

https://dspace.org/

What were they all about? Two questions that provoked different reactions and feelings

Botha, Elizabeth Mathakga

2014
Unisa
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/20490
Botha, E.M. (2014). What were they all about? Two questions that provoked different reactions and feelings. South African Journal of Higher Education, 28(6), 1972-1985.

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

What were they all about? Two questions that provoked different reactions and feelings

E. M. Botha
Wits School of Education
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg, South Africa.
e-mail: mathakga.botha@wits.ac.za

Abstract

The poor education and lack of exposure to literature for most blacks in South Africa makes it difficult of English Second Language (ESL) speakers to cope with the demanding expectations for engaging with the level of knowledge and skills required for working in higher education. Being black, being an ESL speaker, and having to work at a higher education institution (HEI), which privileges the use of English, have combined to shape the author's identity in many ways. The author uses the theoretical framework of agency and ownership in this narrative to share episodes of her journey as a student and an academic. Perseverance and persistence enabled her to overcome the challenges she faced during her studies and to navigate the expectations in her academic career. The narrative is based on two questions: the one triggered action of agency, and the other evoked feelings of self-doubt and judgement. As a black woman and an ESL speaker, the article intends to share the author's experiences associated with overcoming those challenges and celebrating her success against all odds.

Keywords: academic career, academic discourse, knowledge and skills, agency and ownership, perseverance

INTRODUCTION

I am presently a lecturer at one of the most prestigious universities in South Africa and I am about to submit my PhD thesis. There are not many black women at higher education institutions (HEIs) with PhD degrees. This is due to a multiplicity of reasons but chiefly because of the disparities of the apartheid education policies that denied the black population equal education opportunities to those accorded to whites and Indians. The desire to further my studies was in many ways influenced by, and in many ways a reaction to, an unexpected question that I was once asked about where I had obtained my master's degree, before I had even obtained my junior degree.

In my present career, besides having to complete my PhD, I am expected to publish academic papers. It took me quite a while to have the courage to publish a paper. Excited as I was to have overcome my fear of writing, the second question I was asked seemed to be checking if my writing was at the level where I could publish in recognised academic journals. The question was: 'In which journal is your

paper to be published?' This made me doubt my ability to write academically even more, since I thought that my writing was too inferior to compete with papers written by those with linguistic capital and knowledge in the culture of publication.

These two questions are used to signpost the key elements of the journey of my education and career developments. My actions illustrate experiences of agency and ownership, perseverance and persistence to overcome challenges in a social environment were women, in particular black women, do not get much recognition. The story positions me as an initiator of experiences of the 'mineness' of actions to pursue that where not part of my original plans.

The narrative also includes a reflection on failure and success to highlight the plight of blacks as a result of the historically poor education designed for them in South Africa. Despite differences in education, many blacks have striven to prove that it is possible to achieve recognition, through engaging in and making a contribution to education, in the same way as their white counterparts.

The first question about where I obtained my master's degree stimulated my interest to further my studies full-time, instead of studying part-time as most teachers would do to better their qualifications while earning a living. My reaction is described as gaining a sense of agency and ownership, which is an experience of my 'mineness'. The concept of 'mineness' is described as an experience of people's own actions, which requires two different accounts – one of action of agency and another of ownership. The fundamental levels of agency and ownership processing are feeling, thinking and social interaction (Synofzik, Vosgerau and Newen 2008, 411). These concepts are used in this context to explain my actions and the experiences acted upon in making the decision to improve my qualifications, and to take ownership in terms of obtaining my master's degree, and writing and publishing academic papers. This process of action of agency will be presented as events in the story as it unfolds. In the conclusion, I will discuss the conceptual ideas used in the narrative, which aims to inspire other women not to despair and not to be prepared to fail at the first sign of difficulty.

The narrative presents unfolding events in phases that share my experiences of successes and challenges. The first will include experiences relating to the beginning of my education, when I became a teacher, and developments in my teaching career. The next phase of the story is about my career shift, my exposure to and interaction the global world, and my experiences of action of agency and ownership; and lastly my career experiences in higher education. Before I present the events of the narrative, I will explain the narrative approach in order to relate it to theoretical perspectives.

