
The prior learning paths of mature students entering a postgraduate qualification in adult education

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Abstract

Although the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is on the national policy agenda, little is known about mature students' prior learning from experience, the barriers they experience in accessing higher education, or the ways in which RPL may assist them. This article begins to address this gap by tracing the prior learning and career paths followed by three mature students who completed an RPL portfolio development course in 1999 and were subsequently admitted to a postgraduate qualification in adult education at the University of the Witwatersrand. RPL assisted the students by nurturing their self-reflective and narrative skills, shaping their academic and professional goals, and opening up paths which enabled them to learn and develop further.

... if you ask an adult who he is, he is likely to identify himself in terms of what his occupation is, where he has worked, where he has travelled, what his training and experience have equipped him to do, and what his achievements have been. An adult is what he has done.

(Knowles, 1970, p. 61)

As adult learners we are caught in our own history. However good we are at making sense of our own experiences, we all have to start with what we have been given and operate within the horizons set by ways of seeing and understanding that we have acquired through prior learning.

(Mezirow, 1991, p. 1)

One does not get credit for all that one knows.

(Lepheana, 1999, p. 1)

Introduction

In many countries throughout the world, Assessment or Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is used as an instrument for facilitating access to higher education for mature adults who do not have the requisite entrance requirements. RPL enables individuals to identify existing knowledge, skills and value orientations, often acquired from life and work experience rather than through formal education, while allowing institutions to make informed judgements about their preparedness for study and eligibility for credit or exemption (West and Fraser, 1993). RPL can also support partnerships between institutions of higher education and employers and community organisations (Merrifield, McIntyre and Osaigbovo, 2000).

In South Africa, RPL is portrayed in national policy documents as a means of redressing past inequalities in education and training and encouraging lifelong learning. It is a tool for broadening participation in education at all levels, particularly by black South Africans (Ballim, Omar and Ralphps, 2000). It is also represented as a crucial step in reskilling the workforce to suit the needs of a technological, rapidly changing society, competitive in global markets. Less prominent in policy documents is a humanistic argument for RPL as a means of enhancing the identity, self-esteem and confidence of adults who are returning to learning or redirecting their lives and careers. In this discourse, RPL is about enhancing opportunities and quality of life by enabling individuals to play fuller, more active roles as citizens and workers. Finally, RPL may be seen as a tool for challenging the elitism and gatekeeping of statutory education bodies, particularly universities (Buchler, 1999). By making the public more aware of a range of learning which takes place outside formal education, institutions will, perforce, be redefined as they take their place alongside other providers contributing to a 'learning society' (Moreland, 1999).

Providers of education and training, including universities, are required to include RPL as a pathway to qualifications registered with the South African Qualifications Authority. Universities increasingly receive requests for access to programmes of study from adults who do not fulfil the formal admissions requirements. Consequently, it is important for those working in higher education to develop a better understanding of who these adult learners are, the nature of their prior learning and experience, and the significance of RPL in helping them gain access to higher education.

This article focuses on the prior learning and career paths of three working adults admitted to a Master of Education degree in adult education in 2000 after completing an RPL portfolio development course at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 1999. The intention is not to generalise the research results to other groups of students admitted to postgraduate degrees through RPL. Instead, the aim is to invite the reader's engagement with the prior experience of mature adult learners, and the ways in which their experience can be understood as preparedness for higher education. Investigating RPL in this way may influence the ways in which departmental or institutional policies are taken up, the general climate for success or failure of RPL initiatives, and the ways in which academic staff approach teaching, support and assessment of adult learners.

The article begins with a short review of literature relevant to the topic, followed by an account of the research design. Most of the article is taken up with an analysis of responses to the following broad research questions:

- Who are the students? What career and learning paths did they follow after leaving school?
- What access to higher education did they have as school leavers? What propelled them into higher education? What barriers did they encounter initially in gaining access to higher education?
- Is there a 'seamless' route between education and occupation? What influences the learning and career paths followed by students? What motivates them to follow the career and learning paths they have chosen?
- What is the nature of students' prior learning? What knowledge, skills, values and attitudes are given weight in students' accounts of their prior learning? Do they place value on formal, certificated learning, or non-formal and informal learning? Do they place emphasis on hard or soft skills? Is there a difference in the accounts of prior learning offered by women and men?
- What significance does RPL hold for these students, in terms of their learning and career goals? Does it have intrinsic or instrumental value?

RPL literature

There does not appear to be a South African literature which deals with the prior educational paths of mature adult learners, the barriers to their participation in higher education, or their experience of RPL. The phenomenon is perhaps too new in South Africa to have given rise to published research. In the United Kingdom, studies of the prior educational paths of adults who had followed an 'alternative' route¹ into further and higher education conclude that while such routes allow many more people to participate in higher education than would otherwise have been the case, these opportunities have been taken up mainly by adults from middle-class backgrounds whose dominant motivation was career development, followed by personal development and interest in a particular subject or field (Blaxter and Tight, 1993). Divorce or other major life crises, such as unemployment, seem to be important factors in triggering participation in further and higher education (West and Fraser, 1993). Most mature adults enrolled in part-time studies in higher education in the UK had left school at age 16, with some O-levels, but had engaged in further education and training, often on a part-time basis, over several years. Many had acquired qualifications in their careers or voluntary work. Indeed, a significant number of them met or exceeded the minimum entry requirements of universities (Blaxter and Tight, 1993). West and Fraser note that students who had applied to selected universities in a pilot RPL project run by the Learning from Experience Trust

... felt they had educationally underachieved and/or been frustrated in their aspirations the first time round. They were upwardly mobile and suffering from the sense of marginalisation and social discomfort often associated with it. They were in transition between different occupational and social groups, driven by feelings of underachievement or denied opportunity.

