



# Playful pedagogy as a tool through memory work to enhance professional learning and teaching practice

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## Abstract

Memory-work is inevitable in any study that uses participants to reflect on their past so the research strategies we used in the study, on which this paper is based, helped us to recall and reflect on our experiences as primary school learners. In this article, we explore memory-work as a self-study approach to educational research that calls on the distinctive personal memories of three South African primary school teachers. The memories we share are positioned in stories as we reminisce on some childhood and adolescent encounters and our reflections expose what we learned from these experiences as narrated in pertinent excerpts. We adopted sociocultural theory since we understand that learners' actions take place in sociocultural settings. This theory allows individuals to understand their learning as being embedded in social experiences. The key notion we discuss is that play enhances learning since it allows children and young people to solve problems, make decisions, and interact as they discuss their ideas. Our voices therefore unite in dialogue, and we reveal our reciprocal learning as we narrate and reflect on our personal memories. Our writing, which is both reflective and questioning as we explore these memories, emphasises the pedagogic meanings we attach to some childhood and adolescent encounters, particularly those that were embedded in childhood culture. Furthermore, our analyses of our voices reveal various emerging perceptions that have strengthened our learning and teaching as educational practitioners. Additionally, the memory-work in which we engaged allowed us to position ourselves in a grateful yet critical position to better understand our past experiences and how these had aided both our educational and social change. In this paper, we aim to promote the use of playful pedagogy for individual growth. It is envisaged that other teachers could foster the sociocultural advancement of learners through a playful pedagogical context.

**Keywords:** child and youth culture, self-study research, memory work, dialogue, playful pedagogy

## Setting the scene

In this article, we underscore the significance of using memory-work in modern-day teacher-learner engagement as a foundation for learning through play. Memory-work is underpinned by the premise that memories play a fundamental role in individual and collective patterns of thought and actions and that we can consciously work with memory to become aware of, and intervene creatively in, these patterns (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2012). As three South African postgraduate primary school teachers, we embarked on memory-work inquiry to explore playful pedagogy and thus broaden our learning and professional practice with the aim of contributing to our learners' ability to learn through play. Play is an essential requirement for all growing children, and they are entitled to the opportunities to learn in this manner (Storli & Hansen Sandseter, 2019). It is in this context that the first author, Khulekani,<sup>1</sup> focused his research on the role of positive behavioural support in the classroom (see Pillay and Pithouse Morgan, 2016). As a science teacher, Khulekani scrutinised his teaching practice by using memory-work to reflect on learning processes, and he argued that memory work can lead to personal development and professional and social transformation. Khulekani recalled that learning occurred when his learners were able to grasp scientific concepts without struggling after he had integrated playful pedagogy into the science classroom.

The other two co-authors of this paper encountered similar experiences. The cornerstone of Nontuthuko's research was also children's ability to learn through playful pedagogy. As a Grade 1 classroom practitioner, she became conscious of her learners' shortness of concentration span, and she engaged in memory-work to help them. In this process, she rediscovered what it had been that had amused her as a Foundation Phase learner, and she recalled how she and other learners had learned mathematical skills and concepts through the games they had played during break time. She then applied what she had learned based on these memories and these newly acquired insights almost magically improved her teaching prowess. She now embraces the notion that memory work serves as a point of departure for understanding the productivity that can be gained by adopting an array of teaching methodologies that are associated with play, which is a notion that Mitchell et al. (2020) have wholeheartedly supported.

Ntokozo's research focused on social and emotional learning, and she employed memory-work as her research methodology of choice. She endeavoured to improve her teaching practice by engaging Grade 4 learners in storytelling lessons that focused on play. The outcomes of her memory-work consequently aided her in improving her teaching since storytelling and play-acting cultivated her learners' imaginations and enhanced their learning. She understands that memory-work is underpinned by the premise that memories play a fundamental role in habitual patterns of thought and action and that the classroom practitioner can work consciously with memory to engage creatively with these patterns for future change, as proposed by Pillay and Pithouse Morgan (2016). Ntokozo therefore enhanced children's learning by guiding them to connect their classroom activities to stories that resonated with their cultural and environmental experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> We use our first names intentionally.

