



# **A school-based wellbeing programme to promote social functioning in middle childhood**

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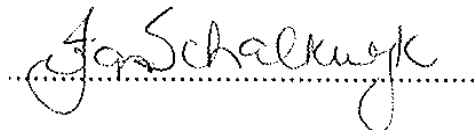
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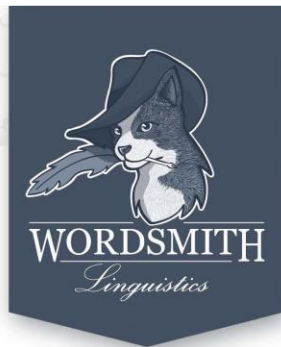
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by

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## Preface

This thesis is submitted in article format as indicated in the 2018 General Academic Rules (A4.4.2 and A4.10.5) of the North-West University. It is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the PhD in Psychology. The manuscript in article style meets the requirements of the specific journals that were selected for submission: i) *South African Journal of Education*, ii) *Acta Academica*, and iii) *Journal of Psychology in Africa*. Exceptions are made for the purpose of the thesis, for example, the use of 1.5 line spacing instead of double line spacing; 11-point font instead of 12-point font; the use of Arial font instead of Times New Roman font; and the length (number of words) of article three. These will be amended before submission to the particular journals. For the purposes of this thesis, the page numbering of the thesis as a whole is consecutive. However, for journal submission purposes, the manuscript will be numbered starting from page 1.

The thesis is divided into three sections. Section A consists of the first stage of the research and the preparation for the main phase and manuscript (research proposal and ethics application); section B reflects the research reports for examination in article format (three research articles); and Section C contains the conclusions and reflections of the study.

## Summary

### Title

A school-based wellbeing programme to promote social functioning in middle childhood

### Keywords

Learners, middle childhood, positive psychology, programme development, programme evaluation, school, social functioning, social skills, South Africa, wellbeing

This study was done from a positive psychology perspective and was based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory as well as Erikson's psychosocial theory. Educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood as well as the skills and competencies these learners need, were explored. This was done by conducting focus groups with 29 educators of 10- to 12-year-old learners (in grades five and six) from four schools that each represent one section into which schools of a selected area in the North-West Province of South Africa are divided. The results indicated that context and culture are important in learners' social functioning, that learners in middle childhood display both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour during their interactions, and that the intentional development and strengthening of certain social skills and competencies are needed.

A school-based wellbeing programme called the Social Treasures Programme (STP) was developed by taking the abovementioned needed skills and competencies as well as literature reviews on social skills programmes into consideration. The STP includes sessions on self-esteem and gratitude, self-regulation and goal setting, values and relationships, communication and listening skills, conflict management, emotional competence, and resilient coping.

As a school-based wellbeing programme in itself does not change learners' social functioning, the STP was implemented and evaluated at one school from the abovementioned area in the North-West Province to determine its effectiveness. A repeated measures design was used for this, and learners, educators and, parents or legal guardians completed psychometric scales at various time-intervals. The psychometric scales that were completed by the learners included the Social Anxiety Scale for Children–Revised (La Greca, 1998; La Greca & Stone, 1993), the School Short-Form Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory–Revised (Coopersmith, 1967; Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011), the Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale (Danielson & Phelps, 2003), the Children's Depression Inventory Short Form (Kovacs, 2011), and the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky &

Lepper, 1999); while the Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (Children's Institute, 2002) was completed by the educators, and the Child Social Preference Scale (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004) by the parents.

Initially, 221 learners from the abovementioned four schools participated in pre-testing, as the reliability and validity of the abovementioned five scales for the learners had to be determined for the South African context (and a large number of participants are needed for this). Sixty-six learners from one school were chosen for the experimental and control groups (with 45 learners in the experimental group and 21 in the control group) and participated in the evaluation of the STP (which consisted of attendance of the STP by the experimental group, post-testing directly after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group, and follow-up testing three months later). Thirteen educators and 66 parents or legal guardians completed the psychometric scales for the particular group into which they fall, before the presentation of the STP to the experimental group and also three months after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group.

The STP had a positive effect. According to the psychometric scales completed by the learners over time, their social anxiety decreased while their social skills (including adherence to social rules and politeness) and self-esteem increased. Furthermore, according to the psychometric scale completed by the educators over time, the STP increased the learners' assertiveness and peer social skills. The psychometric scales completed by the parents or legal guardians indicated that no differences occurred as a result of the STP.

## Opsomming

### Titel

'n Skoolgebaseerde welstandsprogram vir die verbetering van sosiale funksionering in die middel-kinderjare

### Sleutelwoorde

Leerders, middel-kinderjare, positiewe sielkunde, programontwikkeling, programmevaluering, skool, sosiale funksionering, sosiale vaardighede, Suid-Afrika, welstand

Hierdie studie is gedoen vanuit die perspektief van positiewe sielkunde en is gebaseer op Bronfenrenner se bio-ekologiese-sistemeteorie sowel as Erikson se psigososiale teorie.

Opvoeders se ervarings van die sosiale funksionering van leerders in die middel-kinderjare sowel as die vaardighede en bevoegdhede wat hierdie leerders benodig, is ondersoek. Dit is gedoen deur fokusgroepe te hou met 29 opvoeders van 10- tot 12-jarige leerders (in graad vyf en ses) van vier skole, wat elk 'n gedeelte verteenwoordig waarin skole uit 'n geselekteerde area in die Noordwes Provinsie van Suid-Afrika opgedeel is. Die bevindinge toon aan dat konteks en kultuur belangrik is in leerders se sosiale funksionering, dat leerders in die middel-kinderjare beide gepaste en onvanpaste gedrag toon in hul interaksies, en dat die doelbewuste ontwikkeling en versterking van sekere sosiale vaardighede en bevoegdhede nodig is.

'n Skoolgebaseerde program naamlik die "Social Treasures Programme" (STP) is ontwikkel deur die bogenoemde noodsaaklike vaardighede en bevoegdhede sowel as literatuuroorsigte van programme oor sosiale vaardighede in ag te neem. Die STP sluit sessies oor selfwaarde en dankbaarheid, self-regulering en die stel van doelwitte, waardes en verhoudings, kommunikasie- en luistervaardighede, konflikbestuur, emosionele vaardigheid en veerkragtige hantering in.

Aangesien 'n skoolgebaseerde welstandsprogram op sigself nie leerders se sosiale funksionering verander nie is die STP geïmplementeer en geëvalueer by een skool vanuit die bogenoemde area in die Noordwes Provinsie om die effektiwiteit daarvan te bepaal. Herhalende metings is hiervoor gebruik en leerders, opvoeders en ouers of wetlike voogde het psigometriese skale op verskillende tydsintervalle voltooi. Die psigometriese skale wat deur die leerders voltooi is sluit die "Social Anxiety Scale for Children–Revised" (La Greca, 1998; La Greca & Stone, 1993), die "School Short-Form Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory–Revised" (Coopersmith, 1967; Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011), die "Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale" (Danielson & Phelps, 2003), die "Children's Depression

Inventory Short Form” (Kovacs, 2011) en die “Subjective Happiness Scale” (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) in; terwyl die “Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1” (Children’s Institute, 2002) voltooi is deur die opvoeders en die “Child Social Preference Scale” (Coplan, Prakash, O’Neil, & Armer, 2004) deur die ouers.

Aanvanklik het 221 leerders van die bogenoemde vier skole aan die voor-toetsing deelgeneem omdat die betroubaarheid en die geldigheid van die bogenoemde vyf skale vir die leerders bepaal moes word vir die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks (en groot getalle deelnemers hiervoor nodig is). Ses-en-sestig leerders van een skool is vir die eksperimentele en kontrolegroepe gekies (met 45 leerders in die eksperimentele groep en 21 in die kontrolegroep) en het deelgeneem aan die evaluering van die STP (wat bestaan het uit die bywoning van die STP deur die eksperimentele groep, na-toetsing direk na die aanbieding van die STP aan die eksperimentele groep en die opvolgtoetsing drie maande daarna). Dertien opvoeders en 66 ouers of wetlike voogde het die psigometriese skale vir die spesifieke groep waarin hulle val voltooi voor die aanbieding van die STP aan die eksperimentele groep en ook drie maande na die aanbieding van die STP aan die eksperimentele groep.

Die STP het ‘n positiewe effek gehad. Volgens die psigometriese skale wat oor ‘n tydperk deur die leerders voltooi is, het hulle sosiale angs afgeneem terwyl hulle sosiale vaardighede (die nakoming van sosiale reëls en beleefdheid ingesluit) en selfagting toegeneem het. Verder, volgens die psigometriese skale wat deur die opvoeders voltooi is oor ‘n tydperk, het die STP leerders se selfgeldendheid en sosiale vaardighede met hul mede-leerders verbeter. Die psigometriese skale voltooi deur die ouers of wetlike voogde het aangetoon dat geen veranderinge plaasgevind het as gevolg van die STP nie.

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## **SECTION A**

### **INTRODUCTION**

## Introduction

The focus of this study was the development and evaluation of a school-based wellbeing programme to enhance the social functioning of learners in middle childhood in the South African context.

South Africa forms part of what is referred to as the Global South. The Global South is characterised by large numbers of individuals staying in informal settlements, high maternal and child mortality, increasing poverty, ongoing food insecurity, and inequality (Mahali et al., 2018). Many South African schools are situated in environments of high risk, high need and scarce resources (Ebersöhn, 2015), where disciplinary problems occur (Kourkoutas & Wolhuter, 2013; Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2008) and the incidence of violence and aggression is common (South African Council of Educators, 2011). In the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, creating enabling environments for children is central and the 17 Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs) that have been identified are aimed at impacting all aspects of children's lives and outlining a world vision in which all children reach their potential and thrive (Bhardwaj, Sambu, & Jamieson, 2017).

Positive relationships are at the heart of children's development and wellbeing, and researchers and educators are increasingly aware of the significance of social and emotional competence in the classroom and beyond, including education and employment outcomes in adulthood (Frydenberg, Martin & Collie, 2017).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the processes by which social and emotional competencies are developed (Weare & Nind, 2011). This takes place in five domains namely self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making and relationship skills (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). Self-awareness refers to an individual's ability to accurately recognise his/her feelings and thoughts and its influence on his/her behaviour. Social awareness includes the understanding of ethical and social norms for behaviour; the recognition of the support received from the school, family and community; empathising with others; and understanding another individual's perspective. Self-management refers to the ability of an individual to regulate his/her cognitions, emotions and behaviors in order to set and achieve his/her goals. Responsible decision-making refers to making constructive choices on, for example, the consequences of an action. Relationship skills includes the establishment and maintenance of rewarding and healthy relationships with various individuals and groups (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017).

SEL may assist children in acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to understand and manage emotions; to feel and show concern and care for others; to set and achieve goals; and to make responsible decisions (Weissberg,

Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). According to Dusenbury and Weissberg (2017), SEL may assist children in adjusting better, displaying more positive social behaviour and fewer conduct problems, to experience less emotional distress, and in performing better academically. SEL is also necessary for enhanced social relations both in schools and the society (Usakli & Ekici, 2018); may prevent risky behaviours, for example, violence and bullying (Weare & Nind, 2011); and may contribute to important life outcomes, for example, school success (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017).

Supportive relationships are critical in SEL as it leads to engaging, challenging and meaningful learning (Weare & Nind, 2011) and thus positive development. Caring relationships are also important for positive development and as learners grow older, their relationships with peers and teachers, for example, become more important in the development of social connectedness (Berry & Malek, 2017). However, according to Louw and Louw (2014), the family is still central to their lives and the parents still act as powerful socialisation agents by fulfilling the roles of direct instructors (transmitting rules and values to their children), indirect socialisers (providing examples of appropriate behaviour to their children) and social managers (managing their children's exposure to information, activities and people). Children's social interactions are thus central to positive development (Kitching, Roos, & Ferreira, 2012).

SEL may improve social functioning. Social functioning can be viewed as processes of relating (individuals interacting with one another) which create opportunities for wellbeing (Wissing, 2013). In this study, social functioning is also understood as a continuum indicating positive social functioning such as high self-esteem on the higher end and challenging social functioning such as the experience of social anxiety or depression on the lower end. Depending on one's position on the continuum, the level of wellbeing will differ.

Social skills are the best indicator of positive wellbeing (Nair, Ravindranath, & Thomas, 2013). According to Gresham, Elliot, and Kettler (2010), social skills can be defined as the particular behaviour displayed in certain situations that leads to judgement by others on the levels of competency of these behaviours. Social skills are important for successful social functioning because they assist individuals in adapting to and understanding various social settings (Luiselli, McCarty, Coniglio, Ramirez, & Putman, 2008). Furthermore, Dowd and Tierney (2005) state that social skills enable the young to develop and nurture, for example, responsibility, trustworthiness, respect, caring, and fairness. Moreover, all learners need social skills to assist them in achieving meaningful lives and overcoming severe challenges (Nel & Payne-Van Staden, 2014). Social skills may be taught by using behavioural techniques that includes instruction, discussions, modelling and rehearsing of appropriate behaviour as well as feedback and reinforcement (Spence, 2003).

### **Theoretical Paradigm**

This study was done from a positive psychology paradigm, especially Keyes' mental health continuum (Keyes, 2002), and was informed by Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Erikson's psychosocial model (Erikson, 1982). These are discussed next.

#### **Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology was developed as an antidote to the traditional emphasis of psychology on what is not going well, for example, mental illnesses and weaknesses (Eloff, 2013; MacConville & Rae, 2012). However, it does not deny the challenges or problems that individuals may experience (Peterson, 2009), and may assist individuals in fighting psychological and social problems of a serious nature and developing characteristics leading to bigger fulfilment not only for themselves but also for others (Donald, Lazarus, & Moolla, 2014). Furthermore, a positive psychology approach is relevant in schools as it focuses on an awareness of the distress that learners may experience (in various forms) at their homes, within their communities, at school, and in the classroom. The awareness of distress could create possibilities for finding ways to ameliorate or transform it into improved feelings and thus a sense of wellbeing (Donald et al., 2014). In addition, school-based positive psychology programmes aim at preventing future problems and challenges by teaching skills with the purpose of encouraging positive emotions, positive behaviours, and positive self-perceptions (Chodkiewicz & Boyle, 2017).

Within the positive psychology approach, a key assumption is that wellbeing includes an individual's experience of his or her life, an individual's ability to contribute to and function within his or her social environment, and not having mental ill-health (Keyes, 2003; Ryff, 1989). Keyes' model of mental health (the mental health continuum) is used as a cornerstone theoretical approach in this study.

#### **Keyes' Mental Health Continuum**

According to Keyes' (2002) mental health continuum, wellbeing is explained in terms of eudaimonia (to function well) and hedonia (to feel good). The eudaimonia component is represented by social and psychological wellbeing, while the hedonia component is represented by emotional wellbeing (Keyes, 2006). Social wellbeing is especially relevant to this study as it indicates sound social functioning (Wissing, 2014), and Keyes' (1998) model of social wellbeing reveals the interaction between an individual and his or her community by providing a perspective on individuals' judgement of the society's general functioning and the functioning of individuals in their social world (Peter, Roberts, & Dengate, 2011). In short, the psychological wellbeing component of this model includes characteristics that indicate sound individual functioning, namely self-acceptance, positive relations, environmental mastery,

autonomy, purpose in life, and personal growth, while the emotional wellbeing component refers to the characteristics of interest in life, positive emotion, and satisfaction with life (Wissing, 2014).

The mental health continuum represents three wellbeing categories, namely languishing (levels of psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing are low), moderate mental health (levels of psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing are moderate), and flourishing (levels of psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing are high; Wissing, 2014). Some individuals are languishing and can be seen as having relatively low mental health and thus complete mental illness. Moderately healthy individuals are classified as not having complete mental health, but also not having a mental illness. Flourishing individuals are enthusiastic and engaged with others in an active and productive way. They may have a mental disorder but will also display characteristics of positive mental health (Keyes, 2003).

Practices associated with positive psychology, such as promoting healthy social interaction, are compatible with an ecological perspective (compare Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and provide a holistic understanding of human behaviour at individual, family, community, and broader societal levels.

### **Bronfenbrenner's Bio-ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory can be of great value in view of the nature of this study, since it considers important factors with reference to development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as well as the embeddedness of individuals' behaviour in the ecosphere.

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory, an individual's development is influenced either directly or indirectly by various systems. The developing child is in the middle of these systems which include the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016).

The microsystem, of which there may be more than one, consists of the individuals who are closest to the child (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016) and who are familiar to him or her (Donald et al., 2014). Furthermore, it includes patterns of daily activity, relationships, and roles that may shape various aspects of social, spiritual, cognitive, moral, and emotional development (Donald et al., 2014). Events in one microsystem may influence another microsystem (Louw, Louw, & Kail, 2014); for example, the way in which a child responds at school may be influenced by what happens in the peer group or at home (Donald et al., 2014).

Connections or interactions across microsystems lead to the development of the mesosystem (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016); for example, the developing child's experience or

circumstances at home might affect the way in which the child interacts and relates with those at school.

The exosystem represents those social settings that a child does not experience directly but that nevertheless still have an influence on his or her development (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016), for example, religious institutions, social networks, and the availability of institutions for social welfare and health care (Louw et al., 2014).

The macrosystem includes dominant economic and social structures as well as practices, beliefs, and values that have an influence on all the other social systems. For example, a child who grows up in a culture that has the value of respecting older individuals or obeying authority will comply with this in his or her proximal interactions within the micro- and mesosystems (Donald et al., 2014).

The macrosystem develops over time as the environment of the child changes constantly, referring both to physiological changes and changes in the social environment of the child. Bronfenbrenner refers to this as the chronosystem – the specific time at which particular changes take place in the life of a child as well as its influence on the development of the particular child (Louw et al., 2014).

Bronfenbrenner's latest writings differ from his earliest in the sense that he became more concerned with the process of human development (Donald et al., 2014). In the 1980s, Bronfenbrenner (as cited in Donald et al., 2014) refers to a "process" as something explaining the connection between certain aspects of the context or the individual and the outcome of interest. In the 1990s, proximal processes were seen as the most important factor in development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and Bronfenbrenner also started to discuss the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model that now lies central to his theory (Bronfenbrenner, as cited in Donald et al., 2014).

The PPCT model views proximal processes (continuous forms of interaction in the immediate environment) as the primary mechanism for development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Rosa and Tudge (2013) state that, under the person factors, the bio-ecological model looks at the role that personal characteristics of individuals play in social interactions. This is important for the current study, as individual characteristics may not only have an influence on the individual's development but may also be an outcome of the individual's development. Furthermore, context involves the interconnected systems, which are based on Bronfenbrenner's original model as described previously, while time refers to what Bronfenbrenner calls the chronosystem (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Donald et al. (2014) state that time, context, and person factors all have an influence on the process factors.

### **Erikson's Psychosocial Theory**

According to Erikson's (1982) psychosocial theory, middle childhood is the phase of industry versus inferiority, meaning that learners develop the ability to cooperate and create, which may lead to either incompetence or mastery. The most recognised psychological developmental task in middle childhood is the gaining of self-competence (Charlesworth, Wood, & Viggiani, 2008). Furthermore, self-esteem and individuality are developed during this period by mentally comparing actual social experiences to the ideal self (Ripke, Huston, Eccles, & Templeton, 2008), by comparing the self to others, by having friends with whom stable relationships can be developed, and by being accepted and liked by siblings and parents (Feldman, 2007). The formation of a strong sense of identity, based on competence that is separate from parents, should now be built (Hook, 2013). In addition, children during this stage identify strongly with their peer group and peer influences are of key importance to the personality and functioning of developing children. A high value is thus placed on being able to productively engage and communicate with peers and also to be recognised and positively acknowledged by them. If a child fails at the developmental tasks of middle childhood, it will most probably lead to ineptness and inferiority, as the roots of inability, inferiority complexes, low self-esteem, and feelings of unworthiness lie in this developmental stage (Hook, 2013).

### **Problem Statement and Rationale**

During middle childhood, learners are challenged with accomplishing sound social functioning that not only includes the family, but also their school and neighbourhood (Weiten, 2017). Furthermore, peers are rather important in this life phase (Louw & Louw, 2014) and the peer group may have a powerful influence on a learner (Donald et al., 2014). Unfortunately, this influence may be negative (Donald et al., 2014), and social functioning may be hindered. According to Erikson's (1982) psychosocial theory, if learners are not successful in the developmental tasks of their particular life phase (which in middle childhood also include competent social functioning), a sense of inferiority may develop, which may be detrimental to further development (Donald et al., 2014).

Like all other learners, those in middle childhood are exposed to various environmental or external risks that may hamper their social functioning. Barbarin (2003) states that these risks include, for example, poverty, HIV, exposure to violence, familial conflict, and stressors regarding their education (including a lack of resources and support services as well as poorly trained educators). Furthermore, learner discipline is problematic in many South African schools (Kourkoutas & Wolhuter, 2013; Wolhuter & Van Staden, 2008) and include, for example, theft, vandalism, as well as destructive and disrespectful behaviour towards educators and fellow learners (LeeFon, Jacobs, Le Roux, & De Wet,

2013). In addition, aggressive behaviour is a common occurrence in South African schools (SACE, 2011), with this being a manner of expressing frustrations and emotions (Breet, Myburgh, & Poggenpoel, 2010). All of the above may be associated with poor social functioning and lower levels of wellbeing.

Deficits in social functioning (as evidenced by lacking social skills) have many adverse consequences (January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011); for example, learners showing an increased vulnerability towards mental health challenges such as social anxiety and depression (Segrin & Flora, 2000). Given the above, it is thus important that sound social functioning should be developed, strengthened and protected as, according to Damasio (2006), it is not automatic or instinctive due to mere maturation. Furthermore, Luiselli et al. (2005) indicate that it is unlikely that learners will develop positive social skills without direction and assistance. According to Lewis, Brock, and Lazarus (2002), social skills training may be beneficial in the sense that it prevents various problem-behaviours and may also serve as an early intervention or programme for these. As no such evidence-based intervention or programme for the South African context could be found in the literature, the development and evaluation of such a programme was deemed necessary. The aim of this programme is to supplement the limited social skills training for 10- to 12 year old learners, that forms part of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) Life Orientation Curriculum that is presented in South African schools.

As the school environment is associated with learning (Rambaldo, Wilding, Goldman, McClure, & Friedberg, 2001), it was argued that such a programme should be school-based. Other reasons for choosing a school-based programme are that school-based programmes reach more learners (Cemalcilar, 2010; Barret, Lock, & Farrel, 2005) and may lead to learners being less resistant to participate (Barret et al., 2005).

