

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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# Teachers' Self-Exploration of Gender Constructs: A Values-Based Approach to HIV Prevention

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### Introduction

Gender, as an area of research, has received increased attention in recent years due to its undisputed link with HIV transmission. We know that gender inequalities are a key driver of the HIV pandemic (Sherr, Hankins, & Bennett, 1996; Brown, Sorrell, & Raffaelli, 2005; Dowsett, 2003; Lesch & Kruger, 2005) and therefore constitute an essential point of intervention for prevention. We also know that education plays a vital role in shaping the lives of future citizens, and that schooling is therefore an ideal opportunity for encouraging young people to think critically about gender. However, education may also unwittingly contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities when teachers themselves have been socialized to accept and maintain the gendered status quo, rather than challenge it. This essay outlines how 17 South African teachers (four male and 13 female) in an HIV prevention program explored their own gender constructs as a necessary first step to the creation of more gender-sensitive school climates and teaching practices. This self-reflection moved the teachers to action on two levels: firstly to adopt a more gender-sensitive approach in their own personal and professional lives and secondly, to begin to take action to challenge gender inequalities within their particular educational contexts. I tell this story as part of my own self-enquiry into my practice and my ontological values as a teacher educator-researcher as I attempted to find ways to raise awareness around gender issues and to support the teachers in taking action to address gender inequalities in their own contexts.

### **Why Gender?**

Throughout history, gender as a category of inequality has manifested itself in limited opportunities for women in the areas of health, education, the labor market, politics, and in broader social and cultural spheres (Gilbert & Walker, 2002). Gender as a construct emphasizes the social and cultural differences between men and women that are so deeply embedded in culture and society that they appear “normal” (Dowsett, 2003, p. 22). Potential inequalities in access to resources and power may therefore not be evident to us unless we make an intentional effort to critically analyze how we think and act in relation to gender.

I am a lecturer in a Faculty of Education in a university in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. My experience of working with practicing teachers has shown me that gendered attitudes are a powerful force in shaping how HIV prevention is being tackled in schools and communities. Many of teachers I work with appear to me 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.

Our men teachers won't deal with traumatized learners.

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

As a man, I need to be the authority, otherwise I will lose control of my wife.

I was concerned that such attitudes and beliefs must necessarily permeate the teachers' practice and filter into their wider interaction with learners and colleagues—creating the danger that they might unwittingly contribute to the reproduction of the status quo that places women in an inferior position to men in terms of sexual choices and freedoms. The gendered beliefs voiced by the teachers caused me to experience a certain amount of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), as these were counter to the ontological values that guide my practice and to which I hold myself accountable. In addition, I was aware that since the South African national curricula at both primary and secondary levels explicitly stress the importance of promoting gender equality in their outcomes, teachers are required to address gender issues in their teaching. I thus felt compelled to take action by adapting my practice to facilitate teachers' exploration of their own gender constructs and of how these might affect their teaching. In pondering the question, “How can I influence the adoption of more gender equitable beliefs and practices among teachers?”, I realized that

engaging in such a process would call for a high degree of self-reflection on my part and on the part of the teachers, many of whom, by their own admission, had never really critically examined or discussed their own gender relations and constructs.

### **How Could I Best Encourage Self-Reflection around Gender Norms?**

In order to facilitate self-reflection around gender constructs, I introduced the teachers on the program to the values-based action research approach (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006), which I myself was adopting to study my own practice and values as a teacher educator. McNiff and Whitehead (2006) suggest questions to help shape the design of values-based self-reflective action research. I used similar questions to guide my own self-study: What is my concern and why am I concerned? What can I do to improve the situation? What did I do? How can I validate my claim to educational influence? How will I modify my practice in light of what I have learnt? This approach helps practitioners to improve their own learning through systematic cycles of self-reflection, action, evaluation, and adaptation. As teachers offer explanations for what they are doing and why they are doing it (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006, p. 1), they create their own "living theories" (Whitehead, 1989, p. 41) of how to improve their teaching and address challenges facing them. Action research of this genre is ultimately concerned with social action to improve social issues (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 31). The ultimate aim of my self-enquiry in this program was to improve my own practice so as to help teachers to develop agency in gender issues by generating their own living theories of how to create more gender sensitive and equal school climates and practices through action research in their respective schools.

