

# USING LIFE HISTORY TO UNDERSTAND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN IDENTITY, CRITICAL AGENCY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

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## Abstract

In this article we use the concepts identity, agency and social justice education as a lens to explore the role of life history research in the study of the interconnection between emerging teacher identities, critical agency and social justice education. By exploring the life history of a white woman pre-service teacher, this study foregrounds the use of life history research to help teacher educators to understand the contexts through which student teachers' identities are constructed, and how these identities feed into agency and a stance to bring about social change.

**Keywords:** life history research; pre-service teachers; teacher education; identity; agency; social justice education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Wade, Fauske and Thompson (2008) argue that the goal of preparing teachers to be social justice educators, who, in turn, can become agents of change in schools, remains elusive. In many ways, they imply a failure on the part of teacher educators to share the full responsibility for social change and, in fact, the problem often becomes located within our own students (Wade, et al., 2008). As researchers and teacher educators, we want to take responsibility for this critical aspect of teacher education. South African teacher educators and researchers are increasingly addressing forms of anti-oppressive education by focusing on pre-service teachers' identity, their agency to bring about social change, and social justice education (Francis and Hemson, 2007a, 2007b; Francis, Hemson, Mphambukeli and Quin, 2003).

Our study documents the life history of Willemien (a pseudo name), a twenty-five-year old white woman pre-service teacher. Using life history research, we seek to explore her emerging identity as a teacher and how this identity is connected to notions of critical agency and a stance towards social justice. We address two critical questions: what is her perception of herself as an agent of change and how does this perception frame her teacher identity and understanding of teaching for social justice? We chose life histories as a method, in line with our view of identity as a resource that people draw on in constructing personal narratives, which provide meaning and a sense of continuity to their lives.

In addition to our own interest in life history research and the interplay between identity, agency and social justice, our study was motivated by an earlier study (see Francis and Le Roux, 2011) in which an in-depth interview was conducted with Willemien. In comparison with the other seven participants, Willemien perceives herself to be a teacher with the calling to bring about change. Her critical agency seems to be coupled with strong reflexivity on issues of oppression, feeding into a pertinent stance towards social justice. We assumed that by drawing on the life history of a white, middle-class Afrikaans pre-service woman teacher, we could explore the interplay between identity, agency and social justice. We start our paper by presenting a conceptual framework in which we unpack the terms identity, agency and social justice education. The presentation of the research strategy is followed by the unpacking of Willemien's emerging identities, as well as the extent to which these identities feed into her agency and compel her to take up a stance towards social justice. We conclude with a discussion of our analysis.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Three valuable frameworks for examining teaching in urban classrooms involve the notion of identity, agency, and social justice (Moore, 2007). Research on teacher identity and particularly pre-service teacher biographies is seen as relevant to teacher educators in order to understand and conceptualise the support student teachers need better (Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop, 2004). While some contemporary writers use identity as a basic datum that simply "is", others use it to refer to ways in which people define themselves. Newman (2004) offers a useful way of thinking about how individuals make sense of "who they are". Whilst identity is our most essential and personal characteristic, it also comprises our membership in social groups. Identity is subsequently a medium for defining the self as a unique individual and thinking of oneself as a member of a social group. How one's identity is experienced will be mediated by social group or category memberships, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class, language, sexual orientation, physical ability and language (Francis, 2006; Tatum, 1997). Our identity locates us in the social world, thoroughly affecting everything we do, feel, say and think in our lives. Deaux and Ethier (1998: 305) explain identity as an on-going negotiated process. Not only do identities shift over time, but people also often make choices among various identities as they move from one circumstance to another. Within this understanding of identity there are two clear implications: a person may have multiple identities and identities are shared with others who have the same attributes. How a teacher's professional identity is constructed is subsequently linked to the interconnections between personal identity, social identity, context and the roles teachers play in schools.

Agency is a crucial aspect of teacher identity, which translates that teachers have to be active in the process of professional development (Coldron and Smith, 1999).

