

**Exploring educators' experiences of their  
interactions with learners in the  
Foundation Phase**

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## CONTENTS

Declaration by student	4
Declaration by supervisors	5
Declaration of editing	6
Acknowledgements	7
Summary	8
Opsomming	10
Instructions to Authors	12
Chapter 1 – Literature review and study orientation	13
Introduction and problem statement	13
Educators and learners as role players in the interaction	14
Educators	14
Learners in the Foundation Phase	15
The educator-learner relationship	16
Theories underpinning the research	19
Community psychology	19
Developmental systems theory	20
Research problem and aim of the investigation	21
Research method and design	21
Conclusion	22
References	23
Chapter 2 – Article	28
Abstract	29
Exploring educators' experiences of their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase	30
Introduction	30
Goal of the study	31
Research method and design	31
Research context and participants	32
Procedure	32
Data collection	33
Data analysis	33
Trustworthiness	33
Ethical considerations	34

Results	34
Diag 1: How educators experience the interaction in the classroom	35
Theme 1: How educators interact in the classroom	36
Theme 2: Learners' response (as experienced by the educators)	37
Theme 3: Educators' subjective experience of the interaction	37
External Influences	38
Discussion	39
Limitations of the study	41
Recommendations and conclusions	41
References	43
Chapter 3 – Conclusion	46
References	49

**DECLARATION BY STUDENT**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that **Exploring educators' experiences of their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase** is my own original work and that I have not previously submitted it in its entirety or in part at any university for a degree.

.....

Signature  
(S. Roche)

.....

Date

## DECLARATION BY SUPERVISOR

Hereby, I declare that this dissertation in article format was prepared under my supervision and I confirm that it meets all academic criteria for the process of award of academic degree.

.....

Signature  
(Dr. S. Jacobs)

.....

Date

## DECLARATION BY EDITOR

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### CONFIRMATION OF EDITING

22.04.2013

I, Sue von Stein, professional, qualified and practicing editor, hereby confirm that the Research Report and article of Sharon Roche, titled **Exploring educators' experiences of their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase** was edited by me in preparation for submission in April 2013.

Should you have any queries, kindly contact me on my cell phone no: 0825749264.

With thanks



**Sue von Stein**

**WORD WATCHER**  
***Editing and Proofreading***  
***Full Member of PEG***

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5. My Heavenly Father – “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”. Philippians 4:13.

I dedicate this study to my husband, Nick, and our son, Joel, who was born in the middle of this study. I love you both.

## SUMMARY

The interactions between educators and learners in the classroom have been proved to be pivotal in learners' academic performance and social interactions. Furthermore, positive interaction impacts on both the educators' and learners' emotional wellbeing. With this in mind, this study aimed to explore educators' experiences of their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase. The theoretical underpinning of this study, namely community psychology and systems theory states that interaction is a dynamic process between two individuals and that people must always be considered in context, taking into mind their family, community and social environment.

This qualitative study used a case study design, utilizing a focus group discussion in two public schools to gather data. Ten female educators participated, six from the one school and four from the other. They were all English speaking and all had been teaching for more than five years. The discussions were directed by one main question, namely: "Tell me about your experiences of the interactions with the learners in your classroom". Additional probing questions were also utilized. These two schools were chosen as one is well resourced and the other school is under-resourced, and so they provide a different perspective on the subject being explored in this study.

Thematic analysis was utilized and revealed the following main themes. Firstly, the educators reported being very aware of both the educational and emotional needs of the learners, as well as the impact of the family background on the learners' behaviour. Furthermore, the experiences of the educators in relation to the learners were mostly negative, reporting often feeling frustrated, hopeless and angry. They did, however, have some positive experiences. As a result of the learners' needs and their experiences, the educators employed various strategies to meet the identified needs of the learners, to manage the classroom environment and regulate themselves.

These findings are considered in the light of international and South African research and found to concur with this literature, in that educators use interaction to achieve the tasks required by the curriculum, to manage classroom discipline and structure and to meet the emotional needs of the learners. Additionally, the difference in the two schools was revealed in the influence of external factors. The educators from the less resourced school experienced much frustration and stress in contending with the learners' particularly challenging home lives, as well as the inefficiency of the education department, in matters such as assessing learners or placing them correctly, according to their needs.

In the light of these findings, the researcher recommends further studies to determine whether what was reported by the educators in this study, can be generalized to all educators in the Foundation Phase. If this is indeed so, educators could be empowered to be more effective in their



interactions with the learners in their class, which could, in turn, result in better academic performances for the learners and a more positive experience for the educators.

**Keywords:** Community psychology, educators, learners, Foundation Phase, interaction, systems theory

## OPSOMMING

Interaksie en wisselwerking tussen opvoeders en leerders in hulle klaskamers speel 'n deurslaggewende rol in leerders se akademiese prestasie asook in hulle sosiale interaksies. Positiewe interaksie het bonop 'n uitwerking op beide die opvoeders en leerders se emosionele welstand. Die doelstelling van hierdie studie is om opvoeders se belewenis van hulle interaksies met leerders in die Grondslagfase te ondersoek. Die teoretiese vertrekpunt vir hierdie navorsing, naamlik gemeenskapsielkunde en stelselteorie, sien interaksie as 'n dinamiese proses tussen twee individue, met inagneming van beide se familie, gemeenskap en sosiale omgewing.

In hierdie kwalitatiewe ondersoek is van 'n gevallestudie-ontwerp gebruik gemaak, waar data deur middel van twee fokusgroepe in twee openbare skole ingesamel is. Tien vroulike opvoeders het deelgeneem, ses van die een en vier van 'n ander skool. Al die opvoeders was Engelssprekend en het reeds vir meer as vyf jaar onderrig gegee. Die besprekings het rondom een kernvraag plaasgevind, naamlik: "Beskryf hoe julle die interaksie met die leerders in julle klaskamers ervaar". Ander indringende vrae is ook gebruik. Hierdie twee skole is gekies juis omdat die een goed toegerus is en die ander een nie, en hulle dus die vraag vanuit verskillende oogpunte sou beskou.

Tematiese ontleding is gebruik en drie oorheersende temas het daardeur na vore gekom. Eerstens was opvoeders baie bewus van sowel die opvoedkundige en emosionele behoeftes van die leerders en hoe familieomstandighede die leerders beïnvloed. Tweedens is bevind dat, alhoewel positiewe ervaringe wel voorgekom het, opvoeders se ervaringe met betrekking tot die leerders meestal negatief was, met baie gevoelens van frustrasie, hopeloosheid en woede. Derdens het opvoeders, as gevolg van die leerders se behoeftes en agtergrond, verskillende strategieë gebruik om aan hierdie behoeftes te voorsien, die klas te beheer en hulleself te reguleer.

Hierdie bevindinge stem ooreen met internasionale en Suid-Afrikaanse navorsing, naamlik dat opvoeders interaksie gebruik om die nodige leerplantake te voltooi, klaskamerdisipline te handhaaf en aan die emosionele behoeftes van die leerders te voldoen. Bykomend hiertoe het die verskil tussen die twee skole rakende die invloed van eksterne faktore na vore gekom. Opvoeders van die minder toegeruste skool het baie frustrasie en spanning beleef as gevolg van die leerders se moeilike huislike omstandighede, sowel as die onbekwaamheid van die onderwysdepartement rakende aspekte soos asseerling en plasing van leerders volgens hulle behoeftes. Aan die hand van hierdie bevindinge, beveel die navorser aan dat verdere studies onderneem word om te bepaal of hierdie bevindinge uitgebrei kan word na alle opvoeders in die Grondslagfase. As dit wel die geval is, kan opvoeders bemaagtig word om meer doeltreffend in hulle interaksies met leerders in hulle klaskamers te wees. Dit kan lei tot beter akademiese prestasies vir die leerders en meer positiewe ervarings vir die opvoeders.

