‘Shifting perspectives’: an autoethnographic account of how my learning as a doctoral candidate influenced my thinking as a teacher educator

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Abstract

My journey of becoming a teacher educator in a university has been influenced by the learning gleaned from doing a doctoral study. The experience that I had whilst working with children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC) changed my perspective as I discovered and learnt about their innate potential. In this article I provide an autoethnographic account of how my learning as a doctoral candidate impacted on the way I think about teaching pre-service teachers who will in turn teach in diverse contexts. I support my insights by data from my reflective journal, drawings and collages. I explain how Sen’s capability framework helped me to make sense of my learning. My autoethnographic reflective narrative has implications for how teacher educators might reconsider their practice to help pre-service teachers to think critically about their ideas and practice in relation to OVC.

Introduction

My journey of becoming a teacher in a higher education institution has been influenced by a number of factors, one being the learning gleaned from doing a doctoral study. In my study I worked with children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC) (Mayaba, 2013). This experience totally changed my perspective. Instead of viewing these children as objects of pity, I learnt to respect their resilience and I discovered their innate potential. As a black woman I thought I understood the lived experiences of vulnerable black children, but I learnt that I had no real idea of the personal and ecological assets in their lives. I then wondered how my (mostly white, middle class) student teachers who may not have been exposed to the lives of children in poor communities might perceive them and how this might affect their teaching. My study prompted me to think about how I could help pre-service

teachers to recognise and develop the potential of all children, including OVC.

In this article, I provide an autoethnographic account (Ellis and Bochner, 2000) of how my learning as a doctoral candidate impacted on the way I think about teaching pre-service teachers who will in turn teach in diverse and socio-economically challenged contexts. I first provide background to set the scene for this article, and then describe my doctoral study. This is followed by a discussion on autoethnography as a research methodology. Thereafter I present a narrative of my doctoral journey of learning. I go on to describe how the capability framework (Sen, 1999) helped me to make sense of this narrative. I explain how my learning impacted on my thinking about how I could adapt my teaching to help pre-service student teachers to think critically about their own ideas and practice. To conclude, I reflect on how autoethnography as a reflective tool enabled me to recognise and explain my doctoral learning through creative means.

Background

I am a teacher educator who has been working in one of the universities in the Eastern Cape for nine years. I spent three of those years in academic administration, co-coordinating teaching of language education modules for various education programmes in off-campus centres. My role in these programmes was to: develop, revise and write study guides; train tutors who were teaching these modules; set examination papers; and moderate the marking of examination papers. When I began my doctoral journey, I had just been appointed in a permanent position as a lecturer in the Faculty of Education. This was not my first teaching experience as I was a high school teacher for eight years before I joined the university.

When I was appointed on a permanent basis, I taught a module titled ‘Inclusive Education and Barriers to Learning’ to third year Bachelor of Education (Foundation phase) students who were training to teach Grades R–3. This module explored the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to barriers to learning in an inclusive classroom. One of the sections in this module dealt with family structures and their effect on learners’ success in learning. Obviously, family structures as a possible learning barrier were covered, such as children who grow up in single-parent households, foster

families, child headed households and orphans (Pienaar, 2013). What drew my attention to my teaching of this particular section was the realisation that the family structures of children that were being discussed in my module were similar to the participants in my doctoral study, who were children who had been orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC). I became uncomfortable with the way these children were portrayed in the literature in my module which only focused on the risk factors they encountered in life whereas the data generated by the children in my study revealed more positive stories about their lives.

Before I began with my study I also had a stereotypical belief of who OVC were. Growing up, there were assumptions in my black community that these children were poor, marginalised, incapable and in dire need of help. However, as I began to engage with my research data, I noted how my own beliefs and common knowledge were challenged. I also noted my own sense of ambivalence about what I was reading and teaching about OVC, compared to what my data were revealing about them. Hence in this article I ask: how can I help student teachers to recognise and develop the potential in all the children they teach?