We use the term agency with our commitment to an understanding of the dynamic and dialectical nature of the interaction between individual and social context, and the active role of the individual in the process of identity construction and teaching for social justice. Social contexts can either enable or hinder the degree of agency that teachers have. Giddens (1991: 175) argues that human agents “never passively accept external conditions of action, but more or less continuously reflect upon them and reconstitute them in the light of their particular circumstances”. Thus, agency is “action-orientated; it is critical; it is the way that teachers use power, influence and science to make decisions that affect positive social change” in schools (Moore, 2007: 521). We are keen to explore the ways pre-service teachers can exercise agency in working for social justice.

Although the term social justice is contested throughout the field of education (Chubbuck and Zembylas, 2008), in this article social justice education is defined as a process and goal that allows for the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice education envisages a society in which individuals are both self-determining and interdependent. Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency, as well as a sense of responsibility towards and with others, their society and the broader world in which we live (Adams, Bell and Griffin, 2007: 1-2). Teachers are thrust into a position in which they must prepare children and communities for participation in an anti-oppressive society. As Ayers (1998: 1) reminds us, teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity and to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles. Teachers can thus change the context they reside in.

In summary, we are concerned with how life history can be used to understand the interplay between identity, critical agency and social justice. By drawing on Willemien's life history, we attempt to gain access to how she makes sense of her social world, and what she believes about herself as an agent of change and her understanding of teaching for social justice. We have drawn on the concepts of identity, agency and social justice education to provide us with a lens through which to explore the role of life history research in the study of the interconnection between emerging teacher identities, critical agency and a stance towards social justice.

### **3. RESEARCH STRATEGY**

#### **3.1. Life history research**

Life history research has a legitimate place as an inquiry method and its effectiveness is rated equally with that of interviews as a means of evidence for research (Dhunpath and Samuel, 2009; Plummer, 2001). Life history research is suited to discovering the confusions, ambiguities, and contradictions that make up our everyday lives.

It allows us to develop an explanation of how individuals interpret their social world and indicates what people believe about themselves. A life history approach views the totality of the biological bodily needs, immediate social groups, personal definitions of the situation and historical change both in one's own life and in the outside world (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 284). Life history data come from four characteristics, i.e. the data are concrete and closer to raw social data; there is a wealth of detailed information, allowing analysis of idiosyncratic life events; the data is 'processual' in that narratives can trace connections between life events; and the understandings and interpretations of the actors can be included as part of the analysis (Fisher, 1983).

For the purpose of simplicity, a life history is "an account of one person's life in his or her own words" (Plummer, 2001: 18). It aims to explore, analyse and interpret the gaps, silences, biases and exaggerations of individuals, to expand, develop and illuminate new theoretical understandings of a particular phenomenon. Denzin (1999) lists several varieties of life history research methods: biography, autobiography, story, discourse, narrative writing, personal history, oral history, case history, personal experience, and case study.

Plummer (2001) distinguishes between 'long' and 'short' life stories. Whilst long life stories refer to the full-length book account of one person's life in his or her own words over a lengthy period of time, short life stories take much less time and tend to be more focused. Short life stories are usually constructed through in-depth interviews and open-ended questionnaires, requiring gentle probes. A good example of short life history research is Dennis Francis's (2000) doctoral thesis, *Life Histories of Indian White Biracial Adolescents in South Africa*.

Like Francis (2000), we choose to adopt the short life story approach as it requires less time, tends to be more focused and is usually published as one in a series. However, unlike Francis (2000), we choose to remove ourselves as much as possible from the stories. By presenting the participants' response mostly in the first person, we allow the "self of the teller to be at the centre of the story" (Denzin, 1999: 59). Our role as researchers was to guide the participant in the telling of her story and to offer an analysis afterwards. As Robert Atkinson (1998: 9) writes, the interviewee is the narrator of the story being told, whereas the interviewer is a guide in this process. Together the two are collaborators, constructing a story with which the teller can be pleased.

Life histories involve a great deal of meandering chatter and stumbling (Plummer, 2001), and the interview transcripts for Willemien totalled 19 typed pages. While an attempt was made to be faithful to the words of her life history, editing in the form of cutting, sequencing, disguising names and places was used to transform the interview transcripts into an orderly, structured and manageable form to address the aim of this study.