Furthermore, as indicated previously, middle childhood was chosen as the life phase for the programme. Additional reasons, linked to developmental timing, include that this life phase is a favourable time for both the encouraging of competence and the hindering of problems that may emerge in adolescence (Schonert-Reichl, Guhn, Gadermann, Hymel, Sweiss, & Hertzman, 2013).

### **Research Questions**

Given the abovementioned, the research questions for this study were:

- How do educators experience the social functioning of learners in middle childhood?
- What support do learners in middle childhood need in terms of social skills and competencies in order to enhance their social functioning towards higher levels of wellbeing?

- What should be the content of a school-based wellbeing programme to promote the social functioning of learners in middle childhood towards higher levels of wellbeing?
- What is the effect of such a school-based wellbeing programme on the social functioning and wellbeing of learners in middle childhood?

### **Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim of this study was to develop and evaluate the effect of a school-based wellbeing programme, to promote social functioning in middle childhood. The secondary objectives of this study, necessary to achieve the primary aim, were divided into phases:

- Phase 1: to explore educators' experience of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (Section B, Article 1);
- Phase 1: to use the information obtained from the abovementioned objective as a basis for exploring educators' viewpoints on the needs of learners in middle childhood in terms of social skills and competencies (Section B, Article 1);
- Phase 2: to use the information obtained from the abovementioned objectives as well as a thorough literature review to develop (determine the content of) a school-based wellbeing programme aimed at promoting the social functioning of learners in middle childhood towards higher levels of wellbeing (Section B, Article 2); and
- Phase 3: to evaluate the effect of a school-based wellbeing programme aimed at promoting the social functioning of learners in middle childhood towards higher levels of wellbeing (Section B, Article 3).

### **Hypotheses**

No hypotheses have been set for phases 1 and 2 (see the first three objectives) as they were qualitative in nature and thus involved exploratory research. In phase 3, after the school-based wellbeing programme was developed, the null hypothesis was that this programme would not increase the social functioning of learners in middle childhood towards higher levels of wellbeing, while the alternative hypothesis was that the school-based wellbeing programme would increase the social functioning of learners in middle childhood towards higher levels of wellbeing.

### **Research Methodology**

A multiple methods design was used to conduct the study. This design allowed the use of different methods in the three phases of the study. Next, each phase will be discussed in terms of its research methodology, namely its design, setting, participants, sampling strategy, inclusion and exclusion criteria, recruitment process and procedures, methods of data collection, data analysis, dissemination of results, and the ethical aspects of relevance to the particular phase.

## Phase 1

**Design.** Qualitative research was conducted during this phase. According to Rubin and Babbie (2014), qualitative research creates a deeper understanding of individuals' experiences.

**Setting.** The participants to this phase (educators) were selected from four public primary schools in an area in the North-West Province and the research was conducted at these schools.

**Sampling strategy.** The number of schools was determined with cluster sampling based on the number of sub-areas (four) into which schools in the area are divided as well as the number of schools in the area. With cluster sampling, clusters of individuals are identified, after which the appropriate number of clusters are selected randomly (Wilson & MacLean, 2011). Random sampling without replacement was applied and probabilities thus changed after each selection, with the population then having one element less (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2011). A maximum number of educators ( $n = 29$ ), were purposefully recruited. Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) state that with purposive sampling, the elements of a sample are selected based on having certain characteristics that may enable an in-depth exploration and understanding of the topic under investigation.

**Participants.** The educators of 10- to 12-year-old learners (in grades five and six) from four public primary schools were asked to participate. Only schools with at least 400 learners were considered. Educators were asked to participate for the following reasons:

- Educators spend a lot of time with learners as they work with them on a daily basis;
- Educators have knowledge of learners' developmental phases and their various developmental goals as this forms part of their training, and educators can thus establish whether learners are meeting these developmental goals or not;
- Educators have information on learners' school performance, their potential regarding success in school and also the factors hindering success; and,
- Educators are experts on primary school learners' social functioning and challenges regarding daily relational interaction.

**Inclusion and exclusion criteria.** For participation in Phase 1, the following inclusion criteria applied:

- An individual had to be an educator at one of the public primary schools selected for participation,
- An individual had to present classes to learners aged 10 to 12 years (in grade five or six) at one of the public primary schools selected for participation,
- An individual had to have at least two years' experience in presenting classes to learners aged 10 to 12 years (in grade five or six), and

- An individual had to be able to understand and speak English (at English schools), Afrikaans (at Afrikaans schools), or both (at double medium schools).

The following exclusion criterion applied:

- Educators who were appointed as mediators by a principal of any school selected for participation (in order to prevent a person from having possibly conflicting roles).

**Recruitment process and procedure.** The following steps were followed:

- Permission to conduct the research was obtained from the North-West Province's Department of Education and Sport Development (see Appendix 1).
- Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the North-West University (ethics approval number: NWU-00082-15-A1; see Appendix 3).
- Contact was made with the principals (gatekeepers of the school communities) of the public primary schools selected for participation by means of letters. These letters explained the aim of the research to the principals and also asked them to appoint mediators (one per school selected for participation), should the school wish to participate. (The mediator had to be a trusted educator who would not take part in the research him- or herself but who had the role of serving as a contact person between the researcher and the research participants, as this person was in close proximity to the participants).
- The mediators in collaboration with the researcher arranged information sessions (one per school selected for participation) to introduce the research to possible participants.
- Follow-up conversations with the principals and appointed mediators were done telephonically.
- The information sessions were held at the various schools and the researcher was present at all the information sessions. Once the educators had indicated their willingness to participate in the research, participant information leaflets explaining the research together with consent forms for participation in the research were distributed to them by the mediators.
- Those educators who wanted to participate were asked to submit their consent forms to the relevant mediators within three days. The various mediators returned the consent forms to the offices of the various principals.
- The researcher collected the consent forms from the principals of the selected schools.
- Educators who completed the consent forms to participate were invited to attend a focus group interview.

- Focus groups interviews were conducted separately, per school, at the particular schools.

**Data collection.** Qualitative research was done using focus group interviews as a method of data collection. According to Kelly (2006), a focus group can be defined as a research interview that takes place within a group of individuals who share similar experiences.

The aims of the focus group interviews were: firstly, to explore educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood, and secondly, to explore the social skills and competencies which learners in middle childhood might benefit from in order to improve their social functioning. An interview guide was used for the focus group interviews (see Appendix 4).

Throughout the process of data gathering, the researcher kept field and reflective notes about, for example, the participants' non-verbal behaviour such as tone of voice, body posture, and facial expressions. All focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

**Data analysis.** The transcribed data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Coding was done as follows: The researcher read through the transcriptions of the various focus groups a couple of times. A summary was made of the usable information obtained from the focus groups, per school, and various codes were attached to this. Highlighters of different colours were used to group codes with similar meaning or that is linked together, initially per school and then for all the schools together. This was integrated into themes. A thematic content analysis was also undertaken by a co-coder as well as one of the supervisors. This supervisor and the researcher again integrated the themes from the various individuals and then decided on three main themes with the first theme being divided into 4 sub-themes. (For an example on how the coding was done, see Appendix 5).

**Trustworthiness of qualitative data.** According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability can be used to assess the quality of qualitative data and thus its trustworthiness. Credibility refers to consistency between the views of the research participants and the researchers' representation and reconstruction of their views (Schurink, Fouché, & De Vos, 2011). Member checking, that is, the provision of feedback to participants in order to determine whether one's views are correct (Boeije, 2010), was applied during this phase. The themes identified during the thematic analysis were verified to add to the trustworthiness of the research. Transferability refers to the transferring of findings from one case to another. During this phase, transferability was facilitated by analysing the results of studies that are similar to this study, determining theoretical boundaries from them and letting this guide data collection (Schurink et al.,

2011). Dependability refers to keeping the research process well-documented and logical (Schurink et al., 2011). Boeijs (2010) sees this as methodological accountability, that is, the documentation of all activities in terms of what, how, and why. The details of all the activities during this phase were thus thoroughly documented. Confirmability refers to the confirmation of the results of one study by another (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The results were compared with those of similar studies in order to determine if comparable results have been obtained. This was done to prevent bias from the researcher's side (Schurink et al., 2011), and the researcher took care not to let personal values or theoretical inclinations determine the way in which the research was conducted as this could have led to inaccurate findings (Bryman, 2012).

**Dissemination of research results.** Short reports on the findings of the research were provided to the North-West Province's Department of Education and Sport Development, all the participants, the principals, and the mediators. The reports for the various groups of individuals were written with the particular reader in mind. The results of the research were made available to participants and principals through the mediators. The results were presented at a national conference, the Africa Positive Psychology Conference in April 2018 at the North-West University as a poster presentation, and were also prepared in the form of an academic article intended for submission to a peer-reviewed scientific journal.

**Ethics.** Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the research focus area, Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES; see Appendix 2), and the HREC (see Appendix 3). Permission for the study was also obtained from the Department of Education and Sport Development of the North-West Province (see Appendix 1), and the principals of the relevant schools. In addition, consent to participate in this phase of the study was obtained from the educators who wanted to participate.

The ethical guidelines of the HREC were carefully followed. Participation was voluntary; participants were free to withdraw at any time without suffering adverse consequences or having to provide an explanation for their choice. Furthermore, no rewards for participation were provided.

The risks involved in participating were minimal to low for participants and included partial loss of anonymity and confidentiality in the focus group interviews, being uncomfortable to talk in front of others, disagreeing with the opinion of a group member, and possible power relationships due to years of teaching experience. These risks can also be seen as the disadvantages of focus group interviews. These risks were managed by setting rules for the focus groups and the way in which confidentiality and anonymity would be dealt with. The above was also explained to the participants of each focus group interview before

the particular interview started. Furthermore, issues regarding confidentiality and anonymity were explained in the consent form.

The audio-recordings of the focus groups were safeguarded by storing it on the researcher's own personal laptop which was password-protected and to which only the researcher had access. The laptop was locked away for security reasons when the researcher was not busy working on the research. The audio-recordings were also stored on a USB disk which was locked in a cupboard inside the locked office of the researcher. The audio-recordings on the USB disk were password-protected. The transcripts of the audio-recordings were stored in a locked cupboard inside the locked office of the researcher. Data provided in the focus groups were coded while being transcribed. In the transcriptions, it was thus not possible to link any of the data to a particular participant. The audio-recordings of the focus groups were deleted after completion of the transcriptions. Furthermore, only the researchers and the persons who transcribed and analysed the data had access to it, and both the transcriptionist and data analyst had to sign confidentiality agreements. After completion of the study, the transcripts and audio-recordings on the USB disk would be handed over to the archives of the NWU (Center for Child, Youth and Family Studies, Wellington) for safekeeping for a period of 5 years, whereafter it will be destroyed.

## **Phase 2**

**Design and development of the school-based wellbeing programme.** The aim of the second phase of the study was to design a school-based wellbeing programme, eventually called the Social Treasures Programme (STP). This programme was designed within the framework of positive psychology and aims at protecting and promoting the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (aged 10- to 12 years and in grades five and six).

The following steps were followed in the design of the STP:

- Keywords were developed for a literature search.
- Each keyword was thoroughly searched on all the available databases. Books, articles, dissertations, theses, and all other available material were used in the literature study.
- The information obtained from the above was summarised.
- The results of the thematic content analysis (from Phase 1) were used to inform the researcher on educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood.
- The information from the literature study and the research findings from Phase 1 of the research were integrated. (The aim of the abovementioned procedure was to determine the most important components and the content of the school-based wellbeing programme to enhance social functioning directed by wellbeing and health.)

- Academics in the field of psychology (with knowledge on programme development and/or social functioning and/or middle childhood) as well as a registered educational psychologist working with children in middle childhood were asked to evaluate the STP. Face and content validity were of importance. While face validity refers to appearance, content validity refers to the inclusion of the correct content or all the relevant components (Bless, Higson-Smith, & Sithole, 2013). The evaluators thus had to ensure that the STP was valid for its purpose, and that it included the appropriate components and content. Furthermore, the evaluators assisted in determining whether the STP would be suitable for the particular age group in terms of the length of the sessions, the duration of the programme, and the level of the content.

**Dissemination of research results.** The results of the research were to be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed scientific journal in the form of a research article.

### **Phase 3**

**Design.** In this phase, quantitative research methodology was used, namely an experimental pre-test post-test design. According to Bryman (2014), quantitative research involves the quantification of data while it is collected and analysed. In order to ensure that extraneous variables, that is, participant variables (for example, age and gender) and environmental variables (for example, time of day), do not have an effect on the relationship between the variables under investigation, the extraneous variables had to be controlled by the researcher. This was done by using random assignment (the chances of each participant being assigned to either the experimental or control group were equal), by matching (equivalent environments and groups were ensured), and by holding variables constant (for example, the ages of participants were more or less the same; Gravetter & Wallnau, 2011). With the pre-test post-test control group design, an experimental group and a control group are created using random sampling (without replacement) and random assignment (Fouché, Delport, & De Vos, 2011). In this study, both of these groups participated in the pre-tests, post-tests (directly after the presentation of the STP to learners in the experimental group), and follow-up tests (three months after the post-testing) on the same occasions, but only the experimental group received the STP at a time between the pre- and post-testing.

**Setting.** Pre-testing of the learners took place at suitable venues at the abovementioned four public primary schools respectively, while the presentations of the STP, the post-testing of learners in the experimental and control groups, and the follow-up testing of the learners in the experimental and control groups took place at a suitable venue at one school. Educators and parents were asked to complete the psychometric scales at home.

**Participants.** The four public primary schools that were selected in Phase 1, by using cluster sampling within an area in the North-West Province were used again. During pre-testing, a total of 212 learners aged 10 to 12 (in grades five and six) from the abovementioned four schools participated. After the school that was used for the evaluation of the STP was determined, 66 learners from this school (with 45 learners in the experimental group and 21 learners in the control group), 66 parents or legal guardians, and 13 educators participated. Parents and educators were included as participants in order to get a better understanding of learners' social functioning. These participants are significant role players in learners' home and learning environments, respectively, which are learners' main contexts of social functioning.

**Sampling strategy.** Convenience sampling was used for the pre-testing of the learners from the four public primary schools. In this type of sampling, elements to a sample are selected based on how easy and convenient it is to access them (Swanepoel, Swanepoel, Van Graan, Allison & Santana, 2015). Convenience sampling was decided upon because the validity and reliability of the psychometric scales used for the learners had to be determined for the South African context and many learners were needed for this. Furthermore, by using convenience sampling all the learners who assented to be part of pre-testing and whose parents consented to it, could be included and not only a few.

Stratified random sampling, was used for the selection of learners from the one school. This type of sampling refers to the division of the population into different sub-groups (strata) and then randomly selecting elements from each strata (Swanepoel et al., 2015). The learners of this one school were thus divided into three categories based on their total scores on all the psychometric scales completed in the pre-testing, with these categories including a category for learners with high scores, a category for learners with average scores and a category for learners with low scores. More or less equal percentage of learners from all three categories were randomly selected to form both the experimental and control group. Purposive sampling, as defined under phase 1, was used for the selection of parents or legal guardians and educators.

#### **Selection criteria for participants.**

**Learners.** For a learner to be able to participate in pre-testing, he or she had to comply with the following inclusion criteria:

- Be a learner at one of the four public primary schools selected for pre-testing;
- Be 10 to 12 years old (in grade five or six);
- Have a basic proficiency in Afrikaans, English, Setswana, or Sesotho in order to be able to complete the psychometric tests; and

- Receive voluntary consent from parents to participate and provide voluntary assent to participate.

The exclusion criterion for participation of learners in pre-testing was that:

- The learner would move to another school before pre-testing took place.

For a learner to be selected for further participation (STP, post-testing, and follow-up testing) by being part of either the experimental or control group, he or she had to comply with the following inclusion criteria:

- Be a learner at the public primary school selected for further participation;
- Be 10 to 12 years old (in grade five or six);
- Have a basic proficiency in Afrikaans (at Afrikaans schools) or English (at English schools) to be able to follow the STP; and
- Receive voluntary consent from parents to participate and provide voluntary assent to participate in pre-testing.

The exclusion criterion for further participation was that:

- The learner would move to another school before the STP, post-testing, and follow-up testing were completed.

**Parents or legal guardians.** The inclusion criteria for a parent or legal guardian to participate in this phase by means of the completion of a psychometric scale before and three months after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group were that:

- The individual's child is in the school selected for the presentation of the STP, the post-testing, and the follow-up testing;
- The individual's child is 10 to 12 years old (in grade five or six);
- The individual's child has been selected for participation in either the experimental or control group;
- The individual has a basic proficiency in English (to be able to complete the psychometric scale); and
- The individual consented voluntarily to participate in the research.

**Educators.** The inclusion criteria for educators to participate in this phase by means of the completion of a psychometric scale before and three months after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group were that:

- The individual is an educator at the public primary school selected for the presentation of the STP, the post-testing, and the follow-up testing;
- The individual is the register class educator of a learner aged 10 to 12 years (in grade five or six) who has been selected to either the experimental or the control group (preferable); or the individual currently presents classes to learners aged 10 to 12 years

(in grade five or six) who has been selected to the experimental or control group (in cases where a register class educator of a learner or learners selected for either the experimental or control group did not consent to participation or is a mediator);

- The individual must have a basic proficiency in English (to be able to complete the psychometric scale); and
- The individual must voluntarily consent to participate in the study.

The exclusion criterion for participation by educators in this phase was that:

- The educator is appointed in the role of mediator (in order to prevent a person from having possibly conflicting roles).

**Recruitment and procedure.** The following steps were followed:

- The parents of all the 10- to 12-year-olds (in grades five and six) at the four schools selected for participation in the pre-testing were contacted through the school by means of letters asking their permission for their child or children to be approached for participation in this study. In the letters, the parents were asked to send the permission forms back to the school with their child or children within 3 days.
- The mediator at each of the abovementioned four schools then provided the 10- to 12-year-old learners (in grades five and six) of the particular school, whose parents provided permission for them to be approached for this study, with an information leaflet (including an assent form for the learner and a consent form for one of the learner's parents to be completed and signed if the learner assented to participation and a parent or guardian of the learner provided permission for this).
- The mediator asked the learners to return the assent and consent forms to him or her within three days. The selected four schools were visited by the researcher to collect the assent and consent forms.
- All the psychometric scales for learners were translated from English to Afrikaans, Setswana, and Sesotho in order for the participants to be able to complete it in a language of their choice. Back-translation took place to ensure that the psychometric scales were translated correctly. The translation and back translation of the psychometric scales were done by mother-tongue speakers of the language into which the psychometric scales were translated. Before translation took place, consent for this was obtained from the developers of the measures.
- The learners who assented to take part in the pre-testing and whose parents provided consent for this completed the abovementioned five psychometric scales at their particular schools, as part of a group and in the language of their choice, at a time arranged with the principals and mediators as well as the learners and the parents, per school. This was done after school hours at venues identified and approved by the

mediators and principals of the various schools, and took approximately one and a half hours (74 items) with 10-minute breaks after every half-hour. In order to assist the learners in paying the needed attention, a comfortable room with sufficient silence was used and a “do not disturb” notice was placed on the door. Furthermore, all the learners completed the psychometric scales together – the researcher read each question or statement, explained it and then waited for all the learners to indicate their answer before proceeding to the next question or statement. In instances where the researcher was not familiar with the language in which the psychometric scales were completed, an educator at the particular school read the questions to the learners and explained it in both the language in which it was read and in English in order for the researcher to ensure that the explanation was correct. All the learners thus finished the psychometric scales at the same time.

- The psychometric scales were scored by Statistical Consultation Services at the North-West University. The learners who participated in the pre-testing and were from the school selected for further participation were divided into three categories according to their total scores on all the psychometric scales, as indicated previously. An equal percentage of learners from the three categories were selected to form both the experimental and control groups. The Statistical Consultation Services also determined the reliability and validity of all the psychometric scales used for the learners for the particular context (see Section B, Article 3).
- By using a second information leaflet for learners, some learners were invited to participate further by forming part of either the experimental or the control group.
- One parent or legal guardian and the register class educator (or another educator) of every learner in the experimental or control group were invited to take part in the study by means of an information leaflet (including a consent form for their own participation) and to attend an information session on the study (separate sessions for the educators and also for the parents and learners).
- The learners from the school selected for further participation who have participated in the pre-testing but who have not been selected to form part of either the experimental or control group received a letter in which they were thanked for taking part in the pre-testing and for the contribution that they have made. They were also informed that, unfortunately, they have not been selected for further participation as selection was determined by chance.
- An information session for the learners selected for the experimental and control groups, and their parents was arranged for and conducted at the school selected for further participation after school hours. The information session was held three days after the

learners and their parents received invitation and information letters (including assent and consent forms).

- During the information session, the researcher provided the learners and their parents with information on the study and they had the opportunity to ask questions. The researcher asked that the assent and consent forms be returned by the learners to the mediator at the school within three days from the date of the information session, should both the learner and his or her parents agree to participation.
- An information session was also arranged for the educators invited to participate. The information session was held three days after they received information letters (including a consent form) and they also had up to three days after the information session to submit their consent forms to the mediator.
- The school was visited by the researcher to collect the consent and assent forms.
- Psychometric scales were distributed to the parents (CSPS) and register class educators or other educators (T-CRS 2.1) of the learners in both the experimental and control groups with the request to complete and return the psychometric scales in sealed envelopes to the school's mediators within three days.
- The experimental group was divided into two groups and arrangements were made for learners in both these groups to attend the STP that was presented at the one public primary school selected for participation, by an educational psychologist with a background in teaching. The arrangements were communicated with the learners and their parents through the mediator at the particular school.
- After the presentation of the STP to learners in the experimental group and three months after this, the effectiveness of the STP was evaluated and the learners in both the experimental and control groups again completed all the psychometric measures for learners at a venue at their school.
- The learners in both the experimental and control groups received an attendance certificate (see Appendix 7) and a gift of thanks to show the researcher's appreciation for their participation in the research.
- Psychometric scales were distributed to the parents (CSPS) and register class educators or other educators (T-CRS 2.1) of the learners in both the experimental and control groups with the request to complete and return the psychometric scales in sealed envelopes to the school's mediators within three days.
- The presentation of the STP to learners in the control group was arranged for by the mediator of the school after which the STP was presented to these learners at their school and by the same educational psychologist who presented the STP to the experimental group.

- The results of the research were made available to the relevant stakeholders and participants.

**Data collection.** In Phase 3, quantitative research methods were used, and quantitative data were collected by using psychometric scales.