## Adopting a narrative approach to learning

The narratives we offer in this paper reveal how our recalled experiences facilitated our personal and professional learning, a notion strongly endorsed by Pithouse-Morgan et al. (2012). Our recollection of learning activities from our past experience of playful pedagogy prompted us to opt for memory work as a method suitable for this paper since we had to evoke memories of playful learning that could play a key role in our contemporary teaching practice. The key research questions to which we responded were:

In what ways do our memories of childhood games and play inform our understanding of professional learning?

Have the outcomes of our reflections on our childhood games improved our teaching practices?

These questions were the entry point for our self-study research because they allowed us to recall and then reflect on various complex and powerful childhood encounters. Learning from these childhood encounters then shaped our respective teaching practices as adults.

The narratives we offer focus on our memories of play and our reflections illuminate how these games led to our improved teaching methodologies and our learners' enhanced ability to learn. To respond to the research questions, we engaged in dialogue to reflect critically on our childhood memories. This was a process that allowed us to explore our beliefs, values, and learnings. The questions that were posed during our dialogical interactions flowed naturally during the sessions when we discussed our respective stories. The personal narratives we discuss in this paper illustrate our experiences, challenges, and perceptions that were generated through play. They also elucidate how teachers can create play activities for children to enable them to learn through these experiences. We also demonstrate that playful pedagogy could either be child initiated or teacher guided. Our initial reflections are consolidated to illustrate our understanding of how significant play is in children's holistic development.

## Memory work as a self-study method

The self-study research methodology allows teachers to engage in introspection about their teaching practice so that they may enhance their growth as classroom practitioners (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Our understanding is that it is vital for teachers to develop themselves if they wish to improve upon their teaching practice. This process involves discovery and reflection so that new methods and techniques may emerge that will improve and transform their practices and their learners' ability to learn.

To better understand the role of playful pedagogy in children's learning and development, we recalled and explored memories of the games we played as children. The memory-work methodology enabled us reflect on the learning scenarios that had emerged through play. Onyx and Small (2001) pointed out that memory work includes individual and group enquiry

of written memories, while Mitchell et al. (2013) have maintained that memory-work may be used as a pivotal driver of professional learning since it is a valuable method that researchers as classroom practitioners may use to enhance their understanding of their learners' world. Therefore, the memory-work we engaged in was used to recall pertinent childhood and adolescent encounters and perceptions, and we incorporate these findings into our discussion on how play can enhance learning. We offer these findings since they illustrate how we learned from our own past experiences how to develop and employ playful pedagogy in our teaching practice.

In essence, the memory-work we engaged in enabled us to revisit the past, thereby deepening our understanding of play as a tool for teaching and learning.

## Playful pedagogy

It has been well documented that playful pedagogy increases learners' chances to interact with their environment and that it assists them in developing their knowledge and skills. For instance, Connery et al. (2010) argued that children who play discover the meaning of their situation and construct ways of seeing the world. For Neha and Rule (2018, p. 3), "Children learn by watching and imitating situations around them, and it is learning through trial and error that enhances their cognitive abilities." This means that the best way for children to learn is to create their own safe spaces in which they imitate and role-play what they have observed in daily social contexts. These games help children to engage gradually with their world and to fit in as they try out or perform different tasks by playing games that are unconsciously associated with social norms. For example, playing a game with marbles, stones, or bottle caps helps to teach learners to count and sort data. Phewa (2021) averred that pretence games allow children to role-play their current and future responsibilities, to access and understand various societal and cultural practices in a safe space, and to understand the world in which they live. Therefore, play is a tool that prepares children to become social beings who are able to deal with the challenging circumstances or experiences they encounter every day.

Preziosa (2017, p. 9) maintained that play "paves the way for learning", while McFarland and Laird (2018) posited that play allows children to challenge themselves, test their abilities, and learn not to make risky decisions that might harm them physically and emotionally.

Dramatising stories that are read in class is one kind of playful learning that helps learners engage their emotions to better understand the story. Children often participate voluntarily in games with a clear understanding of the nature of the particular game and they accept willingly the challenge, often with the positive mindset that they will win the game or, if they do not win, they can try again. While playing, learners gain self-confidence and they learn quickly to get along with other children of their own age as well as those who are older or younger. Connery et al. (2010) declared that play develops children's ability to be critical flexible thinkers who are capable of acting creatively in a rapidly changing world. Play allows children to adjust to different situations since it boosts their social skills to enable them to fit into a group. Teachers are therefore encouraged to allow children to play and work

in groups in the classroom since playful learning accords them various opportunities to solve problems, make their own decisions, interact with others, and share their ideas. In our view, play guides children to internalise and develop essential skills that will help them become worthy and holistically developed citizens of the world in which they will one day live and work as adults. Playful pedagogy broadens our learning as teachers since we learn to value learners' knowledge and understand the importance of a learner-centred approach.

