



# **Equipping teachers to support learners with psychosocial challenges: the potential of a linked PALAR-Life Design process**

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## Declaration

I the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation / thesis is my own original work and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it at any university for a degree.

RUBINA SETLHARE-KAJEE



Signature

Date: 25 May 2018

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### ***Izandla Ziyagezana***

[A South African indigenous IsiZulu proverb meaning, “One hand washes the other”]

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I propose a linked Participatory Action learning and Action Research (PALAR) and Life Design (LD) process, as a means of equipping teachers to support learners experiencing psychosocial challenges. As an educational psychologist, I was interested in exploring the potential of integrating a traditional Life Design strategy into a participatory action learning and action research process, since it was evident that teachers first needed to build up their personal and professional self-efficacy. The inequitable distribution of resources within South African society is glaringly visible within the provision of basic education and teachers working within such contexts often feel frustrated and demotivated. South African teachers, who are interested in addressing poverty-related psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at school, are understandably anxious and overwhelmed by the complex challenges, making it difficult for these teachers to mobilise their potential agency as providers of support.

In response to a request for assistance from teachers working at an under resourced school in a peri-urban context I collaboratively explored two linked processes to enable participating teachers to:

- i) improve their own feelings of self-efficacy and
- ii) develop capacity to support learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges.

The linked PALAR-LD process is suggested as a means of promoting agency among teachers in under resourced contexts, to rethink their role in the context of the psychosocial challenges as experienced by their learners. In both processes, participants are encouraged to collaboratively explore options for addressing the identified challenges and to network for support from available systemic resources. In the context of South Africa's poverty-related psychosocial challenges which impact negatively on wellness and education, the adaptation of imported theories and models is one possible way forward, for contributing to knowledge and practice. The visual image below of interrelated rings with variety of textures and colours represent the PALAR process with multi-layered connections where different individuals with differing assets collaborated to support learners at the school affected by poverty-related psychosocial challenges.

Data were generated from visual mapping activities, interviews and written and verbal reflections by participants including the university facilitator. The data were coded for themes relevant to collaboratively identifying and addressing psychosocial challenges impacting on teaching and learning.

The results suggest that the PALAR-LD process encouraged reflection by the teachers on their personal and professional experiences of the process and the significance of relationships that were developed. Where contextual challenges caused teachers to lose sight of their purpose, the group LD process enabled the teachers to collectively explore their life narratives to reconnect with their past personal and career goals and to integrate the past and current narratives to guide the way forward. This provided a foundation for a PALAR process to identify and address contextual psychosocial challenges within their learners' reality. The linked PALAR-LD process promoted transformation through the personal and professional growth of the individual participants. The process also initiated action within the school

community to address the poverty-related contextual challenges. The findings add to the existing literature on in-service teacher capacity building, and could be equally valuable in the design of pre-service teacher education. This research project was made possible through multilevel collaboration between and among teacher participants, other school based and academic colleagues, parents and learners connected to the school.



**Keywords:** Agency, Life Design, Participatory Action Learning and Action Research, Poverty, Psychosocial challenges, South African school teachers

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## CHAPTER ONE



### Introduction

In this thesis, I report on a research project in which I explored the potential of a linked PALAR-LD process for facilitating participant teachers' capacity to support learners at an under resourced school. The teacher participants, who were initially overwhelmed by support needs of learners, who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges, were demotivated and frustrated by their lack of capacity to provide the necessary support and they requested support from me as an educational psychologist who represented an institution of higher learning. Teachers were involved from the outset to inform the participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) project. The primary purpose of this research project was to explore the usefulness of a linked PALAR-LD process as a psychosocial support process for teachers working in adverse circumstances, to enable them to better support learners. The secondary purpose was to explore how it promoted lifelong action learning (LAL) so that change is sustainable and meaningful to all participants (Teare, 2013). Since limited research has been done locally to equip teachers to provide psychosocial support to learners in a sustainable way (Wood & Goba, 2011), I intend to address that gap in knowledge. In the section below I explain the background and rationale of the project.

### Background to the study

In South Africa the end of apartheid in 1994 created a climate of high expectation that life for all would improve, but factors like the legacy of colonialism and racially engineered poverty during apartheid (Van Breda, 2001, Soudien, 2001; Van Niekerk & Hay, 2011), crime and corruption (Olivier, De Lange & Wood, 2010), violence (Barnes, Brynard & De Wet, 2012; De Lange & Geldenhuys, 2012; Mampane,

Ebersöhn, Cherrington & Moen, 2014), HIV/AIDS and poverty (Theron, 2009; Wood & Goba, 2011) and poor literacy levels (Khanare, 2012, UNESCO, 2002, Wienand, 2011) have resulted in a significant number of South Africans remaining in the impoverished and under resourced racially defined residential areas called townships, where many inhabitants live in makeshift tin shacks with little access to basic amenities (Landsberg, 2011; Statistics SA, 2015) like clean water and electricity. Thirty million South Africans are living in poverty, the majority of whom are non-white with 53,5% of the 30 million living in rural or peri-urban contexts (Statistics SA, 2015). The Gini co-efficient indicates the highest rate of inequality in the world (Harmse, 2014). These challenging conditions are reflected in schools, where inadequate resources and poverty-related psychosocial problems negatively affect the learning process and the quality of education (Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2013; Van Niekerk & Hay, 2011). Learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges need sustained support to enable them to benefit from educational opportunities. However, teachers struggle to provide such support and need to develop agency in this regard (Loots, Ebersöhn, Ferreira & Eloff, 2012; Wood & Goba, 2011). Nelson Mandela (1993) in his speech as Nobel Peace Prize laureate lauded education as the panacea for change: “Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change your world”. Yet, the crisis in South African township schools (Motshega, 2010) perpetuates the painful realities inherited from apartheid (Soudien 2001). Inadequately prepared teachers (Schulze & Steyn, 2007; Wood & Goba, 2011) struggle to support learners struggling to cope with psychosocial challenges which in turn negatively affect teaching and learning (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). In these contexts the difficulties for teachers to support learners is exacerbated by inadequate infrastructure (Donohue and Bornman, 2014). Not surprisingly, this situation is placing teachers in these contexts under tremendous stress (Schulze & Steyn, 2007, Wood & Goba, 2011) thus impacting on their sense of efficacy to support learners struggling with psychosocial challenges.

The under resourced poverty-related contexts combined with a lack of learner motivation (Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2013), negative attitudes of both teachers and learners (Schulze & Steyn, 2007) poor discipline, and a lack of parental involvement (Landsberg, 2011; Schulze & Steyn, 2007), all contribute to the existence of an inferior education in township schools. Educators are expected to take the lead role in the process of ‘Supporting learner well-being in order to learn’ according to the Education White Paper 6 of 2001 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2011, p35), but understandably many teachers possess insufficient knowledge and skills to support their vulnerable learners who experience psychosocial difficulties (Bhana, Morrell, Epstein, Moletsane, 2006; Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2006b). International research on teacher preparation and policy suggests that this challenge is not unique to South Africa (Handyside, Murray & Mereoiu, 2012; Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). While the South African township school reality is clearly challenging, an asset-based approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993) recognises that South African township teachers possess the potential to support vulnerable learners (Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2006; Theron, 2010), but they are not always able to realise this potential. Teachers at township schools are often willing to support learners (Malindi & Machenjedze, 2012) but they express a need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to do this (Hoadley, 2007; Mampane & Bouwer, 2006; Theron, 2009).

The expectation on teachers to provide support to every learner, places considerable burdens on educators, with administrative and assessment tasks already requiring a great deal of their time and effort (Kruger & Adams, 2002; Schulze & Steyn, 2007, Smit, Fritz & Mabalane, 2010; Theron, 2009). Extensive research has been conducted on the psychosocial challenges experienced by South African township learners (Donald, Lazarus & Moolla, 2014; Theron, 2009; Theron & Theron, 2010; Wood & Goba, 2011). Sadly, there are too few educational psychologists or registered school counsellors at mainstream government schools in South Africa to provide professional psychosocial support, and those who are in the system face multiple challenges (Moolla & Lazarus, 2014; Verrijdt: 2012; Theron: 2007; Theron & Theron: 2010; Van Niekerk & Prins: 2001). The onus then rests with the school and by extension the inadequately prepared teachers (Bornman & Rose, 2010; Wood & Goba, 2011) to provide this kind of professional support. According to the Department of Education policy on Inclusive Education (2001), all learners have a right to be educated in an ordinary mainstream school by well trained teachers, where school based support teams (SBST) have been established to address barriers to learning experienced by learners at schools. The SBST is expected to assist teachers to identify learners with learning barriers and to develop strategies to support teachers to support these learners. School based support teams (SBST) are not always capacitated to provide support to learners and teachers (Booyse & Wolhunter, 2011; Donohue & Bornman, 2014). This brings us to the question of what South African teachers working at under resourced schools need to enable them to provide support to learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges in the twenty-first century.

Increasing globalisation and the concomitant complexity and uncertainty of the twenty-first century demand that we look at solutions to challenges in a novel manner (Boyer, 1990; Savickas, 2013; Zuber-Skerrit, 2002; Guichard, 2012). Teare (2013) proposes that we need a new paradigm for learning and development to address complex problems, particularly for the poor and disadvantaged, to enable people to help themselves rather than relying on outside help. This is particularly relevant to the current socio-political and socio-economic challenges in South Africa, where official unemployment rates between 25% and 40% (Statistics SA, 2015). New approaches include helping people to become lifelong learners through the principles of action learning, drawing on existing local knowledge and wisdom (Guichard, 2013; Teare, 2013) for change to be meaningful and sustainable. This action learning approach to addressing challenges has influenced how I engaged with the teachers in this research process.

As an educational psychologist, I had been volunteering at a township school in the North West Province in South Africa. I offered psychological support to individual educators and learners for six months as a form of community engagement during the second half of 2013. The majority of learners presented with poverty and related psychosocial issues, stemming from HIV, parental death or sickness, abandonment and parental neglect. This was no surprise to me, considering the psychosocial context. What surprised me was that teachers also approached me for psychotherapeutic help to address their own professional and personal challenges related to relationships, HIV, workload stress, finances and grief. This alerted me to the fact that teaching staff were equally in need of support to enable them to fulfil academic and support roles at school. As a teacher educator at an institution of higher learning,

this raised concern regarding the adequacy of how teachers are prepared to work in South African poverty contexts. My observations at this school suggested that the teachers are committed to supporting the learners, often going far beyond the call of duty. I have seen teachers assist learners using the limited school resources and their personal resources to address some of the challenges. I was convinced of the need to work collaboratively with the teachers to help them find ways to improve the psychosocial support processes they can offer to learners. I suggested to the teachers with whom I was working that they engage in a Participatory Action Learning and Action research (PALAR) (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) process to enable them to develop the skills and knowledge needed to help them support learners on an ongoing basis. However, I saw the need to first strengthen the capacity of teachers to deal with their own issues. I reasoned that they could not help learners, unless they themselves were able to deal with their own hurts and frustrations. For this reason, I suggested that the PALAR process begin with a linked group Life Design (Savickas, 2011) intervention. The idea was to work with the teachers as co-researchers (Chilisa, 2005) to implement and evaluate a process for providing support to learners. In other words, as we collaboratively explored PALAR as a process to support learners, a group LD process was followed to address the challenges in their own personal and professional.

Teachers in the South African education system are encouraged continually find new ways to fulfil academic and pastoral support to learners (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). Too little has been done to enable teachers in this regard (Wood & Goba, 2011), thus the need to work collaboratively with teachers to consciously pursue learning and make use of these lessons continually along life's journey (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013), and to flourish in spite of adversity (Theron, 2010). In order for teachers to be educated in this way, they need to learn how to respond creatively to new challenges facing them and their learners as they arise.

### **Problem statement**

South African teachers working in poverty contexts need greater capacity to provide psychosocial support to learners, due to contextual, professional and personal challenges. Teachers would benefit from learning sustainable and flexible processes to address the challenges they and their learners face, as contextual realities and challenges are not static. The current challenging realities within South African schools, as reflected in the literature, are not easily changed. In learning how to first cope with their own life issues to better support learners, the teachers became lifelong action learners who have the capacity to flexibly reflect on and address challenging circumstances. This would enable them to collaborate with colleagues to address their own personal and professional challenges and engage with community stakeholders to support learners. I thus propose that a linked PALAR-LD process is one possible option to attain this outcome.

### **Purpose of study**

The participant teachers and I, collaboratively explored the potential of the PALAR-LD process as a means for capacitating teachers to provide learner support at individual and group level. The primary purpose was thus to explore the usefulness of a linked PALAR-LD process as a psychosocial support

process for teachers working in adverse circumstances. The secondary purpose was to explore how such a process could be implemented to promote lifelong action learning (LAL) so that change is sustainable and meaningful (Teare, 2013). The current state of national education suggests that innovative improvements in research and practice are needed. In particular, current policy inadequately guides community-based responses to psychosocial challenges endemic to poverty contexts. The PALAR process for research and practice involves collaborative reflection by all participants and stakeholders on existing dynamics to work toward collaborative development in repeated learning cycles.

## **Research questions**

I formulated the following main research question to guide this study:

*How could a linked participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) process be contextually adapted to serve as the foundation for preparing teachers to develop a sustainable learner support process?*

The following secondary questions were formulated in order to answer the primary research question:

- How could a linked PALAR-LD process help teachers working in under resourced contexts to support learners with poverty-related psychosocial challenges?
- How can LD be used within the PALAR process to enable teachers to achieve personal and professional efficacy?
- How could the PALAR process help teachers come to a collaborative understanding of the psychosocial challenges their learners face, as a first step in helping them access support for those learners?
- How has a linked PALAR-LD process enabled teachers to develop a sustainable way forward for collaboratively addressing identified psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at their school?

## **Concept clarification**

### **Learner Support**

Learner support involves the teacher actively gaining knowledge and skills regarding the barriers to learning and development among learners, so that they can support them (Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2013). The focus is not only on identifying the systemic challenges but also the strengths, in the process of supporting the learner (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2006; Landsberg, 2011). According to the South African education policy on Inclusive Education (DOE, 2001), all learners have a right to be educated by well trained teachers, where a school based support team (SBST) is established to support learners who are negatively affected when barriers to learning impact on successful learning and teaching experiences. In this research project the focus was on enabling teachers to support to learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges.

## Psychosocial Challenges

Psychosocial challenges as experienced by learners in this study were related to their socio-economic environment, as identified by the teacher participants themselves. Psychosocial challenges referred to here relate to inadequate provision of facilities and resources in poverty contexts (Donald, Lazarus & Moolla, 2014), where these realities negatively influence the teaching and learning process at school. The dynamics which surfaced during this research project prioritised parental absence due to illness and migrant labour, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse as three of twenty-eight challenges identified by teacher participants which impact negatively on teaching and learning. According to Luthar (2006) psychosocial challenges are seldom insular and the cumulative interrelated dynamics exacerbate risk which discourage learners from achieving their full potential.

## **Professional Framework: Community Psychology**

My role as community psychologist and academic is not to perpetuate traditional understandings of research and knowledge, but to engage with communities to explore a contextually relevant understanding of knowledge that would encourage generation of mutually beneficial transformative knowledge to navigate educational pathways for unpredictable and complex world we live in (Wood, 2014). It is imperative that as a community psychologist, I acknowledge the complex realities of providing psychosocial support within diverse communities. For this research project I therefore took cognizance of the different 'levels' of reality in the school and wider community that interact with each other and simultaneously with the whole system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002). This awareness informed my response to the teacher participants who requested professional support. The aim of the research project was not for me to propose an objective psychological intervention, but to collaboratively explore and understand the teachers' understanding of the situation to promote sustainable support (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013) from an asset-based perspective (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2006). In my practice as an educational psychologist I acknowledge the interpersonal, intrapersonal, biological, socio-economic and indigenous knowledge systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) of the teacher participants within the school and broader community. This differs from typical interventionist approach normally adopted by traditional psychologists (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2010) and the paternalistic exploration by positivistic academic researchers who purport to understand the context as well as the indigenous populations themselves (Motsa, 2017). The inclusion of local forms of knowledge may be perceived as an act of resistance (Nkomo, 2011) to the hegemony of western notions of knowledge creation. A critical transformative paradigm is such an alternative, as it recognizes that all people hold deep knowledge about their lives and experiences. The ontological basis of this paradigm acknowledges that all knowledge and processes of knowledge creation is valid (Chilisa, 2012; Spivak, 2003; Tandon & Hall, 2012). In the field of psychology this requires that practitioners critically assess existing theories for its contextual relevance and to focus on exploring psychological interventions that advance the interests of the community rather than merely hypothesise about the benefits of western interventions for ameliorative changes (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) to adapt to

specific contexts like South Africa. Local knowledge holders play a pivotal role in shaping intervention processes, research questions and framing the interpretations of the research findings that relate to their particular contexts as they become equitable knowledge creators (Odora Hoppers, 2009).

My preferred professional approach encourages collaborative, sustainable and contextually relevant processes with community members (Nelson and Prilleltensky, 2010; Teare, 2013) that can be implemented, maintained and adapted even when I am not present. My professional framework for practice is aligned with my research paradigm and methodology, where practice and praxis is underpinned by a critical transformative lens. For this research project the teacher participants and I were co-researchers looking at improving support to learners with psychosocial challenges by building onto existing local knowledge and developing local potential so that the process would be sustainable. The PALAR-LD process was aimed at encouraging the expansion of existing contextually relevant knowledge in the community and academia, for developing skills for addressing new challenges that will arise (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Both PALAR and group LD involve regular, deep reflection to encourage participants to gain insights into the 'big picture' by rethinking their role in addressing contextual challenges (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). The reflective and self-directed process allows (cognitive) adaptability (Hirschi, Herrmann & Keller, 2015) where the participants learn from their past personal and professional experiences. This process encourages participants to apply these lessons to better cope with situations and decisions in the future (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012). Savickas (2002) emphasises planning, decision-making, exploring and being efficacious when the individual has to cope with change and transitions (Savickas, 2011). A linked PALAR-LD process encourages rethinking the direct role and agency of community members, in this case teacher participants, to address their own contextual challenges as well as those of learners, without waiting for authority structures to resolve the challenges (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Odora Hoppers, 2009). PALAR does not only relate to professional practice but also entails reflecting on theory (praxis) to encourage professionals to collaboratively and iteratively reflect on their approach to resolving contextual challenges and thereby contribute to theory (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). The parallel group LD process allows the participating professionals (teachers in this community) to cognitively and emotionally explore their personal and professional identities (Motsa, 2017; Savickas, 2011) and through collaborative interactive group engagement, deconstruct their past narratives and then co-construct their personal and professional narratives for the way forward (Hirschi, Herrmann & Keller, 2015).

The focus of this thesis is on how a trusting relationship built during the group LD process between teacher participants sustained a process for capacitating teachers to support learners at their school who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges. Although this process was collaboratively initiated by the participant teachers and myself as registered psychologist and representative of higher education, teachers were able to sustain the initiative on their own, making it both cost-effective and feasible for working in an under resourced context. See Addendum A, for a record of the various engagements between the participants, myself and the various other stakeholders in the project.

### **Theoretical framework: narrative Life Design (LD)**

One of the therapeutic processes I have explored as a psychologist to improve psycho social well-being is narrative Life Design-NLD (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, Soresi, Van Esbroeck, & Van Vianen, 2009). The effectiveness of this process has been well-documented in literature for collaborating with individuals and groups to help them to make life-enhancing decisions based on their own life narratives (Di Fabio & Maree, 2013; Hirsch, Hermann, Keller, 2015; Maree, 2017; Slied, 2011). LD has previously been used with learner groups (Albien & Naidoo, 2013) but not as often with teachers as collective groups to address the personal and professional challenges they experience in relation to under resourced school contexts in South Africa. As an educational psychologist and teacher educator at an institution of higher learning, I am interested in exploring how this process could be adapted in relation to the teaching and learning process in diverse schooling contexts and at tertiary education level. My interest was triggered by an earlier LD process that I explored with a former street child (Setlhare-Meltor & Wood, 2016), the findings of which revealed the potential of narrative Life Design (LD) as a process for supporting youth living in contexts of adversity. Narrative Life Design is a counselling process that encourages people to use personal narratives or life stories to inform future decisions (Savickas, 2011).

The narrative LD process starts with looking at current client realities and moving toward potential alternatives, in keeping with asset-based positive psychology principles (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2006). The narrative approach encouraged the teacher participants in this project to express reality according to their unique way of constructing or understanding the world within their specific socio-cultural context (Maree, 2007). Cattanaach (2003, p.59) describes how “we realise ourselves through stories and narratives” and how “the words we say, the sentences we construct, and the events we choose to include or omit all contribute to the generation of narrative identity through which we aim to make sense and order out of experience”. This fits well with the narrative tradition for teaching life lessons or for addressing challenges in African contexts (Kehinde, 2010; Ndopiferi & Ndopiferi, 2010; Sougou, 2008). The LD approach gives validity to individual life experiences and allows the person’s life-story to be a meaningful part of their identity and their future life-planning or decision-making. Good decision-making skills can act as a buffer to adverse effects of challenging psychosocial conditions (Masten, 2011).The process involves the exploration of one’s internalized and evolving life narrative which organizes the person’s pre-occupations, self-conceptualizations, preferred settings, dominant ‘script’, and advice to consolidate self-understanding, establish emotions and goals and guides performance in the various roles the person fulfils (Savickas, 2011). Through LD the individual deconstructs and reconstructs their own real life story, where previous unexpected and disruptive events provide themes to constructively guide their future life narrative (Savickas, 2011). This process dovetails well with the principles of PALAR, as both processes encourage individuals to reflect on personal growth and decision-making for current and future growth (Savickas et.al., 2009) to benefit the community of participants and to encourage personal and broader community development (Teare, 2013). LD as therapeutic process aims to “facilitate movement away from pain-filled to triumph-filled themes and, ultimately making social contributions” (Maree, 2013a, p4), with a focus on developing

existing community strengths and resources from an asset-based perspective (Eloff & Ebersöhn, 2006). Both PALAR and LD encourage the individuals to be adaptable, active and intentional (Savickas, et al., 2009). Until recently LD has been used mainly in the context of individual counselling (Savickas, 2012). This project collaboratively explored linking an LD and PALAR process for the potential outcomes at group and community level, where previous painful narratives provided themes for future constructive decisions.

My current interest is to explore group Life design (Di Fabio & Maree) to encourage teachers to design their own lives in relation to personal well-being, employment and relationships (Hartung, 2014; Savickas et al., 2009) in collaboration with others in a safe environment (Di Fabio & Maree, 2013). The critical transformation which emanates from sharing of narratives among participants during the LD process (Di Fabio & Maree, 2013) aligns with a PALAR process which encourages knowledge holders to share and distribute their knowledge (Teare, 2013; Chilisa, 2012) within the community thereby promoting understanding and sustainability (Egmore, 2015). Both PALAR and group LD as separate processes entail the acknowledgement and validation of clients when they collectively reflect on their previous reactions in their personal and professional narratives. The mutual reflexivity and acknowledgement by group members (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012; Sliep, 2011) prompts change and encourages agency for addressing contextual challenges (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013; Kearney, 2015). Unlike traditional positivistic research and psychological approaches which exclude active participation of community members in knowledge creation and dissemination (Odora Hoppers, 2009; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010) community and/or client participation is central to both PALAR and LD.

### **Research methodology: Participatory Action Learning and Action Research [PALAR]**

Each individual views reality subjectively and interacts with the world in relation to their worldview (Mertens, 2010). Research is similarly conducted according to the researcher's epistemological paradigm for making sense of the world (Creswell, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (2000) see paradigm as set within an intellectual discipline, based on assumptions, concepts, values and practices which are arrived at by consensus of a group of researchers who view reality in the same way. In this study, I adopt a critical, transformative ontological paradigm which is participatory and democratic in nature and based on the assumption that the people involved in the context are perfectly capable of improving their own circumstances (Hall & Tandon, 2016). The movement away from empirical research which excludes community-based knowledge holders is slowly gaining support among academic institutions, with the acknowledgement that community members also have valid ideas about contextual challenges and ways to address the challenges (Chilisa, 2012).

My ontology complements my epistemological paradigm about what constitutes knowledge and how it is generated. Existing local knowledge forms part of the research learning process (Chilisa, 2012; Teare,

2013) as a collaborative intervention (Olivier, De Lange & Wood, 2010) for the common good (Maree, 2013b, Teare, 2013). My philosophical understanding is that anybody can learn how to create knowledge through experiential learning to solve real-life problems and become lifelong action learners (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) Lifelong action learning (LAL) is a self-directed, empowering process which aims to unlock human potential for sustainable learning and development (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013) and entails active collaborative problem-solving and learning by all participants in the research themselves (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). The overlapping viewpoint of LAL and the complementary critical transformative paradigm is that all participants as co-researchers are potential bearers and distributors of knowledge (Teare, 2013; Chilisa, 2012), since participants who are traditionally excluded within traditional positivistic research now have a platform to participate in empirically sound research (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). The positivist and objective dynamics within traditional research does not acknowledge the capacity and potential for community members to generate knowledge relevant to their own contextual realities. A transformative, critical paradigm requires a participatory research design.

Participatory Action Learning and Action Research [PALAR] is more a way of living than a mere methodology for research purposes (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). My choice of PALAR over other equally valid methodologies, was motivated by the twofold benefit of adding value to the professional practice of myself and the participating teachers and also that PALAR follows an emerging process where research takes shape gradually rather than being pre-designed (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). PALAR is derived from participatory action research [PAR] which aims at collaborative transformation and empowerment of community members (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) where the knowledgeable voices of the participants are heard (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). PALAR as a research methodology holistically integrates action learning [AL] and participatory action research [PAR] so that people with similar interests and concerns participate (P) and work together on a complex issue (or issues) affecting their lives. The PALAR process encourages democratic, mutually rewarding partnerships between members of the academy and external education communities (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). Participatory action research [PAR] promotes transformation through growth and development of individual participants as well as the community and contributes to professional theory and practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2004) where the research process is published publicly after being conducted systematically, with academic rigour (Zuber-Skerritt, 2009). In this PALAR process the teacher participants met regularly as we engaged in a systematic and empirically sound inquiry (PAR) into how to address and resolve the issue/issues. An iterative process encouraged the action learning set to learn from their experiences and from one another (AL) (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013), which at times was a “messy” process (Stringer, 2014), but encouraged a continuous exchange of ideas. This was a significant shift from traditional positivistic research where the researcher as the expert, and objective, observer of facts and reality, used predominantly quantitative methods research methods and statistics based on large samples of ‘subjects’ to establish ‘objective truth’ (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Mertens, 2010). One of the teachers raised his concern about academics from the nearby university who had previously come to the school to conduct research and then never returned to give feedback. I was able to allay the concern about this project and explained how we would follow a more

inclusive approach. I explained to the school manger and the teacher participants that a PALAR paradigm will include the teachers as equal partners in the process with myself as academic researcher. I facilitated the process of research and development with teacher participants as co-researchers in all phases of the research (Teare, 2013) to address complex contextual challenges collaboratively and actively. Research methods used in PALAR projects are predominantly qualitative, rather than quantitative (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

The aim of this qualitative PALAR project with teacher participants as co-researchers was not merely for identifying and addressing contextual psychosocial challenges at school level, but also to collaboratively explore sustainable avenues to follow when addressing contextual issues (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009) for enhancing future well-being of the participating teachers to enable them to support their learners. The linked PALAR-LD process was based on the philosophical understanding of lifelong learning that anybody can learn how to create knowledge through experiential learning and that collaborative learning improves synergy in a group context (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Sustainability follows on from collaborative problem-solving and learning by the community members themselves (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). The PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) which aimed at developing teacher competence through collaborative communication in groups, encouraged participants to supportively coach one another and to commit to a process of critical reflection on their collaborative actions (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). This action learning process was empowering and transformative, since the individual teachers no longer felt overwhelmed, but now took collaborative responsibility for addressing the challenges they face with providing psychosocial support to their learners (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). Zuber-Skerritt (2002) suggests the process for an action learning and action research project following iterative process as portrayed in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: The process of project design and management (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002a, p145)

1. Vision building
  - i. Relationship building using turning points exercise( see Pope & Denicolo, 1991 in Zuber-Skerrit, 2013, p36)
  - ii. Creating a group vision with timelines for the project, starting first with individuals creating their own vision and sharing with the group
2. Stakeholder analysis- identifying internal and external stakeholders and their potential influence
3. SWOT analysis for strengths and weaknesses of both the project and the team/group
4. Constraint analysis and how they can be overcome
5. Resource analysis to ascertain existing resources as well as how to obtain those that are still needed
6. Vision revisited after context analysis of steps 2 to 5 to possibly alter the vision in light of the context analysis
7. Planning for improved practice from which the following were agreed on:
  - i. Aims and objectives
  - ii. Desired outcomes
  - iii. Evaluating process for deciding on whether outcomes achieved
  - iv. Action plan as shown below
  - v. Evaluating strategies and methods

In this project, I facilitated the above process with teacher participants to help them apply a linked PALAR-LD process to their own personal and professional lives as a form of experiential learning on how to use PALAR to support learners. A thorough understanding of all influences at play in the context firstly created better understanding and secondly guided our actions appropriate to that reality. We followed PALAR as a democratic and non-coercive process whereby all the teacher participants were involved in actively examining their past and present action in order to improve on it (Zuber-Skerrit, 2011). Our willingness to learn from each other moved the emphasis to collaborative learning so that everybody involved in the process was able to both give and receive support and healing. Regular collaborative reflection through action learning became part of our process. In spite of the ‘unchartered’ process and the consequent ‘messiness’ (Stringer, 2014) participants envisioned that the PALAR-LD process could be taken to neighbouring schools and to the broader South Africa at schools where learners experienced the same poverty-related psychosocial challenges. The teacher participants put in a request for community development capacity to the local university to improve their skills as the project expanded. Networking was a skill the participants added to their existing knowledge as one of the goals of lifelong action learning (Teare, 2013). Teacher participants realised that they need to access resources in the community to refer learners to during the second PALAR when challenges come to light which neither they nor the SBST had the capacity to address. PALAR has emancipatory assumptions regarding knowledge claims, with an interest in creating a better society, and acknowledgement of the contribution of the participants (Savickas, 2011; Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013). This action learning and action research project created a platform which acknowledged the

process and the learning (Wood & Zuber-Skerrit, 2013) of the teacher participants and which motivated further participatory action learning and action research with other members of the school community. Parents, learners, non-governmental structures and governmental structures were engaged in later cycles as well, which are not reflected on in detail for purposes of this thesis.

