4.2.5 RESEARCH REPORTS

4.2.5.1 **General background**

Research reports also form one of the widely used techniques for collecting data needed for the assessment of learning needs for community education programmes. Van Niekerk (1982:94) refers to reports as hetero-historicity data whereas Hitchcock and Hughes (1989:108) refer to documentary sources, while Taylor and Bogdan (1984:91) refer to personal documents. For a report to exist, there must be an incident or a situation being reported. This is possible in the community education situation where the co-ordinator of community education reports about the learners, their attitudes, progress, programmes, implementing processes, etc.

According to Hitchcock and Hughes (1989:108-109), documentary sources or reports have been used extensively in all the human sciences over a considerable period of time. These sources constitute a largely neglected source of data on the social world of schools and classrooms, especially when compared to the extensive use of the survey technique, structured interviewing or systematic observation. Used with care and in conjuction with other kinds of data, personal documentary sources offer the reseacher a number of possibilities. This is because ethnographic accounts of school and classroom processes tend to pinpoint the immediate, here and now, contemporary quality of the situation, thus possibly lacking historical depth.

Connelly and Clandinin (in Keeves, 1997:82) refer to reports as autobiography and further mention that autobiography was one of the first methodologies for educational study, though it essentially disappeared until recently. Autobiography is related to narrative. The focus here is on an individual's psychology considered over a span of time.

Narrative inquiry may also be sociologically concerned with groups and the formation of community. To date in the 1990's in education, personal rather than social narrative inquiries have been more in evidence. The educational importance of narrative inquiry is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived. Because of its focus on experience and the qualities of life and education, narrative is situated in a matrix of qualitative research (Connelly and Clandinin in Keeves, 1997:82).

4.2.5.2 **Types of research reports**

Seeing that research reports deal with the experience and the qualities of life they seem to be better placed as a tool (technique) for assessing learning needs for community education programmes. However, it is imperative for the researcher to carefully select the research report(s) he or she desires.

Connely and Clandinin (in Keeves, 1997: 83-84) present a number of types of research reports which may also be used in community education. The following is a brief summary:

- **From field to field texts:** What are normally called data (e.g. field notes) are, in narrative research, better thought of as field texts. These are texts created by participants and researchers to represent aspects of field experience.
- **Oral History:** One method for creating field texts is oral history. There are several strategies for obtaining an oral history, ranging from the use of a structured set of questions in which the researcher's intentions are uppermost, to asking a person to tell his or her own story in his or her own way in which the participant's intentions are uppermost.
  For instance community members could be asked to relate their learning and educational needs and further prioritize them.
- **Stories:** A closely connected method is the telling or writing of stories. Individuals have stories of their own experience, of school, and of their profession.
  In this case participants could tell stories about what they perceive as learning needs depending on their experiences.
- **Annals and Chronicles:** Annals are a simple dated history of significant moments or events for an individual or institution. Annals permit researchers to gain a historical context for the events under study. Chronicles are more thematic representations of the

annals. Chronicles represent a thematic aspect of the field of interest.

- **Photographs, Memory Boxes, Other Personal/Institutional Artifacts:** Physical artifacts are repositories of experience. The items that a person collects and a school's trophies and mementos can, through discussion with knowledgeable participants, reveal important depths of experience. These items, furthermore, are important triggers for memory.
- **Research Interviews**: Interviews can be made into field texts by verbatim transcription, notetaking, and the use of interview segments.

  In order to ascertain learning needs the community education researcher could conduct interviews with selected participants who are knowledgeable about the community members.
- **Journals**: Journals have been increasingly used for teaching purposes.

  It is sometimes overlooked that the same qualities that make them an influencial teaching tool also make them a valid research tool. Journals provide both a descriptive and reflective record of events, and of personal responses to them.
- **Autobiographical and Biographical Writing:** Autographical or biographical field texts are interpretative retellings of a story already lived.
- **Letters**: Letters, unlike journals, are written to another person with the expectation of a response. Both letters and journals are used in autobiographical and biographical methods.

  In this instance the community education researcher could write letters to the community leaders requesting them to identify and list the learning needs of that community.
- **Conversations**

  Conversations cover many kinds of activities, including letter writing. Usually conversation refers to nonhierarchical oral exchanges among researchers and participants in collaborative inquiries.
- **Field Notes and Other Stories from the Field**: Field notes are the standard ethnographic method of data collection. Commonly thought to be drafted by researchers, field notes may, in collaborative studies, be written by participants.

o **Document Analysis:** Documents are an easily overlooked source of field texts,particularly in the narrative study of groups and institutions. Documents have a special status because they are public records and often represent an official position.

