'Every teacher is a researcher!': Creating indigenous epistemologies and practices for HIV prevention through values-based action research

Lesley Wood

Abstract

Since gender is an undisputed driver of HIV infection, teachers concerned with HIV prevention education should ideally encourage critical awareness of and culturally sensitive practices around gender inequalities. Many interventions and programmes have been developed for teachers to enable them to do this, however most have met with limited success. This article proceeds from the viewpoint that for HIV-prevention interventions to be sustainable and effective, teachers should be actively engaged in their design, implementation and evaluation. It outlines how teachers in an HIV prevention programme utilised an action research design to explore their own gender constructs as a necessary first step to the creation of more gender-sensitive school climates and teaching practices. This values-based self-enquiry moved the teachers to action on two levels: first, to adopt a more gender-sensitive approach in their own personal and professional lives and second, to take action to challenge gender inequalities within their particular educational contexts. Evidence is presented to justify the claim that action research of this genre helps teachers to generate indigenous epistemologies and practices that not only are effective in creating sustainable and empowering learning environments for HIV prevention education, but also for teaching and learning in general.

Keywords: *HIV and AIDS prevention, gender education, action research, self-reflection, critical awareness, values-based self-enquiry*

Résumé

Puisque le sexe d'un individu est un facteur incontesté d'infection par le VIH, les enseignants soucieux de sensibiliser les apprenants à la prévention du VIH devraient idéalement encourager la sensibilisation critique aux pratiques culturelles basées sur l'inégalité des sexes. De nombreuses interventions et programmes ont été élaborés pour permettre aux enseignants d'atteindre ce but, mais la plupart ont eu un succès limité. Le point de vue de cet article consiste en ce que, pour que les interventions de prévention du VIH soient durables et efficaces, les enseignants devraient participer activement à leur conception, mise en œuvre et évaluation. Il décrit comment les enseignants dans un programme de prévention du VIH utilisent une conception de recherche-action pour explorer leurs propres constructions de leur sexe comme une première étape nécessaire à la création de climats scolaires et de pratiques d'enseignement plus sensibles à la spécificité des sexes. Cette introspection morale a incité les enseignants à l'action à deux niveaux : tout d'abord, adopter une approche plus sensible à la spécificité des sexes dans leur vie personnelle et professionnelle et, d'autre part, prendre des mesures pour mettre en cause les inégalités entre les sexes dans leurs environnements éducatifs particuliers. Des preuves sont présentées pour confirmer que la recherche-action de ce genre aide les enseignants à générer des épistémologies et des pratiques indigènes qui sont non seulement efficaces dans la création d'environnements d'apprentissage durables et constructifs dans le cas de la sensibilisation à la prévention du VIH, mais aussi pour l'enseignement et l'apprentissage en général.

Mots clés: *Prévention du VIH et du SIDA, l'éducation des sexes, recherche-action, introspection, prise de conscience critique, introspection morale*

Introduction

If education is to be an effective mechanism for addressing and resolving the problems created by the HIV and AIDS pandemic, then it stands to reason that teachers, as the main protagonists in any educational scenario, should be facilitated to direct and execute successful and sustainable interventions; otherwise they may unwittingly exacerbate the factors that contribute to HIV transmission. Since gender is an undisputed driver of HIV infection (Brown, Sorrell & Raffaelli 2005; Bruce 2007; Dunkle & Jewkes 2007; Hallman 2005; Lesch & Kruger 2005), it becomes imperative that teachers develop a critical awareness of their own gender constructs and how these influence what they teach, how they teach it and how they interact with learners.

Gender as a construct emphasises the social and cultural differences between men and women that are so deeply embedded in culture and society that they appear 'normal' (Dowsett

Lesley Wood is Professor at Northwest University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. Her main research interests include using participatory methodologies, such as action research, to enable teachers and learners to improve their social and educational circumstances, with particular reference to HIV and AIDS in education.
Correspondence to: lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za

2003:22). Potential inequalities in access to resources and power may therefore not be evident to us unless we make an intentional effort to critically analyse how we think and act in relation to gender. Teachers are no exception, having been socialised into specific gender contexts. My experience of working with in-service teachers has shown me that gendered attitudes are a powerful force in shaping how HIV prevention is being tackled in schools and communities (Wood 2009a). Many of the teachers I work with appear to be strongly influenced by patriarchal gender norms, even if they do not consciously ascribe to them. The impact of these norms is made evident in the voices of the teachers (both male and female):

HIV [prevention education] is the work of women.