## **Research methods**

### Site selection

This research project was initiated in collaboration with teachers at a high school in an under resourced township community, located in the North West Province of South Africa. The school has 36 teachers and 1090 learners predominantly of Sotho and Tswana home contexts with English (their third or even fourth language) as the language of teaching and learning. Since I had previously already been working at this school providing psychological services to learners and staff, I used convenience sampling (Mertens, 2010), as the teachers approached me for support.

### Participants

Five teachers across all subjects expressed a need for skills to support learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges. I then requested permission from the school manager to approach the entire staff to ask if any other teachers or non-teaching staff members would like to participate in the PALAR project. Ten volunteer teachers, including the five who had first requested support, met regularly with me according to their convenience, to drive the process. The ten teacher participants and I thus formed an action learning set (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) to negotiate from the outset how we would work together. Within this action learning set we regularly met and reflected on the process of identifying psychosocial challenges and then collaboratively evaluated the PALAR-LD process as a teacher support process (See addendum A, p144), rather than for me as researcher to conduct action research in order to only transform my own educational practice (Taylor, Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Davis, Durlak and Isenberg, 2002). Data for this emerging research project emerged from collaboration with teacher participants in the research project, thereby giving voice to all participants personally (Teare, 2013). Each of the action research cycles entailed planning, then action and observation for evaluation of how the process had worked out and then we critically reflected (Reason & Bradbury, 2008) on how to start planning for the next cycle research cycle again (Zuber-Skerrit, 2009). The action learning process allowed us to learn from each other through trial and error to act and to take mutual responsibility for the process of working on real issues that are important to the school community (Zuber-Skerrit, 2002). Through constant collaboration with each other, the dynamics around psychosocial challenges at school level explored within their historical reality or 'situatedness' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p193). This thesis reflects on data from the first two cycles of the PALAR project. Below is a summary of the research design of the study

Table 1: Summary of the Research Design

Purpose	To collaboratively explore the potential of the PALAR-LD process at individual and group level, with teachers as co-researchers to capacitate them to support learners within challenging contexts.	
Paradigms	Ontological: Participatory democratic engagement Epistemological: Critical Transformative for Lifelong Action Learning [LAL]	
Research design and methodology	Participatory Action learning and Action Research [PALAR]	
Research approach	Qualitative	
Theoretical Framework	Narrative Life Design	
Professional framework	Community Psychology to acknowledge complex realities of providing psychosocial support within diverse communities.	
Participants	Ten teachers initiated the research process with me as an educational psychologist and representative of an institution of higher learning.	
PALAR Process	Cycle 1: Teacher participants at an under resourced school reflecting on the PALAR-LD process for identifying contextual challenges and for addressing their own personal and professional challenges.	Cycle 2: Teachers at an under resourced school in South Africa reflecting on the PALAR-LD as a linked process to promote lifelong learning at school level for capacitating teachers to address identified poverty-related psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at the school.
Data generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is a process followed by the participants to identify a starting point for addressing the myriad of challenges (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare 2013). (See Addendum B)</li> <li>• Collages were used to depict the current reality to the desired reality. (See Addendum D)</li> <li>• Photo voice activities for identifying contextual challenges and vision for the project. (See Addendum E)</li> </ul>	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The various Life Design Activities and participant reflections on the LD activities, as expanded on in Article Two. (See Addendum F)</li> <li>• Individual written reflections of teachers and facilitator.. These include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Written and verbal individual and group discussions with teacher participants about the Life Design activities</li> <li>○ Transcriptions of verbal group discussions for identifying contextual challenges.</li> <li>○ Transcriptions of individual and group reflection and planning discussions on the linked PALAR-LD process. WhatsApp communication between research participants. (See Addendum G)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Data analysis	Thematic open coding with verification by teacher participants for confirmation of themes which were identified during the open coding process.
Trustworthiness (Herr and Anderson, 2005)	Internal validity, external validity and reliability were being achieved through ensuring the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogic and process validity</li> <li>• Outcome validity</li> <li>• Catalytic validity</li> <li>• Democratic validity</li> <li>• Process validity</li> </ul>

### Methods of data generation

Through the PALAR process, constant feedback from the participants provided data to help assess the value of the research process and ascertain the challenges of the PALAR research process. The purpose was to collaboratively identify and address as many of the interacting dynamics as possible around poverty-related psychosocial challenges at school level. Data sets included video recordings of group discussions which were transcribed, photo elicitation techniques of the PALAR-LD process, written and verbal reflections on the group LD activities and my reflective journal as PALAR facilitator.

For this project, I engaged collaboratively with the teachers throughout the PALAR-LD process. The reflections during the process with participants entailed their narration of past personal life events, their

emotional responses to these events and how each event connects with previous experiences of similar events, to establish themes from their life narratives for how they perceive and respond to life events. As with action research, LD involves a deeply reflective process (Savickas, 2011) where tacit knowledge is made explicit (Fletcher, 2015). Participants in an LD process use cognitive (executive) processes to reflect on contextual dynamics which influenced the reasons why they responded as they did to past life events. The linked process of PALAR and LD allowed teacher participants involved with this research project to reconstruct and reframe their perceptions and reactions from past narratives to inform the future. These iterative processes are a central part of the lifelong learning outcome of the PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher, Kearney, 2015).

### **Life Design (LD)**

The group LD research activities started with a *balloon exercise* as metaphor for lost dreams, as will be explained in further detail in Articles One and Two. The exercise served as an ice breaker and later provided a stimulus for individual participants to reflect on their current career reality, compared to their previous goals and dreams (Cook & Maree, 2016; Savickas, 2011) When they reflected as a group on the balloon activity, group members became aware of each other's achieved and broken dreams.

The next activity, the *lifeline turning point exercise* (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) encouraged reflection on past life events. The participants created a metaphor like a river or road, to highlight significant turning points (events) which had influenced their individual life narrative (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). They then shared these experiences with other participants who gave verbal reflections and asked clarifying questions. The objective of the exercise was to both foster relationships and understanding, and to acknowledge the individual participant's life experiences. By reflecting on these experiences participants gained insight into how they had addressed past challenges. This awareness potentially informed the way forward. The LD facilitator assisted the participants to identify strengths within their realities, which the participants can rely on as resources as they navigate their way forward to achieve their planned future life narrative. With LD, it is not only the individual who is brought into the narrative, but also the family and other significant people in the participant's past.

The *family genogram* as a technique originated in the field of family therapy and is used in the LD process to identify intergenerational career themes or threads (Fritz & Beekman, 2007). The aim is to identify family members who influenced the participant and to look for similarities between those individuals and the participant, thus looking at identity formation as related to those familiar people or family members. The genogram technique encouraged the individual participants to connect personal dreams with the themes appearing in the genogram. With the LD genogram themes the participant identifies a life motto or theme to reflect on as they construct their future life narrative. The motto becomes a beacon to guide the participant in times of transition (Savickas, 2011).

The LD activities ended with participants designing individual *future life maps*. The life map included a future timeline with short-, medium- and long-term goals and participants discussed in pairs how they hoped to achieve these goals. Table 1 below, summarises the process and purpose of the LD activities in this study.

Table 2: Summary of the Life Design activities

Activity	Process and value for individual or group
Balloon Exercise as metaphor for lost dreams	Participants worked outside in pairs wearing casual clothes. They were given a water filled balloon to pass between each other, each time moving one step away from each other. The balloon may have fallen and burst at any point. This served as an enjoyable ice breaker that encouraged further conversation when participants regrouped. During the group discussion, the balloon symbolised their life and career dreams from adolescence to the present. This helped them reflect on their current career trajectory, compared to their previous goals and dreams. They then reflected on this activity with the group.
The lifeline turning point exercise (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare, 2013)	The participants created a metaphor like a river or road, to highlight significant turning points (events) which had influenced their life (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). They then shared this with other participants who give verbal reflections and asked clarifying questions. The objective of the exercise was to initially foster understanding and to acknowledge past life experiences.
Family Genogram	The participant created a family genogram for as far back as they could recall, to find common interests and career ideals with other family members, thus looking at identity formation as related to family members who share similar values, characteristics and goals. The genogram technique encouraged the individual participants to connect personal dreams with the themes appearing in the genogram.
Future Timeline	Participants were requested to create a future timeline with short, medium and long-term goals and discuss in pairs how they hoped to achieve these goals. The activity ended with individuals writing down what they would like to see written on their tombstones after they had passed on.

### Data Analysis

All interactions and reflections were recorded and transcribed as part of the data gathering process, then coded according to the open coding method (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit, 2004). This entailed first reading through the text to get a global impression. As open coding is inductive so as to capture the complexity of the study, I would need to know what the entire data consists of before making meaning and looking for themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The themes must be related to the research topic and

forms the coding categories. I initially analysed the codes for patterns to identify categories. Evidence of the coding is presented in. The thematic coding process was verified by the teacher participants and the author's research supervisors. This promoted initial intra-coder consistency. Themes that emerge were described in detail in the data presentation. The written reflections of teacher participants and the author's reflective journal were included in the data to add richness to observations and interpretations of data.

### Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study concerns issues of internal validity, external validity and reliability. Herr and Anderson (2005) summarise validity specific to the goals of Action Research in the following way without any specific sequence or hierarchy:

	<i>Goal of Action Research</i>	<i>Quality/Validity criteria</i>
1.	The generation of new knowledge	Dialogic and process validity
2.	The achievement of action orientated outcomes	Outcome validity
3.	The education of both researcher and participants	Catalytic validity
4.	Results that are relevant to the local setting	Democratic validity
5.	A sound and appropriate research methodology	Process validity

The collective discussions and interpretations of the interactions and events among teacher participants and I allowed for triangulation where data came from a variety of activities in the two main action research cycles. Member checking allowed for verification of this congruency and placed value on the relational aspects of the research (Herr & Anderson, 2005), thus promoting cooperative consensus. I took the tentative research findings back to the teacher participants and asked them to reflect on the interpretation of the data. Herr and Anderson (2005) refer to democratic validity in this regard. Catalytic validity was achieved when the teacher participants chose to include parents and learners in the PALAR-LD process after the second cycle as part of the iterative spiralling process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012), and thus expanding the catalytic validity. By teacher participants explaining the process to learners and parents, dialogic and process validity was achieved. Outcome validity was assessed by the value and relevance of the process to all the stakeholders.

External validity or transferability refers to the generalizability of the study's findings to other situations (Merriam, 2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is acknowledged that this study, like most qualitative research, has a low external validity but this study does not aim to ascertain what is generally true of many (Merriam, 2002, p.28). The reliability or dependability of PALAR looks at whether the results are consistent with the data collected (Merriam, 2002). Although replicating a qualitative study would not generate identical results, there can be several interpretations of the same data. I ensured that an "audit trail" was employed whereby a detailed account of how the study was conducted and how data was collected and analysed was kept to ensure dependability (Mertens, 2010). Merriam (2002) describes triangulation as a strategy of promoting the trustworthiness of a study. As such, it involves using multiple sources of data generation to substantiate research findings (Merriam, 2002). This

study's utilization of various data generation methods assisted with triangulation of the findings. Crystallisation allowed for differing vantage points for understanding the same data (Mertens, 2009) and was achieved during the collaborative interpretation process. The extensive engagements and reflections produced large amounts of data. Not all data were used due to data saturation. All data has been archived following ethical processes as determined by the university I represented.

As PALAR is an exploratory approach very little could be predicted ahead of time, which allows for rich and flexible collaboration where all opinions and views were included. As the cycles unfolded, as facilitator I needed to be flexible and creative in dealing with both positive and challenging dynamics in the process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). To address unexpected dynamics, we collaboratively reflected and replan, as part of the PALAR process. Time constraints were definitely a challenge, as a doctoral research project has a time limit. Both challenges and strengths were recorded as part of the data of the PALAR-LD process, since PALAR is about the process and not about the gathering of data for analysis as a means to an end (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012).

### **Ethical aspects of the research**

This research project was conducted according to the ethical requirements of The Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University (See Addendum H) and in accordance with the guidelines for research of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA). As part of the COMBER project, this North-West University study received institutional ethical clearance (number: NWU-00022-13-S2). All aspects of the research question, method and analysis were explained to the teachers and school principal ahead of time. Only once they understood and felt comfortable to proceed, did the research process begin and recordings transcribed for the teachers to confirm. Written permission was sought from all the interested teachers. (See Addendum I) The research was explained to the participants, with the understanding that participation is voluntary and that withdrawal from the study at any point is allowed without any pressure to reconsider. As an educational psychologist, The Hippocratic Oath, upon which the Educational Psychology code of ethics is based, guided my process with teacher participants. When any of the activities with the teachers resulted in a need for professional psychological support, I arranged for professional psychotherapeutic support in a professional and confidential manner.

### **Contributions of the study**

#### Theoretical

The project focussed on how teacher participants could co-construct a process to support learners with psychosocial challenges, using the linked PALAR-LD process and integrating it with existing knowledge and contextual assets, to create novel ways to address identified challenges. This linked PALAR-LD process for collaboratively working toward supporting learners with psychosocial challenges has not been done before in this context. The findings thus add to the existing body of knowledge in Community Psychology, for how LD can be used as part of a group process for

encouraging community members to mobilise and take action, using the assets that they identify, for the benefit of the community.

### Practical

As a teacher educator, I believe that the linked PALAR-LD process can add value to current teacher preparedness. With this additional strategy and networking skills at community level, educators may be better able to fulfil their functions, where the learners' psychosocial challenges become a dynamic learning opportunity, whereas previously it was merely seen as a challenge to the process of learning and teaching. As an educational psychology lecturer, the PALAR-LD process provides a model for future educational psychologists to engage with teachers and other professionals connected to the school reality, to provide support to learners.

### Emancipatory

Through the PALAR-LD process, the participating teachers realised that they possess the skills and knowledge to address new challenges collaboratively through action learning. The PALAR process encouraged participants to explore new support networks and they learned the skill of referral of learners when necessary to identified community structures within the community. This research process thus informed practice in order to develop an awareness of existing community assets/resources, and also contributed to current theory in South Africa on how context and existing knowledge being acknowledged during the LD process, can be an integral part of sustainably adapting and overcoming current challenges through reflecting on themes from previous adverse experiences.

### Methodology

This project potentially added to traditional research by combining two processes, with PALAR as a methodology, in a novel approach. While all South African contexts may not be identical, there are similarities that serve as a point of departure for broader collaboration in the community. In the process of any school community taking decisive action, the current study may act as a lifelong learning model in the continuing process of finding new ways to address psychosocial issues that arise with changing local and global realities.

### **Preliminary structure**

The research thesis followed the article model and comprises an introduction, four articles and a conclusion. Articles Two and Three were structured in accordance with requirements of the journals that published the research findings. Article One and Four were structured in accordance with the requirements of the journals where these two articles are currently still under review. The overview, articles and summary may overlap and repeat some content with regard to explaining the background, epistemology, methodology and rationale for the research project, as these details have to be clarified for the audience in each article.

The thesis is structured as follows:

- CHAPTER ONE

Overview: I provided the background and rationale to the study, briefly outlining the conceptual and methodological framework as well as the process and methods to be used.

- CHAPTER TWO

Chapter Two is a compilation of four journal articles.

Each article focuses on a different aspect of the study. Articles Two and Three have been published. Articles One and Four are under review.

As per the A-rule requirements of the North-West University for the article-based PhD thesis submission:

At least one article has to be published and there must be evidence of submission of the other articles.

The journal articles in this thesis (Chapter 2) are presented in accordance with the editorial prescriptions of the various journals.

The final reference list at the end of this thesis submission, in APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition

The visual summary on the next page provides detail of the four articles, summarising the study:

ARTICLE ONE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Article One, I conceptualised and suggested a linked Participatory Action learning and Action Research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) process as one possible process to promote personal and professional agency of teachers to start addressing poverty-related psychosocial challenges experienced by learners.</li> <li>• <u>IN ARTICLE ONE I ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:</u></li> <li>• <b>How could a linked PALAR-LD process help teachers working in under-resourced contexts to support learners with poverty-related psychosocial challenges?</b></li> <li>• Article one is currently under review for the Journal of Psychology in Africa.</li> </ul>
ARTICLE TWO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In Article Two, I explored the potential of group Life Design [LD], a narrative constructivist career counselling process, for supporting the participant teachers with understanding their career aspirations and their personal and professional identity. This article focused on teachers' experience of the group LD process, which formed an integral part of the relationship-building phase of the PALAR project.</li> <li>• <u>IN ARTICLE TWO I ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:</u></li> <li>• <b>How can LD be used within the PALAR process to enable teachers to achieve personal and professional efficacy?</b></li> <li>• Article Two was published in the South African Journal of Education in 2017</li> </ul>
ARTICLE THREE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Article Three is an empirical article on the findings of the first cycle of action research, focusing on teachers' experience of using the PALAR-LD process to help them improve their own strategy for addressing barriers to learning that are linked to learners' challenging psychosocial situations.</li> <li>• <u>IN ARTICLE THREE I ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:</u></li> <li>• <b>How could the PALAR process help teachers come to a collaborative understanding of the psychosocial challenges their learners face, as a first step in helping them access support for those learners?</b></li> <li>• Article Three was published in the Education Research for Social Change (ERSC) in 2016</li> </ul>
ARTICLE FOUR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Article Four is an evaluation of the PALAR-LD process as adapted for the project with suggestions for further implementation with teachers working at under-resourced schools to address their own personal and professional challenges and to support learners in that context.</li> <li>• <u>IN ARTICLE FOUR I ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:</u></li> <li>• <b>How has a linked PALAR-LD process enabled teachers to develop a sustainable process for collaboratively addressing identified psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at their school?</b></li> <li>• Article Four has been submitted for review to Educational Action Research.</li> </ul>

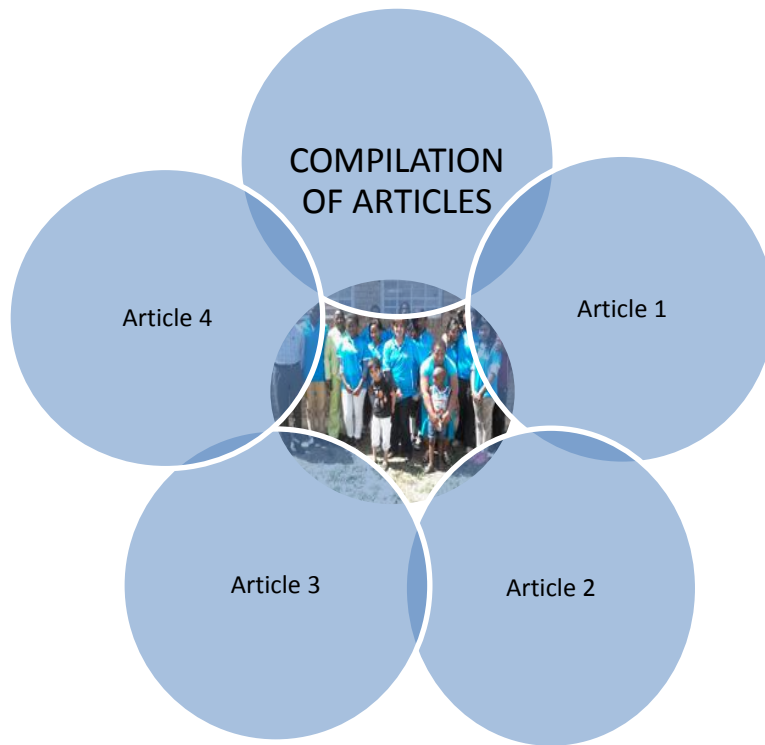
• CHAPTER THREE

Chapter three is a consolidation and conclusion to the linked PALAR-LD process where I reflect on the contributions and limitations of the project with recommendations for future study. I also reflect on my experience as a PALAR practitioner working with a community of

teachers in the field and how the collaborative process contributed to answering my research question:

***How could a linked participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) process be contextually adapted to serve as the foundation for preparing teachers to develop a sustainable learner support process?***

## CHAPTER TWO: COMPILATION OF FOUR ARTICLES



Four articles make up the content for this chapter. Details are provided of the journal where each article was submitted and /or published. Information related to the background, methodology and ethical considerations are repeated in each of the four articles, to orientate the reader. Each article serves as an independent article for publication, to report on different aspects of the PALAR-LD process. I have included evidence of acceptance or submission from the relevant journal at the start of each article.

The references for each article in this chapter are included as per the referencing styles guidelines of the four journals. All four articles from this PALAR-LD project place myself as main author with my research supervisors as second and third authors, as per the agreement with the North-West University. The final composite reference list, after Chapter Three, contains all the references used during this research project in APA 6<sup>th</sup> edition.

The following is a brief overview of the structure of Chapter Two:

### **ARTICLE ONE**

Currently still under review: Journal of Psychology in Africa

<https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpia20>

TITLE:

Proposing A linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research-Life Design process to promote agency among teachers in under resourced schools

This article proposes a linked PALAR-LD process to enable teachers working in under resourced contexts to support learners with poverty-related psychosocial challenges?

## **ARTICLE TWO**

Published 2017 in the South African Journal of Education

[www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci\\_serial&pid=0256-0100](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_serial&pid=0256-0100)

Publication details:

Setlhare, R., Wood, L., & Meyer, L. (2017). Exploring Group Life Design with teachers in the context of poverty-related psychosocial challenges. *South African Journal of Education*, 37(4), 1-8

This article looks at how LD integrated within the relationship building phase of first PALAR cycle encouraged personal and professional efficacy among teacher participants, as a catalyst to providing support to learners through the PALAR process.

## **ARTICLE THREE**

Published 2016 in *Educational Research for Social Change*

[ersc.nmmu.ac.za/index.php?id=2](http://ersc.nmmu.ac.za/index.php?id=2)

Publication Details:

Setlhare, R., Wood, L., & Meyer, L. (2016). Collaborated understandings of context-specific psychosocial challenges facing South African school learners: a participatory approach. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 5(2), 18-34

This article reports on how the PALAR process enabled teacher participants come to a collaborative understanding of the psychosocial challenges their learners face, as a first step in providing support to those learners.

## **ARTICLE FOUR**

<https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/react20>

Submitted to *Educational Action Research* April 2018

TITLE:

A collaboratively constructed action research framework for sustainable learner support in contexts of adversity.

This article proposes a linked participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) model for transformative action research with teachers to enhance their collective capacity for initiating sustainable learner support.

# Article One



## Journal of Psychology In Africa *South of the Sahara, the Caribbean and Afro-Latin America*

May 20, 2017

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Dear Rubina Setlhare Kajee

Thank you for submitting to the Journal of Psychology in Africa [JPA] for publication review your manuscript titled:

**"A linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research-Life Design process to promote agency among teachers in under-resourced schools"**

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Thank you for choosing to submit your research for publication review the JPA.

Best wishes with your continued work in this important area of study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elias Mpofu".

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**TITLE:****A linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research-Life Design process to promote agency among teachers in under resourced schools****Abstract**

South African teachers are mostly willing to address poverty-related psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at school, yet they lack the capacity needed to support learners. We propose a linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) process to promote personal and professional agency of teachers to start addressing poverty-related psychosocial challenges which negatively impact on teaching and learning. The development of this agency starts with enabling teachers to cope with the stressors in their own lives. We discuss the potential of a linked PALAR-LD process for improving the capacity of teachers to be better able to address contextual challenges while also understanding their own personal and professional realities more clearly. Both LD and PALAR have been used separately within various settings to encourage iterative reflection for personal and professional development toward action. This conceptual article explains the potential of a linked PALAR-LD process to encourage collective teacher agency through iterative reflection on existing realities, to improve teacher capacity to sustainably address psychosocial challenges in an under resourced school context.

Keywords: Agency, Action leaders, Life Design, Participatory Action Learning and Action Research, Psychosocial challenges, South African schools

**Introduction**

Violent crime, corruption and poverty (Bayat, Louw, & Rena, 2014) in post-apartheid South Africa challenge the achievement of the social justice which is inherent our national constitution (Bentley, Nathan, & Calland, 2013, Conroy et al., 2014; Pugh, 2014), particularly influencing the provision of quality education for citizens in under resourced contexts (Corder, 1994; Spaul, 2013). In this context, schools and teachers are expected to take responsibility for providing basic education (Moletsane, Mitchell, & Lewin, 2015), and also for playing a significant role in caring for the social welfare of learners and, by extension, their families (Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012). This is personally and professionally demanding on these teachers, since teachers in South Africa were not sufficiently equipped during their pre-service learning to provide the necessary psychosocial support to learners at classroom level (Fritz, & Smit, 2008; Wood & Goba, 2011). The South African Department of Basic Education does attempt to improve the skills of in-service teachers with ad hoc workshops (Smit, Fritz, & Mabalane, 2010), but these tend to be generic and delivered by departmental officials in a top-down approach and only partly addresses specific contextual challenges experienced by learners and teachers (Modisaotsile, 2012). One educational psychologist to 88 000 learners (Aziz, 2017) at government school level leaves teachers feeling completely unsupported. Dysfunctional district-based support teams

fail to provide the infrastructure for psychosocial support to teachers and learners, as mandated in the inclusive support policies mentioned in the White Paper 9 of 2001 (Letseka, Bantwini, & King-McKenzie, 2012). A lack of capacity at school management level, combined with the individual teacher's demanding workload in the classroom and extra-curricular school activities often lead to teachers experiencing burnout (Iwu, Gwija, Benedict, & Tengeh, 2013). This then becomes demotivating in the context of high job demands and low resources (Hu, Schaufeli, & Taris, 2011) with little acknowledgement for the supporting role played by these teachers (Smit, Fritz, & Mabalane, 2010). Emotional exhaustion, reduced personal accomplishment and decreased organizational citizenship behaviour are typical outcomes in circumstances of role conflict and overload (Alarcon, 2011; Eatough, Chang, Miloslavic, & Johnson, 2011). These realities are a barrier to achieving the White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) expectations that teachers should be competent to support learners with challenges. Without the necessary resources and structural support, the teacher's psychological and physical well-being suffers (Eatough et al., 2011).