My doctoral study

In order to put the reader in the picture, it is important that I give a brief overview of my doctoral study. I conducted an action research study which aimed to explore and describe how folktales might be used to enhance resilience in children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS (OVC) and how these stories might be used by teachers to reach both their pastoral and academic goals. Action research is defined as "a cyclical process of action and reflection on and in action which integrates theory and practice, research and development" (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011, p.6). The point of departure in action research is a concern or problem (Wood, Morar and Mostert, 2008).Therefore the problem that I identified from literature was that there was prevalence of OVC in South African schools who needed care and support (Smart, 2003; De Witt and Lessing, 2010) and that teachers perceived themselves as untrained for this pastoral role (Ogina, 2010) and considered it to be an added responsibility to their already existing curriculum requirements. In most South African schools there are no referral options as there are no social workers or psychologists (Pillay and Di Terlizzi, 2009). I

asked myself how teachers could support children to better cope in the face of adversity in a way that could be easily integrated into the academic curriculum so as to minimise the perceived burden of care and support.

This study was underpinned by the social ecological view of resilience (Ungar, 2011) which emphasises that social ecologies such as schools have a duty to facilitate children's positive adjustment to adversity. The choice of folktales was influenced by the importance that resilience theory attaches to cultural variables in the resilience process (Mayaba and Wood, 2015). The participants in this study were twenty two (n=22) isiXhosa speaking OVC between the ages of 9–14 years who either lived in a children's home or with foster parents. I purposefully selected OVC because the intention of this study was to explore ways in which they can be supported as a response to literature that reveals how teachers are struggling to find ways of supporting the increasing number of such children.

In the first cycle of the study I generated data with children who lived in a children's home. The process of research required that I tell them one folktale a week over a period of 24 weeks without any interaction with the story. Before and after the storytelling sessions they had to draw and explain how they viewed their lives. Based on the findings and reflections on the first cycle, in the second cycle children had to select stories that they liked and then engage with them using drawings, collage and drama. The details of the findings of this study are documented in Wood, Theron and Mayaba (2012a) and in Mayaba and Wood (2015). This article draws from my doctoral study which met ethical requirements; therefore any concern about the consent from participants would be invalid. As much as the caregiver had given her consent to this research I was aware of the importance of the children's assent to the research; hence before I embarked on the research process I explained to the children the purpose and the process of the study.

In the next section of the article I discuss my journey of learning by reflecting on some of the moments that changed my own thinking about the children who participated in my doctoral study. Thereafter I analyse my learning by using the capability framework as a lens to consider how I might help pre-service student teachers to think critically about their own ideas and practice.

Autoethnography as a research methodology

Autoethnography as a research methodology (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Wall, 2006, Duarte, 2007, Méndez, 2013) seemed appropriate to help me reflect on how my learning as a doctoral candidate impacted on my thinking about teaching in higher education. I always wanted to write about my own learning and research experiences in a way that could be acknowledged as a contribution to knowledge. An authoethnographic approach affords me freedom to explain my learning through creative ways of reflecting on my experiences (Duarte, 2007). I was part of a reality and I always felt that I needed to share my experience the way I thought about and viewed it, through producing a narrative, which is a personal story that draws on experiences (Wall, 2006) and how such experiences have transformed my way of thinking (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Duarte, 2007; Mcilveen, 2008, Méndez, 2013). In this article I present this narrative and illustrate it with data about my thoughts and feelings (Tenni, Smyth and Boucher, 2003). I use reflections from my doctoral research journal in which I captured moments of epiphany during my interaction with the children along with drawings (Őzden, 2009) and collage (Williams, 2002). Using arts based methods such as drawings and collages enabled me to illustrate the changes in my thinking during my research journey and to also make meaning of my experiences since they serve as a stimulus, guide and scaffold for one's thoughts (Őzden, 2009).

An important feature of autoethnography is that researchers differ in their emphasis of the self (auto), culture (ethno) and the application of the research process (graphy) (Reed-Danahay, in Holt, 2003). In my case, I am writing retrospectively and selectively (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) about my learning emanating from my interaction with children in a specific culture (context of poverty and vulnerability) and then analysing using the capability framework (Sen, 1999) how these experiences impacted on my thinking about teaching pre-service teachers who will in turn teach in diverse and socio-economically challenged contexts. Robeyns (2005, p.94) describes the capability approach as "an evaluative and assessment framework for individual's well-being which focuses on what they are able to do and be, on the quality of their life and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life they value".

