

**Postgraduate students' reflections on the  
promotion of relational well-being in South  
African school communities**

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I dedicate this study to my grandmother,

**Anna Lamont,**

for contributing greatly to my own relational well-being,

and for not needing a degree to promote the well-being of individuals and communities in

such a significant way.

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**DECLARATION BY RESEARCHER**

I hereby declare that this research manuscript, **Postgraduate Students' Reflections on the Promotion of Relational Well-being in South**, is my own effort. I furthermore declare that all the sources used in this report have been referenced and acknowledged.

I also declare that this dissertation was edited and proofread by a qualified language editor as prescribed.

Finally, I declare that this research was submitted to *Turn-it-in* and a satisfactory report was received, indicating that no plagiarism was committed.

---

Petronella Wagner

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## **PREFACE**

Part 1 and 3 of this report is written according to the specifications of the American Psychological Association (APA 6). Part 2 entails an article intended for submission to the Journal of Psychology in Africa, since the topic correlates with the journal's scope of research. Part 2 is thus written according to the guidelines of this journal (see page 15 for further details). However, page numbering in Part 2 is consistent with the report as a whole and will be adapted before submission. Furthermore, the figures included in the body of the article will be submitted separately, as per the Journal's guidelines.

## SUMMARY

Relationships, according to national and international research, play a crucial role in the promotion of holistic well-being in school communities. However, the central role of relationships in school communities is not fully appreciated in the South African context. Concurrently, a gap in research on the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities exists. The importance of addressing this shortcoming is especially evident when viewing recent research literature and media reports on dysfunctional behaviour in school communities, such as violence, bullying, child abuse, inappropriate sexual behaviour, and alcohol and substance abuse. These dysfunctional behaviours indicate the extent to which relational well-being is currently compromised in South African school communities. This study intends to address the abovementioned gap in knowledge regarding the promotion of relational well-being in school communities. The aim was obtained by involving a group of postgraduate students, enrolled for a Master's or Doctoral programme with a focus on relational well-being, and who work in school environments in various capacities and contexts.

The research was informed by a combination of theoretical lenses that offer a holistic, multi-dimensional, strength-based approach to the understanding of relational well-being, and acknowledge the complexity of relationships. A qualitative phenomenological research design was applied using the World Café method, to facilitate a space within which these students could reflect on the promotion of relational well-being in school communities. A total of 29 participants, selected by means of purposive and convenience sampling, were involved in a World Café event, and twenty of these participants completed an open-ended questionnaire, developed with the aim of crystallising the data obtained from the World Café. Thematic analysis of the data was conducted and four main themes were identified:

Firstly, the participants reflected on the complex, integrated nature of the process of promoting relational well-being, from an eco-systemic perspective. Based on this understanding, they viewed members of the school community as inseparably integrated and bi-directionally influencing one another, as also indicated by complex dynamic interactive systems theorists. They also mentioned that certain environmental influences could impair relational well-being. Secondly, they reflected on the promotion of relational well-being as a collaborative and inclusive process that involves all the members of the school community and requires all of them to take responsibility. The teachers' and school managements' role as leaders in facilitating the process was specifically highlighted, although the parents/caretakers were also seen as bearing a responsibility in this regard. Therefore, home-school collaboration was emphasised. Thirdly, they reflected on the challenges relating to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities. These challenges encompassed the need to equip and support teachers and parents to be able to promote relational well-being, addressing the imbalanced focus on academics and achievement in schools at the expense of relationships, and the need to promote relational well-being more proactively by addressing the way in which limited time and large class sizes jeopardise relational well-being. Lastly, perceived key elements of interrelatedness for the promotion of relational well-being in school communities were highlighted. These key elements include respectful engagements, acceptance of one another, positive communication based on trust, a sense of belonging or connectedness, and care and support.

In view of the findings of the study, recommendations are made to the Department of Education as well as to school management teams. Finally, recommendations regarding future research are offered.

*Keywords:* relational well-being, school communities, community psychology, complexity theory, positive psychology, World Café method

## OPSOMMING

Volgens nasionale en internasionale navorsing, speel verhoudings 'n noodsaaklike rol in die bevordering van holistiese welstand in skoolgemeenskappe. Die sentrale rol van verhoudings word egter nie in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks ten volle waardeer nie. Terselfdertyd bestaan daar 'n gaping in navorsing oor die bevordering van verhoudingswelstand in Suid-Afrikaanse skoolgemeenskappe. Die belangrikheid daarvan om dié tekortkoming aan te spreek word veral duidelik wanneer daar gekyk word na onlangse navorsingsliteratuur en mediaberigte oor disfunksionele gedrag in skoolgemeenskappe, soos geweld, afknouery, kindermishandeling, onvanpaste seksuele gedrag, asook alkohol- en dwelmmisbruik. Dít dien as 'n aanduiding van die mate waarin verhoudingswelstand in Suid-Afrikaanse skoolgemeenskappe tans op die agtergrond geskuif word. Die voorneme van hierdie studie is om bogenoemde gaping in kennis, met verwysing na die bevordering van verhoudingswelstand in skoolgemeenskappe, aan te spreek. Dié doel is bereik deur 'n groep nagraadse studente te betrek wat almal ingeskryf is in 'n Meesters- of Doktorsgraadprogram met 'n fokus op verhoudingswelstand, en wat werk in verskillende hoedanighede en kontekste in skoolomgewings.

'n Kombinasie van teoretiese perspektiewe, wat 'n holistiese, multi-dimensionele, sterkte-gebaseerde benadering tot die verstaan van verhoudingswelstand bied, en wat die kompleksiteit van verhoudings erken, is in die navorsing gebruik. 'n Kwalitatiewe fenomenologiese navorsingsontwerp is toegepas deur die *World Café*-metode te gebruik om 'n ruimte te skep waar studente kon reflekteer oor die bevordering van verhoudingswelstand in skoolgemeenskappe. 29 Deelnemers, wat deur middel van doelmatige- en gerieflikheidssteekproefneming gekies is, was by 'n *World Café*-gebeurtenis betrokke. Twintig van hierdie deelnemers het 'n oop-einde vraelys, wat ontwikkel is met die doel om

die data wat tydens die *World Café* versamel is te kristalliseer, voltooi. Dié data is tematies geanaliseer en vier hoofemas is geïdentifiseer.

Eerstens het die deelnemers vanuit 'n eko-sistemiese perspektief reflekteer oor die komplekse, geïntergerde aard van die bevorderingsproses van verhoudingswelstand. Vanuit hierdie perspektief het hulle lede van die skoolgemeenskap as onlosmaaklik geïntergerd beskou, asook dat die lede mekaar wederstyds beïnvloed — soos ook deur kompleks-dinamiese-interaksie-sisteemteoretici aangedui word. Hulle het ook genoem dat sekere omgewingsinvloede verhoudingswelstand kan benadeel. Tweedens is die bevordering van verhoudingswelstand beskou as 'n samewerkende en inklusiewe proses wat al die lede van die skoolgemeenskap betrek, asook eis dat al die lede verantwoordelikheid neem. Die onderwysers en bestuurslede van die skool se rol as leiers in die fasilitering van die proses is spesifiek benadruk, alhoewel die ouers/versorgers as medeverantwoordelik beskou is en samewerking tussen die tuiste en skool daarom beklemtoon is. Derdens het die deelnemers oor die uitdagings ten opsigte die bevordering van verhoudingswelstand nabetrag. Hierdie uitdagings omsluit die behoefte om onderwysers en ouers te bevoeg en te ondersteun om verhoudingswelstand te bevorder, die aanspreek van die ongebalanseerde fokus op akademie en prestasie in skole (ten koste van verhoudings), asook die behoefte om verhoudingswelstand meer pro-aktief te bevorder deur die wyse waarop beperkte tyd en groot klasgroottes verhoudingswelstand benadeel, aan te spreek. Laastens is die waargenome sleutelemente van interafhanklikheid in die bevordering van verhoudingswelstand in skoolgemeenskappe, beklemtoon. Hierdie sleutelemente sluit die volgende in: respekvolle interaksies, die aanvaarding van mekaar, positiewe kommunikasie wat op vertroue gebaseer is, 'n gevoel van behoort en verbintenis, asook versorging en ondersteuning.

In die lig van die studie se bevindings, word daar aanbevelings aan die Departement van Onderwys en skole se bestuurspanne gemaak. Ter afsluiting word daar ook aanbevelings vir toekomstige navorsing gemaak.

*Sleutelwoorde:* Verhoudingswelstand, skoolgemeenskappe, gemeenskapsielkunde, kompleksiteitsteorie, positiewe sielkunde, *World Café*-metode

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Appoh, L. (1995). *The effects of parental attitudes, beliefs and values on the nutritional status of their children in two communities in Ghana* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Trondheim, Norway.

Feltzer, K. (2001). Factors at follow-up associated with adherence with directly observed therapy (DOT) for tuberculosis patients in South Africa. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 11, 165-185.

Sternberg, R. J. (2001, June). *Cultural approaches to intellectual and social competencies*. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Society, Toronto, Canada.

Cook, D. A., & Wiley, C. Y. (2000). Psychotherapy with members of the African American churches and spiritual traditions. In P. S. Richards & A. E. Bergin (Ed.), *Handbook of psychotherapy and religious diversity* (pp. 368-396). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

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I, the supervisor of this study, declare that the input and effort of Petronella Wagner in writing the article reflects the research done by her. I therefore give permission that she may submit the article for examination purposes in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Magister Atrium in Psychology.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Kitching', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Ansie Elizabeth Kitching

## **PART 1: SECTION 1**

### **CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE STUDY**

According to De Jong (2000), schools are powerful sources of health promotion. Therefore, the World Health Organization (WHO)'s Global School Health Initiative was launched in 1995 to encourage more schools to become sites of holistic health promotion (WHO, 2013). In the research literature, various authors found that social relationships are important for the promotion of holistic well-being (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007; Keyes, Schmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Van Schalkwyk & Wissing, 2010; White, 2010). Concurrently, the role of social relationships in enhancing well-being in school communities is emphasised in research literature (Frydenberg, Chan, Care, & Freeman, 2009; Kitching, Roos, & Ferreira, 2012; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Roffey, 2011a, 2012a; Witmer, 2005). Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010) distinguish between individual, relational and collective well-being. They argue that relational well-being mediates both individual and collective well-being, and consider positive and supportive relationships as indicators of relational well-being. Relational well-being is furthermore indicated by active participation, involvement and mutual responsibility. The focus of this study is on the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities.

#### **Rationale for the Study**

The research literature on relationships and well-being clearly indicates the importance of relatedness to others. For example, in their review of literature on personal relationships, Perlman and Duck (2006) conclude that relationship scholars have been gathering remarkable evidence that personal relationships are critical to human well-being and one of the most valued aspects in life. The Well-being in Developing Countries Research Group found a significant subjective link between the quality of people's lives and their relatedness (White, 2010). Likewise, Perlman and Vangelisti (2006) contend that people

often acknowledge personal relationships as something they value and that relate to the happiness and meaningfulness of their lives. This is affirmed in a study on psychosocial well-being in a group of South African adolescents by Van Schalkwyk and Wissing (2010) who found that the experience of positive relationships is a characteristic of well-being. Considering the above-stated, it seems evident that people are universally motivated to invest time to intentionally forge and maintain relationships with others, as found in research conducted over the past 18 years (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Pugno, 2007; Roffey, 2011b).

Personal relationships have many advantages, as reported in the research literature. The advantages include acting as a buffer against illness (Burns & Machin, 2013; Cohen, 2004), encouraging engagement in health-enhancing and thriving behaviours (Prilleltensky, 2011) and curtailing anti-social behaviours (Hromek, & Walsh, 2012). The lack of positive social relationships is therefore seen as a risk factor to well-being (Millar & Hull, 1997). It has numerous negative effects, including a severe sense of deprivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and low quality of life (White, 2010). Even when relationships are strained and problematic, they are no less significant to people (Perlman & Vangelisti, 2006) and still affect their lives, albeit in a negative manner. Consequently, various theorists (e.g., Gergen, 2009; McCubbin, McCubbin, Zhang, Kehl, & Strom, 2013; White, 2010) contest the predominantly individualistic ideology of the West that perceives people as separate entities, instead of cherishing the relationships between them as essential to the construction of the individual person.

In South African schools, this individualist ideology seems to bring about a focus on problems of individual members and not on the relationships between the members of the school community. However, in view of the strong indications that relationships play a significant role in the promotion of people's well-being, it seems critically important to focus more specifically on the promotion of relational well-being in South African school

communities. The need for a relationship-focussed perspective is furthermore strengthened by international and national researchers (Kitching, 2010; Morrison, 2002; Pepler & Craig, 2007) who apply a complexity perspective on understanding human behaviour in schools.

The rationale of this study is to contribute towards a shift in focus from an individualistic approach that addresses challenges on individual level, to a relationship-focussed approach that intends to promote relational well-being in South African school communities. This shift in focus could make it possible to adhere to the challenge posed by the WHO (2013) to develop schools that enhance the holistic well-being of all the members of the school community.

### **Problem Statement**

A General Household Survey (Statistics South Africa, 2012) in 2011 indicated that 14 million South African children are attending school. School communities can therefore be considered critical platforms for the promotion of the relational well-being of the country's youth, since the vast majority of children spend many hours in school settings. According to Roffey (2011b), schools are often the only spaces where children could experience positive relationships and inclusive belonging. This is especially true in South Africa where many learners are in need of care due to the increase in number and proportion of absent fathers and child-headed households, which diminishes the experience of secure family life (Holborn & Eddy, 2011; Weeks, 2008). Due to the deprivation of love and care in many homes and a lack of positive role models among the nation's youth (Rudolph, Monson, Collett, & Sonn, 2008), it becomes imperative to promote relational well-being proactively in South African school communities.

However, there are strong indicators that relational well-being of children and youth in South African school communities is compromised. For example, a 2011 national study showed that 15.2% of learners were exposed to some form of violence, punishment or verbal

abuse while attending school (Statistics South Africa, 2011). Furthermore, recent academic research and reports in the media identify various problems, such as violence and aggression, child abuse, various forms of school bullying; alcohol and substance abuse, and dysfunctional sexual behaviour, which might pose serious threats to relational well-being in school communities.

A safe learning environment is considered important in the promotion of well-being in schools (Swart & Reddy, 1999) and in enhancing school relationships (Ungerer, 2012). The current situation of escalating violence and aggression in schools described in the research (e.g., Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; Masitsa, 2011; Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2009; Snodgrass & Heleta, 2009), therefore raises concern about the relational well-being in South African school communities.

According to Nthite (2006), the previous minister of education, Naledi Pandor, stated that violence in schools is a threat to the future of South African education. Recent media reports confirm that South African school communities are often sites of violence committed against and by children (Bezuidenhout, 2011; Harper, 2012; Hosken, 2011; Molosankwe, 2011), including gang violence (Cupido, 2011; Dolley, 2011). Moreover, in their qualitative study on aggression in South African schools, Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2009) describe how learners experience disrespect as well as physical, verbal and indirect actions of aggression from educational staff and other learners. Associated problems compromising a safe interpersonal school environment in the country are victimisation and bullying (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; Pepler & Craig, 2007; Rudolph et al., 2008), the possession of guns and weapons at school, and gangsterism (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011).

Violence and aggression involve negative interpersonal interactions, and high levels thereof thus serve as an indicator of compromised relational well-being in communities. Conversely, positive relationships at school and inclusion in school networks have been

established in various schools to lower violence and anti-social behaviours such as bullying (Barnes, Brynard, & De Wet, 2012; Hromek & Walsh, 2012; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010).

Another growing problem that affects relational well-being in school communities by limiting a safe learning environment is child abuse (Pierce & Bozalek, 2004). Sexual abuse in schools is especially a problem in South Africa, since children are more likely to be sexually violated at school than at any other place. In 2007, the Medical Research Council established that 33% of perpetrators who had raped girls under the age of 15 were educators (Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011).

The electronic age also poses threats to relational well-being in schools, since people, including children, are increasingly relating through electronic media. Media reports prove that South African school children are exposed to internet and cell phone abuse and bullying (Brodie, 2011; Mukhuthu, 2011; Ngomane, 2011). Cyber or electronic bullying is considered a form of school bullying, and entails the use of mobile phones (e.g., by means of texting and phone cameras) and personal computers (e.g., through e-mail, chat rooms and websites) to harm others (Campbell, 2005; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Cyber abuse and bullying pose unique and complex threats to relational well-being in school communities.

