of a radical outcomes-based education that gave much freedom to the teacher to design lessons adapted to the conditions and context in which they were working. Much hope, effort, and money went into this radical reform, but South Africa now has a curriculum that tightly specifies exactly what a teacher must teach every day. How do we make sense of this massive change from a dictatorial apartheid education system, to a radical outcomes-based education, to this current tight specification of what must be taught each day? How do we develop an analytical language that does not fall into the ideological trap of taking some stereotype of pedagogy as the gold standard but, at the same time, also develop an analytical language that has a real ability to make a difference in the lives of teachers and learners trying to overcome centuries of discrimination? And on top of all that, how develop an analytical language that allows a fair and detailed examination of all the pedagogic changes in South African education over 20 years? Hoadley manages to do all three with aplomb. Her book refuses to fall for a stereotype so there is no blind faith in one type of pedagogy that holds the secret to victory over all others. The tools she develops target improvements in pedagogy that have a real effect on South African conditions. These tools hold analytical power over all the pedagogic transformations undergone in South Africa, enabling a tracking of what exactly the pedagogic transformations were under the ideological expressions and hyperbolic hopes.

At the same time as consistently developing one of the most powerful analytical frameworks for pedagogy in South Africa, Hoadley searches for emergent themes that will take her further and deeper and lead to insights she uses later to push the conceptual distinctions to their limit and break through into new ways of thinking and acting. For example, while spending time in classrooms gathering data, she experienced the common phenomenon of a teacher (apparently) teaching, with no actual teaching or learning taking place. It was happening a lot in South African classrooms; I experienced it myself, sitting in on a lesson and realising that even though the teacher was supposedly teaching and the learners were putting their hands up and answering, there was no actual teaching going on. Hoadley does not let those experiences just go by; she engages with what they mean, and then tries to get an analytical grip on them. What does it mean to come up with an empty or zero code when you are analysing a teaching event because there was no evidence of any actual teaching going on? Rather than just leaving the analysis at that point with some kind of descriptive account (like the teacher did not know what was going on, or was not doing her/his job) Hoadley interrogates the phenomenon, asks how we could grasp something that is not present, analyse it, and make its absence present.

So, what you get in *Pedagogy in poverty* is the most carefully researched and thought-through account of the mechanisms of pedagogy and how these mechanisms have worked and are working in South Africa. I am using mechanism here in a specific way to refer to the refusal to just give a descriptive account of what has happened but to pursue how it is that it works and why it works the way it does, with all its limitations and powers. By pursuing how the mechanism of pedagogy works in conditions of poverty, Hoadley hopes to show us the way forward so that we can learn from the last twenty years of pedagogic reforms, not through an ideological defence of some position, but by understanding what pedagogy is

actually capable of. Therefore, what we have in this book is the most detailed synthetic current account of the effort in South Africa to address historical inequality through educational reform that specifically targeted changes in pedagogy over the last twenty years.

The first three words in the title of Ursula Hoadley's book are "Pedagogy in poverty", and it is this phrase that accurately catches what the book is and does. The most obvious meaning is that the book focuses on how pedagogy happened in an ill-resourced context like South Africa. Much of the book does have this focus. Hoadley gives a historical, sociological, and philosophical account of what pedagogy looked like in South African classrooms over 20 years as we struggled to emerge, somehow alive, from the hell of apartheid. In South Africa we attempted a straight jump from hell into heaven, and we thought that pedagogy was the device that would carry us through the fire. Hoadley gives a principled account of the consequences of this leap of faith, or as the ancient Greeks would have called it, hubris. Radical outcomes-based education and its attendant, Curriculum 2005, certainly fit the tragic mode of great dreams and aspirations slaughtered in the brutal reality of everyday classroom life. *Pedagogy in poverty* starts to sound more like a lament, more like pedagogy that tried really hard to make a difference but was not up to it. Pedagogy was found wanting, not the great healer and fixer, but, rather, mismatched with expectations it could never fulfil. By this account, *Pedagogy in poverty* is about how the rich expectations we held of pedagogy could never be met by a mechanism of such poor resources, reach, influence, and ability. It is pedagogy that is poverty stricken and unable to meet the demands placed on it. Perhaps we placed too much hope in the mechanism of pedagogy to overcome poverty, and the South African story is about how we came to correctly measure the strengths of pedagogy, and realise it was no panacea. In South Africa, we put our faith in pedagogy to do the educational healing. Hoadley gives the account of what happened to this faith, and the big question hanging over her book is whether this faith was misplaced or not.

Pedagogy has always been associated with poverty and privilege. The original pedagogues were slaves educating the sons of the rich and wealthy—the brightest of those discriminated against teaching the entitled how to continue their entitlement. This was the founding function of pedagogy. In South Africa this form of slavery was bastardised by the colour of skin, and pedagogy was weaponised to ensure that black-skinned people learnt only to become gardeners, maids, and to do any other work regarded as too menial for whites. It was reasonable, when the oppressed became masters in South Africa, to expect that the same weapon that had condemned them to labour, would be the weapon of liberation. How did a weapon of such devastating power become so useless in the hands of the liberated?

