

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

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This study is an exploration of the perceptions of primary school educators with regard to emotional problems in children during the developmental phase of middle childhood. The first section comprises the background and rationale that motivated the study, followed by the problem statement, theoretical statement and research methodology. The overview of the study forms the background to and proposal for the study and the manuscript that will form the research report. Some repetition occurs due to this.

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

Middle childhood begins roughly from the age of seven to around 11 or 12 years (Louw & Louw, 2007). This developmental phase is described as a relatively calm phase regarding emotional development, but is seen as important regarding children's cognitive, social, emotional and self-concept development (Louw & Louw, 2007). During this pre-adolescent phase, pre-identity formation may be crucial in defining the child's self-concept (Colwell & Lindsay, 2002). Piaget outlined the particular factors that influence cognitive and emotional development during this phase as being social interaction and transmission. This involves knowledge passed on to children from family members, parents as well as educators (Keenan & Evans, 2009; Louw & Louw, 2007; Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009).

Whilst parental relationships and attachment to caregivers play a major role in the emotional well-being of children, educators as 'substitute parents' may also play a big role in the emotional

development of children (Keenan & Evans, 2009). Children spend over one thousand hours a year at school, and roughly 140 hours at school per month. Considering the amount of time children spend under the care of their educators, it is reasonable to assume that educators may have a significant impact on the lives of the children. Louw, Van Ede and Louw (2004) discussed research that was conducted with educators in the South African context that showed that the attitudes of these educators had an impact on the current, as well as future, success of children in their class. Such attitudes included love and care, encouragement, and extra attention to and patience with slower children. Research has also shown that the expectations of the educators influenced the children's academic achievement, as well as their motivation and self-image (Louw et al., 2004). Thus the educator may have a large impact, positively or negatively, on children's current and future success.

The attitude of the educator has an impact on children in three significant ways. Firstly, the sense of belonging emphasised by educators influences children's academic achievement, as well as whether they will accept the educators' education values (Ma, 2003). This, in turn, affects the motivation of children, as well as their self-image and education values. Secondly, the attitude of the educator towards the children influences the atmosphere in the classroom. Approaches such as the responsive classroom approach, which emphasises empathy as well as structure with the goal of aiding students to develop self-control, produces more positive attitudes in educators, which in turn ignites more positive attitudes in children (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). Thirdly, the attitudes of educators influence how peers view each other. How educators behave towards children in the classroom not only influences the target children's self-image, but also influences how peers perceive their fellow learners (Montague & Rinaldi, 2001).

In addition to this, the attitude or perception an educator holds may also influence how that educator manages various behaviours in children. In a study of educators' perceptions of bullying, it was found that educators often would not intervene because they did not witness incidents, and although they also regarded physical aggression as bullying, they overlooked verbal aggression such as name-calling and exclusion. Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler and Wiener (2005) found that educators did not intervene because they misjudged the extent of bullying and were not aware of ratios of bullying and victimhood. The educators doubted the children's views, and the educators' understanding of bullying behaviours was limited (Mishna et al., 2005). If educators have misperceptions regarding important aspects of the emotional well-being of children, the children may feel ignored, overlooked and even neglected.

In another study, it was found that educators paid more attention to externalising and disruptive behaviours than to internalising, withdrawn behaviours (Mollins, 1999). It seems that educators pay more attention to more visible and disruptive behaviours, but overlook less physical and quieter behaviours that may be just as maladaptive. According to Mash and Wolfe (2005), around five percent of children and between 10 and 20% of adolescents suffer from severe depression. Yet depressive symptoms that are internalised may be overlooked by educators, as they are less visible. These symptoms include persistent feelings of sadness; withdrawn behaviour; low self-esteems and a dismissive attitude; negative thinking and poor concentration; disruptions in sleep and eating patterns; and physical complaints such as stomach aches, headaches, fatigue, etc. (Mash & Wolfe, 2005). These symptoms can easily be overlooked if educators do not have sufficient knowledge regarding the complexity of emotions and manifestations of emotional problems in children.

Because the majority of research focuses more on the parental relationship with children, there seems to be a gap regarding just how important the role of the educator is, as well as what educators believe emotional problems to be. Educators are one of the key informants to psychologists regarding the behaviour and functioning of children in the classroom context (Barret, 2006). Collaboration between educators and psychologists regarding the functioning of children is important because the two parties inform one another; educators inform psychologists of how behaviour is manifested, and psychologists inform educators of how to implement therapeutic interventions (Barret, 2006). Collaboration between the two could be powerful and valuable for the Education Department, the field of psychology and, most importantly, would be in the best interests of children who suffer from emotional and behavioural problems.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Educators play a vital role in the development and observation of children, and the impact that educators have on children in their class is significant. It consequently is extremely important to explore the perceptions of educators regarding the emotional problems of children in order to assist and educate educators in how to recognise emotional problems in children, and refer children for further assessment when necessary.