### **3.2. Selection of the participant**

To satisfy the objective of our study, Willemien was handpicked on the basis of being a white woman pre-service teacher. Since an attempt was made to explore the interconnect between Willemien's emerging identity as a teacher, her critical agency and a stance towards social justice, our desire was to encourage intensive interviews where she was able to communicate her life stories. We argue that the number of subjects is not as important as what each participant contributes to understanding.

### **3.3. Data collection**

For this study, we employed open and in-depth interviews in a highly active and interactive fashion, using only the most general of guides to help the participant construct a sense of her cultural world (Plummer, 2001: 140). The purpose of life story in-depth interviewing is to understand the experience of people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2006: 11). We worked with the assumption that meanings, understandings and interpretations cannot be standardised. Unlike formally structured interviews, in-depth interviews are more like conversations where primarily open-ended questions are used that focus on exploring the norms, values, understandings and experiences of people (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). In our study, in-depth interviewing was used to allow Willemien to 'dig deep' and tell her own life story, especially as related to her understanding of identity, agency and her stance towards working for social justice. A non-directive counselling approach (Rogers, 1990) was employed, emphasising the values of listening, empathy, unconditional positive regard, self-determination, respect and confidentiality on the part of the researcher. Central to the life story interview is the uniqueness of the person and the situation, the importance of empathy and the embodiment of non-possessive warmth in the interviewer (Plummer, 2001: 136).

Seidman (2006: 16) suggests that the in-depth interview be conducted as three separate interviews: firstly, to establish the context of the participant's experience; secondly, to allow the participant to reconstruct the details of experience within the context in which it occurs, and thirdly to encourage the participant to reflect on the meaning of the experience. The series of three interviews allowed us "to plumb the experience and to place it in context". Seidman (2006: 21) also recommends that each interview is spaced from three days to a week apart to allow the participant to "mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two". We found a break of two days between interviews useful. During the intervals the data were transcribed, translated from Afrikaans into English, and discussed. Any questions and/or points that needed further clarification were also noted during this period.

To accomplish the purpose of each of the three interviews, we used a 45-minute format per interview. All our data were tape-recorded, allowing us to have a full copy of the interviews without being distracted by detailed note taking. The second author also took note of expressions, gestures and other non-verbal signs. The focus was not only on the life history, but also on the gaps, silences, biases and exaggerations of the storyteller.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

In analysing the life history, the purpose was to expand, refine, develop and illuminate a theoretical understanding of Willemien's perception of herself as an agent of change and how this perception frames her teacher identity and understanding of teaching for social justice. In our attempt to communicate a thick description of Willemien's emerging teacher identity and the connection to notions of critical agency and a stance towards social justice, the interview transcripts were transformed into an orderly, structured and manageable structure with meaning (Marshal and Rossman, 1989: 112).

Working with a grounded theory approach, we used a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon. Glaser and Strauss (1967: 31) argue that while the procedures are designed to give the analytic process "precision and rigour", creativity is also an important dimension that enables the researcher to ask pertinent questions about the data and to make the kind of comparisons that elicit new insights into the phenomenon.

The life history of Willemien is studied against the backdrop of the conceptual framework and the literature reviewed. This is done to highlight the areas that were consistent, as well as those that were contradictory. The themes and issues that emerge from the data are then organised into a framework that illustrates the relationship between the different variables and the participant's understanding of identity, agency and social justice education.

### **3.5 Reliability and validity**

Throughout the research we were conscious of the limitations and sources of bias that life history researchers are confronted with. To ensure the reliability and validity of this study, the following steps have been taken. Firstly, we kept a 'reflexive journal' to record the rationale behind research decisions; our thoughts about themes, relationships, and gaps emerging from the data; our reactions to the participant and the study itself; and to note our ideas about the analysis and tentative coding categories. After each interview we spent time reflecting on what did and did not work; the second author's thoughts and feelings throughout and after the interview; as well as new and emergent thoughts and ideas. In addition, the journal was used to record reflections about possible changes in the research methods, procedures and decisions that were made during the study and for discussion with each other.