Using this particular lens to analyse autoethnographic data allowed me as a researcher to engage more deeply with data generated during my doctoral

study (Tennie *et al.,* 2003). Tennie *et al*., (2003, p.4) further advise that in order to have quality and rigour "when working with one's own autobiographical data there is a need to engage in external dialogue with others and anyone else who could be pinned down and who will listen". Coia and Taylor (2009, p.8) refer to this engagement process as "co/autoethnography" in which two people reflect on a particular phenomenon collaboratively. Since I can claim that my doctoral supervisor and I have a professional, friendly, mentoring relationship and I am open to learning, she was able to critique and challenge me to deepen my thoughts about the narrative presented in this article.

Autoethnography requires the researcher to use 'I' in writing one's narrative, which "enables his/her voice to be heard" (Méndez, 2013, p.282). In my view, using autoethnography is like telling 'my own story within a story'. Admittedly, I have been writing articles that conform to qualitative approaches. However, although I have used 'I' in reporting my findings (the other story), I never told 'my own story', which is something which autoethnography affords me the opportunity to do. I agree with Ellis's (2007) assertion that autoethnography itself is an ethical practice as it entails being ethical and honest about the events described. In composing my narrative the events described were based on my experiences as a lecturer and a PhD candidate. I taught the module I referred to in this article and in my PhD, which got ethical clearance, participants were indeed OVC. The focus of the narrative presented in the following section of the article is on my transformation and my thinking about what I learnt during my doctoral study and how this impacted on my becoming a teacher and teaching in a higher institution.

An autoethnograhic narrative of my journey of learning

My experience of generating data in a children's home and with OVC changed the way I thought about my participants and how they live their lives. This experience also impacted on how I think about my own teaching. As a black person growing up in rural communities, I had always embraced the script that by default I was marginalized. I never thought that as black children in rural ecologies we were experts and agents of our own learning and that our wealth of resources and expertise resided and were embedded in

the complexity of the rural ecology. However, I am grateful that my parents valued education and were able to put aside money to pay for my university education to study to become a teacher. As indicated earlier, I taught in a rural high school for eight years before I joined the university. During my years in that school, I became aware of learners' diverse backgrounds and the factors that affected their success in learning. Many learners lived with their grandparents since their parents had passed on as a result of HIV and AIDS. At the time there were no support structures at my school for children who were orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS. Twelve years later, when my doctoral supervisor invited me to be part of the 'Read me to resilience project' (Wood, Theron and Mayaba, 2012b) one of my siblings had just been diagnosed with HIV. She was very sick and I was taking care of her. I thought about what was going to happen to her child should anything bad happen to her. For the first time I read a lot about HIV and AIDS and also about the lives of children whose parents die as a result of this pandemic.

During the fieldwork for my doctoral study, I realised that what I thought I knew about OVC and their experiences was limited. My fieldwork experiences also reminded me of the time I was a teacher in high school in the rural areas and made me more conscious of how I had never thought about the significance of getting to know my learners. This made me realise that as a teacher educator who is preparing teachers who will in turn teach in diverse school contexts, I needed to rethink how I could help my students to be able to think critically about their own constructions of OVC and poor communities.

As I indicated earlier, all the children in my study were isiXhosa home language speakers. IsiXhosa is one of the indigenous languages in South Africa. I identify myself as an isiXhosa first language speaker and so I felt it was going to be easy to be immersed in the children's space since I assumed there would be no language barriers. I learnt from the caregiver that these children mostly came from nearby rural and township areas. Growing up in rural areas myself in an extended family of mother, father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and siblings, I knew that it was not going to be difficult for me to adjust to a home where there were a lot of children and adults. At the same time, I was carrying stereotypical images of children's homes: children under strict control, a place where there is no fun and a lot of chaos. I did not have evidence of this situation but interestingly, I somehow imagined a children's home as a very restricted place. Moreover, I had read literature stating that OVC are exposed to risk factors (Ritcher, 2004). A risk factor is

any situation that threatens healthy development (Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch and Ungar, 2005). I also read that children who are sent to residential care or children's homes are reported to be not fully developed socially, as they often find it difficult to adjust to life outside these institutions (Phiri and Webb, 2002). The following drawing depicts my thoughts about the children's home and OVC at that time.