Furthermore, dysfunctional sexual relationships are present among learners. Risky sexual behaviour that often results in teenage pregnancies and HIV contraction are common among South African adolescents (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). The media confirms that teenage pregnancy is a concern in the country's schools (Evans, 2012; Fokazi, 2011; McLea, 2011; Ndaba, 2012) and that inappropriate sexual acts are committed at school and translated into pornography (Mukhuthu, 2011; Steyn & Wondergem, 2011). This could be considered a relational problem, since acting out sexually in adolescence is tied to a need to be accepted by peers (Taylor, 2006). Conversely, delayed sexual activity is encouraged by peer support at school, as established in South African research (Visser, 2007c).

Furthermore, alcohol and substance use is common among the nation's children and also invades school communities (Holborn & Eddy, 2011; Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011). There are many lay articles on the South African youth's alcohol and substance abuse at school (e.g., Ellis, 2011; Fokazi, 2011; Govender, 2012; Maluleka, 2011; Mashaba, 2011; Mkhulisi & Mashaba, 2011; Serrao & Smillie, 2011). This serves as a demonstration of the current compromised relational well-being of the country's youth, since alcohol and substance use is often a result of negative interpersonal issues, such as bullying at school (Ellis, 2011) or a lack of nurturing relationships (Holborn & Eddy, 2011). Moreover, among teenagers, tobacco and drug use as well as alcohol consumption are strongly related to their relationships – it most often entails imitating peers and attempting to be socially acceptable (Taylor, 2006). On the other hand, the research literature indicates that when there is significant connectedness among school community members, substance abuse is lowered (Carter, McGee, Taylor & Williams, 2007).

The above-mentioned problems that occur in school communities thus indicate the need for the promotion of relational well-being. However, problems in schools are mainly addressed through reactive approaches which direct energy and resources to the most challenging students (Roffey, 2011a). Limited attention is given to the proactive promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities, as indicated in research conducted by Kitching (2010). According to Evans, Hanlin and Prilleltensky (2007), this tendency towards reactive, curative approaches exists because of “persisting and stubborn paradoxes” (p. 330) in health, human and community services that maintain ameliorative approaches. Prilleltensky (2005) argues that the imbalance towards reactive interventions should be challenged with more proactive, preventative strategies. The implication is that ameliorative approaches, focussing on addressing problems on individual level, should be

merged with transformative approaches which are more strength-based, proactive, empowering, and working towards changing community circumstances (Evans et al., 2007).

Applying this principle of merging ameliorative and transformative approaches to school communities, Diener and Diener (2009) assert that schools should be aware of and address problems appropriately, while indicating that the potential of children is not optimally developed by eliminating harms without building on strengths. Likewise, Clonan, Chafouleas, McDougal, and Riley-Tillman (2004) advocate a shift in school psychology from deficit-based approaches, targeting a limited population, to a positive, preventative-based school psychology which works towards the enhancement of all learners.

However, in the South African context, limited attention has been given to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities, despite the emphasis that relationships receive in the evaluation of educators' competencies in the Integrated Quality Management Systems for School-Based Educators (Education Labour Relations Council, 2003) - a performance management and development system for educators at national schools. In local research conducted to gain a deeper understanding of nurturing and restraining relationships in a school community, Kitching et al. (2012) concluded that, despite the emphasis on the importance of relationships, research needs to be done to establish how relational well-being can be enhanced in school communities. Likewise, a study by Ungerer (2012), conducted to explore how relationships can be enhanced in schools of skills in South Africa, highlighted the need for research that focuses on the promotion of relational well-being.

The gap in the knowledge regarding the promotion of relational well-being is addressed in this study. In order to gain a better understanding of this subject, the researcher explored the reflections of a group of postgraduate students, enrolled for a Master's or Doctoral degree in Psychology or Social Work, and who work in school communities in

various capacities and contexts, as will be explained in the Research Context section below. Their research furthermore focuses on various aspects of relational well-being, as part of a bigger project on relational well-being in school communities. Thus, the students were firstly involved as participants based on their academic understanding of the concept of relational well-being. Secondly, the fact that these students work in school communities ensure grassroots participation in building knowledge about the promotion of relational well-being in schools, and avoids a top-down approach that imposes outsider ideas of what would be beneficial for school communities, as argued by Theron (2008). Concurrently, the students' experiences in school communities enable them to engage in reflexive conversations regarding the promotion of relational well-being in schools as insider voices.

The research question that guided this study was:

*How do postgraduate students, involved in a project on relational well-being and working in school communities across South Africa, reflect on the promotion of relational well-being in these communities?*

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this qualitative phenomenological research study is to explore the reflections of postgraduate students, whose studies focus on relational well-being and who work in school communities across South Africa, on the promotion of relational well-being in these communities.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

A qualitative, phenomenological research design is applied in this study, since the aim was to collect rich, subjective, in-depth data from the participants and to understand rather than predict the phenomenon of relational well-being promotion in schools (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Creswell, 2009; Henning, 2004). The reflections of the participants on the

promotion of relational well-being in school communities were thus explored and described in-depth.

### **Research Context**

The research context encompasses an academic setting in which the broader research focus is on children, youth and families, with an emphasis on relational well-being as one of the specialised foci of the centre. However, the context represents a broader community of practice in which the students work with children, youth and families on a daily basis. The students work in milieus of teaching and learning (including special needs education), counselling, educational psychology, youth development, social work, psychometrics and drama coaching across the socioeconomic spectrum and in both urban and rural settings. They are located in Gauteng, the Eastern Cape, Western Cape as well as in Namibia and Botswana.

### **Research Population**

The population from which the participants were selected includes the 120 postgraduate students who reside across South Africa, and who are currently enrolled for a Master's or Doctoral at the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies in the Faculty of Health Sciences of the North-West University, South Africa.

### **Sampling**

To select the participants, non-probability sampling in the form of a combination of purposive sampling and convenience sampling was performed (Babbie, 2011; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Creswell, 2009; Graziano & Raulin, 2007; Henning, 2004; Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003; Silverman, 2009). Participants were deliberately selected on the basis of their involvement in a research project focussing on relational well-being, and due to their working contexts, with the expectation that they could provide the researcher with meaningful information to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of ways to promote relational

well-being in school communities. These participants were furthermore involved based on their availability and willingness to complete an open-ended questionnaire and to participate in the research during a cohort supervision meeting organised by the centre. Thus, the sample consists of a group of 29 postgraduate students from all over South Africa, in the process of completing a Master's or Doctoral degree in Psychology or Social Work with a specific focus on relational well-being in school communities. These students are mostly in occupations where they work with children in a wide variety of contexts, as explained above. Out of the 29 participants, 20 responded in a follow-up open-ended questionnaire.

### **Data Gathering**

The World Café method (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Delaney, Daley, & Lajoie, 2006; Schieffer, Isaacs & Gyllenpalm, 2004) and open-ended questionnaires (Labuschagne, 2003) were utilised. World Café is a specialised form of focus group, where relevant questions are explored through “a living network of collaborative dialogue around questions that really matter” (Delaney et al., 2006, p. 46). It is founded on the assumption that people have the ability to work together (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and that systems have the inherent capacity to strategise successfully for survival and adaptation (Schieffer et al., 2004). A World Café event provides a platform for accessing and mobilising collective wisdom, and facilitates a context for collective action and mutual reflection (Schieffer et al., 2004). According to Ritch & Brennan (2010), this method can be used to explore people's experiences, which makes it a suitable data gathering method for this phenomenological study.

During a World Café event, through continuous rounds of small, intimate conversations around tables, large groups of people can think and dialogue together on a topic, while remaining connected to a single, larger conversation - in this case: the promotion of relational well-being in school communities (Schieffer et al., 2004). In this study, a World Café event was held in both the North-West province and the Western Cape on different

dates with different students. During these events, the participants gathered around tables in groups of four, and one participant was chosen as a host for each table. At each table, the participants discussed relational well-being in school communities from various perspectives. The host remained at one table, facilitating that table's specific conversation, while the other participants rotated in small groups between the tables in 20 minute discussion sessions, until everyone had been to each table. Everybody thus had the opportunity to participate in all the conversations. In conclusion, each host summarised the complete discussion at his/her table for all the participants. Paper and drawing material were also provided in order for the groups to present their discussions visually. This method was chosen in order to stimulate the participants' thoughts regarding the topic and to gain access to this vibrant, evolving conversation among academically informed people with grassroots experience.

Following the World Café event, participants were asked to complete a set of open-ended questions regarding their specific contexts and reflect in more detail on their own practice in terms of possible ways to promote relational well-being. The questions were:

- Please reflect on how you view relational well-being in school communities.
- How, in your opinion, can relational well-being be promoted in school communities?
- With reference to your own work experience, describe strengths and weaknesses you have witnessed relating to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.

### **Research Procedure**

The procedure was conducted as follows: access to the community of postgraduate students was gained through the coordinator of the research project that focuses on relational well-being and who is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies.

One group of students convened in the North-West province and another in the Western Cape

on different dates. Participants were thus selected on the basis of their participation in this broader research project. Participants were asked to sign informed consent forms to allow for their ethical participation. World Café events were held in both settings. Participants were also requested to complete a questionnaire with biographical data and open-ended questions on the topic. Following the data analysis, selected participants were asked to give feedback on the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed inductively (Creswell, 2009) by means of thematic analysis. The decision on a thematic analysis resided in the flexibility of this method, which allowed for the underlining of both similarities and differences in the data, for the discovery of unforeseen insights, and for a dual psychological and social understanding of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This unrestrictive data analysis method was needed for the retrieving of meaningful insights from the postgraduate participants. The researcher used the process developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) which includes the following steps: familiarising oneself with the data (also involving the transcribing thereof), generating initial codes – i.e. classifying or categorising individual fragments of data (Babbie, 2011), searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report.

After data analysis, member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) took place in the form of electronic interviews with a few participants through e-mail communications (Morgan & Symon, 2004). Five participants were used based on their availability and willingness to participate. The feedback indicated that the themes and subthemes seemed in order and no alterations were suggested.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in this study will be ensured through the crystallisation of the data. Crystallisation increases trustworthiness “by using multiple methods of data collection and

analysis” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 114). Ellingson (2009) is of the opinion that multiple forms of analysis and multigenre representations serve to construct a more detailed, rich and honest presentation of a phenomenon.

In this study crystallisation took place through the use of multiple methods (Kelly, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010) which in this case included the World Café events and open-ended questionnaires. It also involved different genres or mediums (Ellingson, 2009): written texts in the form of the open-ended questionnaires, the audio data of the World Café conversations and the visual representations made during the World Café events. The inclusion of participants who are involved in a variety of contexts ensured multivocality (Tracy, 2010). The different viewpoints were clearly heard without being influenced in any way. Moreover, various theoretical lenses were utilised (as will be described in the Conceptual Framework section) in order to contribute to crystallisation (Tracy, 2010). The researcher also aimed at providing rich and in-depth descriptions of the findings in order to enhance crystallisation (Ellingson, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Member checking - which involved testing the data, analytical categories, interpretations and conclusions with members of the group from whom data were collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Tracy, 2010) - was conducted via e-mail conversations (Morgan & Symon, 2004) to ensure the credibility of the findings. The researcher furthermore presented transparent, in-depth and detailed descriptions of the research design and methodology to allow other researchers to apply the findings to their own contexts or conduct similar research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Finally, the researcher, who acted as the main instrument in this study, constantly reflected on psychological, sociocultural, academic, career-related or any other personal characteristics which might have influenced data collection and interpretation in order to minimise biased findings. She also shared her biases and assumptions about participants and

the phenomenon with her supervisor to reduce researcher bias, while upholding self-reflectivity (Creswell, 2009; Ellingson, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study is conducted within a larger project, under the ethical code NWU-00060-12-A1, by the North-West University. The researcher abided to the ethical principles as endorsed by the Constitution of South Africa (1996) and the ethical rules of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2004) which protect human rights and public safety. A research proposal was submitted to an ethical review committee in order to ensure the meeting of ethical standards, as advised by many research authors (e.g., Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Strydom, 2011; Graziano & Raulin, 2007). The following principles were upheld:

**Avoidance of harm.** Non-maleficence, which includes the avoidance of physical and/or emotional harm to participants (Bless, Higson-Smith & Kagee, 2006; Strydom, 2011; Graziano & Raulin, 2007), whether intentionally or unintentionally inflicted (Bless et al., 2006) was upheld. Due to the nature of the study, no risks to inflict harm on participants were foreseen.

**Informed consent.** After informing the participants fully and adequately about the study, signed consent forms were obtained (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Bless et al., 2006; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Graziano & Raulin, 2007; Henning, 2004; HPCSA, 2004; Strydom, 2011). All of the participants are also researchers and therefore understood the process.

**Voluntary participation.** Participants took part in the study out of their own free will (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Bless et al., 2006; Strydom, 2011) and were in no way penalised when they decided not to participate.

**Confidentiality.** Although anonymity could not be upheld, since the researcher would be able to identify the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Strydom, 2011), information regarding the participants' input in the process was dealt with in a confidential manner, and names of participants were not indicated in the report or transcriptions (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Bless et al., 2006; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Strydom, 2011). Signed consent forms are treated with utmost discretion and stored in a manner that ensures confidentiality (Henning, 2004). The audio recordings are also protected to ensure the anonymity of the participants' input. After the completion of the study, data were securely stored at North-West University.

**Beneficence, social accountability, and responsibility.** This research study not only focuses on not harming participants, but on actually contributing to the well-being of others (Bless et al., 2006; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008), as the intention of the study is to work towards a better understanding of the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.

**Ethical issues in the reporting or publishing of findings.** After successful examination, the researcher will make the findings unambiguously and objectively known to the public and be open about the methodology that was used (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Strydom, 2011). The researcher reported back to the participants as soon as possible (Bless et al., 2006; Strydom, 2011; HPCSA, 2004) in order to inform them of the findings of the study, which might also enrich their academic and career pursuits. No one was deliberately deceived by the findings, which was not manipulated or falsified in any way (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Strydom, 2011; HPCSA, 2004). This was attained through constant supervision, applying academic rigour, and upholding personal integrity. Shortcomings, limitations or constraints in the research are clearly mentioned in Part 3 of this report (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Strydom, 2011). Great

effort has been taken to avoid any form of plagiarism (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Bless et al., 2006; Strydom, 2011; HPCSA, 2004). All the contributors in this study are appropriately acknowledged (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Bless et al., 2006; Strydom, 2011, HPCSA, 2004) while still upholding confidentiality of research subjects (Bless et al., 2006). Provided that confidentiality of participants is protected, the researcher will not withhold data from other professionals who wish to verify the claims and conclusions drawn from it (HPCSA, 2004).

**Researcher commitment.** The researcher is committed to sensitising herself to ethical considerations and open discussion about ethical issues (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Strydom, 2011). An effort was made to consult a supervisor throughout the research process to ensure that ethical standards were met (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) The researcher acknowledges that the final ethical responsibility rests with her (Graziano & Raulin, 2007) and has accepted the duty to fulfil all ethical requirements throughout all the stages of the study (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Strydom, 2011).

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this subsection, the conceptual framework for the study will be explained with specific reference to the various lenses that the researcher applied in studying the phenomenon of promoting relational well-being in South African school communities.

A community psychology perspective (see Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Duffy & Wong, 2000; Levine & Perkins, 1997; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Rappaport, 1977; Seedat & Lazarus, 2011; Visser, 2007a) provides the basis for this study. Community psychology is a strengths-based approach which focuses on individuals' and communities' assets rather than deficits (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010), and concurrently has the promotion of people's well-being as a goal (Duffy & Wong, 2000; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Visser, 2007a). It therefore serves as an appropriate point of departure for this study, which concentrates on the promotion of relational well-being. Furthermore, community psychology

studies people within their contexts by means of holistic, ecological analyses (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). From this ecological, multilevel perspective, the interactions between people and their physical and social environments are acknowledged. Human behaviour is seen as influenced by interpersonal interactions in microsystems which are embedded in organisational and communal structures and affected by cultural perspectives (Levine & Perkins, 1997; Visser, 2007a). By focussing on the importance of people's interactions with each other and the larger systems in which they are nested, it thus offers a holistic framework for the study of relationships and institutions such as schools. In South Africa, community psychologists play an important role in influencing health and education policy for a diverse society (Seedat & Lazarus, 2011).