All learners aged 10 to 12 (in grades five and six) who were from the four schools selected for participation, who received their parents' permission to participate and who assented to participate, completed all the psychometric scales for the pre-testing (the Social Anxiety Scale for Children–Revised [SASC–R; La Greca, 1998; La Greca & Stone, 1993]; the School Short-Form Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory–Revised [Coopersmith, 1967; Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011]; the Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale [CS<sup>4</sup>; Danielson & Phelps, 2003]; the Children's Depression Inventory Short Form [CDI 2; Kovacs, 2011]; and the Subjective Happiness Scale [SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999]. These scales were selected as they were appropriate to measure the concepts influencing learners' social functioning. Learners who assented and whose parents consented to them being part of the experimental or control groups participated in post-testing (directly after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group) and follow-up testing (three months after the presentation of the STP) by completing the above-mentioned psychometric scales again at various occasions.

The register class educators of the learners selected for the experimental group as well as the control group were asked to complete the Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (Children's Institute, 2002) before and three months after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group. In the instance of a register class educator of a learner not consenting to participate in this research, any other educator who currently presents classes to the particular learner could have participated provided that he or she complied with the inclusion criteria.

A parent or legal guardian of each learner selected for the experimental or the control group was asked to complete the Child Social Preference Scale (CSPS; Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004) before and three months after the presentation of the STP to learners in the experimental group.

**Data analysis.** All the statistical analyses were done with AMOS version 25 (AMOS Development Company, 2017) and SPSS version 25.0 (IBM Corporation, 2017) at the Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University.

The validity and reliability of the psychometric scales that were used, were determined. To determine the validity of all the measures, exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis was conducted, while the reliability (internal consistency) of all the measures was determined by calculating Cronbach alpha coefficients.

To determine the differences between the experimental and control groups, before the presentation of the STP to learners in the experimental group, independent t-tests were conducted.

Repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) were conducted for the determination of the within-group differences for both the experimental and control groups over time, based on the psychometric scales that were completed by the learners, while paired t-tests were performed for the determination of the within-group differences for the abovementioned groups over time, based on the psychometric scales that were completed by the educators and parents or legal guardians.

For the determination of the differences between the experimental and control groups directly after (only in the case of the psychometric scales completed by the learners) as well as three months after the presentation of the STP to learners in the experimental group, repeated measures t-tests were conducted. If differences existed, its statistical and/or practical significances were determined.

**Dissemination of research results.** The results of the research were made available to the North-West Province's Department of Education and Sport Development and also to all the stakeholders and participants. Various reports were formulated in order for each participant or stakeholder to receive feedback that is suitable to him or her and that he or she is able to understand well. The research may also be published in peer-reviewed scientific journals in the form of a research article.

**Ethics.** Approval to conduct the study was obtained from COMPRES and HREC. Permission for the study was obtained from the Department of Education and Sport Development of the North-West Province and the principals of the relevant schools. Before the completion of the psychometric scales, the written consent of parents or legal guardians and educators, and in the case of learners, their written assent and one of their parents' consent, were obtained.

The researcher explained relevant matters related to the study, such as the aim of the study, what participation entailed, the benefits and risks of participation, and how the results would be used, to all the groups of participants before their participation. All the groups of participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that it may be declined and also that consent or assent to participate may be withdrawn at any time, without adverse consequences to anyone or having to explain the reasons for the withdrawal. Since all the important and relevant information were provided to participants before their participation, no participant was deceived.

The learners from the school selected for further participation who have not been selected for the experimental or control groups received letters thanking them for their

participation in the pre-testing and for their contribution to scientific knowledge. They were also informed that they have unfortunately not been selected and also that everyone had an equal chance of being selected to either the experimental or the control group and that it was merely by chance that they were not included. Learners who were selected for the experimental or control groups were informed that both a parent and an educator of each of them will be asked to complete psychometric scales on their social preferences and behaviour, respectively, before and three months after the first presentation of the STP to the experimental group. Learners, educators, and parents or legal guardians were also informed that all information provided was confidential and that only the researcher would have access to it.

Learners' anonymity was protected by representing each learner with a number. This was made possible through the researcher drawing up a list of all the learners that have participated in the pre-testing and allocating a unique number to each learner. Only the researcher had access to this list with names and numbers and it was kept separate from the completed psychometric scales. Regarding the sets of psychometric scales that learners received to complete during pre-testing, post-testing, and follow-up testing, a learner was required to put his or her name on the first page of his or her set. Only the particular learner's name was on the first page of the learner's set, and when the researcher received the sets, the unique number that belongs to a particular learner was put on the second page of the set of psychometric scales of each learner. All the first pages containing the names were then removed to protect the identities of the learners. The same applied for the psychometric scales completed by the parents or legal guardians and the educators.

Furthermore, the educators who completed the psychometric scales on the behaviour of the learners before and three months after the STP had to sign an agreement that they would not share the information they provided on a learner with anyone but the researcher. The mediator was also instructed not to open any sealed envelopes from the learners or teachers (with completed psychometric scales on learners from either their parents or educators in it).

The data were captured and coded by the researcher, and when the datasets were handed over to the Statistical Consultation Services at the North-West University for data analysis, it only included the abovementioned numbers and none of the participants' names. The Statistical Consultation Services selected the learners to be included in both the experimental and control groups scientifically and gave their numbers through to the researcher, per group. The researcher then matched the numbers with the names of learners and invited the particular learners to participate. The category into which a learner was classified according to the learner's scores on the psychometric scales was not

provided to the researcher and no learner's name was thus linked to a certain category; only to being in the experimental or control group.

An educational psychologist registered with the HPCSA presented the STP and also did debriefing after all the sessions (including the sessions where psychometric scales have been completed by the learners). Debriefing was also done during the sessions as needed. If learners needed to discuss anything regarding the psychometric scales that they have completed or the sessions of the STP they attended, they had the opportunity to talk to the psychologist or the researcher.

The risks of the study were less than the benefits.

After completion of the study, the completed psychometric scales will be handed over to the archives of the NWU (Center for Child, Youth and Family Studies, Wellington) for safekeeping for a period of five years, whereafter it will be destroyed.

### **Research Paradigm**

According to Babbie (2013) paradigmatic assumptions forms the foundation of a study, inform readers about the researcher's viewpoints and provide a framework for organising observations and reasoning. The researcher's paradigm and theoretical framework are influenced by her background as a researcher with masters degrees in both Research Psychology and Economics as well as her work experience as a lecturer working with a diversity of youngsters on a daily basis.

Ontology may be defined as the nature of being (Bryman, 2012). The researcher's ontological stance is based on post-modernism and specifically critical social constructivism. This implies that knowledge obtained from individuals is used to build new knowledge and to simultaneously bring about positive change. Social constructivism refers to the development of knowledge (or learning) through interactions (or social processes). Furthermore, it implies that new knowledge are being build on existing knowledge, creating the possibility for existing knowledge to be interpreted in new ways. (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008). Critical constructivism, as a perspective of social constructivism, focuses on the role of both the cultural and social environments in the creation of knowledge (Milutinovic, 2015).

Epistemology may be defined as "the science of knowing" (Babbie, 2013, p. 4). The epistemological viewpoint of this study is that individuals co-create knowledge. The methodology used is to provide the best knowledge, and in this case includes qualitative as well as quantitative approaches. In this study a qualitative approach was used to explore educators' experiences of learners in middle childhood's social interactions and functioning (Section A, Phase 1 and Section B, Article 2). Qualitative research fits well into a postmodern worldview as it moves away from positivism, which emphasises logic, cause and effect. Quantitative measures provided important information to evaluate the effect of

the well-being programme developed to enhance the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (Section A, Phase 3 and Section B, Article 3).

### **Possible Contributions of the Study**

The study will be informative on the social functioning of learners in middle childhood, as viewed by educators. The study will also determine whether some psychometric scales that have been developed overseas are suitable for use in the South African context. Furthermore, a school-based wellbeing programme (the STP) that may enhance the social functioning of learners in middle childhood will emerge from this study. If this programme succeeds in its goals, it may be trusted to enhance the social functioning of learners in middle childhood if used correctly, as it will then be evidence-based. This study will also contribute to the knowledge base of the social functioning and wellbeing of learners, especially in middle childhood. It is likely that the three articles (three phases) that emanated from this study will be published in accredited scientific journals, which will provide information to researchers working on the same themes and/or in the same context. Furthermore, Article 1 was presented as a poster at the Africa Positive Psychology Conference held at the North-West University during April 2018.

### **Outline of the Research Report**

Section A included an introduction to the study, the theoretical paradigm used for the study, the problem statement and rationale for the study, the aim and objectives of the study, the hypotheses set for the study, and the research methodology used in the three phases of the study.

In Section B, three research articles, each prepared according to the author guidelines of the scientific journal chosen for the particular article, will be presented, namely:

- Article 1: Exploring educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (written for submission to the *South African Journal of Education*).
- Article 2: The development of the Social Treasures Programme to enhance the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (written for submission to *Acta Academica*).
- Article 3: An evaluation of the effect of the Social Treasures Programme aimed at enhancing the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (written for submission to the *Journal of Psychology in Africa*).

Section C includes a summary of the study, as well as a complete list of references.

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## **SECTION B**

### **SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES**

## **Article 1**

### **Exploring educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood**

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Research articles of localised content, i.e. of interest only to specific areas or specialists and which would not appeal to the broader readership of the Journal, should preferably not be submitted for consideration by the Editorial Committee. As such, authors should indicate the relevance of the study for education research when submitting manuscripts, where the education system is characterised by transformation, and/or an emerging economy/development state, and/or scarce resources.

Ethical considerations: A brief narrative account/description of ethical issues/aspects should be included in articles that report on empirical findings.

All articles will be submitted to referees (national and/or international), who hold documented expertise in the area the article addresses. When reviews are received, an editorial decision will be reached to either accept the article, reject the article, request a revision (in some cases for further peer review), or request arbitration. As a rule only one article per author or co-author will be accepted per year for refereeing and possible publication.

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Total number of pages should preferably not exceed 17 pages ( $\pm$  6,000 words).

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

Text should be set in Arial font, 12 point in size with 1.5 line spacing. Margins should be 2.54 cm all around.

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

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

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

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

**Figures** should be clear, black/white originals, on separate pages — not embedded in the text. Grey or coloured shading must NOT be used. **Tables/figures** should be numbered

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## References

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

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In works by three or more authors the surnames of all authors should be given in the first reference to such a work. In subsequent references to this work only the name of the first author is given, followed by the abbreviation et al., e.g. (Ziv et al., 1995).

If reference is made to an anonymous item in a newspaper, the name of the newspaper is given in brackets, e.g. (Daily News, 1999).

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Only sources cited in the text must be listed, in alphabetical order, at the end of the article. References should be presented as indicated in the following examples. Special attention should be paid to the required punctuation.

### Journal articles:

Johnson DW & Johnson RT 1999. Gifted students illustrate co-operative learning. *Educational Leadership*, 50:60-61. <https://doi.org/10.15700/el.1999.50>

### Books:

Van Zyl R (ed.) 1994. *Recent advances in classroom research*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

**Chapters in books:**

Dukzec S 1988. Gender issues. In D Hicks & J Brown (eds). *Education for peace*. London: Routledge.

**Unpublished theses or dissertations:**

Squelch J 1991. Teacher training for multicultural education in a multicultural society. MEd dissertation. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

**Anonymous newspaper references:**

*Citizen* 1996. Education for all, 22 March.

**Electronic references:**

*Published under author's name:*

Wilson J 2000. The blame culture. *British Educational Research Journal*, 26. Available at <http://www.govsources/gtp%access>. Accessed 20 April 2005.

*Website references: No author:*

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**Abstract**

This research explored educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood in a South African context. Educators are important socialisation agents for learners in middle childhood, and it was reasoned that they could offer valuable information to identify those key social skills and competencies that learners in this life phase need in order to function optimally. A qualitative approach and an exploratory design were used. Twenty-nine educators were purposefully selected as participants from four school districts in a particular area in the North-West Province. Data were collected via four focus group interviews, with each focus group interview including the educators of one school per district. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that context and culture have a strong influence on social functioning, that both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are displayed by learners in middle childhood in interaction with others, and that various social skills need to be intentionally developed and strengthened. It was thus recommended that learners in middle childhood should be supported to acquire certain social skills, for example, communication and listening, conflict management, and problem solving to improve their social functioning.

**Keywords:** Educators; learners; learning environment; middle childhood, positive psychology; social functioning; social skills, wellbeing

## Introduction

Educators and scientists increasingly acknowledge the importance of promoting social-emotional learning and intelligence in the learning environment, concurrent with traditional cognitive skills (Masten, 2015). Competence and mastery of many key developmental tasks in middle childhood, for example, relate to both academic and social success. In this sense, effective schools advocate individual cognitive and social skills that encourage learning and positive development (Doll, Le Clair & Kurien, 2009).

Social functioning is used as an umbrella term for this study, referring to a continuum of the processes indicating positive social functioning directed by pro-social behaviour in contrast to negative social functioning indicating at-risk behaviour or threats to social functioning. To determine whether the social functioning of learners is age-appropriate, developmental theories are valuable.

Erikson's psychosocial theory is important as it explains the tasks or challenges children in middle childhood face and need to manage (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016) to acquire the needed social skills. Children in middle childhood (six years up to adolescence) are in the "industry versus inferiority" stage (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016). During this stage, children are developing more and more abilities and skills and are preoccupied with gaining proficiency, competence, and mastery in the tasks they receive from both educators and parents (Erikson, cited by Hook, 2013). Children in middle childhood's social relationships are now increasingly expanded to peers, mentors, and educators (Donald, Lazarus & Moolla, 2014). Learners' competence in and mastery of social skills are influenced by the context within which they grow up.

Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory is of great value when considering the nature of this study, since it emphasises important contextual factors with reference to positive youth development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to this theory, the developing child is part of a sequence of complex as well as interactive systems including the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystems (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016). Bronfenbrenner developed the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model. This model is now central to his theory (Bronfenbrenner, cited by Donald et al., 2014; Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000) and views proximal processes (continuing interaction between the learner and his or her immediate environment) as the primary mechanism for development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A learner's interactions within a particular context, for example, home or school, will shape his or her social wellbeing to a great extent.

Keyes' (1998) model of social wellbeing explains the interaction between an individual and his or her community by providing a perspective on the functioning of individuals in their social world and the way in which they judge the general functioning of

the society. According to this model, social wellbeing is an integral part of an individual's mental health and encompasses social acceptance, social coherence, social actualisation, social contribution, and social integration (Du Toit, Wissing & Khumalo, 2014; Keyes, 1998). For learners to improve their psychological functioning and social wellbeing and thus grow in the abovementioned domains, they need sound social skills.

Beyond the family, the learning (school) environment is the most organised system in which most children around the world spend most of their time (Masten, 2015). Schools offer opportunities for relationships with adults and peers beyond the family. According to Samanci (2010), primary schools have the important aim, amongst others, of assisting learners in adapting to a healthy social life. Evidently, educators can be a source of support to learners and facilitate positive relational experiences. This is important in the sense that, as Geldenhuys (2016) states, healthy social functioning is essential for both positive school performance and overall wellbeing. Furthermore, Ryff (2014) claims that relational health is embedded in those daily interactions and connections that offer opportunities for wellbeing. Kitching, Roos and Ferreira (2012) argue that healthy relational functioning is vital to positive human development. In other words, daily interaction or those ordinary activities that add to, for example, children in middle childhood's social functioning is central to processes of positive development.

Educators are in a good position to evaluate the social functioning of learners as they spend a lot of time with them and are well informed about their developmental phases and goals. Hence, the aim of this study was to explore educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood in order to determine the social skills that these learners need to enhance their social functioning.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative approach employing an exploratory design was used for this study.

### **Participants and Setting**

The final number of participating schools ( $n = 4$ ) was determined with cluster sampling, based on the number of public primary schools in a particular area in the North-West province as well as the sub-areas (districts) into which schools in the area are divided. Only schools with at least 400 learners were considered for participation as it is preferable to include the highest possible number of participants. Purposive sampling was applied for the selection of participants (educators;  $n = 29$ ), from the abovementioned four schools. The educators participating had to meet inclusion criteria, for example, having two years of experience in presenting classes to learners aged 10 to 12 years (in grades five and six) in

order to be able to provide valuable information; and being able to understand and speak English or Afrikaans as these are the languages that the researcher is able to understand and speak.

The research was conducted at the schools that participated. The schools are situated in a rural area known for its mining activities. Learners from these schools are from a diversity of races, cultures, languages, and socio-economic circumstances, with two of the schools being no-fee schools situated in informal settlements and the other two schools being in more advantaged suburbs of the selected urban area.

### Data Collection

Four focus group interviews, one per school in each particular sub-area, were conducted. Each focus group consisted of six to 10 participants. After an explanation of the concept of social functioning was provided, open-ended questions such as: "How do you experience the social functioning of learners aged 10 to 12 years old in the classroom?"; "Tell me about any positive experiences that you have had with learners in middle childhood regarding their social functioning in your career up to date"; "Tell me about any negative experiences that you have had with learners in middle childhood regarding their social functioning in your career up to date"; and "How, do you think, can negative experiences be prevented or lessened, with specific reference to the social skills and competencies that learners in middle childhood need in order to manage social situations more effectively in future?" were asked.

The focus groups were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and supplemented by the researcher's field and reflection notes.

### Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the verbatim-transcribed data according to the steps indicated by Clarke and Braun (2013), following an inductive approach. To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, attention was paid to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman, 2012). To ensure credibility, member checking was applied. This involves the provision of feedback on the findings to participants to determine whether the researchers' views were correct (Boeije, 2010). Member checking was done by having conversations on the findings of the study with some of the educators who participated in the focus groups at the various schools. Furthermore, credibility was ensured by the thematic content analysis being done individually by both the researcher and a co-coder, whereafter the coding was compared and verified. Transferability was facilitated by analysing the results of studies similar to this one, by determining theoretical boundaries from these studies, and by allowing this to guide data collection (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011). Dependability

was ensured by documenting the details of all the activities that happened in this study thoroughly and throughout (Boeije, 2010; Schurink et al., 2011). Lastly, confirmability was accomplished by determining whether the results of the current study are comparable to those of similar studies (Schurink et al., 2011).

### **Procedure and Ethical Considerations**

The research proposal was approved by the research focus area, Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES) of the Faculty of Health Sciences at the North-West University (NWU), whereafter ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of the NWU (Ethics Approval Number: NWU-00082-15-A1). Written permission to conduct the study was obtained from the North-West Province's Department of Education and Sport Development and the school principals of the participating schools. The ethical principles as required by the HREC guided the research process: written informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, participants had the freedom to withdraw at any time, no harm was foreseen, and confidentiality and partial anonymity were ensured by explaining the rules of focus groups as well as its importance in protecting participants against harm to everyone involved. The risk level of the participants was labelled as low, and measures to minimise risk were put in place.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The findings entail three main themes and four sub-themes that are discussed next.

#### Theme 1: Context and culture

Educators agreed that the context and culture of learners in middle childhood play an important role in their acquisition and use of social skills.

##### *Sub-theme 1.1: Contextual disadvantages and advantages (socio-economic factors)*

Educators spoke about the differences among learners in the same school or within the same sub-area who come from either rather privileged socio-economic circumstances or from economically deprived conditions. These socio-economic inequalities were expressed in the following way:

*“We sit here with children whom we provide with food, you know, they are poor, and then we also have some of the richest children in town.” (School 1)*

Educators referred to learners' perceptions of hopelessness when coming from less privileged backgrounds and described it in terms of poor motivation to achieve at school and to obtain future success. This lack of commitment and responsibility was further qualified as

learners' tendency towards external incentives for motivation, such as financial rewards. These learners thus value material possessions, probably because they are more aware of their lower-order needs, for example food; in contrast to taking part in opportunities aimed at reaching their full potential and thus self-actualisation (Maslow, cited by Weiten, 2016). This tendency is illustrated by the following quotes:

*"If you can just say, 'Now, we are going to compete for this and then you are going to be awarded a medal', they will say, 'Agh, what can I do with a medal? ... It does not mean anything. Just a medal.' For them to compete for a medal, it's a disgrace ... They will, money will do,..., it will do the thing." (School 4)*

*"They don't dream ... maybe seeing that the others, who are through their grade 12, né ...They are there at home sitting doing nothing ...Then it demotivates them." (School 4)*

This finding indicates the complexity of socio-economic status, educational achievement, and social processes. Louw and Louw (2014) assert that socio-economic status may have an important impact on educational achievement as it influences the atmosphere in the family, the neighbourhood of the family, and the quality of the schooling. Marais (2016) mentions that learners in overcrowded classrooms participate poorly in classroom activities because of learners' lack of motivation and limited focus in the learning environment due to the disruptive behaviour of fellow learners. Furthermore, in a study at 12 secondary schools in four provinces of South Africa, Prinsloo (2007) found that many learners display irresponsible behaviour and carelessness towards others and themselves, and that they lack long-term vision for their lives.

Few negative factors were mentioned by participants regarding learners in middle childhood who come from an advantaged background. However, it may be that these learners' exposure to technology may hold negative consequences, for example, electronic bullying and spending much time being busy in an unproductive way, which may lower their motivation to prioritise their academic work and other healthy activities. Furthermore, learners' unhealthy usage of technology may have a negative impact on their social functioning as such activities decrease direct contact with others and thus the development of the skills and competencies needed for healthy interaction.

It seems that context and socio-economic status is an important factor for learners in middle childhood's social functioning and thus their conduct towards others.

*Sub-theme 1.2: Home and school influences*

According to the educators, many learners in this community are not part of stable home environments and are raised by, for example, a grandparent, a single mother, or a sibling, as indicated by the following quote:

*“The, the children in most instances are not staying in a very stable, form of family ... you will find it is either they are being raised by the grandmothers or maybe their mother without a father, or a sister.” (School 4)*

Educators mentioned that some learners are emotionally deprived (experience a lack of love and attention) and exposed to incompetent parenting practices and unhealthy role-models. The consequences of these behaviours are then also displayed by learners in middle childhood within the school context. For example, some learners find it challenging to accept instructions and discipline from educators at school as they seem to be in control at their homes; they tend to be easily angered, argumentative, manipulative, and blame others for their mistakes as a result of a lack of discipline and/or the role models they are exposed to. In contrast, some learners have more suitable and positive circumstances at home. These learners tend to be well-mannered and educators perceive them as not giving any problems. The above can be illustrated by the following quotes:

*“90 percent depends on the circumstances at home. What happens at home, they apply at school, you know, if he is the, if he can play boss at home, then he will also play the boss here, you know.” (School 1)*

*“There are kids who are having, you know, good manners, who are having a sound social, you know, upbringing.” (School 3)*

Educators emphasised the circumstances at the home environment as a key factor influencing the acquisition of social skills for learners in primary school. This particularly refers to the role of the family providing support, for example: parents modelling suitable behaviour to their children, the use of positive communication at home, parents having democratic attitudes regarding discipline, and parents showing unconditional acceptance of their child(ren). This finding resonates with Samanci (2010) who found that educators perceived the social functioning (development of social skills) of learners in middle childhood as mainly influenced by their primary agents of socialisation, namely their parents. De Witt and Lessing (2011) concur that educators mainly attribute learners' problem behaviour to the parents. Louw and Louw (2014) state that an adult's guidance is crucial to direct a child's disregard for the wishes of the adult through whining or tantrums.