Perceived support and a sense of agency can buffer the potential harm to psychological well-being in such contexts (Eatough et al., 2011). But national realities stifle intellectual capacity which would encourage teacher agency (Makoelle, 2013; Mncube, Davies & Naidoo, 2015; Walker, 1995). Over the past twenty years, initiatives have been implemented to improve education (Makoelle, 2014), but these interventions have been significantly inadequate and unsustainable given the dire and expansive psychosocial needs at school level (Moletsane, Mitchell, & Lewin, 2015; Theron & Theron, 2010). The persistent psychosocial legacy of apartheid, segregated poverty, inequitable resource distribution to schools, crime and current governmental incompetence (Spaull, 2013) reduce the potential efficacy of existing interventions for teachers and learners in under resourced communities in South Africa (Bayat, Louw & Rena, 2014).

### **Linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) and Life Design as a conceptual framework for support**

This conceptual article proposes a linking of two processes to develop capacity among teachers to support learners. We suggest that a linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) and Life Design process has the potential for teachers in contexts of poverty to move beyond feelings of inadequacy to responding positively and powerfully to contextual challenges. PALAR encourages participants to respond critically and creatively (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) to challenges as they arise. PALAR as a research process involves community participants as co-researchers to identify and address contextual challenges (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). The Life Design process as a psychological intervention toward well-being (Maree, 2013) uses personal life narratives to encourage agency and prompt action by deconstructing and reconstructing personal narratives to achieve holistic career and personal life goals (Savickas, 2012). We motivate the linked PALAR-LD process by explaining how the two processes complement each other to develop agency with teachers in challenging poverty contexts in South Africa.

## **Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) for supporting teachers in challenging contexts**

Kearney, Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013) explain the potential of PALAR as a framework for helping teachers develop the necessary skills to identify context specific problems, and improve their agency to respond to these challenges. PALAR aims to develop in participants a critical transformative approach to their professional practice, to enable them to position themselves as agents of change (Lukacz & Galluzzo, 2014). Through action learning and action research (ALAR), professionals collaborate to continually evaluate their existing strengths and weaknesses, to identify potential opportunities for personal and organisational growth and development (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992). Kearney, Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013), explain that:

People involved in PALAR projects are interested in participating (P) and working together on a complex issue (or issues) affecting their lives, learning from their experience and from one another (AL) and engaging in a systematic inquiry (AR) into how to address and resolve issues (p.115).

PALAR is based on a social transformative and emancipatory paradigm, where the implementation of professional learning is reflected on in an iterative process in order to continually improve on professional learning and add value to existing practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Wood, Greyling and Du Toit (2015) reflect on the potential benefit of research collaborations between university and community. Universities are encouraged to partner with teachers as co-researchers in addressing the challenges, since the teachers are more familiar with the daily challenges of teaching and learning in these contexts: This allows collaborative enquiry towards creating new knowledge beneficial to all, while drawing on existing indigenous and academic knowledge (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). With this approach, teachers working in difficult conditions are not pathologised (Walker, 1995) or regarded as being in need of 'saving' by the 'all-knowing' academics who do research *on* them, rather than with them (Wood, Greyling, Du Toit, 2015). Instead, the teachers become an integral part of the improvement process, while the academic researcher facilitates the process of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991).

PALAR necessarily focuses on smaller numbers of people who are engaged in addressing an important, complex problem collaboratively and actively because they are directly affected by the problem and its solution (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). The aim is not to set out to empower others in a top-down approach, but to collaboratively identify contextual challenges and work toward addressing those challenges as equal participants. Action research has to be authentic (Stringer, 2013), which means that research results are recognizable and confirmed by the participants in the research as being of mutual benefit. Outcomes of PALAR include the individual participants acquiring problem-solving and

communication skills, self-confidence and transformational agency at the personal, professional and community/organizational levels through reflection on practice (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). By moving away from the academic ivory towers to engage with communities, research becomes beneficial to both the community and the university (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013), thus balancing emic and etic aims and objectives, through the new knowledge which is co-created to improve professional practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). The PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) becomes the catalyst for transformation, where local knowledge and wisdom (Guichard, 2013; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) informs the action. For transformation to be meaningful and sustainable, there needs to be alignment with the value system (worldview) and purpose (aims) of both the community and university. Relationship building is the foundation for a PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).

The significant first step of establishing trusting relationships ensures that future interactions take place on a level footing where participants respect each other's individual goals and purpose within the research project, while moving towards collective goals and purposes. It is at this initial phase that the individual research participant is required to clarify their expectations for the future by reflecting on their past and present realities which may include their expectations for their role as professionals. The relationship building as a starting point for PALAR, is where a Life Design (LD) process potentially complements and deepens the PALAR process.

### **Life Design (LD) for supporting teachers in challenging contexts**

LD originated in the field of individual career psychology but has evolved to be a rethinking of both personal and professional life narratives (Savickas, 2011). During the LD process the person is facilitated by an LD counsellor, to construct a future life narrative by integrating narratives from their past life events (Savickas, 2011). We now expand on how the LD process may provide teachers with an improved understanding of self as part of a social group which is aligned with their career identity. The LD process should take place during relationship building phase of PALAR. LD encourages the individual to create and adopt a meaningful life script which they then pursue in work roles which matter to them and to their communities (Savickas, 2011). Other participants in the group LD process serve as an audience (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012) to facilitate the process of reconstructing past and present narratives and to reconstruct themes from these narratives to achieve the desired future narrative for the individual within a holding environment like their school or neighbourhood (Savickas, 2011). The LD process is thus not merely about career trajectories, but also encourages the individual to reflect on personal and systemic assets and challenges within their life narrative to provide the 'golden thread' (Savickas, 2011, p.25) which will guide decisions and actions during future challenging times (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012), both professionally and personally (Rehfuss & Di Fabio, 2012).

When the individual deconstructs and analyses present and past experiences they reflect on how to act in order to achieve future possible alternative outcomes (Savickas et al, 2009). This allows the

individual the opportunity to create their own future story. They deconstruct life decisions taken in the past as based on their previous understanding of their contexts and schemata (Guichard, 2005). During the LD process the person(s) then reconstructs their understanding of themselves and their reality to create a new schemata that would result in a better ending. The person thinks of new ways to approach similar challenges to crystallise future life decisions that will be formed, based on the newly identified theme from their life narrative. The aim of the LD process is to collaboratively facilitate an optimal ending for a reconstructed life narrative. The LD practitioner poses strategic questions which encourage the person(s) to creatively reflect on future sustainable options within his systemic reality. Once the person has crystallised ideas for the way forward they are encouraged to take conscious action to achieve the goals of their newly constructed life narrative. The person thus takes ownership of this new life narrative by repeatedly redesigning and re-launching himself into his unique and on-going life process. The repeated reflections on the past to guide the future means that the person is constantly aware of the potential influences within his previous and current systemic reality. This may include the people in his story as well as community or national and even international support structures. Ideally, a cohesive and sustainable future narrative is achieved when there has been negotiation and consultation within the various systemic levels of the person's reality. Action after reflection is an essential part of the LD process.

Group-based LD processes have been explored with Italian entrepreneurs and teachers. Results suggest that the group process motivated and gave purpose and direction to the participants for individuals and for the collective (Lent et al., 2011), where their newly discovered clarity about the self within the reconstructed reality was energising and promoted self-determination (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012). The group members reflected on each other's narratives in a 'safe space' to facilitate the individual's insights into the self with regard to identifying and pursuing educational and vocational goals, problem-solving and the individual's ability to support their own work placement in an unpredictable context (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012). The implication is that a group-based LD process with South African teachers in challenging contexts may be similarly beneficial on the individual and collective level. The deep personal exploration and reconstruction of past and present experiences (Savickas, 2011), becomes a powerful incentive to act (Guichard et al., 2012) with often cathartic benefits for the individual in a safe space where reflection and encouragement from the 'audience' facilitates increased insights (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012) for the individual.

In the context of South African teachers working in under resourced contexts, the newly reconstructed future life and career narratives during the LD process could become the catalyst to action on both the individual and collective level. The trusting relationships (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) ensure that

interactions during the iterative PALAR cycles take place on a level footing since participants have a deep understanding of each other's life narratives and future life goals.

### **The potential of a linked PALAR-LD process for teachers in challenging contexts**

By including LD as an integral part of the relationship building phase of a PALAR project, the individual participants would be encouraged to reflect on their educational, personal and vocational purpose (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012) as professional teachers within the challenging psychosocial realities in South Africa. They would be motivated to take action (Guichard et al., 2012) to achieve both their personal and professional goals and thereby improve their professional practice. This aligns well with the PALAR process which aims to create awareness of the need for continual personal and professional learning in order to cope with ever-changing social realities and perceptions (Teare, 2013). The powerful incentive for action created by a group-based LD process (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012; Guichard et al., 2012) during the relationship building phase in PALAR would initiate personal agency which would then be continued on the collective level throughout the ensuing PALAR cycles. The deep and often cathartic reflection on personal narratives during the LD process motivates biographical agency (Savickas et al., 2009) for addressing current challenges by connecting past narratives for the way forward. During the LD process the individual integrates past and present narratives for coherence and continuity in planning future personal and professional narratives (Savickas et al., 2009).

The therapeutic potential of LD when combined with PALAR can help the teachers who are overwhelmed by current challenges to develop biographic agency. The linked PALAR-LD process would allow the teacher participants to access themes from their personal narratives and relate these to teaching and learning within their specific context. The deep understanding of each other's personal and professional realities would be a continued source of support and motivation (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012) as the PALAR process unfolds. While PALAR and LD share characteristics with regard to process and outcome, the LD process engenders personal investment in the process, which strengthens the potential for agency among participating teachers. The tabular comparison below, between the LD process and the PALAR process, highlights the common conceptual aims and goals and process outcomes, thus justifying the suggested LD-PALAR linked process, where LD processes enhance and lend depth to the PALAR experience on both the individual and collective level.

**Table 1.1: Tabular comparison of PALAR and LD**

<b>LIFE DESIGN process with LD counsellor</b>	<b>PARTICIPATORY ACTION LEARNING AND ACTION RESEARCH</b>	<b>SIMILARITIES BETWEEN LD AND PALAR</b>
Establish what the client hopes to achieve, by defining the problem, and establishing a working alliance.	Volunteers meet regularly and learn how to build trusting relationships to work toward collectively identifying and then addressing contextual /issues.	Trust is established during this relationship building phase. Challenges are identified and the expected goals are collaboratively discussed.
Individual is assisted with reflection and articulation of their past experience and future expectations. The individual articulates and commits to their potential in the new role(s) and identity.	Participants as co-researchers create a group identity and group vision with timelines for the project.	The roles of facilitator and participants are clarified. The process of identifying challenges for the purpose of finding alternatives for the way forward forms the purpose of this phase. There are cathartic benefits to this deconstruction and reconstruction in both the PALAR and LD processes. Agency is encouraged at this stage, where participants realise the potential they have for changing the past and the action they can take in future.
The action stage now follows on from the commitment. A written summary of the action plan and the new identity statement crystallizes.	The Action plan now follows. The PALAR process encourages the creation of support networks and the skill of referral, when necessary, to identified community structures.	Action is now based on the previous reflections. Contextual resources on the various systemic levels are identified for support action to achieve the desired goals within the set time frames.
The success of the process is gauged through short and long term follow- up so as to study the outcomes and provide additional consultation for clarity, support and maintenance through transitional periods.	Evaluating process for deciding on whether outcomes achieved: This iterative and trial-and-error process encourages the participants to learn from their experience and from one another when evaluating their decisions and actions.	Action is regularly evaluated so that strategies and goals are improved and amended to suit the desired goals as collaboratively envisaged. The process is iterative, and action for the way forward adapts to changing contexts

Just as PALAR originates from a transformative social constructivist paradigm, so LD is a self-constructing process where action is an expected part of the process. Both LD and PALAR involve continual (iterative) reflection of past and present realities to inform action for the way forward and

both encourage building/creating alternative future narratives when faced with challenges. LD allows for a deeper personal exploration during the relationship and vision building stage of PALAR. The strength of LD lies in how the process encourages the individual to interpret past life experiences to gain a clearer understanding of the self (Setlhare-Meltor & Wood, 2016), which then gives direction to future life prospects (Marcelline, Guichard, Pouyaoud, Calan, Dumora, 2012; Savickas, 2012). This strengthens the teacher's resolve and encourages ownership of the action to follow. The teacher thus has a vested personal interest in transforming the current reality to the ideal. This metacognitive process is also followed during the iterative PALAR cycles of planning, acting and reflecting. PALAR brings in the collective dimension, where challenges are addressed collectively and resources and processes collectively identified. The PALAR process maintains motivation levels because the individual does not act in isolation. Successes and failures are shared, thus minimising the impact of negative challenges as they arise. PALAR is an exploratory process, so little can be predicted ahead of time. As the cycles unfold, the research participants will need to be flexible when unexpected events and challenges occur (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). The iterative reflection and planning will be recorded as an essential aspect of the process and adds value to the learning since PALAR is not about the gathering of data for analysis as a means to an end (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012).

The proposed PALAR-LD process is based on a Social Constructivist paradigm, where each individual views reality subjectively and interacts with the world in relation to their worldview (Mertens, 2010). This links directly to critical transformation of the perceived reality when issues of equity, social justice and power relations are addressed (Mertens, 2010) in order to move from challenging realities to the desired reality. It thus aligns with Lifelong Action learning [LAL] (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) which is an inherent component of PALAR. With PALAR the participants' subjective reality and existing indigenous knowledge are central to the collaborative research process (Chilisa, 2012; Olivier, De Lange & Wood, 2010) for the common good. The suggested PALAR-LD process based on the philosophical understanding that anybody can learn how to create knowledge through experiential learning to solve real-life problems (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). The process is directed by the participants and aims to unlock their potential for active collaborative problem-solving and learning by the community members themselves (Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). All participants as co-researchers are potential bearers and distributors of knowledge (Teare, 2013; Chilisa, 2012), as compared to traditional positivistic research projects where participants were excluded. We anticipate that the linked PALAR-LD process will empower teachers to continue the process of improving their support strategies to learners and to each other long after this project has been completed. The PALAR-LD process is not a quick fix and requires time for relationship building and for collaboratively identifying contextual challenges and for exploring resources within the context that would allow the way forward to be sustainable. The PALAR-LD process encourages the participating teachers to reflect on their role as teacher and change agents in the context of local poverty-related psychosocial challenges. The

challenge with such participatory processes is the time required for all voices to be heard. However, the alternative is a hierarchical top-down approach which may not be relevant or sustainable (Stringer, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

The linked PALAR-LD process is suggested as a means of promoting agency among teachers in under resourced contexts, to rethink their role as the main source of support learners. In both processes participants are encouraged to collaboratively explore options for addressing the identified challenges and to network for support from available systemic resources. In the context of South Africa's poverty-related psychosocial challenges which impact negatively on wellness and education, the adaptation of imported theories and models is one possible way forward, for contributing to knowledge and practice. We suggest that the linked PALAR-LD process will encourage creative critical thinking as a catalyst to reflexive action by teachers, for addressing psychosocial challenges on a personal and collective level, rather than presenting a ready-made intervention which may not be contextually relevant or sustainable. The suggested PALAR-LD process starts off encouraging agency among the volunteer teachers, to address personal challenges in a group context. The strength of the LD process is the potential it holds for individuals to reflect on personal narratives and to reconstruct their past experiences to then prompt action to achieve personal and collective goals within their school community. Relationship building is the foundation to the PALAR-LD process. Once trusting relationships have been established among participants, the group then collaboratively identifies challenges and explores flexible solutions which are congruent with local norms and values. The narratives of the participants become the construction tools for building new identities and careers within the holding environment that the participants find themselves. PALAR acknowledges the contribution of participating community partners as equal to the contribution of academic participants. The process promotes the exploration of personal and professional agency and promotes collective agency for teachers working in challenging contexts. It helps participants regain their sense of motivation and acknowledges their personal strengths in the process of supporting learners.

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## **Article Two**

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## Exploring Group Life Design with teachers in the context of poverty related psychosocial challenges

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*“A root that gives life is being found from mud”* [Research participant].

Working in challenging contexts can impact negatively on a teacher’s sense of purpose and efficacy. This article explores the potential of group Life Design (LD), a narrative constructivist career counselling process, for supporting ten South African school teachers working at an under-resourced school with understanding their career aspirations and their personal and professional identity. The group LD process formed part of a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) project. This article focuses on teachers’ experience of the group LD process. Participating teachers reflected in writing and during group discussions on their experience of the LD process. Qualitative data generated from transcriptions of their discussions and written reflections were thematically coded. Findings suggest that the group LD process encouraged participants to reflect on themes from their life narratives to encourage agency for pursuing their future personal and professional goals. Through the LD process, the teachers acknowledged personal and professional assets, from past and present narratives which could motivate them during challenging times. The LD process ignited agency for action to achieve career and personal goals. Participants designed future life maps and also explored pathways for collectively improving their support to learners.

**Keywords:** Group Life Design; poverty; psychosocial challenges; South Africa; teacher efficacy

### Introduction and Literature Review

If teachers are capacitated with appropriate skills and knowledge, then feelings of efficacy and competence are fostered (Loots, Ebersöhn, Ferreira & Eloff, 2012; Mwoma & Pillay 2015; Nel, Lazarus & Daniels, 2010). Challenging socio-economic realities in the communities in which learners reside pose a significant challenge to learning and teaching, and are an obstacle to teachers meeting their professional career goals (Wood & Goba, 2011). This in turn, negatively affects teacher motivation and efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010) and cannot be separated from personal goals and identity (Guichard, 2005). In the context of this study, teacher efficacy refers to the teacher’s belief in their capacity to plan, organise and carry out activities to attain their professional goals (Bandura, 2006; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). In this article, we report on a qualitative research project, which explored the potential of a group-based Life Design process, for supporting teachers who experienced a loss of efficacy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). An increase in teacher efficacy is positively related to career adaptability (McLennan, McIlveen & Perera, 2017), defined as “the self-regulation strengths or capacities that a person may draw upon to solve the unfamiliar, complex, and ill-defined problems presented by developmental vocational tasks, occupational transitions, and work traumas” (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012:662). The facilitator of the group LD process is a registered educational psychologist and lecturer in educational psychology at an institution of higher education. While offering therapeutic services to individual educators and learners at a school in a peri-urban context, she realised the need to go beyond individual therapy sessions with teachers to address the impact of poverty-related challenges affecting their sense of efficacy at the school. Teachers at the school had sought individual therapeutic interventions for challenges stemming from financial problems, work-related stress, trauma, HIV and AIDS, grief, and relationship problems. They also requested assistance with giving support to learners facing poverty-related psychosocial challenges. The facilitator observed that these teachers were committed to supporting the learners, but that the lack of infrastructural and financial resources at school level hampered them in doing this. Teachers often used their own personal funds and time to support learners and this placed financial and psychological pressure on the teachers and their families. In addition, demanding workloads and extra-curricular school activities lead to teachers feeling demotivated and in need of support to prevent burnout. Teachers who volunteered to support learners thought there was little acknowledgement and support for their pastoral role in caring for learners with poverty-related psychosocial challenges.

Teachers’ emotional exhaustion, linked to role overload, compounded feelings of poor efficacy. This situation is not an isolated one, as literature confirms that teachers working in such contexts of poverty face severe threats to their emotional health and perceptions of self-efficacy (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Smit, Fritz & Mabalane, 2010; Theron, Geyer, Strydom & Delpont, 2008). Although much has been written about in-service teacher development to increase self-efficacy and address the problems facing South African schools (Jansen & Blank, 2014), this study adds to the body of knowledge through the adoption of a participatory approach, strengthened by an intervention not normally applied in a group setting within a school context. In response to the teachers’ obvious need for support, the facilitator suggested they embark on a

participatory action learning and action research process, starting with a group LD process to enable them to first develop their sense of self-efficacy to better cope with the challenging demands of their career. The following research question was formulated:

*“How could a group Life Design process support teachers to develop their sense of self-efficacy to better cope with the challenging demands of working in an under-resourced school community?”*

We will now explain the research paradigm and methodology followed by an explanation of the process and findings.

### **Research Paradigm**

LD, a narrative social constructivist career psychology process, originated within career counselling to help people plan their work lives and secure meaningful employment (Savickas, 2011). Career counselling has evolved over the past few decades and is now about designing a life narrative and identity where work goals, social roles and life purpose are meaningfully integrated according to life themes (Hartung, 2011). The LD process encourages social and cognitive reflexivity (Cook pp. Maree, 2016) in the life-long iterative process of re-discovering personal and career identities (Guichard, 2005) particularly during periods of transition (Savickas, 2011). Participants apply the insights and competencies (Hirschi, Herrmann & Keller, 2015) that they have discovered during the self-constructing (Guichard, 2005) and career constructing process, to achieve personal and professional goals when faced with both life opportunities and life challenges (Savickas, 2011).

LD aims for participants to experience lifelong career satisfaction and foster career adapt-ability (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) by reflexively exploring their personal and professional identities in a continuous process of self-construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction (Cook & Maree, 2016; Savickas, 2011). Past narratives are deconstructed for the value they have to inform and guide the way forward. An ability and willingness to iteratively reconstruct their life and career narratives as needs, interests and contexts change constitute the cornerstones of the LD process (Savickas, 2013). Traditional LD entails an LD facilitator working with an individual as the central focus, to enable the individual to ‘contain or hold’ themselves (Savickas, 2011) during periods of personal and career transitions. The theme or golden thread then becomes a guide for approaching life and making decisions.

The LD process typically follows six steps, which start with the LD counsellor and client establishing a working alliance and collaboratively exploring the client’s narrative history and context for the identified problem, which emerges from the narration, while highlighting the client’s core and

peripheral roles in the various contexts. Individuals thus explore their identity and function within the roles they played. After articulation, the narratives become more explicit or concrete, allowing the individual to objectively view the narratives from new perspectives. This new perspective allows the individual to revitalise previously silenced stories to re-author and revise for the future. The individual is now able to place the problem within the newly re-authored perspective allowing for a new narrative to be built on the problem story. The individual articulates and commits to their potential in the new role(s) and identity. They are assisted with reflection and articulation of their experience and expectations, where their reflection on past experience and current reality informs future expectations and their new role(s) and identity. The action stage now follows on from the commitment. A new narrative is created through a collaborative plan for moving from the current to the desired reality. This step includes both how to deal with current and potential future obstacles, as well as enlisting the support of significant others for the new narrative. The LD counsellor at this stage needs to check with the client regarding whether or not their objectives for counselling have been met. A written summary of the action plan and the new identity statement crystallises the identified sustainable strengths, and provides clients with a tangible way forward that the client can refer to in periods of transition. The success of the process is gauged through short- and long-term follow-up, so as to study the outcomes and also provide additional consultation for clarity, support and maintenance through transitional periods (Savickas, Nota, Rossier, Dauwalder, Duarte, Guichard, So-resi, Van Esbroek & Van Vianen, 2009:246–247).

Di Fabio and Maree (2012) explored group-based LD counselling with reference to the global economic reality, where individual career counselling is affordable only to a minority. The support and guidance offered through the subjective reflections of participants in a group LD process add value to the process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction, as compared to the individual LD process (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012). A group LD process was used to support teachers working at an under-resourced school to understand their own personal and professional identity, following the six steps as explained.

### **Life Design Process and Activities**

The six-step process for this group LD research project started with a balloon exercise as metaphor for lost dreams (See Table 1). The exercise served as an ice breaker and later also provided a stimulus for individual participants to reflect on their current career reality, compared to their previous goals and dreams (Cook & Maree, 2016; Savickas, 2011). When they reflected as a group on the balloon

activity, group members became aware of each other's dreams, both those achieved and broken.

The next activity, the lifeline turning point exercise (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) encouraged reflection on past life events. The participants created a metaphor such as a river or road, to highlight significant turning points (events) which had influenced their life (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Participants then shared these experiences with one another through verbal reflections and responses to clarifying questions. The objective of the exercise was to both foster relationship and understanding, and then to acknowledge the individual participant's life experiences. By reflecting on these experiences participants gained insight into how they addressed past challenges. This awareness had the potential to inform the way forward. The LD facilitator assisted the participants to identify evidence of their own past strengths within their realities, which the participants draw on as resources as they navigate their way forward to achieve the planned future life narrative. With LD, it is not only the individual who is brought into the narrative but also the family, and other

significant people in the participant's past. The family genogram as a technique originated in the field of family therapy and is used in the LD process to identify intergenerational career themes or threads (Fritz & Beekman, 2007). The aim is to identify family members who influenced the participant, and to look for similarities between those individuals and the participant, thus examining identity formation as it relates to those who are familiar, or family members. The genogram technique encourages the individual to connect personal dreams with the themes appearing in the genogram. With the LD genogram, the participant also identifies a life motto or theme to reflect on as they construct their future life narrative. The motto becomes a beacon to guide the participant in times of transition (Savickas, 2011). The LD activities ended with participants designing individual future life maps. The life map included a future timeline with short-, medium- and long-term goals and participants discussed in pairs how they hoped to achieve these goals. Table 1 below, summarises the process and purpose of the LD activities in this study.

**Table 1** Summary of the Life Design activities

Activity	Process and value for individual or group
Balloon exercise as metaphor for lost Dreams	Participants worked outside in pairs wearing casual clothes. They were given a water-filled balloon to pass between each other, each time moving one step away from each other. The balloon may have fallen and burst at any point. This served as an enjoyable ice-breaker that encouraged further conversation when participants regrouped. During the group discussion the balloon symbolised their life and career dreams from adolescence to the present. This helped them reflect on their current career trajectory, compared to their previous goals and dreams. They then reflected on this activity with the group.
The lifeline turning point exercise (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013)	The participants created a metaphor like a river or road, to highlight significant turning points (events) which had influenced their life (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). They then shared this with other participants who give verbal reflections and asked clarifying questions. The objective of the exercise was to initially foster understanding and to acknowledge past life experiences.
Family genogram	The participant created a family genogram for as far back as he could recall, to find common interests and career ideals with other family members.
Future timeline	Participants were requested to create a future timeline with short, medium and long term goals and discuss in pairs how they hoped to achieve these goals. The activity ended with individuals writing down what they would like to see written on their tombstones after they have passed on.

**Research Participants**

The facilitator presented the proposed linked PALAR-LD project to the entire staff of an under-resourced high school in a peri-urban area of South Africa with the permission of the principal. The presentation involved an explanation of how the PALAR-LD process would encourage teachers to reflect on their personal and career goals and how the process might enable them to be more confident in fulfilling these roles. Five female (one white, four black) and five male teachers (five black) initially volunteered to be part of the project.

**Data Generation**

Data was generated from participants' taped verbal reflections within the group and individual written

reflections on the LD activities post-sessions. The use of verbal and written reflections by all participants ensured crystallisation of data (Mertens, 2010).

**Data Analysis and Interpretation Style**

The data were coded thematically according to Tesch's steps for qualitative data (Tesch, 1990:58) independently by the three researchers who then met to reach consensus on the final themes, which were then confirmed with the participants. Direct quotes of the participants were taken from their written reflections and from transcriptions of their verbal discussions to support the themes, which were also controlled against literature.

**Rigour of the Study**

The research process was followed systematically, with academic rigour, following a PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). In this PALAR process, the participants met regularly as they engaged in a systematic and empirically sound inquiry into how to identify, address and resolve the contextual issues, starting with a group LD process for understanding their own personal and professional aspirations. The research findings were verified with participants in a group session before being published.

### Ethical Considerations

This group LD process was conducted according to the ethical requirements of the Research Ethics Committee of the North-West University, who approved the research project. The facilitator's adherence to The Health Profession Council of South Africa's ethical code as a registered educational psychologist also ensured ethical practice in the interest of participant wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2008).

### Results

We will now focus on the participating teachers' own experience of the LD process and the potential value of the process in their current reality and for the future. The verbatim quotations that support the discussion are given with participants labelled A to L to ensure anonymity. Spelling and grammar in the quotations appear as in the original data.

#### Theme 1: LD Helped Improve Teacher Sense of Self-efficacy

Reflecting on the group LD process, created the space for teacher participants to reconnect with their lost dreams, by reflecting on where they came from and comparing this to the current reality for informing way forward):

*"I can use the balloon activity to measure my ability and achievements from the moment I set my goals to where I am right now and possibly the future [...] Sometimes you can set yourself goals and they are not always according to your expectations due to some obstacles on the way"* (Participant E).