As a woman, I cannot question my husband as to where he has been at night.

Although the South African National Curriculum Statements (Department of Education 2002) contain outcomes that place gender-equitable practices at the centre of life-skills/HIV and AIDS education, the actual practice in schools may contradict these ideals. The verbatim quote from one of the participants below indicates how they experience their lives as women in their community:

Being a female in an African township is like being a bed-spread – you are taught to cover up all situations in your life . . . this means hiding your dirty linen. So this means, although you know of your partner's HIV status, you cannot go on to seek help from others as you will be disclosing important information or disgracing your partner.

This statement indicates that the gendered socialisation that the teachers have experienced may impact on their role as agents of HIV education – given her acceptance of gendered social norms, how likely is it that this teacher would encourage critical questioning of gender practices in her classroom? The curriculum is therefore in danger of being compromised, since teachers' own beliefs and practices play a significant role in deciding what they teach (Bhana 2007; James-Traore, Finger, Ruland & Savariaud 2004; Khau 2009). Outside of the curriculum, the teachers gave examples of many other school practices that are gendered and reinforce the social superiority of males – discipline programmes that require girls to display a level of 'obedience' not expected of boys, meaning that rowdy behaviour is often tolerated in boys, but not in girls; tolerance of the sexual harassment of girls; gendered allocation of tasks, such as cleaning the classroom; and differing expectations of and opportunities created for boys on the sports field and in leadership roles. As Mirembe and Davis (2001:414) warn, even 'best practice school-based prevention programmes may fail if the gendered environmental context is not taken into account'.

My educational concern

There is no shortage of evidence-based research studies that claim to be examples of 'best practice' in terms of gender-based HIV prevention (Gordon & Welbourn 2001; UNAIDS 1999; World Health Organisation 2003), but the reality is that most of these interventions had been developed and tested in other contexts and perhaps could not be transferred to an African township setting with the same efficacy. Although there are many similarities between an African township and similar economically deprived areas in other countries, there are also many differences.

Poverty is endemic to both settings, as are gender inequalities, but the cultural influences are very different, as are the educational contexts. Poverty is also a relative concept and there can be no comparison between what is considered to be a 'poor' lifestyle in the more developed countries of the West and the extreme levels of poverty found in South African townships. On the whole, teachers are better educated, schools are better resourced and there are fewer cultural taboos around sex education and the use of condoms in the West than there are in African communities. Often, 'solutions' for preventing HIV transmission, which meet with success in one context, simply fail to deliver in other contexts, because they ignore the cultural and social constraints specific to that setting (Mirembe & Davis 2001). Although this understanding has prompted a more indigenous approach to gender studies in the past few years, which have been developed for the African context (see, for example, Campbell & MacPhail 2002; Kirby, Laris & Rolleri 2007; Laga, Schwärtlander, Pisani, Sow & Caraël 2001; Stirling, Rees, Kasedde & Hankins 2008), the emphasis still tends to be on 'outside' experts developing and designing programmes and lessons for teachers to implement. There is, therefore, a need for an 'insider' approach to HIV prevention to be encouraged, to promote the development of an indigenous epistemology generated by Africans living in an African context – in contrast to the more prevalent 'outsider' approach of adopting programmes based on paradigms that have little relevance to the majority of the population.

The concept of 'youth as knowledge producers' (Buthelezi, Mitchell, Moletsane, de Lange, Taylor & Stuart 2007:450) has been recognised in HIV research in the educational field, but few studies have acknowledged the valuable contribution that teachers can make to knowledge around HIV prevention. This is a contradiction of my ontological and educational values and therefore leads me to experience a certain amount of dissonance (Festinger 1957). Respect for the individual and what he/she has to offer is one of my guiding values, and to live this value out I have to respect and listen to what teachers have to say around HIV prevention – to do otherwise would make me a 'living contradiction' (Whitehead 1989:49). I was also concerned that, to be truly participatory and emancipatory, research must fully involve all participants (Pain & Francis 2003), without imposing particular outcomes and programme interventions on them. This had in fact been one of the complaints of teachers about previous training they had received in terms of HIV prevention (Wood 2009b) – that the people who 'trained' them to deal with HIV and AIDS issues in schools, did not in fact have much insight into the social, cultural and physical environments in which they live and teach and how this impacts on their professional and personal practices. To be true to this ideal, I would need to turn from traditional research approaches and embrace a new form of scholarship (Schön 1995) that recognises that change and improvement

starts with people in their own lived contexts (McNiff, McGeady & Elliot 2001).

