

## CHAPTER ONE

### MOTIVATION FOR AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

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*“Those who create something have some sort of privileged access to their own creations. They are able to understand in ways other people cannot”*

Hosking and Morley (2004, p.320).

#### **1.1 A PERSONAL REFLECTION OF THE RESEARCHER’S EXPERIENCES AS A TRAINEE HELPING PROFESSIONAL**

This research undertaking has been shaped by my thoughts and observations as a researcher and as a recently trained educational psychologist involved in learning support. In my theoretical training I was exposed to philosophically based debates regarding optimal practice for helping professionals, which continue to shape my personal constructions of my role as a helping professional. I was specifically confronted with the postmodern notion that helping professionals are required to work in close collaboration with parents by means of shared planning, decision-making and problem solving to reach a common goal (Engelbrecht, 2001, p.23). Consequently, I have come to understand collaboration as a greater level of partnership between parents as my clients and myself. I have also come to believe that parents who enter into a counselling relationship with me for learning support purposes are highly capable of initiating their own solutions. The recognition that parents can initiate their own solutions has been strongly influenced by my acknowledgment of postmodern, strengths-based approaches that focus on parents’ strengths and capacities rather than deficits and problems.

Throughout my training, I have noticed that the strengths-based theoretical approaches that I was exposed to, may perhaps lead to an idealistic notion of the parent as an actively engaged partner in collaboration with the helping professional. The parent is merely guided in the right direction as they set their own goals, generate their own solutions, and implement interventions during this collaboration. I have also noted a distinct gap in that these policies and theories seem to fail to consider parents’ expectations of helping professionals. While I have to acknowledge that I find the terminology associated with strengths-based approaches inspiring, I have simultaneously been rather perplexed by the insufficiency of the language to provide any practical indication of how the counselling relationship with parents is supposed to occur. Terms such as “empowerment”, “enablement”, “partnership” and “collaboration” are abundant in the literature on parents and professionals but these words remain somewhat vague to me, in the sense that, although they imply practical action, it is not apparent what actions will result in the

practical manifestation of these terms in practice. There seem to be no tangible illustrations from parents' perspectives of what actually needs to take place in the counselling relationship for my clients and I to feel that we have achieved a collaborative partnership in which my clients feel empowered and enabled.

In both my therapeutic work and in my current observations as researcher, I feel that helping professionals are seemingly trying to distance themselves from the notion of having absolute power and of giving expert designed solutions to parents in learning support initiations. This appears to me to be as a direct result of the critique levelled against the traditionally dominant needs-based approaches associated with the medical-deficit model that continue to be applied within the helping professions. It would seem that, in reaction to the critique of needs-based approaches, there is a trend for helping professionals to try to make use of recent strengths-based approaches in consultation so as to subtly try to guide the process according to what they now think is in parents' best interests. However, if this is so, then I have a number of questions. I wonder, are parents aware of the development of strengths-based approaches in reaction to the criticism of needs-based approaches? As such, are parents informed about my strength-based role as a helping professional? Consequently, are parents aware of the 'new' role that they are expected to play from my strengths-based perspective? Moreover, can we be sure that parents come prepared to engage actively in exploring their strengths and their self-generated solutions?

Thus, regardless of my training in empowering and enabling views of counselling practice, and notwithstanding my best [theoretically influenced] intentions to implement a strengths-based approach to counselling in learning support, I have increasingly pondered whether there may be a possibility that my clients may have other expectations of my role. It has occurred to me that my clients may be caught unaware if I invite them to become more active in constructing a counselling relationship in which their input and knowledge is valued and which requires them to play a more active role in finding solutions.

Furthermore, it is my current conviction that my view of counselling practice in the context of learning support is constructed in a societal realm that appears to be dominated by a kind of reverence that is afforded to the "expert" opinions and advice of professionals. In many ways, I think the society that we live in may still be focused on the importance of expert knowledge and the value of expertise as opposed to the knowledge and skills of "laypeople". I also believe that it is important to establish to what extent parents' expectations of the counselling relationship mirror those of the helping professionals from whom they seek support. Perhaps parents are not

necessarily aware of the theoretical motives of helping professionals, but to me it seems plausible that they develop expectations about helping professionals and that these expectations can influence parents' experience of counselling for learning support as being effective or not. In my opinion, this may lead to helping professionals and parents having different implicit agendas that each party wishes to pursue during their interactions. I think that parents' agendas may be motivated by their socially constructed view of helping professional practice, which may not accommodate parents' recognition of the central role that they will play during the generation and implementation of solutions. Thus, any constructive interaction between the strengths-based helping professional and the parent may immediately be negated due to parents' possibly contrasting ideas of what must occur during the interaction.

To me, partnership implies a level of mutual understanding rather than one party- the helping professional- having an upper hand in terms of a theoretical basis for knowing exactly how she will lead the client or parent to where she thinks is the right place for the parent to be in the process. This has led me to want to investigate what parents' view the role of helping professional to be; how they have come to construct these roles and the potential influence on helping professional practice. A starting point for this investigation into parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional in learning support will be the initial literature informed exploration of the background and the constructs associated with the study in the next sections.

## **1.2 BACKGROUND**

Debates surrounding children's learning support have brought the role of supporters such as parents and helping professionals as well as the nature of support within the context of learning to the fore. The idealised characteristics of the parent-professional relationship in the form of expectations for interaction between these parties have been and continue to be at the forefront of these ongoing deliberations (Engelbrecht & Green, 2001; Fylling & Sandvin, 1999; Ramaekers, 2005; Russell, 2003; Weatherly Valle & Aponte, 2002). Furthermore, growing dissatisfaction with the past roles of helping professionals has led numerous theorists to call for the task of helping professionals to be reconceptualised (Boyd, 1998; Cameron & Orr, 1991; Case, 2000; Engelbrecht, 2001; Russell, 2003; Weatherly Valle & Aponte, 2002). Recently, the fields of counselling, psychotherapy and educational support have shown a significant shift in approach from a problem focused, needs-based approach in which professionals see themselves as all-knowing experts, towards more postmodern, health promoting, developmental approaches in which the professional takes on a more collaborative role (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002; Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2003; Engelbrecht, 2001, pp.17-18).

Specifically, recent postmodern, strengths-based methodologies have emerged that advocate the use of the positive resources that parents and families possess in tackling learning related difficulties. Some of the methodologies that have emerged include the asset-based approach (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), the positive psychology movement (Snyder & Lopez, 2002) and individual counselling approaches that emphasise a solution oriented (Metcalf, 2001) and narrative approach to therapy (White & Epston, 1990). These postmodern methodologies are a response to those forms of helping practice that focus on professionals as “experts” who use their “expert status” to “decide and prescribe” what “treatments” they consider to be best.

