



## ***Studying Ourselves as Scholar-Teachers in the Age of HIV and AIDS in Southern Africa***

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**Abstract:** In southern Africa, critically high levels of HIV and AIDS have brought about an expectation that all teachers should integrate HIV- and AIDS-related education into their subject areas. Research suggests that such integration can be supported by teacher education that takes account of the vital mediating role that teachers' experiences and perspectives play in HIV- and AIDS-related education. In this essay, we reflect on our experiences of learning and teaching in a graduate course for teachers called "Studying ourselves as scholar-teachers in the age of HIV and AIDS in southern Africa" which took place at a university in South Africa. Kathleen (at that time a novice teacher educator and PhD student) designed and taught the course and Mathabo (at that time a school teacher and Masters student) was one of course participants. Our discussion explores the nature and value of the learning that took place during the course and draws attention to the complexity and challenges involved in bringing self-awareness and self-questioning to educational practice and inquiry.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In southern Africa, critically high levels of HIV and AIDS, particularly among the youth (see UNAIDS, 2007), have led to a growing expectation that all teachers should integrate HIV- and AIDS-related ed-

ucation into their subject areas (see, for example, Department of Education South Africa, 2000; Ministry of Education Lesotho, 2005). Research (for instance, Baxen & Breidlid, 2004; Simbayi & Skinner, 2005) and our own experience as teachers and education scholars suggests to us that

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such integration can be supported by teacher education that incorporates teachers' experiences and viewpoints into pedagogic processes and that acknowledges teachers as intellectuals and significant producers of knowledge. In this essay, we reflect on our experiences of learning and teaching in a graduate course for teachers called, "Studying ourselves as scholar-teachers in the age of HIV and AIDS in southern Africa." This course was part of a Masters level module on Health, Sexuality, and HIV/AIDS in Education offered in 2006 in the Gender and Education program at the Faculty of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Kathleen (at that time a novice teacher educator and Ph.D. student) designed and taught the course and Mathabo (at that time a school-teacher and Masters student) was one of nine experienced teachers from the southern African countries of Lesotho and South Africa who participated in the course.

### **KATHLEEN'S INTENTIONS IN DESIGNING THE COURSE**

In my recent doctoral research, I undertook a self-study (see, among others, Loughran, Hamilton, LaBoskey, & Russell, 2004; Mitchell, Weber, & O'Reilly-Scallon, 2005) of my experience as a novice teacher educator (see Pithouse, 2007). As a component of this self-study, I designed and taught a Masters level course on HIV and AIDS in education. The learning activities that I designed for the course were aimed at providing opportunities and support for the students to make connections between their own experiences and concerns as teachers in the age of HIV and AIDS in southern Africa and a range of relevant literature and public issues. My understanding was that, as experienced teachers, the students would bring diverse professional and personal experiences to our class and that interaction with their own and each

other's lived experience, as well as with academic material, could engender new knowledge and understanding about HIV and AIDS in education. I also wanted to create openings for the students to identify and inquire into individual areas of interest within the broad topic of HIV and AIDS in education. In this way, I hoped to facilitate the students' intellectual and emotional engagement with the complex and challenging topic of HIV and AIDS in education and to encourage them to envisage possibilities for taking action through their work as teachers and education scholars.

When planning the course, I decided to make it a requirement for the students to keep course journals. As part of my self-study process, I also kept a journal in which I recorded and reflected on my experience of teaching the course. I aimed to encourage the students to use their journals as informal, unthreatening spaces to muse on and articulate ideas and questions, keep reading logs, write drafts of their assignments, and express their thoughts and feelings about the experience of the course (see Richardson, 2003; Ballantyne & Packer, 1995).

The opening task for the course was a mini literature review, which required small groups of students to select one of a number of themed collections of texts I had compiled and then to work together to read and discuss some texts from their chosen collection. I devised a number of questions to guide the reading and discussion. These questions were designed to encourage the students to identify key public issues and scholarly conversations in the area of HIV and AIDS in education and to consider these in relation to their own experiences, concerns, and viewpoints.

A subsequent activity required the students to write and then present and discuss brief "lived-experience descriptions" (van Manen, 1990, pp. 64-65) of experiences they had had that related in some way to the topic of HIV and AIDS in education and

that they found “emotionally as well as intellectually interesting” (Conle, 2000b, p. 190). I decided to present a lived-experience description of my own as a prompt for the task. Writing this description of an incident that still evoked strong, unresolved feelings in me gave me a sense of how emotionally challenging it could be to bring self-awareness to the study of HIV and AIDS in education and of how important it would be to cultivate an atmosphere of support and mutual trust in the class.