Secondly, we maintained ongoing debriefing sessions with each other to explore some of our implied assumptions to review the emerging methodology, and to articulate our feelings and reactions to various aspects of the study. Having two researchers analyse the data allowed us to compare our analysis and to negotiate interpretations. Thirdly, the second author conducted all the interviews in Afrikaans. The use of one interviewer meant that the possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpretation was minimal. All the data were transcribed and translated by the second author into readable vignettes to ensure that none of the data were distorted or omitted.

Fourthly, Willemien was asked to read her written life history and present a self-reflection on it. She was specifically requested to consider the translation of emotive expressions reflecting on subtle nuances that could easily get lost in translation critically. She did not change or add anything to what she had said during the interviews.

Finally, it should be noted that the three-interview structure incorporates the features that enhance the accomplishment of reliability and validity. It not only placed the participant's comments into context, but also encouraged the interviewing participant to account for idiosyncratic days in the course of one week and to check for the internal consistency of what was said (Seidman, 2006: 16).

### **3.6 Ethics**

Before consent had been obtained from Willemien, she was given a clear explanation of the tasks in which she was expected to participate. She was also informed of the parameters of confidentiality of the information supplied by her, including the use of a pseudonym. This enabled her to make an informed choice for voluntary participation and consent was given. In the following section we present the findings.

## **4. FINDINGS**

Our findings are organised around three themes, each with related sub-themes that highlight the way in which Willemien made sense of her own story about her life, especially as related to her understanding of identity, agency and her stance towards working for social justice. The three themes are emerging identities, activism and agency and a stance for social justice.

### **4.1 Emerging identities**

Identity formation for Willemien appears to be informed by a continuous interplay between her refusal to be trapped in preset identities and an awareness of 'unwritten' boundaries that placed limitations on her struggle to be herself.

- Conception of agent of change

From an early age, Willemien experienced the suppression of her personality: “You often feel that in a small town you are pressured to take up a particular role ... they have already decided for you what role you will fulfil in life.” After completing primary school, “I wanted to go where nobody knew anything about me”. To effect positive change in her own life, she soon realised: “I wanted to be exactly the opposite of my parents ... my parents are always sceptical of people, they wonder about their motives.”

Her perception of herself as an agent of change is strongly connected to her love for people and her ability to establish good relationships: “I had so many friends ... I was friends with the coloured kids who didn't hang out where we did ... for me there have never been boundaries between people. I think it is one thing that I am good at, I am good with people ... Since I was young I knew you can love somebody, you can care for somebody that was not your own people, and that I knew ... it was a natural thing for me to just care for people.”

- Awareness of race

Since a very young age, Willemien had developed an awareness of race, although not necessarily an awareness of herself as a white, privileged person, but rather awareness of other races and of unfairness that goes hand in hand with racism.

Growing up in a small town, “my parents placed a lot of focus on race ... we were kept separate ... in the pre-primary school everybody was white; in the primary school everybody was white”. Yet, in Standard 3 she “had a lot of coloured and black friends, but it was not like they came into the house. We played in the bush, in the field, at the river”. However, she knew “my parents wouldn't have approved of me playing with the other kids... they wouldn't have approved relationships with children of colour. My parents didn't know about it”. She knew almost intuitively that this was not something to tell her parents: “I knew it was Apartheid and that is the way things are ... I half knew ... this was something you don't discuss.”

However, “it really bothered me to see how the black people were struggling in town ... it bothered me to see how they were treated. When I was small and they showed all these old Apartheid stories on TV ... how the white people oppressed the blacks ... I cried and I would say ‘they are not nice to the people’ ... and my dad would ask: ‘My child, where do you come from?’” Although she got annoyed when her father and brother made racist comments, she had difficulty in really discussing issues of race: “How do you discuss this with your father who felt so strongly about it that he was prepared to go to war for it? I always knew it was a very sensitive issue. I think his biggest fear in his whole life was that we will be too sociable with people that were not from our own race.”