Facilitating teachers towards indigenous epistemologies and practices

I adopted a values-based action research approach (McNiff & Whitehead 2006) to answer my research question of 'How can I facilitate teachers to adopt and promote more gender-equitable practices?' I worked with 17 teachers (13 female and 4 male; all Xhosa speaking, with the exception of one Afrikaans 'coloured' teacher) who had volunteered to be part of a research project aimed at HIV prevention through a gender lens. The project was named 'Masilingane' by the teachers, meaning 'let us be equal' – apt, I thought, for both the gender paradigm and for reminding us of the democratic, participatory nature of the research.

The time limit for the project was 1 year, and I therefore decided to split it into two phases. The first five contacts with the teachers were focused on *raising awareness* via self-reflection as a necessary first step to the development of an increased sense of agency (Archer 2007). Over a period of 3 months, meeting every second week, I engaged the teachers in interrogating their own habitus (Bourdieu 1977) around gender and how this might influence both their teaching and their leadership potential as 'gender activists'. The second phase was aimed at supporting the teachers to identify a point of intervention in their schools, to decide on and implement action designed to improve the situation and to evaluate its success as well as to consider how their learning could be integrated into their future practices. The ultimate aim was for the teachers to write a short report that would become the articulation of their own 'living theory' (Whitehead 1989:41) in relation to how to address a specific gender-related issue. The teachers would present this at a seminar as well as have it published in written form.

Before the teachers could begin to reflect on their personal gender constructs, they needed to identify values that would serve as standards of judgment (Whitehead 1989) against which to validate their actions. After brainstorming several values and much discussion as to what it would mean to operationalise them, the group chose *mutual respect* (e.g. being non-judgmental; listening to what others think, feel and say; being caring, compassionate and empathic) and *sincerity* (e.g. modelling desired attitudes/behaviour; living out our values; not having hidden agendas; being open and honest with partners and people in general) as the values to which they would hold themselves accountable.

As a white woman, socialised into a Western paradigm, I admittedly find it difficult to understand some of the gender barriers experienced in the African culture (although I have experienced different forms of gender barriers in my own life), and in a bid to be sincere myself, I admitted this up-front. I also positioned the teachers as experts, stating that I would be open to learn from them, since I could never hope to 'know' as they know. My aim was to foster a climate of mutual learning, living out

my own values of sincerity and mutual respect, by practising what I was preaching – namely, the need for self-reflection. I conceptualise self-reflection as 'reflexive critique' (Winter 1989:18–69), a self-questioning of ideas, beliefs and actions. Accordingly, I prompted the teachers to ask themselves, 'Why do I think and act as I do in terms of gender?' with the intent of moving onto 'dialectical critique' (Winter 1989:18–69), where the sharing of their personal reflections within the group could highlight tensions and contradictions inherent in their constructs. My role in this process was that of an initiator and facilitator of dialogue. I adopted the stance of a 'reflective practitioner' (Schön 1995:295), continually reflecting on my own ideas and practice as I interacted with the teachers, learning from their responses, and adjusting my interventions accordingly. I would reflect on each session immediately afterwards and make notes to help guide my questions in the next session. I was initially very exasperated with the reaction of the men in the group, since they tended to be overly chauvinistic in their responses. However, reflecting on this, I realised that if I wanted more 'truthful' responses, I would have to help them to feel safe in the predominantly female group. At the next session I therefore broached the idea that sometimes we put on acts and hide our real feelings, because it is difficult to go against social norms and this allowed us to explore the need to be honest with each other and to reassure each other of the commitment of the group to living out the value of 'mutual respect'. I learnt in the process that I had to be very careful to keep the fine balance between challenging and supporting the group members.

In order to begin this process of reflexive critique, I decided to concentrate on three constructs as suggested by Campbell and MacPhail (2002:334): first, to facilitate teachers' interrogation of their social identities as males/females in their contexts; second, to raise their critical awareness of their potential agency for influencing change towards gender ideas that are more conducive to HIV prevention and third, to facilitate the teachers' move to action to create more gender-equitable climates and practices in their schools. Although, for clarity, these concepts are discussed separately here, they cannot be separated in practice as they occurred simultaneously, each containing elements that influenced the other.