Hodges and Clifton (2004, p.265) report that recognition and development of strengths in the therapeutic process is envisioned to culminate in individuals’ integration of these strengths into their view of themselves, which is believed to result in changes in their behaviour. According to Neuberger (2000, p.9), and reflecting the turn to these more postmodern, empowering approaches, professionals:

*...need to redefine their role as professionals, which is to assist people to make effective treatment choices for themselves within available resources. The role of the professional is to guide people towards courses of action which are in their best interests by trying to understand how they feel; investigating the cultural, economic and social factors that will affect them; and exploring with them the consequences of the courses of action they might take.*

In the application of postmodern methodologies to professionals’ interactions with parents, one of the primary goals appears to be the development of authentic, collaborative relationships between helping professionals and clients [and in the case of this study, parents] in which “...parity, reciprocity, and mutual problem-solving...” are achieved and empowerment of parents is attained (Heron & Harris, 1993, pp.2-3). The pursuit of such a “partnership” relationship between parents and helping professionals implies that parents’ input is sought, respected and used as an important contribution to the planning and implementation of supportive services (de Geeter, Poppes & Vlaskamp, 2002, p.444). Thus, partnership implies an egalitarian relationship between the helping professional and the parent and a division of power that leads to involvement of parents in decision-making and that goes beyond the giving of help and information by the helping professional (Morrow & Malin, 2004, p.164).

However, Weatherly Valle and Aponte’s (2002, p.470) review of learning disability literature points to the “...routine disqualification of parents’ voices by professionals as a major obstacle to authentic collaboration...” which has frequently been linked to modern, needs-based approaches that are thought to support the expert superiority of the professional (Eloff, 2003).

The illness-centred, pathological focus of these needs-based approaches is sometimes criticised for guiding professionals' towards a narrow focus on what is dysfunctional, weak and defective about people. The ideology and language associated with needs-based approaches are often viewed as portraying people who seek help as passive victims of intra-psychic and biological forces that are beyond their direct control and they are then relegated to the position of being a passive recipient of an expert's care (Maddux, Snyder & Lopez, 2004, pp. 322).

On the contrary, postmodern approaches to learning support aim to prevent the disqualification of parents' voices by encouraging helping professionals to develop collaborative relationships with their clients and to capitalise on the strengths and resources that clients bring to the counselling relationship. Strengths-based helping professionals emphasise the competencies of those who seek assistance rather than their weaknesses, and, these professionals think that the focus on strengths allows for the exploration of potential and existing resources that are available to individuals to address difficulties. This is instead of a drive by the professional to identify what is pathological or abnormal about the person (Metcalf, 2001, p.647).

As evidenced by the proliferation in counselling applications focusing on strengths (O'Hanlon & Weiner- Davis, 1988; White & Epston, 1990; Losoncy, 2001; White, 2002; Akin- Little, Little & Delligatti, 2004) and works on collaborative endeavours between parents and helping professionals (Davis & Spurr, 1998; Glogowska & Campbell, 2000; Case, 2001; Gergen & Warhus, 2001; Swain & Walker, 2003) there appears to be a move towards the use of more postmodern, strengths-based approaches in the helping professions, specifically in the field of psychology. Strengths-based approaches are generally advocated as providing a more proactive, empowering and positive approach to intervention in the helping professions. The emergence of strengths-based considerations for practice is consequently contributing towards a challenging of the status quo- the sole focus on needs-based approaches. It seems that the emphasis is increasingly on facilitating those seeking supportive services to become self-empowered and to play a far more active role in their destinies within the consultative process (Watson & Stead, 2002, pp.26-27).

At a practical level, helping professionals implementing strengths-based approaches expect to mediate parents' recognition of strengths and capacities to address difficulties proactively and to encourage parents' active participation in generating and implementing solutions. However, in doing so, the question arises as to whether parents are aware that helping professionals may expect their active participation in learning support. Despite the laudable theoretically based intentions that frame this postmodern, practical drive for collaboration, we can enquire whether

helping professionals risk inadvertently disempowering parents in the process. This may be accomplished by following postmodern approaches blindly and, in the process of doing so, unintentionally ignoring parental expectations that may not be congruent with the helping professional's approach. As a result, parents may be left feeling puzzled and disenabled.

It may indeed be noble for the helping professional to make a commitment to promote the goals of strengths-based approaches during consultation with parents for learning support. The assumptions regarding the peril of following needs-based approaches may be of value too. However, from the literature available, it appears that parents' actual expectations of helping professionals have not been investigated very extensively. More specifically, it seems that there is a lack of empirical investigation of parental perspectives in the context of strengths-based approaches to counselling. Additionally, assumptions regarding how parents become disempowered by modern, deficit-based approaches, the purported problems inherent in these interactions and even the proposed benefits of postmodern approaches may amount to theoretical hearsay (Freeman, 1988; Russell: 2003; Solas, 2000; Weatherly Valle & Aponte, 2002).

The apparent lack of research into parents' expectations of helping professions can be contemplated in relation to Katzko's (2002, pp.671-683) commentary about first- order theories, considered to be strengths-based theoretical approaches for this study, and second order movements, regarded as the move towards the implementation of strengths-based approaches in practice. To quote Katzko (2002, p.672) at length, his contention is that:

*In extreme instances, a first order theory's primary function is not so much a means for understanding some phenomenon as it is a way of drawing attention to the movement. Analysts [or, in this instance, helping professionals] may address the second-order texts of movements as if they were first order doctrine.*

Katzko (2002, p.672) maintains that analysis of any first-order theoretical approach is necessary to accomplish. However, one is faced with a practical problem when trying to ascertain how the second-order character of a movement associated with the first order approach may be manifested in parents' discourse. This scrutiny is for the purpose of engaging the first order theoretical approach directly or for addressing its discrepancies in relation to those it claims to represent. As evidence of the dilemma of application of first-order theories, in specific reference to strengths-recognising, proactive conceptual frameworks such as "positive psychology", Cowen and Kilmer (2002, pp.449-450) remind us of a very real "tendency of people to jump aboard the 'bandwagon' before the new concept is clearly defined or well understood". As

Cowen and Kilmer (2002, p.450) highlight, new concepts such as “positive psychology” tend to emerge in “somewhat fuzzy ways, often in protest against the perceived insufficiencies of an existing order”. The concept may be attractive as an abstraction, possessing qualities that entice people to identify with it as an “up-and-coming movement” (p.450). They further note that “even though there may be good agreement about the pristine beauty and promise of the new concept as an *abstraction* [authors’ emphasis], people may diverge substantially in how, concretely, its operations are best understood and implemented” (p.450).

