Professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

PHILOSOPHIAE DOCTOR

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Supervisor: Prof Ina Joubert (JC)

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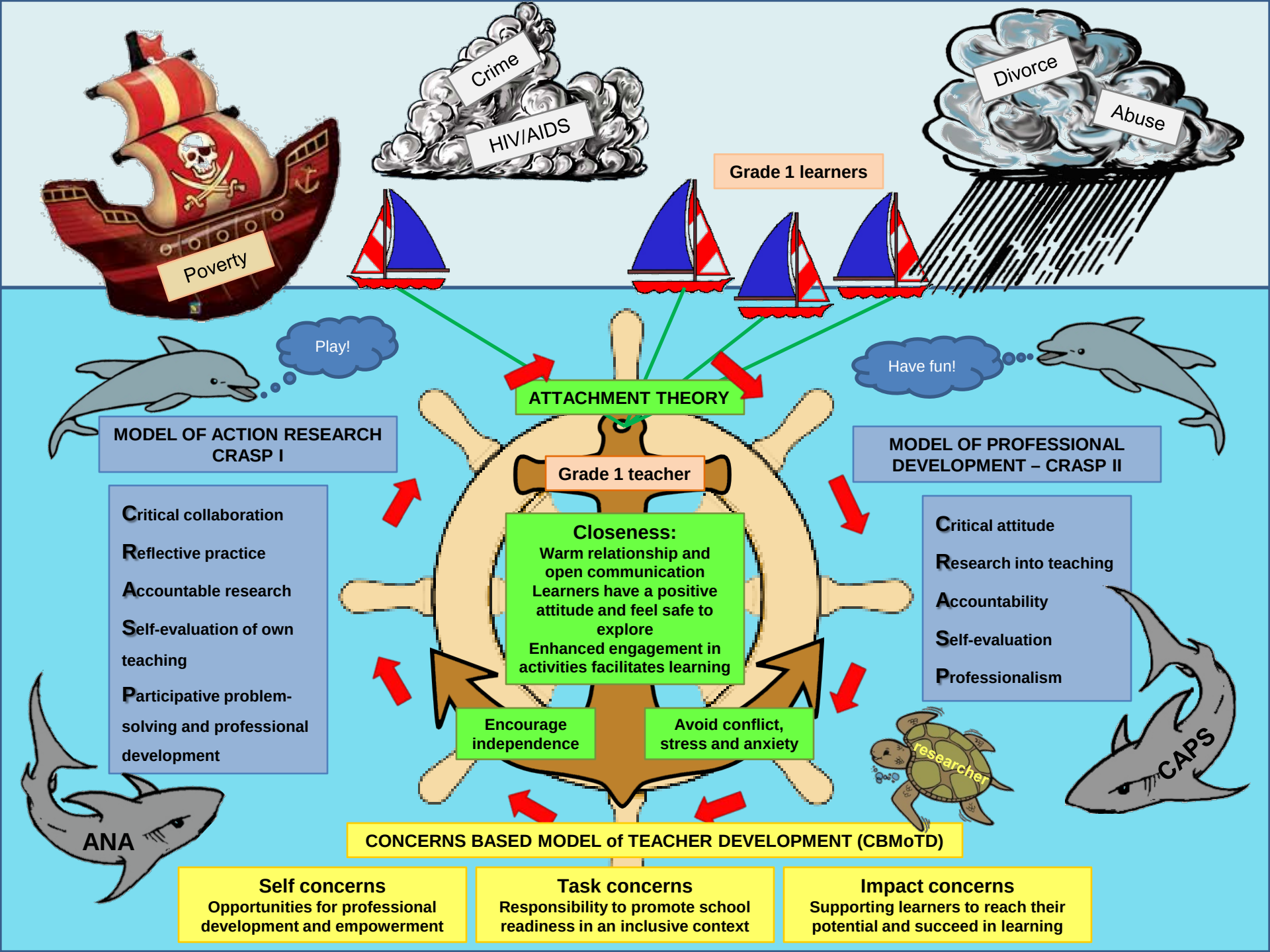
"*. . . research by teachers represents a distinctive way of knowing about teaching and learning . . . (of) generating knowledge and deciding how knowledge ought to be interpreted and used . . . What is missing from the knowledge base for teaching, are the voices of the teachers themselves*."

(Cochran-Smith & Lytle 1992, pp. xiv, 2)


Poverty
Crime
HIV/AIDS
Divorce
Abuse
Grade 1 learners
Play!
Have fun!
ATTACHMENT THEORY
MODEL OF ACTION RESEARCH CRASP I
MODEL OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – CRASP II
Grade 1 teacher
Critical collaboration
Reflective practice
Accountable research
Self-evaluation of own teaching
Participative problem-solving and professional development
Closeness:
Warm relationship and open communication
Learners have a positive attitude and feel safe to explore
Enhanced engagement in activities facilitates learning
Critical attitude
Research into teaching
Accountability
Self-evaluation
Professionalism
Encourage independence
Avoid conflict, stress and anxiety
researcher
ANA
CAPS
CONCERNS BASED MODEL of TEACHER DEVELOPMENT (CBMoTD)
Self concerns
Opportunities for professional development and empowerment
Task concerns
Responsibility to promote school readiness in an inclusive context
Impact concerns
Supporting learners to reach their potential and succeed in learning

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Marietjie Bruwer, hereby declare that this PhD thesis:

Professional development of Grade 1 teachers

to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context

which I hereby submit for the degree Philosophiae Doctor in Education at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

29/3/2018

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Signature Date

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Faculty of Education

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE	CLEARANCE NUMBER: **EC 15/07/03**
DEGREE AND PROJECT	PhD Professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context
INVESTIGATOR	Ms Marietjie Bruwer
DEPARTMENT	Early Childhood Education
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CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS COMMITTEE: Prof Liesel Ebersöhn

CC Ms Bronwynne Swarts
Prof Ina Joubert

This Ethics Clearance Certificate should be read in conjunction with the Integrated Declaration Form (D08) which specifies details regarding:

- Compliance with approved research protocol,
- No significant changes,
- Informed consent/assent,
- Adverse experience or undue risk,
- Registered title, and
- Data storage requirements.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this thesis, has obtained, for the research described in this work, the applicable research ethics approval. The author declares that he/she has observed the ethical standards required in terms of the University of Pretoria's *Code of ethics for researchers and the Policy guidelines for responsible research.*

29/03/2018

_____ _____

Signature Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving family.

A family gives you unconditional love,

Strength and guidance they got from above

They listen when you need an ear

And one thing is they always care

When you need a hand

They will lend you theirs

If you're crying, they will wipe your tears

If you need comfort, you know where to go

Their love is never hidden, it is always shown

They always boast about you to anyone they meet,

Family, friends and strangers on the street

A family is precious and kind

A family is truly divine

A family is God's gift to everyone

They are what makes your house a home

To be appreciated, you don't have to go far,

Because your family loves you for whom you are.

Johnson

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I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the following persons who have supported me during my studies:

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- My Heavenly Father, who provided me the strength, knowledge and perseverance to complete this study.

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ABSTRACT

Academic success depends on whether a Grade 1 learner is ready to learn in the formal school environment and therefore school readiness should be regarded as high priority. Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deprived from a stimulating environment with adequate learning opportunities, consequently resulting in a lack of the school readiness skills needed for formal learning by the time they enter Grade 1. Addressing the diverse needs of such vulnerable learners can be a challenging and daunting task. This study focuses on the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context.

Participatory Action Research was used to collaboratively develop a programme for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers, within an emerging conceptual framework based on the following relevant theories and models. The Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) was implemented to identify the concerns of the participating teachers from where their need for professional development emerged, and defined the base from where the research project was launched. The Attachment Theory provided a framework for intervention to restore and strengthen teacher-learner relationships and provide support to vulnerable Grade 1 learners. The models for action research (CRASP I) and professional development of teachers through action research (CRASP II), clarified the process which needed to be followed.

The research project consisted of five research cycles and data was generated from collaborative discussions, field notes and individual reflections of participating teachers on intervention in their respective classrooms, the reflective journal of the researcher and a focus group interview. The data was collected and collaboratively analysed throughout the research process.

The findings of this study indicate the essentiality of continuous professional development and support for Grade 1 teachers in an inclusive education context and emphasise the importance of listening to the voices of teachers in the development of professional development programmes. This study brought hope to desperately concerned Grade 1 teachers, proving that enhancing the self-efficacy of teachers can bring back the joy of teaching in challenging teaching conditions.

KEYWORDS and/or TERMS

- Professional development
- School readiness
- Inclusive education context
- Concerns
- Attachment Theory
- Criteria for quality teaching:
    - Emotional support
    - Instructional support
    - Classroom organisation
- Self-efficacy

DECLARATION OF EDITING

21 March 2018

This is to certify that I, the undersigned, performed a language edit on:

THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CONTEXT

by

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of a smooth transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment in Grade 1 is emphasised by numerous authors worldwide (Lemelin, Boivin, Forget-Dubois, Dionne, Séguin, Brendgen, Vitaro, Tremblay & Pérusse 2007; Prior, Bavin & Ong 2011). This transition is considered to be one of the most important milestones in the development of young children (Wildenger & McIntyre 2012, p. 169). Both academic performance and social development depend on positive experiences in the first grades of formal learning (Wildenger & McIntyre 2012, p. 169). In this regard Lemelin et al. (2007, p. 1856) stress the fact that academic success depends on whether the Grade 1 learner is ready to learn in a formal school environment and emphasise that school readiness should be regarded as high priority.

The school readiness of a learner at school entry includes physical, social, emotional and cognitive development, as well as language development and approaches to learning (Sherry & Draper 2012, p. 10). Lemelin et al. (2007, p. 1855) explain that school readiness can be seen as the level of development needed to function successfully in the formal learning environment of Grade 1 and respond adequately to the demands thereof. In order to reach the above-mentioned level of personal school readiness, the environment in which the learner grows up should foster such development by providing the necessary opportunities for interaction and experience (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird & Kupzyk 2010, p. 126). This should be done before the learner enters the formal learning environment.

Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are often deprived from a stimulating environment with adequate learning opportunities, consequently resulting in a lack of the school readiness skills needed for formal learning by the time they enter Grade 1. In an inclusive education context, the responsibility is placed heavily on the shoulders of Grade 1 teachers to support learners suffering from insufficient school readiness and to minimize the risk of academic failure for these learners. Addressing the diverse needs of such vulnerable learners can be a challenging and daunting task.

According to Piotrkowski, Botsko and Matthews (2001, p. 540) school readiness also refers to the responsibility of the family, the school and the community in general to support young learners by providing learning environments that will enhance the development of school readiness skills. These role players can strengthen the hands of the Grade 1 teacher in promoting school readiness.

Accordingly, this study attempted to contribute to the professional development of Grade 1 teachers in promoting school readiness and supporting learners who have not yet mastered the required school readiness skills. Teaching strategies with the specific purpose to enhance the school readiness skills of their learners were developed in collaboration with participating teachers. Furthermore, the participating teachers were encouraged to strengthen the confidence of struggling learners by creating a safe and warm learning environment and by providing the scaffolding these learners needed through continuous positive feedback and acknowledgement.

1.2 RATIONALE

The rationale for this study is spurred from a completed research project on school readiness, titled 'The impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1: Teachers' experiences and concerns' (Bruwer 2014). During this qualitative case study, which sought to explore the experiences and concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1, I conducted focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teacher participants of two public schools in Pretoria. Even though both schools were located in urban areas within ten kilometres from the city centre, the majority of their learners lived in rural or semi-rural areas and were transported to school and back on a daily basis. Most of these learners did not attend preschools and had very little or no exposure to English, which was the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) at both schools. During the focus group interviews, the Grade 1 teachers expressed their concerns about their learners who were not ready for formal learning (Bruwer 2014). Findings from the study revealed that the teachers were concerned because their learners were traumatised by the expectations they were confronted with in the formal learning environment and subsequently lost confidence in themselves. As a result, the participating teachers experienced feelings of inadequacy in addressing the needs of these learners.

The traumatic experiences of the Grade 1 learners in the above mentioned study is by no means exceptional in the South African context. Sherry and Draper (2012, p. 3) state that 3.8 million (59.2%) children in South Africa under the age of six, live in poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds often experience substantial delays in school readiness, putting them at risk for learning difficulties and long-term academic failure (Welsh et al. 2010, p. 1). Furthermore, Shelly and Draper (2012, p. 10-12) mention a number of studies which confirm the fact that large numbers of South African children are not ready for formal learning by the time they enter Grade 1. In a comprehensive school readiness assessment by Katz (2005) in a low socio-economic area in Cape Town, it was found that the majority of the children assessed for school readiness had difficulty with the fundamental skills needed for formal learning. These skills included classroom performance, concept formation, fine motor skills and visual perception. Draper et al. (2011) conducted a study in rural areas of South Africa using the Herbst Test to assess the cognitive and motor development of Grade R learners and found that 58% of the children lack the cognitive skills needed to succeed in Grade 1. In South Africa, Grade R is the year before compulsory formal schooling starts. In a study conducted by Lessing and De Wit (2005) two thirds of the Grade R children who were assessed had not acquired the necessary language skills. They also had not mastered the required learning behaviour needed for formal learning, for example demonstrating initiative and persistence in completing tasks.

Looking at the international context in this regard, Taylor (2011, p. 147) mentions that many Australian indigenous learners are not ready for formal education and therefore experience the transition to school as problematic. As a result, assessment scales show that the academic performance of those learners is far below the expected standard. In the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) of 2009 almost half of the “Year Three” learners achieved scores below the minimum standard in reading and mathematics (Taylor 2011, p. 148).

In addition to the findings of these and other studies, the results of the Annual National Assessment conducted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2013), tell a story of academic failure among young learners that calls for urgent intervention. According to the 2013 results, only 53% of Grade 3 learners in South Africa could achieve acceptable levels of competency in Mathematics and only 51% in the language of instruction. Many publications, as mentioned above, emphasise the need for

intervention to address insufficient school readiness and minimise the traumatic impact thereof. However, research on the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education environment is limited in the South African context. Through conducting this study, I hoped to contribute to the professional development of Grade 1 teachers by providing them with a platform where their voices could be heard as well as opportunities to collaboratively search for solutions to their classroom challenges. Empowering Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context will improve the chances of vulnerable learners to have a successful school career.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The devastating effect of insufficient school readiness on a significant proportion of Grade 1 learners in South Africa is alarming. Empowering Grade 1 teachers to address this issue more successfully in order to ensure a better future for these learners, should be regarded as high priority. Conducting this study meant taking a step in the right direction. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1.3.1 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

How can the professional development of Grade 1 teachers promote school readiness in an inclusive education context?

1.3.2 SECONDARY QUESTIONS

- What are the main concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the school readiness of their learners in an inclusive classroom context?
- Which intervention strategies can Grade 1 teachers implement to promote school readiness?
- How can a participatory action research project contribute to the empowerment of Grade 1 teachers in addressing their classroom challenges in an inclusive education context?
- What is the effect of professional development of Grade 1 teachers on the progress of their learners?

1.4 PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this study was to contribute to the professional development of Grade 1 teachers in promoting school readiness in an inclusive education context and in doing so, improve the chances of vulnerable learners to have a successful school career.

1.5 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

The following key concepts: inclusive education, school readiness, professional development, empowerment and research partnerships, will subsequently be defined and the use thereof for this study will be stated.

1.5.1 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

In an inclusive education context, the different learning needs of learners are acknowledged and respected (DoE 2001, p. 16). In order to meet the diverse learning needs of all learners, curricula and teaching strategies need to be adapted. The effective participation of all learners in the learning process has to be ensured, by minimising barriers to learning. Furthermore, learning needs to take place both in the formal school environment, as well as the informal home environment and the community (DoE 2001, p. 16; Landsberg, Krűger & Swart, 2016).

For the purpose of this study, an inclusive education context referred to Grade 1 learners with diverse needs at school entry, as well as the readiness of the school to accommodate Grade 1 learners with different levels of vulnerability. The role and responsibility of the Grade 1 teacher in adapting teaching strategies, thereby making the curriculum accessible for the learners and in doing so, strengthening the confidence of struggling learners, was the focus of the study.

1.5.2 SCHOOL READINESS

School readiness is the concept used both in international and South African literature when referring to the personal readiness of the learner for formal education, as well as the readiness of the school to accommodate the learner (Prior, Bavin & Ong 2011; Bruwer 2014). Snow (2006, p. 18) claims that defining the concept of school readiness is challenging, due to a lack of theory incorporating all the different aspects of the concept. Similarly, Ladd, Herald and Kochel (2006, p. 116) state that principals,

teachers and policymakers do not always agree on what school readiness entails, which explains why the readiness of Grade 1 learners for formal learning remains a matter of debate.

In attempting to define school readiness, numerous authors refer to definitions focussing only on the different competencies or skills the learner needs at school entry to be regarded as ready for formal learning (Mashburn & Pianta 2006; Snow 2006; Ladd et al. 2006). However, this perception on school readiness is limited because the child's dependence on learning opportunities within his/her environment is not taken into consideration (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 151). Snow (2006, p. 30) therefore argues that school readiness should be seen as an interaction between the developing child and the learning opportunities created by the different role players in the child's environment. According to this perception, the concept of school readiness includes the personal readiness of the learner at school entry and the readiness of the school to accommodate and support the learner. Furthermore, it includes the ability of the parents as primary educators as well as the community, to support the development of the child (High 2008, p. 1008).

For the purpose of this study, the concept of school readiness was used in the broader sense, including the personal readiness of the Grade 1 learner, as well as the readiness of the school to support the learner. The role and responsibility of the Grade 1 teacher as the ideal person to initiate the process of enhancing the school readiness of the learner was the focus point of the study.

1.5.3 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Buysse, Winton and Rous (2009, p. 239) present a definition for professional development which was proposed by the National Professional Development Centre on Inclusion (NPDCI). According to this definition professional development can be seen as learning experiences enabling teachers to acquire professional knowledge and skills, as well as opportunities for application. Essential components of this learning process are:

- the teachers (including their contexts and characteristics – in this case the teachers' background knowledge on school readiness and their concerns which were determined in collaboration with the researcher),

- the content (professional competencies that need to be acquired – in this case a thorough understanding of school readiness and skills that would enable the teachers to enhance the school readiness levels of the learners) and
- the facilitator (including the approach to be followed – in this case a constructivist approach was followed and decisions were made collaboratively) (Buysse et al. 2009, p. 239).

In addition, Brown, Knoche, Edwards and Sheridan (2009, p. 485) mention enhancing the confidence and competence of teachers through either individual learning or group learning. In this regard Kruger, Janse van Rensburg and Els (2012, p. 174-175) emphasise that opportunities for reflection and interactive activities with colleagues will ensure that their learning is both activity-based and intellectual.

In this participatory action research study, the professional development of Grade 1 teachers was strengthened in terms of promoting school readiness. This was done through interactive capacity-building engagements, the implementation of new ideas, and personal reflection during the cycles of the participatory research project.