**Sleutelwoorde/Kernwoorde:** Gemeenskapsielkunde, opvoeders, leerders, Grondslagfase, interaksie, stelselteorie.

## INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS

Chapter one and three of this dissertation has been written in APA format, while chapter two has been written according to the Harvard format of referencing, in accordance with the requirements of the South African Journal of Education, to which this article will be submitted.

### ARTICLE GUIDELINES OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION

The manuscript, including abstract, figure captions, tables, etc. should be typed on A4-size paper and the pages numbered consecutively.

Total number of pages should preferably not exceed 15 pages ( $\pm$  5,500 words).

The title should be brief (max. 15 words), followed by the author(s) name(s), affiliation(s) (Department and University), and an e-mail address for the corresponding author.

An abstract in English (approximately 190 words) must be provided, followed by up to 10 keywords, presented alphabetically.

The text of the article should be divided into unnumbered sections (e.g. Introduction, Method, Results, Discussion, Acknowledgements, References, Appendix, in that order). Secondary headings may be used for further subdivision. Footnotes, if any, will be changed to endnotes.

Authors must observe publishing conventions and should not use terminology that can be construed as sexist or racist.

**Figures** should be clear, black/white originals, on separate pages — not embedded in the text. Grey or coloured shading must NOT be used. **Tables/figures** should be numbered consecutively, with a brief descriptive heading/caption. Information should not be duplicated in text and tables. Each table/figure must be referred to in the text by number — not 'above' or 'below'. They will be placed where possible after the first reference.

**References** Authors should cite at least three earlier articles in SAJE that are relevant to the subject matter of their article.

References are cited in the text by the author(s) name(s) and the year of publication in brackets (Harvard method), separated by a comma, e.g. (Brown, 1997).

# CHAPTER 1 – LITERATURE REVIEW AND STUDY ORIENTATION

## Introduction and problem statement

This chapter serves as the literature review and, as such, the researcher will describe the key concepts covered in this study. This chapter begins with the various aspects and challenges of being an educator, particularly in the South African context, as well as an examination of the developmental stage of learners in the Foundation Phase to contextualise the study. The impact and importance of the educator-learner relationship will be explored, followed by an exploration of the characteristics of interaction in the classroom. The theoretical underpinning of the study; that of community psychology and developmental systems theory, will be discussed. The chapter will end with a summary and conclusion.

Education and its many facets have long been a focus of research, as countries the world over have made education a priority. The significance of interaction in the classroom is being recognized, as research has proven that educators have the most significant impact on a learners' performance in the classroom, as well as their success in peer and adult interactions (Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin, Bryant, Burchinal, Early & Howes, 2008). Studies have explored aspects such as the link between the quality of educator-learner interactions and the academic and behavioural outcomes of grade one learners (Cadima, Leal, & Burchinal, 2010). Janssen, Riksenwalraven, Van Dijk, Huisman, Ruijsenaars (2012) have studied the interaction between children with congenital deaf-blindness and their educators. Another study has analysed the different patterns of one-on-one interactions between educators and learners with varying abilities in an inclusive classroom (Cameron, Cook & Tankersley, 2012), while yet others have examined how to best marry curriculum development with effective classroom interaction (Howe, Jacobs, Vukelich & Recchia, 2012; Ryve, Nilsson & Mason 2012).

Much research into teaching and education is being undertaken in South Africa, with a strong focus on the well-being of the educators (Jackson, Rothmann & van de Vijver, 2006; Milner & Khosa, 2008; Theron, 2007). The educator-learner relationship has been considered in terms of discipline in high schools (Mokhele, 2006), while research in the Foundation Phase has included disruptive behaviour and how the educators manage it (Marais & Meier, 2010). Vandeyar & Killen (2006) examined interaction in the classroom from a post-apartheid perspective, while Kitching, Roos and Ferreira (2011) explored interaction in the wider school community, reporting that participation and constructive interaction led to positive wellbeing. Thus far though, little research has examined how educators experience their interactions with learners in South Africa. Insight into this could mean a new awareness for educators. In the light of this, the researcher will first consider

the educators and all the factors that have an influence on them, both personally and professionally. Following this, will be a description of learners in the Foundation Phase and their particular developmental phase. These descriptions therefore preface and inform the discussion on educator-learner interaction so that the ecology or field of both the educator and learner will be considered in terms of their interaction.

### **Educators and learners as role players in the interaction**

#### *Educators*

*“What teachers know, do, expect and value has a significant influence on the nature, extent and rate of student learning. The powerful phrase ‘teachers make the difference’ captures the key role that professional teachers play in shaping the lives and futures of the their students”*

(Australian National Statement from the Teaching Profession on Teacher Standards, Quality and Professionalism, 2003)

Cognisance must be taken of the conditions under which educators in South Africa have to work. Since 1994, the national curriculum has gone through much change. A new approach to education, namely Outcomes-Based Education was introduced in the form of Curriculum 2005, with the focus on trying to link what was taught in schools to the skills needed in the workplace (Hofmeyer, 2010). However, under review it was found to have focused too much on skills and the learning process, while sacrificing content and knowledge (Hofmeyer, 2010). As a result, the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) was instituted, and at the beginning of 2013, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) was added as an amendment to the NCS to make it more accessible for the educators (UNISA, 2012). While these changes have always been with improvement in mind, it has meant many challenges for the educators as they struggle to keep up to date with what is required of them.

“Similar to most professions that require a positive work relationship with the public, teachers must juggle their own emotions, while trying to contend with their students’ needs and attend to other administrative duties” (Schutz, Quijada, De Vries & Lynde, 2010: 67). Further stressors facing educators have been identified, namely uninvolved parents, poor learner discipline, lack of learner motivation, numerous changes inside and outside the school and lack of self-esteem (Schulze & Steyn, 2007). Additional research has confirmed that these and other factors contribute to many teachers experiencing a poor quality of work life and schools having negative organisational climates (Vos, van der Westhuizen, Mentz & Ellis, 2012). The proof of this can be seen in the many educator strikes that take place (Vos et al, 2012), as well as the many educators who suffer burnout (Jackson, 2004). This is however, not simply a South African issue, as

internationally, researchers have found that teachers are leaving the profession and taking early retirement as a result of stress, anxiety, anger and burnout (Schutz et al, 2010). All these impact on the educator's teaching ability, their job satisfaction and their commitment, both to the profession and to the learners entrusted to their care (Schulze & Steyn, 2007).

In addition to the factors discussed above, educators' unique characteristics and qualities that they bring to the classroom should be understood. Morris-Rothschild and Brassard (2006) have explored this phenomenon and identified that the attachment style, gender and race of the educator all impact their interactions with the learners in their class. They state that "we know educators bring to the classroom beliefs about the nature of schooling, knowledge and learning. Additionally, educators may bring with them beliefs about themselves as educators and beliefs about their learners' abilities and motivations and the likelihood of their learners' success" (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006: 107). Individual characteristics of the learners may also impact how the educators relate to them, such as the learners' genders, ages, reputation, previous achievements, stereotypes and friendship groups (Saltzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983). However, the more experienced and comfortable an educator is in the classroom, the more likely they are to recognise these tendencies in themselves and be able to put them aside (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006) and consider the learners for who they are.

#### *Learners in the Foundation Phase*

Learners in the Foundation Phase are considered to be in the developmental phase of middle childhood. Middle childhood is a crucial developmental phase where the child spends more time in the scholastic context and less time with family. As such, it is the stage where they learn greater self-regulation and independence and take on increasing responsibility for their actions (Ripke, Huston, Eccles & Templeton, 2008). Erikson (1968) identified the school-aged child as working through their sense of industry versus inferiority to ultimately obtain competence in the tasks they are required to perform.

