

English and Literacy: Nelson Mandela

Lesson plan 5: Pupils' own biographies

Age group: 10-11

Resources:

You will need **Extract 1** (below) and **Extract 2** (below) from *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela.

Introduction and whole-class activity:

Ask the pupils whether or not they think people write autobiographies on their own. Take one or two of the pupils' Facts about me worksheets from the Facts about me lesson, and/or additional research done at home, and model one or two paragraphs of an autobiography.

Encourage the pupils to suggest vocabulary and phrases to maintain the interest of the reader. Pick out one or two sentences from Nelson Mandela's autobiography that may inspire the pupil's own writing.

1. What information can the pupils recall?
2. Why have they remembered those points?

Brainstorm opening lines for the pupil's autobiographies.

Group activity:

Using all the information the pupils have collected so far, ask the pupils to begin writing their own autobiographies.

Plenary:

Ask the pupils to share opening lines. Which ones are the most powerful? Which openings would you like to read to the end? Why?

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Worksheet: From Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Extract 1)

My mother presided over three rondavels at Qunu which, as I remember, were always filled with the babies and children of my relations. In fact, I hardly recall any occasion as a child when I was alone. In African culture, the sons and daughters of one's aunts or uncles are considered brothers and sisters, not cousins. We do not make the same distinctions among relations practised by Europeans. We have no half-brothers or half-sisters. My mother's sister is my mother; my uncle's son is my brother.

Of my mother's three huts, one was used for cooking, one for sleeping and one for storage. In the hut in which we slept, there was no furniture.

We slept on mats and sat on the ground. I did not discover pillows until I went away to school. The stove on which my mother cooked was a three-legged iron pot that rested on a grate over a hole in the ground. Everything we ate we grew and made ourselves. My mother planted and harvested her own mealies. After harvesting the mealies, the woman ground the kernels between two stones. A portion of this was made into bread, while the rest was dried and stored in pots. Unlike mealies, which were sometimes in short supply, milk from our cows and goats was always plentiful.

From an early age, I spent most of my free time in the veld playing and fighting with the other boys of the village. A boy who remained at home tied to his mother's apron strings was regarded as a sissy. At night, I shared my food and blanket with these same boys. I was no more than five when I became a herd-boy, looking after sheep and calves in the fields. I discovered the almost mystical attachment that the Xhosa have for cattle, not only as a source of food and wealth, but as a blessing from God and a source of happiness. It was in the fields that I learned how to knock birds out of the sky with a slingshot, to gather wild honey and fruits and edible roots, to drink warm, sweet milk straight from the udder of a cow, to swim in the clear, cold streams, and to catch fish with twine and sharpened bits of wire. I learned to stick-fight - essential knowledge to any rural African boy - and became adept at its various techniques, parrying blows, feinting in one direction, striking in another, breaking away from an opponent with quick footwork. From these days I date my love of the veld, of open spaces, the simple beauties of nature, the clean line of the horizon.

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Worksheet: From Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Extract 2)

Usually the boys played among themselves, but we sometimes allowed our sisters to join us. Boys and girls would play games like ndize (hide-and-peek) and icekwa (touch and run). But the game I most enjoyed playing with the girls was what we called khetha, or choose-the-one-you-like. This was not so much an organised game, but a spur-of-the-moment sport that took place when we accosted a group of girls our own age and demanded that each select the boy she loved.

Our rules dictated that the girl's choice be respected and once she had chosen her favourite, she was free to continue on her journey escorted by the lucky boy she loved. But the girls were far cleverer than us and would often confer among themselves and choose one boy, usually the plainest fellow, and then tease him all the way home.

The most popular game for boys was thinti, and like most boys' games it was a youthful approximation of war. Two sticks, used as targets, would be driven firmly into the ground in an upright position about one hundred feet apart. The goal of the game was for each team to hurl sticks at the opposing target and knock it down.

We each defended our own target and attempted to prevent the other side from retrieving the sticks that had been thrown. As we grew older, we organised matches against boys from neighbouring villages, and those who distinguished themselves in these battles were greatly admired.

After games such as these, I would return to my mother's kraal where she was preparing supper. Whereas my father once told stories of historic battles and heroic Xhosa warriors, my mother would enchant us with Xhosa legends and fables that had come down from numberless generations. These tales stimulated my childish imagination, and usually contained some moral lesson. I recall one story my mother told us about a traveller who was approached by an old woman with terrible cataracts on her eyes. The woman asked the traveller for help, and the man averted his eyes. Then another man came along and was approached by the old woman. She asked him to clean her eyes, and even though he found the task unpleasant, he did as she asked.

Then, miraculously, the scales fell from the old woman's eyes and she became young and beautiful. The man married her and became wealthy. It is a simple tale, but its message is an enduring one: virtue and generosity will be rewarded in ways that one cannot know.

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On the first day of school, my teacher gave each of us an English name and said that from then on that was the name we would answer to in school. This was the custom among Africans in those days and was undoubtedly due to the British bias of our education.

That day the teacher told me that my new name was Nelson. Why this particular name was bestowed on me I have no idea. Perhaps it had something to do with the great British sea captain Lord Nelson, but that would only be a guess.