1.5.4 EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment can be defined in multiple ways. It can be seen as creating experiences that foster responsibility and enable people to take ownership of their actions and strengthen their personal interest in improving their own work situation (Martin, Crossland & Johnson 2001, p. 5-6). In other words, opportunities are provided for developing the competence to take control of one's own personal learning and growth, as well as searching for solutions to problems. In addition, the confidence to implement new ideas and make changes is strengthened, and involvement in decision making is encouraged (Martin et al. 2001, p. 5-6). Somech (2005, p. 238-239) sees empowerment as a motivational construct and defines it as intrinsic motivation, characterised by self-determination, autonomy and self-efficacy. According to Page and Czuba (1999, p. 3 of 6) empowerment can be defined as:

> ". . . a multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives . . . by acting on issues they define as important."

For the purpose of this participatory action research study, the concept of empowerment was embedded in all actions. It was used to describe the process of

personal growth and professional development that Grade 1 teachers underwent as research partners. The aim was to equip them with skills which would initiate the process of enhancing the school readiness levels of Grade 1 learners.

1.5.5 RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Johnson (2013, p. xix) explains that research partnerships in the field of education comprise of researchers and teachers actively working together as a team in order to plan, implement and evaluate strategies to effectively address an urgent educational issue. Working in collaboration with a researcher creates opportunities for teachers to reflect on and share their teaching practice from an experienced and theoretical point of view and to stay informed about the latest research in their field (Conner & Duncan 2013, p. 2). Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo (2013, p. 14) emphasise that although research partnerships can be complex and challenging, it creates opportunities for making new connections between theory and the reality in the classroom.

For the purpose of this study the Grade 1 teachers of three selected schools worked in collaboration with me, as the researcher, to explore ways in which school readiness could be promoted.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned above, the concept of school readiness includes an array of responsibilities. The personal readiness of the Grade 1 learner is important, as well as the readiness of the school to accommodate the learner (Piotrkowski et al. 2001, p. 540). Furthermore, it includes the responsibility of the parents as primary educators of their children to provide learning opportunities which will enhance the required school readiness skills during the preschool years (Barbarin et al. 2008, p. 672). In addition, Taylor (2011, p. 150) mentions the preparedness of both the parents and the school to support the learner during the transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment in the Grade 1 classroom. These aspects of school readiness are subsequently discussed in more detail, indicating the importance of school readiness for the Grade 1 learner and emphasising the responsibilities of the different role players with regard to school readiness. Although the roles of the parents and preschools are discussed, this study focused on the professional development of

the Grade 1 teacher to promote school readiness. The parents and preschool teachers therefore, did not act as participants in this research project.

1.6.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PERSONAL SCHOOL READINESS OF THE GRADE 1 LEARNER

The experiences and stimulation children were exposed to during the preschool years will determine whether they are ready for formal learning at school entry or not (Sheridan et al. 2010, p. 126). Upon entering Grade 1, learners are expected to cope with the demands of the formal learning environment on cognitive, physical, social, emotional, as well as language competency levels (Taylor 2011, p. 150). Wildenger and McIntyre (2012, p. 169) argue that learners who experience a smooth transition to the formal learning environment are likely to experience academic success, while learners without the required school readiness skills will probably experience long term academic difficulties (Jeon, Langill, Peterson, Luze, Carta & Atwater 2010, p. 913). Doyle et al. (2012, p. 134) confirm that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are vulnerable at school entry with regard to school readiness skills, and urge schools to provide early intervention for these learners.

1.6.2 THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SCHOOL IN SUPPORTING VULNERABLE LEARNERS

In accordance with the policy for inclusive education, schools need to be ready to accommodate and support learners from diverse backgrounds and with diverse needs (DoE 2001; Barbarin et al. 2008, p. 697). According to Lazarus and Ortega (2007, pp. 57, 70) it is the responsibility of both policy makers and schools to provide high-quality education and academic support (also with regard to school readiness) to all learners and to prevent academic failure in cases where learners are vulnerable, by providing quality early intervention. A rich and stimulating academic environment can counteract the deprivation learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are exposed to (Magnuson & Shager 2010, p. 1187), while high-quality classroom instruction can minimise the risk for academic failure (Hindman, Skibbe, Miller & Zimmerman 2010, p. 237). In order to achieve this, policy makers can support schools by reducing the teacher-learner ratio. Magnuson, Ruhm and Waldfogel (2006, p. 20) point out that smaller classes have been proven to be beneficial, especially for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, because learners receive more individual attention and teachers spend less time on classroom management and discipline. Furthermore, manageable class

sizes also reduce the levels of stress experienced by the teachers (Azzi-Lessing 2010, p. 8), making it easier for them to support vulnerable learners in enhancing their school readiness levels.

1.6.3 THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GRADE 1 TEACHER IN PROMOTING SHOOL READINESS

The Education White Paper 6 (DoE 2001, p. 18) states that teachers are regarded as the "primary resource" in providing support to vulnerable learners, and therefore need to ". . . improve their skills and knowledge . . .". Chazan-Cohen et al. (2009, p. 961) emphasise the fact that teachers should have a good understanding of the effect of poverty and deprivation on school readiness, in order to plan early intervention for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Azzi-Lessing (2010, p. 7) suggests continuous training for teachers in how to collaborate with parents, as well as strategies and interventions needed to address insufficient school readiness in their classrooms. Several authors of school readiness literature (Azzi-Lessing 2010; Liew 2012; Hindman et al. 2010) explain how important it is for the Grade 1 teacher to initiate a warm, supportive and predictable classroom environment characterised by responsive interactions with the learners. Furthermore, good communication with learners and frequent encouragement (Lazarus & Ortega 2007, p. 65) can strengthen academic motivation and a positive self-concept which will consequently improve academic progress (Liew 2012, p. 107). Intervention strategies aiming to improve school readiness in vulnerable learners have been proven effective for positive long-term academic results (Lemelin et al. 2007, p. 1857). For Lapointe, Ford and Zumbo (2007, p. 475) quality early intervention is the key to a successful start in Grade 1, while Roberts, Lim, Doyle and Anderson (2011, p. 123) claim that the Grade 1 classroom should be regarded as an "early intervention resource".

The above mentioned arguments and aspects can weigh heavily on the shoulders of Grade 1 teachers who are overwhelmed by the needs of vulnerable learners lacking the essential personal school readiness skills. Therefore, collaboration between Grade 1 teachers, preschool teachers and parents, as role players who share the responsibility for enhancing the school readiness of young learners, is essential (Piotrkowski et al. 2001, p. 538-539). Since Grade 1 teachers know what is expected from their learners in the formal learning environment, they should take the initiative in establishing working relationships with preschool teachers and parents.

Roberts et al. (2011, p. 123) emphasise the importance of identifying vulnerabilities in young learners before school entry, in order to plan for support and intervention strategies in the Grade 1 classroom. According to Lazarus and Ortega (2007, p. 55) the Grade R classroom is the ideal setting to implement a basic screening process to identify learners who need additional support in mastering the necessary school readiness skills. Collaboration between Grade 1 and Grade R teachers will ensure continuity during the transition to the formal school environment. Ideally the parents should be kept informed and involved throughout, as stated in the White Paper 6 (DoE 2001, p. 50):

> "At the institutional education level, partnerships will be established with parents so that they can, armed with information, counselling and skills, participate more effectively in the planning and implementation of inclusion activities, and so that they can play a more active role in the learning and teaching of their own children . . ."

1.6.4 THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE SCHOOL TO ASSIST PARENTS IN SUPPORTING THEIR CHILDREN

The perceptions parents have of school readiness and their responsibility in this regard, will determine the amount of time and energy they invest in preparing their children for the transition to the formal learning environment in Grade 1. These perceptions of parents depend on their knowledge and understanding of the demands their children will be faced with once they enter Grade 1 (Barbarin et al. 2008, p. 672-673). Piotrkowski et al. (2001, p. 555) point out that the school (especially the Grade R and Grade 1 teachers) has a responsibility to educate and inform parents about their role at home and ways in which they can support their children in strengthening school readiness skills. The school should also address the concerns parents have in this regard and work towards establishing effective partnerships with parents. Continuous communication with and support for parents are important and schools should also provide critical resources as far as possible, especially for low-income parents (Piotrkowski et al. 2001, p. 555; Azzi-Lessing 2010, p. 4). Al Hassan and Lansford (2009, p. 224) emphasise the fact that parents from disadvantaged communities may need more support from the school and the teachers as far as guidance, information and resources are concerned, in order to strengthen their children's school readiness skills at home.

It is important for Grade 1 teachers to be aware of the role parents can play in strengthening their children's school readiness skills. Furthermore, the Grade 1 teachers should keep the parents informed about the expectations their children are faced with in the classroom as well as the assistance they can offer with regard to homework. Doyle, McEntee and McNamara (2012, p. 148) propose that well informed parents are more likely to get involved in their children's education and will have higher expectations of them. These parents will also be more likely to engage in learning activities with their children such as asking questions and showing interest in homework tasks. Through continuous collaboration, teachers can guide parents to implement warm and nurturing parenting styles, as well as a proper routine at home, all of which will have a positive effect on child development (Doyle et al. 2012, p. 148). Here too, the Grade 1 teacher is the most suitable person to initiate collaboration with the parents of Grade 1 learners.

1.6.5 EMPOWERING TEACHERS THROUGH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The importance of the professional development of teachers in supporting vulnerable learners is emphasised by Guo, Piasta, Justice and Kaderavek (2010, p. 1094), when claiming that teachers who are engaged in professional development and further training are likely to have high levels of self-efficacy and will continuously try to improve their teaching strategies. According to these authors, teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy provide higher quality instruction, resulting in better learner performance. Since such teachers believe in their own abilities to improve the progress of their learners, they are willing to take responsibility for doing so. Similarly, Downer, Locasale-Crouch, Hamre and Pianta (2009, p. 432) point out that the professional development of teachers working with young learners should be regarded as high priority. They suggest that factors impacting on teachers' exposure to further training, as well as their responsiveness in this regard should, be investigated in order to increase the opportunities for the professional development of teachers.

Guo et al. (2010, p. 1095) explain that teachers who are continuously exposed to opportunities for professional development usually put more effort into their teaching and tend to be more determined when dealing with challenges in their classrooms. Furthermore, their planning and organisation skills are likely to improve and they seem to make more use of activity-based learning. Classrooms characterised by warm

personal relationships between teachers and learners are also associated with teachers who have high levels of self-efficacy (Guo et al. 2010, p. 1096).

Kim and Kang (2012, p. 904) found that research projects involving teachers as partners create valuable opportunities for the professional development of the teachers. Apart from their empowerment, their teaching philosophies change and their relationships with their learners, as well as their colleagues are enriched.

1.6.6 TEACHERS AS PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH PARTNERSHIPS

Working as partners in research projects can assist teachers in addressing the challenges they encounter, through discussing these issues with colleagues and keeping informed about the latest research (Kim & Kang 2012, p. 903). Working with researchers and colleagues create opportunities for teachers to bring their professional knowledge and experience to the table and join in collaborative discussions about the concerns they have regarding the progress of their learners (Johnson 2013, p. xviii). During these discussions the professional development of the teachers is enhanced and new knowledge is generated which can be implemented in their daily work with their learners (Johnson 2013, p. xviii). Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo (2013, p. 16) explain that through conducting participatory action research projects, teachers can be actively engaged in discussions and interventions that will assist them in addressing problematic issues in their classrooms.

In light of the issues discussed above, my literature study presented in Chapters 2 and 3, subsequently focuses on school readiness and the responsibilities of the different role players in the education of Grade 1 learners. Suggested interventions which Grade 1 teachers can implement in their classes to support struggling learners in acquiring school readiness skills, are presented as found in recent school readiness literature. The importance of a warm and caring relationship between the Grade 1 teacher and her learners is explored through the lens of attachment theory. In addition, the professional development of teachers through research partnerships is discussed and integrated with the models for participatory action research and the professional development of teachers proposed by Zuber-Skerrit (1992) and Fuller (1969) respectively.

1.7 THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL UNDERPINNING OF THIS STUDY

As mentioned above, more than one theory are used to explore, analyse and interpret the professional development of Grade 1 teachers through participatory action research. An emerging conceptual framework which underpinned the study is proposed (see 1.7.4).

1.7.1 MODELS FOR ACTION RESEARCH AND THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

Zuber-Skerritt (1992, p. 2) proposed a model for action research, called CRASP I. CRASP is an acronym for:

> "***C**ritical* (and self-critical) collaborative enquiry by
>
> ***R**eflective* practitioners being
>
> ***A**ccountable* and making the results of their enquiry public,
>
> ***S**elf-evaluating* their practice and engaged in
>
> ***P**articipative* problem-solving and continuing professional development."

The purpose for implementing this model was to bring educational theory and teaching practice together through conducting action research (Pill 2005, p. 178). Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 80) explain that:

> "The main aims of action research are improved practice (the action part) and the participants' understanding, learning, insights and new knowledge, as 'practical theory' related to their workplace (the research part)."

This explains why action research involving teachers as research partners, is increasingly used as a method for enhancing the professional development of teachers. Zuber-Skerritt (1992) proposed a second model, called CRASP II, specifically for the professional development of teachers through action research, namely:

> *"**C**ritical attitude*
>
> ***R**esearch into teaching*
>
> ***A**ccountability*
>
> ***S**elf-evaluation*
>
> ***P**rofessionalism"*
>
> (Zuber-Skerritt 1992, p. xi)

Since the purpose of this study was to initiate the professional development of Grade 1 teachers through participatory action research in order to empower them in promoting school readiness, the above mentioned models of Zuber-Skerritt were implemented as theoretical underpinning for this study. Although I used participatory action research as method for this study, CRASP I as a model for action research was suitable as theoretical underpinning, since the participating teachers were each responsible for conducting their own action research in their respective classrooms. McNiff (2002, p. 14) explains that the aim of participatory action research is not only to improve a practical situation in the classroom, but also to enhance the personal learning journey of each teacher participant. Through conducting this study, I aimed to guide the participating Grade 1 teachers on the route of critical evaluation of their teaching reality, as well as self-evaluation on how they were handling problematic issues in their classrooms. McNiff (2002, p. 16) emphasises that we should never accept a problematic situation as it is, but rather stay alert and keep searching for solutions. By taking part in this participatory action research study, participating teachers had the opportunity to develop a "critical self-awareness through their learning and research experiences" (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerrit 2008, p. 85).

1.7.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

The Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) was developed by Fuller (1969) and had a significant influence on research regarding the professional development of teachers. Although the CBMoTD originated in the sixties, the concerns of teachers are still relevant, especially seen in the light of the professional development of teachers in an ever changing education system (Both 2010).

Fuller's CBMoTD is considered to be a "classic stage theory", in which three stages can be distinguished, namely *self*, *task* and *impact* concerns. *Self* concerns include issues like feelings of adequacy and being able to cope in the classroom; *task* concerns include issues like responsibilities, classroom management and available resources; and *impact* concerns include issues like being able to address the needs of the learners and helping learners to reach their full potential. These three stages were regarded by Fuller as a developmental process following a hierarchical order from concerns about the teacher's own needs to the needs of the learners (Fuller 1969; 1970; 1974; Fuller, Parsons & Watkins 1974). Both (2010, p. 7) suggests that "self,

task and impact concerns (may) alternate or coincide in a non-ranked order", which means that these concerns can occur simultaneously and can re-occur whenever new problems or opportunities arise.

For the purpose of this study, the three stages of concern referred to the concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding:

- their own abilities in supporting vulnerable learners lacking school readiness skills and opportunities for professional development in order to be better equipped to promote school readiness (*self concerns)*,
- the resources and support available to them in carrying out their teaching responsibilities, as well as their effectiveness in promoting school readiness in an inclusive education context (*task concerns)* and
- the effect of their teaching on the progress of their learners (*impact concerns)*. (See Figure 3.2)

1.7.3 ATTACHMENT THEORY WITH REGARD TO THE TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIP

The relationship of the Grade 1 teacher with her learners is prominent in school readiness literature. The Grade 1 teacher is responsible for making her learners feel safe, introducing them to the formal learning environment and supporting them in forming positive relationships with their peers (Murray, Murray & Waas 2008, p. 49). Howes (2000, p. 302) emphasises the importance of an increased awareness of the social-emotional atmosphere in the classroom and a secure attachment between the teacher and the Grade 1 learner.

> "Attachment theory assumes that children use their relationships with significant adults to organize their experiences. If children feel emotionally secure with the teacher, they can use her as a secure base and a resource for exploring the learning opportunities of the classroom" (Howes 2000, p. 193).

The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) was developed by Pianta in 1992 and is based on attachment theory and research on the interactions between teachers and learners. According to the STRS the teacher-learner relationship is characterised by closeness, dependency and conflict (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 169). See Table 1.1 for a more detailed description of these characteristics.

Table 1.1: Characteristics of the teacher-learner relationship (Adapted from Birch & Ladd 1997, p. 62-63)

Closeness	A warm relationship and open communication will support the learners, foster a positive attitude towards school and enhance engagement in classroom activities. The learners feel safe to explore and learning is facilitated.
Dependency	If the learners are overly dependent on the teacher their exploration of the formal learning environment will be hampered. The learners may develop a negative attitude towards school and experience feelings of loneliness.
Conflict	Conflict between the teacher and the learners causes stress, which has a negative effect on the learners' adjustment in the classroom. Anxiety might result in withdrawal from classroom activities and lead to poor academic performance.

Teacher-learner relationships that are characterised by high levels of closeness, low levels of dependency and low levels of conflict, enhance the social-emotional readiness of the Grade 1 learner and provide a secure base from which to explore (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 169).

An opportunity for self-reflection by the participants in this study, was created by implementing the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) of Pianta (1992) (see Addendum B). The participating Grade 1 teachers used this instrument to determine the nature of their relationships with their learners as a group, or with individual learners. Since self-reflection is an essential part of professional development and growth, this was an important step in their individual journeys to personal growth and professional development.

1.7.4 EMERGING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

The following conceptual framework (see Figure 1.1) emerged from an attempt to create a clear picture of the study that I conducted. The above mentioned theories and models (see 1.7.1, 1.7.2 & 1.7.3) were combined to structure the conceptual framework.

The relationship between the Grade 1 teacher and her learners is the most important aspect of the learners' transition to the formal learning environment. Therefore I regard attachment theory as the core of the conceptual framework underpinning my study.