All educators spoke about acting as “parents” for the learners mainly because: i) many parents are uninvolved in their children's lives, and ii) there is an increasing number of primary school learners in South Africa who are the heads of their households. Educators

also mentioned that they have to teach learners good manners in many instances. The above can be evidenced by the following quotes:

*“They sometimes see you as their, another mother or what, they will be so close to you. They will tell you almost everything. Mmm-hmm, and every time they would want to be next to you.” (School 4)*

*“We must teach good manners more than the academic subject. That’s the problem.” (School 1)*

Schoeman (2015) states that it is expected from educators in South Africa, apart from their educational role, to also provide psycho-social support to learners, especially in terms of caring and nurturing. Furthermore, according to Jefferis and Theron (2017), learners associate caring educators with positive parenting.

In a South African study done by Prinsloo (2007), school principals pointed out some parents’ lack of involvement with regard to both their child’s learning process and other school activities. In a study done on primary school learners in the Free State province of South Africa, Leefon, Jacobs, Le Roux and De Wet (2013) indicated parents’ limited interest in learners’ school performance. Prinsloo (2007) asserts that educators need to teach good manners to some learners who are, for example, easily angered, argumentative, manipulative, and blaming of others. Evidently, educators can influence learners’ lives in socially significant and profound ways (Johnson, 2008).

Learners see their schools as safe environments, and many will stay at school long after school hours due to this perception. Beattie, Brown and Cass (2015) indicate that schools are central in the lives of many learners. Furthermore, Masten (2015) states that schools function as “a symbol of normal life” (p. 239) and may, to a limited extent, compensate for deprivation at learners’ homes through the provision of attachment relationships, adult guidance, extra nutrition, and access to and monitoring of health care.

The influence of schools and especially the positive role of educators are vital for the healthy social functioning of learners in middle childhood. Many times, these influences exceed the educators’ educational role, with particular reference to duties that are more of a social nature in order for learners to attain those skills needed at a developmentally appropriate social level.

### *Sub-theme 1.3: Cultural values*

This sub-theme shows that the cultural values of the four schools included in the study differ. Some schools have a culture that is of a Western (individualistic) nature with a focus on autonomy (independence), while others have a collectivistic (interdependent) culture with the principle of “Ubuntu” featuring strongly. Sometimes, when learners representing various

cultures are in the same school, all of these cultures may feature to an extent. The principle of Ubuntu is evidenced in the following quote:

*“Now you realise that now in the group of this learners, they will realise that this one, he’s better than the rest of us. ... And then every time they will give that particular learner a support and even assist. They can even take their boots or their clothes for that particular learner.” (School 4)*

According to Gresham (2016), schools are challenged to teach learners from various language and ethnic backgrounds with different behaviour styles, beliefs, and attitudes.

Even though some values that determine social functioning are universal across cultures, acceptable social functioning may also be culturally bound. Learners enrolled in schools representing various cultures may thus get confused as to what is expected of them in terms of acceptable social behaviour, especially when they are taught by educators from a different culture, with this impacting negatively on their acquisition of appropriate social skills.

#### *Sub-theme 1.4: Parenting styles and disciplinary practices*

In general, educators spoke about the variation in the ways parents discipline their children and how there is no consensus between parents and teachers on how to discipline the children (as also indicated in sub-theme 1.2). For example, some parents have few rules for their children and leave the task of discipline mostly to the educators:

*“And then you will also have to teach them manners, ‘Don’t you say please?’, ‘Don’t you say thank you?’ and ‘How does one ask?’, you know, that question you must ask all the time.” (School 2)*

Other parents are offended by educators disciplining their children and sometimes stand up against this in order to win the favour of their children:

*“And parents abuse that situation, ‘Right, now I will act on behalf of my child and for him, must show him’, to give attention to the child, to fight against the teacher because the child is angry now because the teacher reprimanded him.” (School 2)*

Other parents are co-operating with the educators when it comes to discipline.

*“They’ll even bring the child to school if the child is always bunking.” (School 4)*

*“Teachers you must punish these guys, this child.” (School 4)*

These findings are consistent with those of De Witt and Lessing (2011) who indicate that educators in the South African context may not receive sufficient support from parents when it comes to disciplining or correcting learners towards pro-social behaviour. The educators participating in the research of Leefon et al. (2013) were of the opinion that parents undermined their authority.

Disciplining learners may be problematic for educators, as the parenting style and disciplinary practices of parents differ from the situation at school. It is essential for learners in middle childhood to be socially competent, and this sub-theme shows that differences in the school and home environment (regarding disciplinary practices) could have a negative impact on learners' social development (compare with sub-theme 1.2).

The first theme thus reveals that educators view matters related to context and culture as key in the social functioning of learners in middle childhood.

Theme 2: "Quality of connecting" in terms of behaviour

"Quality of connecting" refers to the nature of learners' relationships and how these relationships influence their behaviour. All educators indicated that learners display both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour which are mainly influenced by what they learn in the context of their home environment. Educators referred to appropriate behaviour as, for example, being kind, helpful, and respectful towards others, commenting nicely, and accepting discipline. The following verbatim quote provides an example of appropriate behaviour:

*"And if they do well in their things, they, there are some of them who will comment nicely." (School 2)*

Inappropriate behaviour includes, for example, being nasty, being disruptive, being argumentative and displaying aggressive behaviour, stealing, and lying. The following verbatim quotes provide examples of inappropriate behaviour:

*"Yes, and I think that specific children can't accept a "no" ... They will carry on and on and on. ... And they will argue with you about small things, for example, too much homework and will just carry on and on until you lose your temper. ... Then they will get so angry. (School 1)*

*"Because sometimes they steal cell phones or they open teacher's bags and take something." (School 3)*

In learners' relationships with others, both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour thus occur.

The manifestation of inappropriate learner behaviour is a big challenge in South African schools (Van Rooyen, 2014; De Witt & Lessing, 2011). An increase in violent behaviour within this country's public schools is linked to overcrowded classrooms, problems with discipline, bullying, fighting, screaming, and vandalism (Marais, 2016; Van Rooyen, 2014). An educator who participated in Marais' (2016) study referred to learners' disrespectful behaviour as evidenced by them laughing at her when she tried to discipline them. Leefon et al. (2013) stated that in spite of most South African schools employing a

code of conduct, it does not necessarily have the desired effect. Leefon et al. (2013) mentioned learners' destructive behaviour towards fellow learners and also towards educators who were often the victims of theft and vandalism. Leefon (2012) found that other undesirable behaviour displayed by learners includes talking non-stop in class and not completing school work, fighting, displaying aggressive and arrogant behaviour, lying, using foul language, and back-chatting the educator when reprimanded.

According to the participants, inappropriate behaviour also occurs due to the influences of negative peer pressure, exposure to unsuitable or age-inappropriate media as well as popular role models, and moral confusion, as illustrated by the following:

*"And the children are really very stuck in group pressure ... they as individuals they are actually wonderful children and almost everyone. ... But together." (School 2)*

*"The social media have got the negative and positive impact on how the children behave." (School 3)*

*"Also reading magazines or their role models. So they like to be like them." (School 4)*

*"The, they will think that, "why is this one loved by the teacher so much?" It means they have a relationship, that's how their mind talk. It means the principal cannot send Elizabeth. If the principal sends Elizabeth, it means the principal has got an affair. ... Even the teachers, if I've been close to the principal, then the principal is ... my boyfriend." (School 3)*

Educators in this study mentioned that bullying is frequently an imitation of the behaviour of role models, for example, parents or family members from dysfunctional homes. Van Rooyen (2014) found that bullying is the result of individuals (learners, educators, and parents) wanting to exercise power over others. She also indicates that bullying takes place by means of exclusions in relationships (whether it is relationships between learners or relationship between a learner and teacher) and continues as a result of fear experienced by the target.

The media have an influence on children's behaviour and beliefs, for example, television may portray adults and parents in a sense that authority structures are broken down, leading to problems with the socialising of children. The media may also provide children with questionable ideas on drugs, sexual attitudes, as well as violence and aggression (Louw & Louw, 2014).

According to the educators, positive behaviour of learners in middle childhood does not occur as frequently as negative behaviour at the schools. However, some learners do display sound behaviour that serves as an example for their fellow learners.

The second theme reveals that educators spoke more about inappropriate behaviour displayed by the learners in middle childhood than appropriate behaviour, in both advantaged and disadvantaged contexts. In line with this, learners' inappropriate behaviour is apparently influenced by various external factors and development-related challenges. Inappropriate behaviour displayed at school in daily activities is associated with poor social functioning and a lack of emotional competence. Conversely, appropriate behaviour is strengthened by being exposed to good examples from adults as well as fellow learners and is viewed as an indicator of sound social functioning and emotional competence.

### Theme 3: Social skills to be strengthened

Educators suggested that the following social skills need to be strengthened and developed amongst learners in middle childhood in order to protect and improve their social functioning: self-regulation, problem solving, conflict management, assertiveness, resilient coping, and communication and listening. Educators also underlined psychological competence regarding self-esteem, values, positive relationships, healthy boundaries, and responsibility. Some prominent responses were:

*"The other skill that I think it is important and could help a lot, is that skill, in terms of conflict situation ... trying to bring peace without judging the other one, but just to calm the situation." (School 3)*

*"Yes, I think as teachers as well, we should teach them to be resilient and have self-worth" (School 3)*

*"We should be able to lead them in order for them to know what is correct." (School 1)*

*"There's the boundaries. Stick to it." (School 1)*

The above findings are in line with various international researchers, amongst these, January, Casey and Paulson (2011), who evaluated various articles regarding programmes with the aim of improving social skills. They explained that many of the programmes offer conflict management, problem solving, emotional regulation skills, an awareness of the emotions of others, and enhancement of positive peer relationships. In support Craig, Brown, Upright and DeRosier (2016), who did a study on elementary school learners in the United States of America, stated that social skills training programmes may be effective in improving the social skills and behaviour of learners and should include problem solving, decision making, communication, self-regulation, and the making and keeping of friends. Concurrently, the 'Stop and Think' social skills programme, as developed by Knoff in 2001, includes various skills, namely listening, interpersonal skills, problem solving, and conflict

resolution skills, and were used for younger primary school learners (McDaniel, Bruhn & Troughton, 2016).

In comparison to numerous international studies on social skills programmes for learners, there is a scarcity of evidence-based South African studies. A South African study relevant to this study is that of De Villiers and Van den Berg (2012) which entails a positive psychology programme with the goal of increasing resilience and wellbeing in 12-year-olds. The programme included, for example, the development and maintenance of self-esteem; the identification, expression, and management of emotions in the self and others; conflict management (including assertiveness); and communication.

The third theme reveals the skills and competencies to be strengthened amongst learners in middle childhood to enhance their social functioning and, ultimately, their wellbeing.

The findings of this qualitative study, presented as three main themes, revealed that the social functioning of learners in middle childhood should be understood within the framework of context and culture, that both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are displayed by learners in middle childhood in interaction with others, and that various social skills and competencies need to be developed and strengthened intentionally.

### **Recommendation and Limitations**

Despite focus group interviews going well and data saturation being reached, the limitations of the study were that some educators in the focus group interviews did not participate as actively as hoped (perhaps as a result of them not being comfortable to do so). Additionally, the focus group interviews were conducted after school (which might have led to staff being tired and in a hurry). It is thus recommended that a preparation sheet or a written questionnaire including all the main questions to be asked during the focus group interviews be given to participants about a week beforehand with a request to complete and submit it after the completion of the focus group interviews. Some semi-structured personal interviews with educators as well as individuals skilled in the social functioning of learners in middle childhood, may also have been beneficial as an additional means of gathering in-depth data.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to explore educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood in a particular South African community. Educators emphasised factors related to context and culture as central to the social functioning of learners in middle childhood. The presence or absence of social competencies in learners in middle childhood is closely linked to the interaction of those particular systems referred to by Bronfenbrenner

as the micro- and meso-levels. Within the South African context, it seems that learners in middle childhood are exposed to much vulnerability, and support and guidance from their schools and educators towards positive social functioning is vital. Educators' efforts to better learners in middle childhood's pro-social behaviour may be challenged by the practices of parents due to different cultures and parenting styles. Being exposed to different cultures in the home and learning environment should be clarified for learners in middle childhood, since social (interactional) expectations are not necessarily similar in various (cultural) contexts.

For educators, healthy social functioning of learners in middle childhood is associated with a clear distinction between appropriate and inappropriate interacting behaviour. In order to nurture the social functioning of these learners, appropriate behaviour should be strengthened and inappropriate behaviour should be amended in accordance with the school's code of conduct towards pro-social behaviour.

As it appears that some educators may be prejudiced towards parents and learners living in disadvantaged circumstances, it is recommended that information on the social functioning of learners in middle childhood should also be obtained from other sources, for example, educational psychologists. Furthermore, it is recommended that a programme that is applicable to the South African context be designed and developed to intentionally strengthen the social functioning of learners in middle childhood. This programme should not be seen as a 'nice to have' but rather as a necessity, because it cannot be assumed that learners are socially competent. Such a programme will be important since learners in middle childhood are part of those representing the future of South Africa and the mastering of social skills and competencies is integral to a prosperous future. This study is of great value as, according to the knowledge of the researchers, it is the first that has been done on this particular topic within the theoretical framework of positive psychology in the South African context.

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## **Article 2**

### **The development of the Social Treasures Programme to enhance the social functioning of learners in middle childhood**

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**Abstract**

The social functioning of learners in middle childhood is vital to their overall wellbeing. Since the mere prevention or addressing of risks in the South African context is not sufficient for healthy interaction, the intentional protection and promotion of learners' social functioning in this vulnerable life phase is needed. The aim of this study was to develop a school-based wellbeing programme called the Social Treasures Programme (STP) for learners in middle childhood to enhance their social functioning towards better wellbeing. The skills and competencies needed for inclusion in the programme were identified by means of a literature review and four focus groups with educators from four sub-areas in an area in the North-West Province of South Africa. The Social Treasures Programme consists of eight sessions covering the following aspects: self-esteem and gratitude, self-regulation and goal setting, values and relationships, communication and listening, conflict management, emotional competence, and resilient coping.

**Keywords:** Learners, middle childhood, programme development, social functioning, wellbeing

## **1. Introduction**

In a study by Beets, Van Schalkwyk and Kirsten (see Section B, Article 1) where focus group interviews were conducted with educators on the social functioning of learners in middle childhood in a selected area of the North-West Province of South Africa, it was recommended that a programme aimed at the intentional enhancement of particular social skills and competencies should be developed. Consistent with this thinking, Luiselli et al. (2005) state that it is unlikely that learners will develop positive social skills without direction and assistance.

A social skills programme named the Social Treasures Programme (STP) was thus developed by the above-mentioned authors for the school context. School communities are viewed as important socialisation contexts (Cemalcilar, 2010) as they offer day-by-day social interactions that are likely to promote competence and positive development. Furthermore, as indicated by Suldo et al. (2015), the school context may develop and strengthen wellbeing as school connectedness and strong peer relationships are positively related to learners' subjective wellbeing or happiness. A programme presented at a school may also reach more learners (Cemalcilar, 2010).

The benefits of interventions or programmes are increased if learners are exposed to them during times when there are transitions in their development (January et al., 2011), such as in middle childhood. Middle childhood is also a favourable time for the identification of adjustable factors that may have an association with maladjustment or wellbeing. Therefore, this life phase is a favourable time for the implementation of programmes aimed at the encouraging of competence and the hindering of problems that may emerge in adolescence (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013).

According to Ungar et al. (2014), school-based programmes may be successful if they either include a cultural component or are sensitive to learners' contextual differences, for example, economic status, access to certain services and support, and the community's size. Successful programmes may then, in turn, change behavioural patterns by changing the social ecology of learners (Ungar et al., 2014). The conceptual background of the STP is discussed next.

## **2. Conceptual background**

### **2.1. A Positive Psychology Perspective**

Positive psychology, with its focus on "what is going well" and how wellbeing can be increased (Roffey, 2012: 12), was used as a theoretical framework for the development of the STP as this programme aims to protect and promote 'ordinary' learners' social

functioning. In other words, the STP is aimed at all learners and not only at those struggling with disorders or other challenges.

## **2.2. A Developmental Perspective**

Learners in middle childhood (6 years up to adolescence) are in Erikson's psychosocial developmental stage of 'Industry vs Inferiority' (Erikson, 1965, 1968, 1982). They face the challenges of working with others and learning basic skills (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016), such as reading, writing, arithmetic, and social interaction. The development of competence is dependent on the social context which provides opportunities for developing intrapersonal outcomes as well as defining suitable parameters for accomplishments. Competence can thus be viewed in the light of context-specific effectiveness and a competent learner will achieve the goals that he or she values and that others sanction. Furthermore, the pursuit of personal goals leads to positive developmental outcomes as well as social integration for the particular learner (Wentzel, 2014).

## **2.3. An Eco-Systemic Contextual Perspective**

Sensitivity towards context is important – especially in a country like South Africa which is rather diverse with its citizens representing various races and with 11 official languages being acknowledged. Furthermore, South Africa has a high incidence of socio-economic inequality, poverty, crime, and violence. Learners' social contexts play an important role in their development (Donald et al., 2014) and it was needed to take an ecological approach to acknowledge the many interacting factors for the development of the STP. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986), puts the developing child in the middle of a sequence of complex and interactive systems (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016), and views youngsters as taking their characteristics with them to the settings in which they interact and develop. Therefore, the STP was developed specifically for learners in South Africa.

## **2.4. A Social-Constructivist Perspective**

Social constructivism acknowledges the role of social interaction (family and community) and, consequently, culture in child development (Mertens, 2005). Vygotsky (1978), in his socio-cultural theory, emphasised learners' thinking being influenced by their socio-cultural context as societies aim to enable them to obtain the needed cultural skills and values (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2016). All aspects of children's development must thus be viewed in the context of their culture (Louw et al., 2014), and this was taken into consideration in the development of the STP.

In summary, the conceptual framework for the STP comprises the theoretical framework of positive psychology and emphasises the importance of life phase as well as the role of context and culture. The STP, which is a school-based wellbeing programme, is discussed next.

### **3. The Social Treasures Programme (STP)**

#### **3.1 Aim of the STP**

The aim of the STP is to enhance the social functioning and, ultimately, the wellbeing of learners in middle childhood in the South African context through intentionally strengthening appropriate or pro-social behaviour and adapting or redirecting inappropriate behaviour.

#### **3.2 Development of the STP**

A thematic content analysis of the data from focus group interviews that explored educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (aged 10 to 12 years and in grades five and six) indicated, amongst others, that a social skills wellbeing programme needed to be developed, and that certain skills and competencies needed to be included in this programme to ensure that appropriate behaviour is developed and strengthened and inappropriate behaviour is amended (see Section B, Article1). Literature reviews to supplement the above were conducted. The steps for doing the above were as follows:

- Keywords were developed for a literature search.
- Each keyword was thoroughly searched on all the available databases. Books, articles, dissertations, theses, and all other available material were used in the literature study.
- The information obtained from the above was summarised.
- The results of the thematic content analysis (see Section B, Article 2) were used to inform the researcher on educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood.
- The information from the literature study and the thematic content analysis were integrated and the information included under each skill or competency, were those that the researcher deemed to be the most important to know for children aged 10 to 12 years old.
- Academics in the field of psychology (with knowledge on programme development and/or social functioning and/or middle childhood) as well as a registered educational psychologist working with children in middle childhood were asked to evaluate the STP. Face and content validity were of importance. While face validity refers to appearance,

content validity refers to the inclusion of the correct content or all the relevant components (Bless, Higson-Smith, & Sithole, 2013). The evaluators thus had to ensure that the STP was valid for its purpose, and that it included the appropriate components and content. Furthermore, the evaluators assisted in determining whether the STP would be suitable for the particular age group in terms of the length of the sessions, the duration of the programme, and the level of the content.

### **3.3 Information about the STP**

The STP is a social wellbeing programme developed for learners aged 10 to 12 years. Furthermore, as indicated above, the STP was written for all learners and not particularly for those with disorders and other challenges. According to Van Vugt et al. (2013), it is beneficial when the composition of a group, for the purpose of a social skills programme, is diverse, as it will then be impossible for learners to strengthen one another's problematic behaviour and will rather lead to them learning from one another.

The STP consists of eight sessions. Except for the introductory session that will orientate the learners towards the programme and establish group rules, each session centres around a key theme(s) identified in literature reviews on social skills programmes as well as a thematic content analysis of the experiences of educators regarding the social functioning of learners in middle childhood (see Section B, Article 1). The themes of the sessions include: self-esteem and gratitude, self-regulation and goal setting, values and relationships, communication and listening, conflict management, emotional competence, and resilient coping. Each session, except for the first one, has a specific logical structure as indicated in Figure 1 below.

#### **Figure 1: Structure of sessions**

1. Special greeting (Hello)
2. Recap of previous session and introduction to current session
3. Ice-breaker
4. Teaching
5. Class activity or activities
6. Tools to be added to the treasure chest
7. Participant feedback
8. Social experiment (Home activity)
9. Special greeting (Good-bye)

The special greetings should include talking and/or singing as well as movement and/or dancing that happen simultaneously. The special greetings and its development will be discussed further under Session 1 below. The recap of the previous session and introduction to the current session should be very short. Regarding the recap of the previous session, only the most important information or lessons learnt should be covered. Feedback on the social experiment provided in the previous session should also be included here. In the introduction to the current session, the facilitator should only indicate what the session is about and what will be covered. The ice-breaker, teaching, class activity, and social experiment will be discussed per session, from session 2 to session 8, below. A treasure chest (Smith, 2006) and tools to be added to it, forms part of the STP and are discussed below. Information on the tools to be added to the treasure chest (Smith, 2006) is provided under Session 1 below. Learners may voluntarily provide feedback on the session, either verbally or in writing. Summaries of all the sessions in the STP have been compiled and should be handed out to the learners during the particular sessions and be referred to as needed.