The above statement leads to the following research questions:

- (1) How do primary school educators perceive emotional problems in children?
- (2) What do primary school educators perceive their role to be regarding the emotional problems of children?

1.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the abovementioned research questions, the following objectives for the study were identified:

- (1) To explore the perceptions of primary school educators regarding the identification and recognition of emotional problems in children.
- (2) To explore the perceptions of educators regarding their perceived role in the identification and recognition of, as well as intervention in, children they perceive to have emotional problems.

1.4 CENTRAL THEORETICAL STATEMENT

The exploration of the perceptions of primary school educators will provide insight into the ability of educators to recognise and intervene in emotional problems in children during the developmental stage of middle childhood. An in-depth description of the perceptions of primary school educators will contribute to information regarding how educators understand emotional problems, as well as what is necessary for effective intervention therein.

1.5 DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTS

The following are definitions of core concepts relevant to this study:

1.5.1 Primary school educator

Within the context of this research, a primary school educator refers to a person who is trained and is employed as an educator at a primary school, teaching grades one to seven. The training may refer either to a diploma or degree received through successful completion of a course in education.

1.5.2 Middle childhood

Middle childhood refers to the pre-adolescent developmental stage of life, ranging from the seventh to the eleventh or twelfth year (Louw & Louw, 2007). During middle childhood there is a dramatic increase in cognitive skills and development, as well as emotional development (Papalia et al., 2009). The focus of this research is on the emotional side of development in children currently in middle childhood, as emotional problems might be easier to identify in a less turbulent developmental stage than in adolescence, for example (Louw & Louw, 2007).

1.5.3 Emotional problems

Emotional: According to Mash and Wolfe, the term emotional reactivity refers to “individual differences in the threshold and intensity of emotional experience, which provides clues to an individual’s level of distress and sensitivity to the environment” (2005, p. 42). Emotional problems therefore refer to the individual differences that become visible when a child has reached his or her boiling point, and the level of distress is higher than normal.

1.5.4 Perceptions

In this research, perceptions refer to what educators see or hear regarding the behaviour of children they believe may be suffering from emotional problems, and how the educators interpret the behaviours of those children.

1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.6.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative exploratory research design was chosen as the most appropriate for the purpose of this study. Qualitative research seeks to understand the unique experiences of people in unique contexts, rather than cause-and-effect relationships (Willig, 2010). Qualitative research is interested in meaning and how people attach meaning to phenomena, as well as the unique contexts in which people live and experience phenomena (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). With this in mind, the researcher chose a qualitative exploratory research design in order to try to understand the unique perceptions of a group of educators in urban schools in the South African context.

1.6.2 Ontology

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The experiences and perceptions of people are regarded as truth, are socially constructed, and are comprised of multiple realities (Terre-Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Ontology regards the researcher's stance towards how people cope and understand the world, as well as the way in which people are involved in the world (Freeman, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative inquiry regards the researcher's attempts at gaining an understanding of experiences and perceptions, and leads to

the researcher's process of knowing what comprises the reality (Slevitch, 2011) of individuals in unique contexts. The researcher subscribes to the relativist ontology, in terms of which reality is viewed as socially constructed (Nieuwenhuis, 2007), and therefore attempts to qualitatively gauge what the primary school educators believe to be the truth regarding emotional problems in children, as well as their perceived role therein.

1.6.3 Epistemology

The process of knowing pertains to epistemology, which involves how the researcher embarks on the venture of discovering what truth is and what justifiable knowledge is, as well as the relationship between the researcher and what can be known (Slevitch, 2011). The knowledge that is discovered enables the researcher to explain the perceptions and experiences of individuals, and grants the researcher an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of phenomena in terms of meanings and the interpretations thereof (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). In the light of this, the researcher acknowledges that this process of knowing is subjective in nature, and that truth is co-constructed by the researcher and the research participants (Terre-Blanche & Durrheim, 2006). Due to this, the researcher attempted to become a part of the natural setting with the participants involved in this study, and in order to minimise the subjectivity of the researcher with regard to the interpretation of the data, member checking was conducted with the participants involved in this study (Creswell, 2009).

The method of data collection used in this study was focus group interviews, as the researcher believed this would grant the participants an opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions with one another, as well as with the researcher (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). This process of knowing

used by the researcher, as well as the details of the research methods used, is discussed in more detail in the manuscript in order to avoid meaningless repetition.