While these reflective processes were sometimes emotionally challenging, they helped to create awareness of the self that participants previously did not have:

*"Those activities have helped me a lot because some of the things that I did not know about myself I now know them and I need to know more about them"* (Participant H).

*"This balloon activity made me feel a bit sad 'cause my balloon did not last; same as my dream did not took off the ground 'cause of listening and respecting my parents' view, but I am the one suffering at the present and I feel that I am not where I am supposed to be"* (Participant B).

The reflexive process encouraged participants to appreciate and contextualise past challenges and reflect on themes from past successes and

disappointments that could be taken forward, not only for themselves, but for family members and their learners as well:

*"The turning points activity made me feel that a person can be from a poor family, but when growing up life becomes better if you are positive and act positively. Even if it's hard [...] I can use this activity to teach learners that life has to go on [...] A root that gives you life is being found from mud"* (Participant H).

*"The turning points activity made me reflect my milestones and it made me to count my blessings and I recognised that my blessings are more than my downfalls and suddenly there was a light shining on me. We should do [The turning points activity] with the learner to can press on when they find themselves in depressing situations"* (Participant K).

The reflection on their past promoted a sense of personal responsibility for ensuring that they themselves and their learners will not be deterred from achieving their personal and career dreams. They acknowledge their potential as teachers to achieve their goals which had earlier seemed much more difficult to achieve in the face of the poverty-related contextual challenges:

*"This balloon activity made me feel you may choose a career but become unable to proceed ... It might not only be that you were useless but because you don't have a good guidance, you need a mentor or a support to what you want to be"* (Participant H).

The LD activities promoted feelings of teacher efficacy. Their lost dreams were rekindled in spite of the inadequate educational support structures, which had significantly eroded their belief in their agency:

*"This [LD process] made me feel confident that I can act as the "Middle Man" to assist [the learners] with the challenges they face daily ... how to confront them and to give advice on further assistance they can obtain, whether that is psychological, medical or otherwise"* (Participant L).

Their own forgotten dreams were brought to the fore to remind them of the capacity they have for overcoming challenges, as well as to assist others based on their own life lessons:

*"I feel renewed as I had to reflect on the past where my life started, the different life stages that I went through, inclusive of my own achievements and challenges. It is therefore both exhilarating and saddening at times"* (Participant L).

*"This activity gave me a new outlook on my job. I now am revitalized to do my job [...] Other teachers should also participate"* (Participant F).

It could be argued that their career adaptability and career optimism were increased, two constructs that contribute to self-efficacy (McLennan et al., 2017). The passion for teaching was reignited and feelings of overwhelming frustration now seemed less debilitating.

## Theme 2: Group LD Deepened a Sense of Personal and Group Identity and Promoted Relationship Building

The group process helped the participants to understand each other's unique and common challenges on a personal and professional level:

*"I can use the balloon activity when I want to convey a message to an individual or a group [...] at work or on a personal level at home to demonstrate the importance of closeness [...] the closer we were to one another the balloon was safer. I learnt that proximity is key in every situation [...] closeness to one's family, friends, colleagues, etc. More activities that are similar to this one should be developed to encourage people to learn and think more about ways to handle different situations or challenges"* (Participant L).

Existing collegial relationships among the participants were deepened by the process as well as relationships with learners and significant others. The realisation that painful life experiences were not unique to individuals encouraged empathy and a safe and confidential space for all to share their personal narratives without reservations or feelings of insecurity:

*"This Turning Points activity made me realise other people have gone through similar challenges but differently"* (Participant C).

*"This Vision activity made me feel happy, 'cause I could say my viewpoints easily"* (Participant B).

The group process initiated a network and flexible support structure that participants could depend on when individual participants had to support learners with challenges and reflections during the group LD process.

*"In the past I thought you can't go to ask anybody [...] because they don't care [...] now I know especially with a boy I can go to Participant B or E"* (Participant F).

*"This activity made me feel very active again, because I was beginning to have burnout. I can use this activity when there are learners who feel that there is no hope in their lives. As a group we need to support to each other in handling these learners"* (Participant E).

Through the lifeline exercise, teacher participants found support from each other and shared successful experiences which promoted feelings of competence and improved self-efficacy):

*"We are working well as group members and I do believe if we really can hold each other's hands we can be able to make many people to work with us, [...] and identifying the types of places whereby our learners are living and how we can improve those places and everything. Even the parents we can invite them to join us and it can be a success, if we all work together here"* (Participant H).

Even though the Group LD process involved reflecting on painful life experiences, participants experienced it as cathartic and later felt confident and motivated enough to extend support even beyond the school community:

*"It arouses a mixture of feelings within me. I can use this activity in the future when I need to*

*encourage a friend, a colleague or loved one who has lost hope about their life to soldier on despite the worst-case scenarios in their lives"* (Participant L).

Participants said that the group LD process created the space for them to learn about each other's deeply personal experiences in a safe space, where their privacy and integrity were protected. Within this space participants deconstructed their past hurts and with the facilitator and peer support co-constructed an integrated "self" which included home and career realities:

*"Some of the turning points in my life are not good or maybe I should say I don't like to talk about [...] but I must say that it's good it happened the way it did because I can't imagine having to spend many years in a marriage with somebody who does not appreciate you"* (Participant L).

The process also strengthened a sense of belonging and personal identity by making participants aware of meaningful roles for themselves at home, at work and within their community. Peer support has proven to be a valuable medium for increasing collegiality and job satisfaction (Cravens & Drake, 2017):

*"The Genogram conscientised me about the importance of family e.g. staying together and taking care of each other"* (Participant L).

*"This balloon activity made me feel good in a sense of being free and content. We should continue doing such activities so to learn more on knowing how to go about helping others"* (Participant K).

A group identity was formed on the realisation that others understood the individual's professional and personal challenges. Where teachers previously worked in isolation in their individual attempts to provide support to learners, the relationships were deepened and extended during the LD process:

*"We are working well as group members and identifying the types of places whereby our learners are living and how we can improve those places [...] Even the parents we can invite them to join us there and it can be a success. If we all work together here"* (Participant H).

The group process was not always easy, as participants reflected on both their past successes and failures and through acknowledging past mistakes they were able to plan better for the future:

*"most of the things that you [LD facilitator] did [LD activities] they do boil back to me as the teacher, even when I want to put the blame on kids, when I want to put the blame on parents, but at the end of the day, my role as teacher, I didn't do it"* (Participant D).

By acknowledging where they had fallen short in the past, participants were able to feel less overwhelmed and with support from colleagues commit to achieving the goals they had previously set for themselves, with the realisation that regular reflection is required to adapt to changing realities:

*"I can use this [Future Timeline] when I want to keep track with my set goals to see which ones I*

*achieved and those that I didn't manage to achieve. I can always chop and change where necessary e.g. changing plans about what I thought in the past. It is important to plan ahead what one needs to achieve in future e.g. about work, family life, community member, a role model and so forth"* (Participant L).

This realisation seems to suggest that this participant had increased her career adaptability.

### Theme 3: The LD Process Helped Participants to Develop Leadership to Support Learners and Contribute to Community Development

Leadership was encouraged on both professional and personal levels, where teacher participants not only looked at their own development, but had begun to think about taking action to develop the school community:

*"I can use this [Future Timeline] to encourage learners to plan and enjoy life, make a better future with themselves. I would like to say God has given me life and secure me to do this work for many years"* (Participant H).

Participants took ownership of the role they could play to contribute actively to their families, learners at school and the wider community. They started to sound like action leaders (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Their envisaged leadership did not entail control and management of the way forward, but entailed encouraging others to be agents of change for themselves

*"There are many more things to be done to our learners to give them light on skills and attitudes, how they have to live to overcome the problems they come across [that] they can't solve with their grannies [...] A confident educator make a confident learner"* (Participant H).

*"I can teach learners [...] they may also achieve a goal if they are responsible. Their achievement can be through their decision-making and problem solving skills [...] I can use the balloon activity to motivate kids and reflect on them that what they are dreaming of can be achieved or can change because of life different situations and environments"* (Participant B).

*"I want to teach learners about taking responsibility of their own actions i.e. to be independent thinkers [...] brainstorming ideas and taking action [...] are the most effective teaching methods"* (Participant L).

### Discussion

We now briefly discuss our research findings as compared to the expected outcomes of the six-step process of Savickas et al. (2009). We explore how the various themes identified from the LD process enabled teachers to understand their own personal and professional identity, and so to increase self-efficacy to deal with the challenges of working in an under-resourced school community. Our findings support recent research indicating that there is a positive relationship between increased self-efficacy and career adaptability in teachers (McLennan et al., 2017), rendering them better able

to meet their professional goals in spite of contextual challenges. The research results suggest that participants were able to apply the insights from the LD process for reconstructing the self (Guichard, 2005; Hirschi et al., 2015), as evidenced through their heightened sense of morale, encouragement and rekindled sense of purpose, and for reformulating personal and career goals (Savickas, 2011). This promoted a sense of personal and professional efficacy (Bandura, 2006), where the participants started to acknowledge their capacity to attain their professional goals (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010). In spite of challenging contextual demands, LD aims not only to link career and identity, but to integrate all spheres of life, and the participants reported they were better able to create meaningful roles for themselves at home, at work and within their community (Hartung, 2011). The study suggests that participants made meaning from their narrated stories which they could then use to make future personal and career decisions. The renewed belief in their individual and collective agency (Luszczynska, Schwarzer, Lippke & Mazurkiewicz, 2011) encouraged participants to start planning the way forward to carry out activities to attain the goals (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010) they set for themselves as individuals and as a collective, following the group LD process. As far as we could establish, results of LD with a group of teachers in an under-resourced school have not been reported before in South Africa. Our findings differ from research which suggests that contextual challenges necessarily lead to teachers being demotivated to the extent that they are unable to take action (Iwu, Gwija, Benedict & Tengeh, 2013; Mwoma & Pillay, 2015). The findings also supported recent research that processes designed to increase self-efficacy, such as LD, contribute to an increase in career adaptability and career optimism (McLennan et al., 2017).

The reflections by participants on the process spoke directly to the role of teachers as change agents, who encourage learners to solve their own problems. Although there is ample literature to support the value of self-reflective forms of teacher development (Moon, 1999), this study emphasised the need for first using a psychological intervention, in this case Life Design, to increase teacher self-efficacy, before expecting them to be able to take action to improve their professional practice. The suggestion of teacher participants to involve parents and other community stakeholders aligns with principles of action leadership for building positive human relationships and networking toward solutions that will work best for the common good (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). Evidence of the sustainability of the learning and how it was integrated into the everyday practice of the school is the subject of a future article currently in press.

## Conclusion

Although this was a small, contextualised study, whose findings cannot be generalised, it does offer evidence that where contextual challenges had led teachers to lose sight of their goals and dreams, the group LD process enabled the teachers to collectively explore their life narratives to reconnect with their past personal and career goals and to integrate the past and current narratives to guide the way forward. The LD process allowed the teachers, working as a group, to identify their support needs and this provided a platform for deeper relationships and empathy between the members. The collaborative process strengthened the teachers' sense of self-efficacy, making them more able to adapt to challenging career demands. This is a necessary first step before embarking on a PALAR process to identify and address contextual psychosocial challenges within their learners' reality. The group LD process encouraged the teachers to reflect on their personal and professional strengths within their individual narratives. The study highlighted how the LD process allowed the teacher participants to reconnect with their lost dreams and forgotten goals, thereby promoting self-efficacy. Collaborative reflection on their past narratives helped to increase their sense of self-efficacy and career adaptability and promote their ability to be action leaders. While this research article reflects on the LD process at one particular South African school, findings may encourage teachers in other contexts to explore the group LD process to understand and address their own personal and career challenges, particularly where contextual challenges erode their professional and self-efficacy. The findings clearly suggest that by implementing a group-based LD process, teachers were better able to understand their personal and professional identity in the context of an under-resourced school community, and as a result, be in a better position to translate this learning into their work to collaboratively embark on ways to support learners with psycho-social challenges. The collaborative LD process followed in this study also may prove useful for expanding the current research into social-cognitive career theory, which is strongly focused on improving teacher self-efficacy.

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### **Article Three**

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**Collaborated Understandings of Context-Specific Psychosocial Challenges Facing South African School Learners: A Participatory Approach**

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**Abstract**

South African teachers are not sufficiently equipped to address psychosocial challenges that they encounter in under-resourced contexts among learners at school, and which impact negatively on learning and teaching. In this article, we report on the first cycle of a community-based participatory action research project undertaken with teacher participants to facilitate a collaborative understanding of the contextual psychosocial challenges that learners face. The aim of the study was to equip teachers with sustainable capacity to conduct a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) enquiry that would enhance their ability to identify and address contextual psychosocial challenges to promote wellness. Following a PALAR design, we collaborated with 10

volunteer teachers for the generation of qualitative data through relationship building activities, individual interviews, the creation of visual artefacts, and informal group discussions. Data were analysed thematically in collaboration with the community of participants. Findings suggest that the process assisted the teachers to gain a deeper understanding of learners' psychosocial challenges, encouraged a sense of group identity among co-researchers, and fostered their agency to begin to address the identified challenges and to network with community stakeholders to promote wellness among themselves and among learners.

**Keywords:** Action research, community-based partnerships, learner wellness, psychosocial challenges, South African schools, under-resourced communities

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## **Introduction**

Learners at under-resourced schools in South Africa face significant psychosocial challenges (Spaull, 2013) that negatively affect both their own wellness and that of the teachers, ultimately resulting in a lower quality of teaching and learning (Modisaotsile, 2012). The transition from a segregated apartheid education system, where resources were inequitably allocated according to race (Modisaotsile, 2012), to an inclusive education system has been fraught with challenges. Inequitable access to resources (Bruce, 2014; Spaull, 2013) and sectorised poverty (Donald, Lazarus, & Lolwana, 2010) continue to play a role in contributing to the psychosocial challenges faced in South African under-resourced communities, which consequently affect the wellness of members of the school community in that context (Donald et al., 2010). Contextual challenges relevant to this article include poor living conditions in informal settlements with little access to basic amenities (Donald et al., 2010), poor parenting (Ward et al., 2014), poverty-related HIV/AIDS issues (Theron, 2009), socioeconomic influences on teenage sexuality (Miller et al., 2014), substance abuse (Tlale & Dreyer, 2013), school violence (Mampane, Ebersöhn, Cherrington, &

Moen, 2014), and poor parent participation within school structures (Joubert, Ebersöhn, Ferreira, du Plessis, & Moen 2014; Khanare, 2012; Mncube, 2009). South African school teachers are inadequately prepared to support learners within such contexts (Masitsa, 2011; Motshekga, 2010), having only received very basic concepts of educational psychology and community development as part of their preservice training (Donald et al., 2010). This situation negatively impacts on the wellness of the individual teacher and on the larger school system. While workshops are conducted sporadically to improve the support skills of in-service teachers, these are inadequate for capacitating teachers to support learners in under-resourced urban black communities (Motshekga, 2010), commonly known in South Africa as townships.

Inadequately prepared teachers are understandably anxious and overwhelmed by the complex challenges experienced by their learners (Masitsa, 2011; Modisaotsile, 2012), making it difficult for them to mobilise their potential agency (Freire, 1970/2005). An asset-based paradigm (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993; Pillay, 2012) suggests that teachers possess the potential and willingness to support vulnerable learners if they are equipped with the knowledge and skills to do this (Hoadley, 2007; Malindi & Machenjedge, 2012; Mampane & Bouwer, 2006; Theron, 2009). In this article, the authors suggest that a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR, Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) process would be suitable to improve the capacity of participating teachers to support learners and thereby feel less overwhelmed and anxious. PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) aims to improve professional practice and involves an iterative and collaborative process that allows professionals to iteratively and collaboratively reflect on their actions throughout the cyclic PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). By following the PALAR process as expanded on in the section on PALAR as a theoretical paradigm, teacher participants collaborated with each other to come to a better understanding of the psychosocial challenges faced by learners. The aim of this PALAR project was not merely for identifying contextual wellness challenges at school level, but also to add to existing indigenous knowledge (Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) with regard to how such contextual issues could be addressed (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) to enhance wellness. Indigenous knowledge refers to existing systems or strategies “generated in a communal way and based on the experiences of a specific group of people” (Fasokun, Katahoire,

& Oduaran, 2005, p. 61), which communities follow when identifying and addressing contextual challenges as a collective (Teare & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013).

Some background to the current PALAR project is presented before explaining PALAR theoretical assumptions. The methods used to facilitate the generation of knowledge by participants is explained, including the ethical considerations and measures to ensure trustworthiness. After critical discussion of the findings in relation to relevant literature, the authors conclude by discussing the relevance of findings for the promotion of psychosocial wellness in South African township schools.

### **Context and Background**

The facilitator of the PALAR process was guided by her academic promoters, the co-authors of the article, throughout this project. The facilitator is a registered educational psychologist and lecturer in educational psychology at an institution of higher education. She volunteered at an under-resourced township school in a peri-urban setting in the North West Province, South Africa, to offer therapeutic services to individual educators and learners as a form of community engagement. The school had 1,009 learners and 36 teachers with varying teaching experience and from differing cultural backgrounds, with few effective psychosocial support structures in place. The African learners from different ethnic groups who came to her for therapy, presented with challenges stemming from harsh socioeconomic realities, reflecting a complex web of adversity. Teachers also sought individual therapy for themselves related to financial problems, work-related stress, trauma, HIV and AIDS, grief, and relationship problems. Teachers who accessed the therapeutic service specifically requested assistance for them to support learners with psychosocial challenges. The facilitator observed that these teachers were committed to supporting the learners, but tended to do so from their personal resources, which placed extra financial and psychological pressure on them and their families. In response to the teachers' request for assistance, the facilitator consulted with her academic advisors. They suggested a process to support these teachers in their effort to promote sustainable school wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2008) by adhering to the 7Cs of PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). The PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) aimed at developing teacher *competence* through *collaborative communication* in groups, where they supportively *coach* one another and *commit* to a process of *critical reflection* on their actions (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). By following iterative cycles of reflection and action, the participants can develop *character*—by being open to new perspectives,

opportunities, and innovations. They learn to be action leaders (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) capable of addressing the psychosocial challenges facing learners in a sustainable and systematic way, rather than repeatedly responding piecemeal to individual learner needs. The following research question was formulated, based on the project aims as expressed by the teacher participants for this first cycle of the PALAR project, as verified by the participating teachers: “How could the PALAR process help teachers come to a collaborative understanding of the psychosocial challenges their learners face, as a first step in helping them access support for those learners?”

### **Participatory Action Learning and Action Research as a Theoretical Paradigm**

The PALAR process aims at collaborative transformation and empowerment of community members (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) by allowing their knowledgeable voices to be heard (Kearney, Wood, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013), thus acknowledging existing indigenous knowledge and skills (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Learning occurs through an iterative process of action and critical reflection (Kearney et al., 2013) that encourages participants to reflect on their professional practice, both individually and collaboratively, to improve their educational circumstances, while encouraging democratic, mutually rewarding partnerships in keeping with the 7Cs of PALAR (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). The aim is to promote transformative action, character building of individual participants and the community, while simultaneously contributing to professional theory and practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). A critical attitude promotes knowledge creation through experiential learning (Kolb, 2014) in order to solve real-life problems (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Participants communicate as collaborative co-researchers and distributors of knowledge when they exercise their personal and collective agency for addressing challenges in their community (Stringer, 2013; Teare, 2013). The knowledge generated is then ploughed back into the context for further action and reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Just as adversity ~~develops within a context, so reflexive responses need to be contextually and collaboratively designed by~~ those familiar with that context (Chilisa, 2005). Therein lies the uniqueness of the PALAR process, which allows participants who were excluded within traditional researcher-driven interventions to participate in empirically sound research. This is a liberating and transformative shift from traditional research where the researcher is the expert (Chilisa, 2005) who aims to establish objective truth (Mertens, 2010; Minkler, 2005; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003) to suggest valid solutions across all contexts. PALAR seeks to acknowledge and evolve traditional empirical research to integrate with local knowledge (Fasokun et al.,

2005; Teare, 2013) to benefit the community and to simultaneously generate action as well as empirically sound theory. The three processes mentioned below (Kearney et al., 2013) are an integral part of any PALAR project from the outset, facilitated by the embodiment of the principles summarised as the 7Cs mentioned above:

Development of democratic, authentic, trusting, and supportive *relationships*.

Regular personal and group *reflection* within the collaborative learning environment. *Recognition* of the achievements of all participants.

On the next page, Figure 1, based on Zuber-Skerritt's design for an action learning and action research project (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002), illustrates the process followed by the participants to come to a collaborative understanding of the contextual psychosocial challenges faced by learners:

**Figure 1: First Cycle in the PALAR Process (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002)**



### **The PALAR Process as Methodology**

The facilitator and teachers who had initially requested support presented the proposed PALAR project to the entire school staff with the permission of the principal. Five female and five male teachers from diverse local cultural backgrounds and of ages varying between 40 and 60 years, and with varying professional training and experience, volunteered to participate. These participants democratically agreed on weekly meetings at a time that was most convenient.

This first cycle of the PALAR process, as depicted in Figure 1, was completed over 8 months in 18 sessions. Sessions and activities were video recorded and later transcribed. Commitments such as sport events, union meetings, staff meetings, family responsibility, and personal illness often meant that attendance by participating teachers was irregular. This became a significant challenge to progress and participants collaboratively agreed that the weekly meetings would go ahead even when all participants could not attend, so as not to lose momentum. At times, only one participant attended the planned session. Parallel to the relationship building activities during this early stage of the PALAR process, a problem identification

process was followed to help the teachers come to a collaborative understanding of the possible contextual psychosocial challenges experienced by learners. Activities were followed by regular verbal group reflection and written individual reflections, as time allowed.

The relationship building exercises aimed to encourage trust among the participants (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013), develop understanding of each other's life circumstances, and also to acknowledge the participants' life experiences (Chilisa, 2005; Wilson et al., 2007) to thereby encourage the use of participants' existing local knowledge (Chilisa, 2005; Fasokun et al., 2005) and wisdom. The exercises allowed the project participants to realise their common problems (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) and shared desire to support their learners. The shared goal was aimed at helping to shape their identity as a collective as they collaboratively identified the psychosocial challenges experienced by their learners.

Data generation consisted of the video-recorded informal group discussions and reflections on the various exercises, as well as visual data (de Lange, Mitchell, & Stuart, 2007; Wilson et al., 2007) as a stimulus to promote active participation and to acknowledge their existing knowledge of the context (Kearney et al., 2013). Participants took photos within the community to highlight contextual psychosocial challenges (Wilson et al., 2007). For the photovoice narrative, they each wrote explanations next to the photographs related to the psychosocial theme, thus allowing the individual teacher participants to visually and then verbally express their understanding of contextual challenges (de Lange et al., 2007). WhatsApp messages as a tool of communication among participants were included as data (Stringer, 2013). The participants also created collages of the contextual challenges using magazine pictures to triangulate the photovoice artefacts. Data were analysed thematically (Merriam, 2009) together with the participants (Mertens, 2010), which encouraged them to re-search the challenges for further analysis (Minkler, 2005) and action. Throughout the initial process, the participants collaborated to reach consensus on the psychosocial challenges faced by learners in their school community. Table 1 below, summarises data generation for the first cycle of the PALAR process and consists of activities for vision and relationship building.

## **Vision and Relationship Building Activities**

### **Balloon exercise for relationship building**

Participants worked outside in pairs wearing casual clothes. They were given a water-filled balloon to pass between themselves, each time moving one step away from each other. The balloon could fall and burst at any point. This served as an enjoyable icebreaker that encouraged further conversation when participants regrouped. During the group discussion, the balloon symbolised their life and career dreams from adolescence—to help them reflect on their current career trajectory compared to their previous goals and dreams. They then reflected on this activity with the group. The activity thus served to make group members aware of each other's achieved and broken dreams since adolescence

### **The Turning Point exercise (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) for relationship building**

Participants created a metaphor, like a river or road, to highlight significant turning points (events) that have influenced their lives (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). They then shared this with other participants who gave verbal reflections and asked clarifying questions. The objective of the exercise is to initially foster relationships and understanding, then also to acknowledge the individual participant's life experiences. By reflecting on these experiences, participants gain insight into how they addressed past challenges. This awareness potentially informs the way forward for how they will use and adapt their approach to address past challenges, for possible future challenges.

### **Group Collages (Fritz & Beekman, 2007)**

Participants used magazine pictures to create three collages that depicted all the myriad of challenges that they felt negatively affected learning and teaching at the school. This was based on their experience at school, and the activity acknowledges this.

### **Photovoice (de Lange et al., 2007)**

Teacher participants were requested to go into the community and capture scenes depicting where they thought learners' challenges came from. They used their cell phones to capture 14 scenes in and around the school community that they believed pose psychosocial challenges to the learners, thereby affecting the teaching and learning process negatively. These 14 pictures were printed out and the person who captured the scene wrote the explanation next to the picture.

Teacher participants shared current challenges experienced by particular learners in an effort to support those learners and for the participants to generate ideas for addressing similar future learner challenges. Teacher participants wrote brief reflections about activities when time allowed. At the beginning or end of weekly sessions, the group reflected verbally on the process to evaluate the individual or collaborative actions taken over the previous week to support learners needing psychosocial support.

Social media tool: The WhatsApp social media tool (Stringer, 2013) was a virtual space where participants could put forward suggestions and make arrangements for the project. Through the WhatsApp tool, participants also supported each other in challenging times

The use of various data sources ensured crystallisation (Mertens, 2010) of verbal and visual data, thus allowing the data to be understood from different vantage points in order to substantiate research findings. This PALAR project was conducted within the community in accordance with the stringent ethical requirements of the Research Ethics Committee of the North West University, who approved the research project. The facilitator's adherence to the Health Professions Council of South Africa's ethical code as a registered educational psychologist also ensured ethical practice in the interest of participant wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2008).

## **Findings and Discussion**

Themes based on the data analysis will be explored, with a focus on the participating teachers' own experience of the PALAR process for understanding the psychosocial challenges facing learners at their school. The verbatim quotations that support the discussion are given in text, under the relevant theme. Participants are labelled from A to J to ensure anonymity. Spelling and grammar in the quotations appear as in the original data.

**Theme 1: Relationship building activities helped teachers to become aware of their own support needs.**

The first stage of the PALAR cycle, particularly relationship building (see Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013, Table 1), encouraged participants to critically reflect on their personal needs as related to professional practice and competence when supporting learners:

*Those activities have helped me a lot because some of the things that I did not know about myself I now know them and I need to know more about them, especially the balloon exercise . . . that my dream, I don't know should I say does it [dream] look far or near . . . but I have realised something about my actual dream. (Participant H)*

The process also served a positive therapeutic function in which the teacher participants coached one another on how to deal with personal challenges, an important prerequisite for being able to help others:

*The project in general is very good. You remember last time I told you I am reaching this burn out. . . It [the process] helped me not to give up. So I think this is a very good programme . . . it has done a difference because you know you remember last time a very big group started but this time the group shranked to be small, so we know each other better now. (Participant E)*

The relationship building activity encouraged teacher participants to discuss their personal experiences, which they had previously not shared easily with colleagues. The smaller group had created a space to get to know and support one another and to remind one another of the capacity each one has for making a difference by being part of a process to actively address the identified challenges. The painful lessons from their own life narratives motivated them to want to take action to support learners with similar life challenges, thereby applying the concept of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), where personal life experiences are reflected on to benefit others in the community.

**Theme 2: Empathy, personal reflection, and character building were encouraged within the collaborative and reflective research space.**

During the relationship building sessions, individual participants shared their personal triumphs, challenges, hurtful experiences, and family problems in a safe environment, often with cathartic results

that promoted empathy and mutual trust. Participant C empathised with Participant B after he spoke about the death of his wife and child: “I never knew that Participant B had also been through these same painful experiences as me.” In professional spaces, co-workers tend to be inhibited to share personal issues, but the reflective action research space encouraged co-participants to see each other differently, to shift perspectives and become respectful of each other as they better understood the challenges their colleagues experienced: “You know it is very powerful . . . it shows we cannot begin to judge each other . . . to me it is a motivation” (Participant A).