I began the process of self-reflection with the teachers by facilitating them to interrogate their *social identity*, or what it means to be a man/woman in their specific contexts. I accomplished this by posing questions and leading discussions[1] that enabled them to reconceptualise their gendered 'recipe for living' (Campbell & MacPhail 2002:332) and their previous hierarchical categorisation of relationships between genders, where one person (inevitably the male) was seen to exercise more power than the other person. By the end of the first phase of the research, it appeared that there had been a shift in their mindsets regarding gender. As one teacher (male) noted in his written reflection, 'I should not stereotype, since we need to respect each other, we have different talents and strengths, but we can complement each other'. Another (female) wrote, 'To me gender is not supposed to be equal, since they are in fact even made different from each other. But there are things that should be equal – respect and love, knowledge, values, and even skills'.

Through promoting critical reflection on their own gender constructs, I hoped to encourage the teachers to analyse their interpretations of their circumstances to promote 'critical consciousness' (Freire 1993:5). By creating an opportunity for teachers to engage in an intentional 'dialogical educational programme' (Freire 1993:19) they could become critically aware of the historical influence of factors such as poverty, lack of education and economic opportunity on the patriarchal nature of South African gender relations. This understanding then laid the foundation for them to take collective action to redefine gender relations. The group context created space for the group members to reflect on their own ideas of gender, exposing them to other views and letting them collectively create alternate possibilities. In this process, they began to experience 'moments of equity' (Berge & Hildur 2000:157) in which they could acknowledge that gender relations can be transformed and that they, as teachers, have an important role to play in attaining this transformation. Evidence of how this awareness led an increase in social agency among the teachers can be seen in some of the extracts from teacher journals:

It is my duty to start small to conscientise [sic] my family, colleagues and friends around gender issues.

I would like to change the mindset of people who are still rigid about things, people who still say a woman is a woman no matter what changes could there be in the world.

However, having an understanding of their potential for agency does not guarantee that teachers will actually initiate action. Being part of a structured action research group (Carr 2002; Zuber-Skerritt 1996), where they were supported through the process of identifying a gender issue to work on and selecting, implementing and evaluating strategies to address it, provided the teachers with the necessary impetus to ensure that they did take action. This was the first time that any of the teachers had taken part in such a project, where they had to hold themselves accountable to each other and to me as project leader, had to meet agreed-on outcomes, devise and stick to a budget, and produce a simple report to present at a seminar.

In structuring their action research projects, they followed the process suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2006) and devised a series of questions to guide their actions: 'What is our[2] concern? Why are we concerned? What can we do to improve the situation? How will we know when we have improved the situation? What have we learnt from our intervention? What are the implications for our teaching? By so doing, they produced written (published in book form), oral (presentations at seminar) and visual (posters) accounts of their work (McNiff 2007) that offered both descriptions and explanations and formed the base of their own living educational theories (Whitehead 1989) (Fig. 1).

Ethical considerations

The values-based action research approach strives to develop the potential of every participant (McNiff & Whitehead 2006) and recognises the unique contribution each has to make towards creating new theory and methodology. For this reason, anonymity is not usually observed, unless indicated as desirable by the participants. I wanted to acknowledge the contribution of each teacher in this project and therefore I requested written permission from them to publish their names in the article as well as photographs which may reveal their identity. This permission
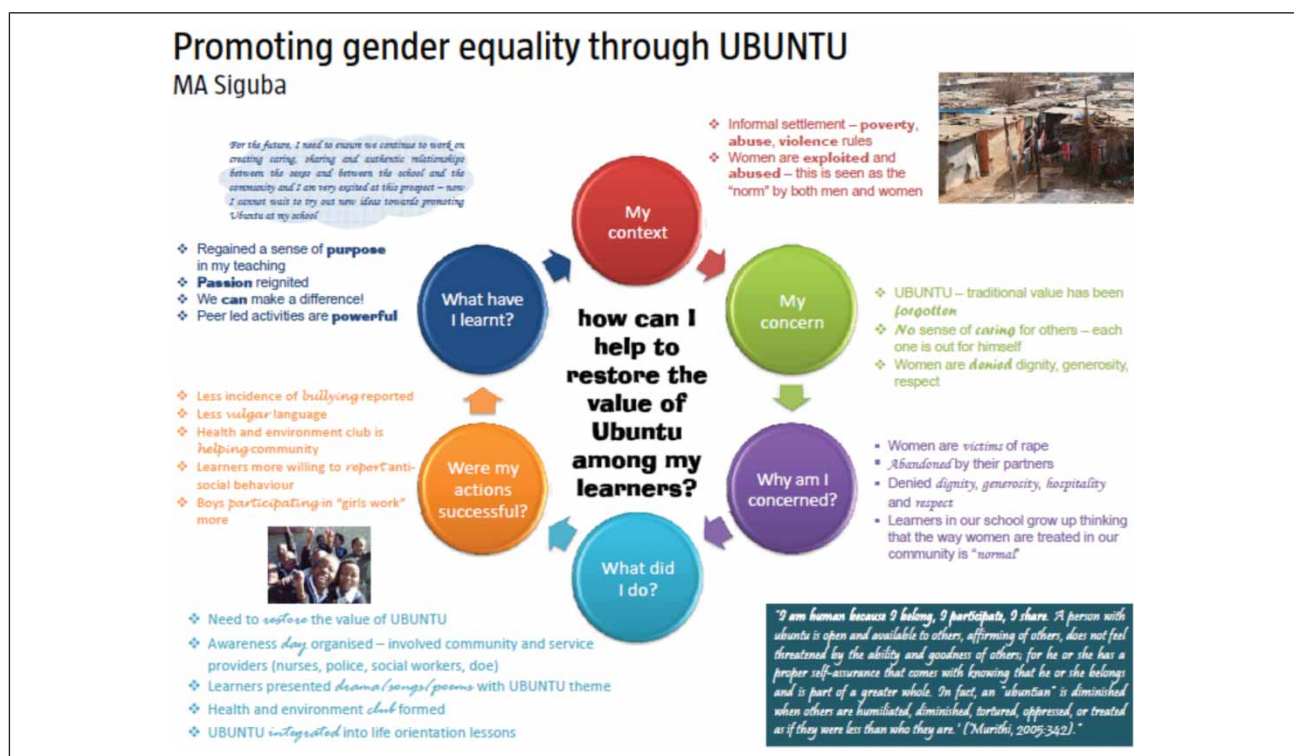