Kelly (1966) identified four ecological principles. Firstly, the principle of interdependence suggests that individuals in any school community are in a position to support one another in the promotion of their well-being. Secondly, the principle of cycling resources suggests that untapped resources might exist in a community and should be identified and allocated to promote well-being. Thirdly, the principle of adaptation suggests that individuals and systems can cope and adapt to changing conditions in the macro-system. Finally, the principle of succession suggests that there is a need to plan a preferred scenario regarding the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.

Based on these ecological principles, Prilleltensky (2005) developed the SPECs approach to the promotion of well-being, which combines investment in strengths, prevention, empowerment and community conditions as a model for the promotion of well-being. With this approach he clearly advocates a shift towards a transformative, rather than merely an ameliorative, paradigm (Evans et al., 2007). The implication of this advocacy is a simultaneous move away from reactive to proactive, from individual to communal, from deficit-oriented to strength-based, and from detached to empowering approaches to well-

being promotion. He argues that well-being can only be attained effectively if all four of these domains are addressed. Prilleltensky (2005) therefore conceptualises well-being as located in individuals, relationships and communities. Each of these sites of well-being has certain signs or manifestations of well-being, deriving from certain sources. Thus, strategies to improve well-being should address the sites, signs and sources in a particular context to promote well-being effectively.

In addition, the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979) was applied to understand the interaction between people and their environments. This theoretical model views reality as complex and argues that characteristics of systems lie beneath all processes. A system consists of numerous interconnected subsystems which create a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Changes and exchanges between parts affect each other and the whole in a non-linear manner (Visser, 2007b). Bronfenbrenner (1979) argued that the individual could not be seen as separate from the social context which is composed of four nested systems on various levels of complexity and in interaction with one another. The microsystem entails any context directly experienced by the individual; in the case of this study it includes schools, classrooms, peer groups and families. The next level is the mesosystem, which refers to the spaces where one or more of these microsystems connect. The exosystem refers to the connection between the microsystem and external settings on organisational level which are outside of the individual's direct experience, such as the school board or the parental workplace will be to a child. The macrosystem entails large-scale societal factors, such as economic and political circumstances, ideology and culture. In the study of relational well-being, all of these systems and the interactions between them should be considered.

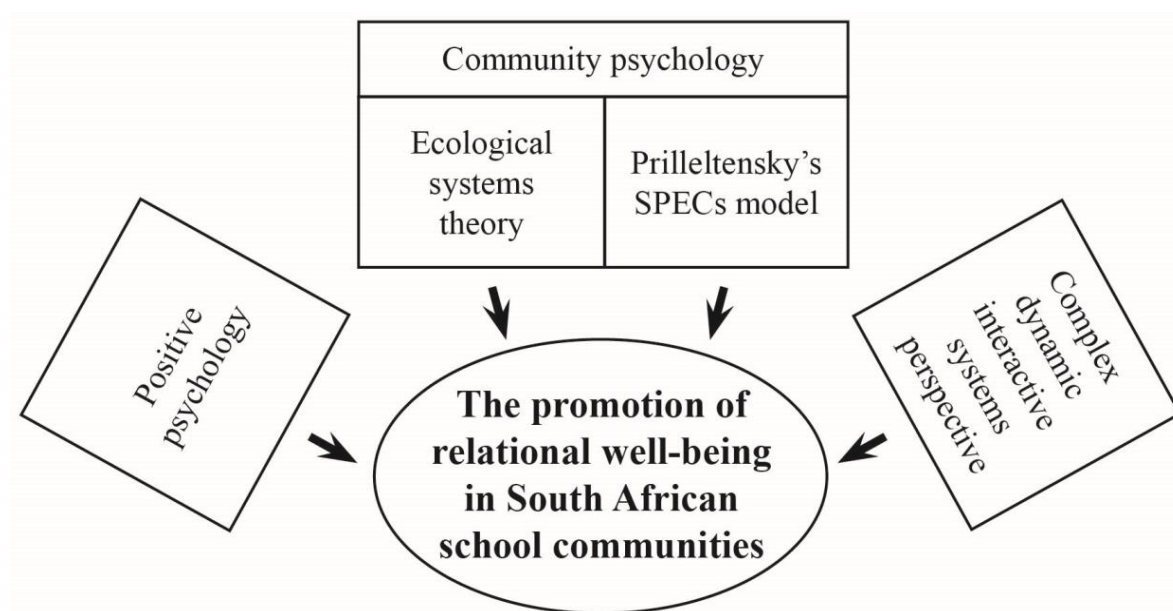
In addition to the above-mentioned theories, this study, which intends to contribute to the proactive promotion of relational well-being in school communities, was also informed

by positive psychology which moves away from the more traditional focus of psychology on pathology to an understanding of how positive qualities can be built. It calls for the thriving rather than mere healing of individuals, communities and societies. In line with the topic of this study, positive psychology focuses on positive subjective experiences such as well-being, and positive interpersonal or institutional aspects such as altruism and tolerance (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Moreover, positive psychology acknowledges that well-being is intrinsically intertwined with relationships to others and therefore investigates positive relationships (Carr, 2004; Roffey, 2012b). One of the foci of positive psychology is the study of positive institutions, including schools (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This theoretical perspective is seen as a useful lens for the study of school communities and the educational process, since positive development is at the heart of positive psychology and schools are the major societal institutions uniquely composed to foster positive development (Clonan et al., 2004; Diener & Diener, 2009). Roffey (2012a) specifically illustrates the importance of positive psychology in understanding how relationships and well-being are linked in school communities. Furthermore, South African researchers, Van Schalkwyk and Wissing (2010), particularly indicated the value of studying well-being in youth from a positive perspective.

Moreover, the lens of a complex interactive dynamic systems perspective was used, which breaks away from reductionist, cause-and-effect models and linear predictability (Morrison, 2008). This theory emphasises that relationships cannot merely be perceived from a traditional modernist perspective which focuses on the linear, causal nature of interactions. It is thus a useful approach in the study of relational well-being, as it considers relationships as complex interactive processes of relating and interacting (Stacey, 2001, 2003) that is present within interconnected networks such as schools (Morrison, 2002, 2008). Morrison (2002, 2008) states that schools impersonate complex, non-linear, adaptive systems and

complexity theory could thus be appropriately applied to educational research, as it does not follow an atomised approach, but rather perceives the system of the school community holistically, acknowledging that it possesses its own ecology of multiple interacting elements. A complex interactive dynamic systems perspective therefore contributes to an understanding of relational well-being as a non-linear, organic experience situated in the complex, dynamic interconnectedness of interactions between people on various levels. South African researchers, Kitching et al. (2012) and Ungerer (2012), emphasise the need for an understanding of relationships in school communities from a complex rather than a modernist, linear viewpoint in order to create enabling school communities. Likewise, McLaughlin and Clarke (2010), in their reflections after conducting a comprehensive review of research studies on relationships in schools, state that an understanding of the complexity of a school and its relationships is mostly missing from these papers.

The diagram below gives an overview of the theoretical perspectives that informed this study on the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.



*Figure 1.1.* A graphical representation of the conceptual framework for this study.

## **PART 1: SECTION 2**

### **THE PROMOTION OF RELATIONAL WELL-BEING IN SCHOOL**

#### **COMMUNITIES: A LITERATURE OVERVIEW**

##### **Schools as Communities**

In this study, schools are considered as communities. The conceptualisation of schools as communities is informed by the ecological systems perspective. From this perspective, communities could be described as networks of social relationships where certain common characteristics, values and interests are shared on various levels of complexity and in constant interaction between the members (Visser, 2007b) who are bound by a sense of community (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986). The implication of this perspective is a shift in focus from a traditional individual- and problem-centred approach to understanding schools as contexts where continuous interactions among individuals, as well as between individuals and their environments, take place (Visser, 2007a).

The work of Sarason (1974), Sergiovanni (1994a, 1994b) and Strike (2000, 2004), furthermore informs the conceptualisation of schools as communities. Sarason (1974) suggests that schools should be perceived as communities. He describes the importance of a psychological “sense of community” in organisations such as schools. This “sense of community” would include perceived similarity between members, an acknowledged interdependence as well as a willingness to maintain this by means of reciprocity, and a feeling of being part of a bigger dependable and stable structure. All of this should be present in schools to prevent an artificial divide between learning and living and in order to make schools more humane settings. McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) elaborate on the notion of sense of community in schools by focussing on “school connectedness”, described as an interlinked group of activities and experiences, including relationships between school

community members, pupil satisfaction, a feeling of membership to the community, and traits such as participation and student voice.

Following Sarason's thinking, but coming from an educational management perspective, Sergiovanni (1994a, 1994b, 1996) challenges existing theories and metaphors in education that shape the way in which schools are understood. He suggests that schools, based on the ways people are bonded together in them, should be perceived as communities rather than organisations. He argues that this would lead to new connections between staff, students and families and a more shared leadership perspective (Sergiovanni, 1994b).

Likewise, Strike (2000, 2004) advocates a reform towards schools as communities. He promotes the four "Cs" of community which should root the school in a shared educational project: coherence (a shared vision and language), cohesion (a sense of community), care (to engage students), and contact (the structural features of school) (Strike, 2004).

### **Well-being in School Communities**

This subsection will offer a brief conceptualisation of the construct of well-being and describe the role of schools in the promotion thereof.

#### **Understanding Well-being as a Construct**

Prilleltensky (2011) upholds that well-being literature is fragmented, since scholars differ on the definitions of well-being and the dimensions comprised by it. A recent tendency is to describe well-being as positive states of being, which moves away from traditional deficit models (Frydenberg et al., 2009). From this perspective, well-being is defined as a satisfactory state of affairs for both individuals and communities, involving more than the mere absence of disease (Prilleltensky, 2005). This viewpoint is in line with the WHO's definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (2005, p. 1). Likewise, Keyes (2007) calls for a

striving towards flourishing rather than simply pursuing the reduction of mental illness. This correlates with the positive psychology notion of thriving instead of focussing on curing pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Although there are many different views on the dimensions of well-being, Negovan (2010) offers a comprehensive summary. In line with different streams of well-being literature, she acknowledges three dimensions comprised by well-being, namely subjective, psychological, and social - all of which are multidimensional and of which the sub-facets are the subject of much academic debate. Correspondingly, well-being research can be divided into two streams, namely the hedonic approach on the one hand, which concerns itself with happiness, the presence of pleasure and absence of pain, as conceptualised in subjective well-being literature. On the other hand, the eudaimonic approach relates to the realisation of human potential, as reflected in the notions of psychological and social well-being (Negovan, 2010; Linley, Maltby, Wood, Osborne, & Hurling, 2009). Even though there is no universal consensus on the above-mentioned dimensions of well-being, a brief description of each will follow.

Subjective well-being could be understood as an individual's affective (emotional) and cognitive judgment about his/her life satisfaction (Diener, Lucas & Oishi, 2005; Keyes et al., 2002). However, psychological well-being is defined by Keyes et al. (2002) as one's perception of engagement and thriving, with regards to the existential challenges of life. It includes some aspects such as personal growth and purpose in life which reflect the self-fulfilment notion of the eudaimonic approach, and also other components, such as positive interpersonal relationships and self-acceptance. On the other hand, Keyes (1998) defines social well-being as "the appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society" (p. 122). He theorises that it entails the five dimensions of social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social actualisation, and social coherence. In addition, psychosocial well-being,

which is a more modern notion in literature, includes a broad range of issues, such as mental, emotional, social, physical, economic, cultural, and spiritual health (Negovan, 2010).

McCubbin et al. (2013), Prilleltensky (2011), White (2010) and Wissing (2013) all agree that most well-being perspectives and measures support individualistic, Western values and are not necessarily valid in indigenous settings. It includes self-affirmation, aggressiveness, and achievement as markers of well-being. This individualistic approach is counteracted by Eastern perspectives on collective well-being (McCubbin et al., 2013) that emphasise relationships. However, little is known about well-being in the collectivist African and multicultural South African context (Wissing, 2013).

### **The Role of Schools in the Promotion of Well-being**

For more than 25 years, education has been considered one of the societal systems obliged to deal with the various health and well-being aspects in a community (Vingillis & Sarkella, 1997). Over this period, the WHO (2001) continuously emphasised the role of schools in preparing children for life and promoting healthy social and mental development. Roffey (2012a), drawing from her own and other previous research as well as additional sources on well-being in schools, asserts that schools can indeed make a very positive difference in the lives of their learners. She states that not all learners' parents can manage to advance the socio-emotional development of their children, and therefore schools need to step into this educational gap. In view of the above, schools are regarded as one of the main settings for the promotion of holistic well-being.

Global endeavours were launched to increase the general well-being of learners, and this also influenced education in South Africa. The WHO's (2013) Global School Health Initiative in 1995 suggested that a school needs to be a place that is "constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working" (n.p.). The Organization for

Economic Cooperation and Development (2009) also investigates and promotes quality of school life as a means of attaining child well-being.

In the South African context, the promotion of well-being in schools has been guided by the international Health Promoting Schools framework as a comprehensive means to address holistic health in schools (Swart & Reddy, 1999). The holistic development of schools is stressed in national policy guidelines for the advancement of health-promoting schools (Department of Health, 2008). In post-Apartheid South Africa the National Committee for Education Support Services (NCESS) along with the National Commission on Special Needs Education and Training (NCSNET) were appointed by the Minister of Education to consult stakeholders and conduct research in order to make recommendations for a new national education policy (Daniels, 2010; Seedat & Lazarus, 2011). As a result, the Department of Education is attempting to enhance holistic well-being by endeavouring to offer psychosocial support to learners in schools. The Education White Paper 6 describes how the education and training system “must transform itself to contribute to establishing a caring and humane society” (Department of Education, 2001a, p. 11).

Despite this emphasis in policy documents, the promotion of well-being in South African school communities has not yet gained a central role, but is mainly perceived as separated from the comprehensive goal of schooling, as confirmed in international research by Konu and Rimpelä (2002). Specialised support to learners was limited in the post-Apartheid era (Daniels, 2010) to the extent that Maree (2010) describes the South African framework for psychosocial services, also in education, as “disappointing to say the least” (p. 119). In view of this situation, as well as the research and lay articles mentioned in the problem statement of this report, South African schools apparently do not currently provide sustainable supportive environments for the promotion of relational well-being.

## **Relational Well-being: A Critical Dimension of Promoting Well-being in School Communities**

This subsection will elaborate on relational well-being as a construct, with reference to various conceptualisations thereof. Concurrently, the value of relational well-being in school communities and the status quo in South Africa with regards to research on and the practice of the promotion of relational well-being will be discussed.

### **Relational Well-being as a Construct**

Relational well-being requires an individual to be nested in “a network of positive and supporting relationships” and to be able to “participate freely in social, community and political life” (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010, p. 30). Prilleltensky (2005) states that signs of relational well-being include caring, respect for diversity, reciprocity, nurturance and affection, support, collaboration, and democratic participation in decision-making processes. McCubbin et al. (2013) defined six factors of relational well-being in their study on an indigenous, Hawaiian population: resilience, community involvement, financial stability, cultural practice, family commitment, and health care.

Relational well-being can be seen as an aspect of a specific dimension of well-being. For instance, Keyes et al. (2002) view positive relations with others as a component of psychological well-being. Yet, Keyes (1998) also stresses the importance of relatedness in his conceptualisation of social well-being. Subjectivity and relatedness are fundamentally intertwined and relationships are therefore also a feature of subjective well-being (Pugno, 2007; White, 2010).

Relational well-being can also be seen as a dimension of well-being in itself, as is proposed in White’s model (2010) where the three dimensions of well-being is explained as material, relational and subjective. She divides relational well-being into two spheres: social (social relations and access to public goods) and human (capabilities, attitudes to life, and

personal relationships), both consisting of objective and subjective aspects. According to Prilleltensky's (2005) conceptualisation of well-being, relationships is one of the three sites of well-being, existing together with individuals and community, and it serves as the mediating factor between the other two sites. Writing from a positive psychology perspective, Seligman (2011) names five pillars of well-being, one of which is relationships, clustered together with positive feelings, engagement, meaning, and achievement/accomplishment.