Middle childhood is a very social stage, with the most significant relationship for the child now being with the educator and peers (Erikson, 1968). Ripke et al. (2008) concur, stating that for children in this developmental stage, peer influence increases dramatically and as a result, it is necessary to develop social competence, including initiating and maintaining social interactions and dealing with and resolving conflicts. Peer bonds become particularly important in this stage of development and the play and interaction that is so typical of this age group has significant impact on a child's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Bergen & Fromberg, 2009).

Children in middle childhood have the potential to form close bonds with other significant individuals in their lives such as teachers, coaches, extended family members and peers

(Mayseless, 2005). For close bonds to develop with an adult other than a parent, three criteria need to be present: the adult must provide physical and emotional care to the child, they must be a constant or regular presence in their life and they must invest emotionally in the child (Howes & Richie, 1999). The ability of children to form close bonds draws heavily on attachment theory and social development (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). The attachment relationship serves the purpose of providing security and comfort to the child. "Attachment does not mean dependency, but rather secure attachment liberates children to explore their world" (Bergin & Bergin, 2009: 142). According to Bowlby (1969; 1982), a child's internal working model is how the child understands the self, the attachment figure and the world around them and, therefore, how to react accordingly. Internal working models (IWM) or mental representations of the relationship with the caregiver are made up of both cognition and affect (Ammaniti, Speranza & Fedele, 2005). The different IWMs which children develop in infancy and their related attachment styles become generalised representations of self and others (Bowlby, 1969; 1982). These IWMs will have a significant influence on how the children will then adapt and relate to others in later social situations, such as the school context (Kennedy, 2008). Securely attached children will carry positive expectations into new situations, while insecurely attached children will have less favourable expectations which may, in turn, jeopardise the new relationships, and thus will serve to further cement their IWM of relationships (Yunger, Corby & Perry, 2005). IWMs, although formed in infancy, are flexible and can be revised as a result of later relationships that occur after infancy (Kennedy, 2008; Moss, St-Laurent, Dubois-Comtois & Cyr, 2005). This has significant implications for the school context.

### **The educator-learner relationship**

The interactions between educators and learners form the foundation of the relationship that develops (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). As such, they are inextricably intertwined and the relationship must be considered when examining the interaction between educators and learners. The relationship between learners and educators has been the focus of much attention as there are many variables which can potentially be very significant for the learners in the class. As 96% of all school-age children attend school in South Africa (De Lannoy & Hall, 2010), the school setting is by far the most practical environment to intervene and have a positive impact on a child's life. In fact, the quality of the educator-learner relationship has been found to be the single most important factor in a learner being able to make a positive adaptation to the school context (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). Indeed, for some learners, the classroom may be the first time that he or she can experience a constant, loving and supportive adult, who is able to provide the safe space that is so vitally important to any child (Geddes, 2006) and, as such, the educator has a "unique opportunity to help learners foster positive representations of themselves, others and relationships" (Kennedy &



Kennedy, 2004: 253). Indeed, it has been found that learners who develop a close bond with their educators in the Foundation Phase will have more success with peer and educator relationships in the later grades and will adjust to school more easily (Stulman & Pianta, 2002).

Crucially important is the fact that learners' behavior in the class is a window into what they have previously experienced with other adults and how they have previously learnt to deal with stressful and difficult situations (Howes & Richie, 1999). In fact, Dover (2011) argues that many of the behaviours seen by educators in the classroom are defensive in nature, with the learner using ineffective coping strategies in perceived stressful situations that may have a detrimental effect on the learner's ability to learn and on the interaction with the educator. If the educator does not simply react to the behaviour, but instead attempts to understand the reason behind it and rather responds to the root cause, it is the beginning of potentially impacting and bringing about change in the learners' interaction style (Geddes, 2006). Dover (2011: 47) goes even further to say that "every time the child has a successful learning experience, the educator is providing a useful therapeutic experience". However, this does assume that the educator has the knowledge, understanding and emotional capacity to provide this successful experience to the child. Learners may find the classroom environment frightening, challenging or anxiety provoking, all of which can bring out less than ideal classroom behaviour, which in turn takes a huge emotional toll on the educator. This is echoed by Sabol and Pianta (2012) who state that "children's previous relational models with adults may guide their interactions with teachers" but excitingly, they continue saying that "a sensitive teacher may reshape children's relational models, subsequent behaviour and relationships" (Sabol & Pianta, 2012: 214).

The empathy and understanding that an educator has for the learners in her class cannot be underestimated. Empathy and understanding can have a transformative effect on a learner. Arnold (2010) reminds us that the context in which learning takes place has a profound impact on the quality of the learning. If an educator has an understanding of how valuable the relationship and interaction between the learner and the educator is for the learner and how it contributes to their overall performance, this understanding will impact their own thoughts and feelings towards the learners. In fact, "educators' empathetic disposition needs to be matched with other abilities, such as a capacity to engage, an ability to create a dynamic between thinking and feeling, coupled with professional expertise, enthusiasm and intelligent caring" (Arnold, 2010: 106).

The business of the classroom is learning and this can only take place effectively in the context of interaction between the educator and learners and between the learners themselves. Brophy (2010) states that in order for this to take place effectively, the onus is on the educator to create a climate in the classroom that facilitates this learning through education and as a result, the learners' motivation to interact and learn. He elaborates, saying that "school learning is supposed to

be enriching and empowering for students, equipping them with important knowledge, skills, values and dispositions. This learning occurs within a community in which people have social connections and responsibilities toward one another and the group as a whole” (Brophy, 2010: 50). If these elements are present, then learners feel comfortable to ask questions and seek the educator’s assistance with tasks, as they realise that uncertainty and mistakes are part of learning (Baker, Terry, Bridges & Windsor, 1997). Pianta, Hamre & Stulman (2003) also highlight the role of the educator in the interaction with the learner, stating that if the educator is able to effectively read and respond to the learner’s cues and signals and provide the support and structure that the learner needs, the interaction will be mutually rewarding.

In addition, Littleton (2010) reminds us that education is not just the amassing of numerous facts and figures, but rather the “gradual development of new problem-solving skills and new ways of using language for representing knowledge and making sense of experience. It also entails the gradual induction by teachers of students into new perspectives on the world” (Littleton, 2010: 149). Research has shown that when educators have high expectations of learners and they are conscious of this, they will perform better and have a healthier self-esteem (Vorhaus, 2010). However, when educators don’t expect much from their learners, it can cause learners to expect that they will fail and can even go as far as resulting in learners displaying depressive symptoms (Vorhaus, 2010). In reality, most educators have different expectations from different learners in their class, based on their previous performance, their gender, social class and ethnicity (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry & Osborne, 1983; Vorhaus, 2010) and this impacts on how they interact with the different learners in the class. Dover (2011), Geddes (2006, 2005, 2003) and Bergin and Bergin (2009) have identified successful strategies for educators to employ in the classroom with learners. For all learners in the class, educators can communicate caring for the learners by being ready and prepared for class, being present physically and emotionally and being prepared to show their real self (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Additionally, educators who are able to give learners autonomy and choice with classroom projects and tasks, reinforce the learner’s sense of self and the educator’s confidence in them (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

Alexander (2000, 2004) has explored the role of educator–learner interaction in the classroom and the role it plays in how educators assist learners in this exploration of new perspectives and understanding. He states that while classroom interaction may seem universally similar, there are subtle differences in the ground rules of different classrooms. Different educators establish different expectations about how interactions should take place, in terms of how educators seek out learners’ opinions and ideas, explain the tasks set before them and work through problems and queries (Alexander, 2000). He terms the most effective method of classroom interaction, dialogic teaching – where both the learners and the educators contribute extensively

and through this, the learners' understanding of a concept or theme is drawn out and expanded (Alexander, 2004). He acknowledges that essentially dialogic teaching is simply a description of good practice.

