

'Checkmating HIV&AIDS': Using chess to break the silence in the classroom

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Abstract

In this article, I give an account of my 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' action research project, which was an attempt to break the 'culture of silence' concerning HIV&AIDS and sex and sexuality in my classroom. In this project, I focused specifically on one code of sport, namely chess, and I point out and discuss the potential of using chess as an educational tool in addressing HIV&AIDS. It was found that learners enjoy playing chess and that it can be used in the Life Orientation classroom to promote HIV&AIDS awareness. This type of alternative awareness is relevant as learners in most schools were becoming fatigued by HIV&AIDS information overload. The project portrays the role of the teacher as a researcher and critical change agent in an HIV&AIDS-challenged society.

Keywords: HIV&AIDS, action research, chess, checkmating, culture of silence, prevention, awareness.

Résumé

Cet article est un compte rendu de mon projet de recherche-action « mettre le VIH/SIDA échec et mat », qui avait pour but de briser dans ma classe la « culture du silence » au sujet du VIH/SIDA ainsi que le sexe et la sexualité. Au cours de ce projet, je me suis concentré sur un seul sport, à savoir les échecs. J'indique et discute la possibilité d'utiliser les échecs comme outil d'enseignement en matière de VIH/SIDA. On a constaté que les apprenants aiment jouer aux échecs et que ce sport peut être utilisé dans la classe de « Life Orientation » afin de promouvoir la sensibilisation au VIH/SIDA. Ce type de sensibilisation alternative est pertinent, car les apprenants dans la plupart des écoles se fatiguaient de la surinformation sur ce sujet. Mon projet d'enseignement décrit le rôle de l'enseignant comme chercheur et agent de transformation critique dans une société confrontée au VIH/SIDA.

Mots clés: VIH/SIDA, recherche-action, échecs, échec et mat, culture du silence, la prévention, la sensibilisation.

Introduction

In reflecting on my own teaching practice, I realised that whenever I spoke about sex and sexuality in my classroom, there appeared to be a lack of response and active participation by the learners. I seemed to be doing all the talking and it appeared to me that the learners were schooled in a tradition that views any talk about sex and sexuality issues as taboo. This type of classroom practice, where the 'voices' of the learners were virtually absent, was in fact contributing to what Freire, as far back as 1972, termed the 'culture of silence' (Freire 1972:11). In my attempt to change my teaching approach to give the learners a 'voice', I wanted to break this silence. How then could I possibly go about giving the learners a 'voice' to talk about sex and matters concerning sexuality? In this article, I reflect on how I made an attempt to break the 'culture of silence' concerning HIV&AIDS.

The impact of HIV&AIDS remains a major health threat and continues to have a devastating impact on the socio-political and economic wellbeing of the global population. Nowhere has the impact of HIV been more devastating than in sub-Saharan Africa. During 2010, an estimated 1.2 million people died of

AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS 2010). According to Holden (2004:5),

[m]ore than 90 per cent of HIV-positive people live in developing nations, and sub-Saharan Africa alone is thought to account for about two-thirds of the global total of cases. The worst affected region in the world, Southern Africa, is home to about two per cent of the world's population – but thirty per cent of all the people in the world who are living with HIV&AIDS live in Southern Africa.

As there is still no cure for HIV&AIDS, prevention remains a priority. The appeal to improve HIV&AIDS education and prevention programmes for curbing the spread of the pandemic among young people is growing, while innovative approaches of how best to reach those groups that are most at risk and how to increase the effectiveness of the interventions, are key. Sport has been identified as a key tool in addressing HIV&AIDS among young people (UNAIDS & IOC 2004). The assumption is that sport may facilitate access to

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HIV&AIDS messages, as it is not only a well-loved pastime, but is also considered to be a good way of promoting sound moral principles of respect for diversity, tolerance, non-discrimination and solidarity. In this article, I focus specifically on chess to explore how I can improve my practice by using chess to help youth cope with the daily challenges and risks that they face, particularly that of HIV.