NARRATIVE APPROACH

Narratives are stories which portray personal accounts of experiences, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Narrative intentions are to share an interest in making sense of experience, of constructing and communicating meaning to

others (Merriam 2002; Richardson 1994). They provide opportunities to reflect on emotions, contexts, influences and significant events related to people's experiences. Stories offer ways to construct and reconstruct a sense of self over a period of time. In addition to creating events, a story-teller 'creates spaces for understanding as multiple and diverse, as a work-in-progress, constantly evolving, growing, shifting and changing' (McCormack 2009, 142). Stories are 'a way of experiencing our lives' (Durance 1997, 26).

This narrative is a construction of my experiences as a teacher, an adult student and a lecturer, to indicate the evolving progress, growth, shifts and changes over a period of time. The story will first tell about my educational background leading to a career path showing my developments, challenges and intellectual shifts. The changes happened through the influence of action and ownership, as I was presented with opportunities and became inspired to improve my sense of self despite the disadvantages I experienced in my early educational career. These differences posed in challenges for the majority of blacks with no exposure to the linguistic capital dominating HEIs, and highlighted the differences experienced in workplace contexts. Despite the odds, the narrative presented intends to share both my experiences of success and failure, and the challenges and opportunities that have characterised my life to this point. This narrative has the potential to motivate other black women to realise that challenges should not deter them from attempting to achieve, as there is always a shining light at the end of the tunnel.

THE BEGINNING OF MY EDUCATION

I was educated during the apartheid era, when the education system was different for diverse racial groups in the country. Black education was the most inferior system compared to that of other racial groups in the country. As a black woman, not only was I oppressed by inferior education, but it was also common to hear adults say that a woman's education was not important. They were possibly influenced by African cultural patriarchal beliefs, which did not consider women to have a significant role in society, apart from bearing children and caring for them. In many black families at that time, a young woman was expected to be married and bear children, rather than become educated. Fortunately my mother, despite her own challenges, wanted to break such chains of slavery in her family by educating her daughters. She managed to pass Standard 6 (now Grade 8), and spent almost all her life as a domestic worker. I am the eldest of four girls and the second of seven siblings in my family. From my mother's domestic worker's meagre salary, she managed to put us through the levels of education deemed adequate to gain entry to the limited occupations designed for us as blacks in the areas of teaching, nursing or office work. None of us had the opportunity to go to university after school, until we each decided to further our qualifications. Being the eldest daughter, I had to choose a career that was to provide me with opportunities to be educated; to get a decent and secure job in order to help my mother educate my younger siblings; and hope to get married and fulfil the wishes of any African parent.

1974

To obtain my teacher qualification I completed Standard 8 (now Grade 10) and a two-year primary teacher certificate. This was the common route most primary teachers followed to obtain the required qualification to teach. With the changes that have happened after the new dispensation in the country, the students I now train to teach in both primary and secondary schools, have to pass their National Senior Certificate (NSC) and do a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.).

BECOMING A TEACHER

After completing my primary teacher certificate, I started my teaching career in the rural area of Limpopo. In the area where I first taught, everything seemed foreign when compared to the township life I grew up in, and where I developed a certain perception of the culture of living.

While teaching in Limpopo, I decided to study part-time to obtain my NSC. To study part-time in a rural area was a challenge, because there were not many opportunities or much support. There was only one high school that catered for learners in several villages in the region, and it was several miles away from where I taught. As a result, for those of us who attempted to study part-time, it was a challenge to access the necessary learning materials and the little support that may have been made available.

The idea of forming support groups for study was a luxury, as travelling was almost impossible. Travelling only happened once a month when I visited my family to share the small salary I earned. There were neither community libraries nor regular transport to reach places where I could either get assistance or collaborate with other colleagues working in neighbouring schools, and who were also busy with their studies. I had to do the best I could but this was not motivating, and after three years of attempting to obtain an NSC, I only managed to pass two subjects.