While facilitative communication (Stringer, 2013) prompted supportive responses to each other’s personal narratives and promoted the project goals, the critical reflections at times created discomfort when participants realised the need to be open to new approaches because this challenged them personally and professionally:

*I think we can help each other . . . In the past I thought you can’t go to ask anybody . . .*

*because they don’t care . . . now I know especially with a boy I can go to Participant B or E.  
(Participant F)*

*These are the things we need to face, but try to push them away. Fatlhogang [name of the group] was here for us so we can accept that it is really sort of a problem solver for me to work in a proper way in the school. But it’s like I am in denial, I am afraid of that things of saying: “What if Fatlhogang is going to see the faults in me” and I know that there are some other things that I didn’t do it right. I have got that fear as a teacher. . . . That is how I experience it because most of the things that you did [PALAR activities] they do boil back to me as the teacher, even when I want to put the blame on kids, when I want to put the blame on parents, but at the end of the day, my role as teacher, I didn’t do it.” (Participant D)*

However, this discomfort is a necessary part of personal growth (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) and is enhanced through critical reflection in a safe space. The participants reflected on their personal experience to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and then integrated their new awareness into their current professional practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) when responding to their learners’ contextual challenges:

*You know going out, taking those pictures really touches me a lot and it really makes me to want to go on helping. . . . That is why I wanted to engage more so that I maybe can get healed. . . . Since we have started this . . . everything that we have done especially on the learners' side, I link that with my growing up. And that is again that what makes me to work harder. Work harder at this Fatlhogang so that I can maybe aid or help learners to go through smoothly . . . like my father used to beat my mum, yes. And when we talk to those learners I sometimes hear [learners say] . . . "my dad was beating my mum and" and that is exactly what happened to me. (Participant K)*

**Theme 3: A sense of group identity to promote personal and collective agency emerged.**

The participants brainstormed and democratically decided on the name *Fatlhogang* for their group, which means "to be enlightened" in Setswana (indigenous South African language). One of their goals was to create awareness among learners that they can overcome challenges with the correct support. The logo they designed (see Figure 2) shows people holding hands, symbolising working together, with orange and blue symbolising light and hope respectively, and with "Light at the end of the tunnel" as their motto.

Figure 2: Fatlhogang Logo and Motto, Designed Collaboratively by Participants



*Light at the end of the tunnel...*

Participants reflected verbally and in writing on how the process created a keener sense of their professional practice and purpose, to the extent that Participant H reflected that she would still participate in *Fatlhogang* even after her retirement the following year: “This process has reminded me where I came from . . . how far I have come . . . it makes me realise that there is still such a lot to do for the institution [school] even after I retire.”

Participant C reported how he takes the process beyond the school and this allowed him to give support to his siblings:

*I even told my mum about this programme . . . what I am doing [for] other kids . . . because I cannot see myself achieving it with others and without starting with them [at home] . . .*

*I just wanted to ask my mum about our family name because it is important to know . . . you need to know [your identity] otherwise it brings up this resentment.*

He had gained deeper awareness of his potential for helping through reflectively integrating his new knowledge and existing personal knowledge to benefit his learners and family. This suggests that, through the collaborative process for identifying psychosocial challenges at school, the participants started to realise their potential agency:

*We are working well as group members and I do believe if we really can hold each other's hands we can be able to make many people to work with us, especially by that one where we were taking photos and identifying the types of places whereby our learners are living and how we can improve those places. (Participant H)*

The awareness of their potential to collaboratively address the identified challenges is one of the transformative aims of a PALAR process (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013).

T-shirts with the *Fatlhogang* logo were printed for each member at their request, which promoted group identity and seemed to create a sense of confidence among the participants, because it was at this point that they decided to invite other stakeholders on board. *Fatlhogang* teachers gave collaborative feedback about the research process to the entire staff. The feedback from other teaching and administrative staff indicated support for the process thus far. It was clear the research participants had started to take ownership of the process

At a memorial service for a 13-year-old learner who had passed away from HIV-related cancer, Participant L invited the parents, learners, and members of the public to approach *Fatlhogang* with any school-related problems they might be experiencing. *Fatlhogang* members invited parents and learner representatives serving on the school governing body to a meeting to create awareness among these stakeholders about the learners' psychosocial challenges and invite them to collaborate to begin to address them. This is evidence of the emergence of transformative learning (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) toward collaborative

action in comparison to previous ad hoc responses to challenges. Parents at this meeting requested a team building day for staff and parent representatives to get to know each other better. *Fatlhogang* members also started to generate data at school related to the number of learners living with extended family members or without any adult supervision, as the start of a project for providing support to such learners. During the final meeting of this first cycle of the PALAR process, the participants indicated their intention to take this process to surrounding schools after evaluation of the second cycle and to then expand on the *Fatlhogang* project so that interested teachers at other schools may be encouraged to use a similar PALAR process to identify and address contextual psychosocial challenges. Their long-term goal is to set up structures and a database that will guide teachers to follow this same process for identifying and addressing contextual psychosocial challenges.

**Theme 4: The use of communication technology promoted collaborative action to support each other and learners.**

During this cycle, participants respectfully motivated each other to achieve their personal and professional goals as equals, helping to minimise power relations within the group and promote collaborative action. One challenge with this process was that the group found it difficult to make decisions unless all participants were present. The WhatsApp social media tool fortunately became a space through which participants could put forward suggestions freely without face-to-face tensions. This encouraged symmetrical communication and group synergy (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Through the WhatsApp tool, participants also supported each other in challenging times of illness, bereavement, and daily life challenges of their own or learners and thus promote wellness. The challenge with using WhatsApp was that not all participants possessed the relevant technological devices to participate equally, and at times were unaware of developments until they actually met another participant. The following are excerpts from Whatsapp messages sent by teacher participants to one another:

*Hi to all, can we all pls pray for . . . [learner who had terminal cancer], he so much wish to come to school n his condition prevents him to. (Participant E)*

*On behalf of Fatlhogang crew . . . be blessed and get well soon . . . take a break and relax, remember you only have 1 life to live. (Participant L)*

*Leave your worries, stress, anger or any illness and start a new life. You r God's property. (Participant H)*

The following message was sent on WhatsApp when a fellow teacher passed on after a severe diabetes episode during the second term school holiday: "Today let your actions speak louder than your words. Give encouragement to the teachers, principal and administrators as a new school term begins" (Participant L).

They also used the WhatsApp tool to communicate around action for the way forward. The following words of Participant B suggest that sessions became personally meaningful, supportive, and motivating with regard to action in supporting learners: "I didn't feel like coming [to school] today but when I think of this session I just sprang out of bed . . . it's better to work as a team compared to previously when each helping [learners] individually."

#### **Theme 5: Following a systematic process made challenges appear more manageable.**

The participants initially identified 28 psychosocial challenges affecting learners, which was overwhelming. The facilitator suggested the nominal group technique (Dick, 1991; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) whereby the participants could prioritise the most urgent challenges to address. The nominal group technique (NGT) is a process where individual participants give numerical value to issues in order of significance to the individual. Scores are then tabulated to identify the issues with the highest scoring for the group. The three prioritised challenges as mentioned below were represented visually on a 3 m x 2 m fabric (Figure 3):

Learners are carrying adult responsibilities due to parents being unavailable

Substance abuse

Teenage pregnancy

**Figure 3: Fabric Collage of the Three Prioritised Challenges Placed in School Staff Room**



The teacher participants decided to begin with finding ways to support learners who experience the three prioritised challenges through referral networks and by creating awareness among the learners at school level. They decided to reflect at monthly meetings on the progress for addressing the three issues over a period of 10 months. The fabric collage in Figure 3 created awareness of the PALAR process among other teachers, learners, and parents at the school. The collage was hung in the staffroom to encourage dialogue among staff. It was also exhibited with explanations to learners at assembly and to parents at a parents' meeting. Participants perceived the three psychosocial challenges as interrelated, particularly when children are vulnerable in the absence of parental care.

& Current research also suggests that these three psychosocial challenges are interrelated within the socioeconomic reality of under-resourced communities in South Africa, negatively affecting personal and community wellness (Donald et al., 2010; Ward et al., 2014). HIV-related illness and death of parents are realities associated with the phenomenon of child-headed households in South Africa (Pillay, 2012) where

older children are expected to perform caregiving responsibilities for siblings (Sloth-Nielsen, 2004) and sometimes also for ailing parents. The migrant labour system in South Africa (Hall & Wright, 2010), as a legacy of colonialism and apartheid (Bennett, Hosegood, Newell & McGrath, 2015; Lu & Treiman, 2006), currently also contributes to children carrying adult responsibilities. These two factors have also disrupted family structures (Hall & Wright, 2010; Lu & Treiman, 2006). The absent father phenomenon is a reality in South Africa (Makusha & Richter, 2014), resulting in increased responsibility on single mother figures who are often overburdened and unable to parent successfully (Makusha & Richter, 2014). These realities are directly related to the fact that almost 1% of the population of about 50 million South Africans live in child-headed households (Meintjes, Hall, Marera, Boule, 2009), where the older children at times must prioritise menial labour over school attendance to support the family financially. Those who remain at school may perform poorly due to their increased family responsibilities (Ibebuike, van Belkum, & Maja, 2014). The strain of being responsible for younger siblings may cause anxiety, resulting in poor concentration in class and poor attention to homework, resulting in poor academic performance (Tsegaye, 2008). In an attempt to cope financially, some girls in these contexts turn to men who will provide financial assistance for temporary periods, but then add to their problems through unwanted pregnancies (Miller et al., 2014; Theron, 2009) or HIV infection. Transactional sex (Potgieter, Strebel, Shefer, & Wagner, 2012) in these contexts is at times a conscious choice by some girls to generate an income (Ibebuike et al., 2014). Teenage pregnancy may also be fuelled by boredom (Miller et al., 2014), alcohol, and other substance use (Davis

& Steslow, 2014; Tlale & Dreyer, 2013) in under-resourced communities where few other leisure options exist. This reality places these adolescents at greater risk for HIV infection in a population where the estimated HIV prevalence among antenatal clinic attendees in 2010 was already 14% for girls aged 15–19 years in South Africa (Blignaut, Vergnani, & Jacobs, 2014) and is steadily rising in peri-urban contexts. Social research indicates that children who are in a healthy relationship with their parents are more likely to make safer life choices (Brown, Gouridine, Waites, & Owens, 2013). The absence of parents in the context of child-headed families and the migrant labour system therefore paints a worrying picture, adding to the typical challenges of parenting in the 21st century (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013)

The research speaks directly to the 28 wellness challenges as identified during the PALAR process. The NGT allowed the participants to identify a starting point for addressing the myriad of challenges, which previously had appeared overwhelming and which impact negatively on the wellness of teachers and learners (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). The dynamics linking the many challenges also highlights the link between wellness and social justice, where the poverty-related challenges cannot be divorced from the wellness of the community at large (Prilleltensky, 2013). The participants collaboratively categorised the remaining 25 challenges into the following categories for addressing in future as part of the ongoing PALAR process: (1) Negative modern and traditional cultural influences, (2) Poor home environment, (3) Socioeconomic challenges and (4) School environment.

#### **Theme 6: Participants encountered challenges impacting on the potential success of PALAR process.**

The challenges experienced by the teacher participants during Cycle 1 of the PALAR process had a direct bearing on achieving the aims and timeframes as decided on by the teacher participants during their vision building activity for the project. The challenge of time as related to their various life roles was repeatedly mentioned by participants. They felt motivated to take action, but felt they could accomplish more if more time was available “because we only meet once a week and sometimes others have commitments . . . I think that if maybe we had more time there could have been more that could have been done (Participant E).”

There were times when those in attendance became frustrated by the lack of progress because of the absenteeism of others. They questioned the commitment of participants. The facilitator contained the situation and encouraged teacher participants to reflect on the contextual challenges in their community and the influence on participating teachers. Fortunately, the group cohesion and commitment encouraged participants to be patient with each other. For the facilitator, the biggest challenge was also to be reflexive and accommodating of the commitments of participants to their other life roles when, often, sessions were cancelled at the last minute for school-related activities or because participants had to attend to learners or family responsibility. This reality was demotivating to the facilitator at times

because progress was slow. There were, however, also “momentum waves” where teacher participants were proactive and achieved project goals in short spaces of time. This is a reality of the context in which this PALAR process was unfolding.

The findings from the analysis of the first cycle of the PALAR process suggest that the participating teachers understand each other much better after the relationship building process. This set the tone for collaborative interaction (Zuber-Skerritt, 2012; Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) where they could draw on personal experience (Chilisa, 2005) to enhance their existing knowledge and skills (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). The participants developed a deep sense of professional, personal, and group identity that encouraged them to engage collectively and reflexively with each other and later, with other stakeholders, to explore ways to support learners coming from challenging psychosocial contexts to improve wellness within the school community.

The initial focus on relationship building allowed for the creation of a democratic and humanising space. Within this supportive environment, the *Fatlhogang* members reflected on the issues they face personally and then professionally and how these impact on wellbeing. The reflections promoted transformation and character building of the participants (Chilisa, 2005), and the resultant learning potentially contributed to theory and practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). This process encouraged a critical attitude and promoted creative discussions and collaborative interactions (Stringer, 2013) to address real-life problems (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) with all stakeholders in comparison with previous individual and ad hoc reactions to challenges the participants experienced at work and personally.

Interactions during the process encouraged empathy and ownership of the larger action research project, with teacher agency (Mertens, 2010; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003) gaining momentum as they collectively identified and categorised the psychosocial challenges faced by their learners. They started to recognise their personal and collective agency, which may not have been apparent to them before they started the PALAR process because they were previously overwhelmed by the contextual challenges. During this first cycle of the iterative PALAR process, participants successfully created a collaborative understanding of their concerns and negotiated a working relationship where, even when individual attendance was not

possible, the participant still remained part of the process. Participants invested personally in the process and came to understand one another well enough to take collective ownership. Through interacting as collaborative co-researchers, they exercised their personal and collective agency for addressing the challenges they identified as affecting learners at their school.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, the interactions and reflections of participants during this first cycle of the PALAR process indicate that these participants have benefitted personally and professionally through the process of repeated action, observation, and reflection within a trusting environment. While contributing to theory on how a PALAR process can support teachers to support learners, the process also improved participants' professional capacity for reflective transformation through democratic partnerships. The iterative trial-and-error approach of PALAR appears messy, but the strength lies in that it allows community participants to contribute to the process at any point. Even though time and effective communication posed significant challenges, the outcomes suggest that the PALAR approach is an option for teachers to initiate sustainable action to support learners with psychosocial challenges. The process was facilitated by the use of visual research methods that provided an avenue for teacher participants to voice their concerns and to reach a collaborated understanding of learner challenges in a non-threatening process. The challenges of time, communication, and commitment to other life roles are realities of a community-based project, but through reflecting collaboratively, solutions can be generated. The emphasis for future PALAR projects should be on the time required for relationship building at the beginning. The strong bonds formed during relationship building become a resource for the participants during challenging times and encourage sustainability for the cycles that follow. The PALAR process for teachers in South Africa is a novel way of improving their practice and praxis in challenging contexts. Reporting on this PALAR project that helped the participating teachers identify and address psychosocial challenges faced by learners, adds to existing literature in the area of teacher support, and encourages teacher agency for collaboratively addressing challenges in their particular context.

While this research is based on improving wellness at one particular South African school, findings may encourage other teachers to adopt a PALAR process to understand and address contextual challenges

affecting learner and teacher wellness in their respective school communities. The findings clearly suggest that by implementing a PALAR process, teachers can collaboratively address contextual wellness issues of school children that have a direct impact on learning and teaching.

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## Article Four

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**A collaboratively constructed action leadership framework  
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## **A collaboratively constructed action leadership framework for sustainable learner support in contexts of adversity**

We will only know the story of the lion when the lion himself tells the story (Motsa, 2017).

[African proverb]

### **Abstract**

Teachers working in under resourced contexts struggle to provide psychosocial support to learners. In this article, we focus on ten teacher participants' reflections of how a transformative action research process enhanced their collective capacity for initiating sustainable learner support. Data were generated from transcriptions of action learning group discussions and teacher reflections during the project were thematically analysed. A linked participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) process initiated at their school with an LD counsellor, assisted them to provide sustainable support at the school. LD enabled teacher participants to build on personal and professional narratives as a foundation for embarking on the PALAR process to attain positive change. LD deepened their psychological understanding of the link between their past and present, which remained a sustainable motivation throughout the PALAR process. Findings suggest that the PALAR-LD process is suitable to enable the sustained addressing of contextual challenges, through the development of action leadership in teachers. Although the LD process has to be initiated together with an LD counsellor, teachers can then sustain the PALAR process on their own, making it both cost-effective and feasible. The framework has value for enhancing learner support in contexts of social and economic adversity.

## Introduction

A practical process for sustainable learner support in the context of poverty-related psychosocial challenges at South African schools (De Beer and Swanepoel 2011; Thorpe 2014) is currently not available to align with the Department of Education (2008) National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS): Operational Guidelines. According to the policy on inclusive education (Department of Education 2001), all learners have the right to be educated in ordinary mainstream schools by well-trained teachers, with school-based support teams (SBST) created to address barriers to learning experienced by learners who face adversity. The SBST is expected to identify learners with learning barriers, whether social, economic or cognitive, and to develop strategies to enable teachers to support these learners (Department of Education 2001). The reality is that teachers in general lack the necessary skills and knowledge to do this, particularly in contexts of poverty (Spaull 2013). This potentially leads to a sense of poor teacher efficacy and demotivation (Donald, Lazarus and Moolla 2014). Demotivated teachers find it difficult to sustain individual effort, especially when their personal circumstances are also challenging, leading to the deterioration of teaching and learning (Donald, Lazarus and Moolla 2014). The dearth of educational psychologists who work in poverty contexts in South Africa means that teachers carry the additional role of providing psychosocial support to learners (Author 2017) and this often results in their personal and professional well-being being negatively affected (Nelson 2010; Author 2016; Trangos 2017).

South African teachers have been trained through expert interventions to support learners experiencing poverty-related psychosocial challenges, but the teachers' own personal and professional needs were not directly addressed (Theron 2010). We argue that without helping teachers to first address their own psychological well-being, they cannot support learners easily or sustainably: The helpers must first help themselves. Community Psychology (CP), as the social conscience of psychology (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2010), is the foundation of such a process. Community psychology advocates involving community members in addressing contextual challenges from an inclusive and emancipatory stance, taking into consideration that each context is unique (Egmose 2015, 2016; Motsa 2017).

We thus conceptualised a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) approach with teachers to enable them to draw on their own local knowledge for transformation of their circumstances (Chilisa 2012) with an embedded psychological Life Design (LD) process (Savickas, 2011). Teacher participants, who expressed feelings of demotivation and burnout, initiated the research project by requesting assistance from a psychologist, the main author of this paper. The teachers were thus an integral part of the project from the outset and took the lead in defining the contextual challenges, setting goals, taking action and evaluating the progress of the research project. Life Design (LD) as a process helped the

teacher participants to reflect deeply on their past narratives for themes that would make sense of their current reality and be the golden thread to guide the way forward (Savickas 2011; Setlhare, Wood & Meyer 2017). The motivation for the LD process was to enable the community participants (teachers in this context) to help themselves first, and then be capacitated further through a PALAR process to support learners experiencing poverty-related psychosocial challenges. We hypothesized that the initial group LD process would continually be a point of reference for participants throughout the project as it would enable individual participants to reflect on their LD experience to guide their decisions and actions going forward. The learning the participants gleaned during the LD process would encourage them to draw on their strengths to keep them motivated and feeling strong (Savickas 2011; Setlhare, Wood & Meyer 2017).

We reflect on how LD potentially re-inforced the PALAR process to make change and learning both possible and sustainable on a cognitive, affective and social level (Zuber-Skerritt, Fletcher and Kearney 2015) for individual participants as well as for the collective (Di Fabio and Maree 2015). The reason for choosing PALAR as the methodological framework for this project was to create awareness among teacher participants of their agency (individually and collectively) and to encourage lifelong action learning (LAL) (Teare 2013) with regard to the support learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges.

The research question that this paper addresses, is:

How has a linked PALAR-LD process enabled teachers to develop a sustainable strategy for collaboratively addressing identified psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at their school?

### **Context of the study**

According to the South African Education Policy on Inclusive Education (2001), a school based support team (SBST) should be established to support learners and teachers to promote effective learning and teaching. Psychosocial challenges which impact negatively on successful learning and teaching include poor living conditions related to inadequate provision of services like electricity and running water (Donald et al. 2014; Statistics SA 2015), socio-economic influences on adolescent decision making around issues of sexuality and recreation (Miller, Caldwell, Weybright, Smith, Vergnani and Wegner 2014; Tlale 2013), school violence (Mampane, Ebersöhn, Cherrington, and Moen 2013), and poor parent participation (Khanare 2012; Morazzini 2014; Mncube 2009). South African school teachers are inadequately prepared to support learners within such contexts (Masitsa 2011; Motshekga 2010; Setlhare & Wood 2011). This reality negatively impacts on teacher motivation and on the larger school system. While workshops are

conducted sporadically to improve the support skills of in-service teachers, these are inadequate for capacitating teachers to support learners in under resourced black communities (Author 2011; Motshekga, 2010) in South Africa.

Inadequately prepared teachers are understandably anxious and overwhelmed by the complex challenges experienced by their learners (Masitsa, 2011; Modisaotsile, 2012), making it difficult for them to mobilise their potential agency (Freire 1970) and become action leaders (Zuber-Skerritt 2011). The focus of this PALAR-LD project was thus to collaborate with teachers working in such a context, to enable them to take the lead to support learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges. The teachers took collective responsibility for networking and orchestrating the human energy within their context to support learners in partnership with others and to enhance their own professional development (Zuber-Skerritt 2011) and collectively address the psychosocial challenges affecting their learners.

Through following a PALAR process, the psychosocial challenges which negatively influenced the teaching and learning process at the school were identified by the teacher participants themselves as knowledge holders in the context (Chilisa, 2005; Theron, 2010). The teacher participants identified 28 poverty-related psychosocial challenges experienced by learners. They then prioritized parental absence due to illness and migrant labour, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse in order of importance through a Nominal Group Technique (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare 2013). Psychosocial challenges are seldom insular (Luthar 2006) and in accordance with PALAR for practice and praxis, teacher participants mobilised people in the community who could assist in addressing the cumulative risks (Luthar 2006) associated with the myriad psychosocial challenges. The lead author formed an integral part of this process as an educational psychologist, due to her professional training and experience with addressing barriers to learning.

### **Background and methodology**

The facilitator of this PALAR-LD project is a registered educational psychologist and lecturer in Educational Psychology at an institution of higher education. She initially volunteered at an under resourced township school in a peri-urban setting in the North West Province, South Africa, to offer therapeutic services to individual educators and learners as a form of community engagement. The school had 1009 learners and 36 teachers with varying teaching experience and from differing cultural backgrounds, with few effective psychosocial support structures in place. Ten teachers at the school specifically requested assistance to support learners with psychosocial challenges. The project was initiated at their request to explore how they could come to a collaborative understanding of the psychosocial challenges their learners face, and thereafter provide support for these learners. She suggested they follow a participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) process to enable them to learn how to do this. Teachers in this

project were unaccustomed to collaborative action learning (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011) which involved reflection on their own personal and professional challenges as a necessary first step. One teacher participant acknowledged during the initial phase of the process:

When I do introspection... I become threatened... I don't want to open up to change.... [Participant A]

We thus agreed to explore a linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research and Life Design process to: (i) encourage participant teachers to express their concerns regarding their feelings of inadequacy in how to support learners who experience psychosocial challenges and (ii) to collaboratively explore and apply action options for providing the necessary support. We hypothesized that a linked PALAR-LD process would have the potential for enabling teachers at the school to move beyond feelings of inadequacy to respond positively and powerfully to contextual challenges. PALAR encourages participants to respond critically and dynamically (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare 2013) to contextual challenges. The Life Design process as a psychological intervention (Maree 2013) uses personal life narratives to encourage agency and prompt action by deconstructing and reconstructing personal narratives to achieve holistic career and personal life goals (Di Fabio and Maree 2013; Savickas 2012). PALAR as a research process involves community participants as co-researchers to identify and address contextual challenges and within the context of this project, to support learners with the potential of building agency to promote change (Zuber-Skerritt and Teare 2013).

Five female and five male teachers, from diverse local cultural backgrounds, ranging in age from 40 to 60 years and with varying professional training and experience, volunteered to participate. The first PALAR cycle spanned ten months and entailed vision-building and identification of the psychosocial challenges affecting their learners. Relationship building and developing a personal and group identity during weekly meetings over a period of three months led to the initiation of the project which the teachers called "FATLHOGANG" which means "to be enlightened" in the local Setswana language. Data were generated from verbal and written reflections by participants, including the facilitator, over a span of two years. While the project continues into 2018, data used for this article have been limited to the end of 2017. Data were analysed thematically (Merriam 2009) together with the participants (Mertens 2010) which encouraged them to re-search the challenges for further analysis (Minkler 2005) and action. The use of these data sources ensured crystallisation (Mertens 2010) by triangulating data from the weekly meeting transcripts and written reflections, thus allowing the data to be understood from different vantage points in order to substantiate research findings. This community-based participatory research was conducted according to

the stringent ethical requirements of the Research Ethics Committee of the university. Furthermore, the facilitator's adherence to The Health Profession Council of South Africa's ethical code as a registered educational psychologist also ensured ethical practice in the interest of participant wellness (Myers and Sweeney 2008).

## **Findings**

The discussion of the findings will highlight themes which indicate that while the PALAR-LD process encouraged teacher participants to take action to address challenges and build their capacity to do so, they experienced unexpected challenges and achievements. These dynamics required constant reflection and planning, to ensure that action was sustainable.

### **Theme 1: Participants learnt the power of reflection**

One participant reflected on how the PALAR-LD process changed her thought patterns and process regarding her approach to supporting learners. She reflected on her former approach to learner support and was able to identify reasons for previous feelings of incompetence as a teacher. As a result of the reflective process she was able transform her role from ineffective teacher to collaborative action leader in addressing contextual challenges:

These are the things we need to face, but try to push them away. FATLHOGANG was here for us so we can accept that it is really sort of a problem solver for me to work in a proper way in the school. But its like I am in denial, I am afraid of that thing of saying :  
“what if FATLHOGANG is going to see the faults in me” and I know that there are some other things that I didn't do it right. ...it (LD activities) helped us a lot, because it was an eye-opener to us that some of the things we were doing wrong but because of it [the process] we ended up knowing... [Participant J]

This suggests that adding the LD component to the PALAR process challenged the teacher participant to reflect and reframe her past experience to help her constructively integrate past events through a reflective process for planning the way forward during transitions and challenging times, a key aim in Life Design counselling (Savickas 2011).

Another participant was similarly challenged to evaluate how she had approached teaching previously and how the PALAR-LD process helped her reframe her approach.

I experienced that because when it started, remember I was here ... but some of the things that I see as a problem here hit us back as a teacher... that as a teacher I talk about ill-discipline, I talk about late coming, but I am the cause of this because everything turns back to me: If I stand up, if I check my mistakes, if I work on myself ... [Participant H].