Establishing a case for classroom chess

This action research project emphasised 'prevention'. It is useful to note that at the 16th World AIDS Conference held in Toronto in 2006, prevention was once again prioritised as the main response to the HIV&AIDS pandemic. I realised that linking awareness to action is required in prevention programmes. After some deep reflection and intense introspection on my own life and the things that formed and shaped my thinking, I decided to teach the learners a game that made a difference in my life – chess. The view that chess can help learners enhance their chances in life is well supported by MacEnulty (2007:2):

Chess has been called the gymnasium of the mind and has been shown to greatly improve reading, thinking, creativity and analytical skills. The skills learned from chess are not limited to moving plastic pieces around a board. Benjamin Franklin said 'Chess is like Life'. World Champion Bobby Fischer changed that to 'Chess is life'. The great chess author/teacher Bruce Pandolfini improved on them both with his statement that 'Chess isn't like life; it's much more important!'

Chess, being a mind game, encourages deep logical thinking which enhances responsible action. Thus, promoting the playing of chess and linking this with issues of sex and sexuality could be a creative and strategic way of taking up the HIV&AIDS challenge.

A surprising number of studies indicate the advisability of making chess part of the school curriculum (Celone 2001; Frank & D'Hondt 1979; Liptrap 1997; Rifner 1993; Smith & Cage 2000; Van Zyl 1991). Chess embodies intellectual skills such as abstract thinking; memory pattern recognition; calculation; inductive and deductive reasoning; visual imagery; creativity; problem-solving; and decision-making. Simply put, chess encourages one to think. Before making a move on the chessboard, one is required to think at least three moves ahead. Similarly, in the quest to address challenges such as the modern day HIV pandemic, logical and clear thinking is required. As long ago as 1776 Benjamin Franklin (quoted in Blanco 1999:25) recommended developing chess as a life skill:

Chess fosters valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life that are to be acquired or strengthened by it, so as to become habits, ready for all occasions. Life is a kind of chess, [requiring] 1. Foresight ... 2. Circumspection ... 3. Caution ... 4. Perseverance ...

There are also more recent examples which highlight the impact of chess on youth:

- Rifner (1993) studied the effect of chess education on Grade 6 and 7 students. He showed that the problem-solving skills that chess teaches may transfer to tasks in other academic domains, including reading comprehension and mathematics, and enhance performance on standardised tests of academic achievement.
- Smith and Cage (2000) conducted a landmark study on the effects of chess instruction on Southern rural black secondary school students. They found that those students who received chess instruction scored significantly higher on all measures of academic achievement, including those pertaining to mathematics, spatial analysis and nonverbal reasoning ability. The authors emphasise the ability of chess to increase students' patience, perseverance, concentration and creativity.
- Grade 5 and 6 students in suburban Texas were the subjects of a study by Liptrap (1997). The study showed that students receiving chess instruction scored significantly higher in standardised tests of both mathematics and reading ability.
- Van Zyl (1991), who studied South African high school learners, concluded that chess nourishes latent learning abilities, and reinforces skills in logical and abstract thinking, impulse control, endurance and determination. Evidence of such improvement was seen in the significant increase in both the verbal and nonverbal IQ scores of the learners concerned after 3 years of chess instruction.
- Smith and Sullivan (1997), in their study of African-American teenagers in the rural south of the USA, concluded that chess education has a substantial positive effect on those analytical thinking skills which are important in the fields of mathematics, engineering and the physical sciences. The impact was particularly strong among girls.
- Frank and D'Hondt (1979) gave 1 year of chess instruction to teenagers in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They came to the conclusion that chess education had a strong positive influence on the development of verbal and mathematical abilities.
- In Celone's (2001) study of 7–14-year-old students in suburban Connecticut, 1 year of chess instruction was shown to significantly increase student scores in tests of nonverbal intelligence. Such improvement reflected their enhanced abilities in abstract reasoning and problem-solving.

The above studies show that playing chess improves logical reasoning skills, concentration and self-esteem of the players. This explains why, for decades, chess has been taught at, and played in schools around the world in such countries as diverse as Russia, Iceland, Venezuela and China, which have included classroom-based instruction in chess in their curricula. It is also the reason why America's Foundation for Chess is striving to make chess a standard part of the American school curriculum.

Ethical considerations

Before I commenced with the research project – which took place over a period of 6 weeks – in a Cape Town primary school where

I taught, I explained my work and negotiated participation in the project with the participants. As Ely (1991:218) puts it, '[q]ualitative research is an ethical endeavour' and I, therefore, involved the participants from the start of the research process. Although the learners agreed to participate, and were told that they could withdraw at any time, I enquired from them why they were willing to participate. They responded that 'Projects are exciting and make school interesting' and 'Sir, why can't we do something exciting – something practical?', but were also intrigued as can be seen in 'Sir, what has chess got to do with fighting AIDS?'