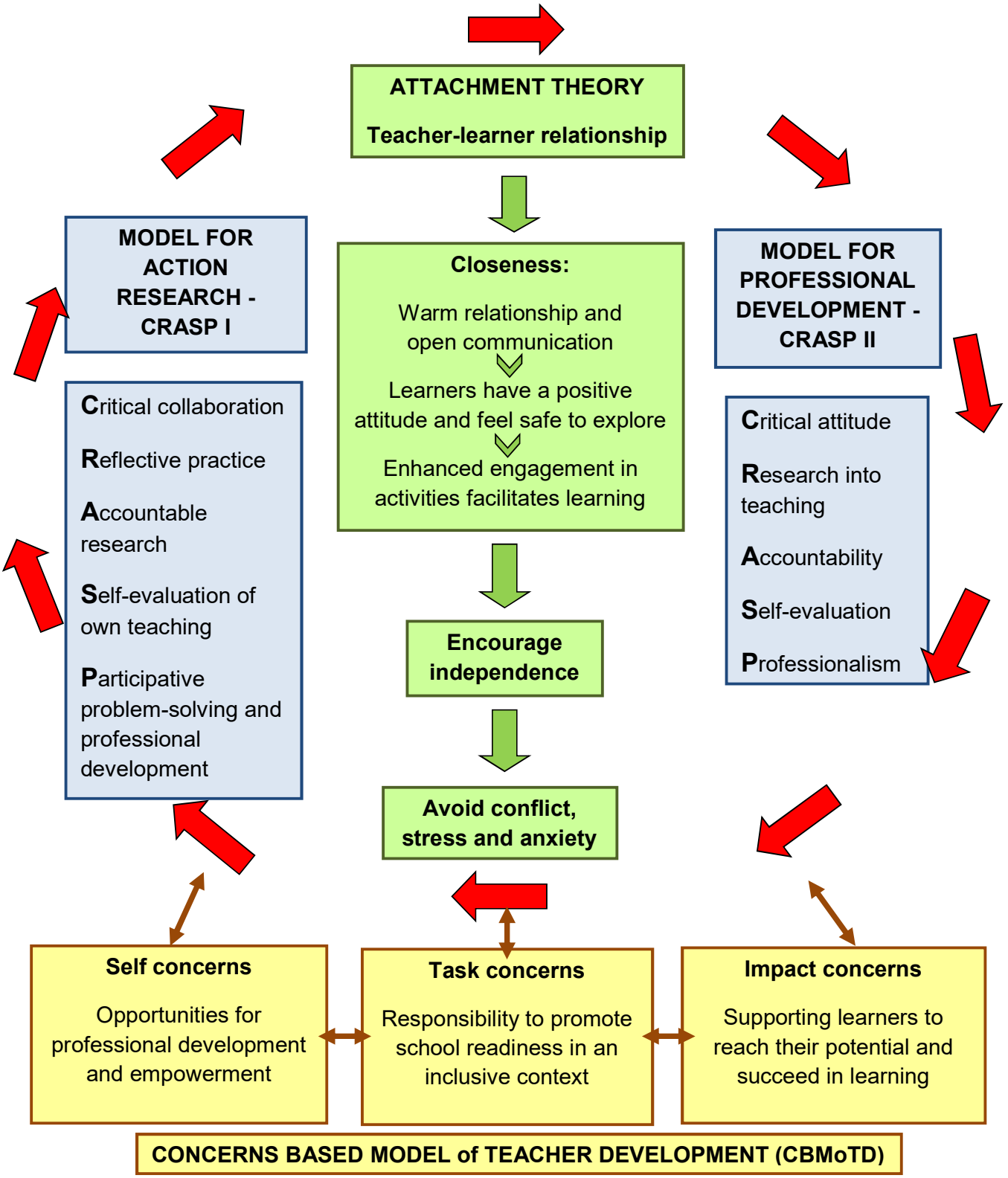


Figure 1.1: Emerging conceptual framework for this study

Each participant embarked on a journey of critical self-reflection during the entire research process, which included reflection on their relationships with their learners.

The reflection diaries of the participants, their field notes and their feedback during workshops were useful in analysing the personal growth process of each Grade 1 teacher in this regard.

I regard the CBMoTD as the foundation from which the professional development of teachers should be launched. The teachers' concerns about themselves, their task in promoting school readiness and the impact thereof on the progress of their learners, should be the starting point from where intervention is planned. Each cycle in this participatory action research project started with a discussion about the above mentioned concerns of the participating Grade 1 teachers, and each cycle was concluded by reflecting on the effect of the intervention that was implemented.

The models for action research and the professional development of teachers (CRASP I and II) can be seen as two sides of the same process. Through participating in the research process, the Grade 1 teachers took part in addressing problematic education issues, engaged in critical self-reflection about their own teaching and grew professionally. Data was collected and analysed intermittendly according to the conceptual framework during each cycle of the research process.

The above mentioned conceptual framework was explained to the participants at the beginning of the research project, using symbolism (see Addendum A for the symbolic overview of this study). Figure 1.1 (the emerging conceptual framework for this study) is expanded at the end of Chapter 3 to include the criteria for classroom quality and to conceptualise the professional development of teachers through participatory action research (see Figure 3.5). I refer to the conceptual framework again in Chapters 5 and 6 when the research findings are presented (see Table 5.1 and Figure 5.1).

1.8. DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS FOR THIS STUDY

The research design for this study is thoroughly discussed in this section and will therefore not be addressed again in Chapter 4. A brief discussion on sampling, data collection and data analysis in participatory action research (PAR) follows, while the implementation thereof in this study is explained in more detail in Chapter 4. The role of the researcher in research partnerships with teachers, is discussed and advice from various authors in this regard is presented. In Chapter 4, I shared some of my learning

experiences as a researcher, while more detailed reflections are included as part of the presentation of the research findings in Chapters 5 and 6. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations applicable for PAR are discussed in this section, and will therefore not be addressed again in Chapter 4.

1.8.1 CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE RESEARCH DESIGN FOR THIS STUDY

Participatory action research is classified as empirical research, using mainly qualitative research methods to collect primary textual data. The research is done in natural field settings, involving the teachers as research participants in a research environment characterised by a low degree of control (Mouton 2001, p. 150-151). See Figure 1.2 for a visual presentation of the research design for this study.

In an interpretive qualitative study, the focus is placed on gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon in its natural setting, through exploring the meaning it has for the participants in the study (Nieuwenhuis 2007a, p. 51; Merriam 2010, p. 34). As mentioned in the rationale, I have recently conducted a qualitative case study (Bruwer 2014), with the aim to explore the effect of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1. The findings of this case study served as groundwork for the current study. Through conducting this qualitative participatory action research study, opportunities were created for the Grade 1 teachers of the first study to address their concerns regarding the school readiness levels of their learners. They had the opportunity to put some of their previous recommendations into action.

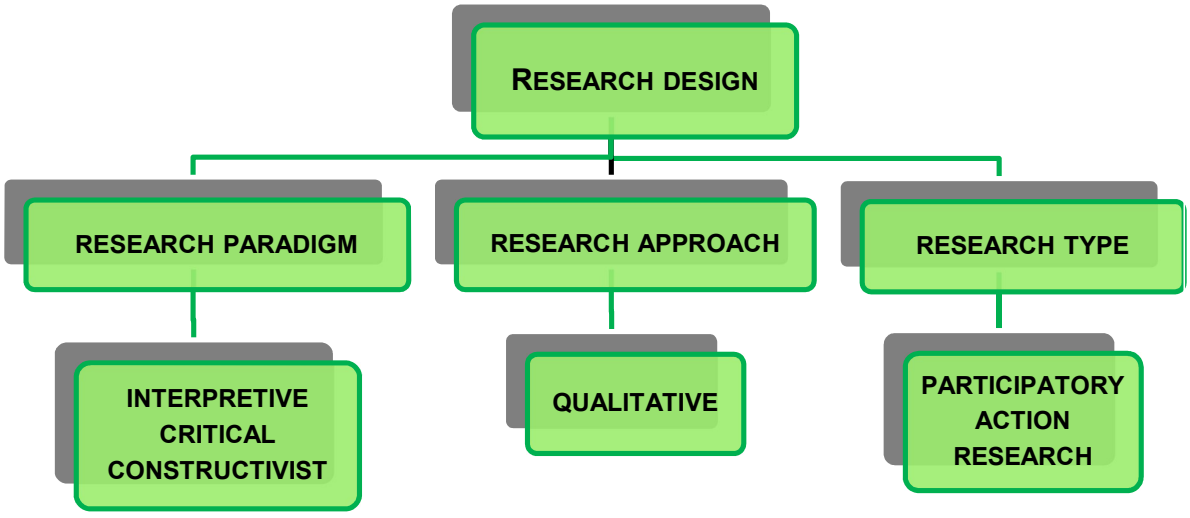


Figure 1.2: Summary of the research design for this study

According to Merriam (2010, p. 36), participatory action research falls in the category of critical qualitative research, with the purpose to empower participants and to bring about changes in their environment. Mouton (2011, p. 150-151) claims that most researchers who conduct participatory action research are committed to the empowerment of their participants and aim to bring about a change in their conditions. Merriam (2010, p. 35) explains that teachers who are confronted with a particular problematic situation, which seems to be beyond their control, might either unconsciously accept it the way it is, and in doing so, reinforce the status quo or they might try to resist the status quo by acting counterproductively. Neither of these will result in a solution. The problem, in this case insufficient school readiness in Grade 1, needs to be addressed through the empowerment of teachers in order to resolve it. Action needs to be taken.

The aim of action research is to solve a "specific educational problem" by providing opportunities for professional development of teachers and reflection on own practice (Creswell 2008, p. 597). Merriam (2010, p. 4) emphasises that the goal of action research is to "address a specific problem within a specific setting, such as a classroom . . . often (involving) the participants in the research process". McNiff (2002, p. 1-2) explains that action research can be seen as an open-ended research design, where an educational problem is identified, possible solutions are implemented and reflection is done to evaluate the outcome and make practical changes accordingly. Ebersöhn, Eloff and Ferreira (2007, p. 131) explain:

> "Whereas qualitative research usually focuses on an in-depth exploration and understanding of a phenomenon, the action research approach might extend research into intervention, doing research via intervention and intervention via research. As a result, change might be facilitated within the communities where research is conducted."

Ebersöhn et al. (2007, p. 130) describe participatory action research as a flexible and unpredictable research design, resembling several other research designs, e.g. case study design, mixed method design, ethnography and constructivist grounded theory design. In order to clarify the methodology of the current study and enhance my conceptualisation thereof, the multiple facets of participatory action research which resemble other qualitative research designs, are indicated in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2: Similarities between participatory action research design and other qualitative research designs (Adapted from Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 130)

	Participatory action research design
Case study design	Information is gathered from a specific context and findings are not generalised.
Mixed method design	Data is collected and analysed by making use of multiple strategies.
Ethnography	Partnerships between the researcher and the participants develop during the prolonged engagement at the research sites. New knowledge, of which all involved take ownership, is constructed and applied.
Grounded theory design	Rich data is gathered and analysed during a cyclical process. Multiple perspectives are integrated and reflected upon. New ideas are implemented and evaluated.

In participatory action research the participants are involved in the design as well as the implementation of the study, focusing on empowerment, construction of new knowledge and subsequently taking action in order to change the status quo of their situation (Merriam 2002, pp. 4, 10). McNiff (2002, p. 4) explains that teachers already have professional knowledge and valuable experience. Furthermore, they are highly capable of initiating their own professional development. All they need is support and guidance to reflect on what they already know and generate new knowledge through active participation and dialogue with others who share the same passion (McNiff 2002, p. 4).

Johnson (2013, p. xv) points out that professional development of teachers is often done by using a 'top-down' model, whereby knowledge that has been generated outside the classroom is given to teachers who are then expected to implement it. Through conducting participatory action research however, opportunities are created for teachers to explore issues they regard as important or problematic. Conner and Duncan (2013, p. 1) propose that research partnerships between researchers and teachers enable teachers to develop as "researchers of their own practice". These authors explain that teachers get better insight into their own professional

development when they are actively involved in research partnerships, rather than being researched by someone from outside (Conner & Duncan 2013, p. 2).

The aim of this study was to work in collaboration with Grade 1 teachers in an inclusive education context in order to address their concerns about the school readiness levels of their learners and in doing so, initiate partnerships that would lead to the professional development and personal growth of the participating teachers.

1.8.2. CHOOSING PARTICIPANTS AND RESEARCH SITES

Since this research project was spurred by the alarming findings of my previous study, I made use of purposeful sampling in order to work with Grade 1 teachers at public schools with similar conditions than those of the previous study. For the purpose of this study it was important to select teachers who are well qualified, who have experience in teaching Grade 1 learners and who have a good understanding of the concept of school readiness. Furthermore, at the time of this study, these particular schools accommodated learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, of whom many suffered from insufficient school readiness. These schools would benefit from this study, as I believed a difference could be made by empowering the teachers with strategies to enhance the school readiness skills of the learners. For the purpose of collecting rich data from different points of view and engaging with more teachers, a third public school in Pretoria with similar conditions was chosen. More detail about how the sampling was done and how access was gained to the research sites, as well as information about the first meetings with the participants is given in Chapter 4 (see 4.3, 4.4 & 4.5).

1.8.3 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Participatory action research is characterised by a partnership between the researcher and the participants (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 125; Conner & Duncan 2013, p. 4). The researcher does not interact with the participants from a distance, but is situated within the field of action. This means that the “boundaries of roles and responsibilities” are blurred (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 125). Both the researcher and the participants take ownership of the research process and the construction of knowledge, though the participants (in this case Grade 1 teachers) are “dependent on the researcher as facilitator” (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 126).

According to McNiff (2002, p. 20) the teachers already have a great deal of practical knowledge, as well as the answers to their specific educational problem within themselves. All they need is a supporter (the researcher) who will listen to their ideas critically and act as a facilitator. The researcher is not expected to have an immediate solution to their problem, but will actively work and learn with them. Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo (2013, p. 14) explain:

> "We try to engage in research with educators from a position of ethical responsibility that does not mean transcending problems but engaging and situating ourselves and our own practices in such problems."

Developing and successfully sustaining a partnership with participants depend on the researcher's interpersonal skills and sensitivity (McNiff 2002, p. 20). Conner and Duncan (2013, p. 3-4) propose that it is the responsibility of the researcher to encourage positive communication between all the participants and create multiple opportunities for discussions, reflection and construction of new knowledge. As facilitator, the researcher should ensure that every member's expertise and contributions are valued (Conner & Duncan 2013, p. 3-4).

Burton, Brundrett and Jones (2008, p. 139) point out that a research partnership can be challenging and recommend that the researcher maintains a degree of harmony amongst all the participants. Furthermore, they advise the researcher to be realistic in terms of what can be expected from the participants, maintain a good relationship with every member of the partnership and ensure effective and transparent communication (Burton et al. 2008, p. 139). In addition, Mouton (2001, p. 151) warns the researcher against being "overly emotional or subjective" and to beware of possible manipulation by participants who might have their own agenda.

As researcher I understand that qualitative research is interpretive and that my personal history of teaching in the Foundation Phase could influence my interpretation of the research findings. For this reason, I continuously made use of self-reflection about my role in the research partnership and I kept a reflection journal for this purpose (Creswell 2008, p. 266). In addition, I made use of member checking to ensure that my interpretation of the data was accurate.

McNiff (2002, p. 26) proposes that the researcher should strive to establish a "genuine sense of partnership" with the participants, where everyone can act as an equal

practitioner. Although there are differences in experience and expertise, there should not be any difference in the value of contributions to the partnership. Such a research partnership can be described as “a creative dialogue of equals in which both are trying to find the best way forward for themselves and each other” (McNiff 2002, p. 26).

As a novice researcher and facilitator for this study, I followed the advice of the above mentioned authors when I launched my participatory action research project. I also focused on the criteria for a successful professional development programme, as emphasised by Brown, Knoche, Edwards and Sheridan (2009, p. 501-502). These include providing opportunities for collaborative relationships and purposeful reflection, as well as investing enough time to provide for personal growth and professional development of the participating teachers (see the discussion in 4.7). Furthermore, I focused on the aspects identified by Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 82-83) that are necessary to enhance the quality of a professional development programme, namely continuously adapting the content of the programme according to the needs of the participants; evaluating the participants’ feedback; making provision for reflection on critical events; providing opportunities for application of new knowledge and guiding the participating teachers on their journey to higher levels of self-efficacy (see the discussion in 4.8). An additional reflection on my role as researcher is included in Chapter 4 (see 4.10).

1.8.4 DATA COLLECTION IN A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Ebersöhn et al. (2007, p. 125) explain that action research is conducted in “an interactive cycle of planning, implementing and reflecting.” Creswell (2008, p. 604) refers to the “interacting spiral” introduced by Stringer in 1999, namely looking, thinking and acting. During the ‘looking’ phase data is collected, analysed and interpreted; during the ‘thinking’ phase the issues under investigation are interpreted and actions are planned; during the ‘acting’ phase plans are carried out and evaluated. This cycle keeps on repeating itself, since every answer leads to new questions (McNiff 2002, p. 7). Burton et al. (2008, p. 132) refer to the research process as a “spiral of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting”. This implies that data is collected and analysed several times during the research process. For a detailed discussion on how data was collected for this study, refer to Chapter 4 (see 4.6).

According to Mouton (2001, p. 151) and Ebersöhn et al. (2007, p. 131-132) sources of data usually associated with participatory action research (and relevant for this study) include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, collaborative discussions and narratives. Creswell (2008, p. 611) states that both qualitative and quantitative data can be collected during an action research study and refers to the "three dimensions" in which Mills (2000) has organised data for action research, namely:

- *Experiencing* through observation and reflection;
- *Enquiring* through initiating collaborative discussions and conducting semi-structured interviews;
- *Examining* through making recordings of collaborative discussions and semi-structured interviews, as well as using records made by the participants, e.g. field notes, written reflections and reporting on the progress of learners.

The sources of data for this study are indicated in Figure 1.3. Different sets of qualitative data were collected during the research process, namely recordings and transcriptions of collaborative discussions, reflections written by participants and the research journal of the researcher. Furthermore, the field notes of the participants written during the implementation of intervention strategies, the recording and transcription of the semi-structured focus group interview and the feedback of the participants at the end of each workshop were used.

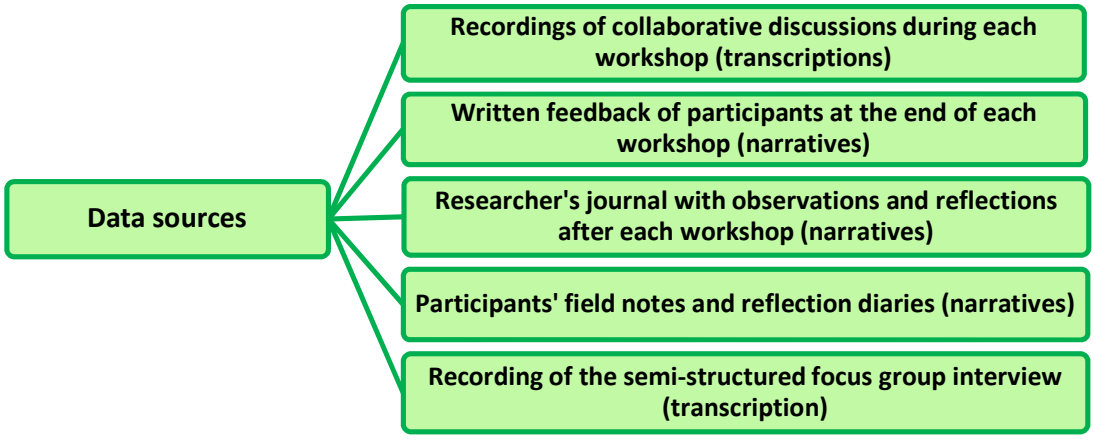


Figure 1.3: Data sources for this study

1.8.4.1 Collaborative discussions

According to MacLure (2013, p. xiv) the meaning of partnership and collaboration is enriched in a participatory action research study when teachers work “ethically and productively” with their colleagues and the researcher in search for solutions to a problematic educational issue. Conner and Duncan (2013, p. 1) explain that the participants share their professional knowledge and experience with each other and in doing so get the opportunity to look at their own situation from different perspectives. This enables them to gain new insight into problematic issues and reconceptualise their teaching practice. Working as a team with the researcher provides teachers with the opportunity to consider possible solutions “from an informed base”, instead of just relying on past experiences (Conner & Duncan 2013, p. 1).