The answer on the one hand is obvious; it can be experienced by simply travelling through South African middle-class suburbs at 4 in the afternoon, and observing the many maids and gardeners walking to town for a taxi home. Colonialism and apartheid brutally structured South African life. Our liberation attempted a softer touch; curriculum could change, pedagogy could change, but established white privilege on the back of black labour remained relatively untouched. With apartheid, pedagogy was part of a large army dedicated to discrimination; with liberation, pedagogy finds itself alone in a poorly resourced school with

poorly trained teachers trying to make a difference. I exaggerate, and I would like to feminise pedagogy, even though its initial Greek reference is masculine—male slaves educating rich boys.

The reason I would like to feminise pedagogy is because I want to give her a Greek name that I think Hoadley would like—Sophia.

Hoadley wants to give pedagogy a spine, and that spine is knowledge, not just any knowledge, but knowledge that can be used in the most difficult of material conditions to produce an uplifting effect. I recognise this hope, this wish, this wager, this principled defence, but when I hear it, all I can see is Sophia, the Gnostic Sophia, who was thought to be one of the feminine aspects of God.

This kind of pedagogy occupies the same space currently occupied by more modern versions, named by Bernstein (2000) as the pedagogic device or the space that provides transition mechanisms and energies. It is not pure creative insight into the heights, nor is it the material enactment of this vision. It is the transitioning energies between material entanglement and pure enlightenment. Ursula Hoadley's book is a modern meditation on an ancient dynamic. We can get a sense of the project by simply taking the first and last parts of the book and placing them next to each other. Here is how the book opens with pedagogy in poverty in both senses: pedagogy located in a poorly resourced context and poor pedagogy, stripped of any power and any effect.

On the first page of the introduction we read a transcript from a grade 3 lesson in Khayelitsha.

Teacher: Listen, on page 63, how a tree lives and grows. It says that . . . what does it say people? How a tree lives and grows. What does it say?

Learners: How a tree lives and grows.

Teacher: What does it say?

Learners: How a tree lives and grows.

Teacher: What does it say?

Learners: How a tree lives and grows.

Teacher: Umthi uphula njani ukhube nyani. Say it in Xhosa.

Learners: Umthi uphula njani ukhube nyani.

Teacher: Say it again in English, how a tree lives and grows.

Learners: How a tree lives and grows.

Teacher: There are those who are not talking. I don't hear you. How a tree lives and grows.

Learners: How a tree lives and grows.

Teacher: I don't hear some [of you], how a tree lives and grows

Learners: How a tree lives and grows.

Teacher: I don't hear you. How a tree lives and grows.

(Grade 3 classroom, Khayelitsha, South Africa, 2003)

So, *Pedagogy in poverty* refers directly to how teaching happens in poorer communities of South Africa.

It is clear from the above example that it is not only the poor community that is in focus, but the poverty of the actual pedagogy, or, as Hoadley puts it, "no distinctions or judgements are made of individual learners and their activity and initiative and spontaneity on the part of the students is closed down. Pedagogy is a form of marking time, a rite of rote" (p 1). This poverty of pedagogy is happening now, not during apartheid, but 10 years after some of the most radical curriculum reforms any country has undergone in recent times.

In a detailed historical account of how pedagogy remained in this poverty-stricken state as South Africa went through two major reform cycles, Hoadley provides a telling dissection of how difficult it is to change embedded pedagogic practices with curriculum reforms.

But there is a deeper meaning to the notion of pedagogy in poverty that has to do with the causal strength of the pedagogic mechanism when one is attempting radical change: pedagogy is not the all-powerful conquering force that can be used to transform the world. It has powers, but it is not the superhero many make it out to be. It is the most human of forces in being weak, intransigent, and local. Hoadley's question, given that we have clear accounts of what pedagogy looks like in our poorer communities, and given that many of these accounts show a weak pedagogy unable to overcome the reproduction of inequality, becomes "What can we do to strengthen pedagogy, get it into shape so that it is doing the best it can, even with the limited powers it has?"

The last part of this book referred to above is her wager and I quote it in full.

In my view, a knowledge-based curriculum is essential for differentiating subjects and delineating the subject-specific skills, concepts and content which need to be taught, especially in contexts of poverty. In this way a curriculum outlines the possibilities for specializing students' consciousness with respect to different subjects and, consequently, gives access to new and different ways of making meaning and organizing experience. (p. 218)

Pedagogy needs help in the classroom trenches, and one of the best ways to do so, is through its companion – curriculum – and not just any curriculum, but a curriculum that is clear and decisive, that provides trusted maps of, and ladders to, the academic terrain. Correctly combined and aligned, curriculum and pedagogy become a mechanism that connects the downtrodden and exploited with the full power of transcendence and possibility, but always

caught in the in-between space, never to have the full power of a god, never able to address poverty with a single act, condemned to fight continually in the trenches for small victories.

## Reference

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control, and Identity: Theory, Research, Critique*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.