Adding the LD component thus helped the teacher participants to reflect more deeply on their own role in what was happening and their potential to effect change. The reflection by Participant H suggests that at first she experienced a bit of discomfort and even resistance to the process of reflection. The discomfort caused Participant H to stay away for a while but she returned again when she realised that this very process was what she needed. The transformation is clear in her reflections and she recognized the action she could take to improve her own situation, rather than expecting outside influences to alter her reality:

These kids have adopted these [behaviours] from me so it's like I am running from reality. I want FATLHOGANG to help but when I am part of the problem I want to give an excuse then later come back again as if it (FATLHOGANG) is a miracle solver. [Participant H]

There is a clear realisation that as teachers they had previously been part of the problem and therefore they could be part of the transformation for a better way forward:

Yes, it [the PALAR-LD process] caused us to reflect a lot. And some of us started to say now let us start to do the right thing, its no use complaining. We should do something ... That is how I experienced it because most of the things that you did [LD activities] they do boil back to me as the teacher, even when I want to put the blame on kids,... when I want to put the blame on parents, ... but at the end of the day, my role as teacher, I didn't do it. [Participant J]

The realisation and transformation was not only limited to their professional lives, but to personal realities as well. When they deconstructed and reconstructed their life narratives during the LD activities, it had a cathartic outcome at times (Savickas 2011):

Because of FATLHOGANG some of the things we were doing, we could see them differently ... especially related to work, but it made me realize that some of the things that were happening in my life I was not aware of why they were happening. Do you remember that family tree actually made me uproot who I am, where I come from. It came with a positive impact. [Participant B]

The teachers, who were previously overwhelmed by contextual challenges of working in under resourced contexts, now felt able to move forward and take responsibility for their own thinking, attitudes and actions through cognitive adaptability as proposed by the LD process (Hirschi, Herrmann and Keller 2015). They were able to collaborate better with each other to determine the way forward and learnt the importance of networking with learners, parents and other community stakeholders. The group LD-process sustained and supported participants to have a better understanding of each other's life and career trajectories (Di Fabio and Maree 2013; Author 2016). Teacher participants in the group LD process who served as an audience for each other encouraged their individual colleagues to reflect on assets and challenges within their life narrative to provide the 'golden thread' (Savickas 2011, 25) which could guide decisions and actions during future challenging times (Di Fabio and Maree 2012), both professionally and personally (Rehfuss and Di Fabio 2012). This is a life skill that they will use to guide personal and professional designs in future, and is not just a once-off intervention that helped them for the duration of the PALAR-LD process to support learners. Five of the participants were encouraged by the process to explore dreams they had abandoned along the way (Savickas 2011) which also shows agency to take control of their lives. The regular and deep reflections which are an integral part of LD, helped them to rewrite their past and often painful narratives to recognise their strengths (Maree 2013).

## **Theme 2: Teacher capacity to take action to support learners was improved in spite of challenges**

During the second cycle of the PALAR-LD project, which spanned 18 months, the FATLHOGANG teachers took on the responsibility to collaborate with learners, parents and other stakeholders. They explored a variety of resources within their context and the following actions were taken to address the challenges they prioritized (child-headed households, substance abuse and learner pregnancy (Setlhare, Wood, Meyer 2016).

With a focus on addressing the challenge of child-headed households, the FATLHOGANG teachers chose to enrol in a workshop arranged by the regional Department of Education for supporting learners through referral to relevant structures. At the workshop, the teachers were provided with a resource list of contact persons within the Department of Education who could provide support to learners who did not

have adult support. FATLHOGANG teachers gathered statistics for learners at the school living without adult supervision to present to social workers from the Department of Social Development. FATLHOGANG teachers also reached out to parents by arranging meetings with parents who were interested in being part of the project. One of the volunteer parents indicated she would network with relevant social workers to explore ways to support the learners and to help learners access social grants where applicable.

The participants also set up a referral process to the local government for learners with substance abuse problems. Unfortunately, the bureaucracy within government structures posed a significant challenge to getting the support learners needed to combat substance abuse. Teachers struggled to make telephonic contact with the relevant persons in charge, but at least they are aware of the process and will continue to pursue this contact.

FATLHOGANG teachers and two learner representatives initiated a meeting with FAMSA [Family and Marriage Society of South Africa], a non-governmental organisation involved in providing psychosocial support to families in the area. They explained the FATLHOGANG project and requested assistance for addressing their three prioritised challenges. FAMSA agreed to work with FATLHOGANG to create awareness about teenage pregnancy with Grade 8 and 9 learners at the school and to give support for teenagers who were pregnant. A detailed report on the process and learner responses was provided to FATLHOGANG by FAMSA at the end of an eight-week programme.

The Fatlhogang teachers also worked with the learners to encourage them to be part of the solutions and these were some of the initiatives taken by learners:

- Learners started a vegetable garden with support from the local municipality and the local university's Anthropology department. The participating teachers communicated with the university staff for guidance on sourcing seeds and other implements. Learners intended for the project to become a sustainable source of fresh vegetables for the school feeding scheme. They wanted to expand the vegetable garden to become a source of income for FATLHOGANG. See Figure 1 below for visual.

**Figure 1: Learners and teacher participants discussing progress of the vegetable garden**



- Learners involved in FATLHOGANG designed and built suggestion boxes into which all learners at school could place anonymous suggestions for addressing the three identified challenges and highlight other psychosocial challenges they were experiencing. See Figure 2 below for visual.

**Figure 2: Suggestion boxes made by learner representatives who joined the PALAR-LD project, into which all learners at school could place anonymous suggestions for addressing the three identified challenges.**



While there were successes to motivate further action, the challenges experienced by the FATLHOGANG teachers and learners with exploring support networks led to the realisation that they needed skill sets for project management, proposal writing for accessing funding and for resolving tensions with the new temporary school manager who was not very supportive of their initiatives:

I want to talk about our Head, he is not flexible enough. Sometimes, when you start something it's as if you are undermining his position, and we do not want that, ... when he hears that you started

something it becomes a problem and offends him, which leaves us scared to initiate things [Participant C].

The tension between the temporary school manager and project participants became a significant challenge until a permanent school manager was employed a year later. The power dynamics (Dustman, Kohen, and Stringer 2014) during the period of leadership under the temporary school manager affected participation negatively. Teacher participants encountered resistance from the temporary school manager for auctioning the decisions they had taken to start addressing the identified psychosocial challenges. The temporary school manager felt threatened when the status quo was challenged. The PALAR-LD project however was not sacrificed and teacher participants continued to support each other and suggest ways to build a better understanding of the project among colleagues at the school as part of the PALAR process:

The challenge is that we do not have everyone on board, but we do not have to wait for other people but we must share with them, talk with them, ...try to attract them. [Participant H]

The FATLHOGANG teachers continued to be motivated and explore alternative ways to address the identified challenges in spite of contextual setbacks. At school level, they decided on an awareness program linked with the school year plan to get learners and other staff involved in activities like poster competitions, drama activities and essay writing competitions related to the psychosocial challenges facing learners that had been identified during the first PALAR cycle. By having informal one-on-one discussions with language and music teachers who were not members of FATLHOGANG, they were able to initiate these activities. The teacher participants agreed to give regular feedback at school assemblies about the FATLHOGANG project and they have plans to expand to neighbouring schools.

### **Theme 3: Action Leadership: Acknowledging the knowledge holder as change agent**

The teacher participants were initially not aware of their role and potential within the project and expected the facilitator to direct the process. Through regular transparent verbal engagement during the weekly group reflections, this misconception was rectified and a power shift ensued toward the end of the first cycle. Through this 'disruption' the facilitator learned to trust that the teacher participants possessed the relevant values, skills and knowledge to address the identified psychosocial challenges. The teachers learnt to be self-directed lifelong learners through the PALAR-LD process. They created a collaborative vision, depicted by a visual collage [see Figure 3], to guide them toward beginning to take action and own the project, allowing the external facilitator to play a more facilitative and less prescriptive role.

**Figure 3: A collaborative collage created by teacher participants, depicting their vision for the PALAR-LD project, to guide and motivate them toward beginning to take action and own the project**



The realisation of their capacity came into play when the lack of support from the school principal became a challenge and he resisted the potential benefits and outcomes of the PALAR-LD process which he perceived to challenge his authority:

Our principal also delays us when we want to initiate something that will help our school, and we can't be effective in the school. So the (PALAR-LD process) will help us to show people how to be fair and that we are not here to take somebody's job, or to criticise, but we just want to build and nothing else [Participant C].

The awakening of their potential as co-researchers and knowledge creators came through clearly during a reflective discussion on the role of the university in addressing contextual challenges during the LD exercises. FATLHOGANG members started to realise they were partners with the university and particularly the potential they have for adding value to the preparation of new teachers:

We are talking about different types of worlds now. The university lifestyle and most of the [university] students ... do not really experience what is happening here in our locations [with under resourced schools]. They are not aware of the way of thinking of most of our kids ... [Participant J]

University gives an ideal situation of somebody's perception totally different from what is in the book, for example I was never told I would meet a child having cancer. We are not prepared for this at university [Participant B].

Participants realised that they possessed capacity as change agents at school level, to transform the quality of life for the learners if they work collaboratively as FATLHOGANG teachers and with the SBST:

We lose children due to their problems and the way to deal with it is to create a school where a child feels listened to, loved and comforted. It should feel like a safe environment. Then they will prefer to come to school unlike staying home doing nothing. If we work individually the school is too big and learners will flock to one person. If we do it as a group, we can spread it out [Participant B].

This is the sustainable 'aha' moment of the PALAR-LD process. The successes of the linked process encouraged FATLHOGANG members to then become ambassadors for the project:

... different as we are we must be able to contribute to the organisation differently so that at the end of the day the organisation must be the winner. Like all of us in here, we are going to leave this organisation here, it's up to us now that we have time to make a difference in the lives of the poor ones we are interacting with every day [Participant A].

By building supportive relationships, FATLHOGANG members were able to give each other regular support, which encouraged the continuation of the project. The use of WhatsApp technology allows members to remain in constant contact even over holiday periods and during personal challenges like death and illness. Existing literature speaks to the importance of relationship building within community projects (Zuber-Skerritt 2011).

### **Discussion and reflections**

The linked PALAR-LD process led to the teachers designing an action plan to provide sustainable support for learners. The ability to do this was enhanced by the LD activities, which allowed them to identify their strengths through reflection on and reframing of personal narratives. This new skill provided them with a

tangible resource for the way forward that they can refer to in periods of transition or challenge (Savickas, 2011). The data suggest that the PALAR-LD process provided a space for social learning and knowledge generation, thereby capacitating the teacher participants to overcome their feelings of demotivation and for them to then iteratively reflect on improving their collective and individual support to learners experiencing poverty-related psychosocial challenges. By reflecting on their previous approaches to supporting learners, participating teachers were able to transform and change their assumptions (Savickas and Porfeli 2012) about how to actively and collaboratively address challenges facing their learners differently in future. Proactivity thus became a project ethos as compared to previous apathy and adaptivity (Prilleltensky and Stead 2012).

Participants continued to communicate with each other without fear and with the sense of security that emanated from the group LD process during the relationship-building phase of PALAR. Together they showed concern, explored and planned alternatives and made decisions for the way forward, all of which enhances self-efficacy (Hirsch, Hermann, Keller 2015) and promotes action leadership (Teare 2013; Zuber-Skerritt 2011). FATLHOGANG became a referral structure for teachers and learners to provide support to learners, which is supposed to be the function of the SBST. In other words, the FATLHOGANG teachers were able to construct a support process from the ground up, which seems to be more effective than the official SBST.

The expansion of the PALAR-LD project is currently under discussion and the intention is to include three other schools in the same vicinity where similar challenges are experienced by learners and teachers. The depth brought in by incorporating the group LD process during the relationship building phase of the PALAR project ensured a more sustainable process. The intensely personal group LD process (Di Fabio and Maree 2015) strengthened the PALAR process on two levels and promoted sustainability. Firstly, the participants felt safe with each other as they had shared deeply personal experiences (Park 2006) and they supported each other as new challenges arose. Secondly, as discussed in Theme 3, the link between personal narratives and professional goals encouraged participants to find meaning in their professional actions and identity (Hirsch, Hermann, Keller 2015; Savickas 2011). LD as a psychological process, combined with PALAR, provided a powerful and sustainable pathway to addressing contextual challenges utilising and acknowledging the participants' existing knowledge (Odora Hoppers 2009) while capacitating participants to access outside resources to complement already existing knowledge and resources. The engagement between the participants and the external facilitator promoted sustainability through the "new forms of social learning ... between citizens and scientists" (Egmose 2015, 12). An official SBST has been constituted at the school in accordance with the policy, but FATLHOGANG has shown that a bottom-up

approach to developing a support system through PALAR is sustainable and perhaps more responsive to specific contextual needs. Indeed, the SBST relies on FATHLOGANG to complement its work. Life Design adds a psychological layer to strengthen and sustain the participants to achieve the vision and mission of the PALAR process even when the psychologist as expert is not present. Teacher participants were thus enabled to help themselves and thereby be in a better position to offer sustainable support to learners at their school.

## **Conclusion**

Findings suggest that the linked PALAR-LD process has enabled participant teachers to develop a sustainable framework for addressing identified psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at their school. The teacher participants and university researcher collectively generated new knowledge by following a bottom-up research process. The linked PALAR-LD process can be successfully implemented, with an LD facilitator, in contexts where poverty and insufficient resources cause community members to feel despondent and ineffective to address related psychosocial challenges. Although the PALAR process alone can develop leadership capacity, we propose the extra component is needed at the beginning to help participants who live and work in contexts of disadvantage to overcome deep-seated feelings of inefficacy and worthlessness. Individuals living in poverty contexts are often inhibited by perceptions of powerlessness, voicelessness and anxiety about the future (Nelson and Prilleltensky 2010). The group LD process in this project became a catalyst for developing increased feelings of self-efficacy, enabling them better to collaborate, bring in more stakeholders, and mobilise access to community resources in their quest to build systems for sustainable learner support. We suggest that the linked PALAR-LD project not only benefits teacher participants and their learners, but that it potentially adds to the existing literature on in-service teacher capacity building to provide sustainable support to learners living in contexts of poverty. The LD process encouraged critical reflection on themes from teachers' personal life narratives, which sustained the teachers in their iterative PALAR process of addressing contextual psychosocial challenges which ultimately negatively affected teaching and learning in the classroom. They were able to draw on themes from their past narratives, as identified during the group LD process, to overcome obstacles even when the lack of support from the school manager led to other teachers on the staff being hesitant about the FATLOHENG project.

Teachers working in disadvantaged contexts need to be capacitated to support learners, due to the shortage of official psychosocial services and related professional support. The PALAR-LD process provides one possible cost-effective avenue to create a sustainable framework for supporting learners. The LD counselor was only required to play a facilitative role for the initial stages of the project. Although

longitudinal research with in-service teachers to assess the value of a PALAR-LD process for promoting sustainable action leadership is needed to definitively determine its usefulness for creating frameworks for learner support, we hope that the findings presented in this article will encourage such further studies to be undertaken.

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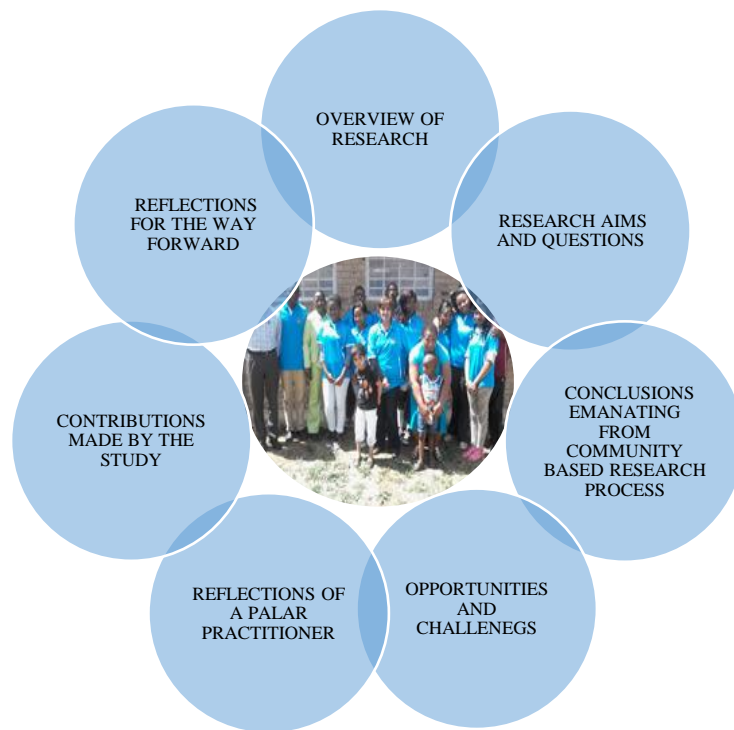
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## CHAPTER THREE: REFLECTIVE SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION



### Overview of Research

In response to the main research question which informed the sub-research questions, this third and final chapter focuses on bringing together the processes and findings of the cyclic PALAR-LD linked project as discussed in the previous four articles.

The overarching purpose of the research project was to explore the potential of a linked PALAR-LD process for facilitating participant teachers' capacity to support learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges at an under resourced school. The teacher participants who were initially overwhelmed by poverty-related learner support needs and demotivated a lack of lack of support from district officials and lack of resources at school, requested me to help them cope. In response to the request for assistance from the teachers in my capacity as an educational psychologist, we collaboratively explored avenues to help them become more motivated and feel more capable of supporting learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges at their school. Working from a participatory community

psychology paradigm, where community members are viewed as integral to the identification and identifying and addressing of challenges, we opted for a collaborative research design, where the teacher participants as knowledge holders were co-researchers. Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR), as a research methodology, aligned well with the community psychology paradigm and acknowledged the teacher participants as holders and creators of knowledge that benefits the learners.

**Research Aims and Questions**

The research aim is contextualized within the unequal resource distribution at schools in South Africa where teachers at all schools are expected to meet the goal of providing inclusive and holistic educational opportunities to learners, in spite of the inequitable resources available to teachers working in poverty contexts. The primary purpose was to explore the usefulness of a PALAR-LD process as a psychosocial learner support process for teachers working in adverse circumstances. The secondary purpose was to explore how such a process could be implemented to promote lifelong action learning (LAL) so that change is sustainable and meaningful. The community-based research project was guided by the following over-arching research question:

*How could a linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) process be contextually adapted to serve as the foundation for preparing teachers to develop a sustainable learner support process?*

Four sub-questions emerged during the PALAR-LD process, to facilitate the exploration of the over-arching question above. The four sub questions were explored in article s in four different journal articles. Article s two and three have been published in accredited journals and article s one and four are currently under review at accredited journals. In my presentation of the sub-questions I now summarise the article titles, questions, methods used and briefly mention the results for each sub question as discussed separately in the four article s:

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Article One: title</i>
<i>Currently under review:</i>	<i>Proposing A linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research-Life Design process to promote agency among teachers in under resourced schools.</i>
<i>Journal of Psychology in Africa</i>	

### Article One research question

*How could a linked PALAR-LD parallel process help teachers working in under resourced contexts support learners with poverty-related psychosocial challenges?*

The inequitable distribution of resources within South Africa leaves teachers working at schools in poverty contexts with feelings of frustration and demotivation, as they are not capacitated to support learners in their classroom who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges. In Article One, I conceptualised and suggested a linked Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)-Life Design (LD) process as one possible process that could promote personal and professional agency of teachers to start addressing poverty-related psychosocial challenges experienced by learners. In the conceptual article, I suggested that the linked PALAR-LD process will encourage creative critical thinking as a catalyst to reflexive action by teachers, for addressing psychosocial challenges on a personal and collective level, rather than presenting a ready-made intervention which may not be contextually relevant or sustainable. The awareness of their individual and collective challenges and assets, gained from exploring their life trajectories during the LD process, would encourage trusting and sustainable relationships. Relationship building is the foundation of the PALAR-LD process. Once trusting relationships have been established among participants, the shared experiences become a unifying and motivating dynamic to carry the process forward. The LD process is the catalyst to shift the demotivated teachers to develop agency to support their learners. The linked PALAR-Process, to identify and address their unique and specific psychosocial challenges, encourages the exploration of personal agency and promotes collective agency for teachers working within challenging contexts. The research process and results from the second sub-question were published in 2017.

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Article Two: title</i>
<i>South African Journal of Education, 37 (4),1-8</i>  <i>Published in 2017</i>	<i>Exploring group Life Design with teachers in the context of poverty-related psychosocial challenges.</i>

**Article Two research question:**

*How can LD be used within the PALAR process to enable teachers to achieve personal and professional efficacy?*

In Article Two I provided empirical evidence to support my conceptual argument in Article one of how group Life Design [LD], a narrative constructivist career counselling process, enabled the participant teachers to understand their career aspirations and explore their personal and professional identity. This article focused on teachers’ experience of the group LD process, which formed an integral part of the relationship-building phase of the PALAR project. Participating teachers reflected in writing and during group discussions, on their experience of the LD process through the designing of future life maps and exploration of pathways for collectively improving their support to learners. Qualitative data generated from transcriptions of their discussions and written reflections were thematically coded. Findings suggest that the group LD process encouraged participants to reflect on themes from their life narratives to encourage agency for pursuing their future personal and professional goals. By means of the LD process, the teachers acknowledged personal and professional assets, from past and present narratives which could motivate them during challenging times. The LD process ignited agency for action to achieve career and personal goals. The group LD process strengthened participant agency and collective action in advance of them embarking on the action research part of the PALAR process.

<i>Journal</i>	<i>Article Three: title</i>
<i>Educational Research for Social Change (5)2, 18-34. Published in 2016</i>	<i>Collaborated Understandings of Context-Specific Psychosocial Challenges Facing South African School Learners: A Participatory Approach</i>

**Article Three research question:**

*How could the PALAR process help teachers come to a collaborative understanding of the psychosocial challenges their learners face, as a first step in helping them access support for those learners?*

In Article Three I report on the first cycle of the participatory action learning and action research project undertaken with teacher participants to facilitate a collaborative understanding of the contextual psychosocial challenges that learners face. My role was to facilitate the process that would enhance their

collective capacity to support learners at school who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges. Following a PALAR design, they generated qualitative data through activities which included relationship building activities, individual interviews, the creation of visual artefacts, and informal group discussions. Data were analysed thematically in collaboration with the community of participants. Findings suggest that the process assisted the teachers to gain a deeper understanding of learners’ psychosocial challenges, and also encouraged a sense of group identity. The PALAR-LD process fostered participant agency to begin to address the identified challenges and to network with community stakeholders to promote wellness among themselves and among learners. The fourth article is still under review.

Journal	Article Four: title
Article Four has been submitted for review to the Educational Action Research journal	<i>A collaboratively constructed practical framework for sustainable action research to support learners in contexts of adversity.</i>

**Article Four research question:**

*How has a linked PALAR-LD process enabled teachers to develop a sustainable process for collaboratively addressing identified psychosocial challenges experienced by learners at their school?*

The fourth article focused on the sustainability of the learning of participants who experienced linked participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) Life Design (LD) process. Data were generated from transcriptions of action learning group discussions and reflections during discussions with participants. Data were thematically analysed. The findings suggest that the PALAR-LD process increased the capacity of teachers to offer support to learners which enabled the sustained addressing of contextual challenges, through the promotion of action leadership and lifelong learning among teachers. Life Design deepened the psychological understanding of the teacher participants of their own personal and professional challenges related to learners’ support and this remained a sustainable motivation throughout. The LD process first strengthened teachers’ self-efficacy and motivation levels, which enabled them to cope with their own issues and to learn from own experiences. These insights helped improve their leadership to promote sustainable support. The skills of action learning helped them to become critically reflective lifelong learners who could iteratively reflect and improve on their practice as professional teachers. Although this process was initiated by a registered psychologist, teachers took the lead with the PALAR process, once their individual and collective purpose and agency was established through the group LD process.

## **Conclusions emanating from the PALAR-LD research process**

A PALAR process encourages agency among community participants, and acknowledges the capacity of community members to explore their own context and collaboratively address identified challenges (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). A critical transformative paradigm (Mertens 2004) guided this PALAR-LD project, where teachers and the LD counsellor collaboratively implemented and evaluated the PALAR-LD process for providing support to learners. The PALAR-LD project assisted teacher participants to gain insight into their own challenges as well as those of their learners. Their understanding of their own challenges and those of learners who experience poverty-related psychosocial challenges guided their actions for the way forward. During the PALAR-LD process the participant teachers developed the skills of action learning, critical self-reflection and reframing their perceptions to address personal and professional challenges differently.

The findings in response to the sub-questions suggest that the PALAR-LD process was successful as a sustainable support process at school level with initial facilitation by an LD trained counsellor. The linked PALAR-LD process with participant teachers firstly provided support needed by the teacher participants to facilitate their capacity to support learners. The LD process encouraged critical reflection on individual and collective assets from teacher participants' personal life narratives. The themes from their composite life narratives sustained the teacher participants through the cyclic PALAR process for addressing contextual psychosocial challenges which negatively affected teaching and learning in the classroom. During the PALAR process teacher participants invited other community stakeholders to become partners in addressing the challenges they had identified.

## **Opportunities and Challenges**

Significant challenges experienced by teacher participants during the PALAR-LD process included resistance from management at school, bureaucracy at community stakeholder level, limited access to resources, participants initially feeling uncomfortable with the deeply reflective process and time management of the university facilitator to meet the restrictions placed by a PhD process. The latter reality placed a great deal of pressure on myself as professional practitioner who needed to ensure that the PALAR-LD process enhanced teacher well-being as a journey and not focus only on research results as an outcome.

The overall results suggest that the PALAR-LD process is sustainable for addressing contextual challenges. The process promoted action leadership and lifelong learning among teacher participants for their personal and professional narratives. The process was not without challenges. The teachers encountered resistance

from the temporary school manager who felt threatened when the status quo was challenged. Governmental and non-governmental bureaucratic processes posed another challenge, which could be addressed with better relationship building. By spending more time on networking within the broader community, participants would have already had networks in place to allow for better engagement with gate-keepers within the support structures to improve access to the required resources/services to support learners. Relationship building and networking needs time and planning. A rushed engagement may not be sustainable.

Another challenge to the sustainability of the project was that five of the ten teachers involved in the project left the school to explore different career and personal life dreams. Participant H, who initiated the project and took a leading role, retired during the second cycle of the PALAR-LD process. Her early retirement to pursue previously interrupted [but not lost] dreams, left a significant gap as she had been respected by the learners as well as the temporary school manager.

This willingness to mobilise and explore alternatives was not evident at the beginning. Initially, teacher participants were dependent on me as the 'expert' university academic and psychologist. This challenge provided an opportunity for me as an educational psychologist and university partner, involved in a community project at the school, to research my own practice as a community psychologist and PALAR practitioner. The participants in my study were accustomed to following instructions, as teachers working in the South African education system, where the curriculum has become highly regulated. Critical thought, taking ownership and reflection on own feelings and practice did not come easy. Fortunately the therapeutic Life Design techniques encouraged a sense of self awareness and confidence among the teacher participants. After three months of regular meetings with myself as LD counsellor taking a more directive role, the teacher participants felt ready to continue with the process independently, with myself as facilitator who just came in to assist with evaluation and reflections.

### **Reflections on my own learning**

Deeper iterative reflecting on my actions as a practitioner was challenging to me, while I was simultaneously trying to meet the time limits placed on outcomes by the tertiary institution that I represented. I always felt that I was being rushed to show results rather than focus on the actual process in the field. The diary format for reflecting on activities immediately after the event was helpful for evaluating the actual activities. The meta-reflection forced me to consider how I actioned PALAR values.

“What do I leave out and what do I include?”

This question sums up my initial dilemma about myself as PALAR practitioner. My current reflections are on two levels: The first is on the technical process which relates to the PhD proposal that is not in sync with PALAR process of including community participants before getting academic approval for the research project. The other level is the ‘human’ experience by myself and other participants of the process. I was attracted to the principles of PALAR which fit with my personal value of social justice and a professional goal to make life easier for children from challenging realities. To me, there is no doubt that a research paradigm which includes participants from the outset is the only respectful approach to research. I therefore chose PALAR for my research process. The “doing” of PALAR is complex with varying depths of one-on-one and group interaction and reflections. In my view, this is both the strength and challenge of PALAR. Everybody individual’s opinion is valid and coming to group consensus requires sharing of ideas which takes a long time, as compared to coming in with a set hypothesis as with positivist research approaches. The traditional PhD proposal and submission timelines do not encourage taking the time required for accommodating all voices. Also, the magnitude of data generated cannot be accommodated in a PhD project, so much of the data has to be archived. It was a challenge deciding what to include and what to archive, and to still acknowledge all the voices.

Getting to the point of accepting that there is no clear cut right and wrong, created significant anxiety, especially with the pressure of limited time. The expectation of writing up the process, with the massive amounts of data generated over almost thirty sessions was overwhelming as it took very long to transcribe the regular discussions and then analyse for relevant themes. “How did I acknowledge participant contribution when I had to leave out so much of the detail?” I learned through trial-and-error how to analyse thematically and to recognise that data saturation meant that participant voices were not lost. When I found that themes were repeatedly coming through, it was reassuring that the voices of participants were not lost and that I need not include every bit of data that related to a theme which had already been identified.