These documents could be obtained from the libraries, community resource centres and also from educated persons within the community.

From the above discussion it is evident that research reports are straightforward documents that set forth to report an incident or a situation. In this study the incidents or situations being reported by the researcher will be the existing learning needs of community members in order to design relevant community education programmes.

4.2.6 GROUP DISCUSSION

4.2.6.1 **General background**

Group discussion is a research method for gathering information which may be useful for assessing educational and learning needs of community members.

According to Rademeyer (1985:1), the group discussion method has been used extensively in all branches of the behavioural sciences since the beginning of the century. Shortly after the Second World War the principles of group dynamics entered the marketing research scene in attempts to probe more deeply into the preferences, opinions and attitudes of the user, but the method was soon labelled unscientific and unreliable by conservative research institutions. Yet it withstood these attacks, and is now internationally regarded as an important instrument for gathering information.

Group discussion is a qualitative research method. However, in community education studies, group discussions are not concerned with gathering expert information. They are concerned with actual information from actual groups, thus attempting to utilise the advantages of group interaction. Group discussions therefore counteract the disadvantages of group interaction.

4.2.6.2 **Definition of Group Discussion**

Group discussion as a method of research is applied extensively and for different objectives in various research studies. The use of group discussion is not confined to community education research but serves even other research studies. The use of group discussion originated with Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist, who did research on group dynamics in the 1930s. In the group dynamics literature a distinction is made between encounter, social, instructional and task-oriented groups (Seaman, 1981: 7). Encounter groups are variously termed T-groups and sensitivity groups and are formed to enhance the interpersonal effectiveness of their members in such fields as communication effectiveness and sensitivity to the feelings, ideas and attitudes of others. Social groups consist of people sharing the same interests, who gather in an informal atmosphere for recreational purposes. A learning process does occur in such groups, but their primary aim, like those of sports and bridge clubs, is a social one. Groups are also formed with the object of studying a particular subject which is of common interest to the members. Such groups are termed instructional groups. Their members share in the insight and experience of all the other members of the group, thus increasing their own enthusiasm, motivation and knowledge.

Seaman (1981:14) gives the following definition of task-oriented groups: "The vast majority of groups which meet from day to day are not designed for self-introspection nor for aiding their members to grow and better understand themselves ... Rather, they are normally formed for the purpose of accomplishing some task, be it to formulate policy, action, to plan for action, or for purposeful learning." As a community education research method, group discussion also fits this description since the primary aim is the purposeful collection of information in order to assess learning needs for planning community education programmes.

4.2.6.3 **Types of Group Discussion**

In community education different types of group discussion may be used. However, the type of group discussion the researcher will select depends on the nature of information required (i.e. learning needs) and the population targeted.

In the literature authors distinguish between: (De Almeida, 1980: 114; Leonhard, 1975:6).
- group discussions
- group interviews
- focussed group interviews
- group dynamics technique

4.2.6.4 **Guidelines for Effective Group Discussion**

Group discussion as a method for gathering information needs to adhere to certain guidelines for it to be successful. These guidelines remain important even when group discussion is used as a research method in assessing learning needs of groups in communities.

With regard to the guidelines for group discussion, Rademeyer (1985:13-14) states that:
One group session usually does not supply sufficient information to explore the problem and so several group sessions are held to make up a survey. In South Africa a group discussion survey comprises on average 3 to 4 separate group sessions. Each session has to be fairly homogeneous if different life-style patterns are to be observed, so groups are formed on the basis of such variables as population group, language group and service or institution being researched. The usual number of participants per group varies between 6 and 10, and sessions vary between 1 and 2 hours in length.

The moderator, who is responsible for conducting the group session, should be well-trained. His role in the group is to make participants feel at ease and explore various facets of the problem in an informal, relaxed atmosphere. Unlike the interviewer using a structured questionnaire, the moderator makes no attempt to ask standard, formulated questions. Participants are left to raise the various facets of the subject and discuss them at their own initiative. In this way the moderator gleans information about opinions, feelings and attitudes that other methods may not reveal (Rademeyer, 1985:14).