This gave me, the teacher-researcher a clearer notion of what learners wanted and at the same time hinted at having raised their interest. After getting assent from the learners, I further explained what was expected of them as co-researchers/co-learners.

When I spoke to the principal about the planned action research project, he was supportive, as he agreed that sport is an integral part of development, and that the project would complement the work done in the Life Orientation (LO) learning area. He indicated that I should also get permission from the Head of Department and the teachers of the Grade 7 classes. At the Grade 7 teachers' meeting, I presented my proposal to the teachers, who felt that they would support it, but that I should also consult the parents as well. At the scheduled Grade 7 parents and teachers meeting, I informed the parents of my planned action research project with their children, and they too gave the go-ahead. At a staff meeting held the following day, I was officially given the full support of the principal and the staff to do the research project. It was expected of me to constantly update the Western Cape Education Department, the school principal, the school governing body, the teachers, the parents and the learners about my research. Ethics is concerned with how one treats individuals with whom one interacts and is involved (Mathison, Ross & Cornett 1993:1) and I deliberately tried to work ethically throughout the study, intending to do no harm, but most good. Furthermore, anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature, as it consisted of an emancipatory action research strategy (Carr & Kemmis 1986). An emancipatory action research strategy is similar to a critical action research approach and is grounded in critical hermeneutics and often by Neo-Marxist theories in Sociology (Habermas 1972), Psychology (Holzkamp 1983) and Education (Freire 1972). Strong practices of emancipatory, critical and participatory action research can be found, for instance, in Australia and New Zealand (Hoogwerf 2002; Kemmis & McTaggart 1998; Zuber-Skerritt 1996), Austria (Boog 2003[]) and South Africa (Walker 1990). Reason and Bradbury (2001:1) have the following to say about emancipatory action research:

Emancipatory action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in pursuit of worthwhile human purposes grounded in a participatory worldview ... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern

to people, and more generally, the flourishing of persons and their communities.

This type of action research approach seemed to suit me as I wished to empower the learners that I worked with, as well as myself. On this, Walker (1990:61) says that action research allows, '... teachers' voices and those of their pupils as partners in the research enterprise to be heard as producers of educational knowledge'. The teacher and learners are not only concerned with changing and improving their practice in the classroom, but also unequal relations in the wider social context. Here, processes in the school are viewed in relation to the macro-environment in which the school is situated. Knowledge is looked at critically in terms of how it is socially constructed and how it, in turn, shapes and hopefully changes reality.

Participants

The Cape Town school where I taught LO and undertook my research had three Grade 7 classes. For the purpose of the current research, and in order to secure sufficient contact time with the researched class, I selected one Grade 7 class, consisting of 29 learners, as my sample. The specific class was chosen because since the beginning of the year the learners in that class had shown that they would be likely to be the more cooperative group. I included the other two Grade 7 classes when I tested the chess knowledge of the 29 learners. I also drew on the insights of LO educators from a neighbouring school in order to gather their responses concerning an action plan for HIV&AIDS.

Data collection

According to Grundy and Kemmis (quoted in Robinson 1993:68), '[t]he function of data in action research is to provide a basis for reflection. Data represents action in such a way that enables it to be reconstructed rather than only recollected'. My data-collecting techniques were practical, suiting both my requirements for my research and its purpose. In choosing my data-collecting techniques, I adhered to the advice given by Hopkins (1985:41) a few decades ago: 'Any method used must not disrupt the teaching commitment, and must not be too demanding on the teacher's time'.

The data-collecting techniques I decided to use comprised the making of field notes, learner journaling, individual interviews, focus group discussions and the administering of a questionnaire. All such methods are discussed below.

Making *field notes* seemed to me to be the most convenient method of capturing the activities in my classroom. This method of data gathering acted as an on-going record keeping and *aide-memoire*. Through use of the method, I was able to make the important observation that I tended to dominate all classroom discussion to such an extent that the learners' 'voices' were effectively silenced and marginalised. The field notes also enabled me to report on what exactly was happening during the lessons, whether the learners were constructively involved in the lessons, or whether they were merely passing time at the school.