Figure 1: Drawing of what I thought I knew about children in children's homes

This picture depicts that as an educated teacher educator who has read a lot of books about the OVC and their lives, I felt that I knew everything that I needed to know and therefore was not expecting to gain any new information. The different bubbles represent different aspects which influenced my thinking: my sense of marginalisation; the literature that I had read and was teaching; my status as a teacher educator – a knower – and my own imagination.

However, on the first day I visited the children's home I noted how different the situation was. Whilst standing at the gate waiting for someone to open for me I noticed children were playing outside. Later on, I noted in my journal:

> The children's home doesn't look like how I imagined it. There are two huge houses facing each other, perhaps, one of them is for boys and the other one for girls. Or one belongs to the caregiver and volunteers and the children share rooms in the other big house. I was surprised that the caregiver told me that students from the university and surrounding communities often visit the home to play with the children or to teach them a sport like chess. It's interesting that the girls were playing 'unophuce' and others 'ugqaphu'. They look happy and carefree unlike the children that I imagined in a children's home (March, 2009).

The sight of these children playing traditional games took me back to the time I was a young girl. I also played these games. I remembered very well how much I enjoyed playing '*unophuce*'. (This is a game in which one either draws a circle or digs a hole on the ground and places about ten little stones therein. One then has to remove the stones inside the circle one by one by throwing a bigger stone in the air whilst taking out the others. In this game you have to take out all ten stones at first and return nine, thereafter, you take out all and return eight and so on.) In hindsight, I realise that *unophuce* was a counting game, which enhanced our thinking ability, as well as being a lot of fun. To me this meant that as much as we were in rural communities, our learning was not only shaped by what was taught at school but also by the indigenous games that we participated in. As a teacher educator, I realised that it is important for me to expose my Foundation phase pre-service teachers to such games as methods they could use to teach in their classrooms.

When I got inside the house, what drew my attention were the many trophies and framed achievement certificates that were displayed on top of the sideboard. I also noticed a lot of photographs that were pasted on the walls. These photographs reflected the many events that children engage in, for example, birthday parties and '*braais*' (a South African name for a barbecue). Since the venue for storytelling was one of the bedrooms, I saw how neat the bedrooms were and later on I found out that children had routines for household chores. I was a bit concerned about the fact that eight children shared a room, I remember noting in my journal:

> Sometimes when I am at home, I think about them, I always wonder how they feel, whether they are happy in the children's home. . . .how it feels to share a room with eight other children (Author, 2012a, p.134).

I was however taken aback by the positive atmosphere and fun that permeated that home. I literally felt love and compassion for these children. The following drawing represents the change in my view of my participants.

Figure 2: Drawing about what I learnt about children in children's home

This drawing represents a sense of love and peace that I felt permeating that home. I noticed a number of resilience enhancing factors (Ungar, 2011), such as good relationships with the caregiver, peers and people from the community. Children displayed a sense of happiness and contentment and there were other people from the community who volunteered to cook and others were assisting children with homework. Moreover, during the study children described themselves as developing well, participating in various sporting activities and having good relationship with the caregiver (Mayaba, 2013). I also noted during my visits that they had access to material resources such as TV and radio; they also had support from community members who

assisted them with homework and hosted birthday parties for them. Faith based organisations also provided spiritual encouragement to these children.

In my doctoral study I was investigating the resilience potential of folktales and, in hindsight, I noted that this linked well with a section in my teacher education module which addressed social issues that are barriers to learning. I realised that in my module students were not referred to cultural assets that exist in learners' ecologies as means to address some of the barriers to learning. My teaching experience and qualifications are in language education. Therefore I know the educative power of reading and storytelling (Parkinson, 2009). As a child I also experienced first-hand being told traditional stories by my grandparents and parents. I know how much I enjoyed these stories and how they fired my imagination. Admittedly, I did not think further about folktales when I was a teacher and before I did my doctoral study. The following collage depicts my fears and scepticism about using folktales at the start of my doctoral study.