As a facilitator, I also began to realise how power dynamics influence the process after deep reflections on my own epistemological position during this process. As I had time constraints as a PhD candidate, I initially took a more directive approach for convenience and expedience, which contradicts the participatory and democratic values of the PALAR process. As the first cycle of the PALAR-LD process evolved, teacher participants started taking greater ownership of the process which meant that the initial timeline we had agreed on, was changed. This left me feeling anxious that the process was not being followed, and time frames as set out in my PhD proposal submission to the university. However much to my disappointment,

I realised that I had not initially appreciated the capacity of teacher participants to manage a research project. I was therefore not being true to my stated epistemological and ontological premises. Through regular transparent verbal engagement during the weekly group reflections, I learned to trust that the teacher participants possessed the relevant PALAR values, skills and knowledge to identify and address the identified psychosocial challenges.

I learned through this experience to value the benefit of using local knowledge holders to address the identified challenges in ways that are authentic to their reality. My shift at that point made me realise how my own undergraduate and postgraduate academic training and the restrictions placed by research processes at a tertiary institution of higher learning, influenced my positioning as researcher in the field. The biggest challenge with breaking from traditional controlled research was the feeling that there was not enough happening, because I was not there all the time to direct the actions and discussions. I went in to reflect with participants about what happened in between my engagements with them and how they felt about what had happened in between our meetings. Initially I felt at a loss at times when the teacher participants reflected how they were taking the project forward during my absence. This contradicted my conviction that I function from a transformative, inclusive and democratic paradigm. In accordance with these transformative values, I should not have felt left out, but rather acknowledged and celebrated the agency of the teacher participants. Ironically, it was in this discomfort that my increased own learning during the project developed. It was at these reflective feedback sessions that I became convinced of the value of PALAR, when I heard about what had transpired between the feedback sessions. I learned to trust the participants to meet the project goals they had envisioned, within their limited resource capacity and limited time available to them. My learning as a PALAR facilitator in the field was thus a humbling and transformative experience. I realised the benefits of regular reflection, not only for the community participants but more so for myself as co-researcher, to shift from the 'expert' position to a democratic, respectful and inclusive engagement. I started to internalize transformative community psychology values which strive toward sustainability and ownership when engaging with the community. I realised that the success and sustainability of the project lies with the community participants taking initiative and that I, the academic and professional, can successfully play a facilitative role as the LD counsellor and PALAR practitioner in this PALAR-LD project.

## **Contributions Made By the Study**

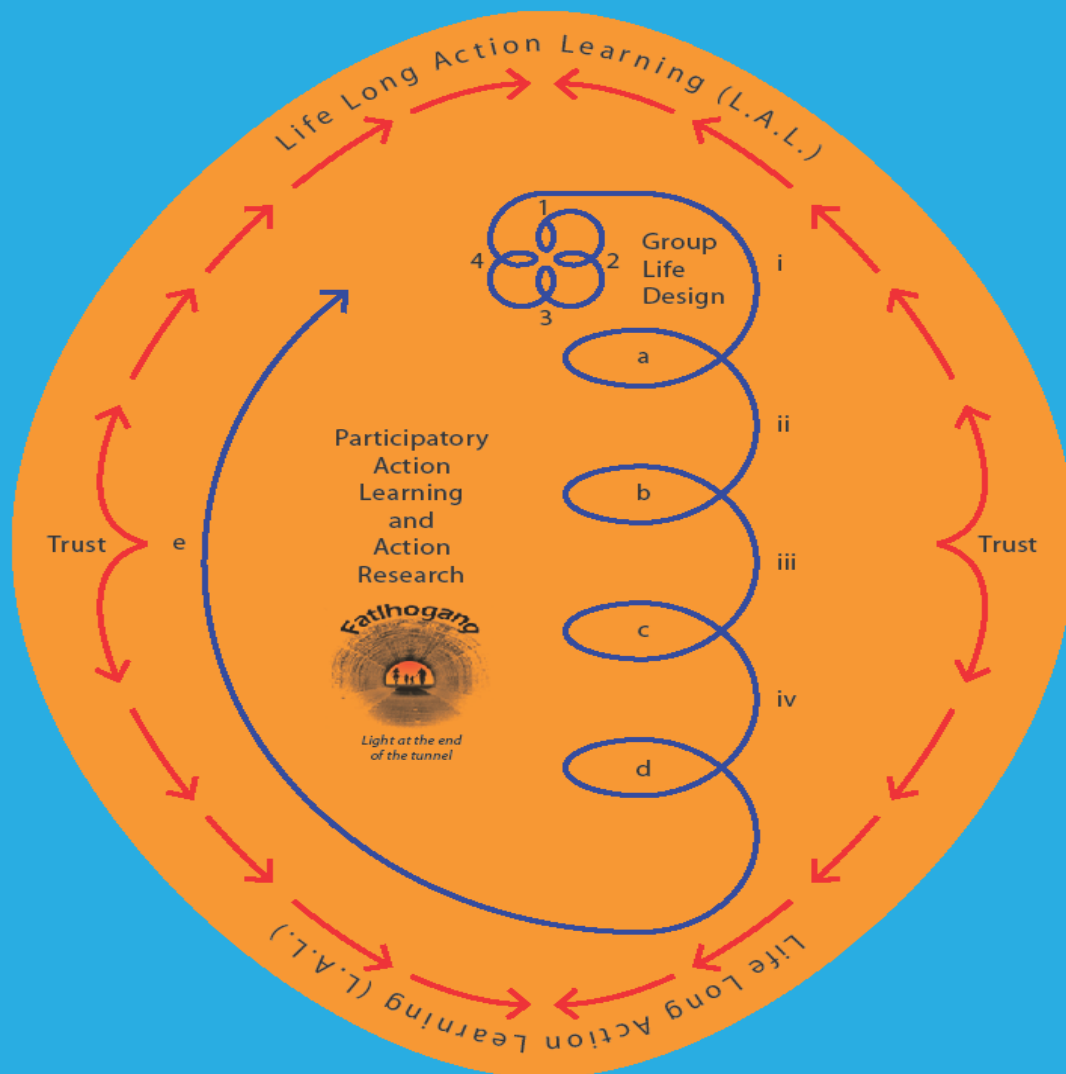
### **Theoretical**

By combining a therapeutic LD framework with PALAR research methodology I have explored the joint application of two well researched processes for addressing diverse personal and professional challenges, in a novel way. The results from the linked PALAR-LD process suggest that by using the LD as an initial process within the relationship building phase of PALAR, teacher participants' challenges were addressed collaboratively and that support to learners could be sustained, even after the LD facilitator became less involved. Results from Articles Three and Four confirm the agency of teacher participants, where the LD as a cognitive and emotional strengthening process, enabled and motivated teacher participants to successfully initiate and sustain support for learners, through the iterative PALAR process. Article Two reflects on how the relationships which were established through the LD process served as reliable resource for participants to affirm and motivate each other.

The linked PALAR LD process started with teacher participants as co-researchers developing an understanding of one another during the group LD process which was embedded into the relationship building phase of PALAR. The teacher participants had previously worked together as colleagues at the school, without having a deep understanding of each other's personal narratives. The trust that had developed between and among the participants and facilitator from the LD process in a safe environment (Di Fabio & Maree, 2012) cascaded into the PALAR cycles which followed. The trusting relationship was maintained through the project allowed participants to be vulnerable within the action research group (Park, 2006) and this safe space became a source of strength and motivation through challenging periods in both the personal and professional lives of the participants. The group LD process with a trained LD counselor served as a catalyst for the reflective PALAR cycles by encouraging individual participants to reflect on their current personal and professional reality, to assess their life narrative/journey, using their previous goals and dreams as a sounding board (Cook & Maree, 2016; Savickas, 2011). By reflecting on past experiences participants gained insight into how and why they addressed past challenges as they had, and they were able to identify the themes or golden threads (Savickas, 2011) within their context which had helped them overcome past challenges. As LD facilitator, I assisted the participants to identify strengths within their life narratives, which the participants could rely on as resources as they navigate their way forward to achieve their personal and professional goals, which were part of their goals as teachers for supporting learners at the school. When they reflected within the group context, the members/participants also became aware of each other's achieved and broken dreams. They developed a better understanding and empathy for each other's challenges, and also an appreciation for each other's successes and

achievements. This strengthened relationships (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013) and engendered trust, which is an integral part of action research (Park, 2006). The LD activities ended with participants designing individual future life maps. The life map included a future timeline with short, medium and long-term goals and participants discussed in pairs how they hoped to achieve these goals. They collaboratively explored sustainable avenues to follow when addressing challenges which may arise in future in their personal and professional lives. (Kearney, Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013; Savickas et al., 2009). The teacher participants communicated as collaborative co-researchers and exercised their personal and collective agency when they brought in themes from their life lessons for addressing challenges in the school community (Teare, 2013; Stringer, 2014). They collectively generated knowledge to plough back into the school context for further action and reflection (Herr & Anderson, 2005). This transformative process contributed to building an individual and collective sense of efficacy among the teachers, while simultaneously contributing to professional theory and practice (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011). The linked PALAR-LD process promoted knowledge creation through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) in order to address the real-life challenges facing the teacher participants and their learners (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). Just as adversity develops within a context, so reflexive responses need to be contextually and collaboratively designed by those familiar with that context (Chilisa, 2005). Therein lies the uniqueness of the PALAR process which allows participants who were excluded within traditional researcher-driven interventions to participate in empirically sound research (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). PALAR seeks to acknowledge and evolve traditional empirical research to integrate with local knowledge (Teare, 2013) to benefit the community and to simultaneously generate action, as well as empirically sound theory.

## Visual summary of PALAR-LD linked process for teachers to support learners



### Group Life Design key descriptors

- 1) Establish client goals and working alliance
- 2) Reflection on past experience and current reality for future expectations new role(s) and identity
- 3) Action plan through written summary and new identity statement with time frames
- 4) The success gaged for possible additional support and maintenance through transitional periods

### PALAR key descriptors

- a) Volunteers meet regularly to identify contextual issues
- b) Participants co-create group identity and vision with timelines for the project
- c) The Action plan encourages networking and referral to relevant systemic structures
- d) Evaluation of iterative trial-and-error process encourages learning from PALAR process and from one another
- e) Iterative process and action adapts to changing contexts over time

### Trust in relationships

- i) Trust is established and the expected goals collaboratively formulated
- ii) Roles clarified and process for way forward forms the purpose and the potential for change acknowledged
- iii) Action involves accessing contextual resources on the various systemic levels, to achieve planned goals and transformation within set time frames
- iv) Action evaluated for improving transformation and achievements of collaborative process simultaneously celebrated

**Figure 1: Visual summary of the linked PALAR-LD process**

Figure 1 above is a visual summary of the linked PALAR-LD research concept summarised above, with a clear indication of how a professional, therapeutic LD process added value to the iterative PALAR process. Collaboration and building trusting relationships between professional and client, with a community of teachers as clients in this case, is the cornerstone of both LD, as a theoretical framework in career psychology, and PALAR as a research methodology.

#### Contribution to PALAR as a research methodology

Figure 1 shows how LD extended and deepened the first phase of the community based PALAR process. The relationship building phase of the PALAR process was enhanced by the LD process. This PALAR-LD project contributes to the practice and praxis for a community psychologist, looking to collaborate with the community for identifying and addressing contextual psychosocial challenges. Article three speaks to the importance of building trusting relationships to ensure sustainability of a PALAR process. Article four confirms PALAR as an alternative research methodology which moves away from empirical research which excludes community based knowledge holders. Initially facilitated by an LD counselor, the participants collectively generated new knowledge to benefit themselves and learners at school. In a context where there is limited access to professional psychosocial services, the PALAR-LD process provides an option for community members to collaborate with a trained LD counsellor and develop agency to start identifying and addressing both personal and professional challenges. Results suggest that the linked PALAR-LD process enabled participant teachers to develop a sustainable process. Facilitated by an LD counsellor, they collectively generated new knowledge to benefit themselves and learners at the school, by following an untraditional bottom-up research process.

#### Contribution to psychological professional practice

The group LD process, as an alternative to a more expensive one-to-one therapy process, allowed the teachers working as a group, to identify their support needs and this provided a platform for establishing trusting relationships and for deeper cathartic processes. Article two reflects on how the LD process integrates the cognitive and emotional experiences from the narratives of participants to guide the way forward. The LD process included individual and group activities where participants used a combination of verbal and non-verbal forms of expressing positive and painful past experiences which could be turned into hope that future dreams will be fulfilled. The therapeutic benefits of using non-verbal therapeutic processes for improving self-esteem and efficacy have been widely published. Article Two explains how photo voice and collages were integrated with verbal narratives to acknowledge past experiences to guide the way forward. The collaborative group LD process strengthened the teachers' sense of self-efficacy, making them

more able to adapt to challenging career demands. This is a necessary first step before embarking on a PALAR process to identify and address contextual psychosocial challenges within their learners' reality. The group LD process encouraged the teachers to reflect on their personal and professional strengths within their individual narratives. Article Two highlighted how the LD process allowed the individual participants to reconnect with their lost dreams and forgotten goals, thereby promoting self-efficacy when forgotten goals and passions are re-ignited to provide motivation for addressing challenges within the current context. The collaborative and deeply reflective process promoted their capacity to encourage and motivate each other to be action leaders within the challenging context and to move beyond their own challenges and limitations as teachers working individually. The linked PALAR-LD can be successfully implemented, with an LD facilitator, in contexts where poverty and insufficient resources cause community members to feel despondent and ineffective to address related psychosocial challenges. In addition to the process adding to psychological practice, the linked PALAR-LD process adds to the existing literature on in-service teacher capacity building to provide sustainable support to learners living in contexts of poverty.

### **Way forward**

While the research project potentially adds to the existing literature on in-service teacher capacity building, the PALAR-LD process could also be introduced in pre-service teacher programmes at tertiary institutions to enhance practice and praxis. LD would add a psychological layer to strengthen the self-esteem of pre-service teachers and to encourage them as future practitioners not to lose sight of their goals and dreams. The group LD process, as an alternative to a more expensive one-to-one therapy process, would allow pre-service teachers to identify their support needs. Since the LD process integrates the cognitive and emotional experiences from the narratives of participants, the process would encourage them to express both positive and painful past experiences from their life narratives to reconnect their past with future personal and career goals to guide their way forward as emerging teachers. The values and outcomes of PALAR would encourage collaborative practice for future teachers to include colleagues at school and community participants in addressing challenges particular to their new school contexts. The PALAR-LD process could also add value to the School Based Support Teams (SBST) at schools where the SBST does not have the capacity to fulfil their mandate in accordance with the Department of Education (2008) National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), to support learners and teachers. This was the case in the research project where the SBST was not functional and not aware of how to implement the SIAS process. Fatlhogang then became a resource for referral. Further research could also be initiated for exploring the potential of the linked PALAR-LD process to capacitate teachers to address psychosocial challenges that are not related to poverty. Three possible questions for future exploration would be:

- How could the PALAR-LD process benefit district based support teams (DBST) to improve their support to school based support teams (SBST) at under resourced schools?
- How could the PALAR-LD process better prepare pre-service teachers to exercise agency when they start working in contexts where conditions are not conducive to effective teaching and learning?
- How could the PALAR-LD process be implemented with learners to enable them to make future personal and professional decisions?

*Izandla Ziyagezana*

[A South African indigenous IsiZulu proverb meaning, “One hand washes the other”]

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## **ADDENDA**

**Addendum A: PALAR LD meeting and reflection dates**

	<b>2014</b>	NAME
1.	November 2013 to October 2015	Reflections by academic researcher on PALAR project
2.	November 2013	Introduction to PALAR-LD project with all teaching staff
3.	26 Feb 2014	Creating collage from magazine pics
4.	6 March 2014	Challenges from pictures taken by participants
5.	13 March	Lifeline [individual and group LD process]
6.	9 April 2014	Drive through school surrounding community
7.	15 May	Collage [research supervisor facilitated]
8.	22 May	Vision building n photovoice two
9.	29 May	Rural challenges
10.	12 June	Genogram and interviews for LD process
11.	26 June	Staff feedback
12.	31 July	Participant interviews
13.	7 August	Future timeline feedback
14.	21 August	Stakeholders n timelines
15.	26 August	SGB parents meeting
16.	28 August	Personal vision
17.	11 September	Cycle 1 recapping and reflecting
18.	18 September	Categorising challenges
		Teacher reflecting on process
19.	30 October	Feedback on data base n Networking
20.	8 Nov 2014	Team building
21.	5 December	planning for 2015 and beyond
22.	23 December 2014	Cycle 1 recalling and reflecting

	<b>2015</b>	
23.	4 March	Fatlhogang roles and database
24.	18 March	Addressing stagnation
25.	25 March	Parents meeting

26.	23 June	SGB and teacher gathering
27.	12 Aug	Teen Fatlhogang feedback
28.	29 Aug	Teacher evaluation of PALAR-LD process
29.	1 Sept	FAMSA feedback n way forward
30.	3 Oct	Parent with Fatlhogang teen meeting

## Addendum B: Sample from the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) Process [June 2]



*Light at the end of the tunnel...*

### **PRIORITISING CHALLENGES**

**June 2014**

- 1. Learners are carrying adult responsibilities due to:**
  - Death of care givers/parents.
  - Commitments of parents
  - Parents working out of town
- 2. Teachers do not have enough personal knowledge of individual learners due to class sizes.**
- 3. Skotana culture (destroying expensive material possessions in a public display of false affluence)**
- 4. Negative attitude to value of education, where learners do not see school being of benefit for their future.**
- 5. Socio-economic environment**
  - From farming environment where early pregnancy common
  - Parents do not value education, and encourages kids to work and not go to school
  - Drinking young
  - Copy what parents did
  - Poverty
- 6. Self-centered educators**
  - They have their own personal problems
- 7. Teenage pregnancy**
  - Learners have not set goals for themselves
  - Is affecting the girl child's education
  - Lack of parental care and guidance leads to unplanned teenage pregnancy
- 8. Dirty environment discourages responsibility to create/ maintain cleanliness**
- 9. Absent fathers who are alive**
- 10. Child-headed families**
  - HIV
  - Orphans
  - A child needs a father figure



**PRIORITISING CHALLENGES: TEACHERS**

9 August 2014

**a) Learners are carrying adult responsibilities due to:**

- **Child-headed families**
  - i. Death of care givers/parents: HIV Orphans
  - ii. A child needs a father figure
  - iii. Commitments of parents
  - iv. Parents working out of town

**b) Teenage pregnancy**

- Learners have not set goals for themselves
- Is affecting the girl child's education
- Lack of parental care and guidance leads to unplanned teenage pregnancy
- Girls don't know the difference between love and sexual use
  - "selling" themselves to taxi drivers
  - "sugar daddy" much older taxi drivers

**c) Substance abuse**

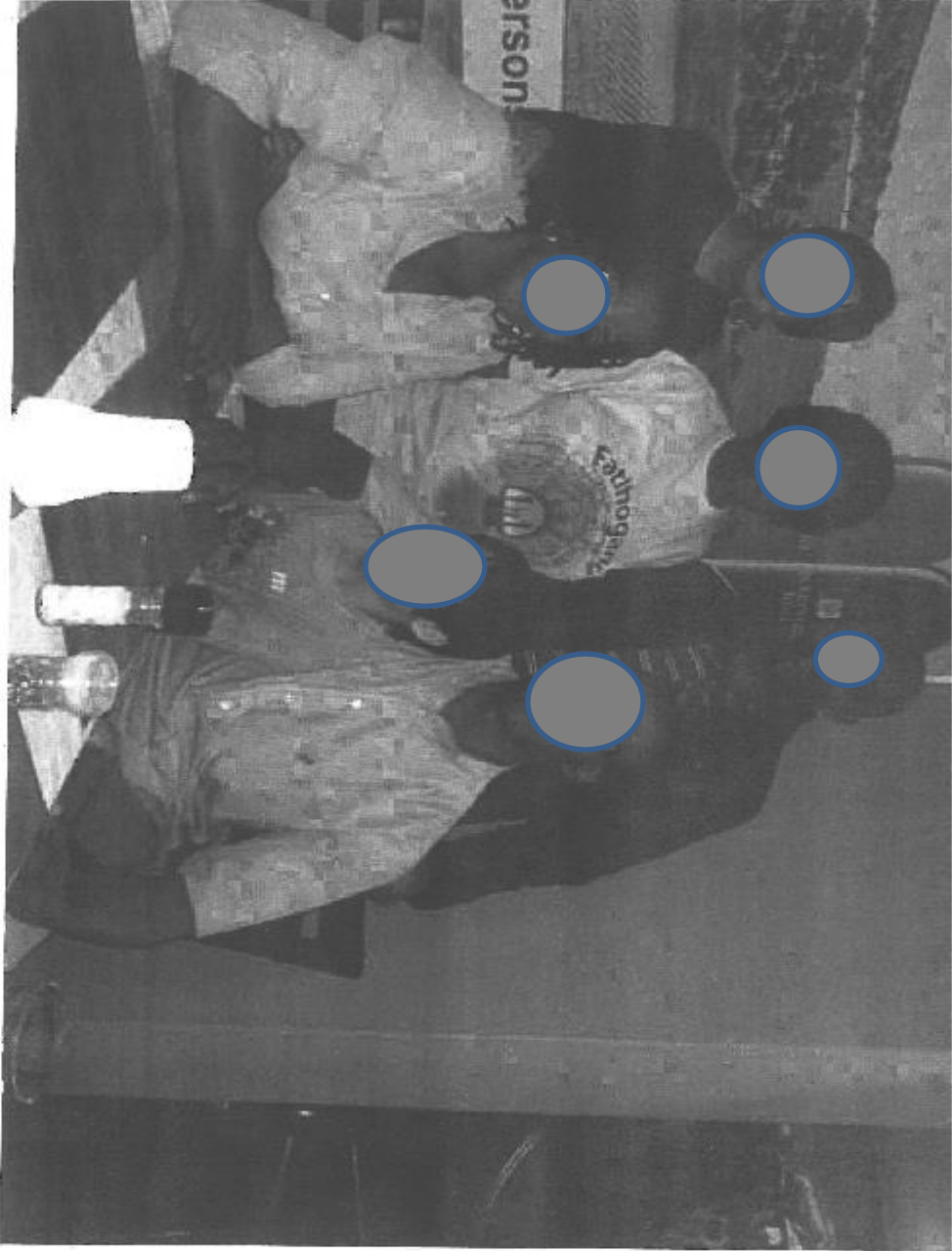
- *Cigarettes*: peer pressure, addiction, forcing young learners to pay for the cigarettes, leaving class to smoke, stealing from home
- *Drugs*: Learners who want attention or don't receive attention at home
- *Illegal drugs that have been legalized*: alcohol



Nominal group technique

**Visuals from PALAR-LD Project**

**Addendum C: Teachers who initiated PALAR process with LD Facilitator**



**Addendum D:** Collage of challenges experienced by learners according to teacher participants:

Created from magazine pictures

A CHILD NEED TO FEEL FREE AND BE LOVED

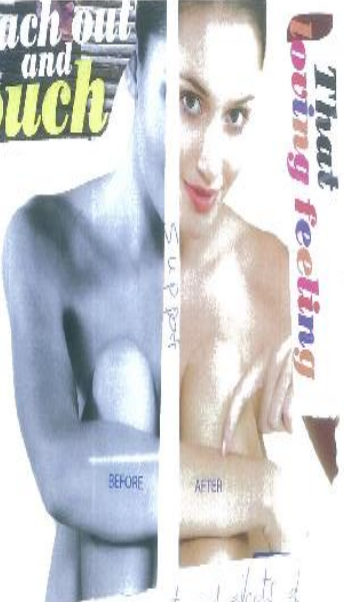
LACK OF PARENTAL CARE AND GUIDANCE LEADS TO UNPLANNED TEENAGE PREGNANCY

LEARNERS NEEDS SUPPORT TO BE ENCOURAGED TO TAKE PART IN SPORT ACTIVITIES

A CHILD NEED A FATHER FIGURE

NEVER HIDE

Reach out and touch



help self esteem

Support

That feeling

Product as preparation Before, support and advice of getting support

high school self-esteem



A healthy body resides in a healthy mind



big Yello Sale

Se vaarvel vir jou ou foon Cause egg in discipline in the classes



Prices: 249, 449, 599, 849. MTN logo and 'everywhere you go' slogan.



Too much information

Directly Divines that phrase seems to be...



Sauvignon, it's dry. But you can drink it.

Not for Sale to Persons Under the Age of 18.






The self-help Education leads to The unexpected loss



Wenthouse, D. ... Culture/Madison ... I'm delighted you're esp. kids ...

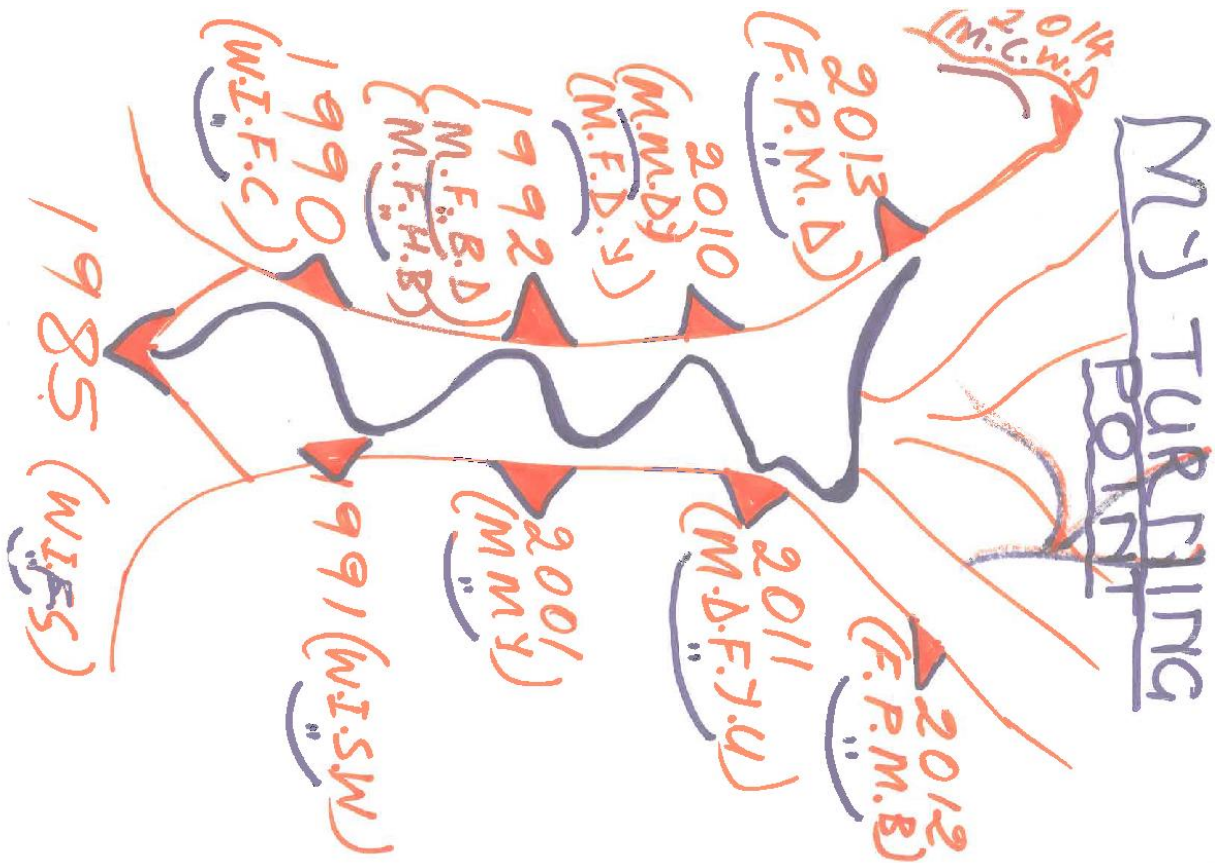
**Addendum E: Sample of photovoice with explanations.**

Pictures taken by teacher participants from the actual environment where learners live.