4.2.6.5 Methodology of Group Discussion

If not properly administered, group discussion may turn into a chaotic situation. It is imperative that certain procedures be followed in order for group discussions to achieve the purpose they are meant for. This is also true even in community education research when group discussions are used in assessing learning needs of community members.

Rademeyer (1985:5-7) suggests the following methodology of group discussion:

1. **Discussion procedure**

- **Group separation:** Several group sessions are held to make up a survey. Members of separate group sessions generally are fairly homogeneous and a number of variables have to be taken into account in the separation of groups.
- **Number of group sessions per survey:** In South Africa a group discussion survey comprises an average of 3 to 4 separate group sessions. However, 3 to 4 sessions per survey will not be sufficient in all circumstances.
- **When the discussion takes place:** A fairly large percentage of total group sessions is conducted after hours. Refined recruiting procedures may make it possible to get together more groups during office hours.
- **Duration of a single, typical group session:** A single group session typically lasts one to two hours. This seems to be adequate in the phenomenological approach, but the clinical approach may require a more extended discussion, while panels may be justified under circumstances in the exploratory approach.

- **Group size**: Like the length of the group session, the size of the group is a dynamic force influencing the discussion. Whereas in practice it varies between about six to ten members, the literature indicates that five-member groups are optimal in the clinical and phenomenological approaches and seven-member groups in the exploratory approach.
- **Discussion style**: It is essential that the moderator's style should be non-directive during the discussion since this is the only way of observing the group culture or the lifestyle pattern. Very often individual opinions are not valid due to mutual influencing and dishonest remarks.
- **Discussion techniques**: Researchers tend to apply a whole range of basic techniques during the discussion and should avoid the danger of developing a directive style as a result of applying such techniques.
- **Venue**: The discussion is usually held at the researcher's offices, whereas a member's home would be the ideal venue. However, the difficulties presented by the absence of the necessary facilities makes this arrangement impracticable. The best alternative is to create a homely atmosphere in a business environment.
- **Use of mechanical equipment**: Facilities refer to recording equipment used during the discussion. Tape recorders and one-way mirrors are fairly widely used in South Africa. Their use is recommended, but group members must be informed of the use of such equipment.
- **Serving of refreshments**: Very often refreshments are served during the discussion to aid interaction, but wine and beer should be limited and strong drinks avoided altogether.

2. **Recruiting**

- **Organising the recruiting function**: Black members are recruited to a larger extent by recruiting agencies than are other population groups who are recruited mostly by the establishment's own staff. Recruiting is a specialised task, but the researcher has little control over the required characteristics of members when recruiting agencies do the job.

- **Matters on which recruiters are briefed**: Whoever does the recruiting should be told to look out for certain important characteristics when selecting members. Apart from panel discussions in the exploratory approach, such members should not have taken part in group discussions of any kind in the past three months to a year, they should not be attached to research institutions or competitors, and they should not know one another.
- **Sampling method:** Recruiters should also be briefed on the sample method. Most of the establishments usually draw judgement samples. This means they apply a non-probability method which is ideally suited to group discussions since probability methods do not confirm the validity of the results.
- **Member drop-out rate**: The drop-out rate is fairly high for members who undertake to attend the discussions. Inadequate transport arrangements seem to be the main problem, while black groups have the added difficulty of finding suitable venues in black areas.

3. Data analysis

Although group discussions are not suitable for quantitative projections, there are many establishments who believe that data should be expressed quantitatively, either in numbers or in quantitative expressions. Sample size is however determined by the number of groups and not the number of group members. This is the reason why various lifestyle patterns are discovered in factors like the facets initiated by members, the intensity of the discussion of such facets, the order of discussion of the facets, and the relation between facets in different group sessions.

From the above discussion it is clear that the group discussion method is widely used to collect data for various reasons. This method is also advantageous for the community education researcher because it allows for face-to-face interaction when assessing learning needs of the group members.

4.2.7 OBSERVATION

4.2.7.1 General background

In our daily lives, many of us are expected to evaluate others, pass judgement and even make decisions. Many of these decisions are based on information gleaned from our environment by means of observation. We therefore observe different people in different situations which enables us to make deductions. Boehm and Weinberg (1987:2) add that the degree of precision with which a person observes is determined by that person's interests, needs and previous experience.

