

Vulnerability and belonging in the history classroom: A teacher's positioning in "volatile conversations" on racism and xenophobia

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This article is explorative in its attempt to define vulnerability within transformative pedagogy by analysing excerpts from two "volatile conversations" on racism and xenophobia between a teacher and her grade nine class in a well-resourced Jewish school. The two conversations differed in regard to the teacher's use of vulnerability, even though the underlying rationale remained the same, namely to question and deconstruct prejudiced thinking. During the first interaction, the teacher struggled to invite learners to join in the conversation when she attempted to situate racism solely in their heads. During the second interaction, in contrast, instead of focusing on the learners' thinking, the teacher placed her own xenophobic thinking in the centre and talked reflectively about what fear might say about one's society and one's position in that society. While this second interaction was difficult, the learners felt safe enough to take up the teacher's attempt to render racism and xenophobia strange. The article argues that more discussion is needed in regard to the potential role of vulnerability in pedagogical interactions, particularly taking into account teachers' and learners' complex, ever-changing narratives and positions in a fast changing, and still very much divided, yet hopeful country.

Keywords: pedagogy, vulnerability, history education, primary narratives, racism, xenophobia, positioning theory

The June 2009 special issue on "The Pedagogical transaction in post-conflict societies" of *Perspectives in Education* raises important questions regarding which pedagogies are appropriate in post-conflict societies, and how learners and teachers deal with contested knowledge in the classroom (Jansen & Weldon, 2009:107). Several articles refer to the potential role of vulnerability in dislodging and questioning power relations and the central, yet challenging, role of teachers in this regard (Keet, Zinn & Porteus, 2009; Jansen, 2009b; Murphy & Gallagher, 2009). What exactly do we mean by vulnerability within a transformative pedagogy? What does it look like in classroom interaction? I am of the opinion that we are only at the beginning of the discussion around these questions, especially when the primary narratives teachers and learners share about their past and present experiences of, and the ever-changing positions they take in, a fast changing and still very much divided, yet hopeful country are considered.

In this article I wish to contribute to the discussion by reflecting on the meaning and possible contribution of vulnerability in the light of excerpts from two interactions a history teacher had with her learners at a well-resourced Jewish independent school in 2005. The first interaction focused on racism and interracial relationships, while the second focused on xenophobia and electric fences, central icons of present-day South Africa. During these two interactions, the teacher engaged with her own vulnerability and that of her learners in very different ways.

It is important to note that the two interactions took place in a particular setting, one that is not representative of history classrooms in South Africa. The article indeed does not have as aim to be representative of the overall practice of the teacher involved, nor of other teachers in South Africa or elsewhere. This is a case study which aims to understand the complex meaning making processes in specific pedagogical interactions (Yin, 2009:4). It aims for "analytic generalization" (Yin, 2009:15), i.e. generate questions which, as mentioned above, would contribute to the discussion regarding the presence

and role of vulnerability in history teaching and whether and how this relates to teachers' and learners' sense of identity and belonging in their country.

Site and participants

I visited the classroom of Geraldine Bridgeton (pseudonym) in 2005, during May and June and again in the period July-September. Bridgeton, a 'white'¹ woman in her forties, with a Higher Diploma in Education (HDE) from the University of Cape Town (UCT), had just joined a well-resourced, independent school, primarily serving the Jewish community in Cape Town, as an interim teacher. The majority of teachers and learners at the school were members of the dominant 'white', well-off group in Cape Town society. The school's learner population (a total of 340 in 2005) comprised a majority of 'white' learners and a few 'coloured' and 'black' learners — most lived in the upper- and middle-class suburbs of the city. While the majority of the teachers at the school were Jewish, Geraldine Bridgeton and a few others were from other religious and cultural communities. In contrast to the average South African under-resourced public school, the school had spacious sports facilities and a library with specialised sections. The annual school fee per learner in 2005 was R26 800-00 (2331.6 GBP) for those whose parents could afford to pay the full amount.

Bridgeton and her learners were part of a larger qualitative research project in which I investigated the role of primary narratives in South African history teaching in high school grade nine history classrooms and in two history museums in Cape Town (Geschier, 2008). How do educators in these different pedagogical contexts, use and construct first-hand accounts? How does this impact on their interaction with learners?