Figure 3: Collage depicting my fears and scepticism

What distinguishes folktales from other stories is that they are generally stories about the world of imagination, about animals and humans with supernatural powers and abilities like fairies (Zin and Nasir, 2007; Parkinson,

2009). I was sceptical about how children would react to these stories since I was aware that nowadays children mostly watch television and folktales are no longer part of the traditional culture. My fears were influenced by my experience of collecting these stories from the community members. As part of the research process I had to approach community members to tell me folktales they had heard as children that made them feel strong or 'enabled' (Mayaba, 2013; Mayaba and Wood, 2015). Most people were surprised that somebody was interested in folktales. However, my father was so excited when I asked him to tell me some of the folktales. Unfortunately he did not live long enough for me to tell him more about what I achieved through my study. My father was a history teacher; a political science honors graduate, and later on a reverend in an Anglican church. He was one person who always reminded us as children how important it was to value cultural assets, but as we became older we forgot about his teachings.

Figure 4 below captures my experience of telling folktales at the children's home.

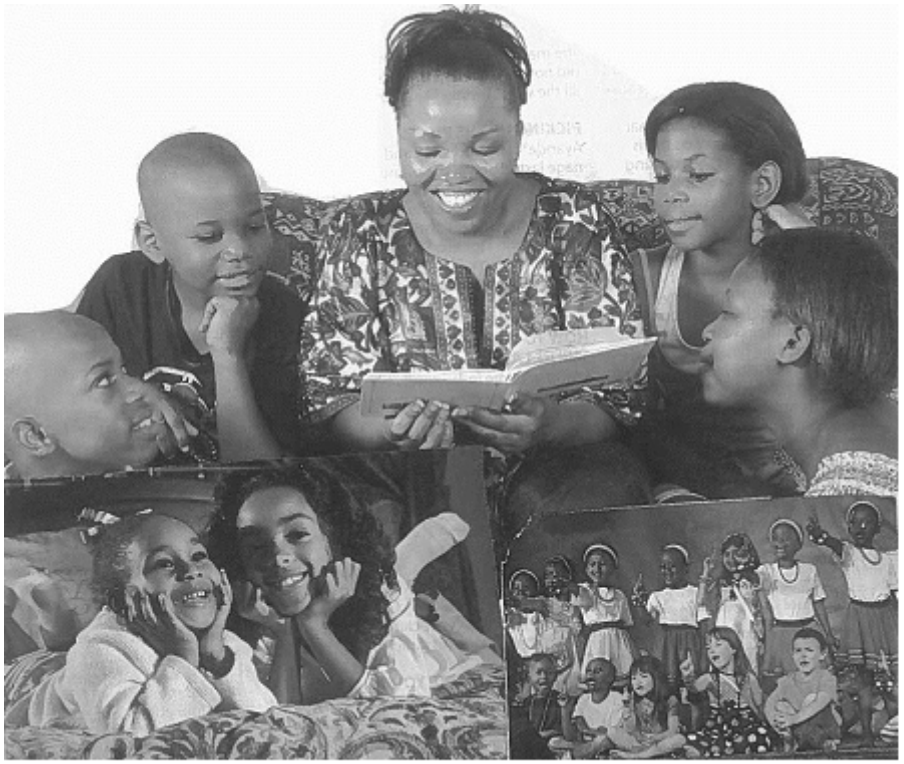

Figure 4: Collage depicting my positive experience about telling folktales

Contrary to my fears and doubts, the twenty two participants at the children's home attended all the storytelling sessions. Although I told the stories in a

non-participative way since I was exploring if merely telling them would develop resilience, I could tell from their facial expressions that they were enjoying the stories. Moreover, whenever I came to the home they would be singing some of the story songs. The caregiver also told me during informal chats that the children were retelling the stories to one another at night. Children also asked me why I was telling folktales during the day because tradition dictates that if you tell a folktale during the day you will grow a horn. This is the indigenous knowledge that I also knew so I had to assure them that nothing was going to happen to them. This was interesting to me as I initially thought that children might think that telling folktales was old fashioned and they might not know any cultural beliefs about these stories. When I used folktales in a participative and educative manner in the second cycle, I noticed that children were having fun and could recall the stories. As Tobin and Snyman (2008) mention, stories tend to stick in the mind longer than abstract ideas alone.

