

Educational Research for Social Change (ERSC)

Volume 11 No. 2 October 2022

pp. 24-38

ersc.nmmu.ac.za

ISSN: 2221-4070

Using Memory Work To Recall Childhood Experiences of Learning: Collaborative Reflections on Four Self-Study Projects¹

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Abstract

We are South African self-study researchers who started building our collaborative relationship as critical friends completing our doctoral studies. We have a keen interest in self-study research, and we all received our doctorates through self-study using arts-based research. Our collective self-study explores our doctoral work as critical friends teaching and learning using arts-based research in education. This article presents how we used memory work in a self-study project to elicit childhood memories for teacher–learner engagement and mentor–mentee knowledge sharing. We understand that a sociocultural theoretical perspective highlights the fundamental requirement of working together in educational contexts to make sense of collective and personal experiences. In addition, employing self-study research and revisiting our learning has assisted or even encouraged us to engage deeply with past life experiences to improve our teaching practice. We understand that our past experiences have the power to shape our teaching practices now and in the future.

¹ Protocol reference numbers:

HSS/0095/018D (Ntokozo Sibusisiwe Mkhize-Mthembu)

HSS/0054/018D (Khulekani Luthuli)

HSS/0055/018D (Nontuthuko Queeneth Phewa)

HSS/0096/018D (Siphiwe Madondo)

Although these experiences occur both inside and outside the classroom, the principles that we endorse remain the same: collaborative and interactive teaching and learning, and acknowledging the children's and our own earlier learning and backgrounds.

Keywords: self-study, personal history, sociocultural perspective, arts-based methodologies

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Please reference as: Mkhize-Mthembu, N. S., Luthuli, K., Phewa, N. & Madondo, S. (2022). Using Memory Work To Recall Childhood Experiences of Learning: Collaborative Reflections on Four Self-Study Projects. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 11 (2), 24-38.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2221-4070/2022/v11i2a2>

Introduction: How Can Memory Work Be Used in a Self-Study Project To Elicit Childhood Memories That Will Encourage Teacher Learning?

This paper showcases four doctoral studies by Ntokozo Mkhize-Mthembu, Khulekani Luthuli, Nontuthuko Phewa, and Siphiwe Madondo. The discourse explores how these South African researchers used self-study methodologies, in particular memory work, to recall their experiences of how and what they learned. In essence, the four researchers used memory work to recollect incidences of the past in order to transform their respective educational practices. They explored various arts-based research tools such as artefacts, memory drawings, their personal histories, and the recalling of experiences and incidents to collect data.

Ntokozo was a teacher at a multiracial primary school. Her self-study project explored social and emotional learning in her past and in her Grade 4 classroom (Mkhize, 2020). Ntokozo wanted to discover ways of improving her teaching practice to create a secure, compassionate, and loving learning environment for her learners. This project inspired her to re-examine her childhood and adolescent experiences and to reflect on learning as stimulated by her parents, teachers, friends, and other significant people in her life. In her memory work, she recalled incidents in her personal history. The strategies she used were artefact retrieval and narrative writing. LaBoskey (2004, p. 829) stated that "the challenge for teacher educators is to provide ways for students to articulate and interrogate their personal histories and resultant understandings." Ntokozo was motivated to recall and question her experiences as a child and as a teacher. Ntokozo used the artefact retrieval technique to make sense of her social and emotional learning as it occurred in her classroom.

Khulekani is an experienced deputy principal in a multiracial urban primary school. The focus of his self-study (Luthuli, 2020) was on mentoring novice teachers in learner behaviour support. He aimed to explore how to improve his mentoring practice to guide his protégés appropriately and to help them negotiate sound learner behaviour in their classrooms. To achieve this purpose, he involved novice teachers at his school as participants in his study.

In this article, Khulekani focuses on his personal history that he recalled to enlighten his own past experiences of being either supported or not to improve his practice. To rekindle these past experiences, Khulekani used narrative reflection to remind himself of some of his experiences as a novice teacher. Khulekani also recalled early experiences that paved the way for his ability to mentor novice teachers in learner behaviour support. This research has offered new strategies to empower prospective mentors to assist novice teachers in coping with learner behaviour in classrooms.

