
An enquiry into the effects of my early learning experiences on my current teaching practice

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Abstract

As a South African educator, I am haunted, positively or negatively, by my own early learning experiences during Apartheid. In this article, I explore my early learning experiences and my current teaching practice through a reflective journey. Firstly, I consider the need to be reflective as a teacher. Then I weave a narrative of personal learning experiences through my early school days and current teaching practice, using the school context, pedagogy, socialisation and discipline as categories of investigation. Lastly, I critically contrast my past learning experiences with my current teaching practice. In exploring my past experiences and reflecting critically on my current teaching pedagogy, I have come to see how I was able to dispel anguish and become an optimistic teacher. In order to realise the change we desire, we as teachers have to embrace change and that can happen.

Memory is the weapon!¹

Introduction

South Africa has shared a past history of unprecedented violence towards the majority of its citizens. This period of brutality by the state towards the majority of its populace was globally deemed as a crime against humanity. However after being the pariah of the world, South Africa underwent a miraculous regime change, which made us the envy of the world. This duality of despair and hope is my memory of a past that has impacted on my learning and influenced my teaching, respectively. In this article, I explore my early learning experiences and my current teaching practice through a reflective journey. In doing so I hope to be the change my country needs to dispel despair and to instil optimism for the future.

¹ Courtesy of Don Mattera's classic book with the full title of: *Minnet är mitt vapen/Memory Is the Weapon*

Firstly, I deliberate on the need to be reflective as a teacher. Then I weave a narrative of personal learning experiences through my early school days and current teaching practice, using the school context, pedagogy, socialisation and discipline as categories of investigation. Lastly, I critically contrast my past learning experiences with my current teaching practice.

Reflection as a meaning making process

I am interested in how we make sense of memories. Descartes' proposition: *cogito ergo sum* "**I think, therefore I am**" intrigues me (Newman, 2010). To me, this suggests that our memories are fashioned by thought. John Dewey is an important scholar in the area of thinking. Rodgers' (2002) paper on Dewey is testimony to that and delves specifically into reflective thinking.

Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationship and connections to other experiences and ideas. It is the thread that makes continuity of learning possible, and ensures the progress of the individual, and, ultimately, society. It is the means to essentially moral ends (Rodgers, 2002).

My first encounter with reflective writing was triggered by my participation in a recent university tutorial based on four self reflective questions from Allender and Allender's (2006) paper. I wrote a letter to my son, an undergraduate student teacher in his second year, using the following questions to frame my narrative: "(1) What did [I] like about school as a child? (2) What bothered [me] in school? (3) What aspects of [my] schooling did [I] always say [I] would change if [I] were [a] teacher? And, (4) what influence does the way [I] were taught have on how [I am] teaching now (Allender and Allender, 2006, p.14)?" This was a sobering experience which put me in touch with deep-rooted memories, which in turn exposed my perpetual optimism about my chosen career.

For me, this duality in sense making of memories and reflection is best understood by drawing upon Pithouse's (2011) conception of 'narrative inquiry' which Pithouse sees as ". . . a mode of thought that understands the self as situated by the storylines and settings of an unfolding life story. . . ." (Pithouse, 2011, p.178). A deeper impetus for reflective writing or historical storytelling is encapsulated in what Pithouse refers to as 'self-study' which

points to teachers examining their own teaching and learning through their memories, with the aim of improving their own pedagogy. This view is supported by Cole (2011), who draws our attention to memory as much more than mere reflection of one's past; Cole sees it both as a study discipline and a method to construct one's identity. In the narrative I present in this article, I attempt to make sense of the duality of 'memory work' and 'memory studies' through remembering of my early 'childhood' learning experiences (Mitchell, Strong-Wilson, Pithouse and Allnutt, 2011). I am however not narrowing the meaning of memory, on the contrary I adhere to the 'embodiment' of the broader use of the term 'memory' (Cole, 2011). My pedagogical narrative is interspersed with the broader meaning of memory work, which is interrelated to the vast themes of remembering spaces as both study and method (Mitchell, Strong-Wilson, Pithouse and Allnutt, 2011).

An example of reflective remembering that has influenced my own meaning making process is Kunene's (2009) exploration of her lived educational experience as she relays and reflects on the South African Education reforms post apartheid which are closely linked to her own growth during the tumultuous time of change. Kunene's reflective thinking is intense and poses deep cutting introspective questions on her, and in fact every teacher's, consciousness by asking whether we are being "educative or miseducative" to others (Dewey, 1963, as cited in Kunene, 2009, p.140). Her story from primary through to high school is reminiscent of my own.

