



Advocacy and subversion: Using the past to think about mathematics in the future

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As we go into the second quarter of the twenty-first century, we enter a troubling time for mathematics education in educational institutions at all levels, with multiple challenges that restrict how mathematics educators can incorporate research-based understandings into their practices. Rather than seeing mathematics education as a contributor to solving the complex climate and geo-political crises engulfing our world, politicians seem intent on redirecting attention away from these difficult-to-tackle crises to instead present the current incarnation of education as the problem. They can then offer a solution to save the economy and to a lesser extent the society, reducing the contributions that mathematics education research can make.

Yet, there remains possibilities for hope, through subversion and advocacy, by identifying what Bernstein (2000) labelled the “unthinkable”, opportunities for new actions that become available when different knowledges come in contact at the curriculum level, the institutional level and in the classroom. Given the pressure that mathematics education, is facing, there is a need to bring different knowledges together so new possibilities for educational practices are identified, developed and implemented, so they contribute to the good for society. The three examples, in the paper, give insights into how the interaction between the valued knowledge of different groups provides spaces for new understandings about situations to arise and be acted upon. However, identifying previously unthinkable possibilities is not easy, nor is it easy to implement these within existing structures. For example, subverting curricula, intentionally or unintentionally, can lead to unsatisfactory compromises, unless the aim for implementing unthinkable possibilities remains clear.

Recontextualising traditional practices, such as having children produce their own problems and solutions, or having preservice teachers interpreting core elements of curricular, such as identity and culture, so they can learn to be advocates, are also forms of subversion, which have become critical in recent challenging times. For example, in Norway, supporting preservice teachers to gain understandings about advocacy when funding for students, who are still learning the language of instruction as an additional language, becomes limited due to reductions in education spending.

Understanding how official knowledge, such as the curriculum, is adapted as it moves through Bernstein’s (2000) pedagogic device provides insights into how hope can be realised, through subversion of existing practices. However, for knowledge about these new practices to move up through the device, so that it becomes valued in discussions about curriculum, then mathematics educators need to develop their own advocacy skills.

References

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control, and identity: Theory, research, critique*. Rowman & Littlefield.

For more information, please refer to the following paper presented at the 48th Annual Conference of MERGA in July 2026.

Meaney, T. (2026). Advocacy and subversion: Using the past to think about mathematics in the future. In N. Berger, M. Thompson, J. Ley & C. Wilsmore (Eds.), *Beyond boundaries: Strengthening futures in mathematics education*. Proceedings of the 48th annual conference of the Mathematics Education Research Group of Australasia, Sydney (pp. 25–33). MERGA.