Hodgson, Mattison, Phillips and Pollack (2001, p.263) have suggested that we need to pay closer attention to the views of parents as consumers if we want to ascertain the quality of the counselling services that are rendered by helping professionals. Thus, it may be necessary to develop a clearer understanding of parents’ expectations of helping professionals in the context of learning support to contribute to the quality of services rendered to parent consumers of helping professional assistance in the application of first-order strengths-based approaches.

In this study, I examine the ways in which parents construct the role of the helping professional and I explore in what ways, if at all, parent’s constructions differ from the ways in which helping professionals construct their own roles. In the following section, the constructs that are associated with the study will be explored for introductory purposes.

### **1.3 CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW BASED ON A LITERATURE INFORMED CLARIFICATION OF THE CONSTRUCTS**

#### **1.3.1 Introduction**

Generally, the function of a literature review is to provide the conceptual framework for the study and to show how the research questions flow logically from an understanding of the current state of theory. Such an approach to the literature review is consistent with the positivist premise that research is primarily deductive in nature (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p.308). In this study however, the purpose of the literature review is aligned with a more inductive approach to research in so far as this study deals with the emergent theory of parents’ constructions of the role of helping professionals in learning support. Thus, in Chapter One the literature review will inform a clarification of the main constructs of the study while a further exploration of the central constructs via an in-depth literature review in Chapter Two will offer the context and rationale for the formulation of the research questions. A second literature review in Chapter Four will present the context for the interpretation of the interview data.

As Northcutt and McCoy (2004, p.308) recommend, the form and function of the literature review will therefore be consistent with the nature and purpose of the study. The literature review in this study is for this reason recursive rather than linear as the interpretation of the research data will lead to a reconsideration of the literature that is presented in this chapter and Chapter Two. The interpretation of the data is also expected to lead to a search for additional literature that may become relevant in light of the findings of the study (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, pp.311-313).

As informed by Berg (1998, p. 26), the intention of the research is to investigate spontaneously emerging meanings amongst research participants regarding their constructions of the role of the helping professional for learning support. Within the exploratory scope of this study, the operationalisation of constructs traditionally presented in the first chapter is regarded as inappropriate. However, formulating the central constructs in a study is nevertheless important as a means of orienting the reader. Thus, preference is given to the objective of sensitising the reader to the meanings of constructs as reflected in the literature, rather than narrowly operationalising constructs with the objective of limiting their meaning. As a result, instead of prescribing a fixed and non-malleable conceptual viewpoint at the beginning of the study, I aim to offer a tentative description of the constructs to form the initial foundations of the study. This is to shed light on the constructs that have assisted in shaping the research focus as a whole and to provide initial views of the constructs, which will be further explored via the practical research exercise with parents. The actual research process is envisaged to lead to the enhancement of the constructs from the perspectives of the parents involved in the study (Bryman, 2004, p.271; Maxwell, 2005, p.33).

Additionally, in line with the constructive focus that directs this inquiry, concepts will be referred to as constructs [as is the general practice in much psychological literature] because meaning-in-context is considered to be constructed and negotiated rather than being discovered or revealed (Maddux *et al.*, 2004, p.326).

### **1.3.2 Social constructionism**

In this study, the primary focus is on how parents who have sought the services of a helping professional for learning support make sense of their experiences by means of their constructive representations of the helping professional as well as the counselling relationship in the context of learning support. Gergen (in Maddux *et al.*, 2004, p.325) suggests that social constructionism involves “elucidating the process by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world in which they live”. Social constructionism is not viewed as a singular and

unified theoretical construct, however, a unifying aspect of the views it comprises are its central precept that people make sense of their experience via the construction and representation of meaning (Gergen, Lightfoot & Sydow, 2004, p.389; Maddux *et al.*, 2004, p.325). These constructions can be referred to as personal “theory”, “knowledge”, “world view”, “beliefs” or as “discourse” and the commonality of these terms is viewed to be the acknowledgement that they are all methods of making sense of all aspects of human experience (White, 2004, p.8).

Both social constructionism and social constructivism as theoretical constructs share an emphasis on the importance of the social sphere to the extent that both view human knowledge as being a product of that which is social in nature. Nonetheless, subtle differences in each theory's focus are apparent. Whereas the social constructivist tends to focus on the personal, mental process of knowledge acquisition as a major point of investigation, the social constructionist will direct more attention to conjoint meaning making and discourse (Gergen & Wortham, 2001, pp.123-124). Essentially this means that the social constructionist theorist will place more emphasis on the socially influenced, relational construction of personal meaning.

The theoretical notion of the social construction of personal knowledge by means of discourse and interaction is considered especially appropriate in relation to this study. This is because a central assumption in this study is that the societal context in which parents participate in may contribute significantly to their views of the role of the helping professional in terms of learning support. In this study, the theoretical association between language and the social construction of meaning is thought to be specifically pertinent to the exploration of parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional. Social systems are thought to be concept dependent or linguistically constructed. Therefore, social systems are defined by how human communities describe these social systems (Hosking & Morley, 2004, pp. 319-320). In this instance, the social system is regarded to encompass helping professional assistance, and the role of the helping professional for assistance is then thought to be constructed by means of the language concepts that the parental community seeking learning support use to discuss what they think the role of the helping professional is in learning support.

### **1.3.3 Learning support**

Learning or educational support is commonly described as being in the service of the goal for learning and educational development to take place (Green, Forrester, Mvambi, Janse Van Vuuren & Du Toit, 1999, p.130). Learning support is not confined to a single activity and can be initiated in a number of different ways to fulfil a variety of different purposes (Tennant, 2001,

p.186). For example, learning support activities may include, but are not limited to, the planning for and implementation of individualised educational programmes, therapeutic undertakings, parent counselling and collaboration between various role players involved with a child for the purpose of assisting in meeting the unique cognitive, emotional and social requirements of the child.

It is often regarded as an undertaking that aids clients to better negotiate and cope with their own learning process within a particular context. Professional learning support initiatives frequently entail the involvement of a variety of helping professionals such as educational psychologists, occupational and speech and language therapists. Generally, it is assumed that learning support can be more effective if the difficulties children experience are addressed and dealt with by multiple role players, each with specific skills for learning support. Indeed, learning support relies on the active engagement and collaboration of people from the context in which the child lives and learns (Bouwer, 2005, p.48) and it therefore does not preclude the involvement of parents.