Fig. 1. Example of a poster generated by the teachers to explain their projects.

was obtained prior to embarking on the study, and in the written communication of informed consent, the teachers were made aware of the fact that they could withdraw at any time from the project or request that their identity be kept secret. Similarly, the written consent of the school principals was obtained to conduct the projects as well as permission to publish the names of the schools in the written reports and on the posters.

The educational value of an action research approach for HIV prevention

All the projects conducted by the teachers focused on some aspect of gender that contributed to HIV infection. A short synopsis of the projects is given in Table 1.

In order to ascertain the educational value of this genre of action research for HIV prevention education, the teachers were asked to respond in writing to questions on how they perceive the impact of their action research projects on themselves and their schools. Their *verbatim* responses were then summarised to avoid repetition and merged to create a polyvocal anecdote (Hatch 2002). The polyvocal is a composite narrative, composed of data generated by research participants in interviews or written form (Ely, Vince, Anzul & Downing 1997). According to Creswell (1994), this involves categorising the data into smaller chunks in order to form a composite and contextualised picture which paints a vivid image for the reader and aids in deepening insight into the lived experiences of the participants (Van Manen 1990). From the written data collected in the evaluation, I constructed an anecdotal narrative on how the teachers experienced action research as a methodology to address gender issues. This form of data analysis and representation allows for each voice to be heard, yet presents a coherent and structured narrative for discussion purposes. In constructing the narrative, the data were read to obtain an overall sense of what the teachers were saying, then re-read to identify specific voices. A tentative narrative was then written which was read to the teachers for their input. After consensus had been reached as to what should go into the narrative, it was rewritten again (Hatch 2002), in the first person plural to represent the collective voices contained herein. These voices are presented below:

Polyvocal anecdote: the value of action research in HIV prevention

Action research is a good method to address HIV prevention and, in this case, gender issues, because *all participants have a voice* and change then comes more willingly because everyone is part of it. It is the best methodology we have come across, because before when there was a problem, we just used to have a meeting and the principal would tell us what to do to improve it – we were never involved and usually did not really make an effort to do anything. But action research forces us to look at issues that we would normally have ignored – it makes us more observant and more sensitive to problems which can occur.

It also stops us from being *judgemental* – instead we look for the causal factors, rather than blaming anyone for the problem. This is a powerful way of changing the way people perceive their problems – it brings an end to the useless cycle of blaming. We all come together to share the problem, listening to different input and viewpoints which helps us to be flexible and therefore it is easier to find the solution.