The STP should be presented at the learners' school, after school hours in order not to interfere with the academic programme, and over four to eight weeks depending on the school's schedule and the activities of the learners. The STP should be presented in learners' home language or the language in which they are schooled, and to approximately 20 learners at a time, as most activities involve all learners participating, which may be time-consuming. During the presentation of the STP it should be emphasised that sound social functioning may differ amongst people of various cultures. Depending on the culture of the learners, the examples used in the STP should also be adjusted in order for it to be suitable for the particular group, whereas various examples should be used in a diverse group. The duration of each session should be approximately 90 minutes and if a facilitator are experiencing problems ensuring that a session fits into this time frame, another opportunity to complete the session should be scheduled. During the presentation of the STP, debriefing should take place if and when necessary.

Each learner should receive an A4-sized plastic envelope during the first session. The purpose of this envelope is to keep all the summaries of the sessions and the activities (where it is applicable to write it on paper) together. Even though the envelopes will be taken in after every session, learners will be allowed to take the summary of a session home after the session has been completed, especially to assist them in doing their social experiment; provided that they bring it with them to the next session and put it in their envelopes. During the last session of the STP, the learners may take the envelopes with all its contents home.

It is important for learners to generalise the skills they are being taught to all the contexts of their lives. To facilitate this, cooperative games and activities are included, various situations in which the particular skills may be valuable are discussed, and behaviours and responses typical of social situations are provoked (Zhang, 2011).

To optimise the effect of the STP, appropriate teaching skills are important as the mere provision of information does not signify competence. The facilitator of the programme should have a post-graduate qualification in psychology and should, furthermore, preferably be experienced in working with learners in middle childhood. In addition, it is important for facilitators to reside in close proximity to the school where the programme will be presented and to have enough time available for the thorough planning, preparation, and facilitation of the sessions. Brief orientation and planning conversations (one per session) with one of the authors of the programme should take place before a facilitator presents the STP.

Learners may receive snacks after each session as a token of appreciation for their participation, provided that all the parents have provided permission for this. Furthermore, attendance certificates (see Appendix 7) are provided to the learners during a function which educators and parents or legal guardians may attend.

Next, the most important aspects of the contents of the sessions are explained.

### **3.4 Content of the STP and Structure of Sessions**

#### **3.4.1 Session 1: Introduction**

The following takes place during this session:

- The learners and facilitator introduce themselves to one another.
- The structure and the content of the STP as well as the structure of the sessions are outlined to the participants by the facilitator.
- A code of conduct or group rules for the particular group of learners doing the STP are determined with the learners' input.
- The consequences of breaking the code of conduct or group rules are determined with the learners' input.
- It is indicated that, should a learner not comply with the code of conduct, reference will be made to it without implicating the particular learner. However, if the problem persists, the particular learner shall be addressed and reminded of the consequences of the particular behaviour, which may be imposed if needed.
- Practical arrangements are made (dates, times, and venues for the STP).
- Participants are told that the STP may be compared to a treasure chest (Smith, 2006) filled with tools; that the tools are the skills that will be learnt in each session of the

programme and that the treasure chest may be carried with them everywhere they go for them to be able to use the tools.

- Participants receive a picture of a treasure chest; are asked to write their names on it; colour it in at home, if they would like to; and bring it back to the second session.
- It is explained to the participants that, at the end of each session, they will get the opportunity to add the skill(s) they have learnt to the treasure chest by writing it anywhere on the picture or by drawing a representation of the particular skill(s) on the picture.
- An activity takes place: the group is divided into smaller groups and each smaller group is tasked with developing a way in which they would like to greet the facilitator and each other at both the beginning (Hello) and end (Good-bye) of each session. Each group presents what they have come up with after a while and the learners pick the greetings that they perceive to be the best. These greetings are then known as the special greetings and will be used during all the sessions.

### **3.4.2 Session 2: Self-esteem and gratitude**

#### **3.4.2.1 Materials needed**

- Three R20-notes.
- A large shell or an unusual or beautiful object.
- A small shell for every learner.

#### **3.4.2.2 Ice-breaker**

Learners are instructed to draw pictures of themselves and to indicate their good and bad features or qualities on the pictures (adapted from Prevatt & Prevatt-Hyles, 2012). After the above is finished, a game named 'I can, I can't' is played. According to this game, each learner gets a turn to say his or her name and to share one strength and one weakness of him- or herself (Badegruber, 2005: 18). The goal of this activity is, amongst others, to improve self-esteem, develop honesty, and learn to trust others (Badegruber, 2005). It may furthermore assist learners not only to experience themselves as being special and unique with both positive and negative characteristics but also to realise that everyone has positive and negative characteristics.

#### **3.4.2.3 Teaching**

The meaning of self-esteem is explained, and self-esteem's influence on behaviour is highlighted. A person's value is compared to that of money (for example a R20-note) that is crumpled and then trampled to the ground, with the lesson being that, irrespective of what

happens to an individual, the individual still has the same value. Furthermore, it is indicated that, even though people differ, everyone is special and unique and of equal importance, meaning that everyone should be treated worthily. It is further explained that self-esteem can be improved in various ways. Lastly, the importance of showing appreciation and how this may lead to improved social relationships are indicated.

#### **3.4.2.4 Class activity**

The name of the activity is 'Pass the shell'. For this activity, all the learners sit in a circle. The facilitator holds a large shell or an unusual or beautiful object and then praises or gives a compliment to the learner sitting on his or her left. The facilitator then passes the shell or object to the learner who received the praise or the compliment and this learner must then, while holding the shell or object, praise or give a compliment to the learner sitting on his or her left. This game continues until everybody has had a chance to give and receive praise or a compliment. Each learner may also be given a small shell that they may carry with them for a week to remind them about the praise or compliment they received. The goals of this activity are to teach learners to give and receive praise, to take turns, to develop empathy, to listen, and to learn to trust others (Plummer, 2008: 109). It also teaches gratitude which may lead to improved self-esteem.

#### **3.4.2.5 Social experiment**

Learners are instructed, for the next week before they go to sleep at night, to make a list of all the good things that they have done during the particular day, to read it to themselves, and to reflect on how it makes them feel (adapted from Greeff, 2005). The aim of this activity is to create awareness that everyone has some good in them and is doing good deeds on a daily basis, and to increase self-esteem.

### **3.4.3 Session 3: Self-regulation and purpose in life (setting goals)**

#### **3.4.3.1 Materials needed**

- Balloons.
- Pens.
- A CD-player.
- A suitable CD (lively music).

#### **3.4.3.2 Ice-breaker**

This ice-breaker's name is 'Balloon Dance'. It commences by letting each learner pick out a balloon that he or she likes. Learners are then instructed to blow it up, knot it, draw their

faces on it, and write their names on it. Furthermore, learners are instructed to let the balloons “dance above their heads” as soon as music starts to play (Badegruber, 2005: 66). All learners should then assist in keeping their own and others’ balloons from falling to the floor. When the music stops, every learner has to catch any balloon, find its owner, and hand it back to him or her (Badegruber, 2005). The aim of this game is to teach learners that part of everyone’s purpose in life is to help others and that if we assist others, these good deeds will come back to us (reciprocity or mutual benefit). Learners will also be taught that if they do something in a group, they must consider others and control themselves in order to not be a bother to others or to create discomfort for others which might lead to them becoming upset. According to Badegruber (2005), this game further assists learners to, amongst other things, relax, reduce their inhibitions, make contact, and animate the group.

### **3.4.3.3 Teaching**

The functions and value of self-regulation are explained. It is indicated that self-regulation may assist individuals in reaching their goals. Furthermore, the process for setting goals, important aspects to remember when setting goals, and the importance of goals are outlined. The discussion continues by indicating that individuals may achieve their purpose in life if they work continuously and diligently until they reach their goals.

### **3.4.3.4 Class activities**

This session includes two class activities. In the first activity, learners need to state the goals they have for their social life for the next six months (or year; Mougey et al., 2009). The aim of this activity is to ensure that learners establish goals for themselves in order to purposefully work towards success. The second activity’s name is ‘Pass a smile’. It starts by instructing all the learners to sit in a circle. The learner to start off the activity (1<sup>st</sup> player) is chosen, and he or she must then send a smile to the person on his or her left side (2<sup>nd</sup> player) by turning to and smiling at him or her. The 2<sup>nd</sup> player then receives or catches the smile and ‘zips’ his or her lips to hold the smile. The 2<sup>nd</sup> player then turns to the 3<sup>rd</sup> player and ‘unzips’ his or her lips and smiles. The 3<sup>rd</sup> player receives the smile, ‘zips’ his or her lips to hold the smile, turns to the 4<sup>th</sup> player, ‘unzips’ his or her lips and smiles. This activity continues until everyone has had a chance and may be adapted by letting the smiles go faster or across the circle or to use frowns or surprised faces (Plummer, 2008: 78). This game is suitable for teaching learners self-control, self-awareness, non-verbal communication, concentration, and to take turns (Plummer, 2008).

### **3.4.3.5 Social experiment**

Learners are instructed to make two lists: one of everything they need to do after school to be ready for the next school day, and one of what they actually do after school. The lists should then be compared, with a difference potentially indicating that not enough attention is paid to the achievement of goals. Furthermore, learners are instructed to draw up a schedule for themselves to indicate how they should spend their time to reach their goals. They should also test these schedules and adapt them where needed. This activity teaches learners an awareness of self-regulation and its benefits, as well as the value of making good decisions.

## **3.4.4 Session 4: Values and relationships**

### **3.4.4.1 Materials needed**

- A poster displaying the steps for choosing an appropriate friend.
- Flash cards with characteristics of possible friends listed on them.

### **3.4.4.2 Ice-breaker**

The name of the ice-breaker is 'Signs and signatures'. It starts off by all learners sitting or standing in a circle. Every learner then gets a chance to introduce him- or herself by stating his or her name accompanied by a movement or gesture (adapted from Plummer, 2008: 65). This game teaches, amongst others, self-awareness, awareness of others, non-verbal communication, taking turns, and listening (Plummer, 2009).

### **3.4.4.3 Teaching**

Values are explained by defining the concept and stating its purpose. Furthermore, values are compared to a GPS navigation system in the sense that it guides individuals in making good choices. In addition, it is indicated that an individual's values determine his or her interactions and interpersonal relationships. It is also highlighted that the behaviour of friends and that which is seen or heard in the media are not always good examples, and that if there is doubt about the suitability of a particular behaviour, a responsible adult may be asked. Furthermore, steps for choosing appropriate friends as well as the benefits of having appropriate friends are explained. Examples of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are also provided.

### **3.4.4.4 Class activities**

This session encompasses two class activities. In the first activity, a list of values is provided and learners need to identify the three values that are most important to them to live by and rank it in order of importance. The aim of this activity is for learners to determine the values

that are of great importance to them and according to which they should live. In the second activity, learners have to create two lists: one containing characteristics that a good friend should have, and one containing characteristics that an inappropriate friend would probably have (learners mention the characteristics aloud and it is written on a board). Two to three characteristics are then grouped together and written on separate flash cards. Some learners are picked to participate in the role play by being either a 'new student' or a 'possible friend'. The 'possible friend' is handed a flash card and has to use the characteristics written on it in the role play (it may be said or acted out). The 'new learner' introduces him- or herself to the 'possible friend' by saying: "Hello! My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I am a new student." The 'possible friend' answers with: "Hello! My name is \_\_\_\_\_", and states that he or she has the characteristics that is written on the card: "I am \_\_\_\_\_". The 'new learner' then decides whether he or she would like to have the 'possible friend' as a friend. If the 'new learner' does not want the 'possible friend' as a friend, he or she should provide an explanation for his or her choice. If the 'new learner' wants to be friends with the 'possible friend', he or she should continue with the conversation and talk about his or her hobbies and interests (Mougey et al., 2009: 226). The aim of this activity is to create an awareness of desirable and undesirable behaviour and to learn to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate friends.

#### **3.4.4.5 Social experiment**

Learners are instructed to thank a family member for something nice he or she has done for them. The learners then have to tell the person that they appreciate his or her kindness, support, etc. This activity teaches learners to express appreciation and thereby to strengthen relationships.

### **3.4.5 Session 5: Communication and listening**

#### **3.4.5.1 Materials needed**

- A mirror.
- A CD-player.
- A suitable CD (classical music).
- Two posters displaying the rules of interaction with others (one indicating what should be done and one indicating what should not be done).

#### **3.4.5.2 Ice-breaker**

The ice-breaker's name is 'You reflect me'. It starts by instructing learners to pair up and stand opposite a partner with a small distance between them. The facilitator then holds up a

mirror and explains its functions and practically demonstrates it. One learner from each pair starts moving with slow and small arm movements while soft music is playing in the background. The second learner imitates the movements of the first learner as if he or she is a mirror. After a while, the learners switch roles. The game may be adapted for players to use leg movements and also facial expressions (Badegruber, 2005: 51). This game can be played to improve communication skills and visual perception and also to develop partnership and sensitivity (Badegruber, 2005).

### **3.4.5.3 Teaching**

Communication is explained by first defining it, distinguishing between the various types of communication and identifying the barriers to communication. Listening is discussed next by indicating that it is different from hearing in the sense that listening goes together with concentration (Chweu, 2015). The rules of communication, that is, what should and should not be done during interaction, are then discussed.

### **3.4.5.4 Class activities**

This session includes two class activities. The name of the first activity is 'Pass the message'. In this activity, all the learners sit in a circle. The first learner whispers a short sentence to the second learner. The second learner whispers this sentence (or what he or she heard) to the third learner. The activity continues in this fashion until the message reaches the first learner, who should then compare the received message to the original one (Plummer, 2008: 90). This activity is suitable for teaching learners to concentrate, listen carefully, reflect on behaviour, take turns, and tolerate frustration (Plummer, 2008). In the second activity, learners are divided into groups, and each smaller group must act out an interaction where something went wrong to the bigger group. The bigger group must then indicate or guess what the problem was and may also be asked if they have previously been in situations like those acted out, and how it felt. Certain situations may be provided to the various groups, for example, person A interrupts person B a few times, leading to person B losing his or her train of thought and getting frustrated and angry with person A.

### **3.4.5.5 Social experiment**

It is explained to learners that sometimes individuals' verbal and non-verbal communication give conflicting messages. Learners are instructed to be attentive of the communication between other people and/or between themselves and others, and to try to pick up on situations where the verbal and non-verbal communication do not give the same message. They are also instructed to think about what happens when double messages are given and

how this can be corrected. The goal of this activity is for learners to realise and remember that differences between the messages given by verbal and non-verbal communication can create a lot of confusion, misunderstandings, and conflict, and that they should make sure that their words are in line with what they are saying with their bodies.

### **3.4.6 Session 6: Conflict management (environmental mastery)**

#### **3.4.6.1 Materials needed**

- A poster displaying the different conflict styles as represented by various animals (see Appendix 6).

#### **3.4.6.2 Ice-breaker**

The name of the ice-breaker is 'Anger Ball Toss'. A soft ball is used and everyone stands in a circle. The facilitator starts the ice-breaker by holding the ball and saying: "I feel angry when..." (the facilitator completes the sentence). He or she then throws the ball to a learner and this learner must indicate what makes him or her angry by saying: "I feel angry when..." The last-mentioned learner must then throw the ball to another learner. This ice-breaker continues until everyone has had a turn. Learners will be asked to sit down after they have had a turn to make it easier for the other learners to see who still has to get a turn (adapted from Quinonez, 2013). Through this game, learners will discover what angers their peers and might try to avoid this in future. Learners may also discover that they are like certain peers in terms of what angers them (Quinones, 2013).

#### **3.4.6.3 Teaching**

It is indicated to the learners that interaction may lead to conflict as people differ and also that conflict is normal (Brokensha, 2015). The facilitator explains possible strategies to use when conflict arises, the most suitable time for handling conflict, and different styles for handling conflict. In addition, it is indicated that conflict should be managed by acting assertively. Assertiveness is discussed and the formula to be followed when acting assertively (Prevatt & Prevatt-Hyles, 2012) is described.

#### **3.4.6.4 Class activities**

This session encompasses two class activities. In the first activity, learners need to identify their conflict handling styles and indicate why they think the styles they have chosen are those they use. Learners who have chosen the same style are then grouped together and the small groups need to act out the animal representing their conflict handling style. The goal of this activity is for learners to understand that various people handle conflict

differently, to identify their own conflict style and thus learn more about themselves, to practice cooperation and taking turns, and to use their imagination. In the second activity, conflict scenarios are prepared, for example, a learner takes another learner's eraser without asking, and then solved using the formula for assertiveness. The goal with this activity is to practise being assertive.

#### **3.4.6.5 Social experiment**

Learners are instructed to be attentive to conflict situations between others or between themselves and another, and to determine the conflict handling styles used by those involved. They have to motivate why they think the conflict styles that they have identified are those that occurred. Furthermore, they have to indicate whether the conflict has been resolved and how. The goal of this activity is for learners to become aware that conflict is part of daily life, to identify and understand various conflict styles, and to realise that conflict can be solved most of the time.

### **3.4.7 Session 7: Emotional competence**

#### **3.4.7.1 Materials needed**

- A poster on the ABCDE model (Ellis, 1977; Ellis & Ellis, 2011).

#### **3.4.7.2 Ice-breaker**

The name of the ice-breaker is 'I fell in the well'. It starts off by letting all the learners stand in a circle. One learner moves to the centre of the circle, quickly sits down and says: "I fell in the well". All the other learners as a group then ask: "Who should pull you out?" The learner in the centre of the circle decides on the emotion that the individual pulling him or her out must display best and answers by saying, for example, the happiest individual in the room. Everyone acts happy and the learner in the middle of the circle decides who looks the happiest to him or her and calls on this person to assist him or her to get out of the well. The learner who assists then falls into the well and the ice-breaker is repeated a few times with other emotions, for example, being sad, angry, excited, etc. (adapted from Badegruber, 2005: 105). This game teaches learners to help others, show affection, enhance creativity, develop partnerships (Badegruber, 2005), as well as recognise and understand the display of emotions.

#### **3.4.7.3 Teaching**

It is indicated that emotions are experienced with all interactions and that all emotions are normal. Furthermore, it is explained that emotions are not long-lasting and that they should

not lead to poor behaviour. The ABCDE model (Ellis, 1977; Ellis & Ellis, 2011), with which negative thinking can be converted into positive thinking to achieve better outcomes, is then explained.

#### **3.4.7.4 Class activity**

The name of the class activity is 'If feelings were colours'. It starts off by the facilitator explaining that different feelings may be represented by different colours. Every learner should then indicate which colour he or she currently chooses to be and explain why. The learners may also move around the room as a specific colour at a specific time. Furthermore, learners may be asked, for example, whether all the 'blues' move in a similar way, how the movements of the different colours differ, and whether it is difficult to change colours or moods and when this might happen. It may also be explored why the same emotion has been linked to different colours by the various participants (Plummer, 2008: 124). This game is suitable for teaching self-awareness, empathy, non-verbal communication, the use of imagination, and to be observant (Plummer, 2008). It also teaches that a variety of emotions exist, and that the same emotion can be experienced and acted upon differently by various individuals.

#### **3.4.7.5 Social experiment**

Learners are instructed to identify individuals who assist them in experiencing positive emotions and to think about the reason(s) why this happens. This activity will help learners to identify positive influences in their lives and also to realise that positive emotions can be created easily and through the simple things in life.

### **3.4.8 Session 8: Resilient coping**

#### **3.4.8.1 Materials needed**

- A poster displaying the steps in the problem-solving process.

#### **3.4.8.2 Ice-breaker**

The name of the ice-breaker is 'Sort us out'. In this ice-breaker, the learners arrange themselves in a line according to the criteria given by the facilitator, for example, alphabetically in terms of learners' names or numerically according to the time they get out of bed in the mornings. The learners may be asked which line took the least or most time to organise and also what the reasons for this are. Learners may also be asked what the similarities and differences among them are (Plummer, 2008: 146). This ice-breaker may

assist learners in learning to tolerate frustration or disappointment and to stay positive despite it.

### **3.4.8.3 Teaching**

It is stated that no individual always has control over what happens to him or her, but that the individual can choose his or her reaction (Jones, 2007). Furthermore, it is indicated that negative events do not have to hold individuals back forever and that it should be attempted to turn these setbacks into experiences that can be learnt from (Greeff, 2005). Resilience as well as ways in which it may be increased are explained. In addition, it is stated that if individuals have positive thoughts and beliefs, problem solving and decision making may be easier. The process for making good decisions to solve problems are discussed. It is then highlighted that individuals cannot exercise control over all problems and that this should just be accepted (Greeff, 2005). Furthermore, it is stated that individuals should take responsibility for their actions and should be willing to both apologise and forgive.

### **3.4.8.4 Class activity**

Learners are divided into groups and each group receives a certain scenario that they are instructed to solve using the problem-solving process. A scenario may be, for example, that some learners want to participate in a talent show on television and have to come up with something entertaining that is worthwhile to watch. Furthermore, the learners must ensure that they are able to be on the show (adapted from Greeff, 2005). The aim of this activity is to teach learners to cooperate in a group situation and to make plans (and adapt, if necessary) to solve problems.

### **3.4.8.5 Social experiment**

As the STP has been concluded, no social experiment is given.

## **4. Recommendations**

It is recommended that the STP be presented to learners in middle childhood, at their schools, by trained individuals with the relevant qualifications and backgrounds as a way of giving back to the community. If, despite this, only a limited number of learners benefit from the STP due to significant time, financial, and opportunity barriers (compare Craig et al., 2016), it is recommended that voluntary community workers or parents be trained to present a simplified version of the STP. Regular monitoring should then be done by an appointed professional person in the particular community. In future, participatory action research may be used to further refine the STP and make it user-friendly for other contexts.

## **5. Conclusion**

The STP was developed to enhance the social functioning and, ultimately, the wellbeing of learners in middle childhood in the South African context. This was needed as it cannot be assumed that most learners will automatically attain healthy social functioning. Also, many learners in middle childhood face serious environmental risks that may inhibit their socio-emotional development. The content of the STP was informed by existing literature as well as empirical research conducted prior to the design of the programme in the form of focus groups with educators of learners aged 10 to 12 years (see Section B, Article 1). Sessions on the following themes were included in the STP: self-esteem and gratitude, self-regulation and purpose in life, values and relationships, communication and listening, conflict management, emotional competence, and resilient coping. As the mere information of such a programme in itself cannot change the social functioning and behaviour of learners, implementation of the STP is recommended in order to evaluate and determine its effect.