Therefore it follows that a coach and a spectator will observe a soccer match differently. Observation as a research technique will therefore be suitable in community education particularly when assessing learning needs of individuals and groups for community education programmes.

Observation is often the first indication that a problem area exists. All professional educators typically use informal observation as one means of evaluation and assessment. Systematic observation is simply a more refined means of data collection which serves to clarify or confirm a suspected problem area (Burbach and Decker, 1977:66).

According to Ary et al (1990:246) in many cases, systematic direct observation is the most desirable measurement method. An investigator identifies the behaviour of interest and devises a systematic procedure for identifying, categorizing, and recording the behaviour in either a natural or a contrived situation. Systematic observation has been used extensively in research on infants and preschool children.

Systematic observation can also be used extensively in community education research, especially to identify learning needs for community education programmes.

4.2.7.2 **The nature and use of observation**

Everyday observations are usually informal, without a specific objective in mind. Scientific observation, on the other hand, is systematic and requires purposeful observation (Du Toit, 1992:45).

Brown (1987:15) gives a description of how research information can be collected through observation: In using this technique, targeted community members are watched carefully, and their behaviours are noted and analysed. The data collector (the observer) can be the community education researcher or a specially trained person.

Direct observation provides some unique data about an individual and is particularly useful when assessing behaviour problems, breaches of discipline, acting out behaviour, or social maladjustment. Of all the assessment techniques available, this one permits the evaluation of individuals while they are in a natural environment (i.e. when they are functioning in an everyday setting). The technique is also useful in assessing the nature of interactions.

According to Du Toit (1992:45-46) the manner in which observations are noted varies widely along a nonstructured to highly structured continuum. At one end, the observer might merely watch the individual engaged in everyday play or activity and thereby secure an overall picture of the situation. At the other end of the continuum, each of the individual's behaviours might be classified and frequencies of occurrence tallied over a specified period of time.

In the community education process, situations may differ, but the underlying principle is almost the same since people's interactions with their environment are being observed and recorded.

4.2.7.3 **Preliminary steps for observation**

In order for observation as a scientific research technique to be a success, certain guidelines need to be thoroughly considered. In the same way the researcher who uses observation to assess learning needs of community members needs to observe certain preliminary steps.

According to Ary et al (1990:247) there are five important preliminary steps to be taken when using observation:

- **The aspect of behaviour to be observed must be selected:** Because it is not possible to observe everything that happens, the investigator must decide beforehand which behaviour to record and which to ignore.
- **The behaviour falling within the chosen category must be clearly defined:** The observers must understand what actions will be classified as, for instance, co-operative behaviour or selfish behaviour.
- **The people who will carry out the observations must be trained:** Training and opportunity for practice are necessary in order that the investigator can rely on the observers to follow an established procedure in observing, interpreting and reporting observations.
- **A system for quantifying observations must be developed:** The investigator must decide on a standard method for "counting" or recording the observed learning needs. For instance, it must be established beforehand whether an action and the reaction to it are to be counted as a single incident of the behaviour observed or as two incidents.
- **Detailed procedures for recording needs must be developed:** The memory of most observers is usually not reliable enough for meaningful research. The best solution is a coding system that allows the immediate recording of what is observed using a single letter or digit, rather than a narrative system, which takes too much of the observers' time and attention.

4.2.7.4 **Types of observation techniques**

There are various types of observation techniques which may be used in community education research studies. The researcher who is gathering information about learning needs of communities in order to design relevant community education programmes will have to carefully select the most appropriate type of observation technique he wishes to use.

The following discussion will look at the different types of observation techniques:

1. **Checklist**: When looking at a situation, the researcher needs to look purposefully, to have an agenda of objectives or behavioural goals (e.g. learning and educational needs) toward which to direct one's attention. In its simplest form, such a list of observational goals (learning needs) is perhaps the ordinary **checklist**. A **checklist** is simply a list of items after each of which a check mark is made in one of two columns: either in the column "observed" or in the column "not observed" (Leedy, 1980:108).

   The community education researcher can compile a list of expected learning needs for a given community. He can then visit the community to make a check whether a listed learning need is 'observed' or 'not observed'. The list of learning needs could include aspects such as:

   - parental involvement in education
   - school readiness
   - learning problems
   - hobbies
   - sport
   - drugs, etc.