These questions are qualitative in nature and allow for a case study analysis of people's meaning making processes in both speech and action (Yin, 2009). To this end, I undertook semi-structured interviews with 12 museum facilitators working at the Cape Town Holocaust Centre and the District Six Museum, and with 26 grade nine history teachers from 19 high schools in broader Cape Town. Seven of these 26 teachers, coming from different backgrounds and working across the wide spectrum of Cape Town schools, agreed to be observed in their respective classes, albeit for varying lengths of time. Despite teachers' initial plans, only one of the seven observed teachers, namely Bridgeton, visited the museums and allowed me to observe the visits.

Following the ethical expectations of a qualitative study, I sought the permission of the institution and individuals involved. In addition, I signed an Ethics Form, which is congruent with the UCT Code for Research involving Human Subjects. In accordance with these agreements, I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the teacher and learners. The principal allowed me to mention the school's religion and the school is, therefore identifiable by deduction. I agreed with the school that I would describe the school as a 'Jewish independent school' and that I would provide the teacher with drafts of the analysis.

Bridgeton seemed to feel comfortable with an observer present, despite the fact that she had just started at the school as an interim teacher. In comparison with other teachers participating in the project, there were fewer language issues and more commonalities between her and the researcher and it seemed easier to establish a relationship of trust. The (perceived) identity of the researcher might have something to do with this: a non-South African, non-Jewish (though often thought by several informants and readers to be Jewish), 'white', educated, female and relatively young, historian and teacher, compared to the teachers and museum facilitators participating in the project. After some time the teacher allowed me to audiotape the interactions, which complemented the hand-written observation notes. I eventually observed more than twenty history lessons over two terms and joined the teacher and her learners on

1 Many South Africans still use 'race' as a basis of differentiation in their discourses despite its historical roots in colonialism and apartheid. I indicate the discursive origin of these labels by using single quotation marks for 'whites', 'coloureds' and 'blacks'. I ask the reader to be aware of the fact that the complexity of the various identities of a person nevertheless defies classification.

their visit to the District Six Museum and the Cape Town Holocaust Centre.² This seeming ease, however, did not render the observations and analysis easy or straightforward.

Analytic lenses

I analysed audiotape recordings and observation notes of the classroom interactions, looking at the presence and form of primary narratives and less organised forms of positioning self and others in history.³ Starting from the premise that individuals and groups recruit language, in the words of discourse analyst Gee, “to ‘pull off’ specific social activities and social identities” (1999:1), I used discourse analysis and positioning theory as methodological tools. The latter developed out of discursive psychology in response to the rather static assumptions of role theory, and aims to study people’s complex, multiple and contradictory agency (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999).

In addition, as the mere presence and construction of primary narratives and less organised forms of positioning self and others in history does not say much about their import in a pedagogical interaction, I analysed the teacher’s approach to history and her pedagogical mode of practice, using categories developed by Seixas (2000) and Jacklin (2004) respectively. It is beyond the scope of this article to spell out all these categories; instead, the description of relevant concepts is embedded in the analysis of the observations below.

Vulnerability: what is at stake in a pedagogical interaction

Traditional definitions associate vulnerability (Latin, *vulnerabilis*, wounding) with the military and the medical realm, defining it, literally and metaphorically, as a breach in one’s defence — a state which one should avoid or overcome (e.g. Thomson, 1998; The Free Dictionary, 2009). Alternative interpretations emphasise the strengths that underlie this breach, associating it with being human, an openness and willingness to risk moving beyond the self and engaging with ‘the other’, and an awareness and reflectivity around making difficult and easy choices each day, having parts of our selves mapped, others unknown or feared (Dale & Frye, 2009; Garrison, 2004; Keet *et al.*, 2009; Lasky, 2005). Several authors emphasise that using this kind of vulnerability in the pedagogical relationship, requires that we do not shy away from conflict and discomfort as, paradoxically, hope and possibility lie in facing them. Conflict and discomfort, in other words, can be conducive to growth in and beyond the pedagogical relationship (Boler, 2004; Dale & Frye, 2009).

Yet, how exactly do we use the latter kind of vulnerability in our teaching? This question is particularly pertinent regarding ways in which teachers use primary narratives, their own and those of others. We

2 More specifically, I observed and partly audiotaped Bridgeton during eight teaching periods of grade nine history on Nazi Germany and the Holocaust (with cross-reference to apartheid) over a total of five days in May and June 2005. Audiotaping was allowed from the third day onwards. During this period, I also observed and audiotaped a half-day visit to the Cape Town Holocaust Centre. Over a total of six days in the period July-September 2005, I observed and audiotaped 13 history periods on apartheid (with cross reference to Nazi Germany) and one assembly in which a ‘coloured’, Muslim teacher told about his experiences of the Forced Removals from District Six. I also observed and partly audio-taped the learners’ half-day visit to the District Six Museum.