(West and Fraser, 1993, p. 42)

The students in West and Fraser's study were reportedly informed and confident about which degree or diploma programme they wished to study. This contrasts sharply with the experience of many mature adult students seeking entry to higher education. Several studies (Blaxter and Tight, 1993; Merrifield *et al*, 2000) note that a major barrier to participation in higher education is lack of information, written in a clear, accessible way for its target audience, about available study paths, RPL procedures, and the learning

¹ Alternative to the conventional route from schools through GCE A-levels.

outcomes of courses and qualifications. Another significant barrier is the cost of tuition and learning materials, often self-financed.

Recent research in RPL (Paczuska, 1999; Michelson, 1998 and 1996) has examined the ways in which the nature of experience influences how students value their learning from experience, how they express and present it, and how these representations are interpreted by assessors. In the United Kingdom, where significantly more women than men over the age of 40 take advantage of RPL (Dearden and Evans, 1994), women seem to hold different concepts of 'career' from men (Blaxter and Tight, 1993). There are also differences in the ways in which men and women interpret and present their experience in RPL applications (Paczuska, 1999; Droegkamp and Taylor, 1995). Humm (in Paczuska, 1999, pp. 148-149) suggests that men's autobiographical essays employ language and syntax assertively to express well-defined educational goals which more readily meet the expectations of tutors and assessors in higher education than do women's essays. Humm says that women's experiential learning is couched in such familiar, everyday situations that it is nearly invisible to tutors and assessors. Furthermore, women's experience is grounded in their individual emotional needs and responses; their accounts tend to record feelings rather than achievements, and do not convey confidence and conviction to assessors. Their RPL applications are less frequently approved by assessors than men's.

Concerning the significance and value of RPL to participants in the process, Evans (1992, pp. 86-87) observes that the experiential learning recognised in RPL is 'owned by the individual'. It is a personal achievement, and the primary benefits of recognising it are that it leads to 'a revaluing and enhanced valuing of self'. This assertion leads to one of the central dilemmas of RPL: the conflict between exploring and integrating individuals' experiential learning in a learner-centred way, and the requirement to translate this learning into statements of learning outcomes for the purposes of assessment and accreditation. As Usher (1989, p. 70) remarks, 'the private activity of reflecting on experience and the public activity of having the learning from the activity publicly assessed' fit together uneasily.

Furthermore, as Usher (1989) points out, RPL requires mature students to demonstrate competencies for progression in higher education when much of higher education itself does not know what skills and abilities are needed for particular courses and qualifications. At most institutions, criteria for progression are implicit rather than explicit, and are expressed in terms of

prior qualifications which act as proxies for criteria. Yet for RPL to succeed, it is important for admission and progression criteria to be explicit and transparent, and for the links between diplomas and degrees to be coordinated.

Higher education institutions in the UK (Merrifield *et al*, 2000) typically expect students admitted under RPL to demonstrate familiarity with the theoretical base of their experiential learning. Students are required to show not just knowledge and skills in practice, but a grasp of theory as well. They may be expected to reflect critically on their experience and what they have learned from it. Furthermore, they are required to show their capacities in a distinctive form of literacy ('academic literacy') which is different from the writing they use in everyday life. Yet students engaged in the process of reclaiming experiential learning are involved in an emotionally as well as intellectually demanding activity, and may feel reluctance, even resistance, to translating their experience into academic language and formats (West and Fraser, 1993). It seems, then, that RPL assumes that candidates can make a fairly straightforward progression from experiential learning to academic learning, an assumption which is not always borne out in practice.

Research design

This study focuses on the prior learning paths of three mature adult students, Chakache, Lepheana and Mokwena, who gained admission to a Master of Education degree in adult education after completing an RPL 'portfolio development course'² in a previous qualification. The three students formed part of a larger group of 23 adults, all practising educators or trainers, who developed portfolio applications for access to an academic programme they aspired to, or for a job, promotion or professional award they desired. At the time, the three students had achieved passing grades in their honours-level Bachelor of Education degree, but their marks did not ensure admission to the

² A portfolio development course is committed to reflection on past experience, and provides tutorial support to assist learners articulate and present learning derived from experience. Butterworth and McKelvey (1997) make a distinction between the 'developmental model' of RPL, which is a personal statement of learning and achievement, and the 'credit exchange model', a more instrumental approach, in which learners apply for credit from the receiving institution for formal qualifications acquired elsewhere. The credit exchange model does not take into account learning acquired informally, through experience.