## The sociocultural theoretical framework

In framing our thinking, we adopted the tenets of the sociocultural theory to understand how our respective communities had contributed to our learning and how our diverse life experiences had enhanced our perspectives on our positioning in the world. This theory also guided our understanding that self-study research is paradoxically both personal and interpersonal since it explains that knowledge grows and practice improves when we collaborate with and learn from others (Samaras & Freese, 2006). With reference to the sociocultural perspective on learning, Kelly (2006) explained that learners bring conceptual resources to the classroom based on or adapted from their cultural backgrounds and the beliefs they have acquired before attending school and also explained that learning can be improved when resources are provided in the classroom that reflect and build on learners' conceptual resources. Therefore, teachers who plan their pedagogy will ensure purposefully that various teaching resources and strategies are used to give recognition to cultural learning and diversity in their classrooms.

According to McMurtry (2015, p. 1), "Most human cognitive skills originate from social interactions, practices, and tools." We concur since our reflections based on our respective and collaborative self-study endeavours have demonstrated that learning occurs through social interaction and communication among learners and their parents, family members, fellow learners, friends, and neighbours, and even strangers whom they encounter in their social world, such as shopkeepers. As classroom practitioners, we are always hopeful that our learners will embrace the need for social interaction so we activate and simulate such activities and play games in the classroom. We share our accounts of our successful memory-work enthusiastically by referring to some pertinent childhood memories of sociocultural experiences in a variety of spaces that enhanced our learning, with specific emphasis on the games that we used to play. All these narratives are presented in the first person to enhance their authenticity and give the experiences immediacy.

**Khulekani's memory work: Evocative memories of my senior primary school teacher (adapted from Luthuli, 2020)**

### *Being inspired through play*

My earliest memories of school take me back to my senior primary school which was approximately three kilometres from my junior primary school. The former enrolled learners from standards 3 to 5 (currently grades 5 to 7). The latter enrolled only African learners from the township where the school was located. I did my standard 5 (grade 7) in the early 1980s.

The school had African teachers only, both male and female. The senior primary school was more significant than my junior primary school. Each standard had three classes. The school had a playground and a large piece of land available for gardening. Initially, I was overwhelmed by the number of subjects offered in the senior primary school. The junior primary school had offered four subjects: IsiZulu; English; Afrikaans; and Health Education, but in senior primary school two more subjects were offered, namely General Science and Social Studies. Social Studies was divided into History and Geography, while in General Science we studied mainly plants and animals.

I remember the first male teacher who taught me General Science in Grade 7. I recall that I was intimidated by his stature and that he could teach a subject that was still foreign to me. Mr Ncapai<sup>2</sup> employed diverse methodologies in teaching General Science. He would introduce most topics in a funny, playful way. For example, when dealing with the animal kingdom, Mr Ncapai would make us choose, as a group, the animal we would like to become. He would then give us time to find more facts about that animal. We would do research on the class to which they belonged, their nutrition and characteristic behaviour, and even the way they communicated. Sometimes, I would feel like I was not learning at all. I remember when Mr Ncapai brought several shoe boxes to class, some containing pictures of various plants and some of different animal species. He would have us sit in groups, give each group a box, and instruct us to sort the images from the box into those with similar characteristics. I remember Mr Ncapai giving my group a box full of pictures of animals. Our point of departure was to group the animals living on land and those living in water. We worked out that some animals, like the crocodile, lived on both land and in water. Doing this activity felt more like playing a game than being engaged in learning. I remember how there would be healthy quarrels and debates, and laughter among group members every time we were sorting animals into their appropriate groups.

It was fun to sort the animals into groups such as those with six legs, five or more pairs of legs, two pairs of wings, antennae, two pairs of antennae, and so on. I developed a love for General Science because Mr Ncapai would make every lesson fun. I remember when he encouraged us all to bring either a potato, a tomato, an onion, a bean seed, a pumpkin, and/or cobs of maize to school. We also had to bring glass jars or fish or baked bean tins to suspend the potato or the flat end of the onion using match sticks, just touching the water beneath it. It was fascinating to observe the roots growing and the shoots developing into leaves. Some of these plants were placed in a dark part of the classroom, and some were exposed to sunlight. It was intriguing to observe how sunlight played a central role in producing food. When they were big enough, Mr Ncapai would then take us to the school garden to plant these growing vegetables. We would take turns watering the rows of crops until they were ready for harvesting.