The participants on the program were all practicing teachers who came from Xhosa-speaking<sup>1</sup> communities and were based in township<sup>2</sup> schools. These teachers were voluntarily recruited from a group of teachers who had either completed or were in their second year of a professional qualification, HIV & AIDS in Teaching, since it was important that the teachers already had a good understanding of the causes and consequences of HIV and AIDS. The limited time allocated to the program would not allow for basic HIV and AIDS education, yet this was crucial for a complete understanding of the link between HIV and gender. The program<sup>3</sup>, which was part of a larger project initiated by the HIV & AIDS Centre, Columbia University, New York, focused on the prevention of HIV using a gender lens. I had been selected as one of 12 South African participants in this project, and this program was conducted as my input into the project.

I designed a series of ten workshops for the program. The first five were focused on raising awareness around the link between HIV and gender; the teachers 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 five were 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 teaching practices. The ultimate aim was for the teachers to write a short report that would become their own “living theory” (Whitehead, 1989, p. 41) as a critical component of inquiry into the self. In this case, the ‘living theory’ would be in relation to how to address a specific gender-related issue. The teachers would present this theory at a seminar, as well as have it published in written form. In this essay, however, I focus on the first step of the action research process that the teachers undertook: that of self-reflection as a means of developing critical self-awareness, as a necessary precursor to an increased sense of agency (Archer, 2007).

### **What Values Guided the Action Research?**

Having identified ‘sincerity’ and ‘mutual respect’ through reflection on my own practice as being the values that guided me around gender, I asked the teachers to identify which values guided them. These ontological and educational values would become the standards by which they would judge “the rightness” of their teaching around gender (Alexander, 1995, p. 304), or how true it was to their professed values. By identifying the values that they believed to be beneficial to the promotion of equal gender climates and practices, the teachers would have a benchmark against which to judge their intentional actions. Thus, the values would become their “living standards of judgment” (Whitehead, 1989, p. 43). Critical reflection on values and their implication for how we decide and act is a vital first step in raising awareness of our own potential agency.

The teachers identified several values: love, honesty, freedom, caring, respect, and integrity. I proposed to them that these values could be listed under the two main categories of mutual respect (love, caring, freedom) and sincerity (honesty and integrity) and they agreed that they would be happy to focus on these as guiding values for their projects. I then asked them to define what each value meant for them in terms of their personal behavior and their teaching around gender. An analysis of their written responses is presented in Table 18.1.

Table 18.1. Working Definitions of Values

Value	How we understand the value	If we are living out this value in our teaching, we will...
Mutual respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Being fair in our dealings with others</li> <li>▪ Listening to others' opinions, ideas even if differ from ours</li> <li>▪ Being non-judgmental</li> <li>▪ Caring for others</li> <li>▪ Knowing our values and living according to them</li> <li>▪ Trusting others</li> <li>▪ Treating others as we want to be treated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Listen to our learners</li> <li>▪ Treat all learners the same, even those who are sick</li> <li>▪ Treat boys and girls the same in terms of tasks, expectations</li> <li>▪ Act as a role model by respecting learners, colleagues</li> <li>▪ Praise what each learner does well</li> <li>▪ Show our learners that we care for them</li> </ul>
Sincerity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Being honest with ourselves first</li> <li>▪ Practising what we preach</li> <li>▪ Living according to our values</li> <li>▪ Telling the whole truth, not half</li> <li>▪ Not having a hidden agenda</li> <li>▪ Being honest with our partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Be interested in our learners</li> <li>▪ Do not ask a learner to do something we are not prepared to do</li> <li>▪ Answer our learners honestly, especially questions around sexuality</li> <li>▪ Be a role model and be open with learners</li> </ul>

### Strategies to Encourage Self-Reflection

After the teachers had identified the standards of judgment that would be used as benchmarks for their self-reflections, my next step was to try to facilitate increased reflexivity around personal gender constructs (Archer, 2007). Reflexivity is conceptualized, in this instance, as “reflexive critique” (Winter, 1989, pp. 18–69), a type of self-questioning of one’s own ideas, beliefs, and actions. Accordingly, I prompted the teachers to ask themselves, “Why do I think/act as I do in terms of gender?”, with the intent of moving onto “dialectical critique” (Winter, 1989, pp. 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, p. 295), continually reflecting on my own ideas and practice as I interacted with the teachers, learning from their responses, and adjusting my interventions accordingly. My aim was to foster a climate of mutual learning, living out my values of sincerity and mutual respect, by practicing what I was preaching—namely, the need for self-reflection.

