Mentoring of Courage and Love: The Contributions of Dr. Beth Blue Swadener

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Abstract

Mentoring is viewed as a minor aspect of academia, where professors and scholars may use their spare time to mentor their students and junior colleagues. But this is not how Professor Beth Blue Swadener [re]imagined and approached her own role in mentoring others. This paper discusses the tremendous and immense effort by Beth in working with and mentoring students and junior colleagues during her entire academic career. I am one of those fortunate doctoral students to be mentored by her. In this paper, I focus on the role Beth played in mentoring me from my fledgling scholarship in graduate school to this day as a professor. My discussion is organized by four interrelated themes. First, I discuss my initial introductions with Beth, when I was intimidated by her insights and scholarship to a point that I was almost afraid of talking with her. Second, I discuss her influences on my scholarship in anti-colonial theories and decolonizing research methodologies. Third, I discuss our mentor-mentee and mentee-mentor relationship, including details of the collaboration on decolonizing research in South Africa and other Global South/North settings. Fourth, I discuss her influence on me to mentor others.

Key Terms: Mentoring, anti-colonization, higher education

It is a day before instruction begins for the Fall 1999 semester at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I had just arrived in Madison in the early hours of the morning. I had spent the night on a bench at O'Hare International Airport, but this had nothing to do with the university, but with my material conditions. It was also for this reason that I booked a red-eye ticket to Chicago, but that's another story.

I had a monumental task ahead of me: to find housing in Madison, a city I barely knew and had not even visited when I was applying for graduate school. Oddly, this task was the least of my worries. Instead, my mind was preoccupied by something else: the complicated nature of the doctoral program, including questions about whether or not I would be successful in it. These thoughts were not random, but were provoked by the words I read about the program a few months back, when I was in the process of my application.

I had read in the university's prospectus that a PhD in curriculum and instruction was the highest academic degree the university offered. These words were constantly in my head. Ordinarily, one should be excited to be associated with excellence, but in my situation this brought an element of uncertainty, nervousness, and internalized self-doubt. However, my nervousness about the program did not help. Tomorrow was the first day of instruction, and I had to attend classes, which meant the beginning of the program.

It was in one of the seminars very early in the semester where I met Professor Beth Blue Swadener. During breaks I would casually interact with her. She introduced herself as Beth, but I did not know who she was, except that I thought she was obviously one of those advanced graduate students enrolled in the seminar. This was Michael Apple's seminar, The Politics of Curriculum. Beth was very kind to everybody, including me, but she also came off as an intellectually informed person. We talked about various critical educational issues in our sporadic conversations. Most were issues I did not have the language to discuss. Here, I do not refer to the ability to speak English, though that too

was a barrier, because I am not a native English speaker. Rather, I am referring to the language of scholarship, the academic discourse.

For example, although I understood that education systems have marginalized Black and Brown children, as well as women, I did not have the language to express these phenomena eloquently in academic discourse. At the time I had not even adequately learned about the Marxian/NeoGramscian language used in critical theory, which was the theoretical lens I would later adopt for my research, nor about the postcolonial language used in the analysis of colonial oppression.[1] I learned more about this language as I made progress in the doctoral program. In relation to post-coloniality, I knew, for example, very little about two key ideas. First, the notion of internalized racism, which is critical for understanding the perpetual struggles against oppression in African countries and elsewhere (Fanon, 1963), and second, the notion of decolonizing the mind through curriculum (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986).

As I stated above, my lack of academic discourse hindered my contributions to these conversations, and I avoided long conversations with Beth. I was conflicted because I also thought what she was sharing was profound and necessary for me to know. At one point, Beth told me she was curious about my thoughts about education in my home country, South Africa. She even suggested that we go out for lunch on State Street to talk more about this. Not wanting to commit myself to lunch, I just nodded, enough of a gesture to make her realize I heard her suggestion. As I reflect on my uneasiness and lack of confidence in these informal conversations, later in my career I realized this was the result of the oppressive system of apartheid South Africa I grew up in, which had systemically denied me this language.

I like food. But my love for food did not persuade me to readily accept Beth's lunch invite. In my few weeks in Madison, I had seen and heard many good things about the city. At that time, it was a city of approximately 200,000 people, with the university nestled in the center. The city itself is an isthmus, tucked between two beautiful lakes, Lake Mendota and Lake Monona. The most popular spot where students, tourists, and residents alike gather for dining and drinks was State Street, and I had seen many restaurants there. I smelled good food when I rode past these restaurants on my bicycle.