The struggle to do self-study was an indication of my lack of knowledge, and of the skills required to engage with knowledge. It was evidence that the poor education inherited from the apartheid system was purposefully designed to deny and frustrate the life of a black person, and this became evident during my attempt to improve my qualifications in order to make a better living. Studying further was a conscious decision to increase my chances of bettering my educational status.

After four years I got married and had to move in with my husband's family who lived in the township of Soweto. I taught at one of the schools in the area, and in 1982, I was part of a cohort of teachers who attended workshops that were offered to Soweto teachers. The aims and objectives of the project were to help language teachers improve their understanding of new approaches in teaching languages. We learned language teaching pedagogies that made me feel confident in handling my classes and engaging learners. Some of the techniques, such as the use of group work to enhance learner participation in a lesson, teaching reading for meaning, and so on, became useful tools to enhance my teaching. In addition to engaging in the workshops, I also took an interest in testing some of the theories and practices we

learned. As a result, I volunteered to try out some of the suggested teaching strategies in my classes, serving as the programme facilitator's pilot, and shared my experience with others as feedback about what transpired, or any observations I made during teaching.

My experience of agency started with taking advantage of the opportunity to participate in in-service teacher training workshops. These exposed teachers to new educational changes that were intended to improve pedagogical content knowledge in teaching literacy. They also provided opportunities to improve knowledge and skills and to teach language better than it had been taught before. Being exposed to thinking about effective ways to make knowledge and skills meaningful, made teaching enjoyable and purposeful. This also made it possible to establish stronger links with, and understanding of, pedagogical content knowledge of languages, in particular English.

At the end of the course, a group of 72 teachers were assessed for competence in aspects related to language teaching and use of a variety of teaching strategies. I was among the six who were rated with an excellent pass. The six of us were further trained as tutors with the intention to become facilitators for further intervention amongst primary teachers in Soweto. This encouraged me to revive my studies and I later obtained my NSC, and continued to study further on a part-time basis.

I registered with a distance learning university, but it was difficult to make much progress since I had a job and was the mother of a young child. Obtaining my NSC, and the experience from the workshops, opened further doors career-wise. Initially, at no point did I think of not being a teacher, but after two years at the end of the Soweto English Language Project (SELP) workshops, I was invited to join a non-government organisation named the English Language Teaching Information Centre (ELTIC) to train less privileged teachers to improve their language teaching. The intended objectives of the ELTIC workshops were almost similar to what I had done when attending SELP workshops.

CAREER SHIFT

In 1986, I was invited to join ELTIC as a teacher trainer for farm school teachers on effective ways of teaching languages. The company had few staff members, with only two blacks on the staff. I was the first black woman to take the position of a tutor. The move was a change to a new culture and social space. Working at ELTIC was not only a shift in physical space but it was shift of mindset, as I had to think differently from when I was teaching learners. I had to make an adjustment and fit in with the new institutional identity, with different ways of thinking and executing expected responsibilities. Some of the skills I learned during the SELP training were useful to get me started, but I still had more to learn. It was exciting and frightening to be in this new position. I had an opportunity to share my knowledge and skills to improve the pedagogical content knowledge of teachers from a very poor farm school environment that catered for black learners. In comparison to the rural and

urban areas where I had taught before, the situation at the farm schools I was exposed to was extremely deprived and made me appreciate some of the privileges I had experienced in education. Some of the teachers at these schools were unqualified. The schools were far from one another, and in schools with only one teacher, mostly women, they did the best they could.

This new workplace was a life-changing experience which shaped my identity. I worked amongst white colleagues from different educational and cultural backgrounds. The environment created a better relationship between white and black employees. Unlike the relationship between my mother and her employer, at ELTIC we called each other by name; a white colleague would offer to make tea for others; and we sat together and shared space comfortably without feeling that I was a less significant other. At first all these new experiences seemed uncomfortable because of the racial discrimination I experienced during the apartheid era. I later realised that we are all educators with the same intention: to make a difference to the lives of those who were in dire situations, in a different context in education.