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### **Article 3**

## **An evaluation of the effect of the Social Treasures Programme aimed at enhancing the social functioning of learners in middle childhood**

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**Magazine article**

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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

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**Abstract**

The aim of this study was to evaluate a school-based wellbeing programme called the Social Treasures Programme (STP) which was developed for learners in middle childhood in the South African context. A repeated measures design was used to evaluate the effect of the STP. Learners, educators, and parents or legal guardians from an area in the North-West Province participated by completing psychometric scales at various time intervals. Data were analysed using SPSS Version 25 and AMOS Version 25. Results indicated that the STP was successful in decreasing social anxiety and improving social skills (including adherence to social rules and politeness) and self-esteem, as rated by the learners. The STP also succeeded in increasing assertiveness and social skills with peers, as rated by educators. The developed programme can thus be used in the South African context to enhance the social functioning and wellbeing of learners in middle childhood.

**Keywords:** middle childhood, programme evaluation, school, social functioning, South African context, wellbeing programme, wellbeing

## Introduction

Based on preliminary research (see Section B, Article 1) and informed by existing literature, a school-based wellbeing programme called the Social Treasures Programme (STP) was developed (see Section B, Article 2). This article focuses on the evaluation of the effect of the STP which is intended to enhance the social functioning and thereby the social-emotional wellbeing of learners in middle childhood in the South African context.

Learners in middle childhood are in Erikson's phase of 'Industry vs Inferiority' (six years up to adolescence). During this phase, they are preoccupied with gaining proficiency, competence, and mastery in tasks. In middle childhood, learners also receive more feedback on their performance in various activities than previously and their self-evaluations will lead to the development of their self-esteem (Erikson, 1963; Erikson, as cited in Hook, 2013). Social functioning is one of the key areas of evaluation by the self and others in which competence needs to be gained.

Social functioning refers to those processes of relating where humans interact with one another, and these processes may offer opportunities for wellbeing (Wissing, 2013). In this study, social functioning refers to a continuum of the processes of relating where the upper levels of social functioning indicate pro-social functioning, and the lower levels indicate poor social functioning.

The social functioning of learners in middle childhood can be understood in terms of the perspectives on wellbeing or happiness that, according to Wissing (2014a, p. 7), include the hedonic perspective ("feeling good") and the eudaimonic perspective ("functioning well"). Research further supports the notion of various levels of wellbeing, namely flourishing (indicating high levels of psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing); moderate mental health (indicating moderate levels of psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing); and languishing (indicating low levels of psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing; Keyes, 2005; Wissing, 2014b). Therefore, within the positive approach of psychology, the social functioning of learners in middle childhood is integral to the presence of wellbeing, while different levels of functioning are understood. Lower levels of social functioning might hold vulnerabilities for mental health (Ryff, 1989) and, for example, lead to psychological disturbances later in life (Verduyn, Lord, & Forrest, 1990), including depression and social anxiety. In addition, Lewis, Brock, and Lazarus (2002) state that training in social skills may prevent various problem behaviours and may serve as an early intervention for these.

Mental health problems as well as problem behaviours may thus be curbed by effective programmes for obtaining the necessary social skills. No evidence-based programmes targeting the improvement of social functioning (usually expressed as programmes improving social skills) could be found for the South African or even the African

context. Furthermore, most programmes aimed at the improvement of social functioning have been developed for specific groups; for example, learners with social anxiety, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism spectrum disorders. Examples of social skills programmes aimed at learners with social anxiety include those of Caballo, Carrillo, and Ollendick (2015) and Yoshinaga and Shimizu (2014), while examples of social skills programmes aimed at learners with ADHD include those of Hannesdottir, Ingvarsdottir, and Bjornsson (2017); Jijina and Sinha (2016); and Wilkes-Gillan, Bundy, Cordier, and Lincoln (2016). In addition, examples of social skills programmes aimed at learners with autism spectrum disorders include those of Cotugno (2009); Dekker et al. (2018); Radley, McHugh, Taber, Battaglia, and Ford (2015); and Einfeld et al. (2018).

January, Casey, and Paulson (2011) indicate that social skills programmes are more effective when, amongst others, they are implemented early in learners' development, engagement in hands-on tasks and activities are included, and they are applied during times of transitions in development. Furthermore, Cartledge and Loe (2001) indicate that skills included in programmes should be selected based on their cultural appropriateness for the learners' context. It is worth mentioning that Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, Ben, and Gravesteyn (2012) indicate that most programmes aim at achieving various positive outcomes simultaneously and are successful in achieving some of their outcomes. However, even though the effects of social skills programmes aimed at all learners are usually positive, it should be noted that not all programmes are successful (January et al., 2011) or evidence-based.

## **Method**

### ***Research design***

A repeated measures design was followed.

### ***Participants***

Although middle childhood comprises the ages of six years to about 12 years (Louw & Louw, 2014), only learners aged 10 to 12 years (in grades 5 and 6) were included in this study as psychometric scales were used for data collection, and learners younger than 10 years old would have struggled to complete it in the available time. Participants to the pre-testing included 221 learners aged 10 to 12 years from four public primary schools in a specific area in the North-West Province of South Africa. The reasons for the large group ( $n > 200$ ) were that the reliability and validity of the psychometric scales and sub-scales (that have been translated from English to Afrikaans, Setswana, and Sesotho) had to be determined for the particular context.

Sixty-six learners (45 learners in the experimental group and 21 learners in the control group) from one public primary school in a certain area in the North-West Province of South Africa participated in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the STP (attendance of the STP, post-testing, and follow-up testing). A parent or legal guardian ( $n = 66$ ) and educators ( $n = 13$ ) of the abovementioned 66 learners also participated. All the participants had to comply with certain inclusion criteria.

### ***Sampling strategy***

The four participating schools were selected using cluster sampling. Convenience sampling was applied for the selection of learners for the pre-testing at the four public primary schools. For purposes of the evaluation of the effect of the STP, stratified random sampling was used for the selection of learners at one school, while purposive sampling was used for the selection of parents or legal guardians and educators.

### ***Procedure***

#### ***Learners***

All the psychometric scales were completed by 221 learners from four public primary schools in an area in the North-West Province to determine the reliability and validity of these scales. This served as the pre-testing and also determined which scales and sub-scales could be used further in the study. Furthermore, the scores that learners obtained on the psychometric scale in the pre-testing were used to divide the learners of the school chosen for the evaluation of the effect of the STP into three categories (low, moderate, and high scores) which enabled the researcher to randomly select equal percentages of learners from each category for both the experimental and control groups. Gender did not play a role in the selection of learners for the experimental- and control groups. Furthermore, twice as many learners as included in the control group, was included in the experimental group. This was done to make provision for learners from the experimental group withdrawing or not attending all the sessions and to despite this, still have enough participants for the statistics not to be compromised.

Both the experimental and control groups completed post-tests and follow-up tests on the same occasions, with the post-testing being done directly after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group. The follow-up testing was done three months later, whereafter the STP was presented to the control group. The STP was presented by an educational psychologist who is currently in private practice.

### *Educators and parents or legal guardians*

The register class educators (educators acting as guardians for learners allocated to their class and who also handle the overall administration for these learners) and parents or legal guardians participated in pre-testing and follow-up testing three months after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group by completing psychometric scales concerning the learners in the experimental and control groups.

### ***The development and content of the STP***

The STP was developed based on literature reviews and information from four focus groups with the educators (n = 29) of 10- to 12-year-old learners, on the educators' experiences of the social functioning of these learners as well as the skills and competencies the learners need to enhance their social functioning (see Section B, Article 1 and Article 2).

The STP consists of eight sessions, with the following skills and competencies being included: self-esteem, gratitude, self-regulation, goal setting, values, relationships, communication, listening, conflict management, emotional competence, and resilient coping. The duration of each session was approximately 90 minutes (see Section B, Article 2).

As the STP was developed for all learners and not only those with certain pathology and/or challenges, a positive psychology approach was used. This implies that the intentional development of positive cognition, emotions, and behaviours were of great importance in this programme (Guse, 2014).

As previously indicated, the focus of the STP is on learners in middle childhood as this life phase focuses on competency, including social competence.

### ***Psychometric scales***

Quantitative data were collected by using the following psychometric scales for the learners:

*The Social Anxiety Scale for Children–Revised (SASC–R; La Greca, 1998; La Greca & Stone, 1993)*. This scale incorporates 18 items (Brumariu & Kerns, 2008) and three factors, namely fear of negative evaluation, social avoidance and distress in new situations, and social avoidance and distress in general (Brumariu & Kerns, 2008; Storch, Masia-Warner, Dent, Roberti, & Fisher, 2004). The SASC–R has good test-retest reliability and internal consistency (Storch et al., 2004). In a study by Findlay, Coplan, and Bowker (2009), a Cronbach alpha of 0.9 was obtained for the SASC–R. In this study, a Cronbach alpha of 0.76 was obtained.

*The School Short-Form Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory–Revised (Coopersmith, 1967; Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011)*. This scale consists of 19 items and four factors, namely personal self-esteem, self-esteem derived from parents, self-esteem derived from

peers, and self-esteem derived from school. The internal consistency of the scale is adequate with a Cronbach alpha of 0.83 and the factor structure is deemed psychometrically sound (Hills et al., 2011). In this study, a Cronbach alpha of 0.72 was obtained.

*Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale (CS<sup>4</sup>; Danielson & Phelps, 2003).* This scale measures learners' view of their own social skills. It consists of 21 items, with 14 items measuring pro-social skills and the remaining seven, poor social skills, on a five-point Likert-type scale. The CS<sup>4</sup> has been found to have good internal consistency (with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.96) and test-retest reliability, with a test-retest coefficient of 0.74 (Danielson & Phelps, 2003). In this study, a Cronbach alpha of 0.59 was obtained.

*The Children's Depression Inventory Short Form (CDI 2; Kovacs, 2011).* The CDI 2 measures symptoms of depression and includes 12 items. According to Kovacs (2012), the CDI 2 displays acceptable to high levels of internal consistency with Cronbach alphas ranging from 0.67 to 0.91. Kovacs (2012) also indicates that the CDI 2 displays convergent validity. In this study, a Cronbach alpha of 0.71 was obtained.

*The Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).* This scale measures total subjective happiness and consists of four items. The SHS has high internal consistency that is stable across samples and good to excellent reliability as suggested by test-retest correlations as well as self-peer correlations. It also has good convergent and discriminant validity (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). In this study, a Cronbach alpha of 0.16 was obtained.

The following psychometric scale was used for the educators:

*The Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (T-CRS 2.1; Children's Institute, 2002a)* measures children's social, behavioural, emotional, and general school adaptation. It encompasses 32 items that are grouped into 4 sub-scales, namely peer social skills, assertiveness, behaviour control, and task orientation, with each of these sub-scales consisting of eight items (four negative and four positive). The reliability of this psychometric scale varies from 0.87 to 0.94 (Children's Institute, 2002b). In this study, a Cronbach alpha of 0.89 was obtained.

The following psychometric scale was used for the parents or legal guardians:

*The Child Social Preference Scale (CSPS; Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004)* assesses shyness and social disinterest (unsociability) in learners (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008; Coplan, Arbeau, & Armer, 2008; Coplan & Armer, 2005; Coplan et al., 2004) and consists of 11 items. According to Coplan et al. (2004), the CSPS has high internal consistency, a reliable factor structure, and strong construct validity. In a study done by Rubin,

Wojslawowics, Rose-Krasnor, Booth-La Force, and Burgess (2006), alpha coefficients ranging from 0.87 to 0.95 were found for the subscales. In this study, a Cronbach alpha of 0.66 was obtained.

### ***Validity and reliability of psychometric scales***

Even though the reliability and validity of the various psychometric scales are not the focus of the study, it is reported to indicate which scales and sub-scales are applicable for use in the South African context. Reliability was determined through the calculation of Cronbach alpha coefficients. While a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.60 is an indication of acceptable reliability for a scale measuring a psychological construct, a Cronbach alpha coefficient of 0.70 and above indicates good reliability for such a scale (Field, 2009).

Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 show descriptive statistics and Cronbach alpha coefficients for the various psychometric scales and sub-scales that have been used for the learners, educators, and parents or legal guardians, respectively. For the psychometric scales and sub-scales where the Cronbach alpha coefficients were too low to be reliable, the means and standard deviations were not calculated as these scales and sub-scales could not be used further.

<insert Table 1 here>

<insert Table 2 here>

<insert Table 3 here>

The reliability coefficients of the Children's Depression Inventory 2 (CDI 2), Social Anxiety Scale for Children–Revised (SASC–R), Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory–Revised (CSI–R), Teacher Child Rating Scale 2.1 (TCRS 2.1), Task Orientation (TO) sub-scale, Assertiveness (AS) sub-scale, Peer Social Skills (PSS) sub-scale, and the Child Social Preference Scale (CSPS) are good, while the reliability coefficients of the Fear of Negative Evaluation from Peers (FNE) sub-scale, Social Avoidance and Distress specific to New Situations (SAD–N) subscale, Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale (CS<sup>4</sup>), Adherence to Social Rules and Politeness (ASRP) sub-scale, Self-esteem regarding the General Self (GS) sub-scale, School or Academic Self-esteem (S) sub-scale, Behaviour Control (BC) sub-scale, and Social Disinterest (SoD) sub-scale are acceptable. The other scales and sub-scales unfortunately seem not to be reliable for the context. It is interesting to

note that scales or sub-scales with fewer or a limited number of items tend to have low Cronbach alpha coefficients (Pallant, 2010).

The validity of scales was determined by conducting exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. S. M. Ellis (personal communication, 20 July 2018) stated that, for validity to be in order, the minimum sample discrepancy divided by degrees of freedom (CMIN/DF) should be as close as possible to two, but according to Mueller (1996), ratios of three, four, and five may also still be representative of good validity. Furthermore, Mueller (1996) states that the comparative fit index (CFI) must be higher than 0.90 for good validity. According to Blunch (2008), models with values of 0.10 and higher for the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) are not acceptable, and thus not indicative of good validity. Table 4, Table 5, and Table 6 indicate the various measures of validity for the psychometric scales used for the learners, the educators, and the parents, respectively.

<insert Table 4 here>

According to Table 4, all the scales except for the SHS were valid, with a 90 percent confidence interval.

<insert Table 5 here>

According to its CMIN/DF, the TCRS 2.1 has good validity, but in contrast to this and according to the CFI and RMSEA, the scale does not display good validity, with a 90 percent confidence interval. It is thus advisable that the TCRS 2.1 be re-evaluated in a larger study in the South African context.

<insert Table 6 here>

According to its CMIN/DF, CFI, and RMSEA, the validity of the CSPS is in order.

As psychometric scales and sub-scales that are not reliable and/or valid could not be used further, it is excluded from further discussions.

### ***Data analysis***

Data was analysed by the Statistical Consultation Services of the North-West University. AMOS version 25 (AMOS Development Company, 2017) was used for the analysis of the validity of the psychometric scales while SPSS version 25.0 (IBM Corporation, 2017) was used for the analysis of the rest of the quantitative data.

The reliability and validity of all the psychometric scales were calculated and descriptive statistics (means and standard deviation) were determined for all the reliable and valid psychometric scales.

For the determination of the differences between the experimental and control groups before the STP, independent t-tests were used. To determine the differences between the experimental and control groups directly after (only in the case of the psychometric scales and sub-scales for the learners) as well as three months after the presentation of the STP, repeated measures t-tests were used. To determine the within-group differences based on the psychometric scales and sub-scales for the learners, repeated measures analysis of variance was done. To determine the within-group differences for both the experimental and control groups over time based on the psychometric scales and sub-scales for the educators and parents or legal guardians, paired t-tests were performed. If differences existed, it was determined whether these were statistically or practically significant. For differences to be statistically significant,  $p < 0.05$  (Ellis & Steyn, 2003). As the size of the group was rather small, it was better to use Cohen's  $d$  (effect size or practical significance; Rosenthal, Rosnow, & Rubin, 2000). Practical significance ( $d$ ) can take various values according to Cohen (1988): if  $d \leq 0.2$ , a small effect is indicated; if  $d \leq 0.5$ , a medium effect is indicated; and if  $d \geq 0.8$ , a large effect is indicated.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Approval for the study was obtained from the research focus area Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES; see Appendix 2) and the Health Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC; see Appendix 3) of the North-West University. Furthermore, permission for the study was obtained from the Department of Education and Sport Development of the North-West Province (see Appendix 1) and the principals of the relevant schools. Before the completion of the psychometric scales, the written consent of parents or legal guardians and educators, and in the case of learners, their written assent and one of their parents' consent, were obtained. All other important ethical principles have been applied to the study and special attention was given to informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity.

### **Results**

Differences between the experimental and control groups before the STP (pre-test); after the presentation of the STP (only applicable for scales completed by learners); and three months after the presentation of the STP; as well as differences within the experimental and control groups over time are discussed below, as rated by the learners (see Table 7),

educators (see Table 8), and parents (see Table 9) by means of various psychometric scales.

<insert Table 7 here>

<insert Table 8 here>

<insert Table 9 here>

### ***Pre-test differences***

#### *Learners*

The scores for the CDI 2, CSI-R, and GS were initially better for the experimental group, while the scores for the SASC-R, FNE, SAD-N, CS<sup>4</sup>, ASRP, and S were initially better for the control group. For GS, there was a practically significant difference with a large effect size ( $d = 0.79$ ) between the groups. For the CS<sup>4</sup>, there was a practically significant difference with a medium effect size ( $d = 0.47$ ) between the groups. For the CDI 2, SASC-R, FNE, SAD-N, ASRP, and CSI-R, there were practically significant differences between the experimental and control groups, with small effect sizes ( $d = 0.22$ ,  $d = 0.37$ ,  $d = 0.16$ ,  $d = 0.34$ ,  $d = 0.31$ , and  $d = 0.24$ , respectively).

#### *Educators*

As the sub-scales of the TCRS 2.1 do not add up to a total score for this psychometric scale, only the sub-scales are discussed. The results indicated that the scores for TO and AS were initially better for the experimental group, while the control group initially had better scores on BC and PSS.

The differences between the groups were not statistically significant for any of the sub-scales, while there were practically significant differences with a small effect for TO ( $d = 0.23$ ) and BC ( $d = 0.19$ ).

#### *Parents or legal guardians*

The scores for SoD were exactly the same for the experimental and control groups, and statistical and practical significance were thus not of relevance.

***Differences between the experimental and control groups directly after (T2) as well as three months after the presentation of the STP (T3)****Learners*

Differences between the groups at T2 were only determined for learner's ratings of themselves. The experimental group's scores on the CDI 2, SASC-R, and FNE were better than those of the control group at both T2 and T3. For the CDI 2, SASC-R, and FNE, the scores for both groups were better at T3 than at T2. For the CDI 2, the scores between the groups differed practically significantly, with a small effect at T2 ( $d = 0.23$ ), while the scores for the two groups did not differ practically significantly at T3. For the SASC-R and FNE, the scores between the two groups differed practically significantly with a small effect at T2 ( $d = 0.09$  for the SASC-R and  $d = 0.33$  for the FNE) and T3 ( $d = 0.26$  for the SASC-R and  $d = 0.15$  for FNE).

For SAD-N, the scores for the control group were better than those of the experimental group at both T2 and T3, with the scores being the best at T3. There were practically significant differences with a small effect between the groups for T2 ( $d = 0.41$ ) and T3 ( $d = 0.2$ ).

For the CS<sup>4</sup>, the scores for the experimental group were better than those of the control group at T2 and T3, with the scores for T2 being the best. There were practically significant differences with a small effect between the two groups at T2 ( $d = 0.31$ ) and T3 ( $d = 0.23$ ).

For ASRP, the scores of the experimental group were better than those of the control group for both T2 and T3. However, the scores weakened from T2 to T3 for the experimental group, while it improved from T2 to T3 for the control group. The differences between the two groups at T2 were practically significant with a medium effect ( $d = 0.56$ ), while the difference between the two groups at T3 were practically significant with a small effect ( $d = 0.15$ ).

For the CSI-R, the scores for the experimental group were better than those of the control group at both T2 and T3, with the scores for both groups being the best at T2. The differences between the two groups were practically significant with a large effect for both T2 ( $d = 0.93$ ) and T3 ( $d = 0.97$ ).

For GS, the scores for the experimental group were lower than those of the control group at T2, while it was higher for the experimental group than for the control group at T3. For the experimental group, the scores at T3 were the highest, while the scores for the control group were the highest at T2. The differences between the groups were practically significant with a medium effect ( $d = 0.74$ ) at T3, while there were no practically significant differences between the groups at T2.

For S, the scores at both T2 and T3 were better for the experimental group than for the control group, with the scores for the experimental group being the highest at T2 and those for the control group being the same for T2 and T3. The groups differed practically significantly with a small effect at both T2 ( $d = 0.43$ ) and T3 ( $d = 0.23$ ).

#### *Educators*

The differences between the groups at T2 were not determined for educators' ratings of the learners. At T3, the scores for TO, BC, AS, and PSS were better for the experimental group than for the control group. The differences between the two groups were statistically significant for AS ( $p = 0.004$ ) and PSS ( $p = 0.037$ ), while the differences between the groups were practically significant with a medium effect for AS ( $d = 0.64$ ) and PSS ( $d = 0.52$ ), and practically significant with a small effect for TO ( $d = 0.31$ ) and BC ( $d = 0.32$ ).

#### *Parents or legal guardians*

The differences between the groups directly after the presentation of the STP were not determined for parents' ratings of the learners. At T3, the score for SoD was better for the experimental group than for the control group, with this difference not being statistically significant, even though it is practically significant with a small effect ( $d = 0.23$ ).

### ***Differences within the experimental and control groups over time (T1, T2, and T3)***

#### *Learners*

The scores for the CDI 2 have weakened practically significantly with a large effect from T1 to T2 for both the experimental and control groups ( $d = 0.85$  and  $d = 0.87$  respectively), and improved practically significantly with a large effect from T2 to T3 for both the experimental and control groups ( $d = 1.10$  and  $d = 1.28$ , respectively). From T1 to T3, the scores for the CDI 2 improved practically significantly for both the experimental and control groups with small effects ( $d = 0.25$  and  $d = 0.41$ , respectively).

The scores for the SASC-R weakened for both groups from T1 to T2 and then improved from T2 to T3, also for both groups. For the experimental group, the change in the scores from T2 to T3 were practically significant with a large effect ( $d = 0.84$ ), while for the control group, the change in the scores from T1 to T2 were practically significant with a medium effect ( $d = 0.74$ ). For the experimental group, the scores from T1 to T2 changed practically significantly with a small effect ( $d = 0.29$ ), while from T1 to T3, the scores changed practically significantly with a medium effect ( $d = 0.59$ ). For the control group, the scores changed practically significantly with a medium effect ( $d = 0.69$ ) from T2 to T3.