This is precisely where Beth wanted us to go for lunch. I was supposed to be happy and excited about that. On football game days, almost everybody you saw on State Street wore a red and white shirt, the colors of this beautiful university. Except for the winter months, State Street was vibrant year-round. Like any Midwestern city, Madison's temperatures in the winter can be very harsh, not to mention the heavy snow fall, which at times can turn into ice. As I stayed longer in Madison, I realized that, despite the cold winters and beyond the serious intellectual environment of this great university, State Street restaurants were one of the attractions that made the city an exciting place to live.

Besides my love for food and the beauty of State Street, as well as my desire to talk more with Beth, I was still bothered by my lack of language to engage in a conversation about education in South Africa. I firmly believed my lack of language might embarrass me. Ordinarily, lunch took an hour. An hour would be a long time to participate in a conversation with Beth without this language. I needed to come up with an excuse, but I drew a blank on a good one. As a result, I decided to strategically avoid Beth during class breaks. I recalled my strategy worked in the next class: I simply said "hello" to her from across the long seminar table and quickly excused myself for a bathroom trip. I convinced myself that despite my love for food, avoiding lunch was a good solution to this problem. This vignette provides a sketch of my initial contact with Beth who, by the way, was eventually successful at getting me to go out for lunch with her at a nice Ethiopian restaurant on State Street. It was during that lunch conversation when I learned who she really was—not a graduate student, but a visiting professor from Arizona State University

(ASU). During our conversation, it became obvious to me that she cared deeply about the education of all students, especially those on the margins.

As I listened to her, I realized she was also an advocate for communities on the African continent who continue to fight poverty and racial oppression. She was critical about neocolonialism and the rise of neoliberalism, especially in sub-Saharan African countries. I also learned from our conversation that she has visited Kenya and South Africa several times to collaborate with teachers and mothers. Ironically, I felt very comfortable throughout that lunch conversation. Whereas before I had thought an hour was going to be a very long time to be with her at the restaurant, it proved to be ephemeral. I finished the food I ordered, for which she paid, and we ended our conversation talking about Bantu education, a hegemonic system I endured growing up under apartheid South Africa.

The Mentoring of Generosity

For the purpose of this paper, I focus specifically on the generosity of mentorship I received from Beth over the years, but let me make it clear: I stand on the shoulders of many mentors throughout my undergraduate, graduate, and academic career. Ever since that lunch conversation, Beth has mentored me through my academic career, especially when I was starting out as an assistant professor. She mentored me on writing my own statement of purpose for job applications, showed me how a curriculum vitae for a candidate should look, and helped me prepare for interviews. I have a lasting memory of the words she told me when I was nervous about a job interview. She put it this way: "You should remember that this dissertation is your original research. You have conducted it. No one in that room will know your work better than you." These were truly remarkable words of encouragement, and instilled confidence in an emerging scholar to believe in themselves.

These words slowly helped me to kick to the side my internalized self-doubt. I have since used the very same words with graduate students I work with when they get ready to defend their dissertations and theses. There were other academic skills Beth mentored me in, including proposal writing for national and international conferences, reviewing for international journals, and ways in which to respond to revise and resubmit comments from journal editors. These skills are necessary for all new assistant professors, especially for those of us who are first generation college students in our families and communities.

While all these skills are important to know in order to navigate the academe, Beth has done something even more crucial. She insisted that in every piece of writing, conference presentation, and undergraduate or graduate class taught, I must purposefully interrogate and interrupt the status quo, including the education system that inherently [re]produces social inequities. This reminder reinforced in me the understanding that education itself is not neutral, but rather is influenced by people, reflecting the particular ideology of dominant groups (Apple, 2004; Darder, 2012; Freire, 1970; Ndimande, 2010).

I have outlined the rest of this paper into four broad areas, namely, (a) Beth's role in shaping my deeper understanding of imperial colonialism and the importance of an anti-colonial framework in my and our shared scholarship; (b) the importance of decolonizing methodology that is informed by anti-colonial lenses; (c) the mentor-mentee collaborations that have helped deepen my understanding of children's rights, and early childhood research in the context of Paulo Freire's theories; and, finally, (d) the importance of student and peer mentoring, what Beth has called "paying it forward."