Makhanya (2010) refers to reflection as a means of recounting a journey through life in order to effect changes in current practice. As a Department of Education subject advisor researching her own practice, Makhanya's deliberate intent is to encourage her teacher participants to reflect on their experiences and to share these with her and each other. Her expectation is to understand what shaped the teachers' lives and how it has impacted on their practice. Furthermore, she is interested in understanding their experiences in the light of possible connections with her own past experiences. Both Kunene, who states, ". . .I began to teach the child rather than the prescribed curriculum. . ." (Kunene, 2009, p.145) and Makhanya, who explains, "I found myself moving away from being a researcher and I discussed about how to teach reading, referring the teachers to. . ., which the teachers claimed they had never seen. . ." (Makhanya, 2010, p.57) make profound critical decisions to teach, respectively. I draw heavily on both Makhanya and Kunene's experiences to make the assumption that good teachers are made and seldom born, because the more I read about lived experiences and self reflection and

how these impact on the present practice, I am convinced that best practice is begotten from remembering what was done right in the past or from making a conscious decision not to repeat what was done wrong.

Thus, I have come to understand how Mitchell and Weber (1998) actually use the phrase “recuperating memories of school” (Mitchell and Weber, 1998, p.46), suggesting that reflective memory accounts of our early experiences of school can lead to a beneficial improvement in our work as teachers. I see this as crucial in any teacher’s awareness of self reflection in order to bring about change in terms of how we ourselves learn and teach, which must in essence radically differ (or rather be positively influenced) from (by) past experiences, this is what I understand by ‘usable past’ (Zandy, 1995, as cited in Mitchell and Weber, 1998).

My early learning experiences

School itself was a blur, especially the junior grades

School has been an integral part of my life. From an early age, I remember waiting for my older friend to return from school and to replay his entire day at school with me, which demonstrates “. . .how children imitate or ‘play out’ [authoritarian roles] where they can impose school work on the less powerful. . .” (Mitchell and Weber, 1998, p.46). I made his experiences mine. Learning from him was “. . .about power and control. . .” (Mitchell and Weber, 1998, p.50) and the subjection to authority was due to his age and access to knowledge. I was able to read and count before I met teachers! I recall reading everything: magazines such as ‘Drum’, and even the photo novel, the craze of the time. It was the time of separate education, of growing up in a Coloured² community. I was vaguely aware of being ‘mixed’³ because we were a potpourri of different hues in my family, as well as in the greater community. Though the country was burdened with undue violence such as forced removals, oppressive laws and police brutality; I experienced corrective guidance at home, in school and in the community. I attribute this deliberate communal shielding from the “. . .restrictive, unresponsive,

² A racial annotation to people of mixed lineage

³ In response to White, African or Asian

oppressive education. . .” to teachers that will “. . .rather than emulate[e] traditions, try to be humanistic. . .” (Allender and Allender, 2006, p.14). In my opinion it is plausible to be consciously shielded [by teachers] from the absurdity of an abnormal reality [education] of poverty.

The senior grades at primary school are indelibly etched in my memory

Our primary school for Coloureds was in an urban setting under the then pennant of separate development. Even though the senior grades at primary school are indelibly etched in my memory, I developed an early desire to move to high school from standard 4 (grade 6). The nearest high schools were about a kilometre away. One was in town, where the streets were kept tidy by Africans. The other was in the location, where Africans’ own front yards never received the same care they showed to the houses in town. Neither the high school in town nor the one in the location was an option to attend for me, due to apartheid.

I can still hear Mr. G.⁴ relating the story of Harry de Strandloper, who engaged the Dutch on their arrival in Table Bay in 1652. During these animated story-lessons we were intermittently asked for clarification – and probing questions to construct a deeper understanding of the lesson (Kunene, 2009). This is significant because it was my earliest encounter of race tensions in South Africa. I vividly recall memories about being taunted and teased about my colour and my short curly mop, and Allender and Allender (2006, p.16) aptly describe these as “. . .the wounds we experienced as children”. My love for reading was unintentionally fired up by Mr. T.,⁵ the choir master and English teacher. An educational deed which I cherish happened when I was quietly denied singing in the school choir, and assigned a school library responsibility that changed my perspective forever. I remember reading Dickens⁶ and Shakespeare⁷ in the library while others were in choir. Both teachers were interspersing the realities of the day subtly in

⁴ Name shortened for anonymity

⁵ Name shortened for anonymity

⁶ *Tale of two cities*

⁷ *Romeo and Juliet*

lessons and depicting the ‘hidden curriculum’ to us (Kunene, 2009), which were the unspoken and unintended knowledge, values and beliefs we were taught in school.