Learner diaries provided me with interesting feedback from the learners' perspectives, especially in their providing interesting contrasts to my own field notes. However, not all learners consistently kept their diaries. Despite such a shortcoming, the data provided me with enough evidence of what was happening, and of how the learners felt about the lessons and activities in which they were engaged.

Interviewing proved to be a valuable way of gaining information during the project. The interviews were conducted during the project, with my observer (the triangulator) and I interviewing learners and being interviewed by them in turn. Such interviewing assisted me to build up a close relationship with my learners, although some learners were reluctant to talk about their own personal experiences.

A *focus group discussion* was held with LO educators from a neighbouring school in order to gather their responses concerning an action plan for HIV&AIDS. The focus group discussion consisted of eight different educators. My interaction and discussion with them served as a motivation for me to continue with my project.

By administering a *questionnaire* at the end of the project, I was able to gain an overall understanding of the learners' opinions of the project. The questionnaire removed the need for face-to-face contact; was easy to administer; and as it was anonymous, enabled participants to give direct responses which they did not have to justify immediately. The learners completed two questionnaires, the first handed out at the beginning of the new school year, gathering their opinions on the issues of HIV&AIDS and sex and sexuality. The second questionnaire, completed at the end of the project, was intended to gather their opinions on the project. I felt that the information gathered by means of the questionnaires would compare well with the information gathered by means of my other data-collection tools, and which will contribute to trustworthiness.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the credibility and reliability of the results of the research project. To strengthen the trustworthiness of my project, I used triangulation. Altrichter, Feldman, Posch and Somekh (2008:147) contend that triangulation 'gives a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation'. The three triangulators who assisted me in my project proved to be just that. Rather than being removed from the action in the classroom, they participated in it, joining in the 'flow of things'. The feedback provided by the three triangulators whom I had invited to sit in helped to inform my reflection on my teaching practice.

The process

This study, entitled 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS', took some planning and preparation. I was reminded by Fullan's (1991) argument that three key factors determine the success of the initiation phase of any innovation, i.e. the relevance of the innovation to the teachers, the resources available to support the change and the readiness of the school to initiate, develop or adopt a given innovation. He isolates two aspects of readiness – individual and organisational – in the following way:

Readiness may be approached in terms of 'individual' and 'organisational' factors. For individuals: Does it address a perceived need? Is it a reasonable change? Do they possess the requisite knowledge and skills? Do they have the time? For organisations: Is the change compatible with the culture of the school? Are facilities, equipment, materials and supplies available? Are there other crisis or change efforts in progress? (Fullan 1991:63)

As teacher, I viewed chess as fulfilling a need to equip the youth in my charge, felt the change required was reasonable, that I was sufficiently equipped to teach them chess and to teach them about HIV, sex and sexuality, and as class teacher I had enough time in the LO learning area.

In my action research project, I started with a focus group discussion prior to my lesson activities. Focus group discussions are guided discussions among a small group of people who share a common characteristic central to the topic of interest (Krueger & Casey 2000). They can serve as a means of developing questions or concepts for questionnaires and interview guides (Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gilmore & Wilsdon 1995; Lankshear 1993). The focus group discussion was held to gather responses from neighbouring LO educators concerning an action plan regarding HIV&AIDS. The focus group consisted of eight educators from different schools and they discussed tentative implementation plans for school 'AIDS month'. The hour and a half focus group discussion was video recorded and field notes were taken, in the presence of the parent observer.

The focus group discussion addressed five critical areas, i.e. prevention, in terms of curriculum, awareness and safety issues; care and support (of the educators) in terms of counselling, emotional support, workload and disclosure/confidentiality issues; care and support (of the learners) in terms of the implementation of the stipulations of Education White Paper Six (Department of Education 2001), the treatment of children, academic support, counselling and visitations; partnerships in terms of multisectoral response, forums in respect of Child Care Units and of resource mapping; monitoring in terms of evaluation systems.

Most of the educators mentioned that their learners seemed to be aware of HIV&AIDS, but that they needed an action plan. One of the educators mentioned that the attitude of some teachers remains a worrying factor, saying about such attitude:

How do we measure success? We are doing things in the dark and in isolation. Theory and practice are not related.

Another educator provided the following input:

Guarantees or not, we as teachers must do our little bit. We need to try to change the mindset of our teachers and learners. Although we cannot reach everyone, maybe we can reach at least one. If we can reach one, then we might make a difference.