Vandemeulebroecke and Nys (as translated by Ramaekers, 2005, p.151) describe learning support broadly as:

*the policy and the practice, aimed at addressing and improving the context of child-rearing, at rebalancing risk factors and preserving protective ones, and at receiving, referring and orientating [parents or families] towards intensive, specialized guidance.*

Vandemeulebroecke is further quoted (in Ramaekers 2005, p.151) as suggesting that learning support can be viewed as "...the set of measures, services, structures and activities which are aimed at addressing the possibilities of the educational context, enriching and/ or optimizing it, for the purpose of offering children and youngsters optimal educational and developmental opportunities". Helping professionals' understandings of the nature and purposes of learning support direct what they view the purpose of assessment to be, how they go about choosing assessment strategies and techniques as well as the questions that are addressed during the process (Bouwer, 2005, p.47). Additionally, if one recognises the central role of parents for this assessment and, indeed, the support that takes place on the basis of this assessment, then it can be argued, as it is for this study, that helping professionals' views of learning support guide the nature of their interactions with parents.

Learning support can include sharing ideas; skills training; emotional and instrumental support; assisting with social networking and stimulating informal self-help. Ramaekers (2005, pp.151-152) suggests that learning support is “an alternative to the traditionally paternalistic, anti-emancipatory” nature of needs-based approaches. A paternalistic approach by the professional may lead to the professional, as a protective authority, taking responsibility for the needs of the child and parent (Deeley, 2002, pp. 19-20). The pathological focus of needs-based “paternalistic, anti-emancipatory approaches” (Ramaekers, 2005, pp.152-153) may result in the view that barriers to learning reside purely within the individual. From a needs-based approach, the professional therefore undertakes an expert focused remedial effort to remedy the child’s problems. The context and the roles of others in addressing the barrier are generally less emphasised due to the focus on the remediation of the within-person pathology of the child (Dudley-Marling, 2004, p. 482).

As an alternative to the needs-based approach, learning support can be viewed as an empowering approach that is aimed at supporting families to work for each other by seeking and mobilising personal or contextual resources available to them, as explored by them and facilitated by the professional. Parents are regarded as participants who can choose to use services that are offered to them rather than feeling obligated to accept what is imposed on them. Accordingly, in learning support parents can determine their inputs, their participation and are in a stronger position to influence outcomes. The support of the helping professional is taken literally to mean providing support to parents who express doubts and questions about child rearing or who have difficulty in the process of raising their children. Learning support is offered to parents rather than being enforced upon them. Parents’ strengths and potential for development [as opposed to their deficiencies] are the focus (Ramaekers, 2005, pp.152-153). Learning support and its associated view of practice for helping professionals consequently support an inquiry into parents views of the outlook associated with this construct; if or how they do experience learning support as an approach; and if indeed this is what they want from the process.

#### **1.3.4 Parents**

The term ‘parents’ is utilised in this study to signify its broadest possible definition. Thus, parents are viewed to be the primary caregivers, whether biologically or socially designated, in relation to a child (Donald *et al.*, 2002, p.290). Case (2000, p.275) proposes that a parent is a layperson with parental and legal responsibility for the care and upbringing of their child. The child –rearing task of the parent is undertaken to be a continual, reciprocal interaction between parents and

children that is embedded in a wider social context (Ramaekers, 2005, p.152). In terms of their interaction with helping professionals for assistance of their children, parents are not only considered to be the “agents of change” for their children but they may also seek direct assistance for themselves as parents in the form of counselling, support or therapy (Hodgson *et al.*, 2001, p.264).

### 1.3.5 Helping professionals

There is widespread recognition of the central role that helping professionals<sup>1</sup> can play in meeting the needs of those seeking learning support (Engelbrecht, 2001, p.17). For the purposes of this study, the term ‘helping professional’ will denote the multiple sources of professional support that parents may consult when seeking learning support for their children (Donald *et al.*, 2002, p.19). Due to its linkages with the construct ‘learning support’ for this study, the term ‘helping professional’ is analogous to “educational support professional”, which is often used in the context of learning and/or educational support (Engelbrecht, 2001, p.17; Ramaekers, 2005). In this study, I will focus on helping professionals who, through their professional activities with children, can be designated as child therapists or “workers for the child” (Sutton & Hughes, 2005, p.171). These helping professionals may include, but are not limited to, occupational therapists, speech therapists, psychiatrists or psychologists who have been involved in specialised support provision from within the school context as well as outside the school environment (Donald *et al.*, 2002, p.19).

Any professional involvement with children generally includes some kind of interaction with their parents too. Sutton and Hughes (2005, p.170) propose that the helping professional’s interaction with parents rests on two foundations, namely, (1) assisting parents in childcare so that there are reasonable expectations of the parents and the child according to the child’s emotional state and stage of development and (2) providing some form of support to the child that the parent has been unable to provide. Yet, these two foundations give no indication of whether parents and helping professionals will be involved in any form of collaborative partnership with each other during support or whether the capacity of the parent will be recognised. When one considers that some (Case, 2000; Russell, 2003) consider partnership between parents and professionals

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<sup>1</sup> The shift away from needs-based approaches towards strengths-based approaches appears to be associated with the psychology field and related professions rather than with medically related professions. Although it seems that medical practitioners are also beginning to question the roles of their patients’ viewpoints in making treatment choices when facing a medically related illness (Neuberger, 2000; Honeycutt, Sleath, Bush, Campbell & Tudor, 2005; Zaffani, Cuzzolin, Meneghelli, Gangemi, Murgia, Chiamenti & Benoni, 2005) medical practitioners are not the overall focus of this study.

to be a fundamental necessity for change then this lack of consideration for the role of parent-professional partnership in these foundations becomes a significant omission.

Traditionally, professionals are viewed as those who are trained and qualified to take responsibility for a child's welfare. By virtue of their training and qualifications, they are recognised as possessing a specialised corpus of knowledge and skill. Consequently, they are viewed as professionals who provide specific expertise through their professional practice (Case, 2000, p.275), which is regulated by their accepted codes of practice as well as their membership of professional bodies (Freeman, 1988, p.80).

In this study, an ideology of professionalism is regarded as a broadly interlinked set of ideas and beliefs that cause professionals demonstrating these beliefs to initiate behaviour, methods and conversational practices as informed by their professional training (Engelbrecht, 2001, p.18). Thus, it is thought that helping professionals' roles as professionals may lead them to educate or give directions to parents on the basis of their beliefs about their role as a professional and their training informed, disciplinary knowledge rather than working alongside parents (Clear, 1999, p.2) in an equitable partnership relationship.