Each of the five research cycles in this study included a workshop during which opportunities for collaborative discussions were provided. These discussions were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

1.8.4.2 Narratives

Johnson (2013, p. xvii) proposes that teachers’ voices can be heard by making use of narratives. He refers to narratives as a process of “powerful personalized knowledge acquisition” and claims that new theories which can be applied in the classroom are created through reflection. According to Conner and Duncan (2013, p. 8) narratives can be used as a tool for research as well as professional development. Different kinds of narratives were used as data sources in this study. Opportunities were created for participants to reflect on their thoughts and experiences throughout the research process. At the end of each workshop, participants were requested to write a reflection about their experiences of the collaborative discussions, decisions that were made, as well as their own learning curve. They were also requested to reflect in writing on their experiences of the implementation of intervention strategies during each research cycle, which were discussed at the following workshop.

During the course of the research project, the participants were requested to keep reflection diaries to capture their experiences and thoughts as well as any new ideas which they would like to share with the research team during workshops or at the end of the research project when feedback was given during a semi-structured focus group

interview. Creswell (2008) suggests that the researcher should provide the participants with specific instructions on how to keep a personal journal, including the format and length of the entries. Careful planning and consideration was necessary in this regard, to ensure that the data which was needed would in fact be provided by the participants. A template for field notes was drafted and handed out for each phase of the intervention, providing guidelines to the participating teachers with regard to the data needed.

As researcher, I made use of a personal researcher journal throughout the research process, in order to keep record of my own observations, reflections and experiences during and after the workshops and the focus group interview. I firmly believed that this study would contribute greatly to my personal as well as professional development, which it did. McNiff (2002, p. 7) emphasises that personal growth and development of own thinking is an essential part of the participatory action research process and should therefore be reported on with the research findings.

1.8.4.3 Semi-structured focus group interview

Focus group interviews which are guided by semi-structured questions create opportunities for generating rich data, as participants listen and react to each other's ideas while exploring new insights in the phenomenon under investigation (Nieuwenhuis 2007b, p. 90). At the end of the research process a semi-structured focus group interview was conducted in order to provide the participants with an opportunity to give feedback on their experiences during the study. During the focus group interview the participants could share their experiences with each other and discuss the effect the intervention had on the school readiness of their learners, instead of just reporting back to the researcher (Nieuwenhuis 2007b, p. 90). The focus group interview was recorded and transcribed for analysis.

1.8.5 ANALYSING THE DATA COLLECTED DURING A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Mouton (2001, p. 151) states that an inductive approach is followed in analysing the data in a participatory action research study and warns the researcher not to impose any pre-set ideas or interpretations. As participatory action research is conducted in a spiral of research cycles, data collection and analysis are done intermittently. Both

Mouton (2001, p. 151) and Ebersöhn et al. (2007, p. 140) indicate that the process of data analysis can be seen as a joint effort, involving the researcher as well as the participants. Involving the participants in the analysis of the data creates opportunities for member checking, which adds to the trustworthiness of the interpretations which are made (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 140).

The collaborative discussions and the focus group interview were recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions, together with the feedback written by the participants at the end of each workshop, the field notes of the participants and the researcher's journal were coded in order to identify the key elements which were important to the participants. These key elements were then grouped to form categories, which were in turn, grouped to form themes (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 132). Creswell (2008, p. 601) recommends a further step in the process of analysis, namely creating a concept map in order to display the connections between the categories and emerging themes. This was an ongoing process throughout the study as new data was added continuously until the end of the research process. These findings were connected to the aims and objectives of the study (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 132) in order to answer the research questions, as well as to findings of past studies found in the literature (Creswell 2008, p. 601).

According to McNiff (2002) an important part of the analysis would be to determine and reflect on the changes that took place within the researcher, the participants and the research relationships:

> "You are aiming to show a development of influence, an unfolding of new understandings and actions from people working together in new ways, and their influence on one another, that is, how they learn with and from one another" (McNiff 2002, p. 15).

Personal reflections from the research journal of the researcher and the field notes of the participants provided valuable information in this regard. This was an essential part of the analysis, since the aim of the study was to contribute to the professional development of the participating Grade 1 teachers through a participatory action research project. See Chapters 5 and 6 for a presentation of the research findings.

1.8.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS IN A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of my study, I specifically focused on enhancing the credibility and transferability of my research. The credibility of a participatory action research study is enhanced by the fact that the researcher stays engaged in the field for an extended period of time, observation is done continuously and the participants are part of the research team. Working collaboratively with the participants means that data is collected from multiple perspectives, providing opportunities for comparing and debating ideas, which in turn enhances the richness of the data (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 133-134). Since data collection and data analysis take place intermittently during the research cycles, the researcher can continuously make use of member checking in order to ensure that the interpretation of research findings is accurate (Creswell 2008, p. 266-267). Making use of different sources of data enables the researcher to confirm findings through triangulation and in doing so, add to the credibility of the findings (Creswell 2008, p. 611; Nieuwenhuis 2007c, p. 113). I followed these guidelines to ensure that the findings of this study would comply with the requirements for credibility.

In a qualitative study the aim is not to generalise the findings, but to gain a clear understanding of the phenomenon under investigation from the participants' perspective (Nieuwenhuis 2007c, p. 115). In order to ensure transferability however, the researcher should provide detailed descriptions of the research sites, the process of data collection and the intervention that took place. Providing comprehensive information in this regard will enable others to apply the findings of this study in similar circumstances (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 134). See Chapter 4 for detailed discussions about the research sites, the participants and the research process.

McNiff (2002, pp. 10, 15) explains that the purpose of an action research study is to claim that a positive change has been made in a problematic educational situation and to provide sufficient evidence to support such a claim. By analysing the field notes and reflections of the participants throughout the research project, I could determine that the intervention enhanced the school readiness of the Grade 1 learners, resulting in better academic progress. By analysing the reflections of the participants about their own professional development and personal growth and observing the enthusiasm with which they engaged in the collaborative discussions, I could clearly see that the

participatory action research project contributed to their professional development to a great extent. See Chapters 5 and 6 for a detailed discussion of the research findings.

1.8.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

In order to ensure that my study was ethically well founded, I followed the required ethics procedures of the University of Pretoria. After my ethics application had been approved by my institution and I gained permission for my research project from the Department of Basic Education, I contacted the principals of the selected schools to gain access to the research sites. The purpose of the study and the research process was discussed with the principals of the three schools (initially four schools, but School C withdrew from the project at a very early stage). After they had signed letters of informed consent, I arranged meetings with the Grade 1 teachers of all three schools. During this introductory meeting I explained the purpose of the study to them, as well as the procedure that would be followed. I made sure that they had a clear understanding of what was expected from them as participants during the course of the research process. I explained to them that participation was voluntary, that they would remain anonymous and that they could withdraw from the research project at any time. Letters of informed consent were then signed by those teachers who agreed to take part in the study.

Since I would be involved with the participants for an extended period of time, it was important to establish a relationship of trust prior to the actual commencement of the study. Burton et al. (2008, p. 128) emphasise the importance of respect and a sensitive approach when working in collaboration with professionals who each have their own experiences and professional knowledge to contribute to the partnership. Furthermore, it is essential to take the limited time of the participants into consideration and keep in mind that conducting a prolonged research study might lead to higher levels of intrusiveness (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 133). For this reason, I completed the participatory action research process which involved the Grade 1 teachers, within four months.

1.8.8 STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Through conducting participatory action research, opportunities are created for teachers to become actively involved in addressing problematic issues in their own

classrooms. As participants and research partners, they work in collaboration with the researcher as facilitator and initiate their own professional development and personal growth. Since the researcher works closely with the participants over an extended period of time during which data is continuously collected and analysed, member checking can take place throughout the research process.

Since participatory action research is unpredictable (Ebersöhn et al. 2007) and often described as 'messy', it poses a challenge to the researcher to stay focused on the purpose of the project. As facilitator, the researcher needs to encourage, motivate and guide the participants to stay on track throughout the research process. The challenges I came across during this study, are mentioned as part of the presentation of the research findings in Chapters 5 and 6. When I conclude my research journey in Chapter 7, I reflect on the limitations of the study.

1.9 SUMMARY

The purpose of Chapter 1 was to provide an overview of this participatory action research study, which was conducted to make a contribution to the professional development of Grade 1 teachers in order to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context. A short summary of the rest of the chapters is provided below.

Chapter 2: The needs and vulnerability of Grade 1 learners, especially those who start school with a disadvantage are briefly discussed. The focus of Chapter 2, however, is on the Grade 1 teacher in providing quality education to school beginners with diverse learning needs. The central theme of the chapter revolves around the essentiality of a close and warm teacher-learner relationship which provides emotional security to vulnerable learners and enables them to participate in learning activities.

Chapter 3: The need for continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness is examined through the lens of Fuller's Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) (1969). Different practices of professional development for teachers as it developed over time are discussed and the success thereof is indicated. The focus is then shifted to the professional development of teachers through participatory action research as an approach that is dynamic, process-orientated and based on the needs of the individual teacher (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 76-79). The benefits of this approach for teacher development

are pointed out and the process thereof is discussed. The model for action research (CRASP I) and the model for the professional development of teachers through action research (CRASP II), by Zuber-Skerrit (1992) are used as theoretical underpinning for this part of the discussion.

Chapter 4: The process of launching and implementing this participatory action research project for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context is presented and explained. Essential criteria for the successful professional development of teachers and the implementation thereof in this study, are discussed. Furthermore, important aspects that contribute to the quality of such a professional development programme and the role these aspects played in this study, are considered in retrospect.

Chapter 5: Part I of the research findings is presented, indicating the pressure of the current education system on the participating Grade 1 teachers, and the negative effect thereof on their competence and confidence as teachers (Theme 1). After agreeing to take a leap of faith and join the participatory action research project, these teachers discover the value of collaboration, problem-solving decision making and critical self-reflection, leading to professional development, personal growth and higher levels of self-efficacy (Theme 2).

Chapter 6: Part II of the research findings indicate how the participating Grade 1 teachers conducted research into their own teaching, while providing emotional support and instructional support to their struggling learners. Their efforts and persistence led to closer teacher-learner relationships, which in turn resulted in academic progress and higher levels of independence for these vulnerable learners (Theme 3).

Chapter 7: In Chapter 7 I reflect on the lessons I have learned through conducting this study, by comparing my research findings to existing knowledge in the literature on school readiness and the professional development of teachers. I present my final conclusions on my study by answering the main research question and the secondary questions which guided this study. In conclusion of the chapter, I make recommendations for the way forward and reflect on the professional and personal effect that the study had on me.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GRADE 1 TEACHER THROUGH THE LENS OF ATTACHMENT THEORY

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The importance of school readiness and a smooth transition to Grade 1 should not be underestimated. Strong indications exist that learners who experience academic failure in the early grades are likely to continue experiencing failure in the long term (Sherry & Draper 2012, p. 10; Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins 2007, p. 4). Early academic success on the other hand, strongly predicts a successful school career and on-going success into adulthood (Margot, Bavin & Ong 2011, p. 4). In Chapter 1, I briefly discussed the roles and responsibilities of schools, Grade 1 teachers and parents in supporting learners in an inclusive education context during the transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment. A further review of literature which is relevant for this study, is presented in Chapters 2 and 3.

In Chapter 2 the needs and vulnerability of Grade 1 learners, especially those who start school with a disadvantage are briefly discussed. The focus of Chapter 2, however, is on the Grade 1 teacher in providing quality education to school beginners with diverse learning needs. The central theme of Chapter 2 relates to the role and responsibilities of the Grade 1 teacher and revolves around the essentiality of a close and warm teacher-learner relationship which provides emotional security to vulnerable learners and enables them to participate in learning activities (Baker 2006, p. 212). The role and responsibility of the Grade 1 teacher will be examined through the lens of attachment theory, since it is closely intertwined in the literature on school readiness. Attachment theory forms the core of the conceptual framework (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.1), as the study evolved around it.

For Grade 1 teachers to fully grasp the importance of attachment as part of their role and responsibility towards vulnerable school beginners, professional development through continuous training and self-reflection is essential. Therefore, the focus of Chapter 3 is on the professional development of the Grade 1 teacher through the lens of the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (Fuller 1969) as foundation from where the need for professional development emerges. Furthermore, the Grade

1 teacher as research partner in the process of professional development is explored, using the model for action research (CRASP I) and the model for the professional development of teachers through action research (CRASP II), which was developed by Zuber-Skerritt (1992) as underpinning theoretical models. I concluded Chapter 3 with a discussion of the conceptual framework (see Chapter 1, Figure 1.1) in which the literature from both Chapters 2 and 3, as well as the theories used, are synthesised.

2.2 THE NEEDS AND VULNERABILITY OF GRADE 1 LEARNERS IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CONTEXT

In order to support Grade 1 learners during the transition from the informal preschool environment to the formal learning environment, teachers need to have a thorough understanding of the diverse needs of vulnerable learners. Learners growing up in low socio-economic communities often start formal schooling with disadvantages as far as school readiness is concerned, which increases the risk of academic difficulties for these learners (Dominguez, Vitiello, Maier & Greenfield 2010, p. 30; Doyle et al. 2012, p. 135-136). The negative effect of poverty on the development of young learners is evident in their physical health, social-emotional well-being, approaches to learning, language development and their cognitive abilities. Many of these learners are exposed to high levels of stress, resulting in emotional insecurity and a higher incidence of aggressive behaviour (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 400; Doyle et al. 2012, p. 134-135). Furthermore, children from poor families often do not have access to stimulation and resources which can foster social and academic development (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 400). Many of them are deprived of rich language stimulation, resulting in poorly developed literacy and academic skills at school entry (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 952).

These children are less likely to attend good quality preschools, due to a lack of such preschools in their own communities and limited or expensive transportation options to more affluent communities with better preschools. Low-income families have no choice but to spend all available money on basic survival, with nothing to spare for preschool attendance (Seay 2012, p. 242-243), leaving their children vulnerable and unprepared for formal learning. According to Sherry and Draper (2012, p. 10) more

than two thirds of primary school learners in South Africa start school with disadvantages due to poverty and as a result, experience academic difficulties.

In cases of families with a slightly higher socio-economic status who live in disadvantaged communities, the home environment can mediate the negative effect of poverty on the development of young learners to some extent (Doyle et al. 2012, p. 135-136). However, this cannot entirely protect these learners against the negative effect of poverty on their readiness for formal learning. The influence of the disadvantaged community still seems to be greater than the benefits of the slightly higher socio-economic status of the family (Doyle et al. 2012, p. 147, 149). Even if parents can afford to enrol their children at good quality primary schools situated in more advantaged communities, they are still being exposed to long and often unsafe travelling distances (Bruwer 2014).

These learners need to get up very early in order to be on time for school and as a result, they arrive at school feeling tired and without having had breakfast. They struggle to concentrate in class and are unable to benefit from the learning opportunities they have. Furthermore, the parents themselves often need to travel long distances to work and arrive home too late to support their children with homework (Bruwer 2014). The negative effect of these circumstances on school readiness is clearly visible at school entry as achievement gaps between learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers (Baker 2006, p. 211; Bierman, Nix, Greenberg, Blair & Domitrovich 2008, p. 821). Without intervention these gaps extend over time, resulting in under-achievement and serious backlogs in academic progress which often persist throughout the learners' school careers (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 952; Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Welsh & Gest 2008, p. 305).

In studies by Magnuson and Shager (2010) and Magnuson et al. (2007), investigations into the early years of formal schooling were conducted to determine which types of classrooms offer the best support to disadvantaged learners as described above. They found that the above mentioned achievement gap between learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers, fades away in classrooms with a lower teacher-learner ratio and high quality academic instruction. Similarly, studies examining ways in which Grade 1 teachers can support vulnerable learners who are at risk of school failure were conducted by Hamre and Pianta (2005)

and Wilson, Pianta and Stuhlman (2007). Both studies found that the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged learners were compensated for by the end of Grade 1 in classrooms characterised by high levels of instructional support, together with emotional support (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 949, 961; Wilson et al. 2007, p. 86). Grade 1 learners with a high risk for academic failure, showed the best progress in classrooms where the teachers were sensitive to their vulnerability. These teachers responded to the social and emotional needs of their learners by creating a learning environment with a positive atmosphere where learners could enjoy being with their teachers and peers (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 962). Wilson et al. (2007, p. 82-83) explain that the Grade 1 teacher serves the role of a surrogate parent for vulnerable young learners and guides them in regulating their behaviour and emotions. Consequently, exposure to high quality emotional support, results in greater social competence and self-regulation for young learners, which are essential for academic progress. This is especially important in cases where vulnerable learners lack the social and emotional skills they need to adapt to the formal learning environment (Wilson et al. 2007, p. 83). These findings indicate that high quality teaching and emotional support in Grade 1 compensate for the lack of school readiness experienced by disadvantaged learners (Magnuson et al. 2007, p. 19), providing them with a better chance of a successful school career.

2.3 THE GRADE 1 TEACHER'S RELATIONSHIP WITH HER LEARNERS THROUGH THE LENS OF ATTACHMENT THEORY

The quality of the teacher-learner relationship in Grade 1 plays a critical role in ensuring positive early school experiences and enhancing the learners' ability to adapt to the formal learning environment (Palermo, Hanish, Martin, Fabes & Reiser 2007, p. 420). The teacher-learner relationship in Grade 1 is regarded as similar to the relationship between parents and their young children in regulating social and emotional development (Pianta & Stuhlman 2004, p. 444-445; Palermo et al. 2007, p. 420) and providing a secure base from where they can explore. For this reason, three distinct features derived from attachment theory, namely closeness, dependence and conflict, are used to assess and rate the quality of teacher-learner relationships (Birch & Ladd 1997; Mashburn & Pianta 2006; Palermo et al. 2007, p. 407) (see 1.7.3 and Table 1.1).

Positive teacher-learner relationships are important for early academic success, especially in cases where learners are at risk of school failure (Rudasill 2011, p. 147; Pianta & Stuhlman 2004, p. 444). Such relationships can be seen as crucial assets (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 962) for vulnerable learners during their transition to the formal learning environment. Grade 1 learners' school readiness and adjustment to school are significantly influenced by their relationships with their teachers (Pianta & Stuhlman, 2004, p. 444) and their behaviour, enjoyment of school, as well as their academic performance are affected by it (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 407-408). Mashburn and Pianta (2006, p. 162) explain that strong teacher-learner relationships can protect disadvantaged learners with little or no support from home, from academic failure. Similarly, Hamre and Pianta (2005, p. 951), Wilson et al. (2007, p. 85), as well as Liew (2012, p. 107) claim that teacher-learner relationships function as mechanisms of resilience against the negative effect of dysfunctional and unsupportive home environments and/or family relationships.

Through positive relationships with their learners, teachers create a warm, supportive environment as a secure base from where learners can explore new grounds. Providing in the learners' needs for safety and acceptance enhances the development of social and academic skills which are needed to successfully adapt in the formal learning context (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 169; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 398; Downer et al. 2009, p. 433). The three features of the teacher-learner relationship according to attachment theory, namely closeness, dependence and conflict will subsequently be discussed in more detail.