2. **Rating scales**: Mehrens and Lehman (1984:219-221) write as follows: Rating scales provide systematic procedures for obtaining, recording and reporting the observer's judgements. Rating scales resemble checklists in that both can be completed either on the spot or after the event, but are used when finer discrimination is needed. Instead of merely indicating the presence or absence of a trait, a rating scale enables the user to indicate the status or quality of what is being rated.

Using the learning needs observed in a checklist, the community education researcher could further refine the learning needs by using a rating scale. It all depends on what the researcher wants to achieve, with regard to the learning needs of the community.

There are three types of rating scales, namely:
- Numerical rating scale
- Graphic rating scale
- Descriptive rating scale.

3. **Tape recording of the data:** One of the observation methods that can be used in assessing learning needs of communities is through the use of a tape recorder.

   In a one-to-one conversation the tape recorder is very useful because it records information on every learning need mentioned in the process. As a result the community education researcher will get ample time to concentrate on the participant's actions, gestures, facial expression and any signs which give a clear indication of the learning need(s) under discussion.

   With regard to tape recording of data, Leedy(1980:107) writes that observation need not always be a visual experience. We "observe" through the ear as well as through the eye.

4.2.7.5 **The advantages of observation**

Because of its advantages the observation method of research is widely used. This also makes it suitable to be used in community education studies.

For example, the community education researcher could commence by using observation to identify a common learning need for a specific group or sector of the community. The researcher could monitor progress through regular observations of the identified learning need to find out if the need still exists. This will assist the researcher to design an appropriate community education programme for this group of people.

Mehrens and Lehman (1984:212-213) cite the following advantages of observation:
- The progress that a person makes can be monitored by means of regular observation.
- When errors or problems arise they can be spotted immediately and attended to.
- Unlike achievement tests, observation is less time-consuming.
- People experience observation as less threatening than tests.
- Observation provides the researcher with a valuable source of supplementary information that he or she is often unable to acquire in any other way.

4.2.7.6 **General guidelines for valid observations**

When observations are used to assess the learning needs of individuals and groups for community education programmes it is important for the researcher to ensure that certain guidelines are adhered to. These observations must therefore be accurate, reliable and systematic.

Mehrens and Lehman (1984:213-215) describe various guidelines for researchers to ensure that they make valid observations:
- Plan in advance what is to be observed and prepare an observational list, guide or form to make the observations objective and systematic.
- The researcher should concentrate on information on only one or two learning needs.
- Use clear, unambiguous terminology.
- Traits (items) should be mutually exclusive.
- The observer must be alert to sampling errors.
- Extensive observations should be selective.
- Carefully record and summarise the observation immediately after it has been made.
- Do not interpret information on the learning needs until later on.

- Have categories and coding schemes that are simple to use, that call for easily observed information on learning needs, and that deal with information on learning needs that can be conveniently recorded.
- Wherever possible, observers and observations should be unobstructive.

From the foregoing discussion it has become evident that observation as a research technique should be characterised by being objective, that is, the phenomenon observed should relate to the research problem. In this case the purpose of observation as a technique will be to assess the learning needs of individuals and groups in their communities in order to design relevant community education programmes.

4.2.8 SMALL GROUP TECHNIQUES

Small group techniques represent more informal methods for assessing learning needs of communities. Learning needs, priorities, and goals are identified and accepted after a series of discussions. These discussion group techniques are particularly helpful in identifying priorities of needs. The following discussion will focus attention on some examples of the small group approach to learning needs assessment:

The Delphi Method: The Delphi method involves the following sequence of events:
a) Expert judges are selected and placed in an environment free of influence from other judges. b) Expert judges generate estimates about future events. c) Judges estimate the probability of these events occuring by a specific date. d) When this is completed, forecasts are collected. The results are fed back to the group and judges then revise their earlier forecasts; they are still free of influence from other judges. Phases b,c, and d are repeated and deviants are informed of their differences and asked to justify their estimates. After a number of rounds, the coordinator of the process then makes the final forecasts based on the consensus of judges' opinions (Delaney and Nuttall, 1978:39).

By following the Delphi method, the community educator could request participants to first identify learning needs by simply listing them. The different learning needs will then be grouped together and compiled into one list. Thereafter participants will be requested to prioritize the learning needs commencing with those which need urgent attention to those which need least attention.