The findings of my doctoral study (Wood, Theron and Mayaba, 2012a; Mayaba and Wood, 2015) made me realise the value of cultural assets to empower vulnerable children and make a practical contribution to improving the quality of life for children. I also became aware of how cultural assets could help teachers to make a difference, therefore making a contribution in terms of eventual social change. I grew as a teacher educator as I learnt through this study how I could help my students to develop children's resilience. I was excited about the possibility that folktales could be used in a classroom situation to meet the requirements of the curriculum as well as to encourage the development of resilience in children. I am aware that nowadays these stories are in an adapted and animated form and that many children do not have access to the original oral version of these stories (Mayaba and Wood, 2015). This means that if schools could work collaboratively with community members by inviting them to tell stories, children's positive coping responses could be enhanced. This also means that since teachers are overworked and stressed and may not find the time to engage children in participative activities around stories, folktales could be a very powerful tool that could be used and take up no more than 10 minutes in a teaching day. This has implications for me as a teacher educator in terms of how I think about cultural assets as a resource for learning that could be used by pre-service and in-service teachers in their classrooms.

Making sense of my learning using the capability framework

In thinking about my experience during my doctoral research fieldwork, I drew from Sen's (1999) capability approach to help me clarify my thoughts on how I could adapt my teaching to help the student teachers to think critically about their own ideas and practice. A core characteristic of the capability approach is its focus on the actual opportunities a person has, namely their functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1999, Wilson-Strydom, 2011; Hick, 2012). 'Functionings' refer to things that a person is able to be or do whereas 'capability' is the ability to achieve and the freedom a person has to enjoy valuable functionings (Wilson-Strydom, 2011).

Contrary to my earlier assumptions about the lives of the OVC and the children's home as a restricted area, I learnt that OVC have the ability to achieve and have ample opportunities to nurture their talents not only at school, but among themselves and with community members. This implies that as a teacher educator I need to conscientise pre-service teachers of their own potential as agents of change and how their perceptions about vulnerable children can either support or hinder these children's success in school and in life in general. This supports the view that Sen's work is underpinned "by seeing each person and each life as valuable and of moral concern and not a means to some end" (Walker, 2010, p.491). In my view teachers have a responsibility to bring about change in the schools where they will be teaching through their own initiatives of responding positively to the challenges they might experience in such schools. This means I also have a responsibility to help my students to acquire knowledge that is based on various perspectives on the issue at hand. Contextual realities they might face are learners who: have experienced the loss of one or both parents; are neglected, destitute, abandoned or abused; have a parent or guardian who is ill; have suffered increased poverty levels; have been the victims of human rights abuses; or are HIV positive themselves (Smart, 2003, p.viii). Based on the capabilities lens (Sen, 1999), teachers should not measure the well-being of children based on their 'means of living' but should focus on what they can be and the opportunities they can have to achieve their dreams and aspirations.

I also learnt that there is an urgent need for debates to demystify vulnerability, which is a complex concept. Focusing only on the negative aspects of

children being vulnerable may perpetuate stereotypes and the dominant scripts that describe the well-being of these children. For instance, research shows that a number of these children come from families who depend on grants and pensions for survival. As a result, when their parents die, these children have nothing to inherit (Ainsworth and Filmer, 2002; UNICEF, 2004). In the capability approach, one would first determine the measurements for poverty before deciding on the context (Hick, 2012). Second, one would have to "evaluate well-being in terms of what people value being and doing, and to increase their freedom to be in those ways or to do those things" (Walker and McLean, 2010, p.850). Poverty is viewed as "deprivation of certain basic capabilities" (Hick, 2012, p.3). This means capability to experience a good quality life, might in fact not have much to do with economic wealth. My data and observations showed that the children who participated in my study are well taken care of and have clothing and shelter. Therefore as a teacher educator I need to be in a position to engage in discussions with my students and fellow colleagues on what vulnerability is and what the concept might mean to pre-service teachers.

From my doctoral study I have come to recognise that cultural assets can shape and contribute towards a sustainable learning environment. Some of my pre-service teachers might be employed in schools where there are few material resources. Therefore it is important that they are aware of the existing assets in the communities in which their learners reside which they can tap into as a resource for teaching and learning. Instead of viewing poor contexts as a deficit they could realise that there are existing strengths that are rooted in those communities. As teachers they need to be capable of finding ways to bring those resources and assets into the classroom context for the benefit of the children they are teaching. As the capability framework also addresses the issues of injustice, especially in marginalised communities (Robeyns, 2005), I believe that it would be unjust to ignore the resources that marginalised communities have at their disposal (Mackinnon and Derickson, 2012), in this case, traditional folktales. Using folktales as a stimulus for interactive pedagogical strategies could enable teachers to gain deeper insight into the reality of the lives of children in their care (Mayaba and Wood, 2015) and help to identify pastoral needs that could be addressed through providing access to support structures (Ogina, 2010). Therefore I learnt that I need to create a space for my pre-service teachers to think creatively about how they could support learners who live in poor communities.