Nontuthuko is a Grade 1 teacher in a semi-urban under-resourced school. Her self-study research project explored play pedagogy as an effective teaching and learning strategy in her Grade 1 classroom (Phewa, 2020). Nontuthuko wanted to better understand the role of play in children's learning and development, and explored the benefits of employing play pedagogy in her teaching practice. Her research motivated her to rekindle childhood memories of play inside and outside the school environment. She used artefacts and drawings to stimulate her memory and to vividly recall the games she and her peers played as children. Samaras (2011) explained that self-study methodology comprises several diverse self-study methods to generate data. Nontuthuko thus infused play with various activities in her classroom to enhance her teaching practice.

Siphiwe is a primary school teacher in a semi-rural area. His self-study research project aimed to explore children's popular culture as a tool for teaching and learning English creative writing in his Grade 6 class (Madondo, 2020). Siphiwe explored diverse strategies to stimulate isiZulu home language children to engage in English creative writing. His self-study research project prompted him to recall past experiences of children's popular culture as a tool to aid him in teaching creative writing. Siphiwe used artefact retrieval and memory drawing as well as narratives of his experiences of children's popular culture (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002) as tools to aid him in teaching creative writing.

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Perspective

In our larger studies, the sociocultural theoretical perspective framed our thinking in our exploration of various self-study methods to pursue our lived experiences as tools for teaching. This approach adequately supported the elicitation of ideas and illuminated our attitudes and mind-sets during the teaching and learning processes in our respective classrooms. This paper focuses on the memory work we are all engaged in and we hope that the information that we share will assist teachers to renew their thinking about the sociocultural background of learners so that they will be exposed to positive experiences in classrooms. We also foresee that emerging researchers will be encouraged by the methodologies we used and that they will build on the positive results of our respective studies for future research projects. A common aim of our studies was to integrate learners' and teachers' daily encounters to create positive teaching and learning experiences that would be embedded in their various sociocultural backgrounds. Danish and Gresalfi (2018) observed that the sociocultural perspective in the educational field focuses on the involvement of individuals in social practices that are associated with a particular background. We hope that our attempt to present and discuss the results of our respective self-study projects will offer teachers the opportunity to consider the manner in which they reconnect with the past, in the present, in order to prepare their learners for the future.

Furthermore, the sociocultural perspective urges active and interactive engagement because it supports the exchange of ideas and perspectives that influence and enrich learning. Björklund and Ahlskög-Bjorkman (2017) argued that an individual's primary learning occurs through processes of meaning-making in which interaction and communication are pivotal. This implies that learning occurs through interaction with others.

Research Methodology: Self-Study Methodology

Self-study research is a research approach that engages teachers in the process of introspection. It raises self-awareness because teachers learn about themselves, and this allows them to develop a new perspective of self in regard to their teaching practice. As Austin and Senese (2004) noted, self-study motivates teachers to evaluate their primary teaching principles and to bring valuable changes to their classroom approach. This implies that educationists who wish to study their teaching practice need to be alienated from the self and engage in introspection. In this process, they gain a new perspective on their beliefs, attitudes, and values as teachers and are guided to understand how their earlier experiences influenced—and are still influencing—their teaching practice. This knowledge enables them to acknowledge their mistakes and to make significant changes to their teaching practice. Austin and Senese (2004) commented that self-study urges teachers to re-examine their practices in order change and improve their teaching so that more effective learning can occur. Likewise, Samaras and Freese (2009, p. 5) maintained that self-study research “requires openness and vulnerability since the focus is on the self.” The self-study approach thus requires one to be honest about one’s teaching capabilities and to allow space for self-criticism and other people’s constructive insights.

As the authors of this paper, we did not only utilise the self-study methodology in our respective research projects but we also recently engaged in collaborative reflection and writing to interrogate our respective personal histories and teaching practices and to share what we have learned. When we started on our self-study journey, we needed to blend our past and professional experiences with theory and practice and we thus chose the self-study approach because it helped us to focus “on the nexus between public and private, theory and practice, research and pedagogy, self and other” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 818). We admit that we harvested accounts of, and yielded insights into, our teaching practices through processes that were transparent, critical, authentic, and troubling at the same time.

We acknowledge that collaboration needs to be open, frank, and unambiguous given that understanding often arises through dialogue that is based on an ontological stance in research (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). To achieve a lack of ambiguity, Pinnegar & Hamilton (2009) proposed a variety of data collection and analysis methods that can be used effectively by the self-study researcher who wishes to improve educational practices. This paper explores our collective experiences as self-study researchers who used, amongst others, memory work to gain insight into our teaching practice and to improve it.

Ethical Considerations

It is important to note that as researchers we adhered to all ethical considerations as required for the nature of our study. We also approached our gatekeepers and requested permission to explore our personal history and memories. The University of KwaZulu-Natal’s research ethics committee also granted our study permission.