Research examining what factors have the greatest impact on a learner's success has revealed that it's not the class size or even the teacher's education, but rather the effectivity of the interaction between the educator and the learner (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Effective interaction between educators and learners create the emotional support that learners require, ensuring that the classroom is well managed and organised with tasks that engage and provide the instructional support and on-going feedback that promotes successful learning and development (Hamre & Pianta, 2007). Thus, it becomes clear that although educator-learner interaction is not straight forward, but rather influenced by many different factors, both from the learner's and the educator's perspective, effective interaction in the classroom has numerous social and academic benefits. This research into classroom interaction is underpinned by community psychology and systems theory and these will be discussed further.

### **Theories underpinning the research**

#### *Community Psychology*

This study has at its core a community psychology perspective. Interaction cannot take place in isolation and so the interaction between the educator and the learners that is being explored in the study must be considered in context. "Community psychologists seek to understand and to enhance quality of life for individuals, communities and society" (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001: 5). Schwer Canning (2011) has identified the core characteristics or foundational principles of community psychology, namely that an ecological perspective is used in exploring human behavior that development occurs through adaption to the field around the individual, wellness is promoted over psychopathology and as a result, that prevention is advocated over treatment. Furthermore, relationships are established to empower those concerned, social justice is prominent and human diversity is considered and celebrated and that research has at its core, action and transformation.

Of these principles, the ecological perspective is pivotal to the community psychology perspective. "From this perspective, people and contexts are understood to interact in mutually influential processes over time. These transactions are seen as having the potential to foster or erode the health of individuals, systems and communities" (Schwer Canning 2011: 187). Indeed, community psychology aims to understand people in context, by recognizing the circumstances surrounding the individual (Kral, Garcia, Aber, Masood, Dutta & Todd 2011). In fact, there are

multiple layers to the context of an individual, such as family, peers, institutions and relationships (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The ecological perspective of community psychology is echoed in Gestalt field theory, which can be described as “a set of principles, an outlook, a method and a whole way of thinking which relates to the intimate interconnectedness between events and the settings or situations in which these events take place” (Parlett, 1991: 68). Field theory takes the whole into account. Nothing stands in isolation and although we may see individual items/beings, there are always underlying interacting processes – the field of that object (Philippson, 2005). So, for example, a field theory definition of a human being; “...is the definition of the person/environment field and the creative adjustments that the person is making in the field. The process of adjustment in the field creates/defines the person as much, or more than, the person defines the creative adjustment” (Philippson, 2005: 1). Field theory can also be described as “a method of exploring” (Yontef, 1993: 3) the whole field, rather than looking at individual factors and maybe missing the influence and interaction between these factors. This community psychology perspective of ecology that is also echoed in Gestalt field theory, finds a fit with developmental systems theory that postulates that there is a constant interaction between individuals, such as educators and learners, and their own backgrounds or ecology.

#### *Developmental Systems Theory*

Research into educator-learner interactions and relationships is grounded in developmental systems theory. According to systems theory, this interaction is mutual, reciprocal and dynamic and must be considered in its wider social environment, in this case, the school and community (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

The impact of learners' internal working models on the classroom interaction becomes clear when one understands that educator-learner relationships and interaction result from the ecological characteristics of both the learner and the educator and the influence this has on one another (Pianta, Hamre & Stuhlman, 2003). “According to developmental systems theory (DST), also referred to as an ecologically-oriented systems theory, children are embedded in organized and dynamic systems that include multiple proximal and distal levels of influence” (Sabol & Pianta, 2012: 214). Thus, the field of the learner and their internal working model of expected ways of relating, influence how he or she will interact with the educator. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) confirm this, stating that systems theory is multi-leveled and must take into account factors such as the individual, family, the school and classroom and the wider community. Furthermore, these factors have a bi-directional influence. All these factors inform the interaction between the educator and the learner and form the foundation of the relationship that develops. In fact, “the temporal

interactions and subsequent relationships form the primary context in which children develop and learn” (Sabol & Pianta, 2012: 214).

### **Research Problem and Aim of the Investigation**

In spite of the importance of the educator-learner interaction, it has not yet been researched in South African schools at a Foundation Phase level and this study aims to address this research gap. The following question will guide the research: How do Foundation Phase teachers experience their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase? This study is important because it aims to contribute to the overall body of education research as it tries to understand educators’ experiences of their interactions with their learners. This can, in turn, result in better support for our educators as they strive to create the best learning environment for our learners. Therefore, this study will explore educators’ experiences of their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase. When we focus on the educators’ subjective experience of their interactions with the learners, we can create awareness for the educator of this process of interaction and how they perceive it. This is significant, since educators are responsible for creating an enabling learning context for learners and their experiences of the interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase can inhibit the interactions between them and the learners (Cameron, Cook & Tankersley, 2012). In fact, these authors go on to say that “perhaps the most important factor for children’s educational development in any classroom is the interaction that occurs between teacher and student” (Cameron et al, 2012: 1336). The aim of this research was, therefore, to explore how educators perceive their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase.

### **Research method and design**

This is a qualitative study (Struwig & Stead, 2001) and the researcher worked inductively (Delpont & De Vos, 2011). The design of this project is based on the ontological assumptions of interpretivism which is the “act of making sense out of social interaction” (Glesne, 2011: 35). A research design is a “plan or strategy which moves from the underlying philosophical assumptions to specifying the selection of respondents, the data gathering techniques to be used and the data analysis to be done” (Nieuwenhuis, 2007: 70). A case study was employed, as literature reports this to be a valuable method of gathering thick, rich data about a specific case which, in this instance, was how educators perceive their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase (Fouché & Shurink, 2011). This method of qualitative data collection is often used to obtain initial data and from which valuable suggestions and recommendations can be made (Royse, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

*Teaching and learning is a dynamic process, affected by what both students and teachers bring with them to the learning environment and also by changing local and global contexts. Ideally, each classroom or learning environment becomes a 'community of learners' set within the broader learning community of a school and an informed, participatory society.*

(Aust Dept of Education and Training, s.a:3)

This literature review and orientation began by examining international and South African interaction research, followed by an insight into both educators in South Africa and the learners in the Foundation Phase. The value of the educator-learner relationship was discussed, as this relationship is developed and based on the interaction that takes place in the classroom and a description was given of the theoretical framework for this study. The research problem and aim of the investigation was stated, along with the method and design of the research, which concluded this chapter.

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## CHAPTER 2 - ARTICLE

Educators' experiences of their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase

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## **ABSTRACT**

Research has revealed that the interactions that take place in the classroom between the educator and the learner have a profound impact on the learners' academic achievements and the emotional wellbeing of both the educator and the learner. With this in mind, this study sought to gain insight into this phenomenon by exploring how educators experienced their interactions with the learners in their class. Qualitative research was conducted and a case study design was utilized.

Two focus group discussions were conducted, one at each participating school with ten educators who were all female and all had been teaching for more than five years. Four educators were from a well-resourced public school, while six were from an under resourced public school. Thematic analysis revealed that the educators were very aware of the emotional and educational needs of the learners and sought to employ various strategies to meet these needs and provide appropriate structure in the classroom. Furthermore, educators reported experiencing emotions as such as frustration, hopelessness and anger as a result of their interactions with the learners. Subjective experiences of affection and satisfaction were also described. Classroom management and coping strategies utilized by the educators were identified and the potential impact thereof is discussed.