I lived for the school holidays when older children returned from high school with stories, books and radio plays to listen to! I relished listening to the radio description of the moon landing in 1969 and knew that learning was important. This was the epitome of what pleasant school days were all about.

I hardly ever recalled being disciplined for frivolous misdemeanours. Specific historical incidents can imprint early memories collectively in groups. In the South African context, a political entrenched social system socialised entire generations collectively with early memories of worthlessness, brutality and poverty, which became the usable past of our recent times (Mitchell and Weber, 1998). To illustrate my contention in the 2011 Teacher Education and Professional Development BEd (Honours) class that I have recently taken, the racial demographics of KwaZulu-Natal is represented by the following groups African, Asian, Coloured and White (the lecturer) (58%, 21%, 14% and 7% respectively). The significance of this is that the African students had horrid recollections of their earlier learning experiences, while the Indian, Coloured and White (lecturer) had, to some extent, gradually more positive recollections of their earlier learning experiences. This could be because teachers whose “. . . earlier experiences were similar. . .” (Makhanya, 2010, p.52) most likely shared the worst atrocities during South Africa’s turbulent past, and were thus more inhumane towards their students. Incidentally both Kunene (2009) and Makhanya (2010) depict their early learning experiences, also as negative due to being subjected to harsh corporal punishment. Thus, in my experience, the shared insecurities of a community and in particular a teacher’s, could result in teachers being caring and protective, that is ‘humanistic’, as opposed to unresponsive and oppressive (Allender and Allender, 2006).

The four years at high school were demoralising

I attended the only high school for Coloureds in Bloemfontein, the capital city of the Orange Free State. All my beliefs of race and identity which I had carved carefully for myself at primary school were systematically demolished by the teachers I encountered at high school.

The principal was an extremely authoritarian Afrikaner nationalist with strict Calvinistic educational views. His mannerism was usually mimicked or played out by students to intimidate or bully others. Being different, made me a perfect target to be taunted and used as the hapless one in the mimicry where “. . . children imitate or ‘play out’ authority structures where they can. . . on the less powerful. . .” (Mitchell and Weber, 1998, p.46). The teachers, the majority being white females and only two reticent coloured teachers, feared the headmaster’s authoritative style and were collectively quietly submissive in his wake, but equally mordant towards us.

Similarly to Kunene (2009), I learned no meaningful skills from my high school teachers who were for the most part disinterested in our lives and shared no meaningful experiences as to where we lived or who our parents were – it was so detached and for the same reason, their names have not remained even vaguely in my memory.

Living in the school’s boarding establishment meant that I was infused with the experiences of peers who hailed from distant places. Most of my learning I gained from my peers; I listened to their stories about visits to seaside resorts and mountain lodges, concepts of which I had no idea, but which remained memories that will forever be part of what influenced me later to become a teacher. In addition, my love for reading increased and I gained insight from experiences from the books I read. These processes became important aspects of my own learning. Jarvis (2004) refers to this type of learning as experiential learning and defines it as:

[A] combination of processes whereby whole persons construct experiences of situations and transform them into knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, emotions and the senses, and integrate the outcomes into their own biographies (Jarvis, 2004, p.111).

In order to gain optimal cooperation from us, excessive punishment was meted out for not regurgitating tasks precisely. High school teachers’ were under tremendous pressure to produce a 100% pass rate in matric and this was normally enforced with brutal subjugation and an abnormally high drop-out rate, especially in standard 9 (grade 11). Kunene (2009) described similar experiences of total disregard for critical thinking or original thought at the convent school she attended. The four years at high school were demoralising and were aimed at making us nothing else than ‘yes men’ for the oppressive social system. It is thus not surprising that very few institutions of higher

learning existed, but also that very few students could attend, and of those the majority lacked critical thinking skills and a propensity for self-discovery, important for university study. Bunting (2006) makes a significant analysis of the hamstrung academic output of the ten historically disadvantaged universities and seven historically disadvantaged technikons designated for the use of black (African, Coloured and Indian) South Africans, whose drop-out rate was extremely higher than the historically white universities and technikons (Bunting, 2006).

Unprecedented learning at tertiary institutions

I attended the only university for Coloureds, which was 1600 kilometres away from my home. I spent three years at the University of the Western-Cape and another four years at Rand College of Education and obtained no qualification (on hindsight the dismal preparation I received at high school and the political agenda thereto attached was solely to blame) at the former and a higher teacher's diploma at the latter. Despite the political turmoil of the 70s and with no qualification, my learning escalated to unprecedented heights and through the turmoil of the 80s I was able to cope well with college life and study while teaching, thereafter.