Master of Education.³ They took the opportunity presented by the course to strengthen applications to the Master of Education degree by constructing an account of their personal qualifications, acquired informally through experiential learning, and offering this alongside their formal education qualifications for assessment by a selection committee. Their portfolios consisted of a reflective, autobiographical essay on prior learning from experience, supported by evidence to support their claims of learning in the form of samples of work, testimonials, performance appraisals and certificates. Students' essays were narratives in which they gave not only an account of themselves, but also gave meaning to their experience by articulating and representing their worlds in writing. Giroux (1995, p. 80) says that it is valuable to examine 'how narratives get constructed, what they mean, how they regulate particular forms of moral or social experience, and how they presuppose and embody particular epistemological and political views of the world'.

In addition to scrutinizing the essays, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students to extend and probe the accounts they provided in their RPL portfolios. The interviews were conducted on the telephone, and were recorded with the students' consent. Summary notes of significant statements in interviews and autobiographical essays were sent to students for validation and amendment. Students gave permission for their names to be used in this study, and for their stories to be publicised.

Research findings

In this section, the research findings are presented under headings which relate to the five research questions set out in the introduction to this article. Significant comments made by the students in interviews and assignments are used to illustrate and illuminate the findings.

³ An average mark of 65% in a relevant honours level qualification is required for admission to the M.Ed degree at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Who are the students? What career and learning paths did they follow after leaving school?

There are similarities in terms of occupation, age and race group of the three students – Chakache, Lepheana and Mokwena – who form the data base of this study, but there are also differences, and these need to be borne in mind when interpreting the data from interviews and portfolios. The tables that follow provide biographical information and an overview of the career and learning paths followed by each student after leaving school.

Table 1: Biographical information, career and learning path:
Buti Chakache

Male

Occupation: Manager of Training Services, L-MAP (an educational NGO),
Bloemfontein

Born: 29.09.1960

Home language: South Sotho

Married, two children

Grew up in: Fouriesburg, a small town in the eastern Free State

Parents' occupations: Mother was a housewife, father a gardener (previously a mineworker)

| Learning path | Year | Career path |
|--|--------|--|
| 1. Primary school in Fouriesburg | 1967 | |
| 2. Secondary school (to Std 8) in Ficksburg | 1977 | 1. 'Piecework' (gardening and odd jobs) on weekends and in holidays to earn school fees and pocket money |
| 3. Primary Teachers Certificate, Bonamelo College of Education, QwaQwa | | |
| 4. Senior Certificate (private study) | 1981-2 | 2. Primary school teacher, Fouriesburg and Ladybrand |
| 5. Secondary Education Certificate, Vista | 1986-7 | 3. Established night school in Ladybrand and taught in it concurrently with day school |
| 6. Certificate in Librarianship, Centre for Continuing Education, Soshanguve | | |
| | 1989 | 4. HOD of a primary school in Ladybrand |
| | 1991 | 5. Recruited by READ to establish school libraries throughout OFS |
| 7. Certificate in Library and Resources Management, Ealing College, London | | |
| | | 6. Employed by educational NGO Primary Science Project to provide support to primary science teachers |
| 8. Advanced Certificate in Primary Science Education, Wits | 1995 | 7. Became Manager of Training Services for L-MAP, an educational NGO |
| 9. Further Diploma in Education (Science and Maths), Wits | 1996-7 | |
| 10. Bachelor of Education, Wits. | 1998-9 | |

Table 2: Biographical information, career and learning path:
Makhethe Lepheana

Female

Occupation: Teacher and community development worker in Matatiele

Born: 13.11.1958

Home language: South Sotho

Single, three children

Grew up in: Ramohlakoana, a rural village near Matatiele, on the borders of the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho

Parents' occupations: Mother was a housewife (but a qualified teacher), father a municipal worker in Johannesburg

| Learning path | Year | Career path |
|--|--------|--|
| 1. Primary school in Ramohlakoana | 1965 | |
| 2. Secondary school (incomplete final year) in Cedarville | | |
| 3. Wrote Standard 10 exams as private candidate | 1978 | |
| 4. Secondary Teachers' Certificate, Maluti Teachers' Training College, Matatiele | | |
| | | 1. Secondary school teacher, Matatiele |
| 5. B.A., University of Fort Hare | | 2. Teacher in King Williams Town |
| 6. B.A. Hons., UNISA (abandoned) | 1993 | 3. Teacher in Matatiele |
| 7. ABET Certificate, UNISA | 1997 | 4. Part-time tutor in night school in Matatiele where she works as a teacher in the day school |
| 8. Bachelor of Education, Wits | 1998-9 | |
| | | 5. Initiated community development projects for adults in Matatiele |

Table 3: Biographical information, career and learning path:
Luxie Mokwena

Female

Occupation: Head of ABET Unit at Mercy College, Winterveldt.