The value of self-reflection within self-study is based on the premise that “looking inward can lead to a more intelligent and useful outward gaze” as so aptly put by Mitchell and Weber (2005, p. 4). In other words, my understanding was that if the teachers were to reflect critically upon their own gender constructs and gendered behavior, they would be in a better position to teach about gender in a non-biased and critical manner. My own experience, however, had taught me that it is not easy to engage in self-focused critical reflection. It is more comfortable to use phrases such as, “the teacher should...” or “a good teacher ought to...” rather than the more intimate first person pronoun. In order to help the teachers to self-reflect, I realized I would have to provide some structure. Therefore, I designed some reflection templates and spent time discussing these with the teachers, using my own reflections as an example.

Apart from this practical input, I also put forward the idea that there were no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ ideas around gender, and that we were there not to ‘judge’ but to question. In this, I made use of Winter’s (1989) idea that existing ideas and stereotypes do not necessarily represent an incorrect view, but rather merely an unquestioned one, and that critique may even result in a strengthening of an existing perspective if our questioning leads us in that direction. I felt it was necessary to say this to create a safer climate for sharing, not only between the male and female members of the group, but also between the more ‘conservative’ and ‘liberal’ components, since it was apparent that group members varied widely in their gender beliefs and constructs.

In order to begin this process of reflexive critique, I decided to concentrate on three constructs as suggested by Campbell and McPhail (2002, p. 334): firstly, to facilitate teachers’ interrogation of their “social identities” as males/females in their contexts; secondly, to raise their “critical awareness” of their potential agency for influencing change towards gender ideas that are more conducive to HIV prevention; and thirdly, 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.

### **Looking at Social Identity**

I asked the teachers to list their ideas of what constituted an 'ideal man' or 'ideal woman'. Once they had listed all their traits, we shared them and it immediately became apparent that both men and women desired the same traits in their idealized gender 'wish list'. Both men and women wanted partners who were strong, faithful, honest, caring, hardworking, and so on. I posed the question, "If both sexes want the same thing, then why can we not work together towards that?" Drawing on a concept that I had recently read about (Young, 2007, p. 157), I introduced the idea of a "circle of relationship", based on the values of mutual respect and sincerity. The teachers then had to reflect on how they would interact with others if they were to live out these values in a relationship where no one person dominated or was in 'control', but where the needs and desires of all were negotiated for the benefit of the relationship. This exercise encouraged the re-conceptualization of their previous hierarchical categorization of relationships between sexes, where one person (inevitably the male) was seen to exercise more power than the other person. As one teacher (male) noted in his 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."

The males in the group were open about the power of the peer pressure they experienced to be 'real men'. According to the teachers, traditional Xhosa beliefs locate the male as the head of the house who is expected to have more than one partner, and is not allowed to be questioned by females. Initially, both the male and female members of the group regarded this "recipe for living" (Campbell & McPhail, 2002, p 332) as a male as something that could not be questioned. As one of the teachers explained:

Males regard themselves as bosses and heads in their family matters as their women have no say when there is crisis, even when raising children since they are the providers of money, food, houses and cars. In community affairs e.g. churches, they are the elders, reverends, and chairmen in community organizations. If a woman can earn more than him in salary, then the situation becomes abnormal and males cannot accept that situation.