The Nominal Group Technique: This technique was developed by Delbecq (1975) and essentially involves a structured way of having informed people identify what the needs are. A typical needs assessment involving this procedure would be to have a group of people come together to identify the needs. This group of people should be knowledgeable, and somewhat various. For example, some may be service providers, others may be employers, others may be clients. Small groups of no fewer than six and no more than ten are formed. Each group has a recorder, a flip chart, marking pens, and many 5 x 8 cards (Delaney and Nuttall, 1978:39).

When using the nominal group technique in identifying learning needs of community members, the community educator can select amongsts others teachers, principals, priests, youth leaders, doctors from the community, to name but a few.

Group Sampling: Pocoff's group sampling technique is a system designed to allow those most involved in a problem to have a say about the nature of the problem and possible solutions to it. It involves getting a small number of the members of various groups together who are affected by the problem and then having them rank order causes (i.e. most important listed first) of the problem (Burbach and Decker, 1977:68).

With regard to community education, group sampling could be used to identify learning needs of the community members using a selection procedure. Thereafter, a relevant community education programme can be designed to address the learning needs.

4.2.9 THE KEY-INFORMANT METHOD

Delaney and Nutall (1978:28) write that: "Key-informants refer to knowledgeable persons in the field." The key-informant method is one of the methods which can be used in order to assess the learning needs of individuals and communities for community education programmes. As the name suggests, the key members in a community will be approached by the researcher with the aim that they give particular information with regard to the community where they belong.

With regard to the key-informant method Decker et al (1988:55) write as follows:
"In this approach, assessment is based on information secured from those persons in the community who are in a position to best know the community, its people, their needs, and the patterns of services being received. The strengths of this approach are that it is simple and inexpensive and the data collection instruments are relatively easy to construct. It also encourages a broad-based discussion of community conditions and can be used to establish or strengthen communications and goodwill among community agencies. Its weaknesses are that the data are statistically unreliable and may contain built-in biases resulting from individual or organizational perspectives."

It therefore follows that the key-informant method focusses attention on selected, informative people in a society. In the context of this study, the term **key informant** includes community leaders, professionals, educationists, artisans, lawyers and many others. These individuals have different experiences and, therefore, potentially different perspectives regarding the learning needs of their communities.

Other authors emphasize the use of key-informant interviews as a technique commonly applied during the key-informant method of research. According to Mc Millan and Schumacher (1993:427) key-informant interviews are in-depth interviews with individuals who have special knowledge, status, or communication skills who are willing to share that knowledge and skill with the researcher. They are usually chosen because they have access to observations unavailable to the ethnographer. They are often atypical individuals and must be selected carefully from among possible key informants.

According to the Manual of Food Economy Assessment Report(1997:27) usually most of the information required by the community educator, especially that relating to learning needs, will be sketchy or unavailable from documentary sources. It will be necessary to go to the field and ask questions; but you are unlikely often to be in a position to mount your own surveys. You will use **key informants,** and if you approach them properly and systematically, you will get good quality information otherwise unavailable.

In any given community, especially where community learning needs are to be identified for the purpose of designing community education programmes, key informants have to be used.

The Manual of Food Economy Assessment Report (1997:27) further gives a clarification of the term **key informant** as follows:
The term 'key informant' is used to describe someone who you have reason to believe can tell you what you need to know. For instance, a trader will be able to tell you about trade routes and seasonal prices, amongst other things; an agricultural extension officer could tell you about landholding sizes, crops grown, and on-farm production levels in the area; members of poor households are probably the best informants on how poor households get food and income. In the same note a teacher in a given community will be able to tell you about the educational and learning needs that exist in a community. It is a matter of determining what you want to know, and then deciding who might be able to tell you.

In concurrence with the above idea with regard to community education, members of the community are probably the best informants on what the learning needs of the community are. Their views are thus regarded as essential to this comprehensive assessment of learning needs.

From the foregoing discussion it is evident that the key-informant method can be suitably used when assessing learning needs of communities. This is because in every community there are certain key people with essential information about the community. These are the people who will give indepth information particularly with regard to the learning needs of their communities.

4.2.10 THE COMMUNITY-FORUM METHOD

Among the many different methods used to collect information from individuals and communities, one also finds the community-forum method. In this case the researcher meets personally with the concerned members of the community. This meeting occurs in a public place and this is where the researcher collects the necessary information.

According to Kleinen (1991:105) the community-forum method refers to where persons concerned meet face-to-face at meetings, collect information, and make decisions. The needs survey is based on information obtained at public hearings or by attending a series of public meetings.