Anti-Colonial Lenses in Education Research

In this section I focus mainly on the theories that interrogate and interrupt colonialism and oppression in education, which Beth strongly suggested I incorporate into my writing. My initial understanding of colonial oppression and the struggles over curriculum in African countries was informed by my cursory readings of the scholarships of Steve Bantu Biko (2002/1978), Frantz Fanon (1952), John McLead (2000), Mokgethi Motlhabi (1985), and Ngungi wa Thiong'o (1986), among others. However, it was Beth who showed me how important this scholarship was to my own research.

Decentering Western/Northern Bias

Beth was patient in pointing out to me why I should read this research more in order to understand the inherent social inequities that were caused by many years of colonialization and apartheid in sub-Saharan Africa. To be clear, she was not suggesting that I jettison theorization that used examples of oppression from the Global/West/North (Michael Apple or Henry Giroux's work). In essence, she was saying that while western scholarship is also important in analyzing these issues, my own scholarship can be stronger and more relevant to those who read it if I also incorporate anticolonial theories, given the struggles in the Global South with which my scholarship mainly focused. Our conversations on this topic compelled me to go back and read the anticolonial scholars for more insights and connect that to my own work.

For example, in a piece (Iseke & Ndimande, 2014) where I problematize the hegemony of English in post-apartheid South African curriculum, we wrote: "Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986) describes language as a carrier of cultural values and beliefs, 'moral, ethical and aesthetic values'" (p. 14), and collective experiences and history.

> Language is "a set of eyeglasses" through which people "view themselves and [their] place in the universe" and through which a people know themselves "as members of the human race" (p. 14). Further Ngugi argues that colonial alienation "on a larger social scale," is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies" (p. 28). In the discussion of parents' concerns, these children are made to be the "bodiless heads and headless bodies" that Ngugi (1986, p. 28) warned about. They are required to leave their language and cultural selves at home and take on the language, values, and beliefs of the schools, teachers, and White peers.

In that article we went on to discuss Bokamba's (2007) argument that Indigenous languages are better suited for governance than colonizers' English, especially in African countries where they are the language of communication. Anticolonial theories have helped me join a group of anticolonial scholars (e.g., Bokamba, 2007) who debunk the myth of English as an official language in African nations, thus undermining the colonial hegemony of English. My analysis concurs with others who also argue that instruction in Indigenous languages in African countries should not be construed as a barrier, but rather enhancing to African students' educational success (Brock-Utne, 2006; Galabawa & Senkoro, 2006).

Decolonizing Research Methodologies

The most significant part of anticolonial research is the manner in which we construct knowledge about marginalized communities, whether in the global North or South. While curriculum theorization is absolutely important, Beth also wanted me to pay attention to the methods in curriculum research and policy, advocating for research methodologies that humanize the communities in which we conduct our research. She would always tell

me, "If our goal and focus is to ameliorate the material conditions and the oppressive regimes these communities experience, then our research methods of interacting with communities should humanize and decolonize the hegemony of research in the first place." She urged me to condemn the notion of viewing marginalized communities as "data plantations" for our research (Swadener, 2000). This is how her mentoring has shown up in my own decolonizing research:

> Decolonizing methodologies can help researchers interrogate the very notion of "knowing" as well as what it is that we know and who benefits from that knowledge (Rogers & Swadener, 1999). . . . Interrogating the constitution of knowledge and its function is what can translate to decolonizing research. As with all projects, decolonizing research is not without challenges. Borrowing for a moment from Swadener and Mutua (2008, p. 36.), "Decolonizing research is a messy, complex, and perhaps impossible endeavor . . . [but] a project worth pursuing, in solidarity with local colleagues and [social justice] movements." Indeed the task for researchers who are engaged in this work is to show persistence and commitments. Negotiating these decolonizing "tools" is a good start and a step in the right direction, especially if research is meant to improve marginalized peoples' lives, not vice versa. (Ndimande, 2012)

Children's Right Projects and Mentor-Mentee Collaboration

"Come with me this way. I would like to introduce you to my friend and colleague, Laura," Beth said to me when I attended a small conference, the Children's Rights Advocacy Learning Group in Tempe, Arizona in the spring of 2009. She and her colleagues had put together this conference. Beth walked very fast and did many things at once while zig-zagging around colleagues in the room. I did not want to lose sight of her, so I started to quickly match her speed as she gave nods to and greeted other attendees on our way toward the front of the room.

This conference was international and centered on Indigenous and marginalized children around the world. I had been invited to present a paper on parental choice and how Black parents navigate their agency to send their children to White schools with better resources in post-apartheid South Africa, despite the racism their children face in those schools. Because the conference was international, I recall seeing a scholar I knew from the University of Pretoria, and meeting scholars from the University in Melbourne, Australia. There were other people I knew, particularly Beth's current doctoral students at ASU at the time.