Born: 06.06.1956

Home language: North Sotho

Widow, two children

Grew up in Lady Selborne, Pretoria, and, following a forced removal, in GaRankuwa, 40km north of Pretoria

Parents' occupations: Grew up in single-parent household headed by her mother, a cleaner in a maternity home in Pretoria

| Learning path | Year | Career path |
|--|---------|---|
| 1. Primary school in Lady Selborne, Pretoria, and in GaRankuwa | 1962-70 | 1. Learned basket-weaving, sewing and other crafts |
| 2. Secondary school in GaRankuwa | 1973 | |
| 3. Primary Teachers' Certificate, Hebron College, GaRankuwa | 1975-6 | |
| 4. Wrote Standard 10 exams as a private candidate | 1982 | 2. Primary and secondary school teacher |
| 5. Bachelor of Arts, UNISA | 1988 | |
| 6. Higher Education Diploma, UNISA | 1991 | 3. Examiner for adult exams |
| 7. Bachelor of Education, UNISA | 1994 | 4. Tutor for out-of-school youth at Mercy College, Winterveldt |
| 8. Remedial Education Diploma, RAU (abandoned) | | |
| 9. Bachelor of Education, Wits | 1998-9 | 5. Introduced literacy work in craft and income-generating projects (embroidery, paper-making), and women's support groups at the college |
| | | 5. Head of the ABET Unit, Mercy College |

Chakache, Lepheana and Mokwena, all born between 1956 and 1960, participated in education at a time of dramatic change in South Africa. In the 1970s, at the height of dissatisfaction with the black schooling system which gave rise to the Soweto uprising, all three students were aware that as black, working-class youth from rural areas they did not have the same access to quality education and a range of career opportunities as others of their generation. This is most strikingly evident in the fact that none of them completed the 12 years of schooling which comprise the conventional route to university admission. Mokwena and Chakache left school after Standard 8 (Grade 10) because they needed to become financially self-sufficient, to contribute to their family's income and to help finance the education of younger siblings. Lepheana was prevented from completing Standard 10 (Grade 12) because she was expecting her first child, and in the 1970s girls who were pregnant were routinely expelled from school.

Night schools for adults had not yet been established in the rural areas where these students lived, so they had no option but to study alone at home and write their examinations as private candidates in the district circuit office. Lepheana matriculated the year after she left school to have her first child. Chakache and Mokwena deferred their Standard 10 (Grade 12) until a later date.

All three students had shown promise at school, but personal and social circumstances thwarted their ambitions to complete their secondary education. Chakache, for example, was interested in science and maths, and aware that these subjects were critical in opening doors to career and study paths, but there were no maths and science teachers in the rural high school which he attended, nor was there a laboratory, a library, or other students who shared his interest in science. He managed, through disciplined self-study, to get a first-class pass in his Standard 8 (Grade 10) examinations in maths and science before resorting, like Lepheana and Mokwena, to the 'soft options' of biblical studies and home language in his Senior Certificate (Grade 12).

All three students had career aspirations outside the field of education. Chakache wanted to be a medical doctor, but was unable to acquire the higher grade maths and science needed for admission to a medical school. Mokwena, aware of new careers for black women in the Bophuthatswana Broadcasting Company, aspired to be a radio or television presenter, but openings were restricted to matriculants. Lepheana's opportunities were limited by her parents' assumption that there were only two careers available to black,

working-class women – nursing and teaching. She wanted to be a nurse, but her parents decided on teaching.

All three students were persuaded by family members (usually an older sibling who had followed the same route) to qualify as school teachers, so that they could earn a regular income within a short period of time. Chakache and Mokwena mistakenly believed that entering the teaching profession would enable them to complete their secondary schooling while at teacher training college, but such opportunities for teachers to upgrade their qualifications lay years in the future. It was their determination, persistence and sustained motivation which enabled these students to complete their secondary schooling. These qualities set them apart from others of their generation⁴, and motivated them to further their education as a way to ‘get on in life’ (Chakache, 22 November 2000).

What access to higher education did the students have as school leavers? What propelled them into higher education? What barriers did they encounter in gaining access to higher education?

As we have seen, for these three students, access to higher education and to occupations of their choice was thwarted by the necessity to leave school before matriculating, a circumstance linked to their particular race, class and gender positions in the 1970s. Absence of choice did not entirely foreclose opportunities, but meant delays and diversions from their chosen learning and career paths.

A glance at the tables of career and learning paths shows that the students first gained access to higher education in the late 1980s, a period when apartheid legislation still limited black students’ access to historically white universities. Chakache and Mokwena elected to study on a part-time basis at the distance education institutions UNISA and Vista. Lepheana studied at Fort Hare, somehow managing to avoid the institutional closures and disrupted examinations of the times. All three students worked full-time as teachers and supported their families financially while studying towards their initial degrees

⁴ Finishing secondary education in the 1970s and 1980s was a major accomplishment in itself. Fewer than 8% of African adults in South Africa have passed matric compared to 61% of whites. Five times more whites have degrees than all other race groups combined (Krige, 1995).

and diplomas. Although they were engaged in studies to further their professional development, they did not receive financial assistance of any kind from their employers at the time – the provincial departments of education.

Their first experience of studying at university was no great departure from their experience of learning and teaching at school and at teacher training college. The volume of work was larger, but the rote-learning strategies which they had employed at school and in self-study continued to be successful. Chakache and Mokwena had become disciplined, independent learners in the hard years of private study leading to Senior Certificate, but for Lepheana, the first year at Fort Hare was the first time she had had to plan her work to meet deadlines. She joined a study group which provided motivation and support, and worked hard.