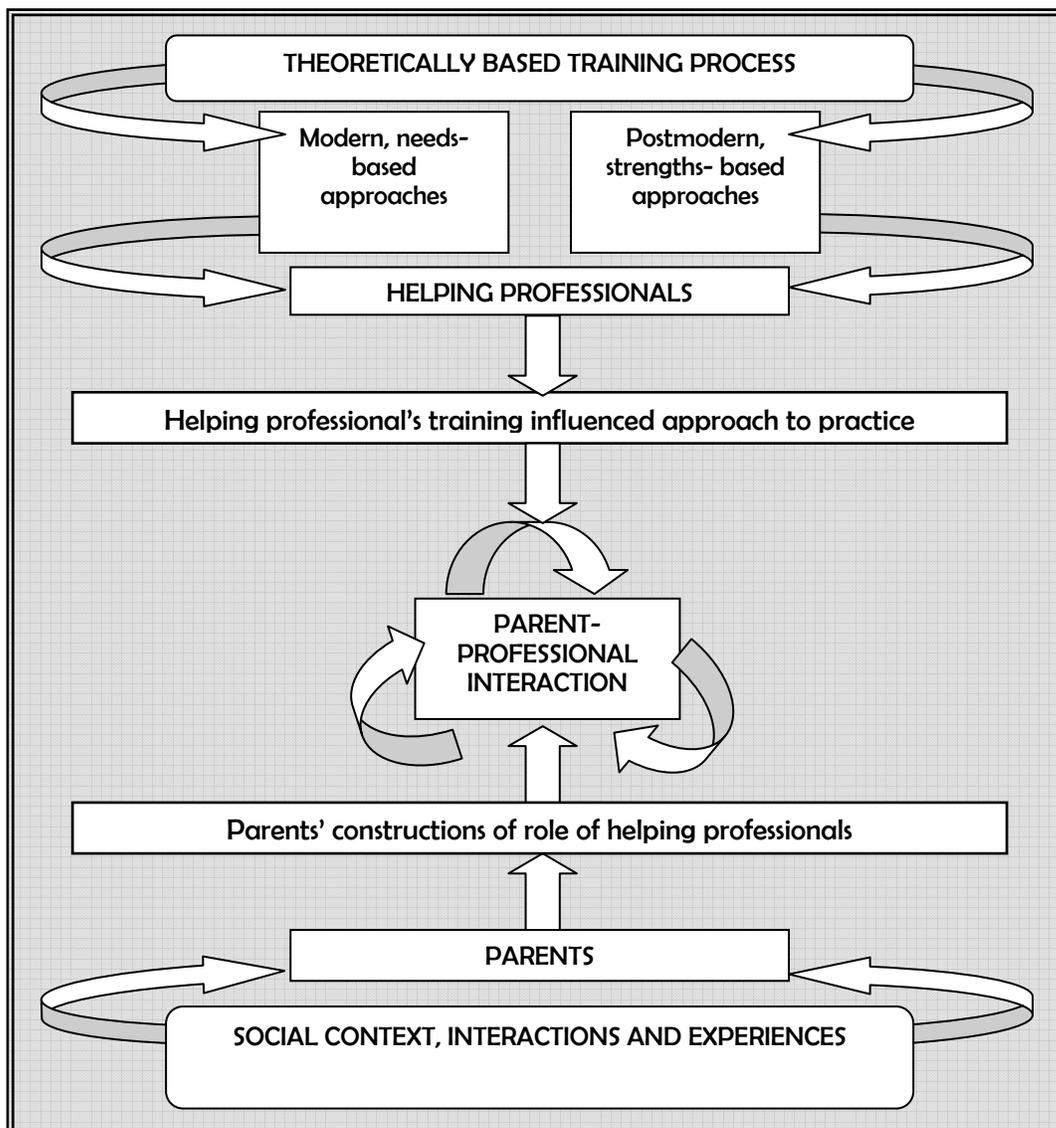
As the afore-mentioned exploration of the construct "helping professionals" was the final construct for initial consideration in this section, I consider it appropriate, in the interest of adding to the transparency of my influence as the researcher, to now reflect personally on the significance of all the constructs for the study. I will accomplish this by providing an initial visual representation of my emerging construction of personal meaning for the research in the next section, which shows my understanding of the relationships between the constructs that have just been explicated.

#### **1.4 Visual representation of the researcher's developing understanding of the research**

The visual representation [Figure 1.1 which follows on the next page] is intended to illustrate my initial construction of meaning for the study. It is indicative of my assumptions about the associations between the constructs for the study<sup>2</sup>, particularly, in terms of what may possibly influence the relationship between parents and helping professionals for learning support.

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<sup>2</sup> The visual representation reflects my emerging understanding of the relationships between and meaning of the constructs for the study. Therefore, of necessity, it may not appear complete and may lack detail at this point.



**Figure 1.1: Visual representation of the researcher’s assumptions of the relationships amongst constructs for the study**

I recognise that it is almost impossible for myself as the researcher to remain detached from my research undertaking. Thus, since my detachment from the research is regarded as unfeasible, along with other strategies to address the authenticity of the research outcomes to be addressed in Chapter Four, my influence must be taken into account and my position within the research needs to be acknowledged (Taylor, 2001, pp.16-17). Consequently, in each subsequent chapter in this study, I will update the visual representation to indicate how my construction of meaning in association with the emergence of a greater depth of understanding of the relationships between these constructs has developed. It is anticipated that the visual representation of my personal meaning making and my associated reflections will offer transparency as to my personal understanding of the research issue and the beliefs, values and assumptions that

underlie my construction of meaning in relation to the understanding afforded by the participants (Creswell, 2003, p.184).

The visual representation in Figure 1.1 indicates my view of the backgrounds that helping professionals and parents bring to their interaction for learning support. I propose that helping professionals' theoretical training, as informed by modern, needs-based approaches or postmodern, strengths-based approaches, will direct both their ideas of the parent-professional interaction, their view of their role and the role of the parent in learning support. The representation also supports my recognition that parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional and their roles in interaction with these professionals may be influenced by their experiences and interactions in their social context. At this stage, I am not aware of how parents' context may construct their view of the role of the helping professional. However, I surmise that, if helping professionals practice is informed by a postmodern strengths-based approach to practice, then this may be in conflict with parents' context informed views of the role of the helping professional, which, in my view, may be orientated to a needs-based construction of the role of the helping professional.

Both my afore- mentioned personal ruminations of which factors may influence the interaction between helping professionals and parents and the literature informed observations shared in the background and construct clarification sections, provide the backdrop to the formulation of the research problem for the study. The research problem for the study will now be revealed in the following section of this chapter.