**Keywords:** Community psychology, educators, learners, Foundation Phase, interaction, systems theory

# **EXPLORING EDUCATORS' EXPERIENCES OF THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH LEARNERS IN THE FOUNDATION PHASE**

## **Introduction**

The Foundation Phase is an important stage of a learner's school career because in these grades the foundations are laid for effective reasoning, literacy and numeracy. If these skills are not developed, it is unlikely that learners will progress and perform to their fullest potential (Rice 2010). International research has revealed that the quality of educator-learner interactions in the Foundation Phase of education has a substantial impact on the development of literacy and numeracy skills, as well as learners' adaption to and positive feelings about the school context, and their participation in classroom activities (Cadima, Leal & Burchinal 2010, 457-482; Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin, Bryant, Burchinal, Early & Howes, 2008, 732-749; Hamre, Pianta, Burchinal, Field, LoCasale-Crouch, Downer, Howes, LaParo & Scott-Little 2012, 88-123). If educators were to be made aware of how they experience the interaction in their classrooms and the part they themselves play, they could be more strategic in this interaction. This could in turn, facilitate a more conducive learning environment, giving the learners the best possible opportunity to grasp the fundamental skills they are required to learn in the foundation phase and providing the educators with greater work satisfaction.

In the foundation phase of the education system, the first four grades are grouped together. Learners in this phase fall into the stage of middle childhood, where they are becoming more independent, are responsible for their actions and are learning to self-regulate (Ripke, Huston, Eccles & Templeton 2008, 137). As this is a more social stage, peers and educators also become more significant (Mayseless 2005, 7). Educators have the challenge of needing to successfully work through the curriculum requirements with the learners as well as manage their needs, keep up to date with all the necessary administration, and all the while being cognisant of their own emotions (Schutz, Quijada, De Vries & Lynde 2010, 67). Research has shown that while 50% – 60% of learners' achievements are based on what they bring to the classroom – their experiences, background, abilities and culture – the other most significant factor in learners' achievements is the educator (Aust Dept of Education and Training s.a, 1). In fact, "within schools, teachers are by far the most profound influence" (Aust Dept of Education and Training s.a, 1). This influence lies in the interaction between the educator and the learner. The educator-learner relationship or interaction in this research refers to the communication and mutual understanding that exists between the educator and the learners (Mokhele 2006, 150).

Kitching, Roos and Ferreira (2011, 245) explored ways of interaction in the schools in South Africa, and identified “enabling and disabling ways of relating to and interacting with others”, and consequently, that positive, enabling interaction can bring about positive transformation in the school and even the community. Additionally, although the learners reported appreciating and responding to enabling interaction from the educators, the educators seemed to perceive themselves as removed from the interaction process. This study however, considers the educators as pivotal to the interaction that happens in the classroom. In fact, the interaction that takes place within a school cannot be separated from the surrounding community and must always be placed in context when considered. Gallavan and Craig (2012, 400) remind us that the community, parents and the greater school dynamic all impact on this pivotal interaction between the learner and the educator. It is this community psychology perspective that underpins this research, as interaction must always be considered in the wider context or ecology of the learners, the educators and the community in which the school is based (Kral, Garcia, Aber, Masood, Dutta & Todd 2011, 47). These ecological characteristics of both the learner and the educator influence their interaction (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard 2006, 107), as stated by developmental systems theory, which also guided this study. It is these mutually reciprocating, dynamic interactions that form the basis of the relationships that develop (Sabol & Pianta 2012, 222; Tseng & Seidman 2007, 218).

This educator-learner interaction has not yet been studied in South Africa at the Foundation Phase level, and this research endeavors to address this gap and contribute to the body of education research by exploring educators’ experiences of their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase. Through exploring their experiences, a new level of awareness can be created for the educator about the interaction that takes place in the classroom. This becomes valuable as the educators are able to use this awareness to modify their interaction, which can result in a more enabling learning environment being created in the classroom (Cameron, Cook & Tankersley 2012, 1349).

### **Goal of the Study**

This study was conducted in order to gain insight into educators’ subjective experiences of their interactions with learners, with the overarching research question: how do educators experience their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase?

### **Research Method and Design**

This qualitative study (Struwig & Stead 2001, 8) was inductive in nature, beginning “not with a pre-established truth or assumption” (Delpont & De Vos 2011, 49).

The design of this project was interpretivism which is the “act of making sense out of a social interaction” (Glesne 2011, 35). An instrumental case study was employed, as this is an extremely effective method of gathering thick, rich data about a specific case (Fouché & Shurink 2011, 321), as well as “facilitating the researcher’s gaining of knowledge about the specific social issue” (Fouché & Schurink 2011, 322). Data will be gathered by means of focus groups, utilizing one main open ended question , with additional probing ones. The unit of analysis in this study is the individual educators’ experience of the interaction (Yin 1984, 31). The researcher ran focus groups with educators from two different schools in order to gain richer data, as well as to better consider the community impact on the educators’ experience of the interaction.

### **Research Context and Participants**

Two public schools, located in different socio-economic areas of Cape Town were selected for this study, as they would provide very different perspectives and opportunities for insight to the topic being explored in this study. While one school is in a stable, predominantly white, relatively affluent suburb, the other school is on the Cape Flats, where drugs and gang violence are a part of everyday life and there are largely low income households. Furthermore, the resources available to each school vary. The well-resourced school has more parents able to pay school fees, which means more funds are available, and so this school has additional teachers, extra teaching aids, a music department, etc., while the less resourced school is more dependent on the Department of Education or outside sponsorship to supply all their needs. The population was Foundation Phase educators in Cape Town who were identified through non-probability, availability sampling. This is in line with Creswell (2007, 128) who states that this sampling method ensures that the participants chosen will provide an insight into the subject being studied. The criteria was that the participants needed to be Foundation Phase educators who speak English, had been teaching for more than two years, and were available and willing to participate. In total, there were ten female, eligible educators who participated, four from the one school and six from the other and all had been teaching for more than five years.

### **Procedure**

Permission was gained to conduct this study from the Western Cape Department of Education. The school principals were identified and approached to explain the purpose of the study and to gain permission. The principals were approached for permission to conduct the study at their schools and Heads of Departments of the Foundation Phase identified educators to participate and facilitated the practical arrangements for the focus group which took place, one at each of the two schools. They were 90 minutes long and occurred in a quiet, private room on the school premises.



Ten teachers participated in total. Informed consent was obtained from the principals and the participating educators. One main question guided the discussion, with additional probing questions. Following the focus groups, notes were made and transcriptions completed. The data was coded and analysed accordingly.

### **Data Collection**

“Focus groups tap the thinking of participants and elicit their ideas, attitudes, reactions, advice and insights” (Royse, 2008: 283). They facilitate discussion and sharing amongst participants, as well as providing multiple perspectives on a topic, as well as gaining insight from people (Greef 2011, 361). Two focus groups took place, one at each of the participating schools. An open-ended question (Glesne 2011, 131) was used to direct the discussions in the focus groups:

1. Tell me about your experiences of the interactions with the learners in your classroom.

Additional probing questions were also utilized, these being:

2. How have you made sense of or understood the learners' behaviour?

3. What feelings and reactions might they have aroused in you?

4. What have you found to be the most effective way of interacting with learners?

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was utilised, focusing on identifying themes and patterns (Glesne 2011, 187). The researcher read through the transcriptions a few times to familiarise herself with the content and then coded the data. The coding was done inductively, drawing the themes from the data gathered (see Kodish & Gittelsohn 2011, 53). These codes were sorted into sub themes, and from there the main themes were identified. This was not a linear process, rather the researcher grappled with the sub themes until they could be sorted into the clearest themes that still retained the essence and meaning of the original transcriptions, according to the guidelines for qualitative data analysis as per Schurink, Fouché & De Vos (2011, 403). These themes and sub themes were then used to better describe the phenomenon being explored in this study (Royse 2008, 284).