3 In the transcripts included in this article, I put informants’ quotes in italics, in order to distinguish between the informant’s and the author’s voice. According to international transcription standards, the informants’ speech has been reproduced as closely as possible. This means that the researcher has not ‘corrected’ vernacular (Yow 1994). I use the following transcription conventions:

- ‘(pause)’ and ‘(long pause)’ stand for short and somewhat longer pauses taken by the interviewee/speaker.
- Words in capital letters indicate that the interviewee/speaker raised his/her voice.
- Underlining indicates the author’s emphasis.
- The author’s editing and cutting interventions are of two kinds:
 - Cutting out the ‘um’s’ and ‘uh’s’ when this is not of discursive relevance is not indicated.
 - Cutting out long pieces of talk, due to repetition or irrelevance to the issue focused on, is indicated by ‘[...]’. In situations where the speakers’ words are unclear or not discernable, I indicate this by placing the words or phrases between straight brackets.

perceive the sharing of especially our own history as potentially disruptive or, when delivered in the form of a confession, inappropriate, as it arouses discomforting feelings such as guilt, blame and shame. Some even argue that sharing a personal narrative, especially about the apartheid era, is per definition a confession, and therefore to be avoided (history lecturer, personal communication, May 2007). We tend to argue that, instead, emotional distance is needed to create a safe space in which we can discuss issues regarding democracy and citizenship (Murphy & Gallagher, 2009: 163). Do we get to the core of human reality though, when we merely talk in terms of commonly understood, seemingly safe, all-around-agreed-upon-moral lessons? Jansen (2009a:93-94) suggests the power of personal narrative indirectly, in contrast to mental reasoning, preaching and blaming. The question remains however: how does this work? What is the (potential) added value of taking a vulnerable position as a teacher while sharing personal narratives?

What requires our attention is the specific form vulnerability needs to take in a pedagogical setting, as learners, given their pedagogical, indeed vulnerable, position, are not equal to the teacher. Reciprocity and mutual self-consciousness — characteristics Kwenda (2003) mentions in his definition of ‘mutual vulnerability’ — only go a certain distance within a pedagogical relationship. More specifically, the teacher has the responsibility to take more risks in taking and role-modelling a vulnerable position. This is, as we know, no easy task (Garrison, 2004; Jansen, 2009a).

The fact that in the South African context, teachers have experienced the apartheid régime first hand, makes the task seem even more daunting. Narrative researchers tell us that humans have the tendency to construct narratives with clear-cut roles and stereotypes and, in anticipation of and response to (imaginative) audiences, struggle to describe painful experiences or experiences they cannot defend on current moral grounds (Portelli, 1991:52-53; Samuel & Thompson, 1990:38). In classrooms, therefore, teachers might share personal narratives, but not necessarily from a vulnerable position. Narratives of admirable heroism or acknowledged victim-hood are easier to share. One does not need to be an unreflective teacher to invest highly in these kinds of positions that are safe because they tend to go unquestioned and are easily perceived as contributing to individual and collective feelings of belonging. Similarly, learners, as most audiences of potentially painful primary narratives, might build an emotional wall and normalize the undiscussable and indescribable in an attempt to find closure (Bar-On, 1999).

Given the high stakes, how did vulnerability play out in Bridgeton’s construction and use of first-hand accounts in her history classroom? In the following sections, I first describe the teacher’s general pedagogical practice and then present and analyse two excerpts of discussions held in June and October 2005 in which Bridgeton engaged with her own vulnerability and that of her learners in very different ways.

Bridgeton’s pedagogical practice

Using the language of Jacklin (2004), one could say that Bridgeton’s mode of pedagogical practice was discourse led: She talked explicitly about the discourse of history, not just its activities, but also its way of thinking, comparing it to law, journalism and medicine. She made the bigger picture clear to the learners through regular cross-disciplinary and cross-period references. She referred to higher grades, the learners’ future careers and other sources of knowledge, such as the media, other disciplines and the learners’ (Jewish) religion. She repeatedly positioned herself as a professional historian by referring to her activities outside school, such as doing research and furthering her education. Throughout her interactions with the learners, the teacher made statements such as: “*You’re trained as a historian*”, explaining that history is about substantiating your arguments and using sources. She also emphasized that becoming a historian is a process by saying: “*You’ll get better in it*”; “*It takes time*”.