My current teaching practice

Teaching at an idyllic school for the first 15 years

My teaching career started in idyllic conditions. The school was in close proximity to the sea, had sprawling grounds and no lack of amenities to amuse and inspire primary school children. I was fortunate to know teachers and community leaders that identified the need to intervene in the lives of the inner city children, whose parents were mostly jobless, drug addicts and substance abusers. A school away from home was established to provide regular meals, adult involvement and supervision through caretaker parents and an intensified schooling system based on remediation and improvement of curriculum gaps in the children's lives.

I consciously decided to involve myself in the teaching of underprivileged children. This awareness developed from observing poor children becoming

increasingly uninvolved in mainstream education. I learned from the onset, as a newly appointed teacher, that the needs of the children and not the syllabus (Kunene, 2009) were at the forefront, in terms of play and learning. These children seldom coped in the school due to malnutrition, overcrowding at home and persistent harassment through the aforementioned factors. The duration of the intervention was for three months only and required a degree of urgency and empathy to bring about a change in the children. Some of the redress was easily observable, for instance, children, who were malnourished, regained strength in record time and their concentration improved and they became adept at their school work.

The teacher/pupil ratio was very manageable and optimally designed for learner involvement; there was at least one professional teacher and two non-professional members available for every twenty children. The need seldom arose for the children to be admonished and if it did occur it was always done with due care that the teacher or caregiver was the substitute parent and that the discipline should be tempered accordingly. Later being senior, and the more experienced teacher, I assumed the role of acting principal, and planned various activities, which eliminated idleness amongst learners, and lessened the need for unsolicited discipline even more. However, when the new winds of change swept across South Africa our school was deemed too exclusive, especially in view of the total degradation of other schools in the newly formed KwaZulu-Natal Education Department.

A complicated dysfunctional inner city school

During the restructuring of the provincial education system in the 90s, I was moved to a newly formed KZN administered school in the Umbilo area. The school was a recently vacated Afrikaans medium school, which closed due to dwindling pupil numbers. Having taught in a school geared to change the lives of others; I felt suitably capable dealing with children from informal settlements and underprivileged city dwellers.

Unfortunately the school culture, especially amongst staff, was from the onset a difficulty that I did not anticipate. The racially mixed staff had different views, and being acting deputy head in the school management team, the principal and I found it difficult to get the school to function. We were forever embroiled in energy depleting conflict situations, such as absenteeism,

unprofessional conduct and sheer neglect of professional duties. For the learners, who were in such need, it was a constant struggle just concentrating in class, as they were presumably hungry and had walked long distances to get to school. The teachers were demoralised; their needs in terms of remuneration were always on the agenda. Obviously this impacted heavily on the teachers' work ethics and manifested in unpreparedness, reluctance in attending after school in-service training and a flagrant disrespect for authority.

Neither the school nor the teachers were really ready to deal with the newly formed diverse cultural mix. These unresolved differences eventually permeated down to the learners, being abetted by teachers I believe, who demanded that the principal and I leave the school. The school was closed, for an indefinite period due to strike action by the learners, at the end of the second term of 1998.

Teaching and managing, both learners and teachers respectively, at the school was both challenging and scary. With an unwilling work force it was extremely difficult therefore to have a semblance of decent discipline amongst the learners, and teaching and learning became a challenge. This resulted in flagrant disregard of directives regarding corporal punishment, and when disciplinary action was instituted, further polarisation amongst the staff occurred. Fortunately these untenable working conditions came to an abrupt end, albeit with much sacrifice on my part and a severe loss of quality education to the maligned learners, when both the principal and I were seconded to other schools.

A well-resourced culture-rich school

I was seconded to my current school as a specialist media teacher/librarian, with no ties to the school management team (SMT). The multi-ethnic school in Durban North provided a space to work with the child. Collegiality, a management perspective that emphasises that power and decision-making should be shared (Bush, 2007), is the operative description of my current teaching experience. The school operates within a "shared vision" and a "rich culture" (Leithwood, 1994, as cited in Bush, 2007, p.396). The surroundings are meticulously kept. In the same way, is policy about how the school is run,

imbedded in the daily routines, to provide quality teaching and learning to its valued clients.

I am experiencing what Allender and Allender (2006, p.16) suggests as the communal respect for another's commitment to the common purpose – 'humanism' at this school. I am experiencing "learner centered practice rather than theory", which Kunene (2009, p.149) desires to be developed for teachers.