### **Trustworthiness**

Transferability is the qualitative alternative to external validity, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985, 300). Conducting a focus group at each of the two schools involved in this study meant that the researcher could compare the contents of the discussions. The educators reported similar experiences, thereby corroborating the data gained from each focus group. The focus groups were video recorded and transcribed by the researcher from these recordings, ensuring the participants' contributions were accurately documented, hereby enhancing reliability (Creswell 2007, 209). Once

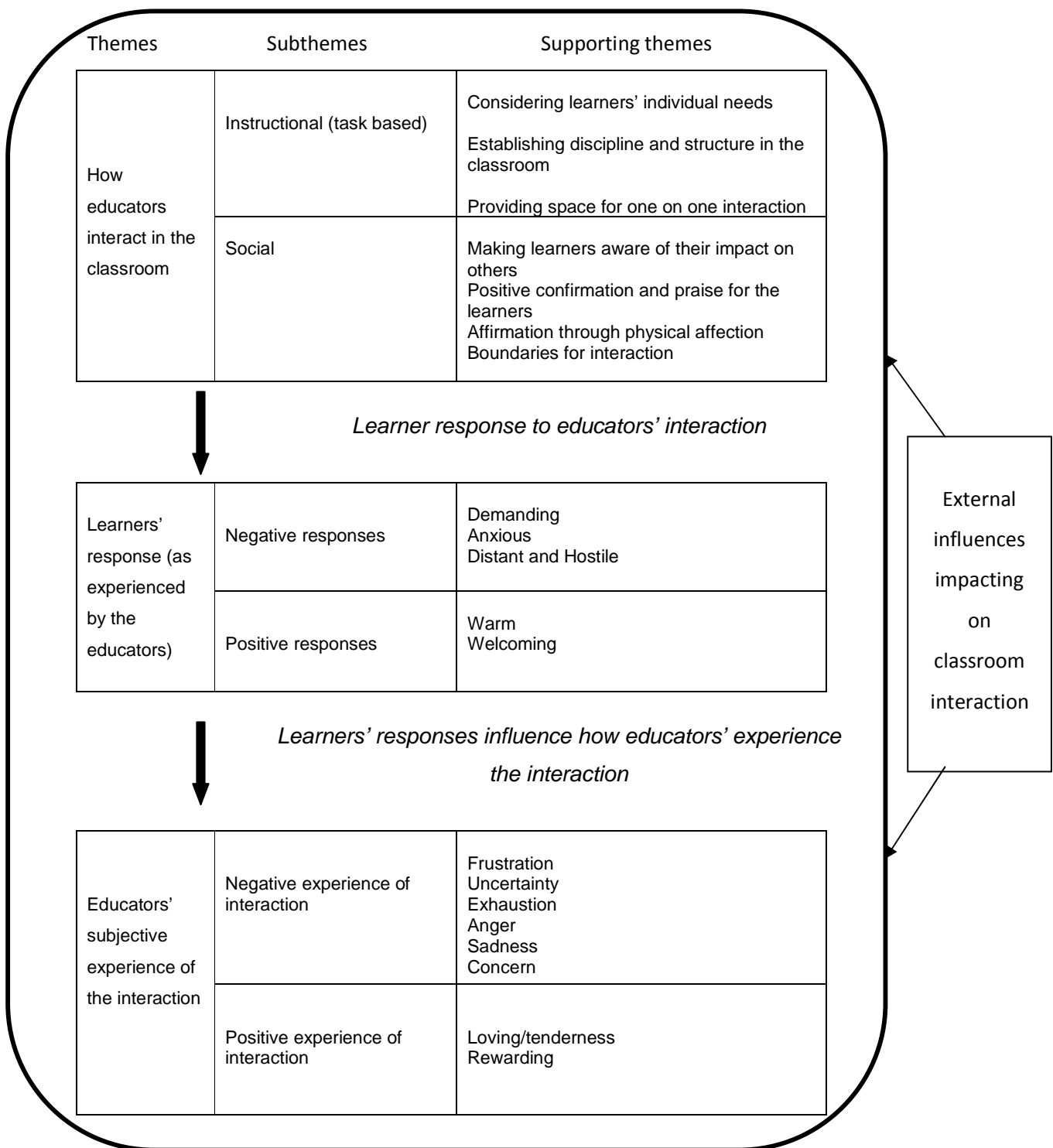
the themes and subthemes were identified, the researcher evaluated them against the original transcriptions to ensure they were still in line with the true essence of the participants' contribution (Polkinghorne 1989 in Creswell 2007, 215). The qualitative data analysis continued into the writing up of the discussion, in line with the statement (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011: 420) that “an in-depth description showing the complexities of variables and interactions will be so embedded with data derived from the setting that it cannot help but be valid”. Additionally, in the writing up process, the researcher found that her identified themes were echoed in literature, further confirming the validity of the study's findings.

### **Ethical Considerations**

“Ethical guidelines served as standards” (Strydom 2011, 114) for this study. Firstly, ethical approval was granted by North West University to conduct this study (NWU-00060-12-A1). Permission was obtained from the school principals and all participants gave informed consent (Glesne 2011, 166). The researcher explained to the participants that their participation was voluntary (Royse 2008, 285) and there would have been no repercussions should they have decided not to participate or if they had withdrawn (Struwig & Stead 2001, 68). Their confidentiality and anonymity was maintained at all times by not identifying the participating schools by name (Struwig & Stead 2001, 69). In the data analysis process each participant was given a code, so as not to be identified by name. Additionally, their consent forms were stored separately from the transcriptions and hard copies of the discussions, to ensure their anonymity.

### **Results**

Three main themes emerged from the data, namely how educators interact in the classroom, the learners' response to this interaction and the educators' subjective experience of the interaction. Additionally, the external influences that impact on the classroom interaction is reported on, as this highlights the differences between the two schools that participated in this study. These main themes are supported by sub themes and supporting themes, as can be seen in diagram 1 (overleaf).



**Diagram 1: How educators experience the interaction in the classroom**

### **Theme 1: How educators interact in the classroom**

The discussions revealed that most of the educators' interaction is strategic and purposeful. Across the board educators reported regularly considering those learners with emotional and educational needs in the class and employing various strategies in order to best meet these needs.

#### **Instructional Interaction**

In order to successfully interact with learners and provide them with a positive learning experience, educators identified the value of an individual approach to each learner, seen in statements such as: *I do give him more chances than I do the average child, because he needs them (E3)* and *If you don't take them in a one-on-one situation, you aren't going to achieve anything (E2)*.

Educators reported having to put the structures in place for interaction, making the learners aware when it is appropriate through phrases such as: *J, not now, I am busy with a group, you've got to wait till I am done (E2)* and *I can't give you a hug now. We're busy...when you are done, you are more than welcome to come for a hug (E2)*. Furthermore, educators also described using specific approaches to regulate the educational environment, such as: *I am very concrete. (E6)* and *I don't allow children to ignore me (E3)*.

Educators also stated that they set aside specific time for individual interaction with specific learners as they needed it, such as: *I sat with him almost every day about tying shoelaces (E2)* and *I try, I mean a person try even individually, you know, one-on-one (E9)*.

#### **Social Interaction**

Educators used opportunities to educate learners on the impact of their interaction with others with statements such as: *Do you know that when you say that, the other teacher feels... (E4)* and *You have upset the other learner, you've hurt her feelings (E4)*.

The value of praise to the learners was recognised by all the educators, who regularly encouraged the learners for their good work and saw how well the learners responded to this: *You just give him a smiley face and he is quite chuffed with himself (E7)* and *You've got to find something to praise and go "WOW"! (E1)*. Educators also recognised many of the learners' need for physical affection and reported their willingness to provide this to the learners as can be seen in the following account: *I had to hold him while he was crying (E5)* and *I hug them every morning, every afternoon, any time during the day they will get hugs (E9)*.

These strategies to regulate the learners and the educational environment all serve to provide a pleasant classroom atmosphere, and more importantly, a platform for meaningful educator-learner interaction.