The teacher mobilised primary narratives regularly. She used narratives about her own experiences and narratives from a Facing History and Ourselves⁴ course, the Cape Town Holocaust Centre (which the learners visited during the term), a visiting teacher who had been forcibly removed from District Six during the apartheid era, and the learners’ grandparents. Even though Bridgeton presented herself, but

4 *Facing History and Ourselves* is an international education program that offers teachers support in creating classrooms in which learners link the past to the present as morally aware, active, citizens.

also primary witnesses, as an authority, she regularly pointed out her positioned, or in the words of Seixas (2000) ‘post-modern’, approach to history, emphasizing the constructed and ever-changing character of knowledge, and inviting the learners to be critical, even of their own teacher. At the same time, however, Bridgeton had a clear moral stance, a desire to teach for change, involving her learners in what she calls “*volatile conversations*”, in which she challenged them to reflect upon the links between past and present and the teacher’s and learners’ responsibilities as advantaged, ‘white’ South Africans.

Bridgeton was, as she stated in a reflective interview, “*on a mission*” to question racism and thoughts of superiority (interview, October 2005). She seemed to attempt to uncover and deconstruct power relations in past and present South Africa by “interrogat[ing] the basis for [the] intelligibility” of racism and the dominant narrative of ‘superiority’ current amongst learners and teachers (Simon, 2005:21). This was not easy, as Bridgeton struggled with *how* to use first hand accounts in an attempt to change the learners’ thinking. The reason for this is that the use and construction of primary narratives went together with potentially undesirable and uncomfortable explicit and implicit positioning of self and others. In her construction and use of primary narratives, Bridgeton worked with her vulnerability, and that of learners’, in different, seemingly contradictory ways which, as the following two extracts show, had markedly different outcomes.

I might have chosen a black man — A conversation in June 2005

The day after the grade nines visited the Cape Town Holocaust Centre, Bridgeton told them that she did not think they had learnt from the visit. A heated discussion ensued, in which one of the learners brought up the following argument:

Richard: I think that the majority of the world is racist. Because, not, not like, say ok, coloured people, black people [away with them] and all that kind of thing. Because — honestly — do you have any children?

T: No, you, you are my children. Ok. Yes?

Richard gives hypothetical situation: If, if, if somebody’s child comes home with a black boyfriend, I don’t care what anybody says, no one, no parent, can honestly say they never thought twice, sort of ‘well, she could have done better’. Everyone/ if you see.

T interrupts and reformulates: So you are saying if my daughter would come home with a black boyfriend, I’m gonna think ‘she could have done better’?

Richard: No, no, not necessarily, [but] I bet you will, you will, you will think twice.

Learners talk at same time.

T: You don’t know if my husband is black or not.

A learner: Is he?

Richard: I don’t think so.

T: You don’t.

(Silence. Learners seem to be taken aback here!)

T: So I might choose a black man. I might have chosen a black man.

Learners talk at the same time.

Richard continues his argument: I bet you, if you saw two people, walking on the street.

T interrupts: Do you understand what I’m saying?

Richard: (dismissively yet respectfully) Ja, I know ... and continues his argument: if you see two white people on the street, you won't look twice, if they're black, like a Nigerian person and an English person, — like LIVE — you'll look.

T: But I think you don't see the point of what I'm saying: I might have chosen a person who's black because I LOVE him.

Richard: Ja maybe, I don't know.

This conversation was one of many in which the teacher repeatedly attempted to make the learners question their own thinking. Again and again, the learners resisted this attempt. It is possible that Richard appealed for racism to be seen as a universally shared characteristic (yet clearly speaking as 'white' and positioning the teacher as such), because throughout the previous interactions the teacher positioned herself implicitly as 'not racist'. Richard tried to convince the teacher by appealing to her personal life by using an imaginative scenario. Bridgeton, however, did not share personal, autobiographical information and rather questioned the learners' assumptions, implying that her personal life could be different from what they assumed it to be. She did this by using modality to move from real to imagined possibility, increasingly lowering her truth claim, yet finishing the discussion with a strong moral truth: "You don't know if my husband is black or not ... I might choose a black man, I might have chosen a black man ... because I LOVE him."