Methods

Memory work in self-study is a method to explore how individuals construct their identities. It is used to expose what we remember about events that unfolded in our lives and how these forged us into becoming who and what we are (O’Reilly-Scanlon, 2002). According to Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2019), memory drawing, which is entrenched in memory work, is a self-study method that aims to explore early memories (of school, for example) that can aid teachers in attending to issues of practice related to educational and social concerns. Mitchell (2008) stated that memory drawing has been used by pre-service teachers in South Africa to study different phenomena they might encounter in the classroom

one day. The notion is that, by revisiting our childhood experiences and events in our personal histories, we can learn to anticipate what and how we can improve our teaching practice.

Having a memory is an essential part of human existence. Coles (2017) reminded us that, by using our memories, we can explore the various experiences and emotions that made us who we are at present. Likewise, Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2019, p. 1) highlighted the importance of memory work as follows:

Memory work is underpinned by the premise that memories play a fundamental role in current individual and collective patterns of thought and action and that we can consciously work with memory to become aware of and intervene creatively in these patterns.

In the same disposition, Brunke (2018, p. 24) maintained that “re-remembering is self-work: it is the work that must be done on oneself and by oneself, and as such each must come to it on their own.” This means that recalling memories for learning creates a foundation for appropriate behaviour in reaction to present and future situations. Against this background, our decision to choose self-study as our research methodology was informed by our intention to explore our memories to assist us in learning about and improving our teaching practices. To illustrate the learning that occurred, we share our key narratives in turn below.

Ntokozo’s Narrative of Her Personal History: My Hiding Place

It was an unforgettable, sunny day. The sky was clear and painted the horizon blue. If my memory serves me right, I was eight years old. Summer days were always days of exploration and adventure regardless of the heat. The sun was out to play, and we expected to be sun-kissed and indulge in ice lollies or ice cream. Unfortunately, we could never venture on any mission or plan without informing our parents because they held our world in their hands. We had to abide by rules and laws, and their authority was unquestioned. These were days to cool off, and what better way to cool off than to have an ice lolly? We were young and carefree—little things mattered, and essential things made little or no sense.

Looking at the picture of this wardrobe (Figure 1) allowed me to reminisce and to relive my childhood days. I remember the lingering scent of my mother’s clothes that hung in it. I recall seeing my mom in her beautiful form-fitting dresses, her beaded blouses, and high-waist skirts that I always longed to try on.

Figure 1

The Wardrobe: My Place of Safety and Security



I remember my fragile little body, my dry knees and elbows, and my piercing voice that, when used optimally, made everything come to a halt. I recall the coat hangers and the glass drawers that always left me with bruises and cuts. I also recall the gold-coloured door handles. The wardrobe was of a heavy dark brown colour and was quite ornamental. I also remember coordinating my mother's mutely neutral, nude, and bright colours. Her clothes were always neatly ironed and stacked. This wardrobe constantly allowed my mind to escape into a place that echoed royalty and fairy-tale experiences, and it easily allowed me to get lost in my imagination.

When I look at the picture of this wardrobe, a host of childhood memories bubbles to the fore. I do not have only one vivid picture in my mind, but I recall a host of scenarios and they are constantly playing in my head. I am reminded of our four-room house that was situated in Umlazi Township. A township in South Africa is a residential suburb for predominantly Black people. These areas were developed and were officially designated for Black occupation by apartheid legislation. I have a picture in my mind of informal settlements that encircled our home and avocado and peach trees. We would play detective and watch people who tried to steal fruit from our trees. It was fascinating and entertaining, and we would sing "Aphela amape" (a song in IsiZulu that means that there will soon be no more peaches). I also recall seeing malnourished children and children walking around with ragged and worn-out clothes and who had very little.

Yes, the photograph of the wardrobe evokes many memories. I remember homes with no electricity and families using only candlelight, and the tranquil and soothing voices of church members who sang harmoniously whenever there was a death or a sick person in the community. This is where I learned to sympathise with other people and to feel compassion and humility.