During her high-school years, “I realised that us friends knew race plays a big role”. In the hostel was a boy who had a white father and black mother. He “looked like a white child, but we all knew he was not a white child ... it was always so sad because when a dance came up we wondered who would go with [him] ... and then it was always like M would go with him and we could all relax. It was always an issue ... the boundaries were there”. Although having an awareness of boundaries, Willemien could not understand her best friend questioning her for sharing a packet of chips and a cool drink with a coloured girl in class: “She was like, ‘how can you do that?’ and I was like, ‘why can’t I do that?’” She also envied the coloured learners who had their separate spot on the playing field: “I always thought they had the most fun ... we were such a prude lot, they were having a hell of a time ... white children have so many prescriptions like you have to be like this and like that ... but they were just who they are and they were happier.” She was aware of what she was losing out on: “Sometimes during break I didn’t find my way back to where I usually sat and then I will sit with them ... and it was fun.” Willemien’s vignette brings into focus how racism and racial division hurt all people, whether black or white. In this specific part of her life story, Willemien communicates how whites are also limited and trapped through maintaining a system of racial division.

Although Willemien did not want to make her parents unhappy, as “I have already made them so unhappy and I didn’t want to add to it”, she resisted being trapped into a particular racial identity. “Since I was young, I knew you can love somebody that was not your own people ... while my parents said you could never love somebody that was not from your own race or your own colour, I realised that I had a genuine love ... it was real neighbourly love. ... they [people from other racial groups] were not part of your responsibility, they were not our neighbours ... I said they are people, so they are our neighbours.”

- Religious identity

Willemien grew up in a close-knit family in which the Dutch Reformed Church [NG Kerk] played a prominent role. In retrospect, Willemien sees herself as “coming from a house in which the NG [Kerk] was very much enforced ... it is something that you had to do”. However, at high school she was exposed to a more charismatic approach to Christianity and was influenced by a Christian man teacher who “boiled over with being a Christian”. A further influence was the conversion of a friend outside the Dutch Reformed Church in Standard 8: “I wanted to understand what on earth was going on with my friend, she completely changed.” Willemien started to go to church with her friend against the will of her parents who “were 100% opposed to that church ... they believed anything outside the NG Kerk was from the devil”. Once again, her awareness of the boundaries did not staunch her in her refusal to be trapped in a DR identity: “I just didn’t tell my parents ... I knew just what to tell them, how to keep them happy.” Willemien’s resistance to entrapment was taken further in Standard 8 when she was expected to comply with the ecclesiastical practice of confirmation.

Disillusioned by the inability of the reverend to answer questions pertaining to issues of homosexuality and race, “I went to my parents and told them I didn’t like this idea [Confirmation], because the Church was like they half discriminate and so on ... my parents became furious with me, I knew it was a big issue”. She participated and consoled herself by saying: “Jesus, I know you said I must honour my father and my mother’ ... I did it for the sake of my parents and not for myself.” After her confirmation she seldom went to church: “I joined another church ... that was when I left the house and knew I could no longer upset my parents ... there I realised that being a Christian is about having a heart for people ... and that contributed to me feeling that you can’t be a racist.”

- Gender consciousness

Willemien remembers herself as a tomboy who only dressed up on Sundays. She recalls disillusionment with her emerging awareness of being different from boys: “I was in Standard 3 ... I got two bras for Christmas ... I cried my eyes out.” Whilst developing early for her age, “I always knotted my shirt so that it didn’t show that I have developed boobs”, and when “my mother told me there was something like you were going to menstruate every month, I cried, I was so cross and prayed and asked that it would never happen to me”. In Standard 5 Willemien was told that as a girl she had to stop going bare-footed and not act so boy-like, and when a friend told her that she was beautiful, “I realised there was something I didn’t want to acknowledge”.