Action research has also increased our *enthusiasm*, because when we were involved, we felt in control, which was exciting and

Table 1. Action research projects conducted by teachers	
Topic addressed by project	**Summary of interventions**
Teenage pregnancy	Ingrid de Monk's account addresses the need to cultivate a climate of respect between the sexes, starting with helping girls to respect themselves. She tells us how she has helped the girls in her school to become aware of the dangers of falling pregnant and how it disadvantages for them in later life. Cordelia Mazomba also focused on helping at-risk girls to become aware of the dangers of early sexual activity and how it diminishes their life chances
Bullying and aggressive behaviour by boys	Ms Jijana and Ms Ncoyo explain how they tried to dispel the myth among boys that the amount of sexual conquests a young man defines his masculinity by introducing them to the values of respect and responsibility. Tuks Mguca and Cindy Tame-Gwaxula, also addressed bullying in the school by exposing the boys to the consequences of behaviour which violates the rights of others. T. J. Mahlakahlaka and M. L. Ntshininda addressed the lack of responsibility and respect shown by boys by inviting an outside agency to conduct workshops with them around responsible sexual practices and the responsibilities that fatherhood brings
Peer norms of sexual activity as part of dating relationships	Sindi Somniso led a team of educators to help primary school children explore the real meaning of love, and to realise that sex is not necessarily a part of dating and a loving relationship
Abuse of drugs/alcohol	David Jauka illustrates how he helped boys to develop positive interests and values, introducing them to alternative ways of spending their free time, rather imitating the behaviour they are exposed to in their environments. He also encouraged them to keep journals
Violation of the rights of children, especially girls	In his report, M. Dimbaza explains how he worked with learners to make them aware of their rights, involving outside agencies and introducing fun events to promote positive values and attitudes. M. Siguba also tried to address the negative behaviour displayed towards women by promoting the value of UBUNTU in his school

enjoyable. For example, when we presented the powerpoints of our sessions to colleagues at school, they became more aware of the gender issues and now we are all working together. This was really good for addressing the issue and solving the problem, because we learnt by doing and so will not forget easily. Also, we could make mistakes but we did not feel failures, because we learnt from them and moved on. The atmosphere at school was improved, because everyone was busy doing something and feeling important and involved – we all shared the same goal.

We have *changed the climate* in our classrooms and even in our schools since we are all trying to live out the values of respect and sincerity. We are conscious of showing respect, listening to others and walking the walk, rather than just talking the talk. We tend to be more honest with others, both our families and at school – we have started to tell our partners exactly how we feel about sex and our relationships, rather than just keeping quiet. We know that sincerity and respect start with us – we will not make decisions until we know that all involved have had a chance to be satisfied with it. We have also learnt that we will not let others demand respect from us, if they do not first show it. We have a clear vision of how we should be acting and we will not be moved from it.

However, it was not all plain sailing. Some of us struggled because our *school leadership* was not interested and did not support us, but we carried on and were successful with the support of this group. There was also some *resistance* from our colleagues to get involved, especially the men, but we know that gender equity is a long-term goal and we still have lots of work to do. Action research helps us to persevere, because we just take one problem at a time and try to improve it.

Doing this action research project has equipped us with knowledge and skills to develop ourselves. It has lifted our self-esteem to an extent that it is now easy for us to convince others about HIV and to talk freely. We need to *keep on doing action research* – we can teach other educators how to do it, and even our churches and community. We, as a group, have to now go out and work with other groups, so that we can have more solutions to gender issues. Action research has taught us that *every teacher is a researcher*, and all our schools are research sites – our learners have problems that arise from gender inequality, but we can help change this through action research.

Significance of action research for HIV prevention education in indigenous contexts

The process of action research is a complicated one to report on, since each level of enquiry forms a continual spiral in itself, without any beginning or end. As I was interrogating my own practice of how to facilitate teachers to promote gender equity, the teachers were conducting their individual enquiries into how they could promote gender equity in their practice. We were all simultaneously engaged in a spiral-like process of research, with each 'coil' of the spiral generating new questions and problems to be investigated. The potential for the spread of

educational influence regarding gender constructs is therefore incremental and almost impossible to quantify – as I influenced the teachers, they influenced each other, their learners, their colleagues, their families – who in turn may have had influence on their specific networks.