For all three students, progression to a degree course in adult education in a historically white institution in the 1990s meant confronting a new teaching style which required their active participation in problem solving, and the active processing of their own ideas, skills, values and attitudes. Previously, the students had relied on a learning strategy in which they passively received knowledge from a powerful, authority figure such as a tutor or a text. Gajdusek and Gillotte (1995) note that such a strategy prevails in cultures in which questioning might be seen as disruptive of cultural norms of the harmony of the group. Now students were required to observe and question former constructions and practices, to find a voice and to take personal responsibility for their views.

For Lepheana, studying at Wits was, at first, an emotionally intense, disturbing and often lonely experience. This is how she recounts it in her RPL application:

During the first year of B.Ed. I was faced with many challenges like the new environment. This included Johannesburg itself, ways of teaching which were just new to me, [and the] diversity of learners. The learners were from different interesting fields of practice and some of them (the fields) were totally new to me. I took time to adjust to the environment. This alone affected my performance.

Adult education was a new field to me. I took time before I could find my footing. In fact, I nearly resigned [from] the course. I was an educator at an adult centre but I used the teaching methods which I used at formal school and added a few tips from my UNISA studies. ...I noticed that what I had learned for the ABET Certificate was not enough.

(Lepheana, November 1999)

Strategies which the students reportedly developed to cope with the demands of their courses and their geographical isolation from the university included forming study groups, becoming computer literate, learning to use resources such as libraries efficiently, using course reading materials more selectively and effectively, and making frequent contact with tutors, by telephone, fax or post. The process of defining and articulating their professional roles and interests, in group discussions, assignments and research projects throughout their Bachelor of Education degree, helped them to find focus and direction in their studies.

According to the students, the most significant barrier to their participation in higher education was not physical or epistemological access, but cost. In interviews they mentioned not only the cost of tuition fees and course materials, but also the expense of transportation to the university and subsistence during residential sessions, and the charges for telephone, postage and courier services associated with learning at a distance. These expenses were all borne by the students themselves, in the absence of bursaries or grants for part-time students, or financial assistance from their employers.⁵ All three students used the word 'sacrifice' to describe the adjustments which they and their families had to make to pay their way in higher education. Lepheana and Mokwena, both single parents, noted that as their children got older, the strain on the family budget increased, and it became difficult to pay their own tuition and other costs, alongside their children's. The second barrier identified by all three students was a lack of time to meet other commitments, either at work or, more particularly, at home. Lack of time called for sacrifices and compromises in their personal lives, and the lives of their partners and children.

Is there a 'seamless' route between education and occupation? What influences the learning and career paths followed by students? What motivates them to follow the learning and career paths they have chosen?

Mokwena and Chakache mentioned the absence of information, guidance or encouragement to take up education and training leading to their original career choices. Lepheana, who grew up in a conservative home in a

⁵ Employers allowed students time off to write examinations at the end of the year. Time spent in residential sessions at the university was usually docked from students' holiday or sick leave. Chakache was the only one of the three students with access to a low-interest loan from his employer.

geographically remote region of KwaZulu-Natal, did not have a career choice at all. Her mother had been a qualified teacher, and she advised Lepheana to take up teaching because it was a respectable, secure and remunerative profession. All three students were guided by their families' expectations and aspirations for them. They were expected to be hardworking, disciplined and responsible and, given the family's limited finances, to progress in school as far as possible. They were expected to perform well in school and set an example to younger siblings. Parents, who generally had received only a few years of schooling themselves, wanted their children to get an education. Education promised the security, prosperity and status which was absent in the parents' lives.

After acquiring their initial qualifications in homeland teacher training colleges, all three students taught in primary schools for a number of years. Chakache and Mokwena completed their Senior Certificates, giving them access to higher education institutions. In the late 1980s, formal and non-formal education programmes for teacher development and upgrading began to be offered by NGOs and distance education institutions, and the students took advantage of these opportunities to consolidate and improve their professional standing. Both Chakache and Mokwena became involved in adult education, and in providing support to their peers. Mokwena did this informally, by setting up study groups to support colleagues studying through Azalea Teachers' College, while for Chakache, teacher development and support became an area of professional specialisation. He was employed on a part-time basis by READ, an NGO, to help teachers set up libraries in the Ladybrand area. Later he was employed full-time by another NGO, the Science Education Project, to improve science teaching in primary schools throughout the Eastern Free State.

In Chakache's case, learning and career paths were 'seamless' in the sense that they were intertwined and supported one another. As he gained formal qualifications, he was given increasingly responsible and challenging positions at work (as head of department, regional library teacher, regional, then provincial science education implementer, and manager of training services) which gave him exposure to learning and career opportunities. Chakache's account of an experience in 1991 provides insights into his own developing critical awareness of his development, and how this led to a path of informal, self-directed and, later, formal education. In 1991 he won a British Council scholarship to do a course in Library and Resources Management at Ealing College, University of London. It was here that 'the need to discover myself

and seek meaning in my education life became aroused'. The practical component of the course meant that Chakache observed and worked in library management in eight schools in and around London:

...I was expected to talk to [staff and students] and to address meetings. This was when I discovered that my language proficiency was very restrictive. English first language speakers surrounded me wherever I went. My ability to explain concepts was minimal. I lacked vocabulary. I needed to do some deeper studies of things I wanted to talk about. To some extent, I discovered that the people I talked to knew more and better than I did about South Africa. I got angry with myself... [This experience] and the counselling and guidance sessions I was exposed to... rekindled my dream to become something in life.