Although this standpoint placed males in apparently privileged positions, some of the men in the group did indicate that they felt uncomfortable professing inequitable, gendered views and behavior in light of their values of mutual respect and sincerity. For example, one of the male participants noted,

“Nowadays when I sit and listen to what men do in my communities, I become so ashamed.” This participant offered the explanation that, because women were being politically and economically favored over men, due to the current affirmative action policies in South Africa, men were “up in arms” and resorting to “violence, rape, abusive language and women abuse in general” in order to gain some measure of control. He concluded, “Presently, it is awful to be a man in South Africa, I conducted a research amongst the illiterate men in my community, they all sing the same song, something needs to be done, I hope not very late [sic].”

I tried to problematize the issue of male privilege by suggesting men might well find it difficult to challenge the practices and ideas of their peer group. I also suggested that the image of the ‘Xhosa man’ as a sexually prolific, economically successful, and politically powerful being was perhaps an unrealistic model to live up to and that attempting to do so could lead to unhappiness and anxiety, rather than make men’s lives easier. This idea was an ‘eye-opener’ for some of the women teachers, who had never realized how much pressure the peer group ideal placed on their male counterparts. This realization not only helped to increase their empathy towards men, but they also indicated that this was something that they would now address in their teaching, so as to influence peer group thinking to be more gender equitable.

The women also drew attention to how traditional views of their gender roles could perpetuate gender inequalities, with serious implications in terms of HIV prevention:

Being a female in an African township is like being a bedspread—you are taught to cover up all situations in your life...this means hiding your dirty linen. So this means, though 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.

Other metaphors used to describe women included that of a donkey (you have to carry heavy loads), an elephant (you must be strong to raise children alone), and an invalid kitten (you cannot make decisions on your own). One teacher said that being a woman was being “culture bound—you have to unconditionally accept your in-laws, you are not expected to discuss against [sic] what men have already decided—be invisible, deaf, and dumb.” This theme of denial of women’s feelings, thoughts, and opinions was taken up by another teacher, who commented, “You must be blind, heartless, and insensitive, where you are expected to raise your husband’s children [from another relationship], when sometimes your own child has to stay with your grandparents or your family.”

Although the majority of teachers expressed the view that these inequita-

ble ideas about gender were outdated and should change, they also pointed out that they found it difficult to move beyond this voicing of their disapproval in our group, as they still felt constrained by their upbringings and gendered contexts. The attainment of economic freedom through improved employment opportunities did not negate the fact that women were still in an 'inferior' position when it came to issues of professional and personal relationships. As one teacher said:

Equality is still a lip-service, if you are a Principal men teachers usually still don't have respect. In our homes men are still taken as being decision makers, head of families, as women we still have the mentality that it's the men's thing to be leaders.

I facilitated discussion around these viewpoints, highlighting the fact that, once again, both sexes were unhappy with the current situation and so perhaps it was time to start creating new gender identities by questioning existing gender-specific practices and norms. So as not to impose my views on the teachers, I shared research that reported on how some groups had started to challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes, in an attempt to create new norms that were more conducive to effective HIV prevention and care. Some examples of this are: the work done by Men As Partners® (EngenderHealth, 2008); the research conducted by Montgomery, Hosegood, Busza, and Timaeus (2006) challenging the male deficit perspective that portrays men as uncaring and unable to help in terms of caring for the ill; and research findings that suggest that women are not always as powerless as they are often made out to be (Schratz, 2005; Gilbert & Walker, 2002). By sharing such research, not only was lively discussion around social identities promoted, but also the idea of being able to question and take action to change existing norms was reinforced.

### **Raising Critical Consciousness**

Through promoting critical reflection on their own gender constructs, I hoped to encourage the teachers to analyze their interpretations of their circumstances to promote "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1993, p. 5). According to Freire (1993), the first prerequisite for attaining critical consciousness is that people are given the opportunity to understand the contextual forces that have led to the inequalities from which they are currently suffering. Within the context of this project, I worked with the teachers to examine how poverty, lack of education and economic opportunity, and various other social and cultural forces have contributed to the patriarchal nature of South African gender relations today. Only when

such an understanding is attained, can people then work towards taking action to collectively redefine their circumstances. In order to move towards working with others to make improvements, an intentional “dialogical educational program” (Freire 1993, p. 19) has to take place. The group context provided the opportunity for this to happen, creating 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.