Although her emerging consciousness of gender was naïve and interspersed with disillusionment, confrontation with her own sexuality was not lost to naivety. In Standard 6, while having the “biggest respect for our matrics, I wanted to be like them”, Willemien was ‘forced’ to sleep with one of the matric boys at a camp. “I didn’t really understand what happened ... I saw the whole bed was full of blood and I covered it immediately ... I got very scared.” Whilst struggling with feelings of guilt and a fear of pregnancy, and coming from a house where her parents “would never show their love to one another in front of us ... even the TV was switched off when there was too much kissing”, Willemien had nowhere to go. By the end of Standard 6 she met a young man six years older and a four-year relationship ensued. Although “it was a terrible thing for my parents because he was so much older”, he became her protector and provider: “If I needed pocket money or a new dress, then I would ask him and he would help me.” The role of the older male friend in her life seems to link with “how absent my father was in my life”. She recalls a father who “seldom played with me as a child, he played a lot with my brother ... because he was a boy”. The covert message of her being of lesser importance was continuously enforced: “I would talk and then all of a sudden my father would start to talk, or he would not listen ... it hurt me many times and I would just stop talking and he didn’t even realise it ... my parents were not concerned with me ... I was not a priority for them.”

## 4.2 Activism and agency

Although Willemien's resistance to being trapped in preset identities feeds into her activism and agency, the latter also seems to stem from her ability to reflect on conditions and circumstances to do good to others critically.

Although Willemien refused to accept her parents' role for her passively, her decision to effect change continuously coincided with an awareness of and reflexivity on the hurt she might cause people, especially her parents. Whilst she considered herself as a rebellious young child, she developed the ability to see herself 'outside' her family and to find "refuge in friends ... in things that were different". Despite knowing "I couldn't tell them things because it would upset them", she had difficulty in accepting her father telling her "not to ask him why, just to do it because I tell you to do it". Although she asked a lot of questions as a young child, she never had the heart to tell him that she thought he was a racist: "I never told him that because it would have made him very unhappy ... I would rather keep quiet." However, although being aware that she might hurt her parents, she kept on pushing to find answers to questions like: "How is it that black people can't sit in the church, while the Bible says they may?" and she continuously tried to make sense of when "people are judged without valid reasons ... to hate other people just because of their skin colour". While "as a child I was aware of it [racism], I just knew it was wrong", she also realised "it was like a lost case ... I tried so many times, I carried such a burden". Her ability to reflect on this state of affairs critically later led her to the realisation that "it is not my burden to carry, I don't have to change their minds, they are adults they can feel the way they feel ... as long as I don't allow them to influence me". Her willingness to participate in shaping the course of her own life actively in the face of parental and societal demands did not lead to judgemental behaviour. Rather, Willemien's reflexivity thrust her into an understanding of "what their racism [her parents'] was grounded [in] ... it basically boiled down to them being scared ... they were afraid of change ... it was fear". It was from this realisation that she was able to come to the conclusion: "I have no fear of other races."

However, Willemien wanted to do good and she recalls being protective of her younger brother who had a tendency for getting into trouble: "I wanted to freak out because he was going to get a hiding. My father had to lock them into the room ... during the whole process I screamed and kicked against the door and afterwards my father would give me a hiding." At high school she accepted the role of a spiritual leader and was keen to help: "When a girl was seen crying somewhere, we were called over the intercom; we were asked to go and talk to her." Her involvement in a soup kitchen took her into a township where she not only came under the impression of suffering, but also the realisation that people "didn't want to become involved, people who have no love for others, or who felt no responsibility for others ... But what made me angry were rules in general; who decide what you may do ... and also helplessness, what can you do, you cannot do more ... because the need is so big and I knew it".

It was very important for Willemien not only to forgive the matric boy who took her virginity, but also to tell him about her forgiveness: “For so long I was so furious and for so long I hated him so deeply. I so wanted to tell him that I forgave him, I so wanted to genuinely forgive him.” Willemien also exhibited critical agency when “these people came to school to talk about HIV/AIDS or something and the woman said: ‘Those of you who are no longer virgins ... you will never be successful in life’. I was flabbergasted ... and I thought: ‘I will bloody well prove you wrong, I don’t even know who you are, but I will prove your wrong’”.

Her critical agency emerges strongly from her reflexivity: “I think it is because of everything that happened to me that I am the person that I am today ... I am grateful for that. All the sadness I had ... I would say the things that went wrong for me are the things that motivate me most to make a difference in the life of other young people, in the life of high school learners.”