As already stated, most well-being approaches focus on the individual from a Western perspective (McCubbin et al., 2013; Prilleltensky, 2011; White, 2010). Yet emerging collectivist approaches draw the attention away from the individual and shift the focus to the community (McCubbin et al., 2013). However, a relational perspective to well-being assumes the interconnectedness and inseparability of the individual, family, community and society (McCubbin et al., 2013). The aforementioned is in line with Prilleltensky and Nelson's (2002) claim that well-being is attained by the concurrent and balanced satisfaction of personal, relational and collective needs. It thus encompasses psychological (individual), interpersonal (relational) and political or societal (communal) well-being.

### **The Contribution of Relational Well-being in School Communities**

The research specifically indicates the important contribution that relational well-being has in school communities in the promotion of holistic well-being and development, school connectedness, the facilitation of care and support, the achievement of academic excellence and eventually the socioeconomic advancement of the nation.

The importance of relationships in enhancing holistic well-being and development in schools is strongly emphasised in the research literature. Findings from a study on students' perceptions and well-being showed that the interpersonal behaviours of their teachers influenced their experience of well-being (Van Petegem, Aelterman, Rosseel, & Creemers,

2007). Two years later, in a study on learner characteristics and the influence of interpersonal behaviours of teachers on learners' well-being, the main researcher found that the subjective experience of positive relationships with teachers contributed to well-being, especially because it supported a positive classroom climate (Van Petegem, Aelterman, Van Keer, & Rosseel, 2008). Resilience, which is an important factor in the maintenance of individual well-being, is also enhanced by everyday teacher-student relational interactions, as established in a longitudinal study by Johnson (2008).

Furthermore, McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) reviewed numerous research papers on the role of relationships in schools and concluded that it plays a great part in the mental health and educational success of youth. Konu and Rimpelä (2002) also argue that relationships are imperative to student well-being. They introduce a conceptual model for holistic well-being in a school setting by dividing learners' well-being into four categories, including social relationships, school conditions, means for self-fulfilment, and health status. Roffey (2012a) perceives positive relationships not so much as a separate category of well-being, but as comprehensively contributing to valuing and developing the whole child. Likewise, in her reflections on developing the whole child, Noddings (2006) argues that nurturing relationships will promote social, emotional, and ethical development and not merely academic outcomes.

Concurrently, literature shows that school relationships foster a feeling of belonging or connectedness among school community members, which contributes to positive holistic outcomes for learners. McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) emphasise how relationships are critical for "school connectedness". The degree to which students feel connected contribute to academic outcomes, well-being, social and psychological development as well as other positive individual outcomes – both long and short term (Frydenberg et al., 2009; McLaughlin and Clarke, 2010; Roffey, 2011b, 2012a; Witmer, 2005). Furthermore, it has

been established that school engagement, which is closely linked to school connectedness, is improved by supportive teacher, peer and family relationships in middle and high school children (Wang & Eccles, 2012). One of the goals of a health-promoting school would thus be to promote change in connectedness in the school community (Roffey, 2012a).

Moreover, relationships are important in the creation of a caring school environment where all the members can feel safe. Therefore, health-promoting schools need to develop caring relationships between all stakeholders (Roffey, 2012a). In his research on caring schools in South Africa, Weeks (2009) found that positive relationships contribute significantly to the constitution of a caring school, which benefits all the members of the school community. Noddings (1995, 2003, 2005) also emphasises the positive effect of caring relationships in schools on learner outcomes. She argues that teaching is fundamentally a relational practice with numerous benefits for learners and teachers, provided that relationships of trust and care exist (Noddings, 2003).

Moreover, relationships are not removed from education's primary goal of academic excellence, as established by many scholars. Roffey (2012a) explains how quality relationships need to be developed in school communities, not just for authentic well-being, but also for educational excellence. Drawing from research literature on the impact of relationships in schools, McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) also conclude that relationships influence academic outcomes, especially because they contribute to student motivation and engagement. Likewise, Diener and Diener (2009) are of the opinion that positive interpersonal factors will directly affect academic outcomes in school communities. Noddings (1995) confirms that academic achievement is related to relational well-being in school communities. She argues that adequate academic achievement cannot be reached in schools if learners do not feel cared for and learn to care for others.

In a local study on learners' perceptions of what contributes to their academic success in highly successful, previously disadvantaged rural schools in the Mpumalanga province, findings emphasised the strong, positive relationships in these schools. Mutual acceptance specifically emerged as a theme (Moloi, Dzvimbo, Potgieter, Wolhuter, & Van der Walt, 2010). Furthermore, a study on the association between affective teacher-student relationships, and academic engagement and achievement confirmed previous findings that indicate a positive correlation between these variables (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). It therefore seems suitable for Witmer (2005) to name relationships "the fourth R in education" apart from reading, writing and arithmetic, and thereby stressing its centrality in academic outcomes.

Moreover, relational well-being in schools can have benefits for the South African society at large. As discussed above, it impacts on academic results, which in turn serve broader developmental goals, since, according to the South African government, "[e]ducation is considered a principal instrument to achieve empowerment, economic growth and general improvements in welfare" (Statistics South Africa, 2012, p. 6). Furthermore, positive relationships and school-belonging curb youth violence and anti-social behaviour, as shown in reviews on educational literature by Hromek and Walsh (2012) and McLaughlin and Clarke (2010). Likewise, a study done by Osher et al. (2012) on school and educator roles in curtailing school dropout, delinquency, and eventual incarceration, concludes that the nature of educators' interactions with learners has a significant impact on both positive and negative outcomes.

In light of the literature referred to above, it thus seems evident that positive relationships are crucial in school communities and therefore the promotion of relational well-being should be prioritised.

### **The Promotion of Relational Well-being in School Communities**

As reflected in research literature, various relationships are involved in relational well-being in school communities. The most important relationships are between learners as peers or friends (McGrath & Noble, 2010; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Roffey, 2012a; Visser, 2007c;), teacher-student relationships (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Roffey, 2012a; Weeks, 2009; Van der Merwe, 2004; Witmer, 2005), staff relationships (Roffey, 2012a), the home-school/teacher-parent relationship (Roffey, 2012a; Witmer, 2005), and the relationship of the school with the wider community (Weeks, 2009). Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky (2003) suggest that well-being should ideally be promoted by working with schools as entire communities – thus, taking all of these relationships into account.

The promotion of relational well-being in schools is addressed in research literature. In the international realm, Roffey (2011a) emphasises the building and rebuilding of positive school and home-school relationships. In her work, relationships in school communities are perceived from an ecological and non-linear perspective, and she advocates a proactive, holistic approach to well-being promotion (Roffey, 2011a, 2012a). In their review of global research studies on the connection between the experience of school relationships and mental health in adolescents, McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) argue that promotional strategies and research need to be more relationally focussed and should take the complexity of the school institution into account, rather than being individualistic and programmatic as is often the case. Furthermore, Witmer (2005) asserts that collaboration and commitment is needed between all the stake-holders in the school community in order to build positive relationships. She also contends for the inclusion of educational psychology courses that teach about relationships in the pre-services training of educators.

South African research on school climate often touches on the importance of relationships for the creation of an environment that is conducive of effective learning and

teaching. According to Molemane (2000), a web of caring relationships contributes to a school climate which fosters school effectiveness. In his study on invitational teaching communication, Van der Merwe (2004) concludes that relationships should be enhanced in schools by improving teachers' communication and interpersonal skills. An investigation of educators' perceptions of school climate in Northern Cape schools highlighted the importance of open, supportive teacher-principal and teacher-teacher relationships which impact on teacher well-being, motivation, and productivity, and in turn on learner motivation and achievement through the teachers' interactions with them (Pretorius & De Villiers, 2009). In further local research on school climate, supportive and inclusive school relationships are suggested as a means to create a non-violent school climate (Barnes et al., 2012). Moreover, respectful, accepting and supportive relationships are seen as contributing to a caring school environment, which is indicated to be a potential solution to challenging behaviour in South African school communities (Weeks, 2008).

In view of the above, it becomes evident that many national and international researchers are acknowledging the importance of relationships in schools. However, relationships are not necessarily perceived as a critically important constituent of well-being, as suggested by Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010), White (2010) and McCubbin et al. (2013). Moreover, the proactive promotion of relational well-being is seldom specifically addressed in research.

National policies and actions for the promotion of general well-being exist, as already discussed, and this often incorporates a focus on relationships. As stated previously, South Africa embraced the international Health Promoting Schools framework (Swart & Reddy, 1999) which encourages the holistic development of schools (Department of Health, 2008). Furthermore, the Department of Education is stressing psychosocial care and support in education (Department of Education, 2001a). Also, there is a call in South Africa for value-

based teaching that should transfer values of the constitution to learners (Department of Education, 2001b; Seedat & Lazarus, 2011). Many of these are interpersonal values which, when applied, will add to relational well-being in schools. These values include reconciliation, respect, equality, non-discrimination, accountability and *Ubuntu* – the African notion of mutual understanding and the appreciation for the value of human differences (Department of Education, 2001b). Furthermore, as indicated previously, relationships are highlighted in the national evaluation of educators' competencies in the Integrated Quality Management Systems for School-Based Educators (Education Labour Relations Council, 2003). Thus, the importance of relationships in school communities is not ignored, but policies and actions are not purposefully directed at specifically improving relationships and promoting relational well-being in South African school communities.

Local researcher, Kitching (2010), suggests that relationships form the basis for the co-construction of enabling school communities, and therefore proposes a relationship-focussed approach to the current relational challenges experienced in schools. The implication is that all the members of a school community will be considered sense-makers who take part in the patterning of enabling social spaces in which well-being is enhanced in the midst of the complexity of togetherness. According to her, a relationship-focussed approach involves the acknowledgement of the importance of various facets of interrelatedness, which include respect, responsibility, care, connectedness, open communication, and the presence of power. Such an approach could contribute to the “rehumanising” of schools.

As already stated, despite the global and local emphasis on the importance of school relationships, meagre research on the promotion of relational well-being exists in the South African context. Kitching et al. (2012) and Ungerer (2012) therefore highlight the need for research that focuses on relationships in school communities. These researchers particularly

emphasise the importance of understanding relational well-being, and consequently its promotion, from a complex interactive dynamic systems perspective and not merely from a traditional modernist viewpoint that focus on the linear, causal nature of interactions.

### **Summary**

In this study, schools are seen as communities due to the way that people are bound together in them. These communities play a significant role in the promotion of well-being, which is understood as a holistic positive state that surpasses the mere absence of ill-being. The WHO's Global School Health Initiative encourages schools worldwide to promote holistic health. In South Africa, the international Health Promoting Schools framework is guiding health promotion in school communities. International and local research literature supports the notion that social relationships play a significant part in people's well-being, particularly in school communities. Relational well-being is seen as mediating personal and collective well-being and incorporating caring, respect for diversity, reciprocity, nurturance and affection, support, collaboration, and democratic participation in decision-making processes. Relational well-being in schools contributes to holistic well-being and development, school connectedness, the creation of a caring and supportive environment, academic success and the socioeconomic progress of the nation. Although South African educational research and policy are acknowledging the importance of positive relationships in schools, relational well-being promotion has not yet gained a central place in either sphere. It is advocated that relationships need to be understood as a crucial element of well-being and that the complex, dynamic, interactive nature of relational well-being in schools needs to be acknowledged.

Part two of this dissertation comprises a research article that will be submitted to the Journal of Psychology in Africa for potential publication. It includes the findings of the phenomenological study that was conducted to investigate Psychology and Social Work

postgraduate students' reflections on the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities. It also contains a brief discussion of these findings. The main themes that were derived from the participants' reflections are: the promotion of relational well-being in school communities as a complex, integrated process; the promotion of relational well-being in school communities as an inclusive, collaborative process; challenges to relational well-being promotion; and key elements of interrelatedness for the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the author included her middle name in this publication, it is the same author as in the previous two references, and thus treated accordingly in the text and reference list

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**PART 2**

**ARTICLE INTENDED FOR SUBMISSION TO THE JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY**

**IN AFRICA**

**Title of Article, Authors, and Contact Details**

Postgraduate Students' Reflections on the Promotion of Relational Well-being in South African School Communities

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**Abstract**

This qualitative, phenomenological study explored a group of Psychology and Social Work postgraduate students' reflections on the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities, using the World Café method and open-ended questionnaires. These students (n=29) are involved in a project on relational well-being, and are working in school communities in various contexts and capacities. Thematic analysis of the data indicated that the participants viewed the promotion of relational well-being in school communities as both a complex, integrated and an inclusive, collaborative process. Challenges to the promotion of relational well-being are discussed as well as key elements of interrelatedness that are perceived as crucial to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.

*Keywords:* relational well-being; school communities; community psychology perspective; complexity theory; positive psychology

## Postgraduate Students' Reflections on the Promotion of Relational Well-being in South African School Communities

School communities play a crucial role in the promotion of well-being (De Jong, 2000), perceived as a holistic positive state that transcends the mere absence of ill-being (Frydenberg, Chan, Care, & Freeman, 2009; Prilleltensky, 2005). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2013a) introduced the Global School Health Initiative in 1995 to encourage holistic health promotion in schools. More recent international and South African research literature highlights the importance of social relationships in the enhancement of well-being in school communities (Frydenberg et al., 2009; Kitching, Roos, & Ferreira, 2012; Konu & Rimpelä, 2002; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Roffey, 2011a, 2012a; Ungerer, 2012; Witmer, 2005). Various research authors attest that relationships are essential to a person's holistic well-being (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007; Keyes, Schmotkin, & Ryff, 2002; Van Schalkwyk & Wissing, 2010; White, 2010). According to Nelson and Prilleltensky (2010), relational well-being is conceptualised as mediating both individual and collective well-being, and includes care, respect for diversity, reciprocity, nurturance and affection, support, collaboration, and democratic participation in decision-making processes. Despite the acknowledgment of the importance of relationships in schools, it is often marginalised due to a continued focus on ameliorating problems (Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2007; Roffey, 2011a). In South Africa, it has become evident that attention needs to be given to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities, in the realm of both research and policy, as confirmed in a study by Kitching (2010).

### **Conceptual Framework for Understanding the Promotion of Relational Well-being in School Communities**

A community psychology perspective, which focuses on community strengths and well-being promotion, (see Duffy & Wong, 2000; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Seedat &

Lazarus, 2011; Visser, 2007a) formed the basis of this study. From this perspective, relationships are perceived as interpersonal interactions in micro settings which are embedded in organisational and communal structures and influenced by cultural patterns (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Visser, 2007a).

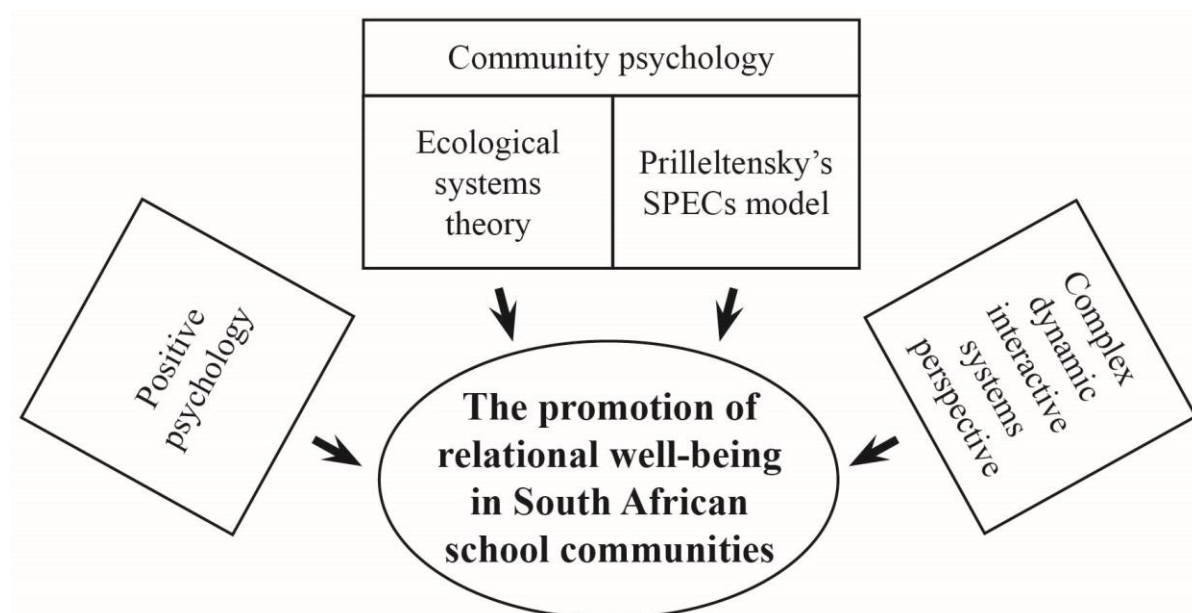
Moreover, this study utilised the lens of the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), who argues that human processes are complex and similar in nature to systems. Individuals are inseparable from their social context, which comprises four interconnected systems on different levels of complexity and in continuous interaction with one another. This approach, highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence between people bound together in a system, is thus useful in this study on relationships in schools.