I tried to promote notions of gender equity through deliberate attempts to disturb existing norms. I shared my underlying assumptions with the group: that change through education is possible (Dewey, 1933) and that by working together, teachers can create new and better realities. Through reflection, critical questioning, encouragement, and challenging, I strove to help the teachers experience “moments of equity” (Berge & Hildur, 2000, p. 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. Initially, I was daunted by the force of the normative statements the group (especially the men) voiced, but as the program progressed, there were more ‘moments of equity’ than ‘moments of normalization’. When teachers were asked what changes they would make as a result of what we had discussed in one of our sessions, most made responses in a similar vein, such as: “I will promote social norms that will empower women as much as men. I will also promote education of girls in careers where women are the minority” and, “I would like to change the mind-set 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.” One male teacher was very honest in assessing his journey of transformation: “I do not live up to that level of being truly honest [concerning sexual relationships] because of my upbringing but I am trying to change since other things are changing, such as values systems, morals, behaviors, and conditions of living. Old days are gone.” This latter quote underlines how difficult it can be to translate changed ideas into changed behavior, and reminded me that change is an ongoing process.

### **Moving to Action**

Research has shown that the failure of many HIV prevention programs can be attributed to the fact that they are based on flawed understandings of cultural practices and other contextual factors (Kalipeni, Craddock, Oppong, & Ghosh, 2004; Waterston, 1997). For a program to succeed, it has to be relevant to the specific contexts of the people involved—in this case the context of being a man or woman living in a South African township with all its

concomitant cultural, economic, and social connotations. Indeed, the teachers in this program indicated that they did feel themselves constrained by the 'way things are', and mentioned some of the factors that prevented them from living out their values of sincerity and mutual respect:

Life has taught us to go with the majority rule, but the majority is not sincere, so how will things ever change?

We are brought up with so many stereotypes, it is difficult just to do away with them.

I don't use condoms, in my belief and customs, condoms block that gift of self and it also takes away my enjoyment and my religious belief that we must have flesh on flesh.

Teachers possess social capital (Blaxter, 2000) in the form of experiences, culture, language, and traditions that provide them with an important advantage in terms of influencing social change. I deliberately worked to raise the group's awareness around the potential they had in this and how they could use this capital to adapt and shape their teaching practices. I admitted up front that, as an 'outsider' from a Western European background, I could not hope to know better than them how to approach gender issues in their contexts. I positioned the teachers as the 'experts' in their culture, which indeed they were, since through this program I became very aware of the fact that my previous knowledge of cultural gender practices had been very superficial. I came to see that culture is a strong normalizing factor and that many gender inequalities are sanctioned in the name of culture, a concept which the group initially saw as static and unquestionable. However, by challenging the teachers on this and introducing them to the idea that culture is a social construct that can and does change over time, they gradually came to see how they, as members of a culture, actually could influence it and, in fact, that they had a duty as educators to take on this role.

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; Züber-Skerrit, 1996), where they were supported through the process of identifying a gender issue to work on and selecting, implementing, and evaluating one strategy 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. At the time of writing this essay, the group is only beginning this phase of the project and therefore it cannot be reported on as yet. Nevertheless, what is clear to me is that the

teachers are now ready to take action as they want to see some change in gender relations in their school contexts.

On a personal level also, some change is evident, showing an increase in understanding and tolerance that was not previously apparent:

It [this program] has made me [sic] to behave different than I was before. Even at home with my partner, my children and most importantly, my learners. This program has made me to see beyond gender sensitivity, it has made me to recognize others as different in their own right, therefore to me it means giving respect to the opposite sex.

Finally, there is evidence that the teachers have begun to use their insights to influence those around them. As one teacher explained when asked how this program had had an impact on his thinking:

It has changed dramatically. It has never been something that I was serious about. These days I'm quite sensitive in any issue related to gender.... I go so far as to correct, in a professional way, those who could not care less about it.