This prompted me to propose my action plan, providing input on 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!'. As an active participant in the focus group discussion, I learned some valuable points from the other educators. I then anticipated putting my plan into action, as it seemed to suit the prevailing needs of both our surrounding schools and our community at large.

My plan which I implemented consisted of the following lesson activities:

Activity one: linking chess play with LO and HIV&AIDS

I started the session by giving reasons for implementing chess in the LO class. I also handed out the school's HIV&AIDS policy document. I then provided an outline of the project, and stated the aims and objectives of the project.

I commenced the first lesson by providing each learner with a set of pieces and a chessboard with the logo 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!' printed on it. I laid down some ground rules and also gave the learners some incentives. They were informed that as soon as they could move the pieces correctly, they would receive their own free set of chess pieces and chessboard to take home with them.

After my introduction, I called on another chess coach to undertake the actual training for the game. I was then able to observe the learners and to take relevant notes, while he taught them how to play chess. The coach gave a short introduction to the history of chess and then started with his instructions on how to play the game, stating: 'Before you move you need to think. You need to anticipate your opponents' moves before deciding on your own move'. The first lesson, lasting an hour, emphasised the ways in which the different pieces can be moved, starting with the possible moves of the pawn and ending with the possible moves of the knight. The coach stressed that the most interesting and unique piece is the knight, which can 'jump'. His explanation captured the imagination of the learners. Regarding the coach's explanation, the parent acting as observer stated:

Very interesting! You have to be alert and think and concentrate. I am quite surprised at the interest shown of the students towards this game, as questions were frequently asked throughout the demonstration of the game. I, too, had no knowledge of how the game works. My conclusion of today's lesson is that this is a game that gets you thinking, can boost your self-confidence and keeps you positive.

When the coach had finished his explanation, the bags in which the pieces were kept were torn open and the learners eagerly packed the pieces on the chessboard so that they could start playing. At the end of the class, the learners were asked to repack the boards and asked questions about the day's lesson, to which they responded enthusiastically.

Activity two: 'making the right move!'

Before we started the actual chess lesson, I allowed the learners to express their feelings about their first encounter with the game of chess. Most of the learners had told their family members that

they had started to learn how to play chess and that they were enjoying the game. The game was taught in conjunction with learning about HIV&AIDS. This was evidence that the project (and also HIV) was being discussed at home. Another parent observer noted the following:

Making the right move in your everyday life can have far-reaching consequences. The nature of the game (chess) is a thinking game and in everyday life we need to think. If we want to prepare or take up any challenge in life, be it AIDS or tik, then we need to sharpen our thinking skills.

Aneesa, one of the learners, also emphasised the importance of making the right move on both the chessboard and in life:

As the game started, I actually found out that total concentration was needed and careful thinking and planning before making a move – the right move. One game could take quite a while, or with quick thinking you could check-mate in no time.

Reflecting on my field notes of Lesson Two I was satisfied that it had been an interactive session, during which the learners all focused on the large demonstration board placed in front of the class. The objective of the game was to reflect on the logic of the moves made. The objective of the second lesson was also expounded by the coach who said:

Today we will engage in an interactive game, where each one will come to the board and make a move – the right move. Each move made needed to be substantiated as to why the move was being made.

As the lesson progressed, the coach emphasised the idea of 'touch as a move'. To conclude the activity for the day, both the coach and I played a simultaneous game (two or more players playing against one player at the same time) against the learners to check whether they could, in fact, play chess.

Activity three: consolidation and strengthening of playing skills

In this activity revision was done to consolidate and strengthen the playing skills of the learners. I then explained to the learners that they would be tested on their newly developed skills in relation to another class. The latter class had no knowledge of the game and the learners who had learned how to play chess were to apply what they had been taught over the preceding 3 days and had to teach the other learners how to play chess. They seemed quite eager to take up the challenge. They were then asked how they intended to set about teaching the other class.

According to parent observer's notes,

[t]oday Mr Esau asked the class what they have learnt. They replied that they have learnt about points and that the king was the most important piece on the board. They also mentioned that they are quite eager to come to school, for the mere fact that the highlight of the day was the chess class.