The combined voices of the teachers clearly highlight the value they perceive participation in the project had for them. The following main themes can be distinguished within the polyvocal anecdote, all of which are connected and have reciprocal influence on each other:

Personal and professional growth are promoted

Reading the polyvocal, it is apparent that the teachers experienced growth on both personal and professional levels. They report that they have started to communicate more around gender-related issues with their partners and families and have begun to feel valued, involved and in control – all positive feelings that are likely to sustain change. They gained knowledge and skills that helped increase their sense of agency – it is noteworthy that they said 'we changed the climate in our schools', rather than the 'climate improved', indicating that they believe they were able to exert educational influence. Their increased level of enthusiasm and excitement reignited their passion for making a difference, and now they are committed to continuing to address gender issues in the school, and in the broader community. They perceive themselves as researchers, who can take control of their circumstances, and are confident in their ability to effect positive change. This paints a very different picture from the one that is generally portrayed in literature – that of teachers feeling despondent, helpless, demotivated and disengaged (Pretorius & de Villiers 2009; Wood & Olivier 2007). The levels of involvement and decision-making that action research afforded them can only positively contribute to the sustainability of their new found confidence in being able to find solutions to change the gender inequalities within their spheres of influence.

The focus is on the solution, not the problem

Being engaged in a collaborative problem-solving cycle appears to have helped the teachers to become more solution oriented, reframing their problems as challenges, rather than wasting energy trying to find out 'who is to blame'. Such thinking suggests that the action research process has helped the teachers to adopt a more systemic way of thinking (Senge 2003), which views failures as the problem of the system and not any particular individual. Collaboration and cooperation are therefore promoted, as all accept responsibility to improve the situation, which can only help to mount the 'coherent response' to the AIDS pandemic that is required of schools (Department of Education 2003:5). The continual process of action research has taught the teachers that change can occur if they take one problem at a time – they have been encouraged to focus on the long-term goal, rather than short-term obstacles.

The school climate is improved

The polyvocal also tells us that the process of values-based action research helps to create a more democratic climate in the school. As teachers embody their living values (Whitehead 1989) in their interaction with colleagues and learners, everyone is encouraged

to participate and add their voice to the process of problem solving. More importantly, in terms of sustained change, they are acutely aware of how their behaviour correlates or not with their stated values and can make a concerted effort to ensure that they 'practice what they preach'. Because their 'solutions' are self-generated, they are more likely to be implemented, be culturally appropriate and suited to their specific contexts, and therefore contribute to sustainable change. As their educational influence spreads with each renewed spiral of action, more learners, colleagues and community members will be encouraged to reflect on their own values and encouraged to question the existing inequitable gender norms. Self-reflection has proven to be a powerful tool for changing mindsets of individuals, and ultimately social norms around gender and HIV and AIDS (Mitchell & Weber 2005) – far more effective and sustainable than the usual pre-determined outcomes-based 'training' programmes that seem to be the preferred method adopted to empower teachers to deal with HIV prevention (Wood & Goba 2011).

Validating the evidence

The evidence presented in this account of my action research intervention with the teachers, and the claims I make for having influenced them to reconsider their thinking and practices around gender constructs, can be validated by comparing what I did to my stated values of respect and sincerity. Using Habermas' (1975) notion of social validity, I considered this account in terms of the following:

Comprehensibility: Is this account comprehensible, does it make sense in the context of HIV and AIDS prevention within an African gendered context?

Appropriateness: Were the interventions/methods used appropriate for influencing sustainable change in terms of HIV prevention through a gender lens?

Sincerity: Does the narrative convey that I was sincere in my interaction with the participants? Did I accord them partnership status in the research? Did I promote listening and valuing of their opinions? Did I value their role as 'experts' in their own contexts?

Truthfulness: Does my account appear truthful and do I present enough data to support my claims?

The trustworthiness of the research project was also improved by having exposed it to a critical validation group (McNiff & Whitehead 2006), in the form of the audience at the seminar where the teachers presented their accounts in written, oral and visual form. The audience comprised their peers, education officials in the local government, school principals and academics from the Faculty of Education and time was allocated for questioning and feedback. The consensus from the audience was that the projects had been very worthwhile and had contributed to the promotion of more gender-sensitive climates in the school. In addition, validation of my claim of having facilitated the teachers to adopt more gender sensitive practices can be seen in the 'living evidence' that they presented at the seminar, where they disseminated their accounts in a passionate and convincing manner, embodying their values of respect and sincerity. The
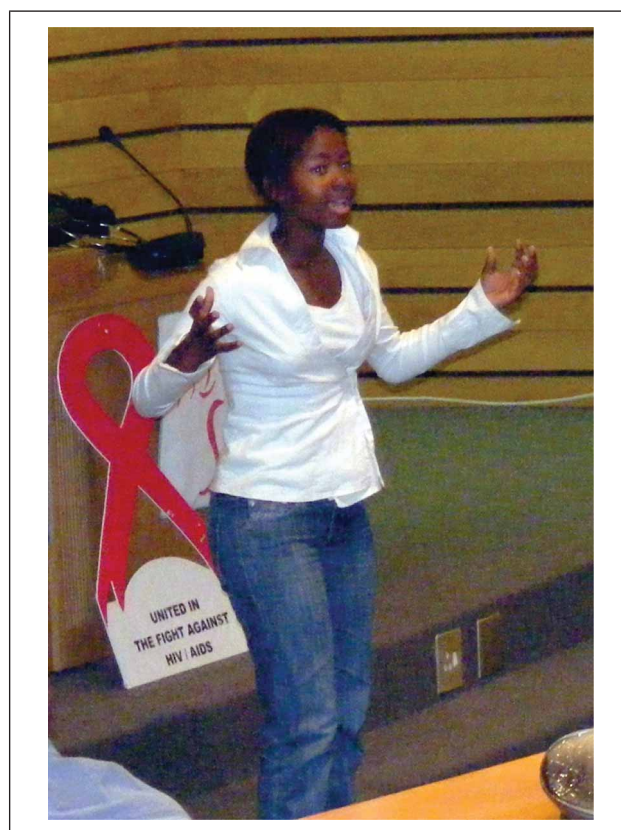