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<sup>2</sup> This is a pseudonym.

**Figure 1:**

Memory photograph: Group gardens that enhanced learning in primary school

*Emulating a successful teacher*

I visited my former senior primary school in November 2015. I photographed the school garden [Figure 1] because it reminded me of how gardening, as part of the explanation and presentation of lessons, had instilled a sense of pride in me when our crops grew. I remember the care, dedication, precision, discipline, and love I used to exhibit whenever I was working in the garden with my group mates to produce crops and to learn more about the importance of science in our lives. My group mates and I would weed the garden and protect the seedlings by covering them with dry grass and tomato sacks. We would do this with care and great zeal as a team. Performing someone else's job if that person was absent from school was a task we all undertook. Looking back, I realise how the diverse methods of learning about science made me love the subject and taught me to work harmoniously with others, to value their contributions and input, and to accept criticism without feeling disgruntled.

Every time I observed the seedlings developing into fully-grown crops and food for human consumption, I imagined myself as a teacher doing great things selflessly for my future learners to see a smile on their faces, just as Mr. Ncapai had done for me during his lessons. I remember how I always imagined myself as a teacher who would treat learners in a fair and just manner. Over and above that, this memory-work made me realise that I had emulated my science teacher by planning my own science lessons so that learners would find them fun and exciting.

**Khulekani's Reflection**

Upon reflection, I realise that much of my learning happened spontaneously during my experiences as a learner. By evoking vivid memories of these experiences, I was stimulated to adopt new teaching practices, and I wish to encourage teachers to do the same by engaging their learners in vigorous play-based learning. My reflections on my experiences as a learner-gardener are significant since I realise now that what I gained through playful pedagogy has always aided me in refining my teaching practice. For example, when I reflect on a particular

lesson, I take what worked for my learners and then modify the aspects that were challenging to ease their learning.

I acknowledge that children learn best in environments that provide meaningful contexts for learning and that offer diverse choices and possibilities for following their interests (see Storli & Sandster, 2018). For example, I sometimes bring puzzles to my English lesson for my grade 6 class. Just before we get to the lesson, I allow the learners to resolve puzzles in groups that require them to build words. This helps them to build up a good vocabulary. Reflecting on my own and other people's experiences has also helped me to put my learners at the centre always when I prepare for a lesson. In this way, the focus is always directed at what the learners should be engaged in so that they will gain knowledge and make meaning of their learning through play. Because the lesson is centred around the learners, I enable them to remember what they have learned without any hassles.

Nontuthuko's unique encounter with a skipping rope (adapted from Phewa, 2020).

#### *A joyful game*

My school was located in a semi-rural setting and was attended by African children only. The school lacked basic resources such as a library and a laboratory as well as adequate textbooks. Looking back on that stage of my childhood, I am reminded that skipping rope was one of the most familiar games we used to play at primary school. The girls used to gather during recess and after school to play this game. Skipping rope was not determined by friendship since anyone could ask to join any group. If you found your peers playing, you would ask if you could join them, and we would play together. In that way, we learned to get along with many people, and it allowed us to learn about and understand people's personalities and their differences. This taught us tolerance. Understanding and accommodating people's differences is a vital skill that must be nurtured from an early age since it allows individuals to maintain good relationships with other people.

**Figure 2:**

Photograph of a skipping rope





A remarkable thing that I remember about the skipping rope game is that making a rope was competitive and everybody tried to create the perfect one. We took pride in making the best rope and would feel honoured when we were acknowledged for this skill by our friends. Making a skipping rope taught me lessons that have added value to my life. These include being passionate and cautious since making the best rope required extra care to ensure that it was better than those of others, and another lesson was to accept this challenge.

Playing was the best time for me to relax, and it was the only time I did not worry about anything like homework and domestic chores. This skipping rope reminded me that play can be a valuable tool for learning.