Based on the ecological principles of Kelly (1966), Prilleltensky's (2005) approach to the promotion of well-being was applied in this study. He advocates the investment in strengths, prevention, empowerment and community conditions (all of which form the acronym "SPECs") as a model for relational well-being promotion. He emphasises a simultaneous move away from reactive to proactive, from individual to communal, from deficit-oriented to strength-based, and from detached to empowering approaches to well-being promotion. Only if all four of these domains are addressed, could well-being be effectively attained.

Furthermore, a complex interactive dynamic systems perspective was applied, which stresses that relationships cannot merely be viewed from reductionist, modernist perspectives which concentrate on linear predictability and cause-and-effect models of interaction (Morrison, 2002, 2008; Stacey, 2003). Rather, relationships are understood as complex, interactive processes of interacting and relating (Stacey, 2003), which are present within interconnected networks such as schools (Morrison, 2002, 2008). This perspective therefore

adds to a conceptualisation of relational well-being as a non-linear experience located in people's complex, dynamic interactions on various levels, and is needed to understand relationships in school communities, according to local and international researchers (Kitching et al., 2012; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Ungerer, 2012).

Lastly, this study employed the lens of positive psychology, which focuses on the building of positive qualities and the thriving of individuals, communities, and societies, rather than on pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It recognises the inherent interconnectedness of well-being and interpersonal relationships (Carr, 2004; Roffey, 2012b) and therefore complements the topic of this study.



*Figure 1.* A graphical representation of the theoretical lenses used in this study.

### **Aim of the Study**

This qualitative, phenomenological study explored the reflections of postgraduate students, involved in a project on relational well-being, and working in various contexts and capacities in school communities, on the promotion of relational well-being in South African schools.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

A qualitative, phenomenological research design was implemented, since the aim was to collect rich, subjective, in-depth data from the participants, and to understand rather than predict the phenomenon of relational well-being promotion in school communities (Babbie, 2011; Creswell, 2009).

### **Sampling and Participants**

The study population included all 120 students currently enrolled for a Master's or Doctoral programme at the Centre for Child, Youth and Family Studies in the Faculty of Health Sciences of the North-West University, South Africa. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling, as a means of non-probability sampling (Babbie, 2011; Creswell, 2009), was utilised to select participants for this study. The sample consisted of a group of 29 Psychology and Social Work postgraduate students enrolled for a Master's or Doctoral degree, with a particular focus on relational well-being in school communities. The participants are all involved in a project that focuses on relational well-being in school communities and were approached to participate while they attended cohort supervision sessions at the University. These participants were thus specifically selected based on their academic insight into the concept of relational well-being. They were furthermore selected due to their involvement with children in a wide variety of contexts, such as teaching and learning (including special needs education), educational psychology, counselling, youth development, social work, psychometrics, and speech and drama coaching, across the socioeconomic spectrum. The students are involved in both urban and rural settings in locations throughout South Africa as well as in Namibia and Botswana. Their working experience at grassroots level allows them to engage in reflexive conversations concerning the promotion of relational well-being in schools, representing insider voices (Theron, 2008).

## Data Gathering

The World Café method, a specialised form of focus group, was applied (Brown & Isaacs, 2005; Schieffer, Isaacs, & Gyllenpalm, 2004). The method is based on individuals' capability to cooperate (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and to strategise effectively for the survival and adaptation of the system (Schieffer et al., 2004). During a World Café event, a group of people collaboratively dialogue on a topic connected to a single, larger conversation (in the case of this study: relational well-being in school communities), through continuous rounds of intimate conversations around tables (Schieffer et al., 2004). In this study a World Café event was held at two different locations with different students. The participants gathered around tables in groups of four and discussed relational well-being from various perspectives. For each table, one of the students was elected as a host who remained at the table, facilitating that table's specific conversation. The other participants, in 20 minute discussion sessions, rotated between the tables until everybody had been to each table. Each person thus had the opportunity to contribute to all the conversations. The hosts finally summarised the complete discussion at each table for all the participants. In order for the groups to make visual presentations of their discussions, paper and drawing material were supplied. The World Café method was chosen as a means to stimulate the participants' reflections regarding relational well-being, in order to tap into this vibrant, evolving dialogue among academically informed people with grassroots experience.

Following the World Café event, participants were asked to complete open-ended questionnaires (Labuschagne, 2003) with questions that would allow for more detailed reflection on the initial themes identified regarding relational well-being promotion in their specific contexts. Out of the 29 participants, 20 responded. The questions were:

- Please reflect on how you view relational well-being in school communities.

- How, in your opinion, can relational well-being be promoted in school communities?
- With reference to your own work experience, describe strengths and weaknesses you have witnessed relating to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.

### **Data Analysis**

Inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2009) by means of thematic analysis was utilised, following the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006) which include familiarisation with the data (also involving transcribing), generating initial codes, searching for themes and reviewing them, defining and naming themes, and ultimately producing a report. Member checking - the testing of findings with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) - took place after data analysis. This process entailed electronic interviews through e-mail communications (Morgan & Symon, 2004) with five participants, chosen based on their availability and willingness to participate. They all confirmed that the analysis seemed appropriate.

### **Trustworthiness**

Crystallisation - the use of multiple methods of data collection and analysis - was applied to increase trustworthiness, in order to present the studied phenomenon more detailed and honestly (Ellingson, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It was applied through the use of multiple methods (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010) - which in this study included two World Café events and open-ended questionnaires; as well as through different genres of representation (Ellingson, 2009), including the written texts of the open-ended questionnaires, the audio data of the World Café discussions, and the visual representations produced during the World Café events. Moreover, various theoretical lenses were utilised (Tracy, 2010). The participants' involvement in a variety of contexts ensured multivocality (Tracy, 2010) and the different viewpoints were clearly heard without being influenced in any

way. Member checking ensured the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, the transparent and detailed descriptions of the research design and methodology allow other researchers to apply the findings to their unique contexts or to conduct similar research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). Finally, the researcher was accountable to a supervisor, and upheld self-reflectivity to reduce researcher bias (Creswell, 2009; Ellingson, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study was conducted within a larger research project by the North-West University (ethical code: NWU-00060-12-A1), and a research proposal was approved by an ethical review committee. The Constitution of South Africa (1996) and the ethical rules of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2004) guided the researcher in ethical principles. Avoidance of harm to participants (Strydom, 2011) was upheld and no risks to inflict harm were foreseen. The participants' informed consent was obtained, and participation was voluntary with the option to withdraw at any time (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; HPCSA, 2004; Strydom, 2011). The data and the participants' personal information were dealt with confidentially, through secure storage of the data at the university and anonymity in the report (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; Strydom, 2011). Social accountability and responsibility (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008) was applied, as the study intends to contribute to a better understanding of relational well-being promotion in school communities. The researcher reported the findings back to the participants (HPCSA, 2004; Strydom, 2011), as it might enrich their own professional and academic pursuits. The findings were not manipulated or falsified in any way (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2008; HPCSA, 2004; Strydom, 2011), thanks to constant supervision, personal integrity and academic rigour.

## Findings

The results from the data on the promotion of relational well-being in school communities are discussed in this section and the four main themes are represented in Figure 2. In the portrayal of the findings, Q1-20 signifies the 29 open-ended questionnaires, while WcG1-8 denotes the eight World Café discussion groups. Different speakers in these group discussions are identified by S1-x. Some of the quotations were translated from Afrikaans in a manner that best preserved the meaning of the statements.

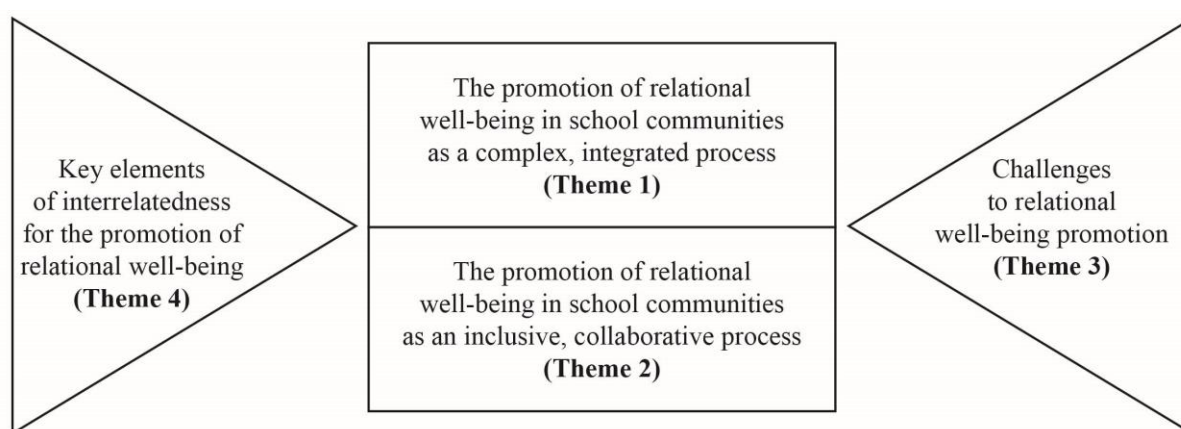


Figure 2. A graphical representation of the four main themes.

### **Theme 1: The Promotion of Relational Well-being in School Communities as a Complex, Integrated Process**

The participants' reflections on the nature of the promotion of relational well-being clearly indicated that they considered it to be a complex, integrated process that needs to be dealt with in an equally complex, integrated manner. Their understanding was evidently informed by an eco-systemic perspective.

**An eco-systemic understanding of the process.** In this study, the participants emphasised the links between the various components involved in the school community, as illustrated in Figure 3 and the following statement: *"We just said that everything is so interlinked that you can't take an entity by itself – everything works together. Every relationship is connected"* (WcG3).

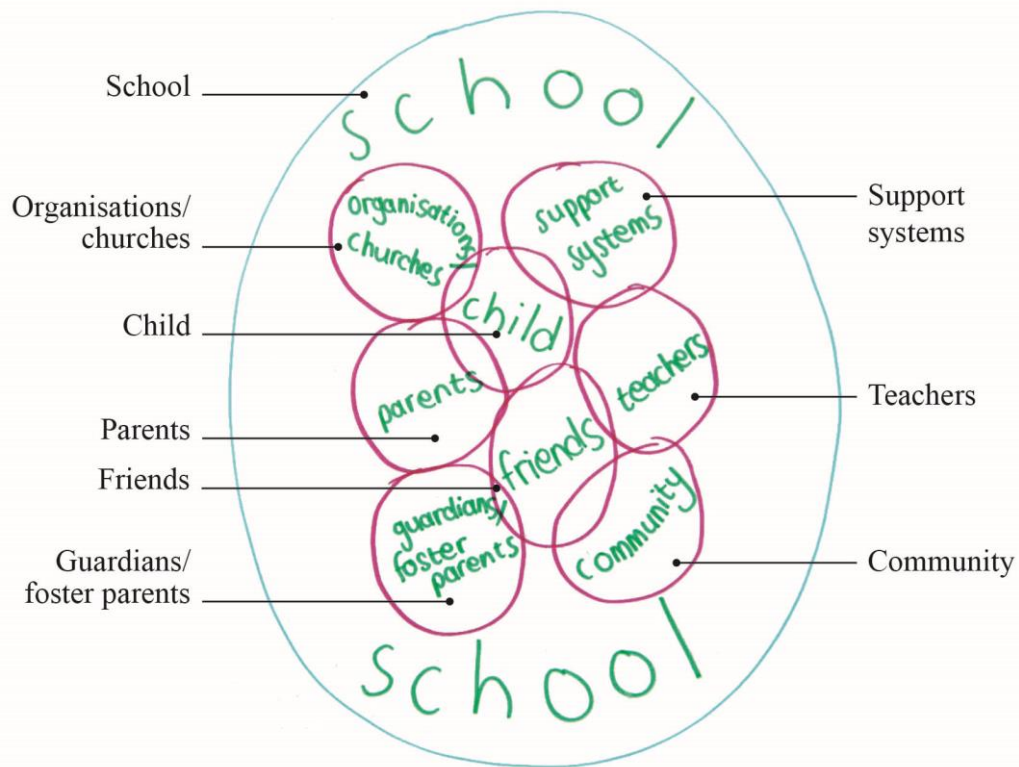


Figure 3. A drawing of the integrated nature of relationships in school communities.

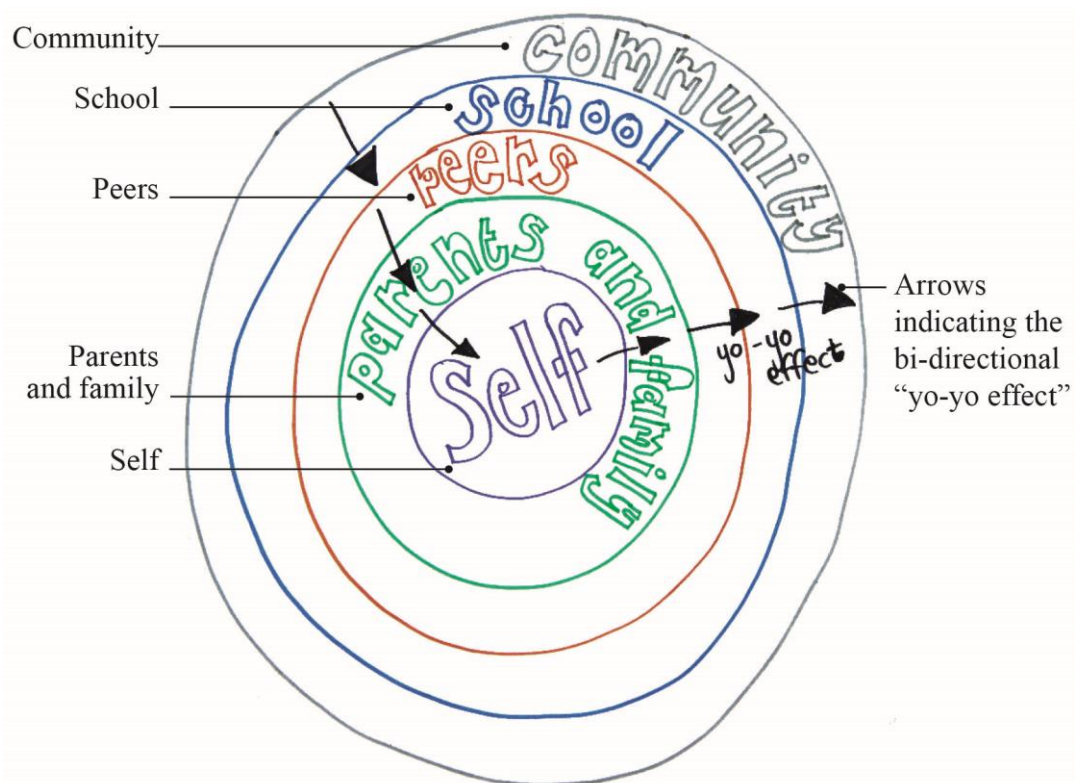


Figure 4. A drawing of the bi-directional nature of relational well-being in school communities between various role players.