Initially, I thought that the consolidation phase might be boring for the learners. However, unlike the usual reaction that is often encountered when revising and memorising the times tables, the learners seemed to be relatively enthusiastic and involved. The coach then revised the basics of the game once more. He tested the learners' knowledge about and skills in the opening, middle and end game theory by showing them different interesting positions of the chess pieces on the chessboard.

In general, all the learners felt proud about their acquired skill and achievement, with one learner stating:

I really feel good about myself, as I never thought I will be able to understand and be able to play chess just over three days.

Activity four: each one teach one

Each learner was encouraged to teach another how to play chess. I explained that 'Each one will teach one' was a common phrase that was used during the apartheid era for enlightening people about what needed to be learned, and that that was to be our strategy for the activity. I kept Brown's (1992:8) definition of group work in mind:

Group work provides a context in which individuals help each other; it is a method of helping groups as well as helping individuals; it can enable individuals and groups to influence and change personal, group, and organisational and community problems.

My thinking was also underpinned by the work of Becker (2005:219), who sees group activity as an empowering process, as can be seen in the following:

We have seen how a supportive network becomes created through commonality of needs and mutual aid and how interpersonal connectedness generates power. The culture of silence, oppression and apathy that marginalised people's experience can be overcome using groups as forums for education and empowerment.

The coach continued the training by stating that,

Today we have a special treat for you; your fellow class mate will teach you the game of chess. First, introduce yourselves to each other and then start teaching as best you can. You only have an hour in which to teach.

They introduced themselves to their fellow learners before they began explaining the game to them. They explained in a way that they best knew, and applied what they had been taught. The coach also instructed them in how they could best begin playing the game by showing them the relevant moves, instead of explaining too much in detail. The noise level rose, but intensive interactive learning was taking place. I noted that most of the learners from the new class were completely enthralled by what their young peer coaches had to teach them. They seemed interested to learn from their peers.

The parent observer commented in her notes as follows:

I went around the class to observe if the first group of learners actually knew what they were doing and I must say I was very impressed with what I saw.

Towards the end of the activity, I once again explained the basic rationale behind the project 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!' to the combined class and also emphasised that they should strive to put into practice what they had already learned, and encouraged them to think strategically and to be innovative and creative in their approach to the game. I pointed out that, whenever one plays chess, one has to think three moves ahead. In everyday life, when faced with peer pressure, decision-making is necessary and one also has to think ahead of the consequences of one's decisions.

Activity five: demonstration game and simultaneous session

With the number of learners having doubled to 58, the demonstration lesson became rather tedious, but most learners were actively involved in playing the game. Options and opinions were constantly discussed throughout such games. The final activity, a simultaneous session during which the coach and I played against 20 players at a time to test what they had learned, concluded the training. A week's playing was concluded, with the learners having gained much, as was indicated by their performance that afternoon. I found the comments of the co-trainer/coach for the duration of the course quite motivating and encouraging. In his notes, he wrote:

After the three days the students walked home with the knowledge of how to play the game, discipline has been installed in them, they had a more positive outlook on them, and after all the talks Mr Esau gave them on checkmating HIV&AIDS, they looked at life just a little bit more different[ly] and appreciated life much more.

Before leaving the class, the learners were asked to repack their boards one more time, as it was standard practice to encourage them to double-check that all the pieces were in place for the next game. I handed out questionnaires for the learners to complete and to return to me at their earliest convenience.

Activity six: graduation day

A 'graduation ceremony' formed part of our school's activities on AIDS awareness day. As promised, the certificates, chessboards and chess sets and the notepads containing HIV&AIDS-related information were handed out to all the participants in the training, who felt a sense of achievement in what they had accomplished. The contribution of the 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!' project was well received by the school community as a whole. The success of the project was also articulated by a learner:

These chess pieces will always remind me to be sensitive towards AIDS patients. Whenever I get myself involved with anything, I will first think, analyse and then make my move.

The coach also encouraged the learners to put into practice what they had learned from the project:

Like life, chess is a continuous interaction with the mind. There are not only one or two options, but there are numerous choices or moves that one can make. Making the right move must include the safety element first. Our learners have all passed the chess test, but they must now implement what they have learned on the board in their real life.

Not only has the 'culture of silence' surrounding HIV&AIDS been broken, but as a result of the processes in which I engaged the learners, a suitable space has been provided in which to make their 'voices' heard.

