

## STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SEEKING INJUSTICE-INDUCED HELP IN A MATHEMATICS CLASSROOM

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*In this paper, we describe the phenomenon of a need for help that comes about as a result of problematic classroom practices, as re-lived and described by Tanzanian high school mathematics students. Through the students' experiences, we demonstrate how unequal power relations in the classroom can suppress students' voices, rendering their attempts at seeking justice futile. The students' experiences were characterized by pain and resignation.*

Keywords: Equity and Diversity; High School Education; Affect, Emotion, Beliefs, and Attitudes

### Introduction

In maths classrooms the world over, students seek help with their maths learning when they experience a lack in their knowledge or understanding. Seeking help in maths may be considered unique in its own way for at least two reasons. First, most maths concepts are abstract by nature, and thus many students experience difficulties not only in relating the concepts to their own prior knowledge and experiences, but also in establishing the connections between the concepts. Even in maths “word” problems, which may be argued to closely resemble problems in other academic disciplines, the language used is different from the one used in ordinary speech, and so many students inevitably encounter ambiguities and difficulties when solving such problems. Secondly, maths often serves as a gatekeeper to many careers and fields of study. This privileged status of maths over other academic disciplines serves well to perpetuate the popular myth of maths as a difficult subject. Seeking help is thus ascribed to persistence in the face of a challenging task, as well as the ability to recognize when help is needed, to decide to seek help, and to secure the needed help from others (Ryan & Pintrich, 1997). By seeking help, students increase their chances of understanding the content, thereby achieving the learning outcomes. Unfortunately, some students are reluctant to seek help even when help is needed and available, because they do not want to appear “dumb” in the eyes of others (Butler, 2006; Ryan & Pintrich, 1997), or out of a desire for independence, or even out of a concern about the competence or utility of available help (Butler, 2006). Although these and other research findings reveal a great deal about students' behaviour when seeking help, they do not offer us a deep appreciation of the student's experience of seeking help. The purpose of the study from where this paper is drawn was to explore and understand the essence and meaning of help in the context of maths learning from high school students' perspective.

### Background

The Tanzanian education system has a 2-7-4-2-3+ structure; that is, 2 years of pre-primary education, 7 years of primary education, 4 years of ordinary level secondary education (also known as “O-level”), 2 years of advanced level secondary education (also known as “A-level”), and at least 3 years of university education (United Republic of Tanzania, 2011). The participants reported in this paper were A-level maths students. Only a small proportion of O-level students go on to A-level. In 2009, for example, only 15.4% of the candidates who sat for the final O-level examination proceeded to A-level (p. 55). Thus, these participants may rightfully be described as very resilient, hardworking and very much interested in succeeding. However, as shall be demonstrated in this paper, the phenomenon of seeking help is normally manifested in the complexity of the contexts within which the students learn.

## Methodology

This study was informed by the research methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, whose aim is to deepen our understanding of what it is like “from the inside” to live through an experience, by describing the “lived-through quality” of the experience (van Manen, 1997, p. 25). Data consist of concrete descriptions of lived events provided by those who have lived through the experience of the phenomenon. These raw data are commonly obtained through open-ended interviews with individual participants, as well as through participants’ own written accounts of their lived experiences. The transcriptions of the interview data and participants’ own written accounts are then transformed into short concrete anecdotes that are aimed at reawakening the reader’s basic experience of the phenomenon being described (p. 122).

### Seeking Help or Seeking Justice?

What is it like for students to ask for help in maths? What meanings do students ascribe to their lived experiences of seeking help in maths? And what is the pedagogical significance of understanding these meanings? These were some of the questions we set out to examine in the study from where this paper is drawn. We expected to learn about the diversity of frustrations, concerns, successes and strategies attendant to seeking help in maths. But instead of, or in addition to, describing a moment they sought help with a mathematical task, some students described experiences of injustice and inequity in their maths classrooms. And so in this paper, we explore the domains of social justice and lived human experience.

### Orienting Oneself Toward Injustice: Re-orienting One’s Way of Being with the Other

In the middle of his first year in A-level, Phineas transferred to a new school, and was shocked to find that the maths teacher was charging additional tuition fee for some of the mandated lessons. The teacher was teaching two topics simultaneously, one of which was to be paid for. Phineas describes his experience of being required to leave the class for lack of money:

*It pained me to see him kick me out of class for lack of money when he was being paid by the government to teach me. But even more painful was the fact that he would not be repeating this topic during the regular class time.*

The phenomenon of seeking help begins with a sense of dissatisfaction with an aspect of our life-world’s condition, emanating from a realization that we lack what we consider vital or important for our life-worldly existence. Only in the midst of a felt need or want do we seek help. A need may draw our attention to the fact that we do or do not have a right, something we may have all along taken for granted. Phineas’ inability to pay for the extra tuition fee being levied by the teacher appears to have drawn Phineas’ attention to his entitlement. Because he does not have full access to the prescribed maths curriculum, Phineas feels that he has been unjustly treated, and so he stands in need of justice. He is aware that his teacher is legally and socially restrained from acting unjustly towards the students. In other words, Phineas knows that his teacher is legally and morally obligated to follow the terms of the contract between the teacher and the government, in which the teacher, in exchange for his salary, is to teach maths to students in accordance with the approved curriculum documents, and to address students’ learning difficulties in an equitable, fair and impartial manner.