(Chakache, 22 November 2000)

When he returned to South Africa, Chakache sought to improve his English by seeking out English speakers and listening to English on the radio and TV. Two years later, he left employment in the state school system to join the Primary Science Project, and enrolled with the University of the Witwatersrand to do an Advanced Certificate in Primary Science Education, which paved the way to a Further Diploma in Education (Science or Mathematics) and a Bachelor of Education degree at the same institution.

The learning paths followed by Lepheana and Mokwena were not as seamless as Chakache's. After completing their first degrees and working for several years as teachers in state primary schools, both women decided to improve their professional standing by acquiring further qualifications. Lepheana registered for an honours degree in Biblical Studies at UNISA, but felt isolated as the sole student registered for the qualification in her geographic area. Discouraged by the lack of contact with staff or fellow students, she withdrew from the course. Mokwena, who by now had completed an HED and B.Ed at UNISA, wanted a specialisation in her teaching career, and began a diploma in remedial teaching at RAU. Despite her success in distance education at UNISA, she disliked the 'mass-based pedagogy' of RAU and abandoned the course (Mokwena, 16 November 2000).

After a brief hiatus, Mokwena and Lepheana were spurred to enter the field of adult education by incidents which piqued their interest and ambition. Mokwena was appointed as an examiner for the Standard 10 adult examinations in Biblical Studies. One mature student fared so badly in his examination, scoring 1 point out of a possible 400, that she started to wonder what sort of learning was taking place at public night schools. Her enquiries

led her to a position with Mercy College in Winterveldt, where she initially taught out-of-school youth, and later led craft and income-generating projects for women. She was not familiar with adult education practice, and decided to inform herself by participating in short courses and workshops, then by doing a degree in adult education at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Lepheana's motivation to pursue formal study in adult education was similar to Mokwena's. A night school for adults had been established at the school where she taught during the day. She became a tutor and decided to enrol in UNISA's ABET Certificate programme to learn how to deal with adult learners, whom she swiftly perceived had different needs from day scholars. Not content with this, she began a B.Ed degree in adult education at Wits in 1988. For once, being a resident of a rural area proved an advantage, for Lepheana was to win a bursary from the South African Institute for Distance Education in her second year of study. This led to her ambition to become a researcher and consultant, and to an RPL application for a Masters degree in adult education in which she said: 'In order to be a trusted researcher, I need to be more qualified in my field of interest (adult education) and to be more equipped with research skills' (Lepheana, November 1999).

Despite their accumulation of certificates, diplomas and degrees, all three students wanted the status and recognition of a degree from a major metropolitan university. In part, this was because a postgraduate qualification symbolized achievement. But it was also because these degrees offered opportunities for personal, professional and academic advancement and choice. Chakache sums up this combination of motivations thus:

I would like to explore the ETD field more in order to find out which of the various roles I may be competent and experienced in. ...I am not going to rest until I obtain a doctorate in education. I would like to be able to offer my help to a wider audience than I am at the moment. From [there] I will be able to offer consultancy, lecturing, and even publishing as well as writing to the country at large.

(Chakache, November 1999)

Motivations change over time, and it is interesting to note that the experience of engaging in research and scholarly activities in their Bachelor of Education degree led Chakache and Lepheana to new learning and career goals. We noted above that Lepheana developed an ambition to be a researcher in adult education. She is particularly interested in research in rural areas: 'At the moment, they (rural people) seem to be voiceless and through research findings their voice could be heard' (Lepheana, November 1999).

All three students felt that it was important for them to be a role model for others in their family and community. The recognition this brought them was, to an extent, a trade-off for the sacrifices which they and their families made for the sake of their continuing education.

What is the nature of students' prior learning? What knowledge, skills, values and attitudes are given weight in students' accounts of their prior learning? Do they place value on formal, certificated learning, or non-formal and informal learning? Do they place emphasis on hard or soft skills? Is there a difference in the accounts provided by women and men?

In the reflective, autobiographical essays which were the centrepiece of their RPL portfolios, students focused on their growth and achievements as learners and practitioners. They placed value on both their formal, certificated learning and their informal learning. It is not surprising that the students prized their formal qualifications highly, since they were keenly aware of how rare their achievements were for black South Africans of their generation. The years of job reservation and Bantu education had taught them how institutions use formal qualifications to screen and exclude potential students. Education was clearly linked to job security and prosperity. Formal qualifications could not be denied or withdrawn. For these students, formal qualifications were symbols of the 'cultural capital' which they had accumulated against the odds. The historically white universities were seen as the gatekeepers of the dominant culture, so places in these institutions were especially prized. Postgraduate qualifications, in particular, provided exposure to ideas and contacts beyond the community or township and the world of work.