At ELTIC I met prominent people like donors and academics who visited the library to borrow books and all seemed knowledgeable about and interested in educational development in the country. I learned a lot from engaging with these academics, who spoke about issues that were to benefit the poor and especially for blacks. Their knowledge was mind-boggling, and at the same time, it was exciting to realise that there was so much that could be done to bring about changes in education to benefit blacks.

I was also exposed to educational conferences, where academics shared intellectual research papers that informed and suggested ways to improve education in the country. Unfortunately, not all teachers are exposed to research works, and as a result, effecting changes in education is still a dire quest for most schools that are still dominated by the legacy of the poor apartheid education system.

Despite the level of education I had acquired before joining ELTIC, I had never been exposed to as many types of books as there were in the library. I was exposed to different genres, such as journals and reports. The use of indexing and monitoring books that were borrowed was a fascinating new experience. To this day, I share these experiences with my students to encourage them to cherish the power of books and to develop their literacy practices if they are to become good teachers. This is because it is possible that some of them may not have encountered or experienced books until being exposed to the vast quantity of books in the libraries at university. This new work place also exposed me to research works, which have become part of my involvement as an academic – a common practice at university level. At university level, skills such as reading and writing are part of the process of conducting research, which is necessary for teaching as well as for furthering academics' own studies.

Starting with my master's degree, up to my present studies, research has exposed me to a variety of reading techniques, to working with various genres, and understanding that writing conventions differ for various writing purposes, such as writing a thesis or a paper for publication. Writing does not come easily to me,

particularly as I could say that I have a richer oral literacy than a written one. I used all available resources to overcome the challenges I experienced.

My exposure to knowledge expanded my intellectual and emotional growth and I became keen to also engage in any possible way, and to contribute positively towards change in education through my teaching. The new experiences I gained at ELTIC had many positive effects on my life, which later influenced my action of agency and ownership (Synofzik et al 2008).

Other advantages of working at ELTIC was the privilege of travelling inside and outside the country. The purpose of these travels was mostly to enhance trainers' knowledge and skills needed for teacher training, and to expose them to new education developments and changes. In 1986 and 1990, I was privileged to spend time at Nottingham University and Leeds University in the United Kingdom.

EXPOSURE TO AND INTERACTION WITH THE GLOBAL WORLD

In 1986 and 1990, I was selected to join educators from various parts of the globe to participate in teacher training courses for second language teachers. These happened at Nottingham University and Leeds University in the UK. These were my first trips abroad, and they were the most exciting moments that I still cherish, despite other travelling opportunities I have had since. When at Leeds University, one day as we were sitting in a staff lounge and continuing a discussion that began in class, one of the participants in the group from Malaysia asked: 'Where did you obtain your master's degree?' I do not remember which feeling came first – excitement or shame – since I had not yet obtained any degree. I know that my sense of pride was overwhelming to hear someone think of me as highly educated. Shepperd and McNulty (2002, 85) consider this kind of reaction as the 'elated outcomes that exceed the counterfactual alternative'. The significance of the question, and why I think it was important, was that for some reason, someone unknown to me had recognised my possible potential as a knowledgeable educator. There is a possibility that he did not know that amongst the ten educators from South Africa who attended the course only one had a bachelor's degree and nine of us were qualified teachers with a diploma in teaching and an NSC.

The question made me start thinking differently about myself. I took pride in the fact that I had something good to share from my teaching experience. Unfortunately, my oral fluency overshadows my writing proficiency, which is necessary in order to successfully produce papers for publication. This challenge limits my opportunities to share my knowledge and experiences' as would be expected in an academic domain where academic papers are a powerful means to disseminate knowledge. Although I can claim that I have grown to some extent in my writing abilities, I cannot claim victory yet, but I am determined to have published a few papers before the end of my career.