Because I was concerned that revisiting HIV and AIDS-related experiences—which intersect with emotionally loaded issues of sickness, death, sexuality, and often, sexual violence—could feel quite overwhelming, I designed an activity in which the students and I would read and discuss Rager’s (2005) article on “self-care” in qualitative research and then negotiate guidelines for ‘group-care’ within the class. I also arranged for the campus student counselor to attend one of our classes so that the students could meet her and find out how to access her support services if need be.

Another learning activity involved constructing an individual and public timeline of the age of HIV and AIDS in southern Africa. My intention was for the students to map out their own experiences in relation to public HIV and AIDS-related issues and happenings. As with the lived-experience descriptions, I offered my own timeline as a pedagogic resource. I linked the timeline activity with a slideshow on public events, issues, and debates in the area of HIV and AIDS in South Africa between 1982 and 2006. When developing the slideshow, I made a point of including controversial and thought-provoking issues and happenings that I anticipated would stimulate critical debate and interest in this area. One example of such an issue was South African President Thabo Mbeki’s highly contentious questioning of orthodox scientific views about HIV and AIDS.

The main coursework task required the

students to write scholarly autobiographical essays in which they would map the development of their interest in HIV and AIDS in education. In the essay guidelines, I encouraged the students to locate their areas of interest in relation to their own experiences and contexts as well as to relevant literature and public issues. I also asked the students to consider how they might translate their concerns into some action (no matter how small) in their professional and/or academic contexts. My aim in devising this essay task was to give the students a framework within which to review and consolidate what they had learned through their thinking, reading, and discussion during the course. I envisioned critical and creative narratives that would move inward, outward, backward, and forward to connect the students’ scholar-teacher selves to broader issues and happenings, and to realistic possibilities for taking action in their professional and academic communities (see Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Nash, 2004; Ritchie & Wilson, 2000).

### **MATHABO’S EXPERIENCE OF THE COURSE**

This course was designed such that students would undertake a mini-research project on their personal/professional/academic interest in the area of HIV and AIDS in education. This involved making journal entry reflections on their interest, drawing up a timeline of the development of this interest, and writing an autobiography of their interest. The interactive nature of the module enabled the students to engage actively with each other and with a range of literature related to HIV and AIDS in education. As educators tasked with the duty of teaching the youth about their sexuality and HIV and AIDS, we all had to face our own experiences and our own selves as teachers, parents, spouses, siblings, and re-

searchers. We had to be able to work out our identities in relation to the complex and sensitive subject of HIV and AIDS and come to terms with how 'who we are' influences us within the classroom.

### *The Story I Shared During the Course*

I first heard of HIV and AIDS in 1986, when the first patient was identified in Lesotho. Then the predominant discourse was that HIV and AIDS infects only homosexual people. At this time, for me, HIV and AIDS was a very foreign disease and like many others in my community and country, I believed that it would never infect me because I was heterosexual.

The reality of HIV and AIDS came closer to home for me when one day in April 1997, I had a fight with my husband and I decided to spend the night at my mother's house. The following morning when I got to my house, my husband refused to let me in. I could sense that there was something wrong. When he finally decided to let me in, he forced me to have sex with him right there and then in the lounge. I told him that I was not ready but he pretended not to hear me. He managed to penetrate me and continue with the sexual act as I lay there like a corpse, mortified by what was happening to me. When he was through, I wanted to go to the bathroom to clean myself of the act. He tried to stop me but I managed to go through.

That is when I saw her, another woman lying on my bed with nothing on. I could not believe my eyes. I knew her. I became nauseous, my vision blurred and my knees could not hold me. I had to hold on to the door to steady myself. The bedroom smelled like a cheap motel room with stale cigarette smoke and empty beer bottles all over. I felt so dirty and cheap. I wished I could disappear or erase what had just happened to me in the lounge. Why did he force me to have sex with him while he had obviously spent the whole night with this

other woman? He could not tell me why he had done what he did, and at that moment, I knew that my marriage was over.