Sen's (1999) capability approach recognises individuals as agents of change and participants in economic, social and political actions. Looking at my journey of learning through this framework also helped me to grow personally. Having realised that teachers are agents of change, I also thought about how I could be an agent of change in the home and the schools where I generated my data. My experiences during the fieldwork ignited a sense of compassion and love for the children that I was generating data with. I thought about how I could contribute and make a difference in their lives. Hence I was able to establish a reading club at the home and secure a sponsorship of 100 story books which were in isiXhosa, English and Afrikaans. When I started off with the reading club I invited my friends to volunteer and we would read stories to and with the children every Sunday afternoon. I would often invite my cell group members from my church to volunteer to clean the houses at the home. What I learnt from this experience led me to establish another reading home in another children's home in the city. I have also built very good relationships with the caregivers. We got to know one another and it was interesting to realise that we all had stories of resilience to tell even though we lived in different areas of the city and had different backgrounds. I realised that these stories could motivate my student teachers to persevere in schools and aim towards making a positive impact in children's lives. An extract from my journal reads as follows:

> Having been at the children's home, it was going to be impossible for me to not give back to the children as they taught me a lot about who they were. I am a changed person and I no longer judge situations especially when I don't know anything about those situations. Although it has not been a smooth journey but there are substantial and significant lessons that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Thank you Les for inviting me to this project (July, 2012).

In my journey of becoming a teacher educator, I had to shift my perspective about OVC and their lives and find a way of communicating my findings to the pre-service teachers that I teach. I believe that teaching is a learning experience where students and I embark on a journey of discovery and engagement that is characterised by exchange and sharing of ideas and expressions of individual perceptions and beliefs about the topic under discussion. In this process, I recognise that both the students and I bring different knowledge and draw from different experiences and backgrounds in relation to what is learned during lectures. I am therefore always open to possibilities of disagreements about certain issues. Hence I encourage critical engagement that is conducted with respect. The journey of learning continues and I hope during the redesign process of the Inclusive Education and

Barriers to Learning module, I will be able to share with my colleagues my autoethnographic story and the lessons learnt during my doctoral journey.

Conclusion

In this article I presented an autoethnographic narrative on my personal experience of how my learning as a doctoral student impacted my thinking about teaching in higher education. I supported my insights with data from my reflective journal, drawings and collages I made to help me clarify my thinking. I used Sen's (1999) capability framework as a lens to make sense of my learning. I learnt that I can help student teachers to recognise and develop the potential in the children they teach by conscientising them of their potential as agents of change, engaging them in discussions that will focus on the positive aspects of OVC and make them aware of the existing assets in children's ecology.

What I learnt from my doctoral journey will help me to better equip pre-service teachers to unlock and tap into the creativity of children from poor diverse contexts. I now realise the importance of understanding children's social realities as the foundation for planning any module that will address diverse family structures or social factors that are barriers to learning. I am not disputing the needs of OVC, but am advancing an argument that there is a more positive side to the story that pre-service teachers can be exposed to. The insights that I gained from my journey both confirmed and contradicted literature I had read about OVC. I found that the children who participated in my study were generally happy and enjoyed good relations with their caregivers, in contradiction to literature that positions OVC as vulnerable to abuse by caregivers (UNAIDS, 2010). Although OVC are exposed to risk factors, as discussed in literature, it is important to also note that such adversity can be an antecedent to the development of resilience. As a former teacher and a teacher educator, I now better understand the role played by children's ecologies in shaping their lives. I feel proud that my study could contribute to the discussions and debates taking place in teacher and teacher education forums on OVC. Moreover, using autoethnography as a reflective tool to explain my doctoral learning through creative ways indeed shifted my perspective about OVC and influenced my thinking as a teacher educator in higher education.

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