2.3.1 TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS IN GRADE 1 AND THE THREE FEATURES OF ATTACHMENT THEORY, NAMELY CLOSENESS, DEPENDENCY AND CONFLICT

Ideal teacher-learner relationships are characterised by high levels of closeness, low levels of dependence and low levels of conflict, as the three distinct features deriving from attachment theory. Teacher-learner relationships characterised by high levels of closeness, have been proven to enhance social development, academic performance, positive learning experiences and self-regulation in Grade 1 learners (Birch & Ladd 1997, p. 61). Close relationships between teachers and learners comprise of warmth, open communication and positive interactions (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 163). Due to increased individual attention and a welcoming learning environment, classroom

participation and engagement in learning activities are encouraged (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 419). Berhenke, Miller, Brown, Seifer and Dickstein (2011, p. 432) found that nurturing relationships in the early grades create a sense of belonging in young learners. This leads to intrinsic motivation which enhances engagement in the classroom and a desire to please the teacher. Furthermore, close teacher-learner relationships in the Grade 1 classroom were found to reduce negative behaviour, anxiety and learning difficulties, while social skills and positive interaction with peers were strengthened (Howes 2000, p. 193; Pianta & Stuhlman 2004, p. 445; Burchinal, Howes, Pianta, Bryant, Early, Clifford & Barbarin 2008, p. 151). Additionally, close relationships between Grade 1 teachers and their learners can protect vulnerable learners from academic failure and reduce the risk of grade retention (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 407; Baker 2006, p. 211).

Dependency in the teacher-learner relationship is associated with difficulty in adjusting to the formal learning environment, lower levels of engagement in learning activities, a lack of competence and slow academic progress (Birch & Ladd 1997, p. 61; Palermo et al. 2007, p. 407; Pianta & Stuhlman 2004, p. 445). Learners who are too dependent on their teachers often display a negative attitude towards learning, tend to withdraw themselves form classroom activities and act aggressively towards their peers (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 164). Therefore, Grade 1 teachers should maintain low levels of dependency by providing a secure learning environment and encouraging their learners to act independently (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 169). In doing so, teachers can enhance the social and emotional development of their learners.

Teacher-learner relationships which are conflict-driven are characterised by angry and insensitive interactions with learners and are the complete opposite of close relationships. These teachers perceive their learners as challenging and react by creating a negative and unsupportive classroom environment (Howes 2000, p. 192; Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 163). In such cases learners are unable to use their teachers as resources in order to adapt to the formal learning environment and master the essential school readiness skills (Howes 2000, p. 193). As a result, these learners develop negative attitudes towards learning, withdraw themselves from classroom activities and experience academic failure. They may even refuse to cooperate in the class and avoid school altogether (Birch & Ladd 1997, p. 61; Pianta & Stuhlman 2004, p. 445; Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 162, 164; Palermo et al. 2007, p. 407). Conflict

between Grade 1 teachers and their learners reinforce the negative factors which threaten the academic progress of vulnerable learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Over time, learners who experience high levels of conflict with their teachers, develop problematic and aggressive behaviour (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 164; Palermo et al. 2007, p. 407). Avoiding stress and anxiety in the classroom environment will result in low levels of conflict, which will in turn impact positively on the learners' social and emotional development.

Authors of school readiness literature agree that teacher-learner relationships characterised by high levels of closeness, low levels of dependence and low levels of conflict provide the best learning conditions for promoting school readiness in Grade 1 classrooms. In order to benefit from the learning opportunities offered in the formal learning environment, learners need to be able to use their teachers as the most important resource in the classroom (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 953). In this regard, Murray et al. (2008, p. 49) explain that teachers guide their learners through the transition to the formal learning environment and serve as the adults they should turn to when in need of assistance. Furthermore, teachers should promote the social-emotional well-being of their learners and be the persons to share fears and accomplishments with (Murray et al. 2008, p. 49). Daniels (2011, p. 18) emphasises that all learners need support with the transition to the formal learning environment, even though some learners might be more ready to learn than others.

2.3.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF POSITIVE TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS IN ENHANCING THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 LEARNERS

Wilson et al. (2007, p. 82) state that young children develop social interaction skills through experiences within their relationships with adults in their life world. Therefore, their relationships with their teachers at school entry will undoubtedly influence their social and academic development. Grade 1 teachers are not only responsible for providing academic instruction, but for supporting the holistic development of the learner. The Grade 1 teachers' relationships with their learners will determine their adjustment to the formal learning environment and the social demands thereof, as well as their interactions with their peers (Wilson et al. 2007, p. 82; Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 162).

Teachers play an important role in determining and regulating social interactions in the classroom (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 398). This applies both to the relationships between teachers and learners, as well as the relationships among learners. Teachers act as role models for their learners and explicitly state what they expect from their learners as far as their relationships with peers and their behaviour in the classroom are concerned (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 398).

Positive teacher-learner relationships encourage young learners to develop positive relationships with peers, by displaying friendly interaction, kindness and a need for co-operative play (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 418). Such behaviour attracts young learners towards each other and provides opportunities to strengthen their social skills. Positive relationships with peers enhance the feeling of being included in the classroom and encourage learners to engage in learning activities, which is critical for academic adjustment in Grade 1 (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 419; Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 962). Through taking part in cooperative learning activities, opportunities are created for peer modelling and encouragement, which are beneficial for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Close relationships with teachers reduce aggressive behaviour and protect disadvantaged learners who are at risk of behavioural problems (Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 5). Learners from classes where teacher-learner relationships are characterised by conflict and dependence on the other hand, are likely to display aggressive behaviour which leads to exclusion by peers and consequently affect their academic readiness in a negative way (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 419).

Positive and warm relationships between Grade 1 teachers and their learners enhance self-regulation and self-confidence which enables learners to successfully engage in academic activities and complete their learning tasks accurately (Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 6). On the other hand, learners who are exposed to high levels of conflict in their relationships with their teachers are less motivated to engage in learning activities and as a result, tend to struggle academically. Hamre and Pianta (2005, p. 962) argue that positive interactions with teachers and peers in Grade 1 strengthen learners' motivation to reach the academic goals set by their teachers. In addition, high levels of closeness in the teacher-learner relationship motivate learners to perform well, in order to please their teachers (Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 15-16). Furthermore, findings from numerous studies indicate that high levels of emotional support result in positive

academic adjustment and experiences, both in first grade and in future grades (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 954, 962; Baker 2006, p. 211; Jeon et al. 2010, p. 932).

2.3.3 THE LONG-TERM EFFECT OF POSITIVE TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS ON THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS OF GRADE 1 LEARNERS

The responsibility of Grade 1 teachers to develop positive relationships with their learners should not be underestimated. Evidence indicates that teacher-learner relationships in the early grades affect the relationships learners will have with their teachers in the long-term (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 164). Learners who experienced teacher-learner relationships characterised by dependency and conflict when they first entered school, continued to display negative behaviour and poor academic progress in higher grades. On the other hand, learners who experienced close teacher-learner relationships with low levels of dependency and conflict early in their school careers, continued to benefit from it, both socially and academically (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 164; Palermo 2007, p. 407; Howes 2000, p. 193).

Similarly, Rudasill (2011, p. 148, 154) stresses the fact that the quality of teacher-learner relationships in the early grades, strongly influence and predict the quality of teacher-learner relationships in later years. In fact, the teacher-learner relationship in the Grade 1 classroom can be seen as a model for learners of what a teacher-learner relationship should be and probably will be in the grades to follow (Rudasill 2011, p. 148, 155). In other words, the relationships and interactions with Grade 1 teachers will determine the learners' relationships and interactions with future teachers to a great extent.

Furthermore, teacher-learner relationships in the early grades also affect learners' behavioural adjustment and academic progress in the higher grades (Jeon et al. 2010, p. 931). An important issue, pointed out by Daniels (2011) is that young learners begin to establish academic identities as soon as they enter the formal learning environment. A positive academic identity plays an essential role in the development of a positive self-esteem and also determines the expectations a learner has of his/her academic progress and school career. The academic skills a learner masters in the early grades, together with motivation and a positive attitude towards learning, determine the beliefs a learner has about his/her own academic abilities (Baker 2006, p. 212). Through teacher-learner relationships which are characterised by high levels of closeness, low

levels of dependency and low levels of conflict, positive academic identities can be fostered within vulnerable young learners (Daniels 2011, p. 18-21) which are essential for future academic success.

Learners who have developed positive academic identities in the early grades of formal learning are likely to remain motivated and continue to learn successfully throughout their school careers (Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 16). In the higher grades the teacher-learner relationship usually becomes less important in terms of motivation, as the learners' internal motivation to succeed strengthens. The self-regulation skills and self-confidence which were fostered in these learners when they first entered the formal learning environment enable them to act and learn independently. On the other hand, learners lacking a positive academic identity are likely to remain dependent on external motivation from their teachers in the higher grades and continue to experience academic difficulties (Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 16).

2.3.4 ASSESSMENT OF TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS FOR THE PURPOSE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Pianta 1992) is based on attachment theory and research on the interactions between teachers and learners which are characterised by closeness, dependency and conflict (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 169) (see Chapter 1 par 1.7.3). This instrument is useful in determining Grade 1 teachers' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with their learners as a group and/or with individual learners (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 411).

The aim of this study was the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context. Assessing their own relationships with their learners has been useful for the Grade 1 teachers who acted as research partners in the study. Self-reflection is an integral part of participatory action research and the STRS could therefore be implemented for this purpose.

2.3.5 CLOSE TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS AS PREREQUISITE FOR HIGH QUALITY INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS

Ensuring positive teacher-learner relationships in Grade 1 is a key factor in promoting school readiness, especially for disadvantaged learners who enter the formal learning environment with a high risk for academic failure. As indicated, numerous studies have

found that learners who are exposed to teacher-learner relationships characterised by high levels of closeness and low levels of dependency and conflict, are likely to adapt to the formal learning environment successfully and make good academic progress. These learners are also likely to feel included in the classroom, display positive attitudes towards learning and engage in learning activities (Birch & Ladd 1997, p. 64; Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 6; Jeon et al. 2010, p. 914). The Grade 1 teacher is clearly the most important role player in the learners' transition to the formal learning environment and the person responsible for providing a high quality inclusive classroom.

According to Pianta, Hamre and Allen (2007, p. 366) positive teacher-learner relationships and interactions can be conceptualised in three domains, namely emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support. These three domains are also referred to as the criteria for high quality classrooms (Downer, Lopez, Grimm, Hamagami, Pianta & Howes 2012, p. 22; Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 950) and are thoroughly scrutinised in the discussion that follows.

2.4 CRITERIA FOR HIGH QUALITY GRADE 1 CLASSROOMS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS IN AN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION CONTEXT

Classroom quality can be determined in terms of the structure of the classroom or in terms of classroom processes (Dominguez et al. 2010, p. 31). Classroom structure includes the teacher-learner ratio and the level of teacher training. Classroom processes include the teacher's relationship with her learners, provision of learning opportunities (which include assessment) and management of teaching time. Wilson et al. (2007, p. 82) found that high quality classroom processes have a stronger influence on the social and academic development of young learners than the structural aspects of classrooms (teacher-learner ratio and teacher training). These classroom processes correlate with the above mentioned criteria for quality classrooms (Pianta et al. 2007; Downer et al. 2012), namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation (see 2.3.6). Similarly, Daniels (2011, p. 20) refers to these criteria for quality classrooms as strategies which teachers can implement in order to support young learners during the transition to the formal learning environment. These classroom strategies include a positive relationship between the Grade 1 teacher and her learners, provision of a rich learning

environment and constructive management in the classroom, which also correlate with the criteria of quality classrooms, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation. See Figure 2.1 for a comparison of the terminology regarding criteria for classroom quality used by the different authors mentioned above.

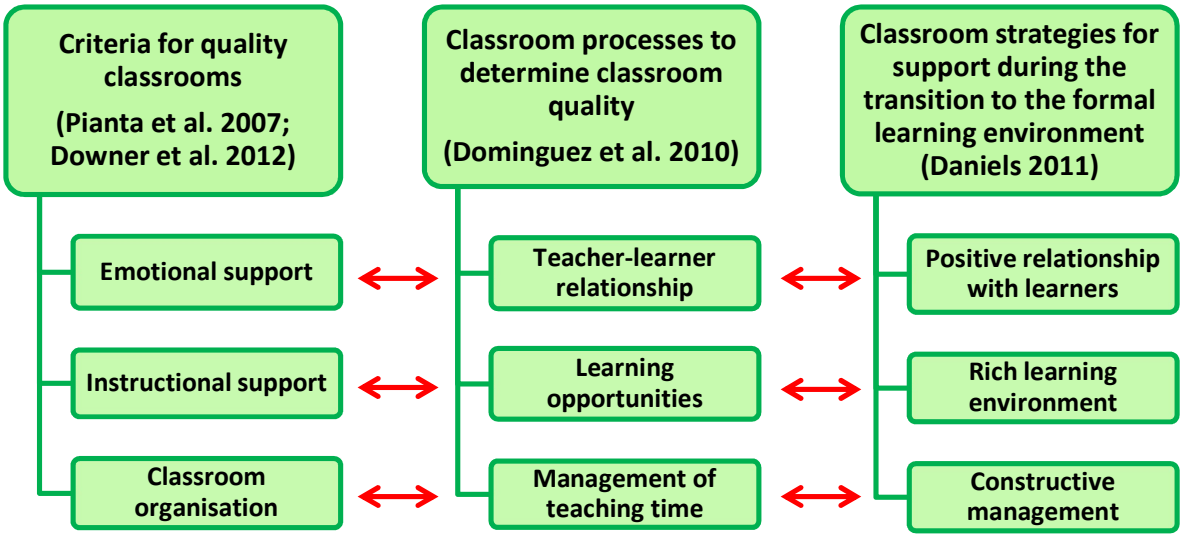


Figure 2.1: Criteria for quality classrooms (Based on Downer et al. 2012; Dominguez et al. 2010; Daniels 2011)

In classrooms with both high levels of emotional support and high levels of instructional support, learners are eager to engage in learning activities and tend to be proud of their achievements (Dominguez et al. 2010, p. 31-32). Such high quality classrooms are essential for optimal social and academic development in Grade 1, especially for learners who start their school career with a disadvantage (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta & Mashburn 2010, p. 166; Downer et al. 2012, p. 22).

Burchinal et al. (2008) explain that in order to create high quality classrooms, teachers need to adhere to the criteria for quality classrooms, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation. They need to manage their classrooms well, without being too rigid, while ensuring continuous verbal engagement with their learners. Furthermore, they need to be sensitive with regard to the diverse needs of their learners and skilfully combine their teaching with warm interactions and motivation through continuous, responsive feedback (Burchinal et al. 2008, p. 142; Downer et al. 2012, p. 21). In order to provide a clear picture of the role and

responsibility of Grade 1 teachers in creating high quality classrooms, each of the above mentioned criteria for quality classrooms is subsequently discussed in more detail. For the purpose of this discussion the terminology of Pianta et al. (2007) and Downer et al. (2012) will be used (see Figure 2.2).

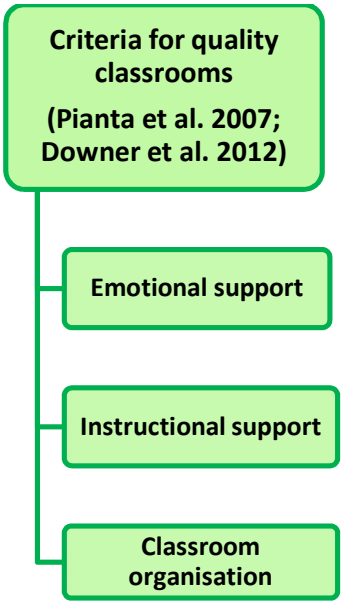


Figure 2.2: Criteria for high quality classrooms (Based on Pianta et al. 2007; Downer et al. 2012)

2.4.1 EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AS THE FIRST ESSENTIAL CRITERION FOR HIGH QUALITY GRADE 1 CLASSROOMS

Emotional support as the first criterion for classroom quality (see Figure 2.2) is closely linked to attachment theory and is in fact, not possible without a close teacher-learner relationship as discussed above (see section 2.3.2). Numerous authors of school readiness literature emphasise that positive, warm and nurturing interactions with sensitive teachers are essential in creating a secure base from where learning can take place (Baker 2006; Daniels 2011; Downer et al. 2012). Young learners need to experience their teachers as dependable and caring in order to feel emotionally secure (Daniels 2011, p. 20).

Furthermore, Grade 1 teachers need to create a learning environment that is learner-centred and supportive, through being responsive to their learners, as well as closely involved in the learning process (Hamre & Pianta 2005; Burchinal et al. 2008; Jeon et

al. 2010; Dominguez et al. 2010). Grade 1 teachers should provide enjoyable, creative and interesting learning activities, as well as opportunities for creative and supportive play, both for individual learners and in small groups (Dominguez et al. 2010; Jeon et al. 2010; Daniels 2011), with continuous encouragement and guidance (Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 5). Burchinal et al. (2010, p. 173-174) suggest that the teacher should constantly observe her learners, in order to immediately pick up any signs of confusion or discomfort, in which case she can quickly respond with the necessary support. Teachers need to be aware of their learners' emotional needs at all times (Wilson et al. 2007, p. 83), while proceeding with enthusiasm.

In order to feel emotionally secure, young learners also need guidance as far as their behaviour is concerned. Discipline in the formal learning environment plays an important role. Burchinal et al. (2010, p. 173-174) state that the teacher should monitor her learners' behaviour closely, and set an example by ensuring that her own behaviour is predictable, which will assist her in setting clear expectations for learner behaviour. In this regard Wilson et al. (2007, p. 83) point out that learners should be treated with respect, while positive interactions with peers are encouraged and self-regulatory skills are fostered. Daniels (2011, p. 20-21) further suggests that teachers make time to speak to individual learners about their interests on a regular basis, which will ensure that every learner can count on positive individual interaction with his/her teacher.

High levels of emotional support in the Grade 1 classroom promote school readiness skills and make the transition to the formal learning environment easier, especially for vulnerable learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Jeon et al. 2010; Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Ritchie, Howes & Karoly 2008). Many studies have found that positive, warm and caring learning environments enhance social development and self-regulation, while behaviour problems are reduced (Wilson et al. 2007; Jeon et al. 2010; Downer et al. 2012; Burchinal et al. 2010). Providing guidance to young learners with regard to self-regulation and expected behaviour results in low levels of conflict, which again links to attachment theory (see section 2.3.2).

Furthermore, academic skills are promoted (Burchinal et al. 2008; Burchinal et al. 2010) through high levels of emotional support in close teacher-learner relationships (Burchinal et al. 2008; Dominguez et al. 2010). Daniels (2011, p. 20) explains that

learners who feel confident and comfortable in the formal learning environment, are willing to engage in challenging learning activities. With the necessary emotional support, learners tend to stay on-task (Hamre & Pianta 2005), complete tasks successfully and experience satisfaction through learning (Dominguez et al. 2010; Baker 2006). Similarly, Berhenke et al. (2011, p. 431) claim that learners who experience positive relationships with their teachers, work hard to experience success which enhances intrinsic motivation. Experiencing positive emotions can improve the ability to pay attention, enhance memory and promote problem solving skills (Berhenke et al. 2011, p. 431). Academic achievement strengthens motivation and self-confidence, which in turn strengthens learning behaviour (Grazanio et al. 2007; Baker 2006). As a result, learners develop internal motivation to reach academic goals and independent learning behaviour is reinforced (Grazanio et al. 2007, p. 16). According to attachment theory, teachers should maintain low levels of dependency and continuously encourage their learners to act and work independently (see section 2.3.2).