For FNE, the scores weakened from T1 to T2 and then improved from T2 to T3 for both the experimental and control groups. For the control group, a practically significant change with a large effect occurred from T1 to T2 ( $d = 0.91$ ) and also from T2 to T3 ( $d = 0.82$ ). For the experimental group, a practically significant change with a medium effect ( $d = 0.63$ ) occurred from T2 to T3, while a practically significant change with a small effect ( $d = 0.21$ ) occurred from T1 to T3.

For SAD-N, the scores for both the experimental and control groups weakened from T1 to T2 and improved from T2 to T3. For the experimental group, from T2 to T3, there was a practically significant change with a medium effect ( $d = 0.49$ ), while from T1 to T2 and also from T1 to T3, there were practically significant changes with small effects ( $d = 0.19$  and  $d = 0.30$ , respectively). For the control group, there was a practically significant difference with a small effect from T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.16$ ) and also from T2 to T3 ( $d = 0.28$ ).

For the CS<sup>4</sup>, the scores improved from T1 to T2 and then decreased (weakened) from T2 to T3 for both the experimental and control groups. There was a practically significant change with a large effect in the experimental group from T1 to T2 ( $d = 1.08$ ) and also from T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.8$ ). For the experimental group, there was a practically significant change with a small effect from T2 to T3 ( $d = 0.28$ ) and also for the control group from T1 to T2 and T2 to T3 ( $d = 0.3$  and  $d = 0.21$ , respectively).

For ASRP, the scores for the experimental group improved from T1 to T2 and then weakened from T2 to T3, while it improved for the control group over time. For ASRP, there are practically significant changes with a large effect in the scores of the experimental group from both T1 to T2 ( $d = 1.20$ ) and also from T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.89$ ). There was a practically significant change with a small effect ( $d = 0.31$ ) in the experimental group from T2 to T3. There were also practically significant changes with small effects in the control group from T1 to T2 ( $d = 0.34$ ) and from T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.43$ ).

The scores for the CSI-R improved from T1 to T2 and then slightly weakened from T2 to T3 for both the experimental and control groups, with the changes in the scores of the experimental group from both T1 to T2 and T1 to T3 being practically significant with a large effect ( $d = 0.97$  and  $d = 0.92$ , respectively). For the control group, practically significant changes with a small effect occurred from T1 to T2 and also from T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.28$  and  $d = 0.19$ , respectively).

For the experimental group, GS improved from T1 to T2 to T3, while it improved from T1 to T2 and then weakened from T2 to T3 for the control group. For the control group, the change in GS from T1 to T2 was practically significant with a large effect ( $d = 1.01$ ). Practically significant changes with a medium effect occurred for the experimental group from T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.53$ ) and for the control group from T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.58$ ). Practically

significant changes with a small effect occurred in the experimental group from T1 to T2 ( $d = 0.17$ ) and T2 to T3 ( $d = 0.36$ ), and in the control group from T2 to T3 ( $d = 0.43$ ).

S improved from T1 to T2 and then weakened from T2 to T3 for the experimental group, and decreased from T1 to T2 and then stayed the same from T2 to T3 for the control group. Practically significant changes with a small effect occurred for the experimental group from T1 to T2 ( $d = 0.26$ ) and T2 to T3 ( $d = 0.21$ ), and for the control group from T1 to T2 ( $d = 0.25$ ) and T1 to T3 ( $d = 0.25$ ).

### *Educators*

The scores for TO, BC, AS, and PSS improved from T1 to T3 for the experimental group, while the scores for BC, AS, and PSS weakened from T1 to T3 and the score for TO improved from T1 to T3 for the control group. For the experimental group, the score for AS at T1 differs statistically significantly from those at T3 (with the  $p$ -value for AS being 0.02). There were practically significant differences with a small effect between T1 and T3 for TO ( $d = 0.30$ ), BC ( $d = 0.27$ ), AS ( $d = 0.44$ ), and PSS ( $d = 0.25$ ) for the experimental group. There were practically significant differences with small effects for TO, BC, AS, and PSS between T1 and T3 ( $d = 0.26$ ,  $d = 0.35$ ,  $d = 0.16$ , and  $d = 0.42$  respectively) for the control group.

### *Parents or legal guardians*

For the experimental group, the score for SoD stayed the same over time and practically and statistically significant differences were thus not applicable. For the control group, the scores for SoD decreased slightly from T1 to T3, with this difference not being statistically or practically significant.

A short discussion of the results is presented next.

## **Discussion**

It was the aim of this study to evaluate the effect of the STP on an experimental group of learners in middle childhood in comparison with a control group. Statistically and practically significant changes, according to the learners' rating of themselves, indicate that the STP had a positive effect, as it reduced learners' levels of social anxiety and improved their social skills (including adherence to social rules and politeness) and self-esteem. Statistically and practically significant changes, according to the educators' ratings of the learners, indicated that the STP had a positive effect on learners, as it increased their assertiveness and peer social skills. According to the parents' ratings of the learners, the STP did not show any significant effects. This is probably as a result of the CSPS measuring a preference and not

a concept. Furthermore, according to learners' ratings of themselves, the effect of the STP was, in most cases, larger directly after its presentation to the experimental group than it was three months thereafter. The STP thus had an impact, to a certain extent. This may be because it aimed at addressing the various needs of all 10- to 12-year old learners simultaneously even though social functioning is a rather complex concept.

Seven- to 11-year-old learners rated themselves as having better social skills and behaviour control after they had went through either one of two school-based social skills programmes (namely 'Peer Mentoring' or 'Skills Training') developed for learners in the United Kingdom with the aim of promoting social inclusion. Even though educators also rated learners' social skills as better after they have completed one of the above programmes, parents did not seem to think that changes occurred in the behaviour of the learners (Denhan, Hatfield, Smethurst, Tan, & Tribe, 2006). These studies support the findings of the current study.

Many studies indicate that intervening does support the notion that learners' social skills can be enhanced. These studies include the 'Peer Mentoring' and 'Skills Training' programmes (Denham et al., 2006). Furthermore, a school-based social skills programme in the United Kingdom promoting resilience showed sustained and significant improvements in friendships and pro-social behaviour of learners (Sheppard & Clibbens, 2015). A study conducted by Van Vugt, Deković, Prinzie, Stams, and Asscher (2013) indicated that a social skills programme ('Star Camp') aimed at seven- to 13-year-old learners from the Netherlands with behavioural problems resulted in a small but positive change in social anxiety, and a continuation programme on the last-mentioned camp, named 'Moon Camp', resulted in large and positive changes in, amongst others, social anxiety and self-esteem. A meta-analysis on after-school programs aiming at the enhancement of social and personal skills of learners (including adolescents) showed that these programs decreased problem behaviours and increased, amongst others, positive social behaviours and self-perceptions (Durlak & Weissberg, 2010). Lastly, an evaluation of the school-based 'Social Skills Training Program' for elementary school learners in Korea aimed at improving peer relations of learners, indicated that this programme achieved its aim (Hong-Shik et al., 2018).

In the evaluation of 'We Have Skills', a video-based social skills programme for elementary school learners in the United States aimed at addressing poor social skills, educators indicated that this programme improved the social skills of learners (Marques et al., 2014). In addition, in a study by DiPerna, Lei, Bellinger, and Cheng (2015) in the United States of America, educators rated the internalising behaviour and social skills of learners as better after they went through the 'Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Programme' which focused on learners' social behaviour in the classroom.

In the evaluation of 'Zoo U', an interactive online social skills game developed in the United States of America for seven- to 12-year-old learners with the aim of assessing and building pro-social skills, parents indicated that it improved, amongst other aspects, their children's assertiveness, while it also reduced aggressive and anti-social behaviour (Craig, Brown, Upright, & DeRosier, 2016).

In a meta-analytic review of previous research, Sklad et al. (2012) found that most programmes lead to positive effects that are in line with the particular programme's outcomes, even though the immediate effects were much better than those obtained over a period of time. This is in line with the current study. However, in the previously mentioned study by Van Vugt et al. (2013), the effect of the social skills programme increased with time.

Evidently, the overall positive effect of the STP is supported by many evidence-based programmes developed mainly in first-world countries.

### **Limitations of the study**

The evaluation of the STP only involved black learners aged 10 to 12 in a particular area in the North-West Province of South Africa. However, the South African demography includes other races and cultures, and middle childhood includes other ages than 10 to 12 years old.

Furthermore, the reliability and validity of the psychometric scales used for educators (TCRS 2.1) and parents (CSPS) were only tested on a small group (n = 66).

### **Recommendations from the study**

It is recommended that the study be replicated with learners of other races and cultures and with learners who are younger than 10 years old in order to determine whether this will lead to different results.

The reliability and validity of the TCRS 2.1 and the CSPS have to be tested on larger groups to determine whether this will lead to different results for the particular context.

Furthermore, it is important to determine why the short-term effect (post-test scores) of the STP were better than its longer-term effect (follow-up scores). It is also recommended to establish the effect of the STP longitudinally in order to determine whether it is sustainable.

To enrich the results obtained from the analysis of the quantitative data, qualitative data regarding the effect of the STP can also be collected from learners, educators, and parents or legal guardians.

It is further suggested that similar programmes be offered to parents or learners and parents within the school environment to improve parent-child inter-connectedness and to prevent possible risk behaviours during adolescence.

**Conclusion**

The STP had a positive effect on the group of 10- to 12-year-old learners, as significant increases in learners' self-esteem, assertiveness, and social skills (including adherence to social rules and politeness as well as peer social skills) were found. These are essential components of social functioning. Evidently, 10- to 12-year-old learners' social functioning and thereby their wellbeing can thus be promoted intentionally in the South African context. These efforts are vital seeing that many youngsters in this country are continuously exposed to environmental stressors which may negatively impact their levels of psychosocial functioning over time. This is in line with the positive psychology stance that a different approach is needed to enhance levels of social functioning and, in particular, wellbeing, as indicated in the expression of "Ubuntu" (through others we are).

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**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and reliabilities of psychometric scales used for learners

Psychometric scales	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach alpha coefficients
CDI 2	4.17	3.45	0.71
SASC-R	56.88	7.96	0.76
FNE	2.93	0.70	0.64
(sub-scale of SASC-R)			
SAD-N	3.06	0.75	0.59
(sub-scale of SASC-R)			
SAD-G			0.42
(sub-scale of SASC-R)			
CS <sup>4</sup>	82.82	7.96	0.59
ASRP (sub-scale of CS <sup>4</sup> )	4.18	0.45	0.59
L (sub-scale of CS <sup>4</sup> )			0.53
SI (sub-scale of CS <sup>4</sup> )			0.10
CSI-R	166.70	19.09	0.72
GS (sub-scale of CSI-R)	1.65	0.25	0.58
SS (sub-scale of CSI-R)			0.35
H (sub-scale of CSI-R)			0.46
S (sub-scale of CSI-R)	1.70	0.38	0.57
SHS			0.16

CDI 2 = Children's Depression Inventory 2; SASC-R = Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised; FNE = Fear of negative evaluation from peers; SAD-N = Social avoidance and distress specific to new situations; SAD-G: Generalised social avoidance and distress; CS<sup>4</sup> = Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale; ASRP = Adherence to social rules and politeness; L = Likeability (perceived popularity); SI = Social ingeniousness (poor recognition and/or comprehension of social interaction's finer details); CSI-R = Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory-Revised; GS = General self; SS = Social self (peers); H = Home (parents), S = School (academic); SHS = Subjective Happiness Scale.

**Table 2:** Descriptive statistics and reliabilities of psychometric scale used for educators

Psychometric scales	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach alpha coefficients
TCRS 2.1	3.93	0.38	0.89
TO (sub-scale of TCRS 2.1)	3.87	0.55	0.83
BC (sub-scale of TCRS 2.1)	3.84	0.44	0.64
AS (sub-scale of TCRS 2.1)	3.92	0.48	0.80
PSS (sub-scale of TCRS 2.1)	4.17	0.48	0.74

TCRS 2.1 = Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1, TO = Task orientation, BC = Behaviour control, AS = Assertiveness; PSS = Peer social skills.

**Table 3:** Descriptive statistics and reliabilities of psychometric scale used for parents or legal guardians

Psychometric scales	Mean	Standard deviation	Cronbach alpha coefficients
CSPS	2.10	0.65	0.66
SH (sub-scale of CSPS)			0.49
SoD (sub-scale of CSPS)	2.03	0.98	0.63

CSPS = Child Social Preference Scale; SH = Shyness; SoD = Social disinterest (Unsociability).

**Table 4:** Validity of psychometric scale used for learners

Scale	CMIN/DF	CFI	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90
CDI 2	1.89	0.86	0.06	0.04	0.08
SASC-R	1.64	0.81	0.05	0.04	0.07
CS <sup>4</sup>	1.24	0.91	0.03	0.00	0.05
CSI-R	1.22	0.92	0.03	0.01	0.05
SHS	6.68	0.00	0.23	0.17	0.30

CDI 2 = Children's Depression Inventory 2; SASC-R = Social Anxiety Scale for Children-Revised;  
 CS<sup>4</sup> = Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale; CSI-R = Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory-Revised; SHS = Subjective Happiness

CMIN / DF = minimum sample discrepancy / degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index;

RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, LO 90 / HI 90 = 90 percent confidence interval

**Table 5:** Validity of psychometric scale used for educators

Scale	CMIN/DF	CFI	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90
TCRS 2.1	2.08	0.49	0.13	0.1	0.14

TCRS 2.1 = Teacher Child Rating Scale 2.1

CMIN / DF = minimum sample discrepancy / degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index;

RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, LO 90 / HI 90 = 90 percent confidence interval

**Table 6:** Validity of psychometric scale used for parents or legal guardians

Scale	CMIN/DF	CFI	RMSEA	LO 90	HI 90
CSPS	0.97	1.00	0.00	0.00	0.08

CSPS = Child Social Preference Scale

CMIN / DF = minimum sample discrepancy / degrees of freedom; CFI = comparative fit index;

RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, LO 90 / HI 90 = 90 percent confidence interval

**Table 7:** Descriptive statistics and statistical- and practical significances (pre-, post-, and follow-up) for experimental- and control groups

Scale/ Sub- Scale	Experimental Group			Control Group			MSE	p	Experimental Group			Control Group			Differences between groups		
	Mean T1	Mean T2	Mean T3	Mean T1	Mean T2	Mean T3			d T1 & T2	d T1 & T3	d T2 & T3	d T1 & T2	d T1 & T3	d T2 & T3	d T1	d T2	d T3
CDI 2	2.74	4.81	2.14	3.29	5.38	2.28	5.87	0.87	0.85***	0.25*	1.10***	0.87***	0.41*	1.28***	0.22*	0.23*	0.06
SASC-R	43.72	45.30	40.49	41.67	45.78	41.94	30.50	0.26	0.29*	0.59**	0.84***	0.74***	0.05	0.69**	0.37*	0.09*	0.26*
FNE	2.59	2.77	2.49	2.52	2.92	2.56	0.19	0.46	0.42*	0.21*	0.63**	0.91***	0.09	0.82***	0.16*	0.33*	0.15*
SAD-N	2.51	2.61	2.38	2.36	2.42	2.28	0.22	0.86	0.19*	0.30*	0.49**	0.12	0.16*	0.28*	0.34*	0.41*	0.20*
CS <sup>4</sup>	81.65	88.58	86.77	84.67	86.61	85.28	41.00	0.10	1.08***	0.80***	0.28*	0.30*	0.10	0.21*	0.47**	0.31*	0.23*
ASRP	3.95	4.36	4.25	4.05	4.17	4.20	0.12	0.10	1.20***	0.89***	0.31*	0.34*	0.43*	0.09	0.31*	0.56**	0.15*
CSI-R	76.45	86.61	86.12	73.93	76.85	75.98	110.3	0.10	0.97***	0.92***	0.05	0.28*	0.19*	0.08	0.24*	0.93***	0.97***
GS	0.81	0.83	0.89	0.68	0.84	0.77	0.03	0.06	0.17*	0.53**	0.36*	1.01***	0.58**	0.43*	0.79***	0.05	0.74**
S	0.87	0.93	0.88	0.89	0.83	0.83	0.05	0.44	0.26*	0.05	0.21*	0.25*	0.25*	0.00	0.08	0.43*	0.23*

CDI 2 = Children’s Depression Inventory 2; SASC-R = Social Anxiety Scale for Children–Revised; FNE = Fear of negative evaluation from peers; SAD-N = Social avoidance and distress specific to new situations; CS<sup>4</sup> = Children’s Self-Report Social Skills Scale; ASRP = Adherence to social rules and politeness; CSI-R = Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory–Revised; GS = General self; S = School (academic) self.

T1 = before the presentation of the STP, T2 = directly after the presentation of the STP, T3 = three months after the presentation of the STP.

p = statistical significance, + if p < 0.05

d = practical significance, \* if d ≥ 0.2 (small effect), \*\* if d ≥ 0.5 (medium effect), \*\*\* if d ≥ 0.8 (large effect)

MSE = mean square error

**Table 8:** T-tests for psychometric scale used for educators

Scale	Experimental group				Control group				p-values				Effect size (d)			
	Time 1		Time 3		Time 1		Time 3		Pre-test	Paired test: EG	Paired test: CG	Post-test	Pre-test	Paired test: EG	Paired test: CG	Post-test
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD								
TO	3.91	0.58	4.09	0.56	3.78	0.51	3.91	0.51	0.356	0.076	0.387	0.222	0.23*	0.30*	0.26*	0.31*
BC	3.81	0.46	3.94	0.42	3.90	0.40	3.76	0.55	0.433	0.174	0.303	0.200	0.19*	0.27*	0.35*	0.32*
AS	3.92	0.50	4.14	0.48	3.91	0.46	3.84	0.47	0.920	0.022+	0.614	0.004+	0.03	0.44*	0.16*	0.64**
PSS	4.16	0.52	4.29	0.47	4.20	0.40	4.04	0.44	0.717	0.132	0.242	0.037+	0.08	0.25*	0.42*	0.52**

TCRS 2.1 = Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1, TO = Task orientation, BC = Behaviour control, AS = Assertiveness, PSS = Peer social skills

T1 = before the presentation of the STP, T3 = three months after the presentation of the STP.

p = statistical significance, + if  $p < 0.05$

d = practical significance, \* if  $d \geq 0.2$  (small effect), \*\* if  $d \geq 0.5$  (medium effect), \*\*\* if  $d \geq 0.8$  (large effect)

SD = standard deviation

EG = experimental group; CG = control group

**Table 9:** T-tests for psychometric scale used for parents

Scale	Experimental group				Control group				p-values				Effect size (d)			
	Time 1		Time 3		Time 1		Time 3		Pre-test	Paired test: EG	Paired test: CG	Post-test	Pre-test	Paired test: EG	Paired test: CG	Post-test
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD								
SoD	1.88	0.90	1.88	0.87	1.88	0.87	1.85	0.89	0.99	0.066	1.00	0.39	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.23*

CSPS = Child Social Preference Scale, SoD = Social disinterest (Unsociability)

T1 = before the presentation of the STP, T3 = three months after the presentation of the STP.

p = statistical significance, + if  $p < 0.05$

d = practical significance, \* if  $d \geq 0.2$  (small effect), \*\* if  $d \geq 0.5$  (medium effect), \*\*\* if  $d \geq 0.8$  (large effect)

SD = standard deviation

EG = experimental group; CG = control group

## **SECTION C**

### **CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION**

### **Aim and Outline of the Study**

This study aimed to develop and evaluate a school-based wellbeing programme to promote the social functioning of learners in middle childhood and thereby their wellbeing. This was done by determining educators' experiences of the social functioning (social skills and competencies) of learners in middle childhood in a certain area of the North-West Province of South Africa (Section B, Article 1); developing a school-based wellbeing programme (called the Social Treasures Programme; STP) to enhance the social functioning of these learners (Section B, Article 2); and by determining the effect of the STP on the abovementioned learners' social functioning (Section B, Article 3).

The first article explored the positive and negative experiences of educators regarding the social functioning of learners in middle childhood, aged 10 to 12 years old, in a particular area in the North-West Province of South Africa. Focus groups were conducted with 29 educators of 10- to 12-year-old learners from four schools that each represented one sub-area into which schools of a selected area in the North-West Province of South Africa are divided. Thematic analysis of the data indicated that matters regarding context and culture are very important in the social functioning of learners, that both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour are displayed by learners in middle childhood in interaction with others, and that various social skills need to be developed and strengthened intentionally. It was recommended that a school-based wellbeing programme targeting certain social skills and competencies should be developed for learners in middle childhood (aged 10 to 12 years) in the South African context, to assist them in managing ordinary daily social interactions more effectively.

The second article's aim was to develop a school-based wellbeing programme called the Social Treasures Programme (STP) to improve 10- to 12-year-old learners' social functioning and thereby their wellbeing. The content of the STP was compiled from the findings of the focus groups with educators (as indicated under article one above) and also information gained through a thorough literature review on existing social skills programmes. The STP was written from a positive psychology perspective as it was developed for all learners and not only those dealing with disorders and/or challenges. The STP encompasses eight sessions that cover the following themes: self-esteem and gratitude, self-regulation and goal setting, values and relationships, communication and listening, conflict management, emotional competence, and resilient coping. Furthermore, the STP should be presented to small groups of about 20 learners at a time, at their school and after school hours. The duration of the STP is four to eight weeks, depending on the number of sessions conducted per week, with the duration of each session being about 90 minutes (including activities and games). As the mere provision of information about a school-based wellbeing programme such as the STP in itself does not change those behaviour/actions associated with the sound social functioning of learners, it was recommended that the STP be implemented to evaluate its effectiveness.

The third article's aim was thus to evaluate the effect of the STP. A repeated measures design was used and learners, educators, and parents or legal guardians from an area in the North-West Province participated by completing psychometric scales at various time-intervals. First, all learner participants completed the Social Anxiety Scale for Children–Revised (La Greca, 1998; La Greca & Stone, 1993), the School Short-Form Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory–Revised (Coopersmith, 1967; Hills, Francis, & Jennings, 2011), the Children's Self-Report Social Skills Scale (Danielson & Phelps, 2003), the Children's Depression Inventory Short Form (Kovacs, 2011), and the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). Two-hundred-and-twenty-one learners participated in the pre-testing (and not only the learners in the experimental and control groups), as the abovementioned psychometric scales were not developed in South Africa and its reliability and validity had to be determined for the particular context. Furthermore, the scores that learners obtained on the psychometric scales in the pre-testing were used to divide the learners of the school chosen for the evaluation of the effect of the STP into three categories (high, moderate, and low scores), with the aim of ensuring that more or less equal percentages of learners from all the categories could be selected randomly for both the experimental and control groups.