I started wondering whether he had used condoms with her because he never used them with me. I asked myself why I had never had the courage to demand that he use condoms. "Am I HIV positive?" "Am I going to die and leave my daughter?" All these questions were running through my mind as I left my house for good, with uncontrollable tears streaming down my face. I was now staring the threat of HIV and AIDS in the eye. It was no longer a foreign disease. It was right here in my family. I knew that with my husband's track record, I had a very good chance of being HIV positive. I wanted to get tested but I was too scared. I kept silent about the sexual and other abuses I had endured in my marriage because I thought people would say that I deserved it. I finally got tested after my divorce came through. I was HIV negative. After three more negative tests over a period of nine months, I decided that I was in the clear.

In 2001, my father was brought home to my mother's house after 23 years of separation. He had been staying with other women during this separation time and he never even knew where my mother was staying or how we as his children were surviving. My mother never considered divorce because she was afraid of being 'cut off' from the Catholic Church. When my father became fatally ill, the woman he was staying with told him that she could not take care of him and that he should find his wife. My younger brother, who had always been in contact with my father, decided to bring him to my mother.

I was very angry with my brother and mother for taking care of my father after so many years during which he never bothered about anyone else but himself. When I saw my father where he was sleeping, I was shocked. He was a corpse, barely breathing. He was very dark and emaciated. His

mouth was covered with thrush and he was wearing adult nappies. I told my mother that the man had AIDS, but she just dismissed me because she had been made to believe that he was only suffering from pneumonia. She was taking care of him without any precautions. She was blind to the other symptoms that were so obviously evident. I was asking myself why my mother felt she had to take care of a man who never loved her, who had always been violent to her, who had spent all his youthful years and his money with other women. It made me feel sick looking at how she was playing the dutiful wife. She took care of him until she buried him. During the same year, four of my friends, aged between 27 and 30 years, died of AIDS-related illnesses.

I was more devastated by the deaths of my friends than by my father's death. I felt guilty that I was still alive and they had died. I started asking myself what I could have done or what I can do to stop such senseless deaths. From then on, I took every chance I could to further my knowledge on HIV and AIDS.

### *My Interaction with the Course*

When I enrolled for the course, I was just making up the required number of modules for a Masters degree. However, my interest was sparked during the literature review activity at the start of the course when I read about sexual violence against women and children and how this links to HIV and AIDS (see, for example, Pettifor, Measham, Rees, & Padian, 2004; Dunkle et al., 2004). All the memories of sexual violence I had kept locked inside came flooding back. I could see myself back then when my own husband sexually abused me, and all the emotion and passion I had for changing the status quo for other women resurfaced. During the course, the sharing of stories of the students' remembered experiences and the subsequent discussions al-

lowed us to learn from each other and to be able to face our fears, demons, challenges, and misgivings in relation to issues of HIV and AIDS.

My personal involvement in the course helped me come to terms with my experiences and to forge an understanding of how I was teaching my own learners in relation to sexuality and HIV and AIDS. I was able to face the fears and demons from my well-hidden past. The course led to a reflective engagement among the teachers in the class concerning how remembered experiences have influenced our professional lives, particularly in relation to our classroom interaction with learners during HIV and AIDS-related lessons. We started asking ourselves questions such as, "How can I improve my teaching?" According to Allender and Allender (2006, p. 15), "Unless we are conscientiously aware of what is driving our choices of behavior in the classroom, we are all too likely to revert to the ways of the teachers who taught us." They argue that self-awareness is "essential to breaking with nonfunctional teaching behaviors in an effort to discover personal strengths as a classroom teacher." A key part of our formation as teachers is our own experiences as learners. Much of what we do and do not do is in reaction to and influenced by those experiences. Our past "experiences create hidden personal narratives about education, school, and schooling that have a profound and sometimes intractable impact on the way we teach our students" (Samaras, Hicks, & Berger, 2004, p. 908). The importance of providing opportunities and support for teachers to develop self-awareness in relation to sexuality and HIV and AIDS is highlighted by Baxen and Breidlid (2004), who draw attention to the need to acknowledge and explore teachers' lives and experiences as a key mediating factor in HIV and AIDS education.