### **4.3 A stance towards social justice**

Willemien's stance towards social justice seems to be informed by: “I always yearned for a fair change and I want to give others also that chance; to be who they are ... and not to judge on skin colour.” Her own struggle to “live out my personality”, her personal experience of humiliation and discrimination at school and a strong awareness of discrimination against others seemingly feed into her stance towards social justice.

Willemien struggled at school because of learning problems and dyslexia. She recalls painful memories of humiliation: “You thought you were stupid, they [the teachers] made you feel stupid ... When I was in Standard 3 ... I struggled as usual to read and then the teacher asked me to stand up ... knock the front of my head and tell myself I am a sheep. I developed this hate for those teachers ... I wanted to get away.” Her humiliation continued in high school: “You sat from the front to the back according to your performance ... needless to say, I sat in the second-last chair ... he didn’t talk to you, it was like you were nothing in class.” Experiences of humiliation not only made Willemien “realise what an impact teachers have on children and the power of the things they say”, but also informed her emerging teacher identity with a strong stance towards social justice: “I will be a totally different teacher ... my heart is for the child that is left behind, those children who suffer. I am set to make life easier for them ... and contribute to them making better choices and that they can get a fair change.”

At high school Willemien established a very good relationship with her Biology teacher and “it was the first time that I was exposed to an older coloured person who played a role in my life”. Through this relationship, Willemien's awareness of the unfairness of racial discrimination was further strengthened: “We could see when something was wrong with her and those of us who really cared about her would ask her what was wrong ... at times she felt very

inhibited, they [the other teachers] always tried to limit her, or to get her to do things their way ... it was actually unfair ... she was so good to everybody and everybody gave her a hard time.” At home, Willemien also had to defend this teacher against racist comments made by her father: “If I didn’t do well in one of her tests he wanted to take her on ... it was perhaps just me who didn’t study hard enough. My parents immediately thought she was not capable to teach because she was a coloured. I think he would have taken the first opportunity to go to the school and ask about her qualifications. He never wanted to understand that she was a good teacher. I always thought he was a racist and unfair.” Willemien recalls feelings of hurt “when you told them something then they immediately put it down, especially when they saw it involved other races”.

Willemien also noticed the exclusion of coloured and black girls at high school “with sport, with academy and with culture ... it was always like they were forgotten ... nobody made an effort to get them involved”. Although she did not have the knowledge at the time to understand why this was the case: “It was only later in my life that it started to make sense, later I realised it was because they were neglected.” The realisation of the unfairness of such neglect and her own experiences as a young girl informed her emerging teacher identity with the passion “to empower girls, especially young girls ... to make them more clever with situations, to make them understand what their options are and to encourage them to still be themselves. My heart is especially for young girls, to get them more skilled”.

## 5. DISCUSSION

In answering our two critical questions: “What is Willemien’s perception of herself as an agent of change?” and “How does this perception frame her teacher identity and understanding of teaching for social justice?” we have used life histories as a method. This method is in line with our view of identity as a resource that people draw on in constructing personal narratives which provide meaning and a sense of continuity to their lives. What Willemien’s vignette brings to the fore is how life history research can provide opportunities for teacher educators to enable discussion about student identities, their agency and their stance to bring about social change. Life history research provides a lens for teacher educators to understand contexts through which students’ identities are constructed, refined, resisted and altered. More importantly, though, it is an approach that “enables transgressions” – a methodology that enables movement against and beyond boundaries (hooks, 1994: 12). We believe that more and more teachers, like Willemien, are educating themselves and engaging more with education for social justice. We also believe that social justice education is more about learning about the self before learning about the other. Kumashiro (2000) argues that learning about others is an important step in changing oppression, but that alone is not enough.

Learning about the other with the goal of empathy often involves seeing how “they are like us” (and that deep down we are all the same). It involves seeing the self in the other, thus maintaining the centrality and normalcy of the self. Learning about the identity, agency and social change does start with the self. It is hoped that this article provides an approach to understanding how life history research can be used to unpack privilege, social power, identity, agency, and difference as a means to enhancing how we think about education for social justice.

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