The challenge presented by the difference between oral fluency and writing competency seems complex for most second language speakers who enter an

HEI with little or no linguistic capital – a component of cultural capital. Students with 'inequalities associated with cultural capital reflect inequalities in capacities' (Moore 2008, 109) that would enable them to engage with academic cultural capital. Academic writing is one of the discourses of power and dominance derived from the possession of cultural capital (Crossley 2008, 88). In this context, students entering university with less cultural capital, such as linguistic capital, are likely to be disadvantaged. This will bring me to the second question later in the article.

GERMINATION OF A PLANTED SEED

When I came back from Leeds University in 1990, I told my colleagues that I wanted to study full time at a university. My wish was to return to the UK to do my degree there. This did not seem to meet with their approval. I felt disappointed that I did not have anyone to support my wishes. However, after some time, one of my colleagues started to support the idea and she helped me to get financial support from the British Council, which was already closely associated with ELTIC, and I was granted financial support for three years to study full time at any university in the country.

After all the arrangements enabling me to start my studies were in place, I informed my husband, children and family. My son agreed to our arrangement as he understood the benefit for him. I promised to enrol him in a boarding school at one of the former white schools that had opened their doors to black learners. To my husband it was the beginning of a cold war, since he would lose my salary to help support the household. My mother surprised me more than everyone. She was fuming with anger, and told me that I was not being a responsible wife. She told me I was going to embarrass my husband if I stopped bringing in a salary to help run the home. At that time I could not care about any challenges with which family members confronted me; I did not care what was to happen, my mind was made up.

This is one way a black woman is prejudiced in society. If a man were to abandon his responsibilities in whatever way, a woman would have to take over, but a woman is expected to remain in her position and do what is expected of her. I am pleased to say my mother has since changed her mind as she has realised the privileges that I have earned from studying. I hope she lives to see me graduate, since she is excited that her daughter will be the first in the family, and in the community, to have the title Doctor, which is highly respected as well as being confused with a medical qualification.

Although I managed to pass each year of my BA degree, in the last quarter of my final year of study I was told that I lacked proficiency in writing, and that the department would never consider me for an honours degree. What angered me was that for all the time I was in this department I was never confronted with the challenges of my writing, except for formative comments that were commonly given for each student to improve. I never failed, even though my marks never exceeded a 'C' level, except a 'B' level for one practical assignment, but this did not make me feel incompetent. As I have stated before, although my marks were not high, I passed

assignments and exams fairly well, and my average final mark was good enough to get me accepted at another university, where I completed my BA Honours part-time in record time.

When I was invited to do my Master of Arts (MA) in the department in which I had done my BA, I was aware that doing the MA would be a challenge, but it was stimulating and motivating to know it was now possible for me to achieve the level of qualification that resonated with the first question I was asked in 1990. That unexpected question, which remained secretly buried at the back of my mind, turned out to be the motivator for what later became a reality in 2004. I do not think the person who asked the question had any intention to influence me or push me to study, but rather my experience of agency of my action made it possible for me to make attempts and to persevere, despite the challenges, in order to realise the germination and growth of the seed. My achievement also became what Shepperd and McNulty (2002, 85) regard as 'the affective consequence of unexpected outcomes'. At no point when I started to study in 1991 was it on my agenda to work towards obtaining my MA. This could be because of the multifaceted challenges I allude to in my narrative.

Fate and the circumstances of working in a university environment presented me with the opportunity to study further. However, writing academic discourse remains a challenge to be reckoned with in order for me to write papers for publication. This academic discourse uses unfamiliar conventions that are not easy to master, but by collaborating with others, my progress has become evident.

CHALLENGES IN WRITING ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

After starting with my studies, I realised that studying at university was a serious challenge. Despite my exposure to education as a teacher and my experience as a teacher trainer at ELTIC, I was unfamiliar with the culture and demands of the university domain, in particular the academic discourse and the demand to engage with literature.