Moreover, I think skipping cultivated social skills that moulded our characters as well as our academic skills and thus helped us to improve our schoolwork. For example, I learned to interact socially, be creative, and control my emotions. For example, we learned about respecting the game's rules, such as taking turns. We also learned about handling bullies and tolerating others' negative attitudes. Moreover, playing with a skipping rope helped us to acquire mathematical and life skills as we learned about patterns, sequence, and flexibility. Moreover, we developed good motor skills and excellent hand-eye coordination. Skipping also encouraged us to learn how to count and to develop the ability to think strategically. Making a skipping rope also helped me develop valuable aptitudes for social life since, when we experienced problems, we learned to solve them.

#### *Nontuthuko's reflection*

Playing games taught us to be creative and to make alternative decisions to deal with different situations. I understand, therefore, that children who play learn to make their own decisions and that teaching through playful pedagogy will enable learners to find various techniques to solve problems rather than relying on the teacher's problem-solving methods. For example, I remember when I was teaching Grade one, I would bring a skipping rope to introduce new number tables. As they played the game, they would count in twos or fives so it was always easy for them to grasp numbers. Sluss (2005) explained that Vygotsky viewed play as advantageous for developing a higher level of reasoning and thinking. I understand that play gives learners a sense of freedom, allows them to take control of their situation, and to make decisions about an activity in which they are engaged.

It is easy to use the same teaching method for different groups of learners over several years and not consider whether your teaching holds any value for your learners. However, as an educator of young learners, I must continue to be innovative. We often forget that our teaching must be allowed to evolve. I know that it is vital to develop my knowledge and skills as I need to equip myself continually with a better understanding of my learners. Self-study methodology allowed me to assess my teaching and to find those gaps that I need to fill to improve my practice.

## Ntokozo's narrative: Unforgettable moments in the garden

### *Fantasy and fun*

My school was in a metropolitan suburb with learners coming from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. I did my primary school years in the mid-1990s. As I focus on my narrative, the smell of wet paint always reminds me of the long summer days I played in the garden. On these days the sun blazed on the school pool and I would run while desperately competing with my shadow. I remember admiring the school garden whose lush vegetation was complemented by the presence of birds. After brain-draining sessions in the classroom, my classmates and I went outside quickly to play in the garden. We would run into the shade of the nearest tree and boast about who had the most prominent tree. As children, we saw these giant, aged, leafy trees as the homes of our dynasties, and, naturally, we played that we were kings and queens of this world.

In 2016, I took this photograph of the school garden [Figure 4], and it reminds me of the many unforgettable moments I experienced as a learner in the garden, such as running and trying to catch a butterfly delicately or spotting brightly coloured and furry caterpillars. I would admire the chirping birds, the bustling pigeons, and the buzzing of bees while birds flew around and cooled off in the garden pond. During our daily lessons in the garden, it felt as if we were playing school. The garden was a place that glorified nature and I could not help but admire the lovely plants, flowers, and deep-rooted trees that only became stronger with age. I remember how we appreciated completing several activities under the maduna trees, even though we were fearful and cautious as we were worried that the purple maduna berries might fall on us and stain our uniforms. This outdoor environment was utterly peaceful. I also felt closer to my peers in the garden and gained a sense of belonging there. In the garden we became a learning community that worked happily and collaboratively. The experiences that I gained by learning in another environment other than the classroom, stirred me to organise some lessons outside the classroom environment so as to capture my learners' imagination. I remember the majestic trees' shade and the quiet garden that became a place of refuge when we played hide and seek during lunch breaks. During this game we would choose to hide in or behind the giant trees or find a secluded, shady part of the garden while waiting to be found.

**Figure 4**

The school garden: A place where I found peace and sanctity



Looking back, I understand now that the garden taught me to be environmentally aware and to learn creatively. For example, the chirping of birds and the falling of dry leaves from the tree allowed me to consider what nature had to offer in terms of being creative. I remember that I would create poems from observing natural occurrences in the garden. I would later collect one or two fallen dry leaves and paste them at the back of the page on which I had written a poem. The garden taught us to appreciate nature's beauty and broaden our imaginations. I felt content and rejuvenated when I worked in the garden. I felt stimulated and perhaps it was because I had more space than in the classroom and the setting was more informal. This allowed us as children to have some liberty and we were interested to work in both groups and individually, especially if we were preparing for oral presentations or dialogues. I also found that this environment lightened the spirit of my Grade 5 teacher. He was more relaxed and could make us work in groups more easily without seeming overwhelmed. I felt emancipated and inspired in the garden.