1.6.4 The role of the researcher

Permission was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to enter three urban primary schools in the Sedibeng West District of Gauteng. The letter of permission from the GDE (Appendix A) was presented to the principal at each of the schools involved in this research, and a letter of permission was obtained from the principal of each school (Appendix A). The principals of the participating schools were informed of the aim and procedures of this research study before any of the educators were approached to participate in the study. The focus group interviews took place on dates and at times that were convenient for the participants involved in the study.

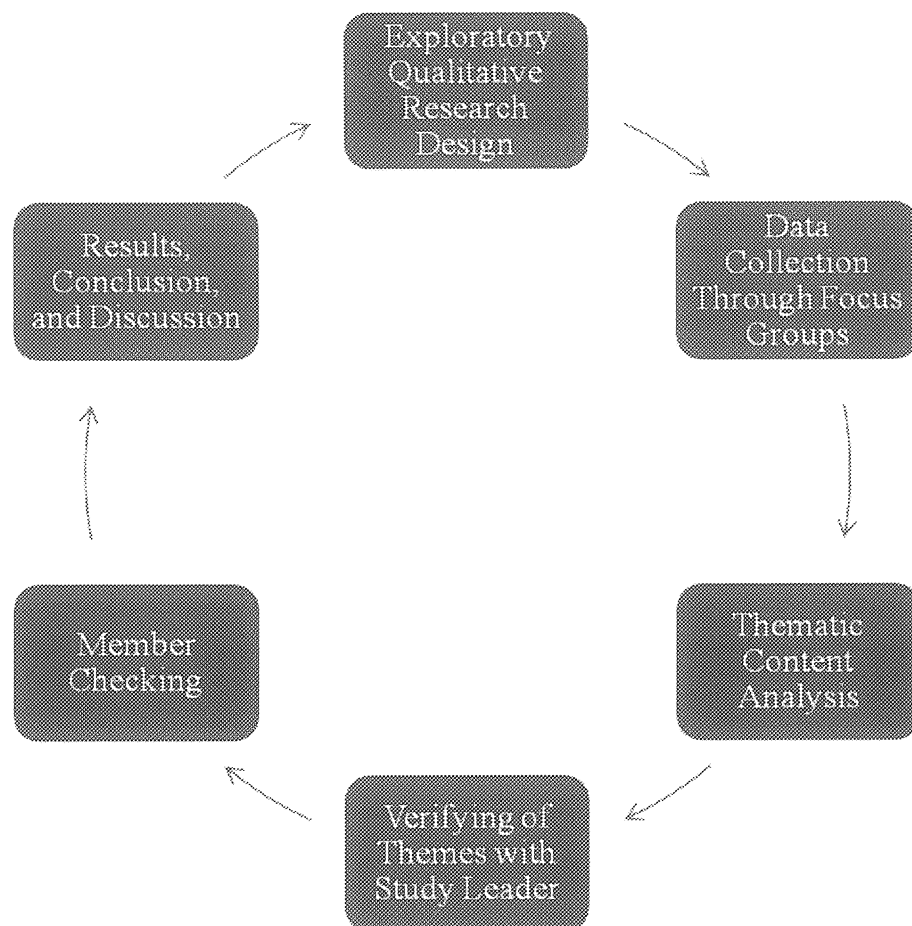
1.6.5 Data handling

The recordings of each focus group interview have been stored in an appropriate manner, are password protected, and will be kept for a period of five years as stipulated by North-West University. Once this time period has passed, all of the data from the focus groups will be destroyed.

1.6.6 Literature control

The literature control refers to the process of validating the results of the study after the data has been collected (Delpont & Fouché, 2005). The literature control allows the researcher to discuss the results of the study in the light of current literature and theoretical perspectives (Delpont &

Fouché, 2005). Therefore the literature control serves as a means to validate the results of this study against the current literature.

DESIGN MAP

1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The researcher maintained ethical conduct at all times throughout the research process. The proposal of this study was approved by the Ethical Committee of North-West University. After ethical approval for the study was obtained, permission was sought from the Gauteng Department of Education to approach three schools in the district of Sedibeng West, Gauteng. A letter of permission was obtained from each of the three schools involved in the study, and each participant involved in this study was given an informed consent form to sign and was informed of the procedures and aims of the study. The participants were well informed of the voluntary nature of the study, and that they could withdraw at any time with no consequences. The participants were also informed that they might be quoted in the final report, but that their names would remain confidential. All participants were over the age of 18 years and were all able to give informed consent. The nature of this research was not sensitive in any way and the participants were in no risk through participation.

1.10 REPORT OUTLINE

The report of this study is written in article format, which includes an overview of the study, the manuscript and the conclusions, recommendations and limitations of the study. An English as well as an Afrikaans abstract are provided. This format is in accordance with the General Regulation A 14.4.2 of North-West University.

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