We reached the front of the room and I noticed a small group of professors who were finishing their coffee break and getting ready to go back to the next conference session. "I would like you to meet Professor Laura Lundy," Beth said as she gestured toward a professor who was relaxing on a chair and finishing a cup of coffee. I immediately learned that Professor Lundy was one of the distinguished scholars in the field of early childhood education from Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I learned she was also the director of the university's Children's Rights Center. In our short introductory conversation, I found Dr. Lundy to be warm. She wanted to know about my research, as she also shared her own research trajectory with me. She asked me about South Africa, including the current political and educational situation there. Overall, this introduction was brief, but very pleasant.

Merging Anti-Colonialism and Children's Rights

I presented my research paper the following day. Professor Lundy was in the room during my presentation but did not ask any questions during the Q&A. After the session was over, she reached out to me and asked if I had time to talk. I said "yes." However, I must admit I had a twinge of fright, anticipating a critique of my research. However, Dr. Lundy told me, "Good paper! I enjoyed listening to your presentation. As I was listening to you, I can also see that your research trajectory intersects with children's rights, the rights of the child." Dr. Lundy waited for my response, but I was puzzled by what she just told me. This is because I had never thought of how desegregation and school choice, a neoliberal ideology, intersected with children's rights.

Dr. Lundy was patient and told me:

> You need to step back and think about policies that enforce school segregation and inequalities. These policies contradict the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the South African Child Act, which enshrine the rights of all children to quality education.

As we wrapped up this conversation, I thanked Dr. Lundy and was so excited to hear her views on this idea. However, I was already on my feet, getting ready to take a taxi to O'Hare International Airport, where I would take a bus to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, where I was now a faculty member. And yes, this was the same O'Hare where I spent a night on the bench on my way to Madison, Wisconsin to start my PhD program a few years prior.

Had it not been for Beth and her extended mentoring efforts, connecting me to other scholars she knew, I do not think I would have met Dr. Lundy, whose suggestions were so crucial to me at the time. They helped me extend my research trajectory in time for my tenure review. Later that year, Beth encouraged me to join the Children's Rights and Voices Cross-National Collaborative, which has continued to influence my scholarship on desegregation and school choice to reflect a child's rights framework. In fact, in 2010, Beth and I traveled to the Una Learning Group conference held in Belfast, Northern Ireland, where I reconnected with Dr. Lundy. At that conference, both Beth and Dr. Lundy mentored my leadership skills by asking me to lead one of the working group papers entitled "Children's Rights in Cultural Contexts" (Una Children's Rights Learning Group, 2011).

Collaborative Mentoring

In what I call mentor-mentee and mentee-mentor collaboration, I have since collaborated with Beth, who became a friend and a colleague on a number of projects. In 2007, we collected data from South Africa to explore issues of children's rights to determine the extent to which rights to education have been restored and how communities view broader children's rights policies. This culminated in three publications. First, in the *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*, we concluded that parents in both Black and White communities support children's protection and provision rights but question participation rights, believing they might undermine cultural values (Ndimande & Swadener, 2012). Second, in a book chapter, we discussed the perspectives of parents about positive aspects of children's rights and access, while at the same time expressing negative outcomes that have resulted in salient inequities (Ndimande & Swadener, 2013). Third was a piece we were invited to share in Norman Denzin's and Michael Giardina's anthology, *Qualitative Inquiry Outside of the Academy*, in which we argued that children's rights policies framed within global perspectives might not be applicable to local practices. This, we argued, requires that Indigenous communities

should be part of the policy process for children's rights (Swadener & Ndimande, 2014). All three publications are connected to school desegregation and bear major implications for Black children's rights in post-apartheid South Africa.

Recently, Beth and I were invited to contribute a peer-reviewed chapter to a volume edited by Dr. Michel Vandenbroeck at Ghent University in Belgium, which celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of Paulo Freire's (1970) ground-breaking book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this chapter we discussed policies implemented to increase children's rights to education in South Africa (e.g., Project Preparation in KwaZulu-Natal province). We argued that this is a step in the right direction, consistent with Freire's argument that children and youth need to experience education for democratic citizenship in order to build and sustain a resilient democratic society (Ndimande & Swadener, 2021).