In their accounts of their informal learning, the students emphasised their experience as learners, and particularly the strategies they had devised to succeed in distance and higher education. They characterised themselves as motivated and experienced learners, responsive to the demands of different educational institutions and different levels of education.

With support from their tutors and classmates in their RPL course, the students were able to analyse the knowledge, skills and values embedded in their achievements as learners and practitioners. These included a wide range of 'soft skills': knowledge and understanding of people of diverse cultural and social backgrounds; inter-personal and communications skills; initiative; leadership qualities; the ability to evaluate situations and events and make

suggestions for improvement; knowledge of cultural practices in rural black communities, and ability to work flexibly within and around them; facilitation and negotiation skills; ability to think reflectively and critically; and the ability to inspire and guide others. The 'hard skills' which students had acquired included knowledge of outcomes-based education, knowledge of adult learning theory; knowledge of adult education principles; knowledge of curriculum and course design; basic research skills; and basic computer skills. This knowledge is practical, operational knowledge, rather than theoretical knowledge. The value orientations students had developed included empathy with the poor and oppressed in society; a sense of personal responsibility to help others, to serve and uplift their communities; and an enquiring rather than accepting approach to life's problems.

Interestingly, the two women students, Mokwena and Lepheana, traced their present capacities and achievements to their experience as women and mothers. Writing about the management component of the M.Ed degree to which she was applying, Lepheana noted that she had already acquired management skills informally and formally:

Management is an everyday aspect. I manage my life well. ... I am a parent, worker and learner. I manage my time so that all these roles could fit in well. In order to carry them out there is money involved. ... When I am at work during the week ... there is someone who looks after the home and she gets paid. I have been with her for five years. This predicts good management. I do not have problems with the members of my family. We solve our problems and settle our differences.

At work I manage my classroom effectively. ... I am democratic and face reality. Due to my management skills I [was invited to attend] a management course which was meant for HODs and Deputy Principals and I was issued a certificate. ... I studied management [in the] ABET certificate. The module included what to do before starting a project, planning ABET and managing an ABET project (to mention a few). This year in the B.Ed I am studying management in ETD practice. I think that I have a foundation [in] management which could be the base for the course in management in M.Ed.

(Lepheana, November 1999)

Mokwena recounts a personal trauma in her life and her recovery from it as a transformative event. Some months after starting her B.Ed degree in 1998, she convened a meeting in her GaRankuwa home of a study group which met fortnightly in members' homes or workplaces to prepare assignments and discuss readings. When the meeting ended, one of the students, Sibongile Mtshali, had not been fetched by her husband as planned. Mtshali was invited

to spend the night in Mokwena's home. During the night, three hit men – apparently hired by Mtshali's husband who resented his wife's independence – broke into the house and shot Mtshali dead. They then burgled, raped and shot Mokwena in the shoulder before escaping. In the weeks and months which followed, Mokwena made a brave recovery. She mourned Mtshali, and, supported by her family, friends and her faith, she returned to work and continued her studies. She laid charges against Mtshali's husband, who evaded prosecution and mounted a campaign of terror against Mokwena by stalking and threatening her. Two years after the event, she said:

My accident in 1998 was life-altering and shatter[ing]. ... As an individual I can choose to become a victor or victim of circumstances. I align myself with the former (a victor). I am gradually educating and supporting female colleagues and students who have been physically and emotionally abused.

(Mokwena, November 2000)

Chakache, the only male in this study, did not refer to his experience as a husband and father as a source of knowledge and skill, and rarely expressed feelings in his reflective essay, suggesting that the gender differentiation in RPL portfolios in the UK may be a feature of South African portfolios, too.

It is significant that none of the three students claimed knowledge and skills gained from their past experience as school teachers or night school tutors. This may have been because their more recent work experience related better to the profile of students set out in M.Ed course documents, which anticipated that students held leadership and management positions in their work or communities. Alternatively, the students may have become critical of the antiquated methods and materials used in state adult night schools, coupled with the inadequate tutor training, and decided to omit these from their RPL applications.

What significance does RPL hold for the students, in terms of their learning and career goals? Does it have intrinsic or instrumental value?

One way in which RPL was important in these students' lives was by nurturing lifelong learning. This may be understood in at least two ways. First, RPL provided access to graduate and postgraduate qualifications from which the students would normally have been barred. Chakache, for example, did not complete a first degree, and would not normally have gained admission to the honours level Bachelor of Education and thereafter the Master of Education

degree. An embryonic form of RPL opened a professional and academic learning path for him which would otherwise have been interrupted or braked (as was the case earlier in his learning career when he returned to learning to complete his Senior Certificate after acquiring a teaching qualification). The decision to admit the students to the M.Ed degree was validated when all three students completed the coursework component of the Master of Education degree successfully.

The second way in which RPL may be seen to nurture lifelong learning is by making students more aware of their prior learning, their capacity to learn, and where they needed to learn more, or different, knowledge and skills. Their appreciation of learning grew, alongside their skill as learners. As Mokwena said:

The portfolio task helped me to identify prior experience, skills and knowledge. These are valuable to me, my family, my colleagues and employers. I have learned that none of us is static, and one can develop herself on an ongoing basis.