One of the most profound memories this picture evokes is my fretful search for money in my mother's purse. When she had left her purse carelessly on the kitchen counter, this signalled a perfect opportunity to snaffle some money for an ice lolly. My friends were outside enjoying their ice lollies, and I recall looking at one of them and desperately wanting one too. My friends refused to share theirs with me, and I knew if I asked my mom, she would say no, especially given that I had heard my parents discussing their finances and wondering how they could make ends meet. Of course, this did not mean much to me because I was too young to comprehend the gravity of the situation. I just wanted an ice lolly. The pleasure of sin was knocking on my mind's door, and I knew I had to open the door to this opportunity. I had to make a choice: surrender to my greed and be socially in line and relate to my friends, or listen to the voice of discipline that said it would be wrong to take the money. So, I fed my gluttony and decided to steal from my mother's purse. I bought a raspberry-flavoured ice lolly. It was juicy and succulent with a sweet, delicate flavour and a pleasant aroma. When I realised that it had melted and dripped onto my lemon-coloured t-shirt, the earth resounded with thunder because I would have a lot of explaining to do when I got home. How did I manage to stain my top? Where did I buy the ice lolly? And who gave me the money? I knew I had put myself in deep trouble. I entered the house nervously and walked down the passage straight to my room.

My mother gave me an unfathomable look when I entered the house, but I knew she was disappointed and broken-hearted. In a matter of seconds, my world came crashing down, and my selfish action defeated me. My mother was fuming, and I knew I had to confess because my crimson mouth and dirty t-shirt told the story. My parents used this opportunity to impress on me that I was the eldest and needed to set a good example for my younger siblings. But worst of all, they expressed their disappointment in me. I was ordered to fetch a belt from the wardrobe. I knew I had to face the consequences of my actions.

On that day, the wardrobe was not only my magical space, but it also became my hiding place—a place of safety and security. I would hide in the wardrobe when I was overwhelmed by my emotions and felt defeated by issues I could not control. This was where I talked to myself and where my sense of freedom surged. I learned several values that day: to be patient, to practise self-control, to control my desires, to know my boundaries, and to respect the feelings and emotions of others. Today, I know that these are potent values that I would like to instil in the learners in my classroom.

I realise that a hiding place is a place of emotional safety and security. I thus imagine that my learners would also like to be in a space where they feel emotionally safe and secure. I think writing about this journey of self-discovery provided me with an opportunity to heal and to understand my own emotions. When we speak of our life experiences, I realise that we explore our weaknesses and find our inner strength. We also remind ourselves of our power, which gives birth to new perspectives. My hiding place allowed me to live in an imaginary world, think freely, be emancipated from my emotional struggles, and explore different spaces. It was a safe space that I treasured as my sanctuary.

Khulekani's Narrative of His Personal History: My Sister's Positive Influence on Me

I remember that one of my older sisters, who was a primary school teacher, shared a story of buffaloes while we were sitting under a tree one day in the summer holidays. My sister told me that I should treat my learners the same way the buffalo family conducts itself in the wild.

This is how my sister related the story of the buffalo family:

Buffaloes are social animals and live in groups called herds. Buffaloes are very protective of one another and always take care of the sick and old members of the herd, shielding them from predators. The protection of the species allows for weak individuals, such as the blind or three-legged members, to survive. They always follow the leader, for the herd relies on him for guidance and protection. If one individual buffalo is attacked, the entire herd will defend it. When chased by predators, a herd sticks close together and makes it hard for the predator to pick one member. Buffaloes also exhibit a symbiotic association with birds, such as ox-peckers that pick off and eat lice, ticks, fleas, and other parasites that the buffalo may be infested with. The birds get food, and the buffaloes get cleaned up.

I related this story to the kind of classroom climate I longed for when I became a teacher. The wild, the habitat of the buffaloes, represented the vulnerability our learners face every day in the classroom environment. Learners learn everything about surviving in this “jungle.” They learn how to deal with behaviour, how to relate to fellow learners, how to focus on academic demands, and more. The herd of buffaloes is the learners from diverse walks of life who gather in the school community for one purpose: to learn. Just like buffaloes in the wild, learners do not only need to achieve academically, but they also learn how to accommodate one another, how to behave and follow the rules, how to take care of their peers, and how to help and embrace those who need help along the way.

For me, the pivotal part of the story is that the herd of buffaloes ensures that they follow the leader—an adult and wise buffalo—and keep the family a close-knit unit in the jungle. A leader buffalo makes certain that no buffalo goes astray, for they are then in danger of falling prey to wild cats. In the same way, as a leader of the learners in my classroom, I had to demonstrate leadership and ensure that my learners received my optimum support and guidance. Learners relied on me as a teacher to steer them in the correct direction by making each of them feel a valuable member of a positive school climate. Brown (2004) also stressed that attaining learners' cooperation requires a classroom environment where teachers address learners' cultural, ethnic, social, emotional, and cognitive needs.