Even when we were inside on rainy days, the smell of soil and the echoing sound of raindrops made me love nature even more. The teacher would make us sit on the carpet in a haphazard seating arrangement and he would engage us in class activities that were playful and fun. For example, I remember that my teacher gave us as many mathematical activities as it was possible to do in 40 minutes. I never realised that he was teaching us to think at speed and with accuracy in the face of positive competition. I also wanted desperately to express myself in writing, such as writing in my parents' old diaries, and I also wanted to spend more time reading, even if I read the most straightforward books or passages, and doing little drawings. When it rained, the sound of the raindrops on the school roof made me eager to listen attentively, acknowledge my surroundings, and feel a sense of comfort.

As I recall these memories, I hope that I shall be able to plant the idea in my learners' minds to enjoy nature and be aware of their surroundings. I hope we shall all learn how to preserve and conserve our natural settings so that they will enrich our memories in the future.

## Ntokozo's reflection

Recalling space and time imbues teachers with the ability to enlighten their present-day teaching practices while remembering events in their childhood that occurred both inside and outside the classroom, and this ability may be profoundly cathartic for researchers. Good memories of their childhood learning experiences encourage teachers not only to teach the way they were taught, but to adopt new teaching strategies to improve and promote their own and their learners' development (Pithouse-Morgan et al., 2019). I understand now that teaching and learning transcend the classroom, the curriculum, and even learning content, since true teaching is about how well we allow our learners to explore and how safe they feel when they engage in playful and imaginative learning activities. For example, in a mathematics lesson (on money), my Grade 4 learners usually enjoy playing store (tuck shop) and such play activity helps them to engage with and understand the value of money in relation to problem-solving, subtracting, and adding.

Being in the garden taught me to be versatile and ingenious and it nourished my peers' and my own childhood curiosity. It also made me realise that I am one with nature and that being surrounded by nature allowed me to tap into my creativity and to engage in critical questioning and conversation. By recalling the memories I made in the garden through memory-work based on humanistic theory, I was able to capture their essence and to better understand the human experiences and relationships that inform our teaching and learning. Therefore, playful pedagogy is a catalyst for restructuring ideas and perceptions and for working on our emotional states and social relationships to understand children's lived experiences and to learn from them.

Self-study methodology is an influential tool for transforming teaching since this research approach inspires teachers to articulate, observe, and redefine the essential values guiding teaching. Critical friends have assisted me in creating an optimistic atmosphere in my classroom and building healthy relationships with my learners and colleagues. They highlighted my blind spots, and this was a vital component of self-study in that it led to the awareness of the fundamental values in which personal teaching practices should be embedded. I saw this as a challenge that would be insightful for the depth of my research. Kelly (2006) stated that learning can be enhanced when resources are provided in the classroom that consider and build on learners' conceptual resources. To understand my teaching practice better, I needed to comprehend how learning unfolds in social contexts since learning is embedded in culture and experiences. I understood that our learning is related to our daily and past experiences, and this allowed me to scaffold my learners' learning of new concepts and work collaboratively with critical friends and colleagues in a learning environment.

## Impact of memory-work on teacher-learning

Memory-work has allowed us to ponder deeply our teaching practice and to understand that playful pedagogy fuels learners' enthusiasm to participate in their learning. My childhood experiences evoked memories and encouraged me to see myself as a child. I engaged in

conversations with other adults about our childhood that allowed us to gain insights from our experiences. Looking back, we can see how our childhood memories have informed our teaching and how they have contributed to our decision to engage in educational research.

## The role of dialoguing in memory work

We engaged in dialogue to encapsulate our learning experiences of play and to understand how play can serve as a tool for improved teaching and learning. When we engage in dialogue, we collaborate through meaningful conversations and subsequent interactions. Such dialogues generally occur in an open and supportive educational environment in which students and teachers can learn about, from, and with one another (Pithouse-Morgan, 2019). Easton (2012) explained, “Learning means that we work with many people, encouraging discoveries and learning from mistakes, helping everyone to find what work[s]” (p. 52). Dialoguing assisted us to learn from our memories of play and this learning can, in turn, inform our teaching practices and can encourage other teachers to adopt a future-oriented approach to teaching and learning that is nurturing, affirmative, and that acknowledges children’s cultural and lived experiences.

