

Interview: In conversation with Professor Debbie Epstein

Samson Maekele Tsegay*, Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom
Debbie Epstein, Anglia Ruskin University, United Kingdom

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*samson.tsegay@aru.acu.uk

This conversation with Professor Emerita Debbie Epstein explores her political activism in South Africa and academic works in the United Kingdom (UK). In particular, the interview focuses on her political involvement against the Apartheid system, which caused her to leave the country six months after starting her undergraduate study at the University of the Witwatersrand. Moreover, the interview discusses Epstein's transition to the UK and her work on gender and education, elite schools, anti-racist education and Southern theories. This interview contributes to understanding factors that affect access and equity in education.

Keywords: elite education; globalisation; southern theory; anti-racist education; gender

Introduction

Debbie Epstein was my doctoral supervisor at the University of Roehampton. When I started thinking about interviewing influential academic for the journal *Access: Critical explorations of equity in higher education*, she was the first one that came to my idea for two reasons. First, I knew about her political activism in against the apartheid system South Africa. I also found her to be vocal against any form of injustice. For example, when my visa was rejected to study in the United Kingdom (UK), Epstein's support (together with my second supervisor – Professor Marie-Pierre Moreau) was one of the main reasons that enabled me to defer my admission and scholarship and reapply for a visa after a year (which was successful) and finally complete my study. As she says, fighting injustice is in her blood.

Second, Epstein has rich academic experiences and extensively researched gender and education, elite schools, anti-racist education and Southern theories. She is Emerita Professor of Cultural Studies in Education. She gained her doctorate in Cultural Studies in 1991. Since then, she has worked at the University of Central England, the Institute of Education (now UCL Institute of Education), Goldsmiths College London, Cardiff University, University of Roehampton and Anglia Ruskin University. She has published eleven single or co-authored books (of which one has been translated into Spanish and six are in the Academic's Support Kit), more than forty papers in refereed journals (five of them translated and another eight

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reprinted), twenty-seven chapters in edited collections (four of them reprints from earlier publications), six edited books (one of them also translated into Spanish) and eleven edited special issues of international refereed journals. She was co-editor of an international refereed journal (*Gender and Education*) from 2006 to 2012.

This interview with Epstein took place online via Zoom on 14 February 2022. It discusses her political activism in South Africa and academic works in the UK.

Interview – 14 February 2022 via Zoom

Samson Tsegay: You left South Africa in 1962, six months after starting a Bachelor of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, due to your political involvement against the Apartheid system in the country, and came to the UK. Could you describe the situation?

Debbie Epstein: It was not entirely my decision to leave South Africa. I was only 17 years old. I was scared, and my parents got scared too. I have an older brother, and he and my sister-in-law and their baby were returning to the UK via South Africa after living in the USA for a few years. So, they wanted me to leave. I also wanted to leave too. It was getting towards the height of the apartheid government's crackdown on anti-apartheid students, including white people, not just black people.

I have been involved in anti-apartheid stuff since I was 12 or 13 since my mother was involved. My father was involved too, but in a less political way. My mother was one of the groups of white women who were providing the Treason Trial (1958–61) prisoners with food because, in the beginning, they were not provided lunch by the state. My mum used to pick me up from school and take me on her days to visit the prisoners, as it was on a rota basis. There was a big saucepan to go and feed the prisoners and on the side of it was written 'Epstein'. Most of the famous people were there, including Nelson Mandela and a handful of white people. So we used to feed them, and that was one of my first introductions to politics.

Then there was the bus boycott (1957) and again my mother used to drive out to the township near Pretoria and give people a lift into town to their work to support the bus boycott. In another occasion, my mum and dad, at my mum's instigation, took me to a meeting which was a meeting of white people that was attended by Albert Luthuli, the head of ANC [African National Congress] at that time. This was when I was about 14 years old. As soon as Albert got up to speak, some Afrikaans tags jumped up on the stage and yelled in Afrikaans: 'We are not going to allow an African [black] to speak at this [white] gathering.' Then, they started throwing chairs. As chairs were flying everywhere, my mother grabbed hold of my hand and sat there saying: 'I am not going to allow a group of tags to make me move.' Then a young friend came up and said to my mum: 'You can stay here as you like, but let me take Debbie outside.' After the meeting, my dad said that I was spared the beat up because he was the doctor of one of the tag's family. My dad was a paediatrician.