Discussion

The emancipatory action research project required that I reflect on my actions in the project towards improving my practice. I believe that it is how one infuses awareness into one's actions that will make the difference in addressing HIV. It seemed that from the first activity the project captured the attention of the learners concerned, as was recorded by the parent observer:

Very interesting! You have to be alert, think and concentrate. Linking Chess play with the HIV&AIDS epidemic makes the students more aware of the AIDS factor . . .

The engagement of the learners indicated their enthusiasm to be part of the project, and their willingness to participate showed that they were eager to acquire the necessary tools to improve their chances in life. What was interesting in the activity was that they saw that 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!' project related to the school's HIV&AIDS policy. One of the learners commented in her notes as follows:

The chess project covered a lot of the information reflected in our school's AIDS policy. In fact after the project I understand our school's HIV&AIDS policy better.

This was evidence that the 'culture of silence' surrounding HIV&AIDS at the researched school had been eroded.

During Activity Two, I initially tried to consolidate the work carried out in Activity One. In so doing, I emphasised the idea of 'making the right move' and its implications for decision-making. It appeared from the comments of the learners as though most of them had discussed the project at home. This also served as evidence that the learners were discussing HIV&AIDS and chess at home with their families and peers.

Activity Three was used to consolidate the work done in the previous two activities, and was also used to sharpen the chess playing skills of the learners. The interaction between the teacher and learners and the enthusiastic involvement of the learners in demonstrating strategic moves strengthened my perception that the learners had been empowered. Cullingford (1999), a qualitative researcher, who has worked at a variety of schools,

would have found reinforcement of his ideas in the experience that our learners had, in keeping with his statement:

When one studies children's experiences of school rather than the curriculum, management or teaching styles, some personal and consistent insights emerge . . . indeed one of the most fundamental insights that children have of school is their own powerlessness, their helplessness in the face of a given system. (1999:195)

Activity Four with its liberatory phrase 'Each one will teach one' was undoubtedly the highlight for all participants involved in the project. The activity dispelled the myth that teachers own the educational rights to being the only guardians of education in any given classroom. Although it took a team of coaches 3 days to teach 29 learners how to play chess, it took 29 learners just over an hour to teach another 29 learners how to play the game. The original learners were continuously informed, assisted and directed throughout the activity. After having engaged in interactive activities with the learners, I notice and consider certain aspects of my daily teaching practice more critically. Seeing that teachers can direct learning activities in the classroom, they are responsible for creative and active learning engagement of their learners.

Activity Five, the final lesson with the learners, was used for testing whether all of them could in fact play chess. I also questioned them how the moves on the chessboard could be linked with the everyday challenges they face in society. It is useful to reiterate the words of the coach:

After the three days the students walked home with the knowledge of how to play the game, discipline has been installed in them. It appeared that they had a more positive outlook and, after all the talks Mr Esau gave them on checkmating HIV&AIDS, they looked at life just a little bit differently and appreciated life much more.

Though the above words sounded over optimistic to me at the time, they provided me with some indication that I was addressing the 'culture of silence' and that I was indeed involved with 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' in my primary school classroom.

Activity Six, on which all involved in the project graduated, was part of our school's AIDS awareness day. This was an opportunity to take the project out of the classroom into the community. After morning assembly, I was approached by the personal consultant of a private trust, who proposed taking the 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!' project to other schools in the country. The proposal serves as evidence that the project was an empowering event, which was already impacting on the community and its leaders. It also seemed as though the 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!' project had made a definite impact on the school at which I was teaching and where I was conducting my research. To reiterate the words of the school principal,

[e]ncouraging deep and logical thinking about our actions is crucial for decision making. In our country, where HIV&AIDS

is a major threat, we need to pull out all stops to take up the AIDS challenge. 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' is an interesting way to get learners to think. In order to make the right move in our lives, we need to think and playing chess does just that. Allow me to compliment Mr Esau and his team for bringing this innovative project to our school. Kids must want to come to school and this project captured their attention.

From classroom practice to community interaction

The 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!' project has been acknowledged by the¹ Vrygrond community in addressing HIV. The² Generation for Change, i.e. the youth in the Vrygrond community, hosted its first ever Chess tournament under the banner 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS!'. A journalist from the *Weekend Argus*, 2 December 2006, wrote the following:

Chess W.P. is promoting chess as an activity under the slogan 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' in order to encourage young people to think about their next move both on and off the chess board, and the consequences of making choices in life.