Carrying the Baton

I have never heard of any scholar or colleague who can claim to have made it on their own. If there are any, I am certainly not one of them, as I have shown in this paper. Having been mentored by many mentors, but especially by Beth, I have been challenged to offer mentoring with courage and love for other colleagues who come after me, and for students under my tutelage. However, it is not easy to assess whether or not the mentoring I do has been effective. I believe that only time will tell. One thing I know is that I try my best to follow Beth's example. I may not be her, but I will try my best to carry the baton so that more peers and students, especially people of color and women, continue to get meaningful mentoring.

I have incorporated the same philosophy I learned from Beth: that to be a good mentor or peer, one has to support the ideas of those you mentor or work with, rather than telling them what ideas they should advance. I stay away from the colonial ways of knowing by incorporating anticolonial perspectives, the very same philosophy that Beth guided me to incorporate in my scholarship. I tell myself that mentoring is an act of identifying my own multilayered identities (Tarule, 1997). In the context of these multilayered identities, my philosophy must create the same space for those with whom I engage in reciprocal mentoring. As a Black, male scholar who was born and raised in the Global South, I should be conscientious of these identities, especially when it comes to my unconscious patriarchal ideology, which I continue to unlearn. In this process, I also focus on community building and positive relationships between and among students and peer mentors. This is what Beth exemplified, which is also connected to Freire's (1970) notion of critical consciousness.

I recently taught a doctoral seminar at my university. As the semester neared the end, some of the doctoral students asked if I could mentor them on conference proposal writing, using the term papers they submitted for the seminar. It is so encouraging to be asked to mentor students on something not related to their grade, but that cultivates their scholarship. Being aware of students' multilayered identities, I approached this task by creating a space for all to talk with each other (the students were all women, some of whom were international students from Brazil and Colombia).

As in most mentoring processes, I found out that I was learning about their thoughts, which also developed my own ideas. I would like to paraphrase an email from one of the doctoral students upon being accepted into AERA 2023 in Chicago, Illinois: *"Thank you very much, Dr. Ndimande! I highly appreciate your mentorship and friendship; this is your achievement too!"* In addition, I have mentored another graduate student to a point where we co-authored two conference proposals that were eventually accepted and presented. We are now collaborating on a journal manuscript from one of those conference papers.

I am constantly engaged in reciprocal mentoring with peer scholars at my university and other universities. Again, this is one of the philosophies Beth taught me: that I have to establish a group of peers within my area of research and so we may encourage each other and strengthen our peer-mentoring activities. This has been helpful to me. For example, as peer mentors, we read each other's manuscripts for critical feedback. Since we are not at the same rank, those of us who are a little ahead do more in terms of mentoring those who are still under the tenure review clock. Tenure can be highly political, and we need each other's support. I always offer to read junior faculty's dossiers and also offer to share my own tenure dossier so they can take things that make sense and relevant to their own research foci. I believe this reciprocal peer-mentoring is one way to honor the work Beth has done over the years.

Conclusion

I conclude by going back to the vignette I shared in the beginning of this paper, a paper that recognizes Beth's outstanding contributions to me and others. My situation may not be unique in terms of suffering internalized "self-doubt" in my academic program. This attitude of fear is not natural or by accident. It is systemically and ideologically created by colonizers as a form of social control (Apple, 2004). Such ideology can cause a reactionary attitude where an oppressed person internalizes such colonization to a point where they do not imagine a critical and empowering possibility, because they were subjugated through the mind (Ngũgĩ wa Thoing'o, 1986).

In fact, it was Fanon (1963) who helped us with a clearer theorization of this concept, for example his argument about "a colonized intellectual dusted over by colonialism" (p. 46), meaning oppressed people may not recognize they are marginalized when they believe the illusion they are free. It is for this reason that scholars such as Bantu Biko (2002/1978) have urged us to "Write What We Like," rather than be confined and suppressed by thinking and actions in the form of internalized oppressions.

A few years ago, I recall making a phone call to Beth. In that conversation, I lamented my inability to understand some complicated university tasks. Her response was explicit and with a stern voice: "Get rid of your internalized self-doubt at once." I have been fighting this own internalized self-doubt for most of my life, but am glad I was mentored by Beth, who constantly reminded me to get rid of this colonial mindset. More recently, I had lunch with her, but this time not on State Street in Madison. Instead, we were in San Diego, CA, at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). I asked Beth what I could do to pay back all the time and energy she had spent mentoring me. She looked at me with a big smile and said three words: "Pay it forward!"

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Footnotes

[1] See for instance Giroux (1992), specifically chapter one (an interview with Giroux); Apple, 2004, on the concepts of ideology, hegemony and common sense.