In reality, the teacher is single. As she explained in the reflective interview, Bridgeton tried to pre-empt the learners' stereotyping of 'we whites all think the same' by positioning herself as 'the other', namely as having married a 'black' man, or as (potentially) wanting to marry a 'black' man. This positioning as 'the other within' seemed to unbalance the learners and deflected Richard's attempt to create an inclusive 'we'-group. It is likely that because of this positioning the teacher challenged their assumption that 'we, whites think and act the same', but at the same time, she closed the door to potential honesty about being racist, in the conversation. During the reflective interview, Bridgeton explained her choice not to disclose certain aspects of her personal identity by referring to the impediments in post-apartheid interactions stating that *because* of the apartheid past, people easily *box* someone, and she did not want to be boxed (in, for example, the Christian faith). At the same time, she referred to an idea in the Jewish faith, namely that 'within every person is a whole universe' — an idea that is not yet internalised:

If you teach that, then how does that relate to you calling someone (long pause) a derogatory term? How does that rate/relate to your racism?

This reflection contrasted with the teacher's performance: 'being racist', a positioning which is part of the world (as being outside the self) and of the world enveloped within the self, was othered (Bar-On, 1999). The teacher's thinking and actions were complex and contradictory, not yet integrated. Instead of taking a vulnerable position herself, she seemed to expect the learners to take on such a position as she located racist thinking solely in *their* heads. According to Jansen (2009a) and Garrison (2004) learners struggle to take on such a position unless the teacher takes the first step. The learners in Bridgeton's class strongly resisted this pedagogical positioning. While the interaction was clearly a teaching-and-learning moment, Bridgeton seemed to have succeeded in making the learners doubt their assumptions, it was limited, because the teacher's positioning cut the discussion short. (Note Richard's seemingly deflated response: "*Yes, maybe, I don't know.*") What could the learner have said without showing disrespect towards the teacher?

Even I did it the other day — A conversation in September 2005

There was, however, later on in the term, one observed interaction where the teacher started to integrate her self-reflections and actions. During a discussion on nationalism and belonging, Bridgeton took on a vulnerable position in which she located prejudiced thinking within herself. It took place during one of the many *volatile conversations*.

The conversation was triggered in a particular way: the teacher left the room to pick up a memo. I switched off the tape recorder and the learners started singing the national anthem spontaneously. They

increased the volume while looking at the door as if hoping for a teacher to hear them. When the teacher arrived, they started anew and the teacher joined them. Some learners stood up and, while still singing, placed their right hand on their heart; Bridgeton did the same.

While this might seem melodramatic to the reader, the learners' performance was impressive at the time. They sang the anthem fully, without faltering. Their spontaneous act, and the passion and confidence with which they sang challenged my own assumptions in regards to these learners' sense of belonging and patriotism (compare with Nkomo & Vandeyar, 2008:14). It seemed to surprise the teacher as well, as she acknowledged and complimented their skills, comparing them to learners in other independent schools at which she had taught, commenting "*You are better than anybody else.*" (The learners cheered at this point.) The teacher then opened a discussion on nationalism ("*the idea [...] to acknowledge our oneness as a nation*") and the different ways in which people perceive it. One of the learners, Henk, linked it to the previous discussions on racism by asking if "*nationalism also fall[s] under the same criteria as racism and all the other discriminations*". In her response, Bridgeton took on a vulnerable position by sharing and analyzing her own xenophobic feelings:

T: I think, it's an interesting thing, Henk, I had a history teacher at school, and he, he refused to accept that there was any positive form of nationalism. I myself am not persuaded on that point of view. I think that we as humans, it's like having, it's a SENSE of identity, that doesn't necessarily have to be negative. Now, I mean nationalism, if you use it as [inaudible] as, as a historic term, it doesn't necess/it's a/it's a PRIDE in one's nation, it's a sense of belonging. You know, it doesn't necessarily have to be [shoot] the exclusion of — which is what you're saying. And I think when we, like for instance xenophobia. People coming from Zimbabwe, people coming from (pause) other countries HERE, and they get beaten up, because, even I did it the other day. Some friends of mine have Zimbabweans living next door to them. (pause) Ok? And those of you who/that might come from Zimbabwe, pardon me for what I am gonna say now, but those friends of mine live in the Southern suburbs, they got a really nice house, they haven't got an electric fence or whatever. None of the neighbours, some of them even don't have fences, you know, high fences, with security gates or whatever. These Zimbabweans pitch up, they put up a fence, they put electric wire around it, and they got this massive flash light that's on permanently right through the night. So I was very rude. And I was loudly rude outside. It was quite childish actually. (Learners chuckle) Considering I teach history and DO say things about not being, um, prejudiced towards others. But I just started chirping, we're having a braai, so I started chirping loudly about the neighbours from Zimbabwe, and if they want to have an electric fence they can go back to Zimbabwe. (Girl gasps) 'Cause that's not what we want in South Africa. Which I believe/ you know what my view is/ and other neighbours don't even have a HIGH wall, they've got LOW walls, and these guys are putting up a flipping armed factory! I don't what they're do/I would put out a GUN outside! (Learners chuckle) Ok, now!