My teaching experience and years of working did not prepare me well for the demands of studying at university. I have been involved in academic writing for a while now and I have completed my MA, and am about to finish writing my PhD thesis. I have presented papers at various conferences, but I still lack confidence in academic writing. This does not mean that I cannot present a comprehensive piece of writing; rather, I am baffled by the rules of the academic conventions that seem to differ from the normal way of writing that is taught in early learning. In addition, English conventions are complex and very different African languages. For example, the use of prepositions, subject-verb agreements and choice of relevant words to present meaning can appear to be very difficult to apply in the expected format. Unsuccessful and struggling students, in particular at university, experience feelings of isolation due to a lack of mastery of academic discourse. Lack of preparation in high school is possibly disadvantaging students coming to university with few or

none of the skills required for engaging with knowledge. Feelings of isolation or exclusion, among other factors, influence their inability to succeed in their studies as a result of different cultural, linguistic and social capital. Many students are able to present their knowledge orally, but when it comes to writing, their ideas are not elaborated upon – either because of their lack of language competency, or because they are unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse. At this level of study, writing requires specialised knowledge and skills that are different from what students are accustomed to (Ramburuth and McCormick 2001) Seligmann (2012) attributes the literacy challenges students face, to their early childhood and school experiences with text. The context of home community and culture is influential when learning to read and write in a new culture (Seligmann 2012, 60). This is no different to the culture of my former literacy experiences, which to some extent may still have an influence on, but are in conflict with, the requirements of my present culture in academia. This leads to the unfolding of events up to when the second question was asked.

MY EXPERIENCES IN ACADEMIA

In 1995, I started working as a lecturer at one of the former black colleges of education. This was the beginning of another era in my teaching career. I was highly enthusiastic about making a difference in education, and sharing the experiences I had gained through my studies and career path. Towards the end of my second year at this college of education, I received a call from the head of a certain department, inviting me to join her to teach at a then prestigious college of education, which had previously trained mainly white student teachers. I joined the department at the beginning of 1997, which was another exposure to a different cultural context with advanced teaching practices. Luckily, my work at ELTIC had to some extent prepared me and given me the confidence to adjust and cope in this new social setting.

When I joined, I was the only black woman in the department. At the time, most former white institutions were transforming race and gender disparities using affirmative action to redress the imbalances of apartheid. It could be that I was one of the guinea pigs used to test whether a black person, in particular a black woman, would succeed in an institution with culturally entrenched high standards in education. My fears of being the only black person among the white female staff was confirmed by one of my colleagues in the same department, probably based on her own prejudice, when she told me that no black person had stayed in the department for more than three months. I learned later that only one black woman had joined the department for a short period of time. However, to say that no black person had stayed in the department made it feel like there was something wrong with us, the blacks. The fact that I was invited to join the department also raised concern and caused confusion as to why this person doubted the abilities of blacks to cope at the institution. I never challenged her assertion, but it haunted me and made me want to prove myself at all costs in order to confirm that it had not been a mistake to invite me

to join the department. Although I acknowledge my experiences of being challenged by academic writing, that did not take away my confidence and sense of agency to make a noticeable contribution in teaching. After being in the department for two years, I was trusted to handle the fourth-year course all by myself. After a few years in the department, there were changes and some individuals left the institution. Of those who were in the department, I am the only member of that era remaining.

In 2001, due to a political decision made by the government of the day, the colleges of education were closed and had to merge with universities. Due to the merger, some college staff members were unsuccessful in retaining their positions; however, I was among the few successful ones. I was offered a position as senior tutor, the position I still hold. Hopefully, with two more publications, I will be able to apply for promotion to become a principal tutor, the equivalent of a senior lecturer.

During the process of merging, the differences between the position of tutor and the lecturer track were to accommodate academics who had taught in the colleges with a background in teaching, but who had no background of research. They had to apply for the tutor track, whereas those from universities who had a research background or interest, had to apply for the lecturer track. The conditions for each track's probation processes were also different. However, with time, as the university leadership changed, everyone was expected to engage in teaching, research and community participation if they were to be considered for promotion.