As a novice teacher in 1995, this story made me realise that it was incumbent on me to ensure that each learner in my classroom received adequate attention. They all came from various home backgrounds and possessed different academic capabilities. I therefore looked forward to creating a classroom environment the following year that would resemble the life of buffaloes in the wild. I was more than prepared than ever to give my learners a platform to help them demonstrate their capabilities. At the same time, I acted as the leader buffalo by guiding, protecting, supporting, and leading them to become responsible citizens with excellent academic results.

I also embraced other metaphors associated with buffaloes. For instance, establishing a library in the corner of my class was just like the birds feeding on the insects on the back of a buffalo because this was going to have a positive effect on my learners. I adopted the idea of having a “corner library” from a Department of Basic Education English workshop in 1994. When I recalled this, I realised that I could advise the novice teachers that a collection of newspapers, magazines, and books in a corner library in each classroom could significantly promote a culture of reading among their learners. I anticipated that the learners would then be exposed to various bits of information that they would gather by reading different genres and sources.

I had an elder sister who would tell me stories about her learners and school, which made me develop a love of teaching. It also gave me tips about managing my learners and establishing cordial working relationships with my colleagues.

Nontuthuko’s Narrative of Her Personal History: Something To Ease Our Minds—Craftwork

Looking back, I recall that primary school was not an exciting place for me because we had to follow the teachers’ predetermined instructions. School meant sitting at your desk, writing, reading, and listening, and the same routine was observed every day. However, while the other classes were busy reading and writing, the weekly craftwork period brought so much joy to me. I remember how craftwork on Wednesday afternoons was appreciated by almost everyone because we would get a break from reading and writing.

Figure 2 depicts a mat like the ones we wove in primary school craftwork lessons. The mat shown is made of different coloured plastic bags; we believed blending different plastic colours would make our mats look more attractive. Craftwork was an activity that was part of the schoolwork programme. In primary school, craftwork was valued and handwork was promoted, so we allocated time to these activities. Usually, we would make doormats and small baskets. Craftwork was gender-based given that girls made doormats while the boys had to do woodwork.

Figure 2

Photograph of a Colourful Mat Nontuthuko Made



The craftwork was assessed based on learners' creativity; for example, whether it was attractive in design and use of colour. We used to collect grass from the field and plastic items for our craft.

I recall going outside to a nearby field where we would cut grass to make mats. After collecting enough grass, we would find shelter and sit under a tree to weave our mats until school ended. I think craftwork was the only thing I did myself given that I created it from scratch and finished it myself. I believe I did my craftwork with confidence and without fear of being judged or feeling the fear of being labelled by my teacher and laughed at by classmates.

Having the opportunity to do craftwork made us feel more positive about school. Craftwork gave hope to most learners who were struggling academically because we could trust ourselves to do something on our own. Thus, I believe it encouraged independence and developed our creativity, focus, and concentration. It promoted confidence and cheerfulness about our efforts and achievements. It was not that craftwork was play per se, but it was the only classwork activity that allowed learners to be more involved and feel that the teachers valued our opinions.

Our teachers might not even have been aware of all that we gained from craftwork, or recognised the importance of those times for us. For example, I do not remember any teacher guiding us on how to weave a doormat, but traditional know-how was passed down to us by our older sisters. So it seems to me that many teachers valued craftwork less. Our teachers never seemed to emphasise that we should work on craftwork independently or saw to it that we were not getting help from others. They only appeared to concern themselves about the result—that is, whether the craftwork was completed or not.

I associate craftwork with play because it was a time when we felt free and comfortable. We felt no pressure compared to other subjects, in which we needed to follow the teachers' instructions and meet their expectations. We had opportunities to bring forward our ideas and creativity without the teachers' influence on the craftwork. I think this was because teachers were only supervising and guiding us to make sure that we were working or making progress, and it was only once in a while that the teacher would ask us to bring our craftwork in to view our progress. Hence, that gave us the freedom to initiate and create our crafts to our satisfaction. I believe craftwork was of enormous value to us and helped us grow and develop emotionally, socially, and intellectually. It gave us the chance to work in teams, share ideas, be creative, negotiate, solve problems on our own and, most of all, to help and respect each other and to tolerate each other when we had different opinions. Craftwork helped us because we could relate to one another. It developed a sense of caring, even though we had competition when sometimes we looked to see who made the most beautiful craftwork. Everyone wanted their craftwork to be the best, so we made sure that we tried, by all means, to make ours look different from those of others, although we also taught and helped each other design the best craftwork.