Further acknowledgement of the potential value of the project is seen in invitations from inter alia a sports administrator of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology inviting me to organise a similar project in the Langa community; a Goodwood prison supervisor inviting me to do the 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' project amongst the prisoners; and the Department of Sports and Recreation of the Western Cape inviting me to organise a 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' workshop for sports officials. This, I believe, is evidence that my small emancipatory action research project, which began in my classroom, had been more successful than I could have imagined. Taking all of this into consideration, my action research project could be seen as a start or a small attempt towards 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' in classrooms in particular, and in the community at large. On reflecting on my actions, I am reminded by Robinson (1993) that:

One small step for one teacher may indeed be one great leap for emancipatory practice, depending on how that small step is harnessed, supported and shared. (5)

Emancipatory action and understanding change

As an emancipatory action researcher, I can never claim that my actions had been truly liberatory and that my project was 100% successful. The HIV&AIDS pandemic has not been 'checkmated', but it is being 'checked'. I do not, in other words claim that my learners and I have won the game against AIDS, but at least that we have become aware of the threats on the board and in life. Our defence mechanisms are in place, and it appears that my learners and I are taking control of the game to an increasing extent. If my action research project claims to be an attempt to be liberatory, then it would be more than useful and appropriate to measure my actions against emancipatory action research as formulated by Carr and Kemmis (1986):

Emancipatory action research is an empowering process for participants; it engages them in the struggle for more rational, just, democratic and fulfilling forms of education. It is 'activist' in that it engages them in taking action on the basis of their critical and self-critical reflection, but it is prudent in that it creates change at the rate at which it is justified by reflection and feasible for the participants in the process. (205)

Judging my actions against the above, I could argue that my action research project has been fulfilling and liberatory. The mere fact that I have made an attempt to change my classroom approach to 'empower' my students, as well as myself, assured me that I was active in a process which Freire and Shor (1987:45) refer to as 'illuminating reality'. By also involving the parents in the research procedure, I expanded my role as a teacher. This could be seen to be a liberatory act as the school became an agent promoting democratic practices which are dedicated to the ethos of inclusion and negotiation. According to Kincheloe (1991),

[i]t is important to note that teachers are not the only educational actors who engage in research. If we are serious about Dewey's notion of a democratic community where all parties have a voice in the formulation of policy, then parents and community members must be participants in the public conversation about education. These people will also be empowered by an understanding of critical research. (20)

Conclusion

The project, together with other sports code projects with similar aims and objectives, can, as argued above, contribute to making youth aware and sufficiently skilled to deal more responsibly with those aspects of the HIV pandemic that affect their lives. Barnett and Whiteside (2002) argue that, when there is openness and a willingness to talk about HIV&AIDS, the prevention of infection becomes a more viable enterprise. Changing my classroom approach during LO lessons, drawing on the game of chess, enabled such openness, which could also extend beyond the classroom. If the project has allowed the learners to transfer their raised awareness of HIV by discussing it with their families and friends, then the project has contributed to challenging the 'culture of silence'. The process of 'Checkmating HIV&AIDS' should then be well on its way.

Emancipatory action research can become a powerful force supporting the transformation of society from defeatism to one of hope and possibility. My optimism comes from my personal experience, as I have experienced the power of inquiry in my school and other schools where I have worked, with fellow educators and in my own classroom. I agree with Sagor (2000) that, when teachers have convincing evidence that their work has made a real difference in their students' lives, the countless hours and endless efforts of teaching seem worthwhile.

Finally, HIV&AIDS will remain a problem for a long time to come. Addressing the 'culture of silence' and the continuous 'checking' of HIV&AIDS by teacher-researchers will be a phase that contemporary society will have to sustain to take on challenges such as the prevention of HIV infection in a meaningful way.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my sincere thanks to the principal, staff, parents and students of the Cape Town Primary school for their support and innumerable contributions. In particular, I thank the learners without whom this study would not have been possible. Also a special thanks to the field workers who supported and assisted me with the gathering and capturing of the data. I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the school and fieldworkers involved in this HIV&AIDS project.

Notes

1. The Vrygrond community is an informal settlement situated in the Lavender Hill township area on the Cape Flats.
2. The Generation for Change is a Literacy, Sport and Recreation Youth Organisation established in 2006 in the Vrygrond community to keep the youth occupied in a positive way.

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