### **Validating My Claim to Educational Influence**

In line with Feldman's (2003) suggestions for increasing the validity of self-study research, in this essay I have attempted to indicate how I constructed my research findings. I have worked to provide a clear description of what data I wished to gather in my work with the teachers and how I gathered it—namely data that provide evidence of the extent to which I have influenced the teachers to begin to live out their identified values of sincerity and integrity. The teachers' journal entries as noted above offer evidence that my interventions to help them to reflect on their own gender constructs have had some educational influence and that they are more aware of the importance of living out these values. Their self-evaluations of the changes they perceived to have occurred in their own thinking, behavior, and attitudes indicate that they are more aware of possible gendered approaches in their practice and those of their colleagues and that they are motivated to adapt their practice to make it more gender equitable.

The teachers presented their personal accounts at a public seminar, where the audience of academics and school officials could be regarded as an expert external validation group (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). This presentation was also an attempt to triangulate my claims to having influenced the teachers (Feldman, 2003). The many positive comments made after their presentations attested to the fact that the audience was impressed with the teachers' insights and their communication of their changed views and behavior via their oral

presentations. The teachers' accounts were thus deemed to possess social validity, according to Habermas's (1976) criteria of comprehensibility, authenticity, truthfulness, and appropriateness. I would ask you, the reader, to validate my own account, using the same criteria and my stated values as standards against which to judge them.

### **Significance of My Learning for Future Practice**

One of the key characteristics of self-study research in teacher education is a focus on how our research into our own practice has prompted changes in our ways of *being* teacher educators (Feldman, 2003). While action research and self-study as methodologies for research in teacher education share many features, this focus on the *ontology* of the teacher educator is not always apparent in action research (Feldman, Paugh, & Mills, 2004). This study has affected me as a teacher educator by helping me to live out more fully my ontological values of mutual respect and sincerity, while working with others to identify and live out their own values. By intentionally facilitating teachers' process of reflecting on their gender beliefs and practices, I have learnt that raising consciousness around the gender-related contradictions in teachers' educational and personal contexts can prompt them to look critically at their own attitudes and practices. By identifying values against which to judge their practice, teachers can become motivated to adapt and improve their teaching around gender equity in a way that is more likely to be sustained than if they were 'told' how to teach in a 'gender-correct' manner. The realization that they are able to question hitherto accepted norms and beliefs can also free teachers from feelings of impotence and restore their capacity to act.

By modeling the values of sincerity and mutual respect in my practice, I felt that I was able to communicate with the teachers on an equal footing. Through encouraging self-reflection, I tried to embody the sentiment expressed by Freire (1993, p. 25) that, "the teacher cannot think for his students, nor can he impose his thought on them." Adherence to the values of mutual respect and sincerity meant that I could be honest with the teachers whether I agreed or disagreed with their viewpoints; I could really listen to them and value their opinions, thereby opening up my mind to alternative realities. And, since we were operating in a mutually respectful and safe environment, I also had the space to challenge the teachers to interrogate their choices.

### Conclusion

Through this self-reflective, explanatory account of my practice with teachers as an entry point to taking action in relation to addressing gender equity in their schools, I believe that I have offered evidence to support my claim that I have helped these teachers to begin to adopt a more gender sensitive approach in their personal and professional lives. The teachers' self-reflections have enabled them to understand better the socio-historical context of gender, its role in shaping societal norms, and how such norms have influenced their own gender constructs. Armed with this deeper understanding, the teachers are in a stronger position to initiate action to create more gender equitable climates in their schools. The teachers now have 'benchmarks', in the form of their stated values of sincerity and mutual respect, against which to measure their own future gender relations and practices. This would not have been possible without them first being engaged in critical self-reflection on their own gender constructs. Critical self-reflection and group discussion will continue during the second phase of the project, where the teachers will be supported in taking action in their schools.

### Notes

- 1 The *amaXhosa* or Xhosa people are members of the ethnic group that speaks *isiXhosa*, one of the indigenous languages of South Africa. *isiXhosa* is South Africa's second most common home language.
- 2 The term 'township' refers to areas that were created by the former apartheid regime in an attempt to contain people designated as 'non-whites' in areas specifically demarcated for them. Schools in townships are mostly under resourced and have high teacher-learner ratios.
- 3 The program was funded by MAC AIDS (see <http://macaidsfund.org/who/who.html>).

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