Fig. 2. Learner performing a self-composed poem about gender inequalities at seminar. Photograph by author.

performances of their learners at the seminar, through the mediums of poetry, drama and song promoting gender equality, are also offered as living proof of the educational influence of the teachers and of my influence on them (Fig. 2).

Implications for future HIV and AIDS prevention

By engaging in self-enquiry into my own practice of working with the teachers to promote HIV prevention education, I have learnt that effective partnerships between university and teachers in schools can only be created and sustained if all parties are equally engaged and valued as key role-players in the project. Based on the values of mutual respect, and sincerity, this Masilingane (Let us be equal) project was true to its name and, for this reason, I know that the teachers who participated are motivated and inspired to carry on working towards sustainable change in their schools. Furthermore, because this genre of action research helps people to explore and question their ontological values, what they learn has implications on a much wider level than the focus of the specific project. This is summed up succinctly by one teacher in her final research report:

I have learnt so much from this project that will enable me to adapt my teaching to improve relationships between myself and the learners. By involving learners and working closely with them on a specific project, we can narrow the gap between teachers, learners and parents as we come to understand each other better.

Each of the teachers' reports ended with a section entitled 'The significance of my learning for the future' and, although impossible to list everything they mentioned, it was apparent that they had experienced the project, as one teacher wrote, to be 'a life changing experience'. Almost every teacher in the project made comments about how they had come to a 'better understanding of themselves and their learners' through action research; that 'working together as a team was a powerful way to expand capacity and improve relationships'; that they can take steps to improve their own knowledge and skills; that it helped all educators involved to 'regain a sense of purpose'; and that they can be 'resourceful and powerful leaders if [they] systematically plan [their] interventions and base them on the values [they] have identified'. Such insights can only contribute to the creation of sustainable, empowering learning environments in their schools.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to explain how teachers can be engaged to create their own living theories around how best to address gender issues in their school as an HIV-prevention intervention. The process of identifying their values and reflecting on their own gender constructs was a necessary first step that helped them to shift their mindsets and become critically aware of the gendered status quo that was contributing to the spread of HIV. Because they created their own 'insider' epistemologies and practices for HIV prevention, it is argued that such interventions are likely to be more sustainable than programmes imposed on them by, albeit well-meaning 'outsiders'.

My role, as a researcher in higher education, was facilitative in order to raise their critical awareness around gender and their potential as agents of change in this arena. Using values-based action research, I could provide them with a 'tool' that would help them to move to action and facilitate their development as researchers and creators of their own theories to inform how they can best address gender inequalities within their spheres of educational influence. The experience of those participating in the project, however, had implications for a wider sphere than just gender issues – the teachers perceived themselves as having learnt many valuable lessons about themselves, their learners, the parents and the community which will have a profound impact on their future teaching practice and will contribute towards the creation of sustainable learning environments, as explained by one of the teachers:

> *This has been a motivating experience for us and we have grown in terms of self-esteem and self-efficacy. The more involved we become in projects like this, the more we enjoy our job, therefore we plan to continue with further cycles of action research to address gender equity and other problems.*

Footnotes

[1]A detailed explanation of the strategies used to facilitate reflection and develop critical awareness is given in Wood (2009c).

[2]Six of the teachers worked in pairs since they were in the same school, and the rest worked individually but the plural personal pronoun is used here to avoid awkward reading.

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