The participants furthermore described the promotion of relational well-being as a bi-directional, non-linear process that involves the reciprocal influence between the individuals and their environments. One of the groups described this process as the “yo-yo effect”, as indicated in Figure 4 and this explanation: *“From the self we moved out, but it also moves in, so it creates the yo-yo effect and it’s a bi-directional process. Change in any direction will create change in the other direction”* (WcG2). Evidently, both Figure 3 and Figure 4 suggest that the participants considered the learner as part of a complex, integrated system, as suggested by the eco-systemic perspective.

The participants argued that, due to the complexity of relational well-being, the promotion thereof needs to be holistic; taking all of the subsystems and their complex interrelatedness into account. The following statement reflects this notion: *“Schools should be trained in a more holistic approach to identify problems in different areas of a learner’s life, and then be able to address the problem so that it doesn’t affect other parts of a learner’s life”* (Q7).

Although some of the participants indicated a limited appreciation for the complexity of the process of relational well-being promotion, and still referred to simplistic programmes when reflecting on the praxis thereof, many others specified that the process cannot be reduced to a simplistic, time-limited and detached programme. Rather, the process should focus on the everyday encounters between school community members: *“Do you not perhaps see it...as in...everyday things, how do we promote relational well-being? Not in the sense of a programme, but maybe just what’s needed for everyday things... So my vision is, maybe on a smaller scale, just where you are, just...in the setting you work... to look at things that promote relational well-being”* (WcG2). And: *“Promoting relational well-being does not mean or imply that big campaigns need to be implemented, or that a lot of money is needed. It starts with the little things, like just being aware of how your behaviour influences others”*

(Q3). It should also be a continuous process: *“Relational well-being is something that needs to be constantly developed in school communities”* (Q4).

**Environmental influences limiting the promotion of relational well-being.** In line with the eco-systemic understanding of the process of promotion of relational well-being in school communities, participants in this study specifically reflected on the way in which certain environmental influences are limiting the promotion of relational well-being; thereby acknowledging the complexity of the process: *“To promote relational well-being, you have to take the environment into consideration”* (WcG1).

The participants argued that there is insufficient funding available for basic educational resources such as textbooks, infrastructure and human resources, as illustrated in these comments: *“If certain basic resources are lacking (e.g., enough staff, books, classrooms) there is simply no way the school can focus on relationships. Funds, but also the sufficient management thereof and the stewardship of property, are necessary. It almost works on a hierarchy – if the basic needs are not met, nobody will be striving towards the more existential needs like relational well-being”* (Q9). And: *“S1: What about things like textbooks? S2: There is a lack of basic educational resources. S3: We are saying that these relationships in schools are negative, because there is...a lack of resources”* (WcG3).

Likewise: *“It is easy to say, let’s promote relational well-being, but you need expertise, you need staff...finances... If the community doesn’t have finances, then none of this can happen”* (WcG1).

The participants also indicated that the socioeconomic circumstances of many families do not meet the basic physiological needs of children, such as the need for food and proper shelter. Their arguments were based on their understanding of Maslow’s (1970) hierarchal organising of basic needs, which claims that needs lower in the hierarchy (such as physiological needs) are more urgent and should be gratified before needs at a higher level

(such as relational needs) will manifest. This is illustrated in these comments: *“S1: You can’t work on relational well-being when basic needs have not been met. S2: You want to look at Maslow’s hierarchy when you are working within a group”* (WcG1). And: *“These relationships are being influenced by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs”* (WcG7).

## **Theme 2: The Promotion of Relational Well-being in School Communities as an Inclusive, Collaborative Process**

The participants’ reflections indicated that they viewed relational well-being promotion as a collaborative process. They argued that it should be an inclusive endeavour, engaging all the different parties involved in the community. They particularly focussed on the teachers’, school management’s and caregivers’ roles in promoting relational well-being, and indicated certain limitations to collaboration.

**The inclusive nature of the process.** The participants described the relational matrix in a school community by referring to all the different role players involved: *“There is principle-to-staff, staff-to-staff (staff meaning teachers, cleaners, admin ladies, and so forth), ...child-to-teacher relationship, child-to-child relationship, teachers-to-parents relationship, parents-to-child relationship, leaders (prefects and so forth) with the child relationship, school and the Education Department’s relationship, and the parents-to-parents relationship”* (WcG3). Also: *“I see relational well-being as healthy relationships between all the parties involved in a school community – learners, staff, support staff, school leadership, governing body, parents and the wider community”* (Q9).

The participants emphasised that relational well-being in the school community is the responsibility of all these role players: *“It might firstly be necessary to determine who forms part of the school community and to make sure that everybody is being involved in the ‘dream’ to promote relational well-being”* (Q12). And: *“Each one needs to take responsibility for his role to provide to the relational well-being of the others and the whole”*

(Q9). Furthermore: “*S1: Each one has to know their role. The teacher, the parents, the churches and organisations; children as well – they need to know what their role is. S2: And then also taking responsibility to fulfil that [role]*” (WcG3). There was a recurring emphasis on the reciprocity of taking responsibility that involves commitment from everybody involved, as one participant stated: “*It has to be a two-way street*” (WcG8).

The participants argued that collective responsibility for the promotion of relational well-being should start with collective awareness of the importance of relationships and relational well-being among school community members, as indicated in the following participants’ understanding of the promotion of relational well-being: “*It is actually making all of these people aware of what is relational well-being is*” (WcG2). Also: “*I think the first step would be to create an awareness of relationships that already exist in the school*” (Q8). And: “*Where there is the realisation that relational well-being is important, I have only seen positive outcomes*” (Q17).

With reference to whom the role players in the promotion of relational well-being in school communities should be, participants suggested that marginalised groups like gangs also need to be acknowledged in this process: “*S1: We also looked at gangsterism, and the role of... 'out-groups' in community and relational well-being. S2: ... People are normally doing research without the gangsters...but the gangsters actually play a vital role in the community – they are...ruling many communities. So we can't leave them out. You must include everybody. Not just the churches*” (WcG4).

However, participants were mindful that even though relational well-being promotion is an inclusive process, different subsystems might need different strategies of promotion. For example, one participant stated that relational well-being can be promoted by “*educating and empowering everybody in a way that is appropriate to them (for example, it will look different for learners as for teachers, and different again for parents, etc.)*” (Q9), and another

one indicated that *“Every one of them is going to be [promoted] in a different way... You are not going to speak to parents the way you speak to the educators”* (WcG2).

The participants furthermore suggested that the adults in the school community should collaborate for the benefit of the learners: *“My belief is that relational well-being in schools can be promoted if parents, the community and teachers take hands and work together as a partnership; in other words stop blaming each other and try to work together in helping children to experience...relational well-being in schools”* (Q19).

**The position of teachers and the management team in the process.** Although all members of the school community were considered responsible for the promotion of relational well-being, the participants suggested that teachers and school management teams should initiate the process and lead by example: *“If relational well-being starts with the management of the school and the teachers, it will filter through to the rest of the school”* (Q8). And: *“I strongly feel that the superiors of the schools must know the key of relational well-being before discussing it with the children. To make sure all the teachers, together with the principal, have a common understanding that they can pass on to the children”* (Q1). Furthermore: *“The teacher is pivotal in enabling it [relational well-being] to happen. Whoever the leader is...the way they interact with the group will affect how... the group is with each other”* (WcG1).

**Home-school collaboration.** Some conflicting opinions existed on whether the onus for relational well-being is on the home or school. As previously indicated, the participants strongly highlighted the responsibility of the teachers and the school management in the promotion of relational well-being. However, the participants also emphasised the responsibility of parents and caregivers towards their children’s relational well-being, based on their perceptions of home as a place where a child should learn about relationships:

*“Respect in the home, relationships in the home...that is where it begins... What you teach your child at home, he carries to the outside” (WcG3).*

The participants argued that so-called “broken homes” and a lack of proper examples of healthy relationships at home are jeopardising children’s ability to form positive relationships, as indicated in these reflections: *“What happens at home will determine how he views himself, and will influence other relationships” (WcG6).* And *“Many children come from broken and unhealthy households. They do not, in many cases, have a good example of healthy relationships and bring their “unhealthy” example of relationships to schools” (Q3).*

Some participants reflected on the role of the home in the process from a linear, causal position, indicating that the relationship between parents and children at home will directly influence relational well-being at school: *“When there are bad relationships between the parents and the child, the relationship between the child and the teacher is also bad and that leads to bad behaviour... When they are not being disciplined at home, they think they can do just what they want to at school... So if [the relationship at home] is bad, the relationship at school is also bad” (G5).*

These linear, causal reflections were balanced by other participants who acknowledged the complexity of the process and the interdependence between the home and school environment in the promotion of relational well-being. These participants argued for a collaborative effort: *“S1: ...Surely this [the promotion of relational well-being] should start off over here – in the schools. S2: I think it should start at home. S1: ...How do you practically start this at home? S2: I just think that if one starts at school, it’s not there [at home]... So, it must be the other way around. The parents should be brought in [to the school]...” (WcG2).* They also argued that both parties were liable for poor home-school partnerships: *“The teachers do not involve the parents enough. The parents do not want to be involved in the school” (WcG5).*

### **Theme 3: Challenges that need to be addressed in the Promotion of Relational Well-being**

The theme refers to the challenges that the promotion of relational well-being in school communities might face on different levels of implementation. The challenges are based on what were described as concerns and limitations to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities where the participants work. It involves the equipping and support of teachers and parents/caregivers, addressing the imbalance in focus between academic achievement and the promotion of relational well-being, as well as the challenge to facilitate relational well-being proactively in school communities.

**Equip and support teachers and caregivers.** The participants acknowledged that the responsibility of school staff and caregivers to take the lead in relational well-being promotion is coupled with the challenge to equip and train them better for the task. Teachers were specifically highlighted in this regard: *“Perhaps educators need to be trained from university/college with an emphasis on relationships just as much as on academics; in other words, incorporate relational training more into training curricula”* (Q9). And: *“There is a great need for more in-depth education on relational well-being in the school as a whole... Teachers do want to help these children [in need of counselling], but because of their lack of knowledge about relational well-being they can worsen the situation”* (Q11). Also: *“S1: Through skills we want to leave them [the teachers and caregivers] with empowerment. S2: ... So it’s knowledge. You give them the knowledge about relational well-being”* (WcG1). And: *“Proper training of educators; also motivational input and stress and conflict management [is necessary]”* (Q5).

The participants also stated that teachers furthermore need to be supported in taking care of themselves to enable them to promote relational well-being: *“Helping [teachers] to relax and learn to take care of themselves [is needed], as stress is one of the biggest reasons*

*for aggression and negative behaviour” (Q3). Furthermore: “S1:...To me it is also about [teachers’] own well-being, in terms of burnout, in terms of...really being tired and stress relief... S2:...You also [have to] look at support networks” (WcG1).*

The participants furthermore argued that the school needs to sustain their staff members in their efforts to promote relational well-being, by employing support staff, including school counsellors, to aid the process: *“What I have identified at the school that I work in is that teachers have too many children in their classrooms and can’t always give them the individual attention that is needed. Therefore, having a school counsellor is useful” (Q7). And: “Each school should have at least one counsellor that is available full time” (Q2). Furthermore, teacher assistants were seen as essential support staff in this process: “You need teacher assistants” (WcG3).*

Besides educators, a lack of training and support of parents and other caretakers was also seen as a challenge that needs to be addressed: *“Parents feel they do not know how to support their children” (Q10). And: “I also think promoting parents and equipping parents [is important], because sometimes parents don’t know what they are doing (WcG3). Moreover: “That’s a big problem – educating those people who take care of these children, even if they are in orphanages, educating those [caretakers]...because sometimes they are also just trying to keep their head above the water” (WcG3).*

**Address the imbalance in focus on academic achievement at the expense of the promotion of relational well-being.** The participants reflected on the compromised state of relational well-being in school communities because of the imbalance in focus between academic achievement and the promotion of relational well-being. They argued that relationships were not always viewed as important in school communities: *“Relational well-being is not a priority in schools. Relationships are not regarded as important. Achievement and competition are however regarded as important” (Q18). Also: “A lot of the time*

*teachers only focus on the academics, because they are so worried about finishing the curriculum...and they forget that they are actually teaching people and not robots” (Q2).*

It was also acknowledged that relationships in schools are seen as separated from academic achievement and success, although the participants felt that relationships could contribute to academic accomplishment and that it forms part of what school success entails, as described in these statements: *“I think that it [relational well-being] is not really being developed well. The focus is still more on academic achievements than on relational well-being, without realising the benefits of relational well-being for achievement” (Q16).* And: *“S1: Success is measured by that [achievements]. Success is not seen as all these qualities that we are talking about of relational well-being” (WcG3).*

In light of the above, a paradigm shift that moves towards integrating a relational focus in schools was advised: *“The whole thing about relational well-being is to move the paradigm, so that we work more towards acknowledging relationships and the interaction that keeps going every day, because that is the kind of thing that is neglected” (WcG1).*

**Attend more proactively to the promotion of relational well-being.** Many participants elaborated on the fact that the time and space to attend to relational well-being is limited. It seems the staff, parents and learners are too busy and pressured to invest in relationships, as the following statement indicates: *“Relational well-being is non-existent in most schools. It’s not a priority in most schools, since teachers, learners and parents seem to be overwhelmed” (Q17).*

They argued that the teachers’ workloads -which entail teaching, administrative duties, coaching extra-curricular activities, and large curricula which need to be completed within the school year - do not allow teachers the opportunities to attend to learners’ individual situations and to work on relationships: *“It is not about how the children in the classroom are doing, it is about how the file looks...and it is sport and academics and*

*competition and weekends driving to other schools... There is no time. Relationships always come last, because there is no time” (WcG5). A Grade 1 teacher commented that “there is no time for looking into the emotional needs of the learners. I do not even get a chance to ask learners about their ‘news’ every day” (Q2).*

The pressure and large workloads were seen as leading to stress and burnout in teachers, which further compromises relational well-being, as the following statements indicate: *“Stress [among teachers] is one of the biggest reasons for aggression and negative behaviour” (Q3). Also: “S1: I think we must look at why these relationships are negative. S2: The teachers are overworked. They don’t have enough support... Teachers are suffering from huge burnout” (WcG3). A primary school teacher stated that “the teachers’ personal coping capacity is so exhausted throughout the week that there is nothing left [by] Friday” (WcG5).*

The participants acknowledged that parents also experience pressure due to heavy workloads, and that this might influence their relationships with their children and the school, as indicated in these reflections: *“Burnout [in parents] is a big problem. And...if you burn out it will affect your relationship with your children” (WcG2). Also: “It’s also not always possible to involve the parents, as sometimes they...are too busy” (Q7).*

The participants furthermore recognised that children are being pressured to perform and partake in many activities. This pressure comes from various sources, such as the school, their parents and themselves, and it influences relational well-being, as reflected in the following discussions: *“There is just no time for these relational qualities and interaction with the kids, because they have to go to school and then they have to go to netball and then they have to go swimming, so there is just no time” (WcG3). And: “S1: The pressure that’s been put on children is huge. And it’s not just from the teachers; it’s from within the school community. It’s from children themselves... Competition is sort of encouraged. S2: I also*

*think what kind of happens with the parents is that they are sort of living their own dreams through the child... I think that pressure from your parents as well” (WcG3).*

Furthermore, participants emphasised that large class sizes or child-to-teacher ratios are restricting opportunities to promote relational well-being in schools: *“The classes are way too big to really get to know each child well” (Q2)* and *“...if you’ve got 50 kids in your class, there is no way that you are really going to form a relationship with each learner” (WcG3).*

#### **Theme 4: Key Elements of Interrelatedness for the Promotion of Relational Well-being in School Communities**

The theme refers to values, attitudes and skills which can be considered as key elements of interrelatedness. The key elements evident from the reflections are respectful engagements, acceptance of one other, open and honest communication based on trust, the enhancement of a sense of belonging and connectedness, as well as caring and supporting one another.