The school has an aura of professionalism cloaking it and the intensity of striving for the best is almost tangible. As an educator, my awareness is heightened in being meticulous in delivering the curriculum and to engender a sense of cohesiveness and collaboration. This is comparable to my senior grades at primary school and the current use of my past experience is indeed informing my current practice (Mitchell and Weber, 1998). The culture of the school values the involvement of parents, teachers, administrators, and even the learners in solving problems, which are seen as social, not individual, challenges.

The school allows everyone enormous opportunities to grow and to contribute to its growth. Various codes of conduct for teachers, learners and other professionals are in place. Learner discipline is based on privileges and penalties – negative behaviour earn demerits and positive deeds are rewarded. This cooperative approach allows each teacher to teach and each learner is provided with an optimal learning experience.

Comparison of past learning experiences and current teaching practices

My experience of an idyllic junior school as a learner and an idyllic school as a teacher

My indistinguishable junior school years were in a sense a realisation of who I was. I think I am mostly moulded around these years in terms of my deep-set caring nature and unrivalled sense of optimism. My experience suggests that there is truth in the fact that we can emerge from our uncertain pasts as optimists, even as humanists (Allender and Allender, 2006). This is juxtaposed with my idyllic first teaching post where I made deliberate changes and planned meticulously what type of teacher I wanted to be. This

corresponds to Makhanya's (2010) belief that deliberate reflection about our past experiences is bound to make us better teachers. We experience realities differently and I was aware that change, insignificant maybe, but life changing to the children I taught at the idyllic school, is what we should stand for.

My experience of a demoralising high school as a learner and a dysfunctional school as teacher

Memories can be utterly painful and dealing with them can lead to a catharsis which focuses a new direction when encountered again. This 'usable past' that Mitchell and Weber (1998) refer to is in my case pertinently envisioned by my demoralising high school years. During my high school years, power and authority, as well as a sense of helplessness, played a major role in my socialisation. At the dysfunctional school, I was not able to exert power over subordinates and hence could not cope with what is termed 'playing school' (Mitchell and Weber, 1998), which hints at various forms of authoritarian and power struggles in education. My present position deliberately avoids being authoritative or submissive, which is a learned response and is early memory dependent or part of the 'usable past' (Mitchell and Weber, 1998). This knowingly steering clear from leadership is what presently urged me to register for a Bachelor of Honours Education Leadership, Management and Policy programme. I am keen to uncover effective principles that are necessary in creating a coherent balance between leadership, management and policy implementation with the aim of creating sustainable schools for success. I am ultimately motivated to find a lasting solution to eliminate barriers such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, incongruent teaching spaces as well as unmanageable large class sizes which still exist almost 17 years into reform. I therefore realised that ". . .this deeper understanding of teachers' past experiences has helped me to understand my own responsibilities and roles. . ." (Makhanya, 2010, p.65).

My experience of memorable senior grades at primary school as a learner and a well-resourced culture-rich school as a teacher

My early recollections of school are about constructing my own learning and delight in learning from others. Kunene (2009) points out that constructivism,

the development of higher order thinking and problem-based learning, is what we should teach our learners. I happened to read and count before school. In my current teaching practice I actively, and with great encouragement from the environment I teach in, seek that learners learn from their own ideas and make meaning from their own experiences (Kunene, 2009). This correlation between my early learning experiences and the teacher I am now is supported by the belief that influences of our past learning experiences impact either positively or negatively on our present teaching practice (Allender and Allender, 2006). I see neither the learners as entities belonging to a different race, nor do they see me as teacher belonging to a specific race, the racial ‘wound’ (Allender and Allender, 2006) of my past has healed.

I am teaching information communication technology, where the rules are determined by just-in-time learning (Taylor and Sheehan, 2010), which is the learning of a required skill when needed and at an appropriate ability level. This is what Kunene (2009) terms teaching the child and not the curriculum. I find it exhilarating when a learner’s sense of inquiry is triggered to become active learners. This sense of learner involvement in learning experiences is what is yearned for by Kunene (2009) in her endeavour to entrench learner-centeredness as a Curriculum Education Specialist (CES) in her sphere.

Conclusion

In exploring my early learning experiences and my current teaching practice through memory work, I have gained a deeper insight into my life. Our country is still in a transformational state and the education sector, and by implication teachers, are tasked to change it from hopelessness to optimism. We do need to draw from how it was in the past so as to know how it should or should not be in the present and the future. It is only through undertaking this reflective journey that we will arrive at the point of complete transformation – change for the better. In order to realise the change we desire, we have to change and that can happen.

Memory is the weapon.

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