By positively responding to the social and emotional needs of their learners through providing high levels of emotional support, Grade 1 teachers can ensure that their learners will adjust to the formal learning environment and benefit from formal teaching (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 954). Jennings and DiPete (2010) explain that high levels of emotional support result in enhanced social and behavioural skills, which indirectly strengthen the effect of the teacher's formal teaching of academic skills.

2.4.2 INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT AS THE SECOND ESSENTIAL CRITERION FOR HIGH QUALITY GRADE 1 CLASSROOMS

High levels of emotional support are essential for school readiness, but high quality instructional support is equally important for the development of the language and academic skills needed in the formal learning environment (Mashburn & Pianta 2006, p. 158). High levels of instructional support as the second criterion for quality Grade 1 classrooms (see Figure 2.2) are characterised by three elements, namely intensive language instruction, academic concept development and high quality feedback by the teacher (Hamre & Pianta 2005; Guo et al. 2009; Downer et al. 2012; Wilson et al. 2007).

The first step in intensive language instruction is to promote the language usage and vocabulary of the learners through the example set by the teacher's own language usage as a model for the learners (Wilson et al. 2007; Guo et al. 2009; Burchinal et al. 2010). Furthermore, the teacher should stimulate the language development of the learners by continuously encouraging them to communicate and use the language of instruction. Through positive involvement and frequent interaction, the teacher can engage the learners in language activities and conversations (Jeon et al. 2010; Burchinal et al. 2008). In order to develop the learners' reasoning skills, the teacher should encourage them to express their thoughts and ideas, while engaging in rich dialogues with them (Burchinal et al. 2008; Jeon et al. 2010). This is especially important for the vulnerable learners in a diverse classroom context who were deprived from rich language stimulation during their preschool years. Well planned literacy activities comprising of teaching phonics, language structures and comprehension should be supplemented with constant responsive feedback (Wilson et al. 2007; Downer et al. 2012). High quality language instruction will compensate for the lack of language stimulation and learning experiences during the preschool years of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 961).

The second element of instructional support, namely academic concept development entails high quality, teacher-directed interaction with learners in a rich learning environment (Wilson et al. 2007; Daniels 2011; Hamre & Pianta 2005). In order for learners to master new academic concepts successfully, teachers need to introduce these concepts systematically through direct instruction, in combination with opportunities for practical experience (Hamre & Pianta 2005; Burchinal et al. 2008). In this regard, Burchinal et al. (2008) explain that Grade 1 teachers need to provide the necessary learning materials which will enable the learners to explore and master new academic concepts. In addition, activities should be planned to expose learners to reasoning and problem solving, while the teacher continuously provides the necessary scaffolding (Burchinal et al. 2008; Hamre & Pianta 2005). For Daniels (2011, p. 20-21) a rich learning environment means the provision of learning activities in a playful manner, for example taking part in academic games or engaging in outdoor 'scientific observations'. Hamre and Pianta (2005) suggest that learners should also be prompted to engage in discussions on new academic concepts that are presented and

to link these new concepts to concepts from their own lifeworld. Doing so will assist them in mastering the necessary vocabulary to verbalise their thoughts.

The third element of instructional support is the provision of quality feedback to learners about their performance and progress (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 951). This includes positive feedback regarding their behaviour, engagement in learning activities, ideas, amount of effort and persistence when confronted with challenging tasks, as well as their understanding and mastering of new concepts (Wilson et al. 2007, p. 87-88). The teacher should ensure that the feedback is informative, clear and encouraging, when discreetly pointing out what the learners have mastered and which aspects still need to be mastered (Burchinal et al. 2008; Wilson et al. 2007). By confirming what the learners have learned and encouraging them to take the next step, the teacher can extend their thinking and understanding of academic concepts and provide the necessary scaffolding to perform on a higher level (Burchinal et al. 2010, p. 174). In order to provide effective feedback, the teacher needs to respond to the performance and progress of each learner according to his/her level of understanding. This needs to be done continuously throughout the day (Burchinal et al. 2008, p. 141).

Stanulis and Manning (2002, p. 3) emphasise that teachers should closely monitor both their verbal and nonverbal feedback to their learners, since it affects the young learners' developing sense of self-worth, which includes their emerging academic identities. Great care should be taken to monitor and adjust nonverbal feedback, including eye contact, facial expression, tone of voice and body language, since teachers are continuously sending unintentional messages of approval or disapproval to their learners. Both the verbal and nonverbal responses of the teacher should indicate warmth, closeness, interest, enthusiasm and involvement to every individual learner (Stanulis & Manning 2002, p. 7). The way in which teachers give feedback and respond to their learners, influences the way in which the learners will respond to each other inside the classroom, as well as outside the classroom. Furthermore, it determines the nature of the inner voices of the learners (either positive or negative) through which they constantly measure themselves and their achievements (Stanulis & Manning 2002, p. 3). Providing vulnerable learners with positive verbal and nonverbal feedback will help them to believe in their own abilities, which will in turn, promote intrinsic motivation and independent learning. As a result, learners develop positive academic identities and learn to value themselves and each other.

To summarise, most young learners who enter the formal learning environment will benefit from instructional support where they are encouraged to actively engage in well-structured learning activities with their peers (Downer et al. 2012, p. 23). Structuring the learning environment by setting clear goals, which are challenging but within their reach, will motivate the learners to explore. Continuous positive feedback will provide the scaffolding needed to master and apply new concepts (Downer et al. 2012, p. 23).

High quality instructional support promotes both language and academic skills (Downer et al. 2012; Burchinal et al. 2010). Daniels (2011, p. 21) argues that high levels of instructional support result in a positive attitude towards learning, which enhances the learners' capacity to master concepts. Furthermore, instructional support ensures more positive interactions between teachers and learners and strengthens motivation to learn (Hamre & Pianta 2005, p. 952). Burchinal et al. (2008, p. 141) found that by providing learners with developmentally appropriate learning activities, which are neither too difficult, nor too easy, teachers can ensure that learners will remain motivated to learn.

The social skills of young learners are also enhanced, as behavioural problems are reduced and language usage is promoted through responsive interactions with their teacher (Burchinal et al. 2008; Daniels 2011). Although all Grade 1 learners will benefit from high quality instructional support during the transition to the formal learning environment, it is crucial for vulnerable learners who lack school readiness skills.

An important issue mentioned by Guo et al. (2009), is that teaching with high levels of instructional support but without emotional support (as described in section 2.4.1), will have a negative effect on school beginners' academic progress. Without the warmth and responsiveness of a caring teacher, high academic expectations will put too much pressure on young, vulnerable learners and evoke a fear of failure. This will negatively affect the development of a strong, positive academic identity which is essential for long term academic success (Guo et al. 2009, p. 1101).

2.4.3 CLASSROOM ORGANISATION AS THE THIRD ESSENTIAL CRITERION FOR HIGH QUALITY GRADE 1 CLASSROOMS

Classroom organisation as the third criterion for classroom quality (see Figure 2.2) entails structuring the classroom with regard to class rules, routines and procedures (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 398). Sharing responsibilities in the classroom with the learners will foster a sense of belonging which is crucial in the early days of school. This can be done by including the learners when the class rules are being set and by assigning specific jobs to different learners (Daniels 2011, p. 20). Furthermore, classroom organisation includes the way in which the teacher organises social interactions in the classroom between herself and the learners, as well as amongst the learners themselves during group activities or class activities (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 398). Managing learner behaviour by implementing proactive strategies and providing clear expectations strengthens the learners' ability to regulate their own behaviour, which is essential for academic progress (Daniels 2011; Wilson et al. 2007; Dominguez et al. 2010). Another important aspect of classroom organisation is the effective use of time, in order to ensure productive teaching and learning (Hamre & Pianta 2005; Dominguez et al. 2010; Wilson et al. 2007). In this regard Burchinal et al. (2010) emphasise that teachers should see every moment of the school day as an opportunity to enhance thinking and learning. Learning is promoted in classrooms that are well organised with set routines, and therefore the academic progress of learners is much faster in well organised classrooms than in those that are less organised (Burchinal et al. 2008; Dominguez et al. 2010).

From the discussion above, it is clear that many authors agree that quality classrooms are characterised by emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation. A few additional perceptions of what quality classrooms entail, are discussed in the next section.

2.4.4 ADDITIONAL PERCEPTIONS ON CLASSROOM QUALITY FROM THE LITERATURE

2.4.4.1 Teachers' perspectives of quality classrooms for promoting school readiness

Lara-Cinisomo, Fuligni, Daugherty, Howes, and Karoly (n.d.) conducted a study in different types of preschool settings, during which focus group discussions were held with teachers in order to explore their perceptions of what is needed to promote school

readiness. Although this study has been conducted in preschool settings, the findings are relevant for Grade 1 classrooms, especially as far as vulnerable learners who lack school readiness skills are concerned. Three important issues emerged from their data analysis, namely the nature of teacher-learner interactions, the learning opportunities which are made available for young learners and the learning environment created by the teacher (Lara-Cinisomo et al. n.d., p. 3). These three aspects of early teaching, which the authors refer to as dimensions or types of preschool experiences, can be linked to the criteria for quality classrooms discussed above (see Figure 2.3).

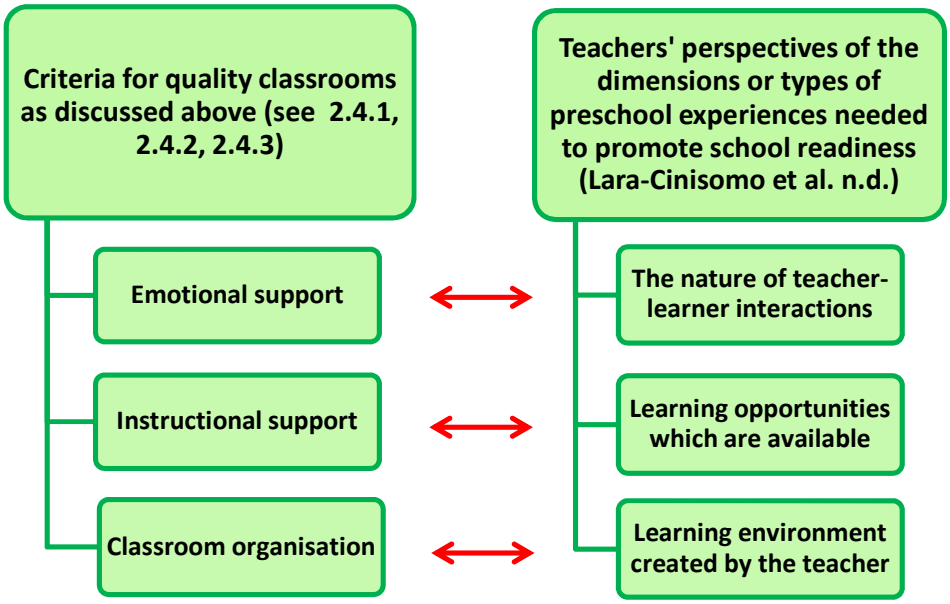


Figure 2.3: Criteria for quality classrooms compared to teachers' perspectives of the aspects needed to promote school readiness (Based on Lara-Cinisomo et al. n.d.)

Firstly, Lara-Cinisomo et al. (n.d.) found that in order to promote school readiness, the interactions between the teacher and her learners should consist of support, trust, encouragement, mutual respect and setting an example for the learners regarding socially accepted behaviour. Being supportive of the learners' emotional needs and establishing a relationship of trust which makes the learners feel safe, correlate with the close and warm teacher-learner relationship which is an essential part of attachment theory. Furthermore, encouraging individualisation will result in low levels of dependency, which is also an important aspect of attachment theory, all of which closely link with high levels of emotional support as first criterion for quality classrooms (see 2.4.1).

Secondly, Lara-Cinisomo et al. (n.d., p. 4) found that teachers perceive the learning opportunities which are available to young learners as an essential issue in promoting school readiness. In this regard both what the learners learn and how they learn, need to be considered. Learning opportunities which are beneficial for enhancing school readiness skills include hands-on activities where learners can experiment with and explore the learning environment, while creatively engaging with appropriate learning material (Lara-Cinisomo et al. n.d., p. 4). Furthermore, young learners need exposure to one-on-one activities with their teacher, as well as peer interactions and small group activities. Both teacher-directed activities, where learners are guided by the teacher while they explore, and learner-guided activities, where learners use their own initiative, are important in the early stages of education (Lara-Cinisomo et al. n.d., p. 3). These factors, which were identified by Lara-Cinisomo et al. (n.d.) as essential learning encounters in the early years of learning, can be linked to high levels of instructional support as second criterion for quality classrooms (see 2.4.2).

Similar to classroom organisation as third criterion for quality classrooms (see 2.4.3) Lara-Cinisomo et al. (n.d.) identified the learning environment as the third aspect that teachers perceive as important for promoting school readiness. According to their findings a beneficial learning environment is safe, both emotionally and physically, developmentally appropriate according to the cognitive and verbal skills of the learners and predictable with regard to routine and expectations. In addition, the learning environment should be well equipped with resources from the learners' lifeworld and the rules for socially acceptable behaviour should be clear (Lara-Cinisomo et al. n.d., p. 4).

2.4.4.2 Professionally developed standards for classroom practice

Burchinal et al. (2008, p. 141) used the Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidelines (DAP) which was developed by The National Association for the Evaluation of Young Children (NAEYC) as guidelines for promoting early learning. These guidelines include four aspects, namely positive teacher-learner relationships, the implementation of an appropriate curriculum, the provision of effective teaching and continuous assessment. According to these guidelines, positive teacher-learner relationships are regarded as central to young learners' academic success, which correlates with emotional support as criterion for quality classrooms (see 2.4.1).

Effective teaching as another aspect included in these guidelines, correlates with instructional support as one of the criteria for quality classrooms (see 2.4.2). Effective teaching entails providing optimal learning opportunities to learners by using various teaching approaches, while continuous feedback is provided to support the learners during the learning process (Burchinal et al. 2008, p. 141).

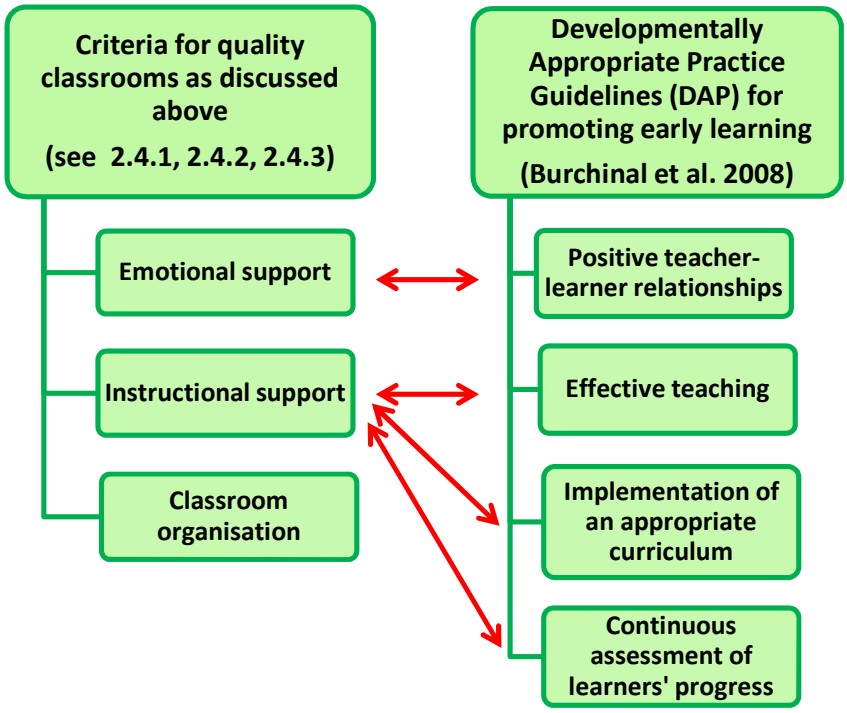


Figure 2.4: Criteria for quality classrooms compared to the Developmentally Appropriate Practice Guidelines (DAP) for promoting early learning (Based on Burchinal et al. 2008)

The other two aspects included in the DAP, namely the implementation of an appropriate curriculum and continuous assessment, can both be linked to instructional support as the second criterion for quality classrooms (see 2.4.1, 2.4.2, 2.4.3 and Figure 2.4). These aspects are very important for the provision of quality education in the early grades. Burchinal et al. (2008, p. 141) explain that a curriculum is regarded as appropriate, when both the background of the learners and their diverse levels of development are taken into consideration. Furthermore, young learners should be allowed to actively take part in their own learning process. Continuous assessment of the learners' progress as the fourth aspect of the Developmentally Appropriate

Practice Guidelines is necessary in order to provide effective instructional support according to the diverse learning needs of the learners (Burchinal et al. 2008, p. 141).

2.4.4.3 The Responsive Classroom Approach (RC Approach)

The Responsive Classroom Approach was developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC) and can be described as a "social and emotional learning intervention providing professional development for elementary teachers in the use of specific classroom practices designed to promote children's academic and social growth" (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman & Abry 2013, p. 559). The RC Approach emphasises the importance of caring teacher-learner relationships and the integration of social and academic learning (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 398) (see Figure 2.5).

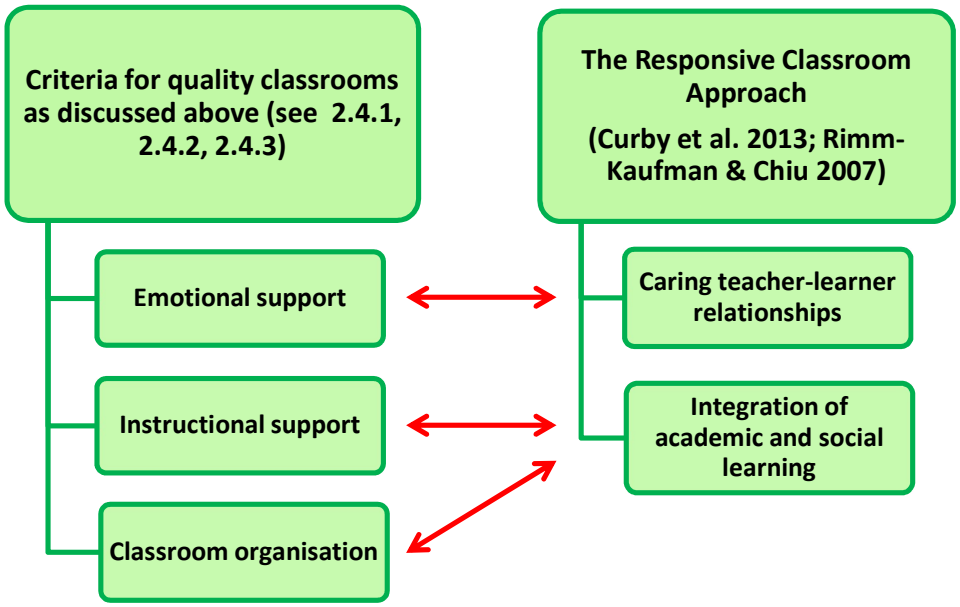


Figure 2.5: Criteria for quality classrooms compared to the Responsive Classroom Approach (Based on Curby et al. 2013; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007)

The Responsive Classroom Approach is based on seven key principles, namely:

a) Social development and academic development are equally important and should be taught simultaneously;
b) *How* the learners learn is as important as *what* they learn;
c) Cognitive development is facilitated through social interaction;

d) Critical social skills which need to be taught include self-control, empathy, responsibility, cooperation and assertiveness;
e) Teachers need to know their learners as individuals with unique developmental and cultural characteristics;
f) Teachers need to know and understand each learner's home environment and family setup;
g) How the adults work together at school, is as important as the teacher's individual competence (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 398).

Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007, p. 409) describe the Responsive Classroom Approach as a tool which can be implemented to promote close teacher-learner relationships in order to enhance academic progress and reduce problematic learner behaviour. The Responsive Classroom Approach consists of classroom practices which can be implemented to enhance the quality of teaching through holistically supporting young learners' growth and development. The focus of these classroom practices is placed specifically on emotional support and classroom organisation which includes clear expectations regarding behaviour and social goals (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007, p. 399; Curby et al. 2013, p. 559). Classroom discipline is maintained by implementing proactive rather than reactive measures. Furthermore, teachers ensure that each learner feels safe and welcome by deliberately making personal contact with every individual learner as they enter the classroom. Creating a sense of community in the classroom reduces feelings of fear and anxiety, while increasing participation and engagement in learning activities. Independent learning behaviour is fostered by providing different learning activities simultaneously and encouraging learners to choose the activities they would like to engage in (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu 2007; Curby et al. 2013).

Vulnerable learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack the essential social and emotional skills at school entry, can benefit from the Responsive Classroom Approach, since it is based on Attachment Theory (high levels of closeness, low levels of conflict and low levels of dependency) (Rimm-Kaufmann & Chiu 2007, p. 400). Training teachers to implement the Responsive Classroom Approach as part of professional development has been proven to be very successful as they achieved higher levels of self-efficacy (Rimm-Kaufmann & Chiu 2007, p. 409).

2.4.5 MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT OF CLASSROOM QUALITY WITH REGARD TO THE PROMOTION OF SCHOOL READINESS

Teacher-learner interactions which are characterised by warm and close relationships, cognitively stimulating activities and well-organised learning environments are of crucial importance in ensuring a smooth transition to the formal learning environment. Even more so in Grade 1 classrooms with vulnerable learners who lack the essential school readiness skills to cope with the social and cognitive demands of formal learning.

Various researchers in the field of school readiness (Wilson et al. 2007; Dominguez et al. 2010; Burchinal et al. 2010; Downer et al. 2012; Curby et al. 2013) make use of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). This instrument is useful when monitoring and assessing preschool and elementary classrooms in order to determine the quality of these classrooms with regard to promoting school readiness. Downer et al. (2012, p. 25) explain that the quality of classrooms can be assessed using the CLASS as rating scale by observing the teacher-learner interactions approximately every 30 minutes during a school day. The CLASS scale for the elementary grades consists of ten items which are divided into three categories, namely emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support (see Table 2.1). These categories, which are also referred to as factors or domains (Downer et al. 2012) were discussed above as the criteria for quality classrooms (see 2.4.1, 2.4.2, 2.4.3).

Table 2.1: The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) for the elementary grades (Adapted from Wilson et al. 2007; Dominguez et al. 2010; Downer et al. 2012; Teachstone Training 2015)

Emotional Support	A positive classroom climate characterised by enthusiasm, enjoyment and respect
	A negative classroom climate characterised by anger, aggression and harshness
	Teacher sensitivity which entails providing comfort, reassurance and encouragement that foster independence
	Classroom over-control where activities are rigidly structured with a disregard for learners' perspectives, resulting in high levels of dependence

Classroom Organisation	Behaviour management by preventing and redirecting misbehaviour
	Ensuring productivity through effective time management and consistently involving learners in learning activities
	Provision of developmentally appropriate activities to maximise learners' attention, interest and active engagement
Instructional Support	Concept development by implementing strategies to enhance learners' thinking skills and creativity, using problem solving, integration and instructional discussions
	Quality of verbal feedback about learners' work, comments and ideas
	Language modelling and language stimulation through teaching phonics, language structures and comprehension

When using the CLASS, rating is done on a 7-point Likert scale with 6 or 7 indicating high quality teacher-learner interactions; 3, 4, or 5 indicating moderate quality teacher-learner interactions; and 1 or 2 indicating low quality teacher-learner interactions (Dominguez et al. 2010; Downer et al. 2012; Teachstone Training 2015). According to Downer et al. (2012, p. 30) their research findings confirm that the CLASS is suitable for application in diverse classrooms, both ethnically and linguistically.

The CLASS is implemented as continuous professional development with the purpose to support teachers in improving the quality of their teaching. This is done by observing and monitoring the teacher-learner relationships and interactions in a classroom and discussing the findings with the teacher. Thereafter strategies for improvement are discussed and implemented. This process is similar to the cyclical process of participatory action research where classroom practice is evaluated and discussed, possible intervention strategies are planned and implemented, which is then followed by another evaluation process to determine the success of the implementation (see section 1.8.2.3). Self-reflection is an integral part of the cyclical process and an essential part of professional development. The monitoring and assessment of classroom quality for the purpose of the professional development of Grade 1 teachers is currently not done in the South African context.

2.5 THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In order to develop positive relationships with their learners and promote learning, teachers need to create a safe and positive learning environment, organise their classrooms well and encourage their learners to engage in learning activities (see 2.4.1, 2.4.2 & 2.4.3). Baker (2006, p. 225) points out that the professional capacity of teachers to adhere to these criteria for classroom quality, is affected by their personalities, prior teaching experiences, as well as their teacher-learner relationship history. Graziano et al. (2007, p. 15) found that teachers are likely to perceive learners who lack the necessary social and emotional skills to adapt to the formal learning environment, as difficult to manage. They tend to develop negative relationships with such learners and find it tiring to monitor their behaviour or support them with learning activities (Graziano et al. 2007, p. 15). As indicated in the discussion above (see 2.3.3), negative teacher-learner relationships often lead to negative classroom experiences for young learners, resulting in poor academic progress and the development of behavioural problems. In this regard Jeon et al. (2010, p. 914) explain that if teachers understand the effect of early learning experiences on the social and academic development of Grade 1 learners, they will take every precaution to ensure positive learning experiences for each individual learner.

Teaching Grade 1 learners with diverse educational needs, especially vulnerable learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not ready for formal learning, is challenging. Teachers need to have a good understanding of the effect of insufficient school readiness on the emotional, social and academic development of Grade 1 learners in the formal learning environment. They need to understand their role and responsibility in strengthening the school readiness skills of learners entering the formal learning environment with a disadvantage. Furthermore, they need to have knowledge of tools and intervention strategies (Azzi-Lessing 2010, p. 7) which can be implemented as early as possible in order to prevent these young learners from developing behavioural problems and negative academic identities. The training, professional experience and classroom practices of teachers are regarded as important variables in determining the development of social and academic skills in young learners (Hindman et al. 2010, p. 237). Azzi-Lessing (2010) suggests that in addition to pre-service training, teachers also need continuous training in addressing these challenges. In this regard Jeon et al. (2010, p. 932) emphasise the need for

continuous professional development of teachers, focussing on their involvement and interaction with their learners in order to ensure positive early learning experiences for every learner.

2.6 SUMMARY

In Chapter 2 the role and responsibility of Grade 1 teachers in providing quality education to learners with diverse educational needs were discussed, with specific reference to learners who start their school careers with a disadvantage. The needs and vulnerability of these learners were pointed out and the essentiality of close, positive teacher-learner relationships in promoting the social and academic development of such learners was explored through the lens of attachment theory. Teacher-learner relationships characterised by high levels of closeness, low levels of conflict and low levels of dependency were discussed as a crucial resource in promoting school readiness in Grade 1. The long term effect of teacher-learner relationships on the academic progress of learners was emphasised and the need for assessment of teacher-learner relationships for the purpose of professional development was pointed out. Emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation as criteria for classroom quality were examined and compared to other perceptions on what quality classrooms should consist of. The necessity of monitoring and assessing classroom quality for the purpose of promoting school readiness in Grade 1 was suggested as the need for the continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers emerged throughout the discussion in Chapter 2.

Consequently, the focus of the next chapter, Chapter 3, is on the continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness. The discussion is underpinned by the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development by Fuller (1969), as the concerns of teachers about themselves, their teaching task and the effect of their teaching on their learners, form the basis from where the need for continuous training and professional development emerges. In addition, the model for action research (CRASP I) and the model for the professional development of teachers through action research (CRASP II), by Zuber-Skerrit (1992) are used in exploring the professional development of teachers who act as research partners in participatory action research projects.

CHAPTER 3

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Research findings indicate that continuous professional development of and support for Grade 1 teachers can enhance close teacher-learner relationships and promote the readiness of young learners for formal learning (Palermo et al. 2007, p. 407, 418). Wilson et al. (2007, p. 94) claim that the professional development of Grade 1 teachers is crucial in providing the emotional and instructional support needed by vulnerable learners at the beginning of their school careers. In Chapter 2 the role and responsibility of Grade 1 teachers to establish attachment through close and warm relationships with their learners in order to provide quality education were discussed. The criteria for quality classrooms, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation were examined and the need for continuous professional development emerged from this discussion.

In Chapter 3 the need for continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness is further examined through the lens of Fuller's (1969) Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD). Different practices of professional development for teachers as it developed over time are discussed and the success thereof is indicated. The focus is then shifted to the professional development of teachers through participatory action research (PAR) as an approach that is dynamic, process-orientated and based on the needs of the individual teacher (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 76-79). The benefits of this research approach for teacher development are pointed out and the process of PAR is discussed. The model for action research (CRASP I) and the model for the professional development of teachers through action research (CRASP II), by Zuber-Skerrit (1992) are used as theoretical underpinning for this part of the discussion. Teachers as research partners in PAR studies and the characteristics of teachers that play a role in the success of these professional development research projects are discussed.

3.2 THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS

Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds often enter the formal learning environment without the required level of school readiness (see 2.2). Research findings have proven that the quality of teacher-learner interactions plays an important role in supporting vulnerable learners who start their school careers with a backlog (Hamre, Pianta, Burchinal, Field, LoCasale-Crouch, Downer, Howes, LaParo & Scott-Little 2012, p. 89-90). The need for continuous professional development of teachers to promote the individual learning experiences of their learners is multi-dimensional and is emphasised by numerous authors of school readiness literature (Jeon et al. 2010, p. 932; Downer et al. 2009, p. 434; Pianta, DeCoster, Cabell, Burchinal, Hamre, Downer, LoCasale-Crouch, Williford & Howes 2014, p. 500).

3.2.1 THE MULTI-DIMENSIONAL NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS TO PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS

School readiness is defined as a multi-dimensional concept which includes the personal readiness of the Grade 1 learner for formal education, as well as the readiness of the school to accommodate learners with diverse needs and the readiness of the parents and the community to support young learners during the transition to the formal learning environment (see 1.5.2). The Grade 1 teacher is regarded as the key role player who should initiate early intervention for vulnerable learners as well as collaboration with the other role players involved in the development and learning process of school beginners (see 1.6.2 – 1.6.4). Providing professional development for Grade 1 teachers will promote all aspects mentioned in this definition of school readiness (see Figure 3.1).

Continuous professional development will firstly enable Grade 1 teachers to create high quality inclusive classrooms characterised by warm teacher-learner relationships and high levels of emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation (see 2.4.1 – 2.4.3). In doing so, the readiness of the school and particularly the Grade 1 teacher to accommodate and support vulnerable learners at school entry, will be strengthened.

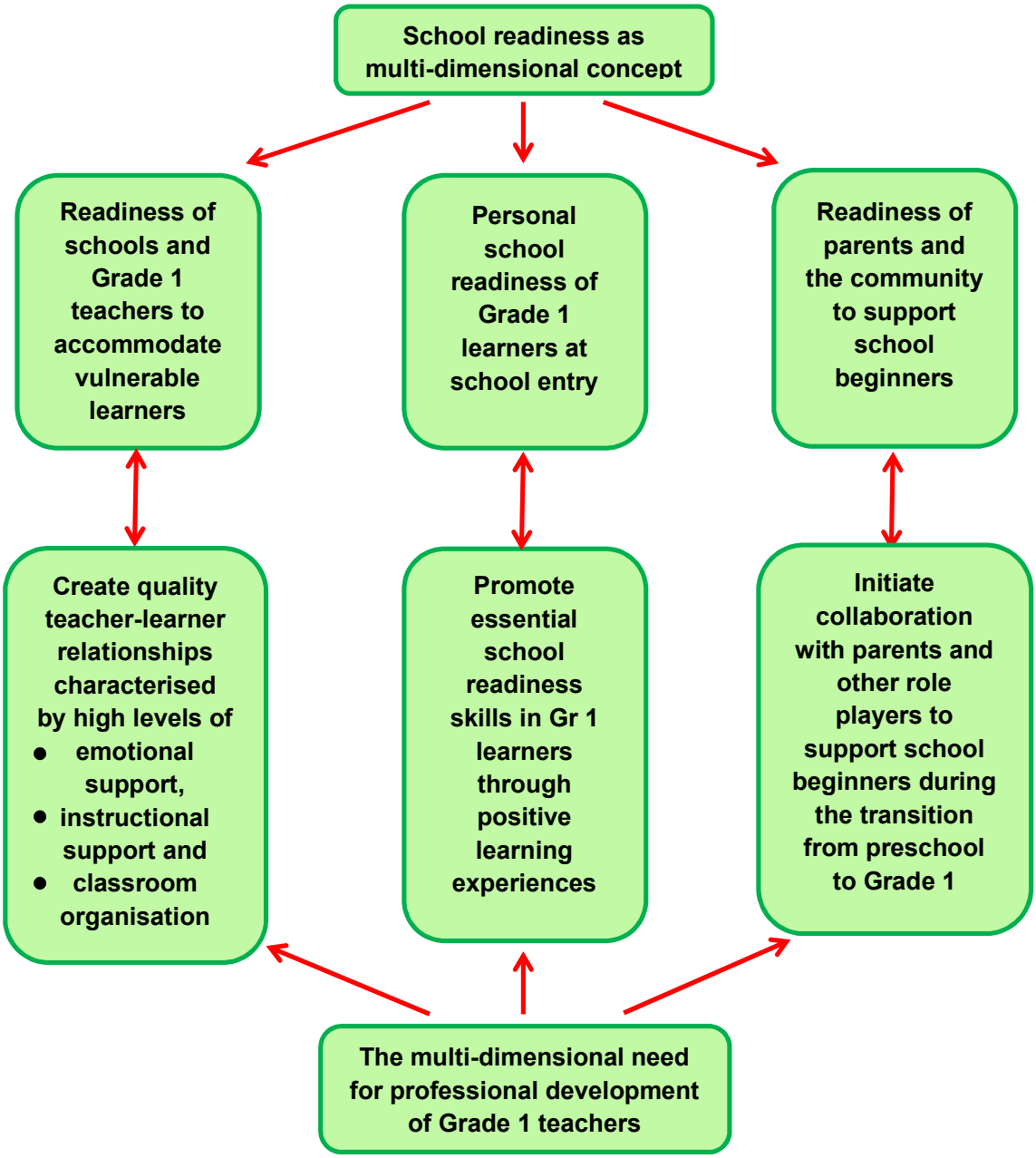


Figure 3.1 The multi-dimensional need for professional development of Grade 1 teachers

Secondly, several authors of school readiness literature refer to the link between high quality teacher-learner interactions in the early grades and the progress of the learners, both academically and socially (Downer, Kraft-Sayre & Pianta 2009, p. 322; Jeon et al. 2010, p. 932; Pianta et al. 2014, p. 500). Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, Justice, and Pianta (2010, p. 180) explain that high quality emotional and instructional

support on a daily basis are essential for the development of social, language and academic competencies in young children. They continue by claiming that in-service professional development is an effective way to improve teacher-learner relationships and the quality of classroom interactions (Mashburn et al. 2010, p. 180). Professional development of Grade 1 teachers will enable them to create high quality learning environments which will promote the school readiness skills of young learners who start their school careers with a backlog.

In the third place, Grade 1 teachers have the responsibility to initiate collaboration with parents and other role players from the community who are involved in supporting young learners during the transition to the formal learning environment (Doyle et al. 2012, p. 148). There is a strong focus in school readiness literature on strengthening collaboration between teachers and parents through the professional development of Grade 1 teachers. This aspect, however, will not be discussed in more detail, since the focus of this study was on the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to enhance high quality teacher-learner interactions in the classroom and in doing so, promote the school readiness skills of Grade 1 learners. The following discussion on research findings illustrates the multi-dimensional need for the continuous professional development of teachers.

In a study conducted by Hindman, Erhart and Wasik (2012, p. 782-783) research findings indicated that the gap between learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers escalates over time, especially as far as language development is concerned. For example, learners who enter the formal learning environment without an extended vocabulary and a sound knowledge of the meaning of words are unable to benefit from reading instruction, due to insufficient word recognition and poor reading comprehension. By the time they reach Grade 4, up to 50% of learners are unable to read fluently (Hindman et al. 2012, p. 782-783). Since learning opportunities for such learners are limited at home, teachers need to be thoroughly trained to provide structured learning environments with plenty of word-learning opportunities, which include both suitable activities and the necessary learning materials. Furthermore, high quality formal as well as informal classroom instruction is needed to support learners in their individual learning experiences with the resources available (Hindman et al. 2012, p. 782-783). According to these authors, intensive professional development is seen as a “key resource” in promoting the

language development of vulnerable learners. Pre-service training of teachers is important, but not sufficient in preparing teachers for the reality of supporting learners with diverse needs in an inclusive classroom.

3.2.2 THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO SUPPLEMENT PRE-SERVICE TRAINING OF TEACHERS

Research findings have shown that without continuous professional development teacher-learner interactions in the early grades are less than ideal and that instructional support is insufficient with regards to language development, concept development and the feedback provided to learners (Pianta et al. 2014, p. 500). Similarly, Hamre et al. (2012, p. 89-90) found that despite numerous research efforts and large investments in early childhood education, the quality of teacher-learner interactions are still well below the ideal level of quality education which is desperately needed by learners from disadvantaged backgrounds in preparation for formal learning. Downer et al. (2009, p. 323) emphasise that average instead of high quality teacher-learner interactions and instructional support cause great concern, even in classrooms where teachers are well qualified, experienced and using an approved curriculum.

It is clear from the research findings of the above mentioned studies, that initial pre-service training is not sufficient to prepare teachers for the daunting task of supporting learners from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack school readiness skills when entering the formal learning environment (Downer et al. 2009, p. 433-434). This alarming trend accentuates the need for continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers, especially as far as school readiness and language development are concerned (Downer et al. 2009, p. 323). Hughes (2010, p. 50) supports this argument when claiming that classroom quality is determined by the quality of teacher-learner interactions, and not only by teachers' pre-service training and qualifications.