It is at public meetings that community members can speak collectively about perceived learning needs such as:

- quality of life
- current problems and affairs
- political programmes
- recreation
- improvement of community facilities, etc.

"The strengths of this approach are that it is relatively easy to arrange, inexpensive to conduct, and provides an opportunity for input from many sources. It also may be used to identify community-minded citizens and to bring new areas or undefined needs to attention. Its weaknesses are that it presents possible logistical problems for large communities in terms of the number and convenience of sites, and there is no assurance of representative attendance. There is also the potential for a meeting to be dominated by one or more outspoken participants and to create heightened expectations for quick solutions" (Decker et al, 1988:57).

The community-forum method is useful for research work involving the assessment of learning needs in communities. This is because it allows the community members to speak out about their needs in conjuction with other community members. In this case there is more likelihood that the most common learning needs of the community will emerge.

4.2.11 THE SOCIAL INDICATORS METHOD

In most cases the need survey research methods used to gather data for a research purpose such as the assessment of learning needs in a community, normally involve some form of statistical analysis as the end result.

Decker et al (1988:57) write the following with regard to the social indicators method: "Assessment in the social indicators approach is based on inferences drawn from statistics found in public records and reports. This approach uses secondary, non-attitudinal data instead of eliciting direct community participation in the assessment process. Its strengths are that assessment can be accomplished in a short period of time and can provide non-attitudinal data. It is a good use of existing statistical data. It also is a good way to compare different geographic or political units, such as city versus country. Its weaknesses are that it is not a direct assessment of community conditions and opinions, and it may use data that is invalid or out-of-date".

Needless to say, there are numerous ways of organizing vast amounts of information derived from these sources. The essential steps in the social indicators approach are: 1) the articulation of the objectives of the project; 2) the determination of what indicators or categories of information would be most useful in assessing the needs of a specific client population; and 3) the identification of what specific factors lend themselves to the development of categories or indicators (Delaney and Nuttall, 1978:36).

Moriyama (Delaney and Nuttall, 1978:36-37) offers a number of guidelines for the creation of social indicators. He states that the criteria for the selection of a social indicator should be as follows:

- It should be meaningful and understandable
- It should be sensitive to variations in the phenomenon being measured
- The assumptions underlying the index should be theoretically justifiable and intuitively reasonable
- It should consist of clearly defined component parts
- Each component part should make an independent contribution to variations in the phenomenon being measured, and
- The index should be derivable from data that are available or quite feasible to obtain.

Leedy (1980:135) describes descriptive statistics as used in the social indicators method in this way: Namely, statistics whose function is to **describe the data**. This branch of statistics describes what the data look like, where their center is, how broadly they spread, and how they are related in terms of one aspect to another aspect of the same data.

With regard to the social indicators method Mc Millan and Schumacher (1993:192) also add that descriptive statistics transform a set of numbers or observations into indices that describe or characterize the data. Descriptive statistics (sometimes referred to as summary statistics) are thus used to summarize, organize, and reduce large numbers of observations.

From the foregoing discussion it is evident that the social indicators method is also useful in community education studies. It is also evident that a study which aims at assessing the learning needs of community members will in most cases involve a large number of people. This is where the use of descriptive statistics is imperative since it is the most fundamental way to summarize data, and it is indispensable in interpreting the results of quantitative research.

4.2.12 THE COMBINATION METHOD

In certain research studies it becomes imperative to use a combination of methods and techniques for assessing learning needs of individuals and communities, in order to design community education programmes. In such cases we refer to the **combination method**.

With regard to the combination method, Kleinen (1991:105) states that:
"The above-mentioned methods can be used independently or in combination with each other, depending on the type of information, and on the extent of direct community involvement in the needs survey."

Decker et al (1988:57) also add that the assessment approaches are not mutually exclusive. They can be used in combination or independently, depending on the extent of direct citizen involvement desired, and the constraints of time and resources.

It is evident that the combination method can be very useful in the hands of the community education researcher. This is because the combination method has the advantage of combining and utilising the advantages of the other methods and techniques for assessing learning needs. In this way the one method covers for the other method which has certain loopholes.

The combination method is a useful tool for the community educator in identifying a wide spectrum of possible educational and learning needs in order to design relevant community education programmes.