Looking at craftwork period (see Figure 2) gave me a sense of belonging because I felt comfortable, warm, relaxed, and happy. It also allowed me to express myself because it enabled me to create and implement my ideas to make my craft look attractive. Likewise, I believe learners' talents and skills should be appreciated. I think my teaching and learning should encourage learners' creativity.

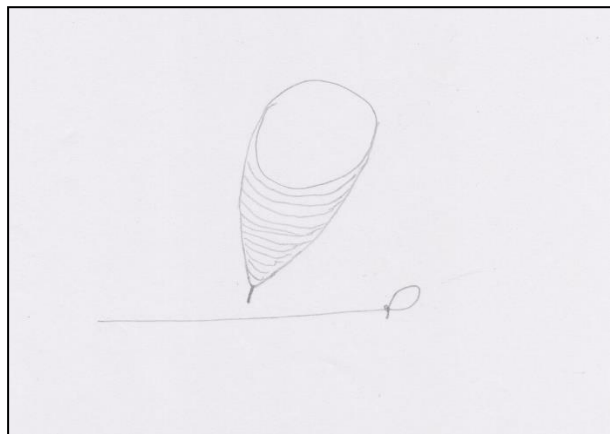
Siphiwe's Narrative of His Personal History: Dangerous Toys

Playing with a spinning top (Figure 3) was a favourite activity among boys during my childhood. Most boys enjoyed playing with this toy because most owned one. The negative thing about this game was that, to participate, you had to have a top. A spinning top was a cone-shaped piece of wood with a

sharp steel point at the bottom. It was coated with varnish for a smooth finish. It was not big; it could fit in the palm of a hand. It required a string of about 30 to 50 centimetres, which we made ourselves. The top was designed to spin rapidly upright on its axis with its point on the ground.

Figure 4

“Dangerous Toys”: Memory Drawing of a Spinning Top Used by Boys



This toy was sold at nearby shops in the local area, and they made a lot of money out of it. Every one of us, as boys, saved the little funds we carried from home to buy treats to own a spinning top. “Toppies,” as we called them, were small in size and we therefore brought them to school. However, they were prohibited on the school premises because of the danger they posed. We hid them in our school bags and took them out during lunchtime. Teachers confiscated the tops if they were found in your possession, and you were also harshly disciplined through corporal punishment. As an adult, I can now see that banning these toys was meant to be in the best interest and safety of the learners. If someone was mistakenly hit by a toppie, it could leave a lifetime scar on a foot. Children’s culture played a role in this artefact because we all wanted to participate in the game and have friends who owned toppies.

To enjoy playing with a spinning top one required a group of friends or participants with sets of strings and toppies. This reminds me of my primary school friends who even taught me how to make homemade toppies, which was extremely dangerous because we made the point using iron nails. I recall how the group would stand in a circle. We would draw a circle on the ground, and we all had to start by spinning our toppies and catching them, using strings to pull them up. The last person to pick up his spinning top would be the first to leave it in the centre of the circle drawn on the ground for other participants to use their toppies to hit and damage it while it lay there. We would hit it hard so that the sharp point would leave a scratch mark or even and break it. It was such an outstanding achievement to crack or break a spinning top belonging to another competitor. Sometimes we would miss hitting the toppie and it would accidentally hit a person's foot, and that was when the trouble began with teachers.

Looking back, I can see how we developed friendships with other participants. Social interaction improved as we shared ideas on surviving painful situations and protecting our belongings. Playing toppies taught me about surviving difficult times in life because sometimes our spinning tops got scratched or were broken beyond repair. Playing toppies also required precision not to miss the target, and we had to act or move very fast.

I remember I bought a new toppie with the money that I had saved for quite a long time. It was on a weekend when I got it. I longed for Monday and I felt that time was so slow before I would get to

school. When Monday came, I was very excited and wanted to show the top to my friends. During lunch recess, we went to play spinning tops on the sports field. When it was my turn to leave my toppie in the centre of the circle, I was very nervous because I was so attached to it. It was brand new. I did not want any scratches on it because it looked so good. Every member of the circle started to hit my toppie hard. However, most of them could not dent it because it was slippery because of its varnish. At last, one boy hit it with his homemade toppie—precisely in the centre and it cracked wide open. They all laughed at me and I was speechless. My heart was bleeding deep inside, and I was fuming with anger and frustration because the toppie was new.