**Respectful engagement between members of the school community.** In their reflections, the participants referred to respectful engagements between the members of the school community as an important value-based way of interacting, which will promote relational well-being. To these participants, relational well-being includes: *“Mutual respect. Respect for self, property and others” (WcG2)* and *“mutual respect for one another” (Q14).* The participants in particular emphasised the reciprocity of such engagements: *“I believe that respect is vital to the promotion of well-being, and not just in the sense of learners respecting educators (although that is a big part of it), but educators also being respectful of learners by treating them in ways they would like to be treated as people and not as a “lesser” beings... Having real respect and regard appears to go a long way” (Q20).*

However, reflecting on the current situation in schools, participants expressed concern about the tendency towards disrespectful engagement by both educators and learners: *“There*

*is no respect for teachers. Pupils often ignore teachers [and] talk back to them. [However,] when teenagers voice their opinions it is often suppressed, as it is seen as misbehaving by adults” (Q4). Furthermore: “I have noticed that learners are not always...respected by educators and are judged [by them]” (Q20), and simultaneously “staff at schools is seen by learners as negative role models, resulting in learners showing no respect for educators” (Q5).*

**Acceptance of one another.** Participants also viewed acceptance as imperative to relational well-being and necessary for respectful interactions, as one participant stated: relational well-being *“can further be promoted by accepting one another” (Q14).*

This acceptance was seen as the willingness to view others non-judgementally and as equal in relationships, as indicated in the following statements: *“Relational well-being can be promoted through encouraging equal relationships; equal relationships between peers as well as between the learners and teachers. Through this I think mutual respect will come easier, seeing that there is no ranking or the need to be judgemental” (Q14).* And: *“...we talked about interesting qualities or constructs that we experienced in our relational well-being... Good understanding, acceptance...and being non-judgemental” (WcG4).* Moreover: *“It also includes...allowing the freedom to just be and not to be judged” (Q14).* Such an accepting space is, according to one participant, created *“when there is NO discrimination with regards to race, religion, gender, socioeconomic affluence or the lack thereof” (Q12).*

The participants furthermore suggested that acceptance imply the ability to show empathy and understanding, as these reflections show: *“Understanding and empathy on both the sides of learners and educators also would be helpful” (Q20).* And: *“S1: Maybe also to be understood by others... S2: What about empathy? So I can feel what you are feeling. S3: So I can identify with you” (WcG2).*

Furthermore, sensitivity towards cultural differences, and celebrating and confirming the uniqueness of others were seen as important in accepting interactions: “*S1: Acceptance of others... S2: [We need] to celebrate the uniqueness of others*” (WcG2). And: “*S1: Confirmation, I think confirmation is also [important] S2: It [implies] celebrating the uniqueness of others*” (WcG1). Furthermore: “*I think culture also plays a role. Because sometimes the teacher doesn’t have an understanding of some [cultures]...and sometimes the teacher doesn’t have a multicultural view. And if you are in a basic school, there are multicultural children... Empathy for their cultural differences [is necessary]*” (Q3).

Maintaining a positive attitude towards self and others was seemingly also seen as an important facet of acceptance. It was emphasised that negativity currently prevails in South African school communities, and that a more positive attitude is needed to promote relational well-being: “*There is a lot of negative energy, so it is important to bring in the positive energy as well...to balance out the negative experience and that will help to live the experience of relational well-being*” (Q4).

**Positive communication based on trust between members.** The need for positive communication between members of the school community was strongly argued as being central to relational well-being: “*S1: So, what qualities are in a positive relationship? S2: Positive communication, between groups or individuals*” (WcG1). Furthermore, “*Good, sufficient communication should gain optimal attention*” (Q18), because “*the relationship is forming and developing through any means of communication*” (Q3).

However, it was mentioned that limited communication is often present in schools, which impinges on relational well-being: “*We are saying that these relationships in schools are negative, because...there is no communication*” (WcG3). Therefore, in describing how relational well-being could be promoted through communication, many participants commented on the challenges that need to be overcome for good communication to take

place: *“Teaching teachers how to listen”* (Q10) and *“...the teachers have to teach, and then they have to coach, and then they have to [take care of various other responsibilities], so there is really no time to work on communication...”* (WcG3). Furthermore, conflict management was highlighted as part of positive communication: *“The ability to manage conflict in appropriate ways...enhances cooperation”* (WcG1).

The need for reciprocal trust between members as a basis for communication was specifically emphasised in group discussions: *“S1: How can you have relational well-being with somebody you don't trust or [who doesn't] trust you?”* (WcG2) and *“S1: Trusting... S2: ...that is very important...”* (WcG1).

Other qualities related to trusting relationships were also mentioned, such as openness and confidentiality. Below is an example of how communication in an open, trusting relationship was perceived: *“You need an open relationship with the parents so that you can say: you can tell me what's going on; I'm not going to be judging and telling everyone at school. The teachers must also know when to be...confidential”* (WcG3). However, relationships that lack openness and trust were also described: *“Confidentiality of learner problems is not a priority, and...educators end up knowing the learner's business, even when it does not have anything to do with them. The educators then complain that the learners spread rumours and can't be trusted, but are often engaging in the exact same behaviour. Learners are not stupid and see this double standard and I have never noticed that children do as you say and not as you do”* (Q20).

**Developing a sense of belonging and connectedness.** The importance of creating a sense of belonging was emphasised by the participants: *“The relationships should function in such a way that...the members have a sense of belonging to the school community”* (Q8) and *“The experience of well-being is to belong”* (WcG1).

According to the participants, a sense of belonging is enhanced by the feeling among members that they make a contribution to the larger context, and that a common goal and cooperation exist, as reflected in the statements below: *“Relational well-being also creates a sense that people want to be at the school, and they are passionate about their contribution”* (Q8). Also: *“There where people have a common goal and support each other, the relationships are fine – it is nice and comfortable. But there where people work against each other, or simply...for [themselves], relationships are not healthy at all”* (WcG5). Furthermore: *“...instead of working against each other, you take your different strengths and work with each other”* (WcG1).

Moreover, connecting with others and forming peer friendships were seen as important to fostering a sense of belonging: *“Peer relationships between learners need...to provide friendship and belonging”* (Q9) and *“Relational well-being for me means that learners can have opportunities to build friendships with peers”* (Q14).

The participants also mentioned that humour and laughter are involved in this connectedness at school: *“S1: You must also have humour. S2: That forms part of well-being... S3: Being able to laugh at yourself. S1: I think humour changes group dynamics a lot”* (WcG1). And: *“It should also be a place where [children] can have a laugh”* (Q14).

Some participants advocated that connectedness might be built by hosting team building events: *“Certain school events, like parent evenings, fun days, family events and staff bonding times are great in the promotion of relationships”* (Q9).

**Showing care and support.** The participants repeatedly referred to the importance of showing care and support for others as a way to promote relational well-being in school communities. One participant stated that the promotion of relational well-being *“starts at looking after and taking care of each other”* (Q3). The participants specifically referred to the care and support that the peer group provide: *“Relational well-being for me means that*

*learners...receive support from friends and are cared for by their peers” (Q14) and “peer support would promote relational well-being” (WcG2). Care and support from teachers were also highlighted: “I have seen many teachers...who truly care for their learners, and have also noticed that those are the ones who have fewer problems with learners” (Q20).*

According to some participants, a caring and supportive environment would create a safe space, which is imperative to the promotion of relational well-being: *“Creating an environment where children can feel safe and comfortable may contribute to relational well-being” (Q14). Also: “S1: You have to feel comfortable and secure [at school]. S2: [School should be a] safe environment” (WcG1).*

The participants indicated that care and support of learners could be incorporated into the school’s curriculum and activities by providing a space where learners can voice their problems and gain life skills: *“Allowing children to have group discussions (say for example in the Life Orientation period) about things that bother them at school...or problems...that they experience can help to enhance relational well-being” (Q14). Furthermore, a participant indicated that “life skills groups for students” could promote relational well-being (Q4). Education on and opportunities for caring were seen as important in the promotion of relational well-being: “Teach them [learners] to care for others and give to others in a practical way... Implement programmes and support groups at school where learners get involved in order to help with needs in their community” (Q13).*

### **Discussion of Findings**

The postgraduate students, participating in this study based on their experience in various school contexts and their academic understanding of relational well-being, reflected on the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities. Firstly, they acknowledged the complex, integrated nature of the process (Theme 1), based on the ecosystemic approach, which views human processes as embodying a system that comprises

various interconnected subsystems (Visser, 2007b). Roffey (2012a) supports an eco-systemic view of relationships in school communities, and states that numerous influences in different systems on various levels of complexity in a school setting, all affect a child's well-being.

Concurrently, some participants argued that due to the complex nature of the process, a more integrated, holistic approach to relational well-being than the current fragmented approach which focuses only on certain levels of interrelatedness might be needed to promote relational well-being effectively in school communities. These participants argued that all the systems related to school communities, as well as the bi-directional influences and actions within and between these components, should be considered in the understanding of relationships in a school community. These findings are in line with recent research conducted from a complexity perspective and based on the work of Stacey (2003). Morrison (2008) argues that learners and their school cannot be seen as separate entities, since they are connected to family, teachers, peers, societies and groups – relationships that all need to be considered. Along the same lines, Kitching et al. (2012) recommend that a comprehensive relationship-focussed approach, which acknowledges the complexity of human behaviours and the relationships between all members, should be implemented in South African school communities.

Applying the ecological perspective, the participants reflected on environmental influences that are limiting relational well-being and need to be addressed as part of the promotion of relational well-being. The findings of this study therefore concur with the position taken by the WHO (2013b), advocating that a health-promoting school should consider physical and social circumstances in health promotion, and that income, shelter and food need to be taken into account. In confirmation, Perlman and Vangelisti (2006) state that relationships do not happen in a vacuum, but are influenced by physical, social and cultural contexts. Prilleltensky (2005) furthermore acknowledges that investments in community

conditions are needed in the promotion of well-being. In line with these arguments, Snodgrass and Heleta (2009) contend for feeding schemes in South African schools located in impoverished areas as a way to address violence and aggression in school relationships.

The participants, despite their knowledge and experience, still assumed a causal, linear position in their reflections on the influence of environmental problems, which raises concerns regarding the lack of university education on the complex nature of processes such as well-being promotion. Moreover, their reliance on Maslow's (1970) theory of the hierarchal organising of basic needs is conflicting with a complexity perspective. Maslow's theory is critiqued in literature as reductionist (Geller, 1982) and relying on Western, individualistic ideals of personal growth, while minimising the importance of relatedness, which is actually the impetus of individual development (Hanley & Abell, 2002).

The findings furthermore indicate that the promotion of relational well-being, as an inclusive, collaborative process (Theme 2), should include all the different relationships in schools, as also identified in the research literature: peer relationships between learners (McGrath & Noble, 2010; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Roffey, 2012a; Visser, 2007c), teacher-learner relationships (McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Roffey, 2012a; Van der Merwe, 2004; Weeks, 2009; Witmer, 2005), staff relationships (Roffey, 2012a), the home-school relationship (Roffey, 2012a; Witmer, 2005), and the school's relationship with the wider community (Weeks, 2009). The participants' reflections confirm literature which suggests that schools as entire communities should be involved in well-being promotion (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003) and that all the stakeholders in the school community should take ownership and participate in health and well-being promotion (Kitching, 2010; Roffey, 2012a). Theory furthermore supports the findings by stressing that awareness is a necessary precursor to taking responsibility and action (Woldt & Toman, 2005; Yontef, 1993), as the participants argued.

In their reflections on the inclusive nature of the process, the participants particularly emphasised that, although each member of the school community needs to be involved, teachers and the management team have to take responsibility for relational well-being promotion. The findings seem to be in line with the educational manifesto of the Department of Education (2001) which promotes educators as role models. Witmer (2005) also emphasises the important role of educators and school administrators in the fostering of positive relationships with both learners and parents. Concurrently, Roffey (2012a) highlights how school leaders should set the example regarding positive relationships if they wish it to be incorporated into school culture. In an earlier study, Roffey (2008) also established that the relationship among teachers, and between them and the school management, filtered down to teacher-student relationships. Along the same lines, Noddings (2010) argues that teachers should be models of care in school communities.

Regarding home-school affiliations, the findings suggest that collaboration, although complex, is non-negotiable in the process of promoting relational well-being in school communities, as confirmed in the research literature. Witmer (2005), for example, stresses the importance of the teacher-parent relationship and parental involvement for school success. Likewise, Roffey (2012a) emphasises that positive home-school partnerships are pivotal in the school ecology, and that it has far-reaching positive effects on the school community members. However, she also acknowledges that these relationships are often subject to tension. Both authors see this positive relationship as crucial to learner well-being and it is therefore critically important to optimise parental involvement (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004). Local research established that effective, bi-direction home-school communication is often not applied in South African schools (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004), since educators are evidently not sufficiently equipped to manage home-school partnerships (Lemmer, 2012; Van Wyk, 2001). Furthermore, school governing bodies are not functional in

certain schools, due to lack of parental participation (Mbokodi & Singh, 2011). The participants in the study, however, seemed to lean towards blaming home circumstances for poor relationships at school. Such blame-shifting is argued in local literature to restrain enabling school communities (Kitching et al., 2012).

Three challenges regarding the promotion of relational well-being in school communities were identified (Theme 3). Firstly, the need to equip and support teachers especially, but also parents and caretakers, was indicated as a challenge based on the arguments that lacking knowledge of relational well-being is restraining its promotion in school communities. In confirmation, the WHO (2013b) states that a health-promoting school should focus on health-related knowledge, skills and support. Likewise, Witmer (2005) stresses that educational psychology courses should be completed as part of educator training in order to raise awareness in aspiring educators of the importance of relationships in education. South African researchers also argue that teachers should be trained in relational skills such as conflict management, communication skills, holistic support of learners (Van der Merwe, 2004), handling violence and conflict in school communities (Snodgrass & Heleta, 2009), and managing parent-school partnerships (Lemmer, 2012; Van Wyk, 2001). Schools in South Africa are considered as highly stressful working environments which threaten the well-being of teachers, and therefore workplace transformations that would better support teachers are necessary (Daniels & Strauss, 2010).

The participants regarded an imbalanced focus on academics as a second challenge to relational well-being. These findings are confirmed in a study conducted on school drop-outs, which found that schools tend to follow a linear, modernist approach that focuses mainly on academic achievement (Smyth, 2006). Furthermore, in an American study, Gonzalez and Padilla (1997) state that it is mostly assumed that the mental and psychological well-being needs of school community members are met outside of the classroom.

The need to attend more proactively to the promotion of relational well-being in schools was also regarded as a challenge by the participants. Drawing from various sources of educational research, Roffey (2012a) confirms that teachers often become so overwhelmed by large workloads and day-to-day demands that they struggle to invest in relationships, despite the fact that they truly care for the learners. This regularly contributes to burnout which causes teachers to distance themselves from their peers, and thereby negatively affecting their relational well-being.

The participants' reflections also involved the identification of five key elements of interrelatedness imperative to relational well-being (Theme 4). Firstly, respectful engagements were seen as crucial in relational well-being. This finding confirms the work of Roffey (2011a), who conducted research on the link between relational well-being and behaviour change in schools, and highlights the importance of respect as a basis for healthy relationships. The need for respectful engagement in the promotion of relational well-being in school communities also correlates with the findings of two South African studies – that of Kitching et al. (2012) and Ungerer (2012). Kitching et al. (2012) established that respectful engagements nurture relationships between members of a school community, while disrespectful engagements restrain relationships. The value of respectful engagements was confirmed in a study by Ungerer (2012) in schools of skill in South Africa. The study found that respect is required from both the teachers and the learners in order to enhance relationships in these schools, as the findings also indicated. Respect is furthermore one of the constitutional values of South Africa that should be emphasised in value-based education, according to the Department of Education (2001). The concern voiced by the participants regarding the escalation of disrespectful engagements between learners and teachers is also confirmed in literature and numerous media reports on violence and bullying behaviour in

schools (e.g., Bezuidenhout, 2011; Harper, 2012; Hosken, 2011; Le Roux & Mokhele, 2011; Myburgh & Poggenpoel, 2009; Nthite, 2006; Snodgrass & Heleta, 2009).

Secondly, acceptance was viewed as an important element of interrelatedness.