Henk: You're intolerant. An armed factory (chuckles).

T: It's totally intolerant of ME/ What I'm saying is 'Zimbabweans pack your goods, and TREK', you get? [...] They feel, they have felt insecure, maybe. [...] Look, I'm not saying, I am not proud of my behaviour. I'm just saying: it was an EASY, it was an easy sort of a PREJUDICIAL response [...] they might have very well had a bad experience or something. I was EXHIBITING xenophobia, in this/ shsh (learners talking at the same time).

Sarah: What's xenophobia? Does that mean?

T: Xenophobia is an intolerance/ (Simon is talking at same time, inaudible) — Simon! Sh! — is an intolerance of people from other nations.

(Learners are talking at the same time, inaudible.)

T: Ok, I'll take your points now. I am not justifying my behaviour. It was CHILDISH. (pause) But the point is, it was quite fun at that moment because I don't wanna live in a South Africa where we

have electric fences, I don't/ What is that? When you as people in a country, have to separate your fellow country-people by an electric fence, what sort of country is that? Now, some of you might have electric fences, so you better give me feedback.

[...]

Simon: [...] you've got no right at all. I know it sounds horrible but you've got no right to judge them.

T: Exactly my point that I just made. That's exactly the point.

(Girl laughs.)

Simon: So what's the point of the story?

T: The point of the story is about nationalism — I come back to your point. Ok.

[...] *(Marta says she disagrees with the teacher and explains how her family put up electric fencing on their wall the year before, and the emotions of feeling unsafe having people breaking in on a regular basis that lay at the root of that decision). [...]*

T: It does/ it does make me/ it makes/ shshsh (to talking learners)/ it does make me think a little bit, about our society. All I'm, I think your point, Martha, listen I, I understand that people want to feel safe, and that's, that's a natural NEED.

Martha: We, We didn't do it viciously, we just did it for our own safety.

T: I know that, I'm not, I am sorry, Martha, I wasn't implying, I'm just saying, what always strikes me is to, is to think about, is to think about the BROADER picture; if we FEEL, shshsh, (pause) if we feel the need to put up fences and putting electric gates, and put up barbed wire; it SAYS something about our society. I am not making a comment about the need to feel safe. That's a natural need. Everyone wants to feel safe. But that we need to do that to PROTECT ourselves is a comment on our society, and we need to ask deeper questions about that. What does this say about our society? What does this say about my POSITION in this society? You know things like that. We need to think about it. We don't NECESSARILY have solutions. But I DO think that it's important that we think about that.

During this conversation the teacher positioned herself explicitly as xenophobic towards Zimbabweans who put up electric fences. Of note is that Bridgeton stayed with her own positioning; she did not explicitly position the learners as xenophobic. Because she stayed with her own position, and, at the same time, allowed the learners to take and hold their own positioning, it seems, the discussion was less heated, yet in-depth and honest (Lasky, 2005:901 & 907). The learners reacted in diverse ways, simultaneously expressing discomfort and ease around the risk the teacher took in exposing herself in such manner by chuckling, gasping and laughing. At the same time, however, they also seemed to feel safe enough to question her, and in this way to deepen their understanding around the challenges of nationalism and belonging.