## **1.5 STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The main issue that frames the inquiry in this study concerns the shift from modern, needs-based approaches towards postmodern, strengths-based approaches to learning support. I am particularly interested in examining to what extent strengths-based approaches can contribute towards enhancing parents' participation, and to what extent parents are aware of the shift in power relations between themselves and the professional. Parents automatically generate expectations of people delivering the services that they seek. Expectations can be described as personal predictions about what may happen in future, and which originate from a person's beliefs, knowledge and experiences. As well as being influenced by social context, expectations have an impact on people's interactions across their social context. People often only become attentive to reflecting on their expectations, if they are not met (Russell, 2003, pp.145-146).

The shift away from expert designed solutions in learning support has led to some professionals being trained in postmodern, strengths-based approaches to assist parents in utilising their personal resources for making effective and informed decisions. In this study, I will explore whether parents' constructions of the helping professional reveal a tendency on the part of the helping professional to focus on theoretical prescriptions that favour a particular [strengths-based or deficit-based] orientation towards learning support. I contend that much of what is expected of parents during the helping process may remain implicit in professionals' actions and communications with parents. As Case (2001, p. 837) reports, service provisions using any theoretical approach to practice are more likely to reflect the needs and agendas of the professional him- or herself rather than those of the client. Therefore, it seems plausible to assume that helping professionals may not focus sufficiently enough on what parents' expect of them in the process and how parents' then view their own roles as a result of their expectations of the helping professional.

Katzko's (2002, pp.671- 683) comments about first-order theories and second-order movements are of particular relevance to the study. According to Katzko (2002, pp. 671-672), first order theories are focused on a phenomenon or theory of a phenomenon. In the case of this study, the strengths-based theoretical approaches are viewed as first order theory because they introduce the phenomenon of strengths-based practice. Katzko (2002, p. 674) suggests that a movement is revolutionary in the sense that it is the process of change and the change often necessitates opposition to that which has gone before. In terms of helping professional practice, the implementation of postmodern, strengths-based approaches reflect the revolutionary movement or process of change away from needs-based approaches.

Katzko's (2002, pp.671-683) observations can perhaps be extended to an argument that the risk with any first-order theory is that it may not have been subjected to rigorous research with its intended population to examine the conjectures it is based on. As it appears that there is a lack of empirical investigation into the client populations who will be influenced by the application of strengths-based theories, one can question the applicability of these theories with the clients they purport to represent. Whilst, from an emotive perspective, it seems that focusing on strengths rather than deficits is the best way of going about practice with clients, there appears to be little evidence that a) clients prefer this approach and b) that it is a more appropriate way of engaging with clients. Consequently, the second order practical "movement" crafted on the initial first order theory of strengths-based practice, which in the case of this study would be the implementation of strengths-based approaches in helping professional practice with parents, tread the proverbial 'thin ice' in terms of their applicability in the public domain.

Until helping professionals engage with parents' possible indoctrination to the modernistic expert role of the helping professional, they may not be successful in meeting their goals in the second order implementation of an alternative strengths-based, first order theoretical approach to practice. As such, in supporting parents towards a presumed new understanding of their role in initiating solutions to their difficulties, helping professionals need to have an understanding of the current socially influenced expectations parents have of helping professionals. These personal constructions of helping professionals and their roles need to be explored so as to take a closer look to see if the movement towards strengths-based approaches is manifested in parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional. Ultimately, the question arises as to whether the shift towards a second order strengths based practice reflects the wishes of clients or the first order theoretically driven views of the helping professional as postmodern practitioner.

## **1.6 AIM OF STUDY, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND OUTCOME GOALS**

### **1.6.1 Aims**

The aim of this qualitative research study is to explore parents' constructions of the helping professional in learning support. As such, the primary aim is to explore how parents view helping professionals who have been involved in learning support of their child. Ideological notions about parent-professional relationships and the theoretically driven nature of learning support provide the impetus and context for this research exploration. Underlying the central aim of exploring parents' views of helping professionals is the secondary aim of exploring the discourses that contribute to parents' construction of their own roles and those of the helping professional during learning support. Specifically, it may be useful to explore parental discourses about helping professionals and any associated discourse that detracts from helping professionals' collaborative, strengths-based goals. The need to explore whether conflict exists between the expectations of the professional and the parent as well as its implication for training in practice provides the context and rationale for the formulation of the research aims and questions.

### **1.6.2 Research questions**

#### *1.6.2.1 Central research question*

- How do parents construct the role of helping professionals in learning support?

### 1.6.2.2 Sub questions

- What are parents' expectations of the helping professional in learning support?
- What do parents value in their interactions with helping professionals?
- What are parents' understandings of their roles in learning support?
- What are the discourses that may influence parents' views of their own roles and those of the helping professional in learning support?

### 1.6.3 Outcome goals for the study

A central outcome of the study will be the presentation of the research participants' social representations of the roles of helping professionals in learning support. This will be in the form of mind maps consisting of the abstract and concrete elements of the participants discourse about the role of helping professionals in learning support and how this influences their interactions with helping professionals. A further outcome of the study will be the visual representation of my own construction of meaning about parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional in learning support, as informed by my reflections throughout the research process. The research design and methodological considerations that aim to access parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional in learning support will now be highlighted.

## 1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

### 1.7.1 The case study as research design

A research design is an underlying scheme that guides the functioning, development and emergence of the different components of the research in relation to each other (Maxwell, 2005, p.1). A case study research design is useful when undertaking research that is envisioned to lead to insight, discovery and interpretation in context (Merriam, 1998, pp.27-28). Case studies are especially suited to situations in which it appears impossible to separate a phenomenon's variables from their context. For the purposes of this study, a case study design is considered suitable for exploring parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional in the context of learning support. A more in-depth exposition for the choice of a case study design will be furnished in Chapter Three.

### 1.7.2 Participant selection

Decisions about which location to conduct one's research in and whom to include as participants are a fundamental part of the research undertaking (Maxwell, 2005, p.87). In this study, participants will be selected who are regarded as "information rich" in that they will each possess knowledge of and experience with helping professionals for learning support of their child (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p.87). Specifically, parents of children in a school for Learners with Special Educational Needs [LSEN] who have had experience with various helping professionals, both at the school and in private practice settings, in the course of seeking assistance for their children, will be included in the study.