After the merger, there was pressure on all members of staff to engage in research and write academic papers for publication. The catch was that even those on the tutor track would be considered for promotion only if they succeeded in obtaining MA and/or PhD degrees and published between three and four papers. To many black and some white members of staff who were not interested in doing research, it was a difficult choice to make. Although this seemed unfair to some extent, on the other hand, it provided an opportunity for individuals to cross boundaries and test their abilities in ways they may not have thought they were capable of doing. Although research required advance knowledge and skills to succeed, the thought of being part of those who were admired because of their achievements, such as professors, was inspiration enough for me to make an attempt. It is paying off, because before long, I will be on the list of PhDs.

THE JOYS AND CHALLENGES OF MY ACHIEVEMENTS

The pleasure of my achievements is that I am about to submit my PhD thesis, and I have published a paper in an academic journal. It took me more than two years to finally publish, and my paper was rejected twice, but that did not deter me from persevering.

In contrast to the first question, the second question evoked entirely different feelings. When I finally learnt that my paper had been accepted, I proudly shared the news with a colleague. Instead of first congratulating me, however, I was asked: 'In which journal did you publish?' This question diminished my feeling of achievement to one of judgement and self-doubt, based on the realisation that the person who

asked the question was aware of the challenges I have with my academic writing. I experienced mixed emotions after the question was asked. I thought the question undermined my efforts to publish as a second language speaker, or questioned my knowledge of knowing which journal would have been appropriate to submit my papers to. It also gave me a sense of self-doubt about being able to compete with those who understand the social and cultural capital of the university domain. All these thoughts happened in a split second, and then I collected myself and straightened my shoulders, feeling the energy of motivation and pride that surrounded me at the time. I moved away holding my head high and nothing has stopped me from continuing my attempts to write. I am determined to publish more papers with the help of mentors willing to support emerging researchers. The question asked may have been innocent, but it depends on who posed the question and to whom.

The second question is in contrast to the one I was asked in 1990, by a colleague with no knowledge of my educational background, but who saw the potential in my knowledge, They made assumptions about my qualifications, mainly from hearing what I presented during class discussions. On the other hand, the colleague who asked the second question had a good knowledge of the history of the black education system in South Africa and the disadvantages that disempowered those who went through such a system.

The sensitivity surrounding social class and racial difference is something that cannot be easily dismissed when emotions are stirred. I do not hold a grudge against the person who asked the question, but I use the two questions to illustrate how differently they affected me. Both questions were unexpected, and yet each resulted in a different reaction. The former affirmed my ability and validated my decision to study further, whereas the latter seemed to question my capability in academia as a researcher and writer.

As a black woman academic coming from a historically disadvantaged educational background, it is my responsibility to be a role model for young black women; to let them know that as women from a disempowered community, they have to empower themselves and work hard to uplift themselves; and to claim their position in the (already challenging) working environment.

CONCLUSION

To make this narrative publishable in a recognised academic journal, I had to use concepts from other research works to enable me to express the evolving developments, challenges and successes of my experiences. My achievement is expressed through my experiences of lifelong learning. This is grounded with concepts used in Synofzik et al (2008); that experiences of ‘mineness’ account for action of agency and ownership. As part of my intellectual growth, the decision to study further was a process of ongoing mood swings, of trials and tests, as observed in Castle’s (2013) research study. To succeed and be where I am today was made possible through hard work, perseverance and persistence. These are identified as

apparent in the self-efficacy that characterises academic women who face obstacles, as outlined by the literature (Bandura 1989; Betz and Fitzgerald 1987). When women are determined to succeed, perseverance and persistence make it possible to focus on their goal and not be side-tracked by emotional or self-esteem issues (Badenhorst 2008). With each step of my progress, changes in my life also influenced my perceptions and my identity.