Later, I went to a university and got involved in student anti-apartheid politics. Of course, with that background, who would not? There were some demonstrations, and the apartheid government was tightening its grip on students. The apartheid government started arresting students and other people and was putting them in prison for 90 days without being able to see their partners or families. They also killed Steve Biko and several other people. So, that got me frightened and my brother, who was an academic, had done his PhD in Cambridge. He also worked at Princeton University for two years and he was on his way back to Cambridge, the UK, with his wife and little child. So, I would have somebody older and wiser to keep an eye on

me. That was when I came to England. Overall, I grew up in a very political family. My grandparents from my mother's side were very political. My grandmother and two of her daughters (my mother and her younger daughter) were very strongly feminists. That is why I called one of my publications 'A Feminist DNA', because it is in my blood.

You asked me if my privilege affected my political activism. Yes, I was very privileged. I had access to education and my family was quite well off. They had been a very poor immigrant family, but my father was a doctor. However, you cannot identify out of your privilege. I used to say to my students, even Bram Fischer [the anti-apartheid activist and lawyer who led Nelson Mandela's legal defence team in the Rivonia trial] and Ruth First [South African anti-apartheid activist and scholar] were all privileged white people. So, you can not pretend not to have the privilege. However, that did not hold me from opposing the evils of apartheid. The political struggle was a part of everyday lived family experience.

Tsegay: You joined the University of Sussex in the UK to complete/study your undergraduate studies. How did you find access to education and life in the UK?

Epstein: It was hard because I could not go to university straight away. I have been to a university, but I had to go back to school because the British universities would not accept my university's entrance qualifications from South Africa. After a short (and horrible) period back in school to do A levels, I went, in 1963, to the newly formed Sussex University. In its second year of existence, with about 155 students, Sussex was an extraordinary experience. In the first year, there were about 50 and, in the second year, they accepted about 105 students. I think they partly accepted me because of my politics.

I found life in the UK very difficult for a number of reasons. First, I was very miserable and guilty about leaving South Africa and seeing my student comrades being imprisoned for 90 days. Second, I was miserable as hell about the weather. That first winter was the coldest one in the country in living memory. The thick frost on the inside of my bedroom windows did not melt throughout the winter from November to March. So, we were freezing; I was living with my brother's family in a flat in Cambridge. The huge room with high ceilings also made the house impossible to heat. It was horrible and I hated it. But, equally, I made friends in Sussex. I was secretary of the Student Union; and there were other South African refugees there such as Thabo Mbeki (former South African President – 1999 to 2008), who was a year ahead of me. Doing a lot of politics affected my academic result. I did not get a great degree. I got 2.2 and I was very disappointed with that because I wanted to do a PhD. I was expected to get First Class. However, I had a wonderful education at the University of Sussex.

Tsegay: You have worked in several universities and conducted numerous research projects investigating the experiences of those in subordinated, marginalised and/or stigmatised groups, as well as those in more dominant groups. Could you describe your professional career, mainly how your research activities evolved?

Epstein: I was affected enormously by the University of Sussex education. After finishing my study, I got a research assistant job at the University College London; and started a PhD that I did not finish because I did not find the topic exciting and, partly, my supervisor became a Member of Parliament (MP). After he became MP, he did not supervise me. So, I focused on my job and worked for 20 years as a school teacher before doing my PhD.

My overall personal intellectual project was to understand what kept dominant groups in power, which comes directly from my experience in South Africa. So, my PhD project was

about anti-racist strategies in white schools. And that developed from my background in anti-apartheid and anti-racism, and also from my interest in how to change classroom cultures. I was really interested in trying to make a difference in how teachers see things. I always try to write accessibly for teachers. As I was coming to the end of that, I had the opportunity to go and work at the Open University summer school and teach some of their courses. At the summer school, I came out as a lesbian at this time. At that time, there was a huge campaign during the introduction of Section 28, a conservative government proposal that prohibited local authorities (councils) and schools from teaching about homosexuality as a 'normal family relationship'. So, I was not only very involved in the protests, but was also in the leadership organising campaigns against the clause as it was first a clause amendment and then became a section after.