## **Theme 2: Learners' response (as experienced by the educators)**

The educators reported that learners reacted in different ways in response to the educators' interaction.

### **Negative responses**

Some learners seemed to be particularly demanding in requiring the educator's focus and attention. This was expressed by two educators: *I know he looks for that attention, that recognition. (E1)*, and *She looks for attention. (E2)*. Educators also reported interactions with learners who were very unsure and anxious of their position with the educator, in spite of reassurances, which would come through in statements such as: *He would say to me: "when am I coming back to you? When am I coming back? (E4)*. And: *I think maybe she is scared she is going to do the wrong stuff. (E7).*)

Another emotional reaction that the educators identified was that learners displayed emotional distance. They linked it to connecting to the learners and said: *He is really not interested in feeling connected (E4)*. Another expressed it in terms of willingness to communicate: *He don't want to communicate (E9)*. In contrast, educators who experienced learners who connected with them, could observe different behaviour: *If he feels connected to the educator emotionally, he will not ignore the educator (E4)*.

Learners' anger was expressed verbally and behaviourally. Educators noted anger as follows: *She's like, "whatever!" That's the attitude: "Whatever!" (E2)* and *He can be very hostile to teachers (E3)*.

### **Positive responses**

Some learners were very receptive to the educators' interaction. They would deliberately seek out opportunities to interact and would welcome contact with the educator, as reported by the educators: *I see her coming running and then she hugs me (E10)*, *He wants to please (E3)* and *they respond to your responsiveness and they warm up to...they respond to you. (E1)*

## **Theme 3: Educators' subjective experiences of the interaction**

The third theme that was identified centered on the educators' emotional experiences as a consequence of the interaction with learners. Negative emotional experiences dominated, although some positive emotional experiences were reported.

### **Negative experiences**

Without exception, all educators experienced some level of frustration, resulting either from the learner behaviour, such as: *This child is always talking and is driving me nuts! (E7)* and: *He makes all these funny sounds and it's irritating (E5)*; Or as a consequence of not succeeding with a learner as they would have liked, as reported by one educator: *It becomes very frustrating, because you can see you are not reaching him (E6).* Closely linked was their uncertainty as to how to

further proceed and what strategies to next employ to assist the learners to succeed, evidenced in the following comments: *I don't know how to...I don't want to break her spirit (E7)* and *This is the first time I have come across a child I don't know what to do with (E7)*.

The daily challenges presented to the educators by the learners took their toll as evidenced by statements such as: *I just want to give up. Really, I am tired now (E3)* and *Maybe I am not trying hard enough...but I can't, because I am sitting with more than 40 children in my class (E9)* and meant they often felt hopeless and overwhelmed. The confrontations and trials with the learners also challenged the educators and left them feeling angry and resentful, as reported by one educator who said: *That's what I cannot endure every day (E5)* and another: *It makes you angry, it affects your natural responses (E1)*.

Educators confessed to becoming emotionally involved in the lives of the learners and being distressed when the learner is faced with challenges as can be seen in statements such as: *It's sad, it's very sad (E8)* and *It's sad to see a child like that, you know, not being placed and there is nothing you can do (E8)*. Closely linked was the concern expressed by the educators as a result of hardships encountered by learners as reported: *We were a bit concerned he was perhaps suicidal (E4)*; *I am very worried about this child, very worried (E7)*.

### **Positive Experiences**

In spite of the many challenges, most educators reported becoming quite fond of the learners: *I obviously love this child. You get very fond of him (E3)* and *They might be one heck of a naughty, but they creep into your heart (E2)*. Satisfaction was reported when educators were able to see the results after much time, energy and patience were invested into learners' lives: *She can say little things now – 'my name is L' and 'I love you, teacher' (E8)* and *In the end, I suppose it is rewarding, because you manage to progress and get somewhere (E1)*.

### **External Influences**

Educators also reported that there were? external factors that influenced the interaction with the learners in the classroom. These were noteworthy, as it highlighted the differences between the two schools that participated in this study and also impacted on how the educators experienced the interaction in the classroom. A significant factor as experienced by the educators was the learners' background and home life. The educators expressed empathy for learners as they gained an awareness of the impact of family background on learners' behaviour: *I think he gets broken down a lot at home (E2)*. Another educator said: *We think of their background, it's all hinged...there is always a link with their behaviour (E1)*. This understanding and awareness had a positive impact on the patience and empathy that the educator experienced towards the learners and the extra length to which the educators would go to support the learners.

Furthermore, the difference between the two schools who took part in the study was highlighted through the less-resourced school's dependence on the educational system for matters such as having learners assessed and placed properly. This was seen in statements such as: *I can't understand why they are leaving him in a mainstream school. Because there are things that I cannot help him with (E6)* and *He is also going to repeat in the system, because he is not going to get any help (E5)*.

The educators' experience of the interaction in the classroom is therefore a dynamic one. Both the learners and the educators influence the interaction, as well as external factors that also impact on how the interaction is experienced by the educators.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study revealed that the educators experienced the interaction in the classroom as being dynamic. They would interact with the learners with a particular purpose in mind – to either meet the learners' educational or social needs. The learners would then respond to this interaction in various positive or negative ways. How the educators in turn experienced this response from the learners would then influence educators' further interaction. Contributing to this was the influence of external factors that impacted on this classroom interaction. This cycle of interaction echoes systems theory, which states that all interaction is a dynamic ebb and flow and is always influenced by the wider community or social environment (Tseng & Seidman 2007, 218).

The manner in which educators interacted in the classroom was guided by either instructional or social aims and to meet the learners' needs in these regards. Educators' strategies included social interaction in the form of positive physical and verbal confirmation, as well as making the learners aware of their impact on others; while structure and discipline was implemented in the classroom through verbal boundaries. Academic support was made available to the learners through the educators' methods of explaining tasks and by creating time and space for learning. These findings echo interaction research by Hamre and Pianta (2007, 52) who have described three broad areas of educator interaction, namely: emotional support for learners; classroom organization, which includes discipline and structure; and instructional support, which focuses on the academic tasks and learning.

Following on from this, the analysis revealed that each learner responds differently to the educator's interaction. This response is guided by each learner's own personality, beliefs, values, background and experiences, all of which impact on their behaviour, interactions and performance. This dynamic was discussed at length in the focus groups, as educators sought to make sense of the learners' behaviour. Without exception, if the educators had insight into the learners' lives, their

interaction in the classroom made more sense to the educator. This is echoed by Horner (2011, 310), who highlights how a child's culture and learnt interaction style can impact on their academic behaviour and Burton (2000: 330) reminds us that "young minds are inextricable mixtures of personal and cultural dimensions". In fact, learners' families, homes and the school all exist within a community, which will have definite characteristics and all act upon each other (Philipson Hetzner, Johnson & Brooks-Gunn 2010, 82). Delpit (1988, 285) elaborates on this, saying that to understand the learner's perspectives, educators must become ethnographers, researching the backgrounds of learners to have a better understanding of who they are, with the result that the educator's instruction is informed not only by the content of the curriculum but also by the lives of the learners. This becomes particularly important to consider in South Africa, as we have children with very varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds together in our classrooms, together with the educator, who also brings her own cultural dynamic, all of which affect the interaction between the learners and the educator.

The educators' reported responses to the interactions with the learners were dominated by negative emotions such as frustration, feeling hopeless and overwhelmed, angry, resentful and sad. This is not a unique phenomenon; rather, previous research by Sutton (2007, 272) demonstrated that unpleasant emotions such as anger and frustration were experienced by educators multiple times a week. Furthermore, it has been shown that when educators report negative emotions towards a learner, this parallels their interaction with these particular learners in the classroom (Stulman & Pianta 2002, 160). From a systems theory perspective, which describes interaction as a mutually reciprocating relationship, the interactions with particular learners described as causing frustration and resentment are unhealthy and unproductive, to the detriment of both the learners and the educators (see Marais & Meier 2010, 41; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

While the educators did report experiencing positive emotions such as satisfaction, the subjective experiences of frustration, uncertainty and helplessness dominated the discussions. The educators' negative emotional experiences can also have a detrimental impact on how they view the classroom and consequently, the greater school environment, as reported by Vos, van der Westhuizen, Mentz & Ellis (2012, 57). This can, in turn, affect their teaching ability, empathy towards the learners and their job satisfaction (Schulze & Steyn 2007, 692).