The awareness of our right to something that is brought about by a need may alter our way of being with the other. We may, for instance, begin to question the other’s indifference to his/her moral obligations as they affect our rights. Our response to perceptions of injustice may include feelings of pain. Phineas says that it pained him to see the teacher kick him out of the class. Pain—from the Latin *poena*, meaning punishment or penalty (Harper, 2001)—is unpleasant and hurtful. Phineas is being punished in spite of his innocence. He is thus being subjected to the injustice of an undeserved and unjustifiable punishment.

### Injustice Demands to Be Heard

Students may react to perceptions of injustice in the classroom by seeking help from the school administration. But what the conversations with some of the students in this study revealed is that unless one appeals to one's moral conscience, any external imposition of ethical responsibility cannot guarantee the authenticity of a pedagogical enterprise. When Kalunda observed that her maths teacher was frequently missing his teaching duties, she reported the matter to the headmaster. She describes the outcome of the headmaster's intervention:

*Now the class monitor has an attendance register. When a lesson is taught, the monitor remarks: "Taught" and appends his signature against the remark. If the teacher assigns someone to copy some notes for the class, the monitor remarks: "Notes Written" and appends his signature. The teacher is then expected to countersign against each of the monitor's signature. But I have several experiences where the teacher comes to class, gives you questions, hangs around for a few minutes, and then leaves. The questions will not be graded nor discussed. Of course the teacher will not agree to sign if the monitor remarks: "Untaught" And so when the headmaster or his deputy delves through the attendance register, he will find that the teacher's signature is there, almost everywhere. And the game is over. But it is we the students who really know what goes on inside the class.*

Although the attendance register was meant to enforce justice in the teacher, he is somehow managing to get around it. A scenario is eventually established where a masquerade of adherence to one's ethical obligation goes unchallenged by the other. Who, then, is to blame for the injustice in Kalunda's classroom? The headmaster, to whom Kalunda's teacher is subordinate, may have done his job by warning or reprimanding Kalunda's teacher. In fact the headmaster may be thinking that Kalunda's classroom is running smoothly. The ball, as it were, is in the students' court. But then there is a problem: The playing ground may not be levelled for a fair play. If the power relations between oneself and the subjects over whom one is ethically responsible are skewed in one's favour, then any pedagogy based on other-rather-than-self-monitoring is bound to break down even under the other's keen and watchful eye.

In another interview we learned Jacinta's teacher would regularly miss his lessons. At times he would come to class and appoint one of those students who had attended private tuition to teach some topics to the class. Jacinta recounts her experience when she responded to these unjust practices:

*It reached a point where everyone was dissatisfied with how we were learning maths. One day, the Deputy Headmaster came to our class and, in a very friendly manner, asked: "What problems are you facing in this class?" Now I just said to myself: "This is our administrator. If we don't tell him what we are going through, whom shall we tell?" So I decided to be honest. And it was as if everyone else was waiting for someone to initiate. So we said we had this and that problem in maths. The Deputy promised to look into the matter. But then I don't know how he presented the issue to the maths teacher, because the next time the teacher came to class, he was very angry with us. Thereafter, we became the marked group. Anytime you went to the staff room, a teacher would always find something to punish you for—your blouse, tie, shoes, socks, finger nails. And there was enmity between us, the "bad" class, and the teachers. From that incident, I learnt to persevere, whatever the case. Now if someone comes and asks how we are doing, I'll just look at them. And so people are just dying like that, each one on her own, quietly but surely.*

To speak is to be a person, to be unique, to be recognized. But the act of speaking is relational; it is something between oneself and an other. When we speak, we are voicing a desire to be listened to, to be heard, to be understood. But what happens when our speaking turns out to be merely an act of losing our ideas? What is it like to have our right to be heard violated? Jacinta knows that she is capable of learning much more maths than she is learning at present. She believes that she is not learning as much maths as are required to meet the intellectual demands of modern life and work. She knows that at the end of A-level, her demonstrated competencies in maths will determine her prospects for job opportunities and/or her admissibility to various programs in institutions of higher education. The main cause of Jacinta's dissatisfaction with her progress in maths is the indifference of her maths teacher to his ethical obligations.

The teacher is not adhering to the recommended instructional time guidelines for the maths curriculum. He is not monitoring the progress of the students and the course as required by the ministry. And contrary to his professional ethics, he is sanctioning an unqualified person to perform the duties of a maths teacher, and without compensating this person accordingly. Jacinta's act of seeking help from the Deputy headmaster produces in Jacinta's teacher a disinterest in Jacinta's welfare. Jacinta's teacher manages to mobilize his colleagues in the maths departmental office and together, they wittingly adopt a hostile "we-against-them" attitude towards the students. To whom can Jacinta now turn for justice? Or has she been officially consigned to silence? Has her need for help been rendered a taboo, something not to be spoken of?

### Pedagogical Implications

When we think of students seeking help in maths, we most often imagine the object of their need for help being specific to a particular mathematical task. Yet students in this study raised a much more nuanced notion of help than has been written about in the literature. We knew that issues of self-confidence and esteem might be woven into the students' experiences of seeking help, but we didn't expect to hear about students' experiences of seeking justice in their search for help. What these students' experiences do is, on the one hand, to remind us that the "text" of the phenomenon of help cannot be isolated from its larger context and, on the other, to highlight some of the challenges that hinder students' realization of their full learning capacities. The onus, then, is on educational leaders to be more pedagogically sensitive to the challenges that students encounter in their classrooms. One sure way of guaranteeing authentic and meaningful learning experiences for the students is ensuring that the classroom is an arena for justice and voice.

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