When I was working at the Open University summer school, the staff used to give seminars about their work. One day, there was an event on gender and education with a theme on different forms or perspectives of feminism. I did my session on 'Whatever happened to lesbian and gay perspectives?' Afterwards, Gaby Weiner, one of the Gender and Education course leaders invited me to present a paper at the British Educational Research Association (BERA). She wanted me to give a paper about lesbian and gay sexuality in schools. And I said no because I wanted to do a presentation about my PhD topic, which she accepted. I said I had not done any research about lesbian and gay sexuality; what I did at the gender and education event was share my experience. She said, 'I understand, but it was life-changing'. Then, she challenged me, 'If you don't do that work, then who will?' She said, 'It took black people first to raise the issues for anti-racism or racism in schools'. I thought about that, and I decided I would do it. At that time, Richard Johnson was Director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and he was a key presence in the Politics of Sexuality Group. I spoke to him, and he agreed. Then, we started talking about sexuality. The CCCS had a tradition of a group including staff and students looking at a specific issue. We started such a study group about sexuality. During that time, when I had my PhD, I edited a book on *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education*ⁱⁱ. We also started doing research projects about it, which resulted in the book *Schooling Sexualities*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Tsegay: In your book *Where it really matters*^{iv} in 1990, you argued for the development of anti-racist education in predominantly white schools. Why did you write the book? How much progress do you think we have made in 30 years?

Epstein: I did that book while I was doing my PhD. Alison Sealey and I both worked in Birmingham LEA Centre for Multicultural Studies. We were working in schools as advisors for race equality. Anti-racist education has been used in schools, but the challenge of racism has not been alleviated. Things have changed since the book's publication in 1990, but some still remain the same. I do not know if levels of panic about the arrival of migrants have decreased, but I would say probably not in the white schools. But there are many more schools with multi-ethnic students now. At the time, the number was not significant. One head of school said to me after a discussion with primary school heads in part of Birmingham, 'We have only got one multicultural child in our school, but she is so middle class we do not notice'. So, where do you start – I am afraid I laughed. At that time, the ethnic minority children in the predominantly white (working-class) schools were middle class because they lived in the area. So, it was the local doctors who could be someone like that. However, now, both middle-class and working-class schools in cities tend to be more culturally mixed. So, I would say almost all schools, at least in urban areas, are multicultural now.

The ethnic minority students were often from a migrant background. There was always the anti-migrant sentiment from way back 1905, the *Aliens Act 1905*, which was partly aimed at controlling Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. Brexit and the Conservatives have whipped up people's panic about migrants. The number of wars in the Middle East and North Africa, and the number of countries with difficult situations have increased the number of migrants in the world. However, numbers were not the reason for the hostile environment, but now things are even more vicious. It is unbelievable and very depressing.

Tsegay: As you have stated in many of your publications, issues of access and equity in education are racialised, gendered and class-based. Could you elaborate on these issues, including your view on the current condition of gender equality in education, beyond the numbers/figures?

Epstein: I think gender, race and class are significant for education, particularly class which has kind of been forgotten. However, a lot of it is down to class, mostly class interconnected with other variables such as class and race, class and sex and so on. These things do not operate on their own; they are articulated, working together. For example, in the *Elite Schools*^v project, one thing that was clear is that while race was really important, class was more important. You can see that in a way the servants were treated because the kids were all privileged as they are from very privileged, very rich families. My recent paper about COVID-19^{vi} also indicated that the effects of COVID-19 are strongly classed, raced and gendered, and they go by nation.

We have barely touched the surface of gender equality. Most of my work is all being UK-based. I always had a political awareness of these issues, but it was only in *Changing Classroom Cultures*^{vii} and in the HIV projects in South Africa that I got into issues of gender equity, which I prefer to name it these days sex equality or equality of the sexes. In Africa, south of the Sahara in particular, I have been interested in these issues because, obviously, the HIV [human immunodeficiency virus] epidemic was very gendered. Recently I noticed on social media that some people still say that it was mostly gay males who got HIV, but it was mostly women. In fact, I got into an argument with a scholar of gay sexuality for saying women are the most affected and impacted by HIV in South Africa and probably in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa. This is partly because of the inequality between the sexes.