The difference in the two schools was revealed in the influence of external factors. These external factors need to be considered, as community psychology states that interaction cannot take place in isolation and must be placed in context of the wider social influences (Kral, Garcia, Aber, Masood, Dutta & Todd 2011). Furthermore, these factors can either strengthen or erode the interaction in question (Schwer Canning 2011, 187).



The teachers from the less resourced school experienced greater frustration and stress with the inefficiency of the education department in matters such as assessing learners or placing them correctly according to their needs (see Milner & Khosa 2008, 158; Okeke & Dlamini 2013, 2). Furthermore, on average the learners in this community faced greater challenges at home which in turn impacted on the classroom. These two factors absorbed much of the educators' energy and focus, with the result that they were less able to concentrate on the interactions with the learners. The educators from the well resourced school on the other hand, were able to be more intentional about their interaction with the learners in the classroom. If the educators are able to actively understand the needs of the learner and respond effectively, this will have mutually rewarding consequences as reported by the educators and confirmed by Geddes (2006, 139).

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

A case study approach was utilized for this study, as it provides rich insight and discussion around a particular situation. This does, however, mean that these results cannot be generalised and so further research on a larger scale will be necessary before one can assume these reported experiences are the norm for all educators in the Foundation Phase. Furthermore, this study has examined the interaction only from the perspectives of the educator, but given that literature has revealed the importance of the educator-learner interaction, additional research observing the interaction from the perspective of the learners could add richly to the understanding of this interaction.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This research has revealed that educators can indeed make a significant impact on the learners' experience in the classroom as they seek to better understand the interaction dynamic in the classroom and then use this insight to employ purposeful interaction strategies. If further research into educator-learner interaction was conducted in the South African context, this could be used to empower educators and potentially transform schools. Alongside this, educators could be better supported through regular staff discussions for the educators to manage negative emotions and stressors. This could also provide them opportunities to gain insight into the interaction experienced in the classroom. Through this, the educator would feel validated and heard, encouraged in her efforts and able to convey a greater empathy for the learners concerned. Additionally, as educators become more aware, they would be better able to regulate their emotional responses to the interaction. The educators' positive experiences could be utilised to assist with coping. This will, in

turn, make way for a more positive and productive experience in the classroom for both the educator and the learner.

Ultimately, this case study provides insight into the ebb and flow of classroom interaction in the Foundation Phase from the perspective of the educator. This research has echoed international research findings, but has also opened the door for further research into this field in the South African context.

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## CHAPTER 3 – CONCLUSION

Educator-learner interaction research has gathered momentum internationally as studies have proven that educators are the most significant influence in the learners' ability to succeed in the classroom and manage peer and adult relations more effectively (Cadima, Leal & Burchinal, 2010; Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin, Bryant, Burchinal, Early & Howes, 2008). Furthermore, research has revealed that educators who receive training and input into how they interact have been able to improve their efficacy in the classroom, with positive results for both the educator and learners (see Hamre, Pianta, Burchinal, Field, LoCasale-Crouch, Downer, Howes, LaParo & Scott-Little, 2012; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). This field of research is still in its infancy in South Africa, with the researcher only able to find two studies examining interaction in the wider school context (see Kitching, Roos & Ferreira, 2011; Vandeyar & Killen, 2006).

The Department of Education is actively working on strategies to improve education in this country by implementing improvements and updates to the current curriculum (UNISA, 2012). Results in the Annual National Assessment examining grade three literacy and numeracy show an improvement from 2011, but the national average still only reflects around the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile (Motshekga, 2012). This improvement in results was made possible by supporting the educators' ability to effectively deliver the relevant curriculums (Motshekga, 2012).

Within this context of the international research, as well as the state of Foundation Phase education in South Africa, this study aimed to contribute to a wider body of knowledge by providing an insight into how educators experience their interactions with learners in the Foundation Phase. This is a qualitative case study, employing focus groups to gather data from two schools. The participants were female educators who spoke English and had all been teaching for more than five years. These schools were selected as they provided an opportunity for different perspectives on the same subject.

The findings of the study revealed three main themes, namely: how educators interact in the classroom, the learners' response to this interaction (as experienced by the educators), and the educators' subjective experience of the interaction. The educators reported being aware of and understanding the emotional and educational needs of the learners and employing various strategies in order to meet these needs successfully. These needs include emotional, educational and discipline or structural. Furthermore, when they had insight and understanding into the lives of the learners, they were better able to tolerate challenging behaviour. The educators experienced more negative than positive emotions as a result of their interactions with the learners. Furthermore, the educators from the less resourced schools reported more frequently about being hampered by the education system not working as it should. The learners in their classes also

faced additional challenges as a result of the community in which they resided. These factors absorbed more of the educators' energy and attention and so they were not able to focus on the interaction with the learners to the same extent as the educators in the better resourced school. Thus, this research reveals that in these two schools, educators are engaging in interaction with the learners in order to understand them and respond to their needs, but that the researchers experience many of their emotional experiences with the learners to be negative.

The findings from this study confirms that what is seen in the South African classrooms echoes international research on educator interaction (see Hamre & Pianta, 2007) in terms of how educators use interactions in the classroom in order to educate, provide structure and discipline and give emotional support to learners. Additionally, research has placed much emphasis on the role that educators can play in providing a safe space through being consistent, loving and supportive (Geddes, 2006; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004 & Stulman & Pianta, 2002). This study reveals that this is indeed what educators aim to provide for the learners, through much physical affection, consideration and understanding of the learners' home lives and employing various strategies until they are able to meet the learners' needs. Finally, education research in South Africa has looked at various factors contributing to educator stress and burnout, including excessive administration and lack of recognition (Milner & Khosa, 2008), the quality of their work environment (Vos, van der Westhuizen, Mentz & Ellis, 2012) and implementing curriculums that have been developed without their participation (Swanepoel, 2008). This research adds to the factors that need to be considered – that of the interaction with the learners themselves, as can be seen in the strong negative emotional experiences reported by the participants.

With these results in mind, the researcher recommends additional research to determine whether what has been explored in this case study is the case for educators in other schools and in other provinces in South Africa. Furthermore, if indeed effective interaction in the classroom has significant positive impact on the learners' academic ability and social interaction, as has been reported in the literature, then further research into how educators in South Africa could gain from additional input into how they interact with the learners in their classes would be invaluable.

Through conducting this study, the researcher gained a deeper understanding and admiration for educators in South Africa, particularly the challenges they face and the exceptional work they do in spite of these trials. Added to this is the potential positive impact they are positioned to make in the lives of children through their interaction, something which the researcher had not considered from this angle before completing this study. The researcher also gained a keen appreciation for the way that good quality research can provide a stepping stone to implementing useful change in an area such as education.



This study has provided insight into the interactions between educators and learners by exploring how the educators experience this interaction. The value of this lies in the increased awareness that this can bring to the educators and thereby create a positive learning environment, beneficial for both the learners and the educators themselves. The results of this study have been described and discussed in conjunction with current research. Opportunities for further research have been identified as well as how this study contributes to the overall body of education research.

This chapter concludes with the researcher's insights gained through this research process and the hope that this study can contribute in a noteworthy way to improving interaction in the classroom, and thereby significantly impacting the experience of both the learners and the educators as they interact with one other.

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