### *Using Autobiography*

Cole and Knowles (2001) point out that autobiography is a structured account of life written by and about oneself. As I embarked on writing my autobiographical essay for the course, I became aware of the challenges and complexity of using autobiographical writing within an academic setting. These involve a perceived lack of objectivity, lack of scientific evidence, and a reliance on memory. I remember very well the struggles we all went through trying to write the first draft of our autobiographical essays and how we felt it was against the conventional way of doing academic writing. In addition, an autobiographical approach involves the writer in self-examination and scrutiny whose potential effect is exposure to emotional threat. The danger of emotional harm was offset by discussing how to take care of ourselves as researchers especially when dealing with emotionally taxing subjects. Rager (2005) outlines several strategies for self-care that were useful for our class. Since the process of writing our autobiographies and sharing our stories touched the whole person and not just the intellect, "there needed to be a sense of trust, security and mutual respect" (Conle, Loudon, & Mildon, 1998) among the members of the group. Understanding ourselves shaped the way we interacted with each other. Acknowledging insecurities, fears, and weaknesses in 'self' helped us view the world and others in a different, more empathetic light.

At first, it was very difficult for me to put myself in the centre of my inquiry. I was uncomfortable with starting with the self and making myself vulnerable. I found myself having to share with my fellow students stories that are close to my very being and who I have become. While these stories were very sensitive in nature, I thought that baring my experiences to this small group of friends and acquaintances would help them better understand who I was and

where I was coming from. For me this was a very therapeutic experience because the spaces created in this environment allowed me to let go and cry, releasing all my pent-up emotions from years gone by. I believe that being able to deal with who we are as teachers in relation to our own gendered experiences and sexual identities is necessary if we are to teach effectively on HIV and AIDS. Who we are as people shapes who we are as teachers and this influences our interactions with learners in our classrooms. Who we are as people is shaped by different actors in our lives. Acknowledging the influence of all these social actors in our lives allows us to engage ourselves in reflection on how they have shaped us.

### *So What?*

Being part of the "Studying ourselves as scholar-teachers in the age of HIV and AIDS in southern Africa" course has made me better understand my position as a woman science teacher in relation to issues of sexuality and HIV and AIDS in Lesotho classrooms. The position I occupy is surrounded with conflicting social constructions of masculinity and femininity. As a Mosotho woman, I am expected to be submissive, unquestioning, and sexually innocent. However, as a science teacher, I am expected to be knowledgeable, powerful, and able to make decisions in any situation. These positions that I occupy have an important bearing on my teacher self and how I handle boys and girls in my lessons. It is important for my professional development to find a balance or some common ground between being a woman and a science teacher so that my learners can benefit from our interactions. Walkerdine (1990) draws our attention to the "impossible fiction" of being a woman teacher in today's society. She points to the tensions and contradictions that are inherent in an identity that asserts power and status and commands respect (teacher) at the same time

that it speaks of subordination, marginalization, and repression (woman). In support, Munro explains that “to be a woman is to lack authority, knowledge, and power. To be a teacher is to have authority, knowledge, and power” (1998, p. 1). Looking at the contradictions in what constitutes a good Mosotho woman and a good science teacher, I believe the only way forward is to disturb and challenge the assumptions that my society has regarding these two seemingly conflicting positions. I believe that social constructions of masculinity and femininity in Lesotho can be contested and reconstructed. I would like to see women in Lesotho treated as autonomous beings, with knowledge and opinions, and with a right to enjoy sex. I think that this could help to make women teachers more comfortable in teaching about HIV and AIDS. Maybe such sexual enlightenment would change the power dynamics in sexual partnerships, such that women become empowered to decide on what they really want.

My engagement with the course was also very helpful in shaping my research topic for my Masters thesis. The stories we explored contributed to my reflection on the power dynamics that are characteristic of sexual relationships, and the role of sexuality education in reshaping the landscape of sexual decision-making and HIV infections. I started thinking of how I was taught as an adolescent girl and how I am teaching adolescent boys and girls on issues of sexuality and HIV and AIDS in my classrooms. This led to a reflection on my practice and, in my Masters research, I involved other teachers in reflecting together on our memories of adolescent sexual experiences and their influence on our teaching (see Motalingane-Khau, 2007).

### **KATHLEEN’S REFLECTION ON THE COURSE**

For me, Mathabo’s response to the course underlines the educative value of offering opportunities and support for teachers to work together to make sense of the complex and challenging area of HIV and AIDS in the light of their own experiences and concerns as well as pertinent literature and public issues. During the course, Mathabo and her fellow students began to look more closely and carefully at their own contexts, viewpoints, and professional practices in relation to HIV and AIDS in education. They also began to think in new ways about a variety of HIV- and AIDS-related public issues. The storytelling aspects of the course allowed the students to look through each other’s eyes to gain new perspectives on HIV- and AIDS-related experiences and issues (cf. Conle, 1996, 2000a; Conle, Li, & Tan, 2002). Mathabo’s reflection highlights how the students learned with and from each other and how their learning was supported and facilitated by their relationships and interaction with each other (see, among others, Hollingsworth, 1992; Palmer, n.d.). In addition, perhaps most importantly, the course encouraged the students to identify and explore aspects of HIV and AIDS in education that they genuinely cared about and to imagine and share possibilities for making choices and taking action in response to those issues in their professional and scholarly practice.