Early in 2024, we thought critically about what it means to be reflexive. We then considered questions to prompt our thinking about our positionality and we engaged in a critical friendship that cultivated constructive critique and support for our professional learning and teaching. Below, we present excerpts from that dialogue to illustrate what meanings we captured from our memories of play.

Question: How has your teaching been developed through your memories of play?

Khulekani: I engaged in vigorous deliberations with my fellow teachers on how to use play activities in our lessons. The ideas we shared enabled us to refrain from teaching only according to textbook prescriptions and to redesign what should be delivered to learners in a way that involves them without compromising subject content. Memories of our lived experiences fuelled us with a sense of curiosity, and we generated alternative possibilities and gained a new orientation and direction for the future. I remembered activities that had worked for us during lessons as learners, and I transformed them to suit today’s classroom milieu.

Nontuthuko: Self-study guided me to gain new understanding of my role as a teacher who must use playful pedagogy to encourage learners to learn. Recalling my memories of play helped me to realise that teaching is not about delivering a lesson to my learners but that it is essentially about initiating teaching practices that are innovative and attractive for them. Memory-work also guided me to acknowledge the value of play since it allows children to learn. I have learned to use teaching techniques that infuse learning through play. Playful pedagogy enhances learners’ engagement in their own learning, so my early childhood memories of play allowed me to understand that games bring joy and draw every child’s interest either as they

participate in or observe such activities. Playing games amuses children and infuses them with enthusiasm to learn and understand.

Ntokozo: I was enthused by the experience of engaging with my colleagues in sharing our childhood memories since they reminded me of how important it is to engage with children's play culture even in the classroom. When teachers recall their childhood memories and discuss them in a social context, they are enabled to reconstruct these memories into playful pedagogical activities that enhance learning. It was inspiring to unpack my childhood experiences in a sociocultural context as an adult educator and to learn how these experiences of play may be transformed into learning activities in my classroom. I recalled how my friends and I had collaborated during our games, and this lesson is invaluable in my classroom as a learning space.

Question: Why does playful pedagogy matter to you as educational researchers and teachers?

Khulekani: Educational practices have transformed over the years. Most teachers who attended teaching colleges are still glued to the same teaching methodologies. . . I mean, written learning. Most teachers follow in the footsteps of earlier teachers whose lesson presentations were teacher-centred and who did not require learners to apply their minds. Learners were expected to regurgitate what the teacher had taught them. Therefore, there was a lack of development in learners' skills, such as analysing, understanding, evaluating, and applying their knowledge, which was tantamount to an inability to solve the problems they would confront in the distant future.

Nontuthuko: Every teacher wishes to see his or her learners doing well academically, and it becomes stressful for teachers if learners' performance drops or remains at the same level every year. Teachers' professional learning enhances awareness of their professional selves and their practice and encourages them to reflect continually on their teaching practice by evaluating their learners' academic performance. These evaluation outcomes assist them in looking for better ways to teach if their learners did not do well. I believe teachers who develop professionally are driven to look for methods that will help their learners to perform better academically. Teaching requires improving one's practice and this is an ongoing process of learning that is also beneficial for the education of learners.

Ntokozo: As an educational researcher, I believe that one fundamental role of a teacher is to cultivate and nurture learners' indigenous knowledge so they can make meaning of their learning. The notion that our past experiences offer insight into how we construct knowledge and forge existing relations in our sociocultural worlds contains an implicit argument for a particular methodology. Teachers should act as agents of change to ensure their learners' educational development. Therefore, we ought to seize every opportunity to learn and apply diverse teaching techniques that will stimulate learners' academic growth.

Question: How have your memories of play informed other educational researchers and teachers?

Khulekani: Educational requirements today compel teachers to teach children who come from all walks of life. For teachers to be more relevant in today's classroom, they need to be more inventive in their quest to capture children's imagination. Teachers are central to the process of assisting their learners to learn through play. Therefore, by recalling and analysing childhood events and games in their lives that sparked learning could stimulate them to develop lessons that will stimulate learning through play. I therefore invite educational researchers and teachers to consider their memories of their own learning and to create opportunities for more playful activities to teach their learners currently and in the future.