There was an almost audible release of tension in the classroom, as Bridgeton had been working on her *mission* persistently for quite a while, and the learners had resisted this in equal measures of persistence. The release was not gory or sensational in character (“*what a bad a person you are teacher*”), nor was it vindictive or self-righteous (“*you see, I told you all along that everybody is prejudiced*”). There seemed to be recognition and a relief that this ‘dark’ (unaccepted) side, this side that needs to be changed and healed, is shared with the teacher, a sense that the learners are not alone in this. The teacher modelled self-awareness and honesty about the persistence and daily-ness of stereotypes, while seemingly lightening the atmosphere by using humour in her hyperbolic expressions (Garrison, 2004:102; Lasky, 2005:907). Importantly, the teacher took the authority and final responsibility for the interaction by focusing on and being aware of the learners’ position, without, however, disregarding her own position and the awareness that that position is different from that of the learners. While allowing this difference to be, she also modelled contemplation, wondering about, and opening one’s worldview, inviting the learners

to join in this process of asking difficult, uncomfortable questions about one's society and one's position in that society, questions which may not be answered or solved.

Fascinatingly, while there is openness in this interaction, the moral parameters are still clearly present. Bridgeton indirectly indicated desirable behaviour by lowering the power-claim (and threat?) of her own behaviour by labelling it as *childish* (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998). Yet, at the same time, Bridgeton indicated that there is truth in her *childish* behaviour too; it brings out the critical question: "*what does this [putting up fences] say about this society [and] [one's] position in this society?*"

This critical question, however, draws the attention away from Bridgeton's xenophobic thoughts, feelings and actions. This possibly indicates a boundary the teacher reaches here in making herself vulnerable as she places herself again in a strong(er), acceptable, 'belonging' position, namely the position of one who has the interests of society at heart. Yet, it is still an uncomfortable position. It does not have the same quality as the statement, "*I am not racist but ...*".⁵ While it is not a (radical) shift in which the advantaged, 'white', 'we' group is decentred (Boler, 2004), Bridgeton's layered and complex positioning unbalances her learners' thinking in an honest and productive way.

Conclusion

This article looked at the ways in which a teacher used vulnerability during two interactions in a grade nine-history classroom. In both interactions the crossing of boundaries is central; the boundaries of 'us' and 'them' in terms of the racialised bodies and the fences that we construct and that divide and define our lives. These were discomforting topics and, for both teacher and learners, a (desire for a) sense of belonging seemed to drive their positioning. While in both conversations the teacher aimed to invite the learners to question their thinking, the way in which she did this, and the learners' responses to her attempts, differed. During the first interaction, the teacher resisted the learners' idea that people are racist, by positioning herself as an 'other within'. The learners, in turn, resisted this strongly, possibly because of "the hatred or fear of one's own implication in what's being taught" (Ellsworth, 1997:57): how do I deal with racism inside me; racism that the teacher 'others'? This fear or hatred seemed to be less unbearable during the second interaction where the teacher, instead of focusing on the learners' thinking, made her own xenophobic thinking central, rendering it strange, and talking reflectively about what fear might say about one's positioning in life and in society.

What is so particular about these two interactions, especially the difference between them? We need to develop a language of description for, and a deeper understanding around, the ways in which teachers use different forms of vulnerability and how learners react to that. Something profound happened in especially the second interaction, where the teacher took the lead in risking opening herself up and reflecting on the human desire for closure and openness (Friedlander, 1994:260-2), and on the interrelatedness of the self and the world. This is not therapy or confession; that would be too easy a way to box this attempt to work on transforming personal and social identities in the setting of a classroom. There is something hopeful and promising in this interaction. It reminds me of the feeling of relief and the attentive state I was/am in as a child/student, when adults/teachers spoke/speak from this level instead of from a higher moral ground. The latter often calls up a tiredness, because it requests the listener to behave, to 'be' in particular ways, while the former requests merely listening, and in that listening lies potential learning, and also, importantly, a sense of belonging.

Yet, at the same time, the relationship between taking a vulnerable position and wanting to belong, within pedagogical relationships, needs to be investigated further: Do dialogues take place in other, similar and different, South African high schools? If so, what form does this interaction take? How do teachers and learners position themselves and others in regards to the past, present and future of their country and their respective responsibilities herein? Does vulnerability play a role and how does this relate to their sense of belonging? Moreover, more research is needed in relation to transformative teaching, especially

⁵ I express my gratitude to Carolyn McKinney for these insights. She also raised the question as to how this interaction, or a reflection on this interaction, would have been different after the xenophobic attacks in South Africa in 2008.

the forms it could, or maybe even should, take. For example, what would a dialogue look like in which 'the others' are, instead of only talked about, part of the interaction? How would individuals and groups across the spectrum of South African education position themselves and others historically, personally and pedagogically in such a joined dialogue, and how would this contribute to co-creating a better future?

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