4.3 SYNTHESIS

The main objective of this chapter was to identify and describe methods and techniques for assessing learning needs for community education programmes. Indeed, a variety of methods and techniques which are suitable for the assessment of the learning needs of individuals and groups in a community were identified and investigated, and a description thereof was given.

Of importance is the requirement that the assessment of learning needs for community education programmes be done in a formalised, systematic, accountable manner and not in a haphazard manner.

One of the appropriate methods for assessing learning needs for community education programmes is through the use of the questionnaire. The questionnaire serves as a self-report instrument used for collecting data about learning needs of individuals and groups in a community. The questionnaire allows the respondent to read, understand and then answer the questions or items honestly. In addition to the identification of learning needs the questionnaire can include factual questions about the respondent, such as age, sex, ethnic group and occupation.

The interview is another research technique that can be used in assessing learning needs for community education programmes. The interview is a direct technique of collecting information in a one-to-one situation. One of its greatest advantages is its flexibility. For example, interviewing is particularly useful in dealing even with children or uneducated people. It virtually can be used to identify learning needs of any member of the community. However, it is a skill that demands careful preparation and much practice. Interviewing is deeply satisfying to the community education researcher who is interested in others' views or learning needs.

A survey is a form of planned collection of data for the purpose of describing the existing learning needs. Surveys are normally conducted on a large scale. The survey approach provides results that are the most scientifically valid and reliable. It also assists in extracting specific information from individuals and groups. However, in order to identify learning needs using the survey research approach it is imperative to follow a logical process referred to as the 'survey research cycle'. This cycle is not a tailor-made solution for the identification of learning needs, but it is flexible and user friendly at the hands of the community education researcher.

Research reports are straightforward documents that set forth clearly and precisely what the researcher has done to resolve the research problem. It is imperative that research reports be factual and logical in structure. It has been noted that there is a variety of research methods which the researcher may use when assessing the learning needs of individuals and groups in a given community. Of importance is that the nature of the research study will determine the type of research method which a researcher may select.

Group discussion is a method of research which is applied extensively and for different purposes in various research studies. In this study it has become evident that group discussion is advantageous for assessing learning needs in communities because it allows for face-to-face interaction between the community education researcher and the group members, and also among the group members themselves. In this way the researcher attains both individual and group accountability. It has also emerged that group discussion can tend to be chaotic at the hands of the inexperienced researcher or interviewer. Therefore, if done with caution, group discussion can be a great asset for the community education researcher.

Observation as a research technique should be characterised by purposiveness, that is, the phenomenon observed should relate to the research problem. In this case the purpose of observation as a technique will be to assess the learning needs of individuals and groups in their natural environment in order to design relevant community education programmes. The researcher should always carefully study the nature of the problem that he or she wishes to investigate (i.e. identification of learning needs), or the question to which he or she seeks an answer. It is also imperative that researchers clearly define the problem and the behaviour manifestations that relate to it before they can actually start observing.

Small group techniques play a major role in identifying priorities of educational and learning needs for community education programmes. They basically seek to focus on learning needs of small groups or representatives of the larger community. Some of the small group approaches used to assess learning needs include, the Delphi method, the nominal group technique and group sampling.

The identification of learning needs is also based on information which is obtained from people in the community who are in the position to know the societal needs and its people better. Such people are the so-called 'key communicators' in the community. This method is simple and cheap, referred to as the key-informant method. It also encourages indepth discussion of community circumstances and it can be employed to establish and strengthen communication between community members.

In the community-forum method persons concerned meet face-to-face at meetings, collect information and make decisions. It is the community-forum method where the identification of learning needs is based on information obtained at public hearings or by attending a series of public meetings. This method is easy to organise and easier to execute, and it offers an opportunity for numerous stakeholders of the community to participate. It also serves to identify law-abiding citizens and to bring new problematic areas and unidentified learning needs to the attention of the community.

According to the social indicators method the identification of learning needs is based on conclusions which derive from descriptive statistics which are obtainable from records and reports. Here the data used are not obtainable through community participation, and good use is made of existing statistical data. However, the community education researcher should always look out for invalid and outdated data.

The combination method emphasizes the fact that the different methods and techniques for assessing learning needs can be used independently or in combination with each other. Therefore needs assessment methods and techniques are not mutually exclusive but at times can be combined, depending on the type of information and on the extent of direct community involvement in the needs survey.

In Chapter 5 the findings of the study will be summarised and distinct recommendations resulting from the study made.