The research is, as such, not aimed at investigating the influence of this school environment on parents' constructions of helping professionals but rather parents' overall ideas of the role of any helping professional that assists children who experience difficulties and their parents. However, in line with a constructivist perspective, the schooling context needs to be acknowledged for its potential influence. It is therefore important to briefly describe the setting that was used to gain access to these parent participants. The LSEN school approached to assist with access to parents is situated in an urban setting in Gauteng, South Africa. Learners from diverse cultural, racial, language, social and economic backgrounds attend the school. Due to the small number of these LSEN schools in South Africa, most learners who have been recommended for placement at one of these schools do not have access to them. Referral for placement at the specific school is based on a team of school helping professional's deliberation of private practice helping professional assessment reports and/ or recommendation by the local district department of education, under whose jurisdiction the school falls. LSEN schools have traditionally assisted learners with organic, medically based impairments and the professionals at these schools have historically subscribed to a medical-deficit model of practice. In the movement towards a more inclusive education system in South Africa (DoE, 2001, p.21) it is envisaged that these schools will have a "new role in providing particular expertise and support, especially professional support in curriculum, assessment and instruction, as part of a district support team to neighbourhood schools...". As such, it can be argued that the abilities of the helping professionals at such schools to collaborate with and act in ways which empower others in local schooling contexts will become even more important in South Africa.

It also has to be noted that the helping professionals the parents in this study consulted in private practice settings may also have been trained in the medical-deficit tradition of helping

assistance. This not an unanticipated scenario for this research, as the move towards strengths-based models has only been a recent development in the helping professions.

### **1.7.3 Data collection and data analyses**

#### *1.7.3.1 Phase one: Semi-structured interviews and content analysis*

Data collection and analyses will take place in two phases. For phase one of this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow flexibility in the interview process and allow for an in-depth description of the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, pp.146-147). The questions guiding this phase of the research will focus on the follow aspects:

- What do parents see as the role of the helping professional in learning support?
- What do parents expect from helping professionals in learning support?
- What do parents value in their interactions with helping professionals?
- How do parents view their own roles in learning support?
- What do parents think they need from helping professionals in order to fulfil their roles in learning support?

The data will be analysed through a process of open, inductive coding or content analysis. During the content analysis, verbatim transcriptions of the interviews will be examined and units of meaning or codes will be identified and labelled. Thereafter, related codes will be grouped or categorised together into themes (Henning, van Rensburg & Smit, 2004, pp.104-105). The goal of a case description allows for analysis that encompasses all the nuances of the phenomenon contained in the cases of parents' constructions of the role of the helping professional (Yin, 2003, pp.109-114). The outcome of this phase is to identify and describe preliminary themes, which will be used in phase two of the study.

#### *1.7.3.2 Phase two: Interactive Qualitative Analysis [IQA]*

Phase two encompasses a modified Interactive Qualitative Analysis [IQA] method as described by Northcutt and McCoy (2004). IQA is a social constructionist approach to data collection and analysis which addresses power relations between researcher and participant by encouraging greater participation of participants in the (1) *elicitation of themes* via collaborative axial coding

and the creation of theory and in (2) *data analysis* via the use of Affinity Relationship Tables [ARTs] so that participants can record their view of the possible relationships amongst themes.

IQA rests on the assumption that people build their own internal representations of their world, which can be likened to systems of meaning. Thus, the purpose of IQA is to draw up a visual representation of the participants' systems of meaning (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, pp.147-149). The participants' representation is not assumed to form a map of reality but rather a representation from each individual's perspective of the discourse that is used to represent the reality. These representations can be considered as networks of concepts, with language being the key for accessing the formation of an understanding of these representations (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, pp. 40; 147-149).

Thus, during an interview in this phase, parents will be encouraged to peruse the preliminary themes as well as their corresponding descriptions elicited via content analysis by the researcher and asked to add to or modify these themes. Parents will also be invited to provide further commentary on their experiences with each of the themes. After the preliminary themes have been discussed and clarified with the participants, parents will use them to record their understanding of the relationships between the themes. For this purpose, an Affinity Relationship Table [ART]<sup>3</sup> is used to draw up a mind map indicating how parents structure their understanding of the role of helping professionals in learning support.

#### **1.7.4 Rationale for the research methodology instituted during the research**

Russell (2004, p.75) states that "...although parental involvement and the notion of partnership in education are a prime focus for many policies and initiatives, this is not replicated in educational research, where traditionally the imbalance of power between the researcher and the researched persists". Earlier, Wolfendale (1999, pp.164-169) already suggested that researchers involved in enquiry that centres on the scrutiny of partnership initiatives with parents have been guilty of paying little attention to the associated methodological and ethical issues, which she regards as especially relevant since research initiatives are generally based on principles of partnership with parents, rights, equality, reciprocity and empowerment. She notes that research into "parents as partners" is sometimes initiated because of ideology and rarely takes place from neutral, value-free bases (p.164).

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<sup>3</sup> The IQA data analysis process, including the use of the ART will be described in detail in Chapter Three and the appendix associated with Chapter Four.

To counteract the apparent lack of equal partnership between parents and the researcher during the research process, the specific qualitative method to be used, IQA, mirrors postmodern notions of partnership and expertise in that the participants will be viewed as those most qualified to generate and interpret their own data through collaboration with the researcher. It is considered to be plausible that IQA data collection and analysis methods will be more likely to contribute to parents' partnership with the researcher during the research. Specifically, parents in this study will be recognised for their own ability to generate and give meaning to research data rather than relying on myself as the researcher being the only expert capable of subjectively interpreting the data. It is felt that the implementation of IQA methods as well as ethical undertakings will contribute to the four key areas for partnership in research, namely rights, equality, reciprocity and empowerment as identified by Wolfendale (1999, p.167), so as to increase the likelihood of parents' sense of participative partnership with the researcher throughout the researcher.

To contribute to a sense of equality, the parents will be encouraged to become equal partners in the research process. Ensuring reciprocal involvement of the parents involved in the study means that their contribution of information and expertise will be valued in the process. Their capability to share the responsibility of co-analysis of the data will also be recognised. Empowerment in research involving parents entails that parents' voices constitute an influential presence in the data. IQA as a research methodology is considered to be a suitable means for parents to be able 'express their views, and constructively influence' the data collection and analyses processes to be undertaken with them during the research process (Wolfendale, 1999, p.167). Furthermore, parents involved in the study will be encouraged to exercise their rights during the research by means of a number of ethical actions, which will be considered in the next section.

### **1.7.5 Ethical considerations**

#### *1.7.5.1 The cardinal importance of ethical conduct in research*

Ethics is a critical part of the research process from the initial formulation of the research issue to the interpretation and reporting of the research findings. Thus, it is relevant to thoroughly stipulate the ethical considerations that will guide the research in this chapter. The guiding ethical principle for this study is respect of the rights of research participants to safeguard their integrity (Hesse- Biber & Leavy, 2005, pp. 86-87). As researcher, I undertake to adhere to the principle of respect for participants' integrity by ensuring their informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity and by undertaking to protect them from any harm during the research process.