I learned from this memory that learners gain a sense of pride when they play and win popular culture games. Victory is important for learners who participate in such activities. This shows that teachers need to consider the experiences learners have when they play with their precious objects, such as toppies. And when they write creatively, it is essential to give them a chance to write about such experiences. Taking part in popular cultural activities can also boost children's confidence and ignite in them an intrinsic sense of motivation.

Discoveries: What We Have Learned

When we revisited our narratives collectively, a key insight that emerged was the need to establish inclusive classrooms, and acknowledge teacher practice through shared knowledge and teacher–learner diversity and inclusive classroom engagement. We also learned that learning is stimulated when we revisit and rectify our past learning occurrences as learners to enhance and embrace an accommodative teacher–learner relationship. Another lesson is that our childhood emotions were important then and are still important now.

We acknowledge that learning is not an individual journey but that learning communities are created along the way. Collaboration in both the learning and teaching processes are therefore pivotal inside and outside the classroom. This understanding was enhanced by the memory work in which we engaged as a research method, and we now realise that the outcomes will equip us with the skills to create a nurturing classroom environment. Our memories allowed us to recall our childhood experiences and to remember how and what we had learned, and this enriched our collaborative writing experiences as well. Samaras (2011) argued that meaningful teacher learning occurs through mutual effort. Thus, re-remembering the past and sharing the knowledge we acquired has facilitated our mutual understandings that now enrich our teaching practices.

Moreover, when we collaboratively revisited the narratives that we had explored individually earlier, we were able to identify similar patterns and findings that linked our respective studies. We employed thematic data analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and arrived at insightful outcomes that we share in this paper. As explained by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis encompasses a learning process based on experiences that reveal patterns, similarities, and consistencies or inconsistencies that result in various outcomes and lead to clear conclusions. We identified key themes by exploring the patterns that emerged as we read through and discussed the narratives. Three themes emerged from our memory work and are discussed in turn, below.

Theme 1: Memory Work Can Help Teachers Improve Their Teaching Practice

Our memory work enabled us to comprehend the nature of collaborative interactions. Memory work helps teachers to reflect on their own early learning to accelerate and improve teacher practice. Witt-Löw (2019, p. 365) observed that memory work can “facilitate learning through the joy of gaining new insights and through following one's interests.” We established that teachers could learn from their

past learning experiences to forge a more profound understanding of how learning occurs. This is illustrated by Ntokozo's comments:

I think writing about this journey of self-discovery provided me with an opportunity to heal and to understand my own emotions. When we speak of our life experiences, I realise that we explore our weaknesses and find our inner strength. We also remind ourselves of our power, which gives birth to new perspectives.

Through memory work, our views on school are influenced by memories of our own learning experiences. Moreover, memory work can help to optimise positive teacher–learner engagement and minimise making the mistakes of our former teachers. This is evident in the following excerpt from Khulekani's narrative:

This story made me realise that it is incumbent on me to ensure that each learner in my classroom received adequate attention. They all came from various home backgrounds and possessed different academic capabilities. I therefore looked forward to creating a classroom environment the following year that would resemble the life of buffaloes in the wild. I was more prepared than ever to give my learners a platform to help them demonstrate their capabilities. At the same time, I acted as the leader buffalo by guiding, protecting, supporting, and leading them to become responsible citizen with excellent academic results.

Memory work can help improve teachers' diverse methodological engagement with learners. Memory work thus aided us as researchers and teachers to understand the value of relationship reparation and to value the lesson we learned that success is the order of the day when learning happens through play. By remembering and comparing our experiences, we could identify key ideas that will serve as a guide, now and in the future, on how to improve our own teaching practice. This illustration by Nontuthuko is the indication that embarking on diverse teaching strategies can enhance learner academic engagement and critical thinking abilities:

I associate craftwork with play because it was where we felt free and comfortable. We felt no pressure compared to other subjects, in which we needed to follow the teachers' instructions and meet their expectations. We had few opportunities to bring forward our ideas and creativity without the teacher's influence on the craftwork. I think this was because teachers were only supervising and guiding us to make sure that we were working or making progress, and it was only once in a while that the teacher would ask us to bring our craftwork in to view our progress.

Memory work can thus be used as a tool to help teachers embark on a journey of discovery to achieve optimal social and educational understanding and skills. This journey should clearly not be undertaken alone because collaborative work and interaction among teachers is pivotal.