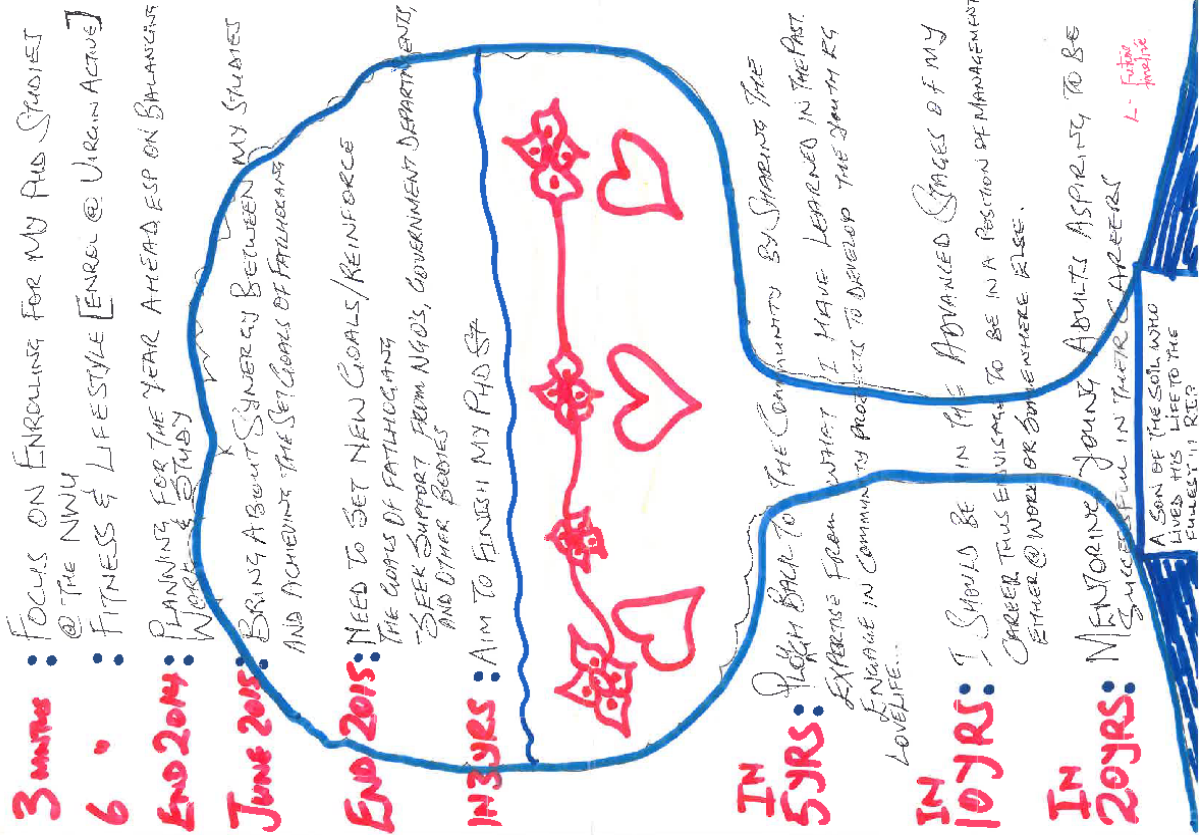
	<p><b>A</b> Unfriendly environment for learners because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• No space for them to identify themselves with their families</li><li>• No definite boundaries</li><li>• The environment doesn't encourage learners to study</li><li>• It exposes learners to health situation</li><li>• Self-esteem will not be enhanced because of background</li></ul>
	<p><b>B</b></p>
	<p><b>C</b> Exposed to dangerous environment- it is not good for our learners. Girls are sometimes raped here on the way to school because the school is far from home and the place is very lonely.</p>



TURNING POINTS IN LIFE NARRATIVE OF PARTICIPANT A



FUTURE TIMELINE OF PARTICIPANT L



Written reflections on LD activities by teacher participants

B.

Done



Participatory Action Learning and Action Research

Personal Reflection

DATE 26/01/14

PARTICIPANT B

REFLECTING ON

balloon

ACTIVITY

**THIS ACTIVITY MADE ME FEEL**

Made me feel a bit sad cause my balloon did not last some as my dream did not took of the ground cause of listening and respecting my parents view but I am the one suffering at present and feel that I am not where I am supposed to be.

**I CAN USE THIS ACTIVITY IN THE FUTURE WHEN**

I can use it during camping days to motivate kids and reflect on that that it's not what what they are dreaming of can be achieved or can change because of life different situation and circumstances.

**WHAT I DID NOT APPRECIATE ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY IS**

It showed me that even if I did not achieve my basic dreams other can impose themselves and they can make one happy or miserable.

**I WOULD ALSO LIKE TO SAY THAT**

This activity made me think back in my life and see how much I went with my dreams.

RUBINA SETLHARE-MELTOR  
NORTH WEST UNIVERSITY  
COMBER

## Transcripts

### Sample of transcripts of discussion on links between past and present life narratives among teacher participants

Date: 23 December 2014

Activity: Cycle one recalling and reflecting

Time: 00:29:23

R	.... And what is it that they are busy with?
P1	The support group? they wanted to help cleaning the school, now they were calling us to come and discuss that with us first before they start helping they asked us to go the those men that are cleaning to help them. To ask them to help them do another park, another week and then another week another part.
R	
P1	Yes I have also realised that the parents are willing to work with us
R	
p1	Yes its part of those 28 but that one is part that the rats decided to...
R	
p1	yes and you are right it will be a good thing if we can ask Mr XXX if there are people who are willing to give eh, willing to help then they come.
R	Greetings and reflection
P1	About all the process
R	
p1	Mam, from this process the most thing that i have experienced, i have realised that life doesn't just take it light. Where a person hasn't done anything and for you to reach a life, or to reach goal that you want you really need to fight for it. You know why i say so. I start thinking about this that i started doing. I realised how far do i come from. Really when i left school in 1972, I didn't think that one day i would be at this stage that i am now. I fought hard to find myself here, so i feel i am pleased because of that and I have realised that even the kids who are still learning. Even the kids who are suffering, who don't have parent and all those difficulties, they can reach a better life, a better destiny. They can do that by themselves, and by this balloon where is that baloon. With this balloon, I have realised that errrr what can i say. this made me to think that when you're still growing you find life easy for you because there aren't many things that you do, but whereby you have p[arents you have advisors you have security you have everything so you think things are easier. When time goes by you find that life has its own challenges, because i realised that when we, when we were throwing the balloons to each other, starting to go

## Sample of transcripts of discussions about FATLHOGANG challenges

R	Rubina has asked that we come together as SGB so that she can also play her part efficiently for this program to be a success. What I have noticed though, is that there is a gap between staff, management and SGB. We cannot work together with such great separation. At first I thought if our SGB works together and we all collectively meet this will work, but there is a problem because we cannot meet and have time to meet. We have issues and things are not going so well. We need to come together with one mentality that we are here to help nothing else. And it is not that when we are teachers we know better, somehow, we believe we are disciplining kids but we can't because this begins from the issues that are unresolved as school management. It is impossible to speak to a child that is abused, angry or hungry. They will not understand what we are trying to do.
R	
P1	Yes, from the parent's side it is a very good thing. We will then try our best to call together parents to give them feedback of the gathering that we have. I am asking this question because, last week I was here at the school to come inform the learners about Rubina and the program, but nobody wanted to know what I was talking about and I left with not success.
R	
P3	May I please answer to that? In life, we find people that do not want to do the work even when they want to help. If we sit down with people and tell them about our plans, they agree and they also come to us with questions regarding what we plan to do without their input at all. So what I noticed is that, it is not like they do not want to be involved, but in life there are people who are not active they are so not active that when they see that these duties will be too much for them. They will want to see this work first then they come when it is working successfully only after the evident that this program is successfully working and children are being help.
R	
P9	The way I understand the gentlemen it that, he came last week to the school but struggled to get someone from Fatlhogang and are distancing themselves from the Fatlhoko people. I think he came during school hours where we were in classes and ultimately even I also didn't know that he is here because Rubina continuously asked if you came to the school. Therefore, there is a communication break out amongst us here at school so that there will be proper communication.
R	
P1	Yes because, I told the person if I can meet up with the teacher so that we can communicate about this project, but no one attended to me. I asked if there is a teacher that knows about the project they should come then and inform me. I even left because there was no one to attend to me. I left here not having received assistance.
R	
P3	And Friday I did not leave the school.
R	
P8	May I please say something? Sir, the problem is that some of the things that happen here at school and you are dedicated with them, it becomes as though we are taking peoples jobs. I want to talk about our head, he is not flexible enough. Sometimes, when you start something as if you are underpinning his position, and we do not want that. To add on, our principal struggles delegating things to us and wants to take up a lot without any assistance and then it becomes a burden on him. At the end when he hears that you started something it becomes a problem and offends him. Which leads us scared to initiate things. Let's talk about Rubina, she is here due to the principal and when we want to help Rubina the principal then becomes reluctant. Which is difficult on us to push and support a project with a reluctant leader. The truth is that, our management also struggles to work their things accordingly, because if they play by the book, the principal will come and change

R	things which will make the project dissolve and they don't complete what they started. So our principal also delays us when we want to initiate something that will help our school, and we can't be effective in the school. So Rubina's intervention will help us to show people how to be fair and that we are not here to take somebody's job, or to criticize, but we just want to build and nothing else.
R	
P1	Delay,
R	
P9	Can I bring in another thing, I don't understand what you are saying that it is not always that everybody would agree to what we are doing, but as a school we need to be a team. For the past two years, I have been proposing that our school needs to go for team building, at least it will bring some strengths together so that we would agree together. The last time when I was here it was only a communication breakdown, and somebody was not willing to go further, but if it was a member of the team they would have known that these people are involved in Fatlhogang and they would check the timetable and call one of them. So because we are not team players and if this is our school project it stays our baby.
R	
P10	Actually that I want to bring here is that as a society being a family and whatever, we always forget about this thing 'Control measures'. It is very very important that we need to be control measures, because all the problems that we are encountering as families, parents and whatever we do not have that and we need to have that in place. Like preventive control measures, those damage control measures and directive one, because if a parent having kids then I will know the kids can do other things that other learners do. Even if you are in a good family setup, what we need to do it bring your kids and advise them and make them know what the consequences are. Talking of the SGB, because of some of the problems that we are facing here at school as parents is that we are failing those learners. We need to have the control back and the code of conduct and the disciplinary communities and the structures.
R	
P10	The SGB must take note of that, so that some parents can be involved in their children's lives regardless of them being single parents and spend only limited hours with their children. The mother of the child may also have problems which plays as a factor that affects the children, because you are thinking that you are supporting the child but are also becoming a problem to the child.
R	
P	I was asking a question, I hear that you asked us to come and help. I am willing to help, I do not have any qualification but have a parental qualification. I am always worried about the increasing number of teenage pregnancies in this school. It is stressing us, the child may not be my own but they are from my school and I am willing to work together in this project.
R	
P1	Yes it is good, but I have one problem. As I said this project is very good, but if we do not have support from the management side then we must forget, because even in this meeting, if I never come today and insisted that this meeting must carry on we wouldn't be gathered here today.
R	
P1	Sorry to cut you short, but I think the teachers including myself, I will ask the principal, even the SMT to have a meeting so that we can talk about this together.
R	
P1	Just to talk about this and Fatlhogang, but what we are going to do is that as teachers, SMT and the principal will have a meeting to discuss about this think and how important it is for our children. So from our side there is no problem because we will be calling in the parents

A sample of reflections by teacher participants of how LD influenced their personal and professional lives

Date: 28 August 2014

Activity: [REDACTED]

Time:

R	
P1	You know this thing of a genogram, I think there is something that I did not do..
R	
P1	I do not get <del>err</del> competent that that's it
R	Okay,
P1	You know that's, you know that time we were at home and quickly I wanted to ask my mum about there, because basically at home neh, In a family, there are these families who write their surname, Khumalo with the H, and the one with the U without the H, and it has been a problem between us. Even us, amongst us there is this other one his surname is having an H in it
R	Is yours not?
P1	No, my first ID it was H, only to find out in my birth certificate it was without the H and the others their birth certificate has got a H in them, and it prompted me to ask my mum. Actually, why is this? And then now why I need to ask, I'm Xhosa or I'm Zulu?
R	
P1	I didn't get answers just that...
R	
P1	She'd get angry, I also even got angry. I mean...
R	
P1	I mean they cannot leave such very important thing.
R	
P1	Huh?
R	
P1	The what?
R	
P2	Culture.
R	
P1	No we grow in a family of Christian, other things we didn't bother that much. Well I still feel that the manner in which we grew up there are still...but there are these little things.
R	
P1	At home, we are just speaking but we are not yet, most of the time we are speaking Tswana. Yah, and this thing it's started like, why we sort of speaking Siswana then now I know the story behind that, because of here there are no schools like Zulu schools, most specifically Zulu schools, that's how I grew up that's how I knew it. Its like and then now, therefore now you cannot sort of speaking your Zulu, then now your Tswana then now doesn't become good. You see we have to balance because of that especially in Vanerular you don't do good..But the issue is, it kills me, if I have to write Zulu and then now im not

*Identity*

①

Addendum G: Sample of reflections by PALAR-LD facilitator

Rubina Reflections

Initial reflection	Later reflection
<p>11/11/2013 - Monday</p> <p>When I thought of the research potential and possibility of helping teachers address the psychosocial challenges that they and their learners experience, I was so convinced that it was a good idea. The initial process of writing the proposal for doing this research has really done nothing to excite and motivate me in this regard however. The process requires one to conform and fit in with the research process that is academically and empirically acceptable. I am convinced of the benefit that this research process potentially has for the school and for me as a practitioner. But I am no longer sure that I will be a researcher on a long-term basis. It is not in my nature to conform to the experts and authorities in any sphere of life. I have never before just accepted the expert opinions, whether political, religious or personal, unless they make sense to me. This has taken me on unusual and interesting life journeys, but these journeys have often been very demanding and lonely. Similarly the PALAR process is so different from the research that I read about, even the more post-positivist, methodology events like Lincoln &amp; Guba, Donna Mertens etc still expect conformity to the existing research authorities. I definitely want to do the PALAR research and I am so grateful to have a PALAR practitioner/researcher as my promoter, but do I have the strength to convince the experts that this alternative way is empirically valid? I foresee so many questions and challenges when interacting with the experienced researchers. I just want to do my thing and not need to keep justifying it along the way to people who just would not want to understand anyway. I know I am an action person. Sitting and writing and pondering endlessly about the 'why and why not' gets in the way of actually doing, in my opinion. I have been aware of Jean McNiff's writings since before my masters in 2009. The expansion on that with Zuber Skerritt's work this year makes me wonder how people can still continue to do 'human' research 'the old way' where they are disconnected from who the research is actually about. Yet those people are the successful and acclaimed researchers, who I have to convince here. I then wonder if my own road is not once again going to be the road less taken.</p>	<p>10/7/2015</p> <p>I wonder more now about the process of planning and empirical research with regard to the proposal for a PALAR project, because the unpredictable role out of events have lead to me losing track of the focus of the project as proposed. It is not easy to reconcile the reality of PALAR on the ground which is not controlled with research</p>

## **ETHICS**

## Addendum H: Ethical clearance from North-west University



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY  
YUNIBESITHI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA  
NGORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom  
South Africa 2520

Tel: (018) 299-4900  
Faks: (018) 299-4910  
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

### Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee

Tel +27 18 299 4849  
Email [Ethics@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics@nwu.ac.za)

### ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE OF PROJECT

Based on approval by Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education Sciences, the North-West University Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-IRERC) hereby approves your project as indicated below. This implies that the NWU-IRERC grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the project may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

<b>Project title: ACTION RESEARCH FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BY TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: BEYOND SERVICE LEARNING</b>																															
<b>Project Leader:</b>	Prof L Wood																														
<b>Student/Research Team:</b>	Prof P du Toit; Me A Seobi; R Setlhare-Meltor; R Waddington; C Langenhoeven; L Mphahlele																														
<b>Ethics number:</b>	<table border="1"><tr><td>N</td><td>W</td><td>U</td><td>-</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>0</td><td>4</td><td>0</td><td>-</td><td>1</td><td>4</td><td>-</td><td>A</td><td>2</td></tr><tr><td colspan="3">Institution</td><td colspan="6">Project Number</td><td colspan="2">Year</td><td colspan="4">Status</td></tr></table> <small>Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation</small>	N	W	U	-	0	0	0	4	0	-	1	4	-	A	2	Institution			Project Number						Year		Status			
N	W	U	-	0	0	0	4	0	-	1	4	-	A	2																	
Institution			Project Number						Year		Status																				
<b>Approval date:</b> 2013-03-07	<b>Expiry date:</b> 2018-03-08	<b>Category:</b> <span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;">N/A</span>																													

Special conditions of the approval (if any): None

<p><b>General conditions:</b></p> <p>While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The project leader (principle investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-IRERC:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- annually (or as otherwise requested) on the progress of the project,</li><li>- without any delay in case of any adverse event (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the project.</li></ul></li><li>• The approval applies strictly to the protocol as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the protocol be deemed necessary during the course of the project, the project leader must apply for approval of these changes at the NWU-IRERC. Would there be deviations from the project protocol without the necessary approval of such changes, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.</li><li>• The date of approval indicates the first date that the project may be started. Would the project have to continue after the expiry date, a new application must be made to the NWU-IRERC and new approval received before or on the expiry date.</li><li>• In the interest of ethical responsibility the NWU-IRERC retains the right to:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the project;</li><li>- withdraw or postpone approval if:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- any unethical principles or practices of the project are revealed or suspected,</li><li>- it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the NWU-IRERC or that information has been false or misrepresented,</li><li>- the required annual report and reporting of adverse events was not done timely and accurately,</li><li>- new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.</li></ul></li></ul></li></ul>
---

The IRERC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your project. Please do not hesitate to contact the IRERC for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely

**Linda du Plessis**  
Digitally signed by Linda du Plessis  
DN: cn=Linda du Plessis, o=NWU,  
ou=Vaal Triangle Campus,  
email=linda.duplessis@nwu.ac.za,  
c=ZA  
Date: 2015.07.15 18:04:23 +0200

**Prof Linda du Plessis**  
Chair NWU Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (IRERC)

## Addendum I: Sample of teacher participants consent forms



Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom  
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222  
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Dear Teacher

My name is Rubina Sethare-Meltor and I appreciate your collaboration with the research project until now, through the North West University- Potchefstroom campus. I am seeking your consent to continue to participate in the project. Only teachers who agree will participate collaboratively as a group in this research project. I ask that you discuss participation in this study with your colleagues and headmaster, based on our previous meeting at the school. The study will entail collaboration on constructive ways to provide support for psychosocial challenges experienced at your school. All information obtained during this research process will be treated in strictest confidence. The teachers' names will not be used and individual teachers will not be identifiable in any written reports about the study. A summary report of the findings will be made available to you as the stakeholders. The research process will require regular meetings as decided on by the participants. Participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty. If a teacher requires support as a result of their participation in the survey, I will take appropriate steps to accommodate this. Please discuss participation in this project with your relevant family members as well, as we will meet regularly during this research process. To give your permission, please complete the form below, which I will collect from you. I am a PhD level researcher at the North West University under the supervision of Professor Lesley Wood and Prof Lukas Meyer.

If you agree to what I have explained, please place an "X" in the 'yes' boxes to show that you understand and agree with each statement. There are 6 statements. Then write your name, sign and date the form please:

1. I understand the information about the study as explained in our meeting with Rubina and as stated in the above communication.	Yes, I understand <input type="checkbox"/>
2. I realize that participation is completely voluntary and that I can stop the study at any time. If I feel uncomfortable answering any question, I can discuss this with Rubina and I may choose not to answer.	Yes, I understand <input type="checkbox"/>

## Addendum J: Permission to conduct research



### education

Lefapha la Thuto la Bokone Bophirima  
Noord-Wes Departement van Onderwys  
North West Department of Education  
NORTH WEST PROVINCE

Temane Building  
8 O.R. Tambo Street, Potchefstroom  
Private Bag X1256,  
Potchefstroom 2520  
Tel.: (018) 299-8216  
Fax: (018) 294-8234  
Enquiries: Mr H. Motara  
e-mail: hmotara@nwpg.gov.za

---

### DR KENNETH KAUNDA DISTRICT

### SENIOR PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT MANAGER

---

06 December 2013

Ms R Setlhare- [REDACTED]  
Lecturer  
Ethics Number: NUW-000 22-13-S2  
North West University – Potchefstroom Campus

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH ON “ACTION RESEARCH FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT BY TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: BEYOND SERVICE LEARNING” AT [REDACTED] SECONDARY SCHOOL IN TLOKWE AREA OFFICE - DR KENNETH KAUNDA DISTRICT**

The above matter refers.

Permission is hereby granted to you to conduct your research at [REDACTED] Secondary School at Tlokwe Area Office - Dr Kenneth Kaunda District under the following provisions:

- **the activity you undertake at the school should not tamper with the normal process of learning and teaching;**
- **you inform the principal of your identified school of your impending visit and activity;**
- **you provide my office with a report in respect of your findings from the research; and**
- **you obtain prior permission from this office before availing your findings for public or media consumption.**

Wishing you well in your endeavour.

Thanking you

[REDACTED]  
**DISTRICT DIRECTOR  
DR KENNETH KAUNDA DISTRICT**

cc Ms S S Yssel – Area Manager: Tlokwe

## Addendum K

### Author Guidelines: *Journal of Psychology in Africa*

#### Articles

Articles should be submitted in English. The articles should be typewritten and double-spaced, with wide margins, using one side of the page only. Articles should conform to the publication guidelines of the latest edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual of instructions for authors.

#### Submission

Articles should be submitted to the Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, Elias Mpofu, PhD., DEd, CRC, Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Sydney, Cumberland Campus, East Street, PO Box 170 Lidcombe NSW 1825, Australia, email: [elias.mpofu@sydney.edu.au](mailto:elias.mpofu@sydney.edu.au). We encourage authors to submit articles via e-mail, in MS Word, but we also require two hard copies of any e-mail submission. Before submitting an article, authors should peruse and consult a recent issue of the *Journal of Psychology in Africa* for general layout and style. Articles should conform to the publication guidelines of the latest edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual of instructions for authors.

#### Article format

All pages must be numbered consecutively, including those containing the references, tables and figures. The typescript of an article should be arranged as follows:

- Title: this should be brief, sufficiently informative for retrieval by automatic searching techniques and should contain important key-words (preferably <13 words).
- Author(s) and Address(es) of author(s): The corresponding author must be indicated. The author's respective addresses where the work was done must be indicated. An e-mail address, telephone number and fax number for the corresponding author must be provided.
- Abstract: Articles and abstracts must be in English. Submission of abstracts translated to French, Portuguese and/ or Spanish is encouraged. For data-based contributions, the abstract should be structured as follows: *Objective* - the primary purpose of the paper, *Method* - data source, participants, design, measures, data analysis, *Results* - key findings, implications, future directions and *Conclusions* - in relation to the research questions and theory development. For all other contributions (except editorials, book reviews, special announcements) the abstract must be a concise statement of the content of the paper. Abstracts must not exceed 150 words. The statement of the abstract should summarise the information presented in the paper but should not include references.
- Text:
  - (1) Do not align text using spaces or tabs in references. Use one of the following:
    - (a) use CTRL-T in Word 2007 to generate a hanging indent; or (b) MS Word allows author to define a style (e.g., reference) that will create the correct formatting.
    - (2) Per APA guide-lines, only one space should follow any punctuation.
    - (3) Do not insert spaces at the beginning or end of paragraphs.
    - (4) Do not use colour in text.
- Tables: Tables should be either included at the end of the article or as a separate file. Indicate the correct placement by indicating the insertion point in brackets, e.g., <Inset Table 1 approximately here>. Tables should be provided as either tab-delimited text or as a MS Word table (One item/cell). Font for tables should be Helvetica to maintain consistency.
- Figures/Graphs/Photos: Figures, graphs and photos should be provided in graphic format (either JPG or TIF) with a separate file for each figure, graph or photo. indicate the correct placement by indicating the insertion point in brackets e.g., <Inset Figure 1 approximately here>. Provide the title for the item and any notes that should appear at bottom of item in the article text. Items should be cropped to avoid the appearance of superfluous white space around items. Text on figures and graphs should be Helvetica to maintain consistency. Figures must not repeat data presented in the text or tables. Figures should be planned to appear to a maximum final width of either 80 or 175mm. (3.5 or 7.0''). Complicated symbols or patterns must be avoided. Graphs and histograms should preferably be two-dimensional and scale marks

provided. All lines should be black but not too heavy or thick (including boxes). Colour only in photos or colour sensitive graphic illustrations. Extra charges will be levied for colour printing.

**Referencing style should follow latest edition of the APA manual of instructions for authors.**



**A collaboratively constructed action leadership framework  
for sustainable learner support in contexts of adversity**

Journal:	<i>Educational Action Research</i>
Manuscript ID	REAC-2018-0082
Manuscript Type:	Accounts of Action research and development Studies
Keywords:	Agency, Action leaders, Life Design, Participatory Action Learning and Action Research, Psychosocial challenges

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Manuscripts

URL: <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/reac> Email: [ear@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:ear@nottingham.ac.uk)

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Please follow any specific Instructions for Authors provided by the Editor of the journal, which are available on the journal pages at [www.tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com). Please also see our guidance on [putting your article together](#), [defining authorship](#) and [anonymizing your article for](#) peer review.

We recommend that you use our [templates](#) to prepare your article, but if you prefer not to use templates this guide will help you prepare your article for review.

If your article is accepted for publication, the manuscript will be copyedited and typeset in the correct style for the journal.

**Font:** Times New Roman, 12 point, double-line spaced. Use margins of at least 2.5 cm (or 1 inch). Guidance on how to insert special characters, accents and diacritics is available [here](#).

**Title:** Use bold for your article title, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.

**Abstract:** Indicate the abstract paragraph with a heading or by reducing the font size. Check whether the journal requires a structured abstract or graphical abstract by reading the Instructions for Authors. The Instructions for Authors may also give word limits for your abstract. Advice on writing abstracts is available [here](#).

**Keywords:** Please provide keywords to help readers find your article. If the Instructions for Authors do not give a number of keywords to provide, please give five or six. Advice on selecting suitable keywords is available [here](#).

**Headings:** Please indicate the level of the section headings in your article:

- First-level headings (e.g. Introduction, Conclusion) should be in bold, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.
- Second-level headings should be in bold italics, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.
- Third-level headings should be in italics, with an initial capital letter for any proper nouns.
- Fourth-level headings should be in bold italics, at the beginning of a paragraph. The text follows immediately after a full stop (full point) or other punctuation mark.
- Fifth-level headings should be in italics, at the beginning of a paragraph. The text follows immediately after a full stop (full point) or other punctuation mark.

**Tables and figures:** Indicate in the text where the tables and figures should appear, for example by inserting [Table 1 near here]. The actual tables should be supplied either at the end of the text or in a separate file. The actual figures should be supplied as separate files. The journal Editor's preference will be detailed in the Instructions for Authors or in the guidance on the submission system. Ensure you have permission to use any tables or figures you are reproducing from another source.

Addendum L: Certificate of editing

**Certificate of Editing**

Mariëtte Postma  
141 Palm Street  
Doringkloof  
Centurion  
0157  
mariette@postma.co.za  
012-6673938  
0845062989

20 April 2018

I, Dr Mariette Postma (5804180059081),  
hereby certify that I have language edited the dissertation,

**Equipping teachers to support learners with  
psychosocial challenges: The potential of a linked  
PALAR-Life Design process**

by Rubina Setlhare-Meltor, student number 16328280.

**Account details**

Dr M Postma  
Absa Lyttelton  
Branch code: 632005  
Account number: 4079467217

**Certification**

Fully accredited member of the  
South African Translator's  
Institute (SATI)  
Membership Number: 1000114

Editing complies with the standards set by SATI.

## Addendum M: Turnitin report

21813965:rubina\_Ph\_d\_draft\_20\_April\_2018.pdf

### ORIGINALITY REPORT

<b>17</b> %	<b>16</b> %	<b>9</b> %	<b>8</b> %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

### PRIMARY SOURCES

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<b>4</b>	<b>link.springer.com</b> Internet Source	<b>1</b> %
<b>5</b>	<b>uir.unisa.ac.za</b> Internet Source	<b>&lt;1</b> %
<b>6</b>	<b>Submitted to North West University</b> Student Paper	<b>&lt;1</b> %
<b>7</b>	<b>scholar.sun.ac.za</b> Internet Source	<b>&lt;1</b> %
<b>8</b>	<b>ersc.nmmu.ac.za</b> Internet Source	<b>&lt;1</b> %
<b>9</b>	<b>Wood, Lesley. "Community development in higher education: how do academics ensure</b>	<b>&lt;1</b> %