Tsegay: One of the topics you researched is elite schools. What is the role of elite schools in aggravating or alleviating access and equity in education?

Epstein: Our research on *Elite Schools* was on schools in Britain and the former British Empire in the model of the British 'public' private schools. We did it like that because we had to look at Britain somehow. We could not start looking at other European systems as well. We looked at elite schools as they affect the education system in two ways: 1) These elite schools are seen as the gold standard; 2) they educate and coproduce, with other aspects of the social system, the next ruling class through their privileges. For example, in Britain, the majority of cabinet ministers were from one of these schools. Until quite recently, in both Labour and Conservative governments, we have not had many who were not in these schools or classes. In that way, the elite schools produce the next generation of the ruling class. Even when all schools are public schools, strict rules exist regarding accepting a proportion of students from less privileged backgrounds in these elite schools. For instance, in India, they always get around them somehow to accept a small proportion of lower caste students in these elite schools. In South Africa, it is partly the legacy of apartheid because certain schools were white schools. However, the majority of black schools now retain worse conditions of resources. The elite schools are also expensive;

not all, particularly the poor, can afford them, and the situation is similar in many countries such as Australia and Hong Kong. So inequality is repeated in one way or another.

The elite schools do not arise from neoliberal policies. They have been there much longer than neoliberalism has. You could say they have a different way of working in this neoliberal and globalised age. They have vast and different networks with various features. Some are organised by specific values (such as religion), geographical area and so on. That is why we called our book on elite schools *Class Choreographies* because it is like a dance whose aim, consciously or unconsciously, is to maintain elite privilege. Now it is conducted globally in a much more overt way. With the British empire, it was global but it was differently so. Now elite schools are not only international, but many international organisations such as Microsoft are also very active in these schools.

Tsegay: Your work also highlighted the impact of colonialism, British Empire in particular, on education, such as elite schools and the education system of postcolonial states. On the other hand, you argued the importance of Southern theory in education in the Global South and in dethroning and enriching Northern, mainstream theory. How can we balance these two things?

Epstein: The education system of most postcolonial states is based on the education system of their colonisers, and this, in particular, is noticeable when we talk about the British Empire with regard to their former colonies. Change is really slow, and it is probably not in the interest of the ruling class. Moreover, I think it is difficult to remove the colonial education system entirely because there are things to be valued in the colonial or postcolonial education system. But there still are issues and we cannot unknow the history. So I think it is very difficult to completely remove the colonial education system, but we should seek balancing between the two. The problem is that the elite organisations do not necessarily listen until the masses revolt in anger. It is also difficult to know exactly what should be kept and what should be eliminated. It partly needs trial and error to identify which one needs to be kept or not.

We need to be clear about traditional and scientific knowledge, particularly regarding what does good and what does harm. This also involves the political leaders' will and awareness. In 2006, I wrote an article regarding *Democratising the Research Imagination*^{viii}. It is not about education specifically, but it is sort of asking who comes to the table if you are having a party for research imagination. Who do you invite to this party? It is a political party, obviously. At that time, Thabo Mbeki was in denial about HIV and sexual transmission. He was saying something that had a grain of truth in them. He said that HIV was a disease of the poor. Of course, the infection spreads effectively if people are poor. However, in the West, it was not necessarily a disease of the poor. He also was saying that it was a Western conspiracy; it was not a virus; and all the usual kinds of conspiracy theories, including it was invented in a lab in the USA. There were also lots of mythologies in South Africa, including about how it could be cured. Nevertheless, we know that there is no cure for HIV/AIDs so far, but it is a disease you have to live with it with the help of antiretroviral medicines.

The point is that we need to be clear about what does good and what does harm. I am not saying that Western medicine does not harm. Sometimes it could cause great harm, but completely dismissing it is ridiculous. So, it is the same thing with education. There are some goods in Western education and some that need to be decolonised. It is not either or; it is both and. It is a matter of balancing by taking the good from both Western and indigenous education systems.

Endnotes

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