Research literature endorses acceptance and its associated values as important to healthy relationships. Roffey (2011a, 2012a) argues that acceptance of the whole person is important for a healthy relationship and holistic development in schools, and Frydenberg et al. (2009) view it as imperative to bonding people together in a school. Furthermore, equality and non-racism/non-sexism are stressed as values that underpin the creation of accepting spaces - as indicated in the South African Constitution (1996) - and should be addressed in the school curricula (Department of Education, 2001). Likewise, the WHO (2013b) stresses equity as a focus of a health-promoting school, and tolerance for diversity is seen by Onyx and Bullen (2000) as a measure of social capital in a school community.

Positive communication as a third key element of interrelatedness was highlighted by the participants. Kitching et al. (2012) and Ungerer (2012) also confirm communication as an aspect of nurturing relationships in South African schools. Trust as an important basis for positive communication, and therefore relational well-being, is indicated in the findings and confirmed in research literature as a characteristic of positive relationships in schools (Roffey, 2011a; Ungerer, 2012). Likewise, Krall and Jalongo (1998) assert that mutual trust is necessary in establishing a caring school environment, and Onyx and Bullen (2000) regard it as another measure of social capital in schools.

The importance of school connectedness or belonging, which is another imperative element of relational well-being according to the findings, is specifically emphasised in the literature (Frydenberg et al., 2009; Kitching et al., 2012; McLaughlin & Clarke, 2010; Roffey 2011b, 2012a; Weeks, 2009). Roffey (2011b) states that belonging is critical to well-being, and therefore people will search for ways to belong - in schools as well. Thus, a health-

promoting school would work towards connectedness in the school community (Roffey, 2012a). This connectedness is seen as learners' perception of being accepted and being part of the school community (Frydenberg et al., 2009). The findings also correlate with the notion of schools being bound by a sense of community (Sarason, 1974; Strike, 2004).

The participants' reflections lastly indicated care and support as a key element of interrelatedness for relational well-being promotion, which correlates with Prilleltensky's (2005) view that caring and support are signs of relational well-being. Caring for oneself and others is part of what constitutes a health-promoting school, according to the WHO (2013b), and the creation of a safe and supportive school environment is advocated in the framework for health-promoting schools in South Africa (Swart & Reddy, 1999). Krall and Jalongo (1998), Noddings (2010), Strike (2004), and Weeks (2008, 2009) confirm the importance of caring schools to the well-being of children. Concurrently, Kitching et al. (2012) and Ungerer (2012) found caring to be one of the central characteristics of nurturing school relationships in South Africa. Support from peers and teachers is concluded as contributing to learners' well-being by McLaughlin and Clarke (2010) in their review of literature on school relationships. Likewise, Strike (2004) views support as an aspect of community that should be promoted in schools. Similar to the findings, it is suggested that support of learners in South Africa should be incorporated into life skills education and other school and extracurricular activities (Scott, 2001).

### **Recommendations**

Relationships and the proactive promotion of well-being should be prioritised in schools while addressing the challenges to relational well-being that were identified in this study. The merging of ameliorative and transformative approaches is thus suggested, as advised by Prilleltensky (2005). All the members of the school community need awareness of the importance of relationships and their responsibility in relational well-being promotion.

To facilitate relational well-being promotion, school management teams, teachers and parents require equipping and support. Home-school partnerships are imperative in this undertaking. It is suggested that the key elements of interrelatedness which derived from the findings are enhanced in schools. Moreover, further research on the promotion of relational well-being in South African schools is suggested.

### **Limitations**

This study contributes towards a basis for the understanding of relational well-being promotion in school communities. However, the sample's restricted size and homogeneity limit the scope of this research, and the purposive and convenience sampling method implies that findings do not necessarily reflect the situation in all South African school communities. In future research, a wider variety of contexts and school community members' experiences should be investigated. Particularly, learners' perspectives need to be included, as strongly argued in literature on children's subjective perceptions of their well-being (Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, & Goswami, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

The reflections of postgraduate students, studying relational well-being and working in school communities, indicated that the promotion of relational well-being in schools is a complex, integrated as well as collaborative, inclusive process. They identified several challenges regarding relational well-being promotion as well as certain key elements of interrelatedness which are central to the process. It is concluded that the promotion of relational well-being is essential in South African school communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the author included her middle name in this publication, it is the same author as in the previous two references, and thus treated accordingly in the text and reference list.

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### PART 3

#### CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter includes conclusions to the study, which will briefly review the main themes and subthemes that derived from the data analysis. Furthermore, the limitations of the study will be discussed. In light of the conclusion, recommendations for the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities to the Department of Education and school management teams will be offered, as well as recommendations for further research. A brief note on the contribution of this study is also included.

#### Conclusion

The conclusion will specifically aim at answering the research question of this qualitative, phenomenological study, namely: *How do postgraduate students, involved in a project on relational well-being and working in school communities across South Africa, reflect on the promotion of relational well-being in these communities?*

The need for answering this question is evident when reviewing research literature which confirms the important contribution of relationships to well-being in school contexts, as well as evidence from research and media reports indicating that relational well-being in South African school communities is under threat (see Part 1).

As the preceding presentation of the findings in the proposed article (see Part 2) indicated, four main themes regarding the promotion of relational well-being in school communities emerged from the participants' reflections. Based on these findings, the researcher came to the following conclusions regarding the reflections of postgraduate students on the promotion of relational well-being in school communities.

Firstly, in their reflections the participants regarded the promotion of relational well-being as a process, and mainly focussed on describing the nature of this process. In the first place, they regarded the process as complex and integrated in nature (Theme 1), as suggested

by the eco-systemic perspective which describes this complex, interactive, non-linear process of relating in school communities between many different role players who are inseparably integrated with, and bi-directionally influencing one another. The concluded implication of this view for practice is that promoting relational well-being in schools requires a holistic approach which acknowledges all the systems involved as well as the way they are interrelated. It should also involve, as understood from the findings, a processes-oriented approach rather than once-off programmes which are detached from the other activities in the school context. However, some of the participants still relied on programmatic interventions when reflecting on the praxis of relational well-being promotion, and thereby not completely acknowledging the complexity of the process, as concluded by the researcher.

From this eco-systemic understanding of the process, the participants reflected on environmental influences which limit relational well-being in school communities, indicating their awareness that the environment will impact on relationships in school communities. A lack of funding and basic educational resources was highlighted as well as socioeconomic challenges experienced by learners' families. Participants applied Maslow's (1970) hierarchical organising of needs to indicate that when basic, physiological needs are not met, one cannot attend to needs higher in the hierarchy, such as relational needs. These arguments raise concern that the participating students still have a limited understanding of the complexity of relationships, and still apply linear, causal reasoning in their attempts to understand the process of promoting relational well-being in school communities.

Secondly, the researcher concluded that the promotion of relational well-being was viewed by the participants as a collaborative and inclusive process (Theme 2) that involves participation from all the members of the school community. The participants identified the various role-players included in this process, and emphasised that all members need to take responsibility in the promotion of relational well-being. They furthermore argued that the

genesis of this collective responsibility lies in collective awareness of relational well-being. The participants indicated that even out-groups, such as gangs, should be involved in this inclusive process. However, they also acknowledged that strategies of relational well-being promotion need to be adapted to suit different role-players.

The teachers' and school managements' role as leaders and role-models in facilitating the process of promoting relational well-being was specifically highlighted and it is therefore concluded that these role-players have a significant responsibility in the process. The participants furthermore focussed on the home as having a responsibility to promote relational well-being in families. Some students argued that "broken relationships" at home often negatively impact on school relationships. Different opinions existed on whether the home or school is primarily responsible for the promotion of relational well-being, which lead to the conclusion that even on postgraduate level some students do not consider the complexity of promoting well-being in a holistic and integrated manner. However, some students displayed more complex reasoning by indicating that the two systems should collaborate in this process. They also mentioned that both were currently failing in this mandate, as they witnessed in their work settings. The researcher thus concludes that both the parents or caretakers and educators have a responsibility to collaborate in effort of the promotion of learners' relational well-being.

Thirdly, it could be concluded from the postgraduate students' reflections that challenges exist with regards to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities (Theme 3). A need for equipping and support regarding the promotion of relational well-being in school communities was identified. They emphasised that teachers and staff, but also parents, need to be equipped with knowledge and skills to promote relational well-being. Teachers should also be supported to take care of their own well-being and a need for more support staff was identified. Based on the participants' reflections, it is concluded that they

perceived an imbalanced focus on academics and achievement in schools at the expense of relationships, which was identified as another challenge to the promotion of relational well-being in school communities. The findings suggest that academic achievement is understood as distinguished from relational well-being and not as the basis for academic achievement. Furthermore, a need was identified to promote relational well-being more proactively. Especially teachers, but also parents and children, were seen as too busy and experiencing too much pressure to be able to invest in relationships. Large class sizes were especially noticed as limiting the capacity for teacher-learner relationships. The conclusion drawn from the findings is that these challenges need to be addressed in order to aid relational well-being in schools effectively.

Finally, it was concluded from the results that there are key elements of interrelatedness (Theme 4) which provide a basis for the promotion of relational well-being in school communities, and which should be enhanced. These key elements include respectful engagements, acceptance, positive communication, a sense of belonging or connectedness, and care and support.

Reciprocal respectful engagements between members of the school community were seen as imperative to relational well-being. However, it was noted that this is often restricted in South African school communities by the ways in which people relate and interact.

The enhancement of acceptance was further highlighted. This included viewing others non-judgementally and as equal, showing empathy and understanding, being culturally sensitive while celebrating the uniqueness of others, and maintaining a positive attitude towards self and others.

Positive communication based on reciprocal trust, which included openness, confidentiality and conflict management, was indicated as another crucial element in

relational well-being promotion. Limitations to positive communication were seen as a challenge in school communities.

Furthermore, a sense of belonging and connectedness is imperative to relational well-being, according to the findings. This entails that community members should feel that they are part of the community, are contributing to the whole, and are working towards a common goal. Peer friendships, connecting to others, and humour and laughter were seen as contributing towards this goal. Team building and other school events were suggested to enhance this sense of belonging.

Lastly, care and support were identified as crucial elements in relational well-being promotion. This involves establishing a safe space. Also, it was suggested that opportunities for, and education on caring should be present in school communities, and that support should be incorporated into the school's curriculum and activities.

The findings of this study confirm previous research which supports the notion that relationships in schools are complex, interactive and influenced by environmental factors. The study also supports literature on the necessity of collaboration among and inclusion of various role players in the process of well-being promotion in schools. The identified challenges furthermore endorse local and international research on the situation in school communities. Moreover, the findings confirm former research indicating the value and importance of the proposed key elements of interrelatedness. It is therefore concluded that more attention should be given to the implementation of a relationship-focussed approach that challenges the current individual, modernist approach in school communities. Also, the development of proactive interventions to promote relational well-being is necessary, while addressing the challenges that impinge on it. Such an approach should take the complexity of relationships into consideration, and work towards cooperation between all the different role players.

In conclusion, the promotion of relational well-being in school communities should be approached, according to the reflections of the postgraduate students, by acknowledging the nature of the process as complex and integrated as well as collaborative and inclusive, whilst addressing relational challenges and building on the positive key elements of interrelatedness.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The baseline exploration of the reflections of Psychology and Social Work postgraduate students, with an academic understanding of relational well-being and experience in the field, on the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities, was conducted thoroughly. To accomplish this, the sample was selected purposively and conveniently in order to fit the research aims. The study thus offers a valuable point of departure for the understanding of relational well-being promotion in school communities. However, it is limited in scope due to the restricted sample size and the homogenous group of participants who are all postgraduate students. Therefore, the findings do not necessarily reflect the situation in all South African school communities.

Furthermore, the study is limited by not including children's voices. Community input is imperative in health and well-being promotion strategies, lest a top-down model is established according to outsider opinions (Layde et al., 2012; Theron, 2008). In school communities, children are central community members and therefore their perspectives need to count with regards to well-being promotion in these communities. This is in line with the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) which states that in matters concerning children, their best interest should be the chief consideration, and their views should be taken into account. The importance of allowing children to speak for themselves was clearly indicated in an international study which showed discrepancy between children's subjective indicators of well-being and other, objective measures of well-being, as well as between the subjective indicators of different groups of children (Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, &

Goswami, 2010). An understanding of the promotion of relational well-being in school communities would thus not be complete without including learners' perspectives.

In future research, these limitations should be addressed by increasing sample sizes and heterogeneity, and especially by including child participants.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are proposed to the Department of Education and school management teams regarding the praxis of relational well-being promotion in school communities. Recommendations are also offered with regards to future research.

#### **Recommendations regarding the Praxis of Relational Well-being Promotion**

Firstly, recommendations are suggested to the Department of Education:

- A greater emphasis on the promotion of well-being and enhancement of relationships is suggested, rather than a focus on the mere ameliorating of problems. A merging of ameliorative and transformative approaches is recommended, as suggested by Prilleltensky (2005).
- Challenges that should however be addressed include a lack of basic educational resources, socioeconomic challenges in communities affecting children at school, a lack of support staff, teachers' hefty workloads, and class sizes that are too large.
- All the different members of the school community require better equipping and support to enhance relational well-being. This is particularly applicable to teachers, school management, and parents. It is suggested that relational education is incorporated in teacher training programmes. Principals and management teams need to be trained and supported to take the main responsibility in the promotion of relational well-being.

- It is advised that policies in the South African education system are to be adapted to focus more on relationships in school communities. A shift in focus from viewing academics as superior and separate from relational well-being, to recognising its vital contribution to the holistic well-being of school community members, as well as to academic achievement, is recommended.

Recommendations to school management teams include:

- All the members of the school community should be made aware of their responsibility in the collaborative process of the promotion of relational well-being.
- Teachers require better equipping and support in order to enhance relational well-being in schools. Their workloads should also be lessened where possible by reducing learner-teacher ratios, employing teacher assistants and decreasing their after-school commitments.
- Home-school partnerships should be fostered, as they are imperative to the successful promotion of relational well-being. Teachers need specific assistance in managing these relationships.
- Support for parents is required to assist them in enhancing the relational well-being of their children. This could include involving them more in the education of their children and empowering them with knowledge and skills regarding relationships.
- Learners need support to help them deal with the pressure to perform and with overloaded schedules, as this influences their capacity to invest in positive relationships.
- Schools are advised to foster a culture that upholds a balanced focus between academic accomplishments and relationships, as both are necessary for holistic positive outcomes in learners. Furthermore, positive relationships enhance academic outcomes.

- Awareness of the importance of respectful engagements between school community members, acceptance of others, positive communication based on reciprocal trust, a sense of belonging and connectedness, and care and support should all be raised as key elements of interrelatedness for the promotion of relational well-being. These key elements should be emphasised more proactively, and knowledge and skills that will enhance the integration of these key elements in the everyday engagements between the members should be provided.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

In light of the findings, recommendations for further research are also included, as indicated below:

- More research on relational well-being promotion in South African school communities, in a wider variety of contexts with larger and more heterogenic samples, is necessary to form a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon. This entails the participation of a wider range of school community members, with a special focus on listening to learners' perspectives.
- Further research should take the complex, dynamic, interactive and eco-systemic nature of relational well-being and of interactions between people into consideration.
- Research is necessary regarding the promotion of a positive home-school partnership in South African school communities.
- Initiatives for the equipping and support of various school community members with regards to the promotion of relational well-being should be formulated in further research.
- The key elements of interrelatedness for relational well-being which are mentioned in this study, as well as ways in which they could be promoted in school communities, need further investigation.

### **Contribution of the Study**

Relational well-being promotion is a crucial need in South African schools. However, there exists a gap in research in this regard, which is being addressed in this study. This baseline study contributes towards an improved understanding of the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities. The study also confirms previous research highlighting the importance and complexity of relationships in school communities. The recommendations offered have the potential to contribute, upon implementation, towards enhanced relational well-being in school communities.

### **Final Word**

Relationships contribute significantly to the well-being of individuals and have the potential to transform education from an enterprise which merely imparts knowledge, to a rich and meaningful experience of interrelatedness. Positive relationships are powerful, since people “become who and what they are in and through their relatedness to others” (White, 2010, p. 164). The researcher thus envisions that the promotion of relational well-being in South African school communities would contribute to the holistic well-being of all members as well as the enhancement of academic achievement in these contexts.

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