(Mokwena, November 1999)

Chakache, in the introduction to his RPL portfolio, wrote that 'The portfolio assignment helped me realise I had potential. I had to put on paper what I had achieved... and I also discovered what I didn't know' (November 1999).

The portfolios called on students to develop the skills of reflection, questioning and critical thinking. They had to grapple with academic expectations and norms. Using these skills to highlight their achievements, they also became aware of how their accomplishments were valued (or not valued) by others, including university administrators and academic staff. As Lepheana poignantly put it: 'One does not get credit for all that one knows' (November 1999).

The self-reflective, narrative aspects of the RPL portfolio development course provided students with an opportunity to explore a sense of self and develop a sense of community, even destiny. We have already noted Chakache's drive to do a doctorate in education, and his interest in exploring new roles as a practitioner, as well as Lepheana's aim of becoming an educational researcher. Mokwena said that her RPL portfolio 'helped her unlock her thoughts about prior learning and experience'. After the death of her classmate, Mokwena began to see herself as 'a wounded healer who has a mission to reach out to other women in similar situations'. She proceeded to organise workshops on woman abuse for learners and staff of her college, and to introduce discussion

of gender discrimination in the literacy and income-generating projects in which she is involved.

All of the students noted that the RPL course alerted them to the knowledge and skills which they and other adult learners have, which is not recognised or certified. They had become more sensitive to the ways in which this prior experience prepared (or failed to prepare) adults for study.

Chakache says that he employs many of the methods associated with RPL in his educational practice:

We do not talk about ideas only, but in my workshops we practise methodologies and discuss principles... we do reflections and encourage a lot of self-assessment, peer-assessment and whole group evaluation of demonstrations and presentations... Teachers bring with them copies of their presentations... This is used as evidence of what they do. I have also encouraged them to continue keeping journals and compiling portfolios.

(Chakache, November 1999)

It seems, then, that RPL has both intrinsic *and* instrumental value to the students. The knowledge and skills which are required for a successful RPL application are valuable in themselves. They may also enrich students' repertoires as educators.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this article was to engage the reader in reflection on the prior experience of mature adult learners, and the ways in which their experience could be understood as preparedness for higher education. The intention of such reflection was to move academic staff to take a more positive, welcoming approach to RPL and to adult learners entering their institutions.

This study has focussed on three students who gained admission to a postgraduate qualification at a major South African university by following a longer and more difficult route than that taken by a conventional school-leaver. Their admission to the Master of Education degree was based on the submission of a portfolio of prior learning which demonstrated their potential and motivation to study at postgraduate level.

The students' personal histories are interesting, and provide hints of the variety and complexity of prior learning and experience. Like the mature adult students in part-time studies in the UK (Blaxter and Tight, 1993), these students are aware of their position in society and in history. Unlike the UK students, they are from rural, working-class families, the first generation to acquire more than a few years of schooling. They generally describe themselves as being constrained by political and economic circumstances in their youth, and as gaining greater control of, and direction in, their learning and career paths as they matured. They were unable to complete their secondary education in the repressive 1970s, but returned to school, and proceeded to tertiary education in the 1980s and 1990s, when the first opportunities to improve their professional and academic standing arose. The process involved personal ambition and determination, a strong drive for self-improvement, and the ability to mobilise financial and other resources.

The students' prior experience, including their experience of learning, was shaped by their social context and their position in it. As they entered higher levels of education and engaged with specialised fields of study, they became aware that they needed to adapt their learning strategies to accommodate demands for active participation, critical reflection, problem-solving and information processing. As they advanced toward a higher degree, they were made aware of the need for more penetrating and abstract thinking, more sophisticated research and writing skills, and more sophisticated computer skills. As the contexts of learning changed, so did the students' position and understandings. They became aware of the limits of their prior experience, as well as their capacities as learners, and planned strategies to improve their situations.

Their stories tell us that the students were involved in a struggle to acquire a status-enhancing qualification, but they were also involved in a struggle to learn, to know and to grow. RPL can facilitate both goals by validating adults' knowledge and experience, and opening doors to more and different learning.

What of the promises of RPL sketched at the beginning of this article – the promises of redress, skills development, personal development and institutional change? Does this study illuminate any of these promises?

The claim that RPL contributes to redress and institutional change is related to wider national goals of social justice and transformation. This study of three adult students' prior learning in a single postgraduate qualification is much too

small to address such issues meaningfully. More and different research is needed to evaluate the capacity of RPL to effect such changes. However, the promises of skills development and personal development through RPL were realised for the three students in this study. The students clearly stated that engaging in reflection on prior learning and experience developed their knowledge and skills as education and training practitioners. In terms of personal development, the students reported that they gained self-knowledge and self-confidence from expressing themselves in their portfolios. They claimed that they developed greater empathy and respect for adult learners that they encountered in their work. Clearly RPL was a valuable educational process for the students, in which they learned about themselves, about learning and assessment in higher education, and about the contingent nature of experiential learning and RPL. This leads to the conclusion that RPL, applied with sensitivity and discretion, can be an appropriate and benign practice in higher education, one that should be developed further.

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