As well as identifying benefits of studying the ‘teacher self’ in relation to HIV and AIDS in education, Mathabo also raises some queries and concerns about this pedagogic approach. Teaching this course helped me to understand more about the complexity of bringing self-awareness and self-questioning to teacher education. I came to see that self-study could actually make a teacher’s professional life more dif-

difficult because colleagues or parents might feel threatened by new ideas or ways of working. I also became more aware of tensions between individual teachers' intentions and deep-rooted patterns of school and community life. I realized that these tensions might not necessarily be resolved in the university classroom, but that teacher educators and fellow students could offer encouragement and support for teachers to acknowledge and grapple with them.

Part of my pedagogic approach to the course involved giving broad outlines for the main coursework assignment and requiring the students to discover their own foci for their essays. I anticipated that my inquiry-orientated approach would help the students to find intrinsic motivation for and satisfaction in learning (see Kleiser, 2004; LaBoskey, 2004). I also hoped that this approach would make the learning in our class more relevant to the students' lived experience and to their professional and academic work. In my view, Mathabo's interaction with the course illustrates how positioning students as agents of their own learning can stimulate and enhance their learning. Nonetheless, during the course, I became conscious of how many students can find this positioning unfamiliar and can feel unsure and anxious about what it requires from them. I realized the importance of monitoring and supporting the growth of students' agency through class interaction, appropriate learning activities, and ongoing guidance and assistance. In addition, I came to see that, as I worked to support and challenge the students to develop more self-reliance, I needed to make sure that I was being as clear and explicit as possible about why I was taking this particular pedagogic approach and that I was inviting the students to interrogate this approach with me. Furthermore, I was surprised and somewhat disconcerted to find that, like several of the students, I too experienced anxiety about not having a wholly

pre-determined assignment 'question.' Although I had deliberately chosen to work with the students to develop individual foci for their essays, the tentative, emergent nature of the process that we went through did make me feel unsure and 'out of control' at times. Nevertheless, I came to see how it was possible for a teacher-educator to find the way together with students rather than to prescribe the way, and that although this might involve relinquishing some 'control,' it did not necessarily amount to an abdication of responsibility.

Mathabo's discussion of the course also draws attention to the emotional complexity of bringing self-awareness into the classroom, particularly when dealing with the emotionally loaded topic of HIV and AIDS. While I had foreseen this to some degree, and had made some provision for it, I do not think that I had fully anticipated the emotional weight that some of the learning activities would carry. Additionally, I had not expected to be so personally affected by this emotional intensity. Consequently, I had not realized how stressful I might find it to facilitate sessions in which I would need to be constantly alert and ready to make immediate decisions about when and how to intervene in group processes in order to provide support where necessary and to minimize potential for harm.

Through my experience of this course, I have become more conscious of the emotional responsibility that I take on when I encourage students to bring awareness of self to an area such as HIV and AIDS, which is permeated with experiences of suffering and loss. I find that responsibility quite daunting. However, I understand from Mathabo and her fellow students' responses to the course that even though they found some of the learning activities to be emotionally painful at times, they did not experience them as harmful, but rather as valuable and rare learning experiences (cf. Conle, 1996; Elbaz-Luwisch, 2002). Moreover, their responses emphasized the atmo-

sphere of encouragement, understanding, and trust that developed in the class as a central factor in helping them to deal with emotionally challenging learning.

## LOOKING FORWARD

Our shared reflection on this course has emphasized for us that starting with the self and making one's self visible and thus vulnerable in educational practice and inquiry can be a demanding experience. We are mindful of the complexity and responsibilities involved in bringing self-awareness and self-questioning to teaching and learning, particularly in relation to sensitive and emotionally taxing topics such as HIV and AIDS. Nonetheless, because our reflections have also highlighted the educative potential of linking the development of self-knowledge to the study of significant educational and social issues, we are committed to the ongoing exploration of ways in which to work skillfully and constructively with self-study and autobiography in our practice as scholar-teachers.

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