Nontuthuko: Recalling and sharing my childhood memories of play helped me to make meaning of what I did not understand back then. Learning how my past influenced my beliefs and practices has allowed me to change some ineffective teaching practices. I now understand the value of playing in my academic learning. I believe playful pedagogy consider children's indigenous knowledge that allows learners the joy of discovering knowledge for themselves. Applying playful pedagogy enhances learners' participation and also enables teachers to build learners' knowledge from what they already know. Challenges I have experienced in class with applying playful pedagogy include having learners quarrel as they mock each other about their toys or about losing a game. I therefore have to follow classroom rules strictly to prevent such instances.

Ntokozo: We invite teachers and educational researchers to make meaning of teaching and learning by recollecting and re-examining stories of the past and by re-imagining stories of the future. As researchers, our quest is to illuminate a workable process to enhance professional learning, and this process involves the exploration of our memories of play and our embracing the lessons we learned as children. It emerged clearly that such lessons can serve as living examples that can be emulated to improve teaching and enhance learning.

## Data Analysis

To analyse our data, we adopted what Samaras (2011) described as a "hermeneutic process" (p. 197) during which data collection and analysis happen simultaneously through a dialogue. We engaged in reflexivity that entailed three phases: before (identifying memories of play from our childhood, during (sharing our personal narratives using drawings, artefacts, to evoke our past) and after (sharing our narratives, we identified patterns and experiences that deepened our understanding of playful pedagogy). For us to capture the essence of our individual memories we treasured engaging in reflexivity through documenting our individual thoughts on how our childhood memories aided us to improve our teaching practice.

## Discoveries

The lessons learnt from the games we played can be used collaboratively to facilitate improved planning and classroom practice.

By recalling and analysing our memories of play, we discovered that teachers could work in clusters to map a multitude of learning encounters for their learners. We also affirm that memory-work enables teachers to engage learners effectively if they employ multifaceted teaching methodologies, including play. When we constructed our narratives from memory, we expedited our awareness that playful pedagogy had helped to facilitate our learning so we gained new insight into the value of what learners know about and can learn from their backgrounds. Working as a group and sharing our learning experiences yielded diverse techniques that could be used to involve learners actively in the learning process through play.

Memories of play can act as a catalyst in the creation of innovative teaching strategies

Teachers are central to the process of stimulating learners' academic growth, and they can do this effectively if they adjust out-dated teaching styles, become creative, and place the child at the centre of their teaching practice. For example, if learners are allowed to bring resources to class with which they are familiar for a particular lesson, it could make learning both meaningful and enjoyable. We believe that teachers could incorporate play in their teaching by allowing learners, especially those in primary school, to bring toys for storytelling and perhaps role-play story reading to encourage participation instead of just reading the story for learners and then asking questions. This would encourage full learner participation for they would have keen interest in the activities they are engaged in because they would have brought the resources themselves.

Teachers could introduce the lesson on place value for example They could play the number board game during which learners pick numbers randomly from a box and place them in correctly on a number board. Building blocks could also be implemented in early childhood to develop children's thinking and reasoning. When learners bring board games into the classroom this engages them in meaningful activities such as learning about themselves and others and encourages autonomy and motivation.

The playful activities that teachers devise based on their own experiences can also help to develop diverse skills in learners, such as knowledge application, problem solving, understanding, analysing, listening, and synthesising.

Children's learning space is extended when play pedagogy is applied in the classroom

Teachers who involve their learners in playful learning activities also cultivate their own professional learning as they evolve as classroom practitioners. Teachers who encourage their learners to participate in many different activities in a playful manner confront their



professional anxieties since play pedagogy enables their learners to make sense of their expanding world because it is rooted in their prior experiences and socio-cultural understandings. At the same time, teachers are also enriched since their understanding of their learners' world is enhanced while they play. Moreover, the more teachers are involved in the creation of playful pedagogical activities for their learners, the more they gain professional insights and vigour to learn more about their practice as they engage learners in lesson activities that could be translated into playful pedagogical experiences.

## Conclusion

Having shared the lessons we have learned from recalling our childhood memories of play, we invite teachers to explore new ways of knowing by recalling the lessons they learned as children at play. We foresee that if similar narratives are shared by other teachers and teacher educators, they will provide a forum for teacher development since the participants will gain enriched insight into teaching and learning challenges as they recall and reflect on the lessons they learned through their own childhood experiences. Playful pedagogy is undoubtedly a teaching technique that enhances teachers' professional learning and increases teaching proficiency.

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