### 1.7.5.2 *Informed consent*

Informed consent involves providing information about the research to assist potential participants in their decisions about whether or not they want to participate in the research. By providing explanatory written information that is accessible to participants and not written in academic jargon, I intend to assist potential participants towards a full understanding of this information (Silverman, 2005, p.258). The ultimate guiding ethical consideration for informed consent is my acknowledgement that participants have the right to know that their viewpoints are being researched. Furthermore, participants are entitled to be informed about the nature of the research and that they can withdraw from the research at any stage (Ryen, 2004, p.231). It is necessary to obtain written consent from participants so as to provide documentary evidence that their participation is voluntary and that they understand what the research entails as well as what it will be used for (Silverman, 2005, p.258).

The following steps will be taken to ensure that the participants are informed about the nature of the research as well as their rights in the research process:

- The expectations for participation in the research and all ethical issues will first be explained to potential participants telephonically.
- A letter of informed consent seeking participation and outlining the nature of the research will be sent to potential participants so that they can make an informed decision as to whether they want to participate or not. The letter to the parents will deal with the written clarification of the research purpose and process; explanation that they can discontinue their participation in the research at any time during the process and the assurance that their confidentiality will be ensured at all times. The parents will also need to give permission for their interview responses to be recorded using an audiotape recorder. At the commencement of the first data collection with those who agree to participate, the letter of informed consent will be signed [see **Appendix A**].
- During all phases of data collection, the process will be explained, participants will be reminded of their right to withdraw from the research at any time and all other ethical aspects will be reiterated.

Written consent is also required from any site which will be used to gain access to research participants (Henning *et al.*, 2004, p.73). Written consent will be sought from:

- Letters granting permission to approach parents of children with learning difficulties at a LSEN school in Johannesburg will be signed by the management of the school as well as the School Governing Body [see **Appendices B** and **C**].
- Written permission will be obtained from The Gauteng Department of Education, as the school chosen to provide participants falls under this governmental department's jurisdiction [see **Appendix D** for the letter of permission].

#### *1.7.5.3 Confidentiality and anonymity*

According to Ryen (2004, p.233), researchers are obliged to protect participants' identity and the location of the research. The name of the location that will be used to gain access to participants for the research will be protected. To protect research participants from any potential invasion of their privacy, I undertake to guarantee the anonymity of research participants by assigning aliases to these individuals (Creswell, 1998, p.132; Cameron, 2001, p.23). The conditions of anonymity apply to data collected through the usage of voice recording devices as well as through face-to-face interactions (Mouton, 2001, p.243). Therefore, real names will not be furnished and any information provided that may lead to the identification of the participant will be removed. When a form of distinction is needed between different research participants for discussion purposes, pseudonyms will be used. Participants will also have the opportunity to seek exclusion of information from their replies to the interview data upon completion of the interviews to ensure that any information that they do not want reported is excluded (Taylor, 2001, pp.20-21; Mouton, 2001, pp.238-246).

#### *1.7.5.4 Protection from harm*

In interacting with the participants in this study, I am committed to non-maleficence and undertake to do no harm to them (Ryen, 2004, p.233). Instead, I will seek a beneficial experience for participants by addressing any potentially harmful aspects associated with the research. In an interview-focused study, researchers must use their sensitivity to judge how far to take questioning of a personal nature due to the potential negative effects (Kvale, 1996, p.116). The personal being of the research participant must therefore be respected at all times. I undertake to anticipate the possibility of negative outcomes associated with the research and to

take steps to protect participants in the research based on these anticipations, as recommended by Taylor (2001, p.20). Rapley (2004, p.26) sums up ethical considerations for research participants concisely and expressively when he writes that “Above all, treat them with respect, they are never just ‘more data’ “.

## 1.8 POTENTIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is anticipated that the findings of this study may be useful to:

- Interrogate theoretically based assumptions concerning the postmodern, strengths-based approach to consultation in relation to a modern, needs-based approach from the perspectives of parents as clients who are affected by the practical application and implications of these approaches.
- Help enrich helping professionals understanding of parents expectations of helping professionals to inform their praxis in learning support consultation with parents.
- Provide exploratory research into parents’ constructions of the role of the helping professional that may be used for further research into clients’ perspectives in strengths-based practice and parent-professional partnership research.
- Explore a collaborative approach to research- IQA- that may be useful for assisting in partnership between researchers and parents.

## 1.9 DELINEATION OF THE STUDY

**Chapter One** has aimed to present the background to the study as well as its aims and focus. The research questions addressed during the research process were highlighted too. The researcher’s initial understanding of the central constructs to be utilised and elaborated on during the study have also been presented. Furthermore, the design considerations for the study were touched on briefly.

**Chapter Two** provides an in-depth literature based overview of the epistemological bases that impact on helping professionals’ views of optimal practice for learning support. The nature of these theories as well as their impact on views of practice will be considered. Furthermore, indications of the literature-based ideologies for parent-professional relationships as well as parental perspectives on this will be provided.

**Chapter Three** offers a comprehensive account of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the research as well as an explication of the research design and methodological plan for the practical research exercise in its entirety. The philosophical paradigms, which acted as an overarching interpretative basis for the research, will be represented. Thereafter, the methodological assumptions and research design that guided the research methodology will be illustrated. The context of the study and the roles of those involved in the research will be furnished as well. An exposition of the data collection and data analysis process will then be undertaken. Finally, a discussion of the trustworthiness of the exploration will be conducted.

**Chapter Four** presents a discussion of the research outcomes, particularly focusing on the participants' representations of the role of the helping professional in learning support. A recursive reflection about the first literature review in Chapter Two as well as the consideration of a second literature review will be provided in exploration of the findings of the study.

In **Chapter Five** a summation of the findings of the study and an investigation of their relevance to the research questions posed will be initiated. The limitations of the study as well as recommendations for helping professional practice and further research will be offered as a conclusion to the study.

## **1.10 CONCLUDING COMMENTS**

Although there are many burgeoning theoretical views of optimal helping professional practice (Engelbrecht & Green, 2001; Snyder & Lopez, 2002; Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2003), the current literature (see Fylling & Sandvin, 1999; Case, 2001; Weatherly Valle & Aponte, 2002; Russell, 2003; Sutton & Hughes, 2005, as examples) provides little indication of what parents may actually want from helping professionals for learning support of a child.

In this study I attempt to explore parents' views of the role of the helping professional as formed by their experiences of and interaction with professionals in the course of their child's learning support. The exploration of the factors that parents view as assisting in their constructions of the role of the helping professional and as influencing their interactions with helping professionals will be especially important in this regard.