Theme 2: Memory Work Can Help Teachers Promote Emotional Value Systems for Teacher Learning

Using memory work as a self-study tool to recall key learning experiences can help to make one a better teacher. This process allows teachers to step into a space where they can reflect on their state of mind when they recall emotional experiences during their schooling days. When memory work becomes reflective, it aids teachers improve learner emotional stability because they will give them the necessary leeway to be themselves when they are confronted by and have to deal with issues. The following excerpt illustrates what Ntokozo learned about coping with her emotions:

I would hide in the wardrobe when I was overwhelmed by my emotions and felt defeated by issues I could not control. This is where I talked to myself and where my sense of freedom surged. I learned values that day: to be patient, to practise self-control, to control my desires, to know my boundaries, and also to respect the feelings and emotions of others.

Teachers must ensure that they deal with their emotional experiences to transfer that to the learners if they want teaching and learning to continue with few mishaps. Preparing to support and enhance an emotional value system is equal to preparing for a lesson. For instance, memory work now allows Khulekani to look forward to creating a classroom where minimal emotional issues will disrupt the teaching and learning processes:

Learners learn everything about surviving in the “jungle.” They learn how to deal with behaviour, how to relate to fellow learners, how to focus on academic demands, and more. . . . Just like buffaloes in the wild, learners do not only need to achieve academically, but they also learn to accommodate one another, how to behave and follow the rules, how to take care of their peers, and how to help and embrace those who need help along the way.

Memory work undoubtedly elicits memories that remind teachers to reflect on their own emotional patterns and experiences. An important outcome of this process is that they become equipped with the knowledge to nurture their learners' emotions when they engage in interactive learning activities in the classroom environment.

Theme 3: The Outcomes of Memory Work Can Help Enact Children's Popular Culture in Teaching

Teachers' use of memory work can serve as a catalyst for learning in the modern classroom. Teachers are pivotal in cultivating learner popular culture in their classrooms that can encourage active and interactive learning. The teacher thinking capability can be enhanced through memory work by creating activities that can stimulate learners to be independent thinkers and take charge of their own learning. Kwadwo and Danso (2018) argued that learning becomes profound when learners craft and shape their own knowledge. Sipiwe's understanding of this notion is as follows:

Victory is important for learners who participate in such activities. This shows that teachers need to consider the experiences learners have when they play with their precious objects, such as toppies. And when they write creatively, it is essential to give them a chance to write about such experiences. Taking part in popular cultural activities could also boost children's confidence and ignite in them an intrinsic sense of motivation.

The use of memory work could help teachers to establish what works for learners in the classroom environment and what does not. Teachers should thus balance their teaching strategies and the tasks they prepare for learners to perform. Learners' independent thinking skills could also be encouraged and heightened if teachers reflect on what worked for them during their schooling years. The following is Nontuthuko's explanation of the value of being allowed to express oneself freely:

The craftwork period gave me a sense of belonging because I felt comfortable, warm, relaxed, and happy. It also allowed me to express myself because it enabled me to create and implement my ideas on making my craft look attractive. Likewise, I believe learners' talents and skills should be appreciated. This will motivate them to work hard towards their dreams. I think my teaching and learning should encourage learners' creativity.

According to Ntokozo, teachers should unearth diverse spaces to think independently so as to encourage and grant learners leeway to always find suitable spaces to think and believe in their capabilities. This excerpt illustrates this view:

We also remind ourselves of our power, which gives birth to new perspectives. My hiding place allowed me to live in an imaginary world, think freely, be emancipated from my emotional struggles, and explore different spaces.

Memory work may thus serve as an essential tool for teachers to blend their teaching prowess with their learners' prior knowledge and skills in order to ultimately benefit the learners.

Conclusion

As self-study researchers, we understand that our past experiences have the power to shape our teaching practices now and in the future. Although these experiences occur both inside and outside the classroom, the principles that we endorse remain the same: collaborative and interactive teaching and learning, and acknowledging our own earlier learning and background. Based on the understandings we gained from our respective self-study research projects and our subsequent collaboration, we shall continue to encourage our peers to expand their pedagogy through self-study.

Furthermore, engaging in a self-study requires a deep sense of introspection and self-analysis. Thus, it could be challenging to wear two hats: one of being a participant, and the other of being a researcher. We were guided by the elements of self-study as outlined: self-initiated and focused, improvement aimed, interactive and mainly qualitative methods (LaBoskey, 2004). We as critical friends collaboratively worked together, inspired by how our memories could be used to improve our teaching experience and practice. The study illuminates the value of positioning children's voices in our classrooms and paying careful attention to daily encounters, experiences, and challenges.

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