Moving from teaching learners to training teachers at ELTIC, and ending up at an HEI was a shift in my career and exposed me to a new context that gave me a new identity. The move was not only physical; there was also a shift in my experience that persists through each experience. Tajfel and Turner (1979) propose that social identity is derived when people belong where they find an important source of pride and self-esteem. My perception of 'self' changed as a result of a new context, which exposed me to the cultural diversity, and differences in educational background, that influence our future. My identity was influenced and I had to make a mindshift and adjust my perception of this new world.

Despite the challenges I experienced in my studies and my career in academia, I would not have succeeded if I had seen the challenges as impediments to trying harder. Acknowledging these challenges has made me more determined to find ways to overcome them and succeed in my writing. I agree with the idiom that says 'perseverance is the mother of success'. If I was not persistent in working towards completing what I started, I would not have gained the experience I share in this narrative. As I construct and reconstruct my past and present, it enables me to reflect on my experiences and to appreciate the courage and tenacity I showed in order to overcome the challenges of studying, and obtaining achievements beyond my expectations.

Accepting and acknowledging challenges should not lead to defeat but rather to learning how to overcome those challenges. This also requires an openness to seeking help and not feeling embarrassed to address issues that can hamper progress. Collaborating and creating communities of learning make it possible for students and colleagues to support those with less experience in the process of learning. This has to encourage more women to support one another, because it is likely that they will understand the many difficulties women endure as they attempt to improve their career opportunities. Experience of 'mineness' is a powerful tool to drive women to take action of agency and ownership of their achievements. This could also encourage more working women to move away from regarding themselves as inferior to men, intellectually speaking.

REFERENCES

Badenhorst, C. 2008. *Dissertation writing: A research journey.* Cape Town: Shumani Printers.

Bandura, A. 1989. Human agency in social cognitive theory. *American Psychologist* 44(9): 1175–1184.

Betz, N. E. and L. F. Fitzgerald. 1987. *The career psychology of women.* New York: Academic Press.

Castle, J. 2013. 'I had no time to bleed': Heroic journeys of PhD students in a South African school of education. *Journal of Education: Periodical of the Kenton Education Association* 57: 103–125.

Christie, P. 1985. *The right to learn: The struggle for education in South Africa.* Johannesburg: Raven Press.

Crossley, N. 2008. Social class. In *Pierre Bourdieu: Key concepts*, ed. M. Grenfell. Durham: Acumen.

Durance, B. 1997. Stories at work. *Training and Development* 51(2): 25–30.

Grenfell, M., ed. 2008. *Pierre Bourdieu: Key concepts*. Durham: Acumen.

McCormack, C. 2009. Stories return personal narrative ways of knowing to the professional development of doctoral supervisors. *Studies in Continuing Education* 3(2): 141–156.

McMillan, L. H. and S. Schumacher. 2010. *Research in education: Evidence-based inquiry*. Seventh edition. Cape Town: Pearson.

Merriam, S. B. and Associates. 2002. *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Moore, R. 2008. Capital. In *Pierre Bourdieu: Key concepts*, ed. M. Grenfell. Durham: Acumen.

Ramburuth, P. and J. M. McCormick. 2001. Learning diversity in higher education: A comparative study of Asian international and Australian students. *Higher Education* 333–350.

Richardson, L. 1994. Writing: A method of inquiry. In *Handbook of qualitative research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, 345–371. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Seligmann, J. 2012. *Academic literacy for education students*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Shepperd, J. A. and J. K McNulty. 2002. The affective consequences of expected and unexpected outcomes. *Psychological Science* 13(1): 85–88.

Synofzik, M., G. Vosgerau and A. Newen. 2008. I move, therefore I am: A theoretical framework to investigate agency and ownership. *Consciousness and Cognition* 17(2): 411–424.

Tajfel, H. and J. C. Turner. 1979. A integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, ed. W. G. Austin and S. Worchel, 33–47. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Whitehead, J. 2008. Using a living theory methodology in improving practice and generating educational knowledge in living theories. *Educational Journal of Living Theories* 1(1): 103–126.

Copyright of South African Journal of Higher Education is the property of Unisa Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.