Sixty-six learners were part of the experimental and control groups (with 45 learners in the experimental group and 21 in the control group) and thus participated in the evaluation of the STP (the attendance of the STP by the experimental group, the post-testing [involving both the experimental and control groups] directly after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group, and the follow-up testing [involving both the experimental and control groups] three months after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group). Thirteen educators completed the Teacher-Child Rating Scale 2.1 (Children's Institute, 2002) and 66 parents or legal guardians completed the Child Social Preference Scale (Coplan, Prakash, O'Neil, & Armer, 2004) before and also three months after the presentation of the STP to the experimental group. According to an analysis of the quantitative data, as provided by the psychometric scales and sub-scales, the STP impacted positively on the learners in the sense that it decreased their social anxiety and increased their social skills (including adherence to social rules and politeness) and self-esteem, according to the ratings of the learners, and also increased their assertiveness and peer social skills, according to the ratings of the educators. The null hypothesis, as stated in Section A, is thus rejected.

Spontaneous positive feedback on the sessions of the STP was provided by the learners and was expressed in the following ways:

"I learnt to be myself and believe in myself. I learnt to be good to other people. I learnt to say positive things to other people."

"I learnt about self-regulation, take control of myself, take control of my emotions, take control of my thoughts, take control of my behaviour, take control of my energy, and be smart."

"I learnt what to do to achieve my dream which is to work hard and set myself a goal."

“Today I learnt about values and relationships, and I learnt to have values and boundaries and I must not be selfish to my friends and gossip about them. I must be kindness, trustworthy, gratitude and thankfulness.”

“I learnt conflict management. Conflict means disagree with other person. And I learn a style for handling conflict. It is just like a tortoise, teddy bear, shark, fox, and owl.”

“I learnt about assertiveness – mean to stand up for your rights in a good way.”

“I learnt about how to communicate which is to listen, speak afterwards, make eye contact. I learned about communicating with words and body language.”

“I can change my feel about someone and not be sad when something bad happen. I need to take control and remember we are unique and special.”

“Today I learnt about resilience and about problem solving and that resilience means not giving up but bouncing back again like a ball and not to be negative in life but to be positive and if life gives you lemon you must make a sweet lemonade.”

“I want you to know that you taught me a lot of things. You taught me about self-esteem and gratitude, self-regulation and goal setting, values and relationships.”

“This programme will help me to achieve something in life because it teaches me to live a good life.”

These responses of the experimental group emphasised the positive effect of the STP in enhancing learners’ social functioning as established through the quantitative methods.

In summary, the qualitative findings of this study (see Section B, Article 1) indicate that many of the learners in the selected area of the North-West Province of South Africa who are in middle childhood (aged 10 to 12 years) face challenges regarding their social functioning. Furthermore, the sound social functioning of all learners in middle childhood is central to their positive development. All learners in this developmental phase should thus be supported in acquiring the social skills that would assist them in functioning socially soundly. Given the above, a school-based wellbeing programme, the STP, was developed from a positive psychology perspective. The STP includes social skills and competencies aimed at enhancing the social functioning of learners in middle childhood. The STP was implemented and its effect was evaluated. It improved social skills, self-esteem and assertiveness, while it reduced social anxiety. These successes, as well as learners’ expressions of the value of the STP, indicate that the programme is likely to improve the social functioning and thereby the wellbeing of learners in middle childhood.

### **Limitations of the Study**

During the first data collection opportunity, some educators did not participate actively in the focus groups interviews conducted at the four different schools. These data collection opportunities were held after school as this was the only available time. This might have led to educators being tired and in a hurry and not providing the best information.

Although educators provided valuable information regarding the social functioning of learners during the focus group interviews, the information obtained was limited to an extent, as all educators are not necessarily well-equipped in providing information on the social functioning of learners, as initially assumed.

The STP was presented in English without it being interpreted in the learners' home language. The main reason for this was that the learners were against interpretation as they are schooled in English (even though it is only from grade four) and indicated that interpretation would make them feel inferior. This is in line with a study done by Jefferis and Theron (2017) in which Sesotho-speaking adolescent girls from the Free State Province of South Africa seemed to prefer using English, the language in which they are schooled, despite interpreters being present during the research. Secondly, learners had different home languages, which would have made the use of another language than English unfair to some. The above might have affected the results of the evaluation of the effect of the STP.

The reliability and validity of the psychometric scales used for educators and parents or legal guardians have only been tested on small groups as larger groups were not available.

The effect of the STP was only tested on black learners (in a particular school), while the South African demography also includes other races and cultures.

### **Recommendations from the Study**

A preparation sheet or a written questionnaire including all the main questions to be asked during a focus group interview should be given to participants about a week beforehand, with the request to fill it out and submit it after the completion of the focus group interview. A couple of semi-structured personal interviews, as an additional means of gathering in-depth data, should also be conducted.

It is recommended to consult professional persons, such as educational psychologists, as a valuable source of information when socio-emotional research is planned with learner-participants.

It might be beneficial to provide in-depth training on the social functioning of learners to educators as part of their continuous career development as this may contribute to the development of competent school communities. Furthermore, since it cannot be assumed that all educators are experts of learners' social functioning, it is suggested that some training on the optimal levels of social functioning of learners is given to educators if they are asked to evaluate the learners' social functioning.

As bias is always a sensitive matter in qualitative research, it is a given that researchers should be cautious about the judgmental attitudes of participants as well as their personal prejudices. It is recommended that special measures should be in place when researchers are investigating matters related to many cultures and different socio-economic statuses.

South African learners in middle childhood (aged 10 to 12 years) should be supported to acquire certain social skills and competencies by means of a school-based wellbeing programme

such as the STP, which includes sessions on, for example, communication and listening, conflict management, and problem solving. It is recommended that the STP be presented to all learners in middle childhood (aged 10 to 12) at their schools, after school-hours, and by trained individuals with the relevant backgrounds and qualifications, as a supplement to the social skills training that are taught in the CAPS Life Orientation Curriculum in schools, and as a way of giving back to the community. If, despite this, only a limited number of learners benefit from the STP due to significant financial, time, and opportunity barriers (compare Craig, Brown, Upright, & DeRosier, 2016), it is recommended that parents or voluntary community workers be trained to present a simplified version of the STP with regular monitoring by an appointed professional person in the particular community. In addition, similar programmes may be offered to parents or learners and parents within the school environment to improve parent-child inter-connectedness and to prevent possible risk behaviours during adolescence.

The evaluation of the effect of the STP over a longer period of time may be beneficial, and the reasons for it having better effects over the short term than over the longer term should be determined. Furthermore, in-depth qualitative data regarding the effects of the STP (and perhaps each session in the particular programme) should be obtained from learners, educators, and parents or legal guardians in order to supplement the quantitative findings.

The study should be replicated with learners from other races and culture groups and with learners in middle childhood that are younger than 10 years old to determine whether different results are obtained.

The reliability and validity of the TCRS 2.1 and the CSPS should be evaluated on larger groups.

### **Contribution of the Study**

This study is of great value as, according to the knowledge of the researchers, it is the first of its kind on the topic in question amongst learners in middle childhood (aged 10 to 12 years) within the theoretical framework of positive psychology, and in the South African context - this study thus improves the knowledge base in psychology.

As a result of this study, information on educators' experiences of the social functioning of learners in middle childhood, in the particular community, is available. Furthermore, a school-based wellbeing programme to enhance the social functioning of learners in middle childhood aged 10 to 12 years, namely the STP, has been developed for the South African context. In addition, the effect of the STP has been evaluated and the STP is thus an evidence-based programme that can be used not only to enhance social skills (including peer relations and adherence to social rules and politeness), but also to improve self-esteem and assertiveness as well as decrease social anxiety.

This study further determined the validity and reliability of various psychometric scales and sub-scales for the South African context and thus indicates which of these can be used successfully in the particular context.

The results of Article 1 were presented as a poster at the Africa Positive Psychology Conference at the North-West University during April 2018.

### **Implications of the Study for Learners, Educators, and Parents**

This study has implications for the learners who have completed the STP and also for those with whom they are in contact with or interact with, for example, their fellow learners, their educators, their school, their parents or legal guardians, their families, and their communities.

#### **Learners**

The learners who completed the STP are likely to reap the benefits thereof, for example, having more positive social interactions with other individuals or being seen as leaders from which a lot can be learnt as a result of their changed social behaviour. Furthermore, learners who completed the STP are likely to transfer the skills and competencies they have learnt to their fellow learners, with this having positive consequences for everyone involved.

#### **Educators**

Educators may, for example, be able to spend less time on learners' problem behaviour and more time on academic work, enabling them to reach their timelines and experience less work-related stress and more work satisfaction as they are working in a more conducive environment.

#### **School**

A school may, for example, become known as a good school if learners in the school show appropriate social skills and good behaviour. This may lead to the school being popular among prospective learners and parents of the school, and current learners and parents being proud to be associated with the school and wanting to be involved in the activities of the school. Furthermore, being known as a good school may also attract sponsorships for sport and cultural activities to the school.

#### **Parents or Legal Guardians**

Parents or legal guardians may, for example, experience less problem behaviours regarding household tasks, homework, and general attitude from the learners who have been exposed to the STP in some way. This may lead to changes in the whole family, for example, more support and cooperation in the family and less fights between family members as they have learnt to respect and appreciate one another.

#### **Community**

Regarding the community, learners who have participated in the STP may also, for example, teach some of the good values that they have learnt to some members of the community. This may have a snowball effect leading to more and more people learning these values with the outcome possibly including that crime is lowered in the particular community.

### Reflection

Many lessons were learnt during this study. The following aspects are highlighted:

It is crucial to build relationships with and obtain the trust and commitment of the gatekeepers (persons who provide a researcher with access to a particular community and who give permission to a researcher to have interaction with possible participants to his or her study in the community, for example, the principal of a school), mediators (persons who serve as a point of contact between the researcher and participants to the study, for example, a head of a department at a school), and participants before the commencement of the research process, to prevent them from feeling used and to ensure the best possible cooperation from them.

It is advisable to inform all of the involved parties of the timeline of the research and the importance of sticking to it, and to then make all appointments and arrangements well ahead of time, but also to be willing to make adjustments on short notice, should the need for this arise. It is thus best to try to adapt to the schedules of the school, educators, and learners and to recognise and show appreciation for their involvement in the research on a continuous basis.

Constant persuasion and motivation, based on the value of the research and its advantages, are needed, as even though participants are interested in the research and passionate about its objectives, they may give it a low priority as a result of other commitments.

A lot of patience is needed when it comes to consent and assent letters for participants as well as psychometric scales that need to be completed at home. It is rather likely that a lot of participants will fill it out only partially or wrongly, despite instructions, and that it will have to be sent back to them for full and correct completion (in this study, the mediators and researcher assisted in such situations at the particular schools). Furthermore, when working with learners or individuals with a low level of schooling, they may be unfamiliar with psychometric scales and have feelings of discomfort and uncertainty regarding it. In order to get the most accurate research results, it may thus be valuable to also use qualitative research, for example, personal interviews. In addition, the rate at which the completed and/or signed documentation is submitted back may be rather slow and longer than the time allowed for this. The research process may thus be delayed and planning will have to be amended. In addition, a lot of unexpected situations may also occur, and it may thus be necessary to quickly come up with possible solutions, considering others in this and staying on track and positive.

Permission is needed to use the psychometric scales developed by others. Furthermore, if no psychometric scales that have been developed in South Africa are available for a particular construct, psychometric scales developed overseas have to be used. Rather large groups of participants will thus be needed to determine the reliability and validity of these psychometric scales and sub-scales and, as the South African context is quite unique, it may happen that some scales and sub-scales are not reliable and valid and thus cannot be used in the study. In addition, fees for using psychometric scales have to be paid, and using psychometric scales from overseas

may be expensive as a license or licenses may have to be purchased in the currency of the country where the particular psychometric scale has been developed and sometimes also for every person the scale is administered to, with the understanding that if a scale is administered more than once on the same person, a license is needed for each administration. Some licenses are only valid for a couple of months after they have been purchased, and more licenses may have to be purchased for later use, as may be the case with follow-up testing.

In addition, if psychometric scales are not in the home language(s) of those who need to complete it, as is the case when scales developed overseas are used, the scales may have to be translated to these home language(s). This is a time-consuming and expensive process as scales have to be translated from its original language to the preferred language by one person, then from the preferred language to its original language again by a second person, after which a comparison of the two versions in the original language must be undertaken by a third person who should then make amendments as needed. It may also happen that when a scale is translated to a certain language, there are a word(s) in the original scale for which no words with the same meaning exist in the language to which the scale must be translated, in which case the word with the closest meaning is used. Unfortunately, this may lead to a different interpretation than what was originally intended and a scale or sub-scales being less reliable and valid.

When working with learners in middle childhood, it must be taken into consideration that, as time passes, they tend to forget the skills and competencies that they have learnt, and frequent revision in the form of short repetitions of the basics skills and competencies as well as practising it often may be needed in order for these learners not to lose the skills.

Field and reflective notes should be made during the research process in order to remember important information that may add value to the research when results are written up.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this study was on developing and evaluating the effect of a school-based wellbeing programme, the Social Treasures Programme (STP), with the aim of enhancing the social functioning and thereby the wellbeing of South African learners in middle childhood, aged 10 to 12 years. While certain limitations were indicated, the important contributions and positive implications for learners, educators, schools, parents or legal guardians, and communities were shown. Furthermore, valuable lessons have been learnt from this study and these may serve as a guide for other researchers working on the development and evaluation of programmes for the South African context.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1

### Permission for the study from the North-West Province's Department of Education and Sport Development



#### Education and Sport Development

Department of Education and Sport Development  
 Departement van Onderwys en Sport Ontwikkeling  
 Letapha la Thuto le Tlhabololo ya Metsamake  
**NORTH WEST PROVINCE**

Temane Building  
 8 D.R. Tambo Street, Potchefstroom  
 Private Bag X1255,  
 Potchefstroom 2520  
 Tel: (018) 299-821-5  
 Fax: (018) 294-8284  
 Enquiries: M. H. Motara  
 e-mail: hmotara@nwpg.gov.za

#### DR KENNETH KAUNDA DISTRICT

#### OFFICE OF THE DISTRICT DIRECTOR

21 January 2016

Ms S Beets  
 PhD Student No 10937265  
 North West University – Potchefstroom Campus

**PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH "A SCHOOL-BASED WELLBEING PROGRAMME TO PROMOTE SOCIAL FUNCTIONING IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD" AT PRIMARY SCHOOLS – MATLOANA AREA OFFICE IN DR KENNETH KAUNDA DISTRICT**

The above matter refers.

Permission is hereby granted to you to conduct your research at primary schools – Matlosana Area Office in Dr Kenneth Kaunda District under the following provisions:

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

Wishing you well in your endeavour.

Thanking you

**MR H MOTARA**  
**DISTRICT DIRECTOR**  
**DR KENNETH KAUNDA DISTRICT**

cc: Mr S S Mogotsi – Area Manager, Matlosana

**Appendix 2****Permission for the study from the research focus area, Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES)**

Community Psychosocial Research

Private Bag X6001

Potchefstroom

South Africa

2520

Date: 7 October 2015

Dear Prof Minrie Greeff

Candidate: **Student Soretha Beets Student no. 10937625**

Project: **Exploring the role of identity configuration in decision-making towards behaviour change**

Supervisor: **Dr I Van Schalkwyk**

The above project proposal was reviewed by the Scientific Panel of COMPRES during a review meeting on 9 September 2015.

The COMPRES panel has reviewed all aspects of the proposal, starting with the scientific orientation, Goal and objectives, method, data collection and analysis and have found the proposal to be ready for submission to HREC. The panel concludes the research is feasible and beneficial to COMPRES's research agenda.

The COMPRES review panel consisted of: Proff WJH Roestenburg, E Van Rensburg, M Weyers, K Botha and CC Wessels; Dr W De Klerk.

The panel regards this study has sensitive and of moderate risk and request HREC to critically review ethical procedures with regard to the data to be collected in the school system.

Signed: Prof WJH Roestenburg

Chairperson: COMPRES Review Panel

## Appendix 3

## Ethics Approval Certificate from the Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC)



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

Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom,  
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Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee

Tel: +27 18 299 4849

Email: [Ethics@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics@nwu.ac.za)

2016/06/02

## ETHICS APPROVAL CERTIFICATE OF STUDY

Based on approval by Health Research Ethics Committee (HREC) on 27/05/2016, the North-West University Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (NWU-IRERC) hereby approves your study as indicated below. This implies that the NWU-IRERC grants its permission that provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

**Study title:** A school-based wellbeing programme to promote social functioning during middle childhood.

**Study Leader/Supervisor:** Dr I van Schalkwyk

**Student:** S Beets

**Ethics number:**

N W U - 0 0 0 8 2 - 1 5 - A 1

Institution Study Number Year Status

Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

**Application Type:** Single Study

**Commencement date:** 2016-05-27

**Risk-Level:** Medium; Greater than minimal with no benefits – Children – Category 3;

Greater than minimal with benefits – Children – Category 2

**Continuation of the study is dependent on receipt of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation up to a maximum period of three years.**

## Special conditions of the approval (if applicable):

- Translation of the Informed consent document to the languages applicable to the study participants should be submitted to the HREC (if applicable).
- Any research at governmental or private Institutions, permission must still be obtained from relevant authorities and provided to the HREC. Ethics approval is required BEFORE approval can be obtained from these authorities.

## General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, please note the following:

- The study leader (principle investigator) must report in the prescribed format to the NWU-IRERC via HREC:
  - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, and upon completion of the study
  - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Would any changes to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader must apply for approval of these amendments at the HREC, prior to implementation. Would there be deviated from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.
- In the interest of ethical responsibility the NWU-IRERC and HREC retains the right to:
  - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;
  - to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process.
  - withdraw or postpone approval if:
    - any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected,
    - it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the HREC or that information has been false or misrepresented,
    - the required amendments, annual (or otherwise stipulated) report and reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately,
    - new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.
- HREC can be contacted for further information or any report templates via [Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Ethics-HRECAppl@nwu.ac.za) or 018 299 1205.

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

Yours sincerely

Linda du Plessis

Digitally signed by Linda du Plessis  
DN: cn=Linda du Plessis, o=NWU,  
ou=Vaal Triangle Campus,  
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c=ZA  
Date: 2016.06.02 09:29:19 +0200

Prof Linda du Plessis

Chair NWU Institutional Research Ethics Regulatory Committee (IRERC)

## Appendix 4

### Focus group interview guide

- An opening statement will be used, such as: “A focus group can be seen as a group interview. This focus group will last approximately an hour and I would like to learn more about your experiences regarding the social functioning of learners aged 10 to 12 years in the classroom situation; the social skills that you think can enable these learners to improve their social functioning; and social or relational challenges that these learners experience that may affect their social functioning and wellbeing. I want to emphasise that social functioning entails the interaction between the social demands or challenges presented by the environment and the learner’s competencies to meet these demands or challenges”.
- An open-ended question will be used to explore social functioning in middle childhood, for example: “How do you experience the social functioning of learners aged 10 to 12 years old in the classroom?” or “According to your experience, what is the difference in terms of social functioning between a 10- to 12-year-old learner who does not function well socially and a learner of the same age who functions well socially?”
- Participants will be encouraged to recount experiences of interaction with learners. The following questions will be asked in this respect:
  - Please tell me about any positive experiences that you have had with learners in middle childhood regarding their social functioning, in your career, to date.
  - Please tell me about any negative experiences that you have had with learners in middle childhood regarding their social functioning, in your career, to date.
  - Please provide examples of when you felt helpless in working with a 10- to 12-year-old learner who experiences challenges regarding social functioning, during your career, to date.
  - How, do you think, can negative experiences be prevented or lessened, with specific reference to the competencies and social skills that learners in middle childhood need in order to manage social situations more effectively in future?
  - Please tell me about your best techniques in the learning environment to protect (and promote) the social functioning of learners in middle childhood.
- These questions will be followed up with various prompts requesting examples, also paying attention to possible cultural differences.
- Closure and explanation of the completion of the research process for phase 1.

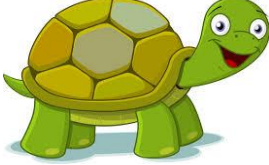




**Appendix 5**  
**An example of the coding of the qualitative data**

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Sub-Theme</b>	<b>Main Theme</b>
Kind (comment nicely, assist)	Appropriate behavior	Quality of connecting in terms of behavior
Respectful (accept discipline)		
Supportive (look after one another, involved with peers)		
Disrespectful (disruptive, interrupt, don't accept authority, inform educators about things instead of asking)	Inappropriate behavior	
No boundaries (take-over, bossy, don't think before speaking, using vulgar language)		
Conflict (fighting, argumentative, aggressive)		
Unaccommodative / Inconsiderate		
Bullying (teasing, spread rumours, belittle)		

**Appendix 6**

**An example of a poster used in the Social Treasures Programme**

**Conflict management styles**

<p><b>Avoidance (Tortoise)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Avoids conflict: withdraws/distances him-/herself.</li> <li>• Does not assert his/her wants.</li> <li>• Does not help the other party to get what he/she wants.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Accommodative (Teddy Bear)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Helps the other party to get what he/she wants (pleases other party).</li> <li>• Gives up on his/her own ideas/needs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Competitive (Shark)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wants to resolve conflict his/her way.</li> <li>• Finds it difficult to understand why other people do not see things the same way he/she does.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Compromising (Fox)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both parties are willing to give and take.</li> <li>• Both win a little and lose a little.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Collaborative (Owl)</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All the parties work together to get the best solution for everyone (to meet everyone's needs as much as possible) and to make everyone as happy as possible.</li> </ul>

**Appendix 7**  
**Attendance certificate for the Social Treasures Programme**

**This is to certify that**

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**has attended**

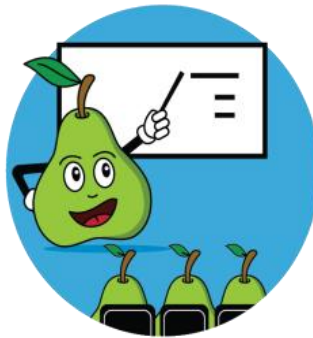
**THE SOCIAL TREASURES PROGRAMME**

**TO PROMOTE SOCIAL FUNCTIONING IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD**



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**Researcher**



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**Presenter**



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**Date**