3.2.3 THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS THROUGH THE LENS OF THE CONCERNS BASED MODEL OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT (CBMoTD)

While conducting a study on the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1, Bruwer (2014) found that the participating teachers were concerned about the school readiness levels of their Grade 1 learners and the fact that the curriculum

was inaccessible to their learners. They were also concerned about the traumatic effect thereof on their learners and the discouragement and failure their learners were experiencing. They expressed an overwhelming need for support from parents, district officials and the Department of Basic Education (DBE). According to them, the district officials were not prepared to listen to them and the only feedback they received from the DBE was critique when their learners did not perform well in the Annual National Assessment (DBE in Bruwer 2014, p. 102-105). These teachers needed to voice their concerns. They needed to be heard by people who could support them in searching for solutions and addressing their concerns.

According to the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD), which was developed by Fuller (1969), three stages of teachers' concerns can be identified, namely *self, task* and *impact* concerns. As explained in Chapter 1 (see 1.7.2), *self* concerns include teachers' feelings of adequacy in dealing with problematic issues in their classrooms, *task* concerns include teachers' responsibilities in providing quality education to their learners and *impact* concerns include teachers' ability to support their learners in reaching their potential (Fuller 1969; 1970; 1974) (see Figure 3.2). Findings from the above mentioned study (Bruwer 2014) indicate that the participating teachers were concerned about their own competency to successfully teach the vulnerable learners they worked with, their responsibility to implement the curriculum which they regarded as inaccessible to their learners and the devastating impact it had on their learners (see Figure 3.2).

From the concerns teachers have about *themselves*, their *teaching task* and the *impact they have on their learners' development*, emerges the need for continuous professional development (see Figure 1.1 and Figure 3.2). For this reason, a professional development programme for Grade 1 teachers, with the aim to promote school readiness, should use the concerns of the teachers involved as point of departure.

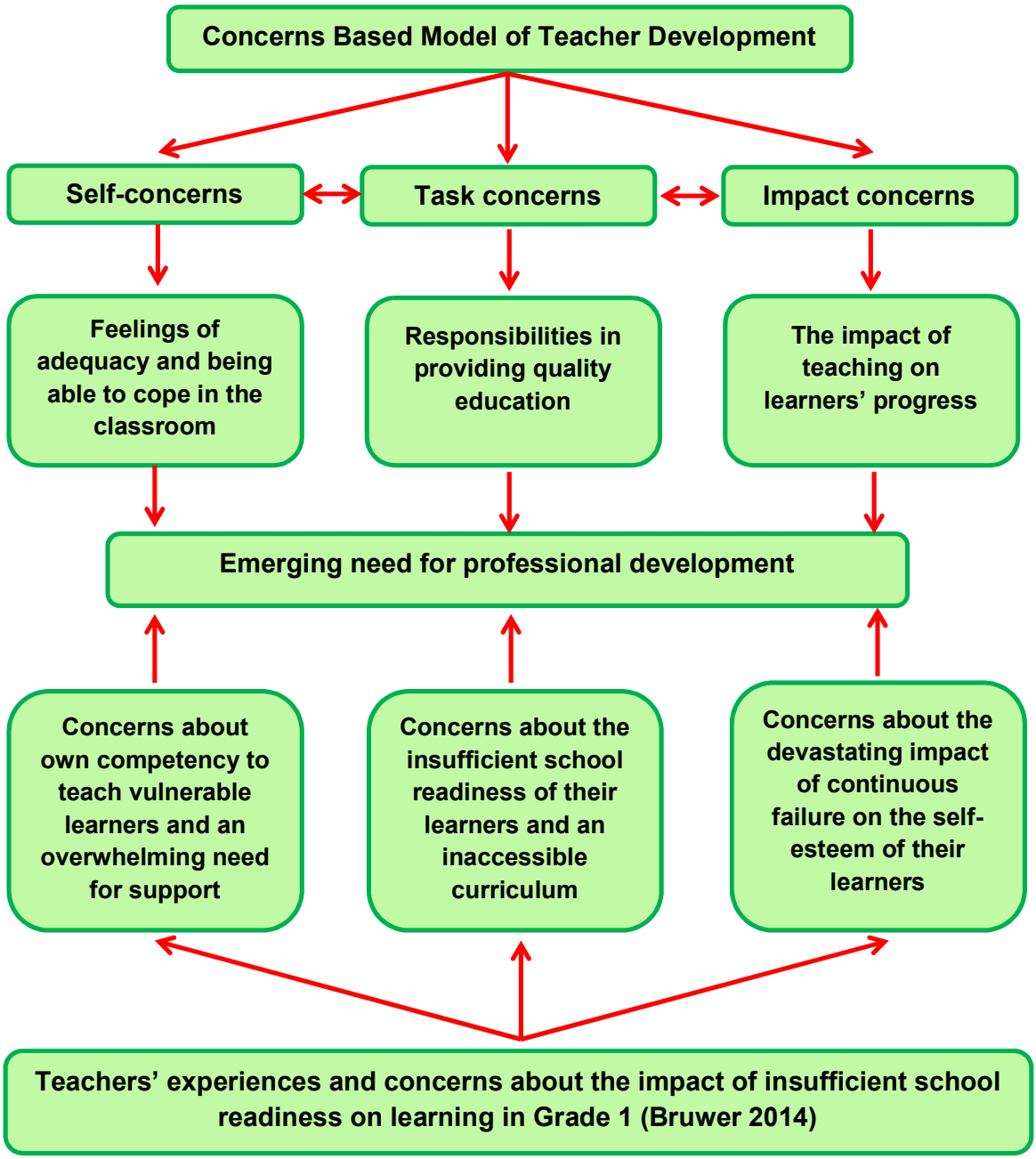


Figure 3.2: The need for professional development of Grade 1 teachers through the lens of the CBMoTD

3.2.4 THE FOCUS OF THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS

As indicated above, the quality of teacher-learner interactions has a direct impact on the development of young learners, especially in inclusive classrooms. Therefore, continuous professional development with an emphasis on effective teacher-learner interactions is needed, in order to ensure high quality education in the early grades (Pianta et al. 2014, p. 500). Margot et al. (2011, p. 14) suggest that teachers involved

with young learners, should have a clear understanding of the concept of school readiness and the principles underpinning early intervention. Furthermore, they should have a thorough knowledge of the features of learner readiness, reliable assessment of school readiness, as well as intervention strategies that will promote school readiness in vulnerable learners and enhance their opportunities for long term academic success (Margot et al. 2011, p. 4).

Jeon et al. (2010, p. 914) emphasise that teachers should be trained in observing and assessing the quality of individual learners' participation in learning activities and the quality of their interactions with their teachers and peers. This will enable them to identify and address the diverse needs of individual learners (Jeon et al. 2010, p. 934). In addition, teachers need guidance and support with the implementation of learning activities, rich conversations and high quality interactions with their learners in order to enhance the individual learning experiences of each learner (Downer et al. 2009, p. 323).

Authors of school readiness literature (Hindman et al. 2012, p. 781-782) accentuate the fact that language development should be regarded as a priority, especially as far as learners from disadvantaged backgrounds are concerned. These learners often enter the formal learning environment with a backlog, including poor language acquisition and limited vocabulary. The gap between them and their more advantaged peers expands with time and they tend to fall further behind, increasing the risk of academic failure and grade retention (Hindman et al. 2012, p. 781-782). In order to counteract this long-term effect of insufficient language development, Grade 1 teachers should provide effective language instruction to compensate for the backlog of these vulnerable learners. Teachers need to be trained to promote early language and literacy skills, since learners with insufficient language development need more guidance and opportunities to hear and use new words. In quality inclusive classrooms that are characterised by high levels of instructional support (which includes intensive language instruction, concept development and extensive feedback) the vocabulary of disadvantaged learners will rapidly expand and enable them to catch up with their peers (Hindman et al. 2012, p. 782-785).

3.3 TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT PRACTICES OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

The quality of education is determined by teacher-learner interactions but, as indicated in the previous section, neither pre-service training, nor teaching experience can guarantee classrooms of good quality. Even in classrooms where teachers are well qualified, experienced and using approved curricula, there is a vast difference in the quality of the interactions between the teachers and their learners (Downer et al. 2009, p. 322). Quality education depends on continuous professional development and training in teacher-learner interactions and instructional support, in order to enhance the individual learning experiences of learners (Jeon et al. 2010, p. 930).

Guo et al. (2010, p. 1094) claim that one of the most important factors in determining the level of classroom quality is the teachers themselves, but emphasise that the acquired qualifications and years of experience of teachers, do not necessarily guarantee the effectiveness of their interactions with their learners. High levels of self-efficacy obtained through continuous professional development however, has been proven to positively predict higher quality of instruction, which consequently leads to a positive effect on learner performance (Guo et al. 2010, p. 1094).

3.3.1 OBTAINING HIGHER LEVELS OF SELF-EFFICACY THROUGH CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TO IMPROVE CLASSROOM QUALITY AND PROMOTE SCHOOL READINESS

Evolving from the social cognitive theory of Bandura, self-efficacy can be defined as the confidence in one's own abilities to plan and perform actions which are necessary in order to achieve desired goals (Guo et al. 2010, p. 1095). When the concept of self-efficacy is applied to teachers, it refers to the teachers' beliefs that they have the ability to teach, support and shape each learner according to his/her potential. When teachers lack confidence in their own abilities, they may be reluctant to take up the responsibility for guiding and motivating their learners (Guo et al. 2010, p. 1095).

Findings from a study that explored the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 (Bruwer 2014; see 1.2), indicated that the learners were traumatised by the expectations of the Grade 1 curriculum for which they were not ready. The teachers who participated in this study were extremely concerned about

the fact that they were expected to implement a curriculum that seemed to be inaccessible to their learners and the overwhelming negative impact thereof on the learners. The teachers also expressed their feelings of helplessness and desperation in trying to find support from education authorities. These teachers did not receive any support in the form of professional development (Bruwer 2014). Looking at these research findings through the lens of the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD), the teachers who participated in this study were concerned about their task, the impact of their teaching on their learners as well as their own abilities to remedy the situation (see 3.2.3). The low levels of self-efficacy experienced by these teachers, accentuates the urgent need for continuous professional development for Grade 1 teachers in the South African context (Bruwer 2014).

According to Guo et al. (2010, p. 1101) continuous professional development aiming to promote teacher performance through strengthening teacher-learner relationships and interactions, will lead to higher levels of teacher self-efficacy. High levels of self-efficacy will lead to high classroom quality and eventually to improved academic performance and social competency of learners. In conducting a study to explore the relation between teacher self-efficacy and classroom quality, Guo et al. (2010) found that teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy tend to have warm relationships with their learners. These teachers also tend to create emotionally supportive learning environments. Both these aspects are characteristics of high quality classrooms and are beneficial for the academic progress of the learners. Furthermore, they found that teachers with high levels of self-efficacy are prepared to make adjustments in their teaching practice according to challenges that might arise. They will strive to improve their teaching to the benefit of their learners and in doing so, enhance the quality of their classrooms (Guo et al. 2010, p. 1095).

High levels of teacher self-efficacy will however, only be beneficial for learners in classrooms that are also characterised by high levels of emotional support. Guo et al. (2010, p. 1101) warn that without the necessary emotional support, learners might experience the high expectations set by their teachers as overwhelming, leading to a fear of failure which will negatively influence their academic progress. Continuous professional development of teachers should therefore be planned carefully, always keeping the needs of the learners in mind.

3.3.2 DIFFERENT MODELS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS AND THE CHANGES THAT ARE TAKING PLACE (RE-CONCEPTUALISING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS)

Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre and Justice (2008, p. 433) state that professional development for teachers tended to be ineffective and incoherent in the past. When teachers were confronted with challenges in their classrooms they would informally ask for advice from colleagues in the staffroom, look for learning opportunities on their own or just rely on their own previous experiences to solve problems (Pianta et al. 2008, p. 433). The most common method of in-service training or professional development of teachers by district officials was through presenting workshops that were based on knowledge and techniques. According to Downer et al. (2009, p. 324) this type of in-service training was usually planned as short-term events and had numerous limitations. In the first place, the content of the workshops was often vague, irrelevant and not suitable for the reality in the classroom. Secondly, teachers attending these workshops were usually expected to listen passively, as no opportunities for collaboration were provided. In the third place there were little or no follow-up interventions to support the teachers after the workshops (Downer et al. 2009, p. 324; Pianta et al. 2008, p. 433).

In a study investigating the development and assessment of models for the professional development of teachers, findings indicated that teachers regarded in-service training workshops that were presented by district officials as neither enjoyable, nor relevant for their daily teaching (Downer et al. 2009, p. 325). The teachers stated that they would prefer a more interactive and dynamic approach to professional development that is relevant to their daily experiences and interactions with their learners. Research findings such as these initiated the move away from knowledge-based teacher training that is static, towards a model for professional development which is characterised by mentoring, guidance and support (Downer et al. 2009, p. 325).

Pianta et al. (2014, p. 500) explain that the focus for the professional development of teachers has lately moved to the teachers' interactions with their learners in the classroom. They point out that focussing on the teaching skills of teachers enhances both the competency of the teachers and the development of the learners.

Furthermore, a strong focus on teacher-learner interactions promotes teachers' implementation of instructional support as well as their provision of emotional support to their learners (Pianta et al. 2014, p. 500), which are both essential for high quality classrooms (see 2.4.1 & 2.4.2). Two successful models for the professional development of teachers which are currently being implemented internationally, are the model for Exceptional Coaching in Early Language and Literacy (ExCELL) and the MyTeachingPartner (MTP) programme.

The ExCELL (Exceptional Coaching in Early Language and Literacy) model was developed to train preschool teachers in promoting the language and literacy development of their learners in preparation for entering the formal learning environment (Hindman et al. 2012, p. 781-782). The focus is placed on oral language usage and the expansion of vocabulary as the basis for language, academic and social development. This professional development programme is implemented over a period of two years. During the first year the teachers receive intensive training and coaching in the implementation of the intervention strategies, which is followed by support for individual teachers during the second year. Successful teaching strategies are explained and demonstrated by expert coaches during small group workshops and support is provided to teachers individually. The intervention strategies are aimed at promoting enriched teacher-learner and learner-learner conversations which will enhance instructional support in the classroom. Teachers are guided in providing language-rich instruction which correlates with their two weekly themes and in doing so, gradually exposing their learners to new vocabulary. Learners' progress is assessed on a regular basis and support is given to learners who are struggling (Hindman et al. 2012, p. 783-784, 787).

MyTeachingPartner (MTP) is a professional development programme for teachers focusing on the quality of emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation (see 2.4) to promote teacher-learner interactions (Mashburn et al. 2010, p. 182). Research findings from several studies indicate that instructional support, consisting of language development, concept development and constructive feedback, is needed to enhance the academic progress of learners. Furthermore, it was found that professional development programmes making use of coaching or video-based coaching and feedback, are effective in improving teacher-learner interactions. Teachers in the MTP professional development programme have access

to video clips of high quality teacher-learner interactions, which are discussed and evaluated. Viewing and analysing the video clips create opportunities for observing high quality examples of emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation. Doing so has proven to promote teacher-learner relationships and interactions, resulting in better learning opportunities and improved academic progress (Downer et al. 2009, p. 322).

In addition to viewing and discussing the video clips, individual consultation sessions based on the CLASS framework (see 2.4.5 and Table 2.1) are arranged with individual teachers taking part in the MTP professional development programme. During such consultation sessions teachers receive continuous, non-evaluative feedback on classroom interactions that were video-taped from their own classrooms, as well as advice on the implementation of activities and intervention strategies that promote learning outcomes, especially those that enhance language development (Downer et al. 2009, p. 434-435; Mashburn et al. 2010, p. 179, 182). Results from MTP programmes show improvement in the quality of teacher-learner interactions, as well as the language proficiency and academic progress of the learners. Pianta et al. (2014, p. 501) add that teachers who were exposed to the MTP model of professional development tend to provide more constructive and continuous feedback to their learners, promote their learners' language development and encourage higher-order thinking in their classrooms. Downer et al. (2009, p. 434-435) point out that the opportunity teachers have to establish a relationship or partnership with someone who is knowledgeable and supportive, but at the same time non-judgmental, adds to the success of the MTP approach.

Recent research indicates clearly that professional development of teachers needs to move away from knowledge-based workshops where teachers are passive listeners (Mashburn et al. 2010, p. 180). For professional development programmes to be effective in promoting quality classrooms, the focus needs to be on intensive teacher training that is sustainable and based on classroom practice. Furthermore, professional development workshops need to be characterised by dynamic collaboration and ongoing guidance and support, in order to ensure high quality teaching and learning (Mashburn et al. 2010, p. 180; Pianta et al. 2008, p. 433) (see Figure 3.3). Participatory action research is an effective method in achieving this and was therefore used in this study.

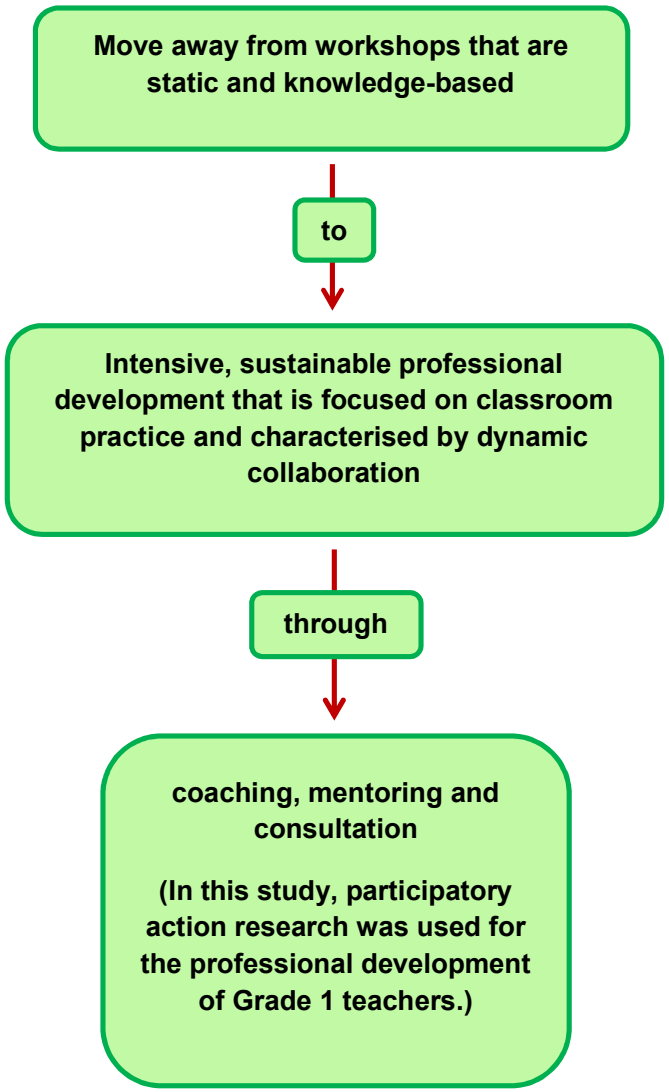


Figure 3.3 Re-conceptualising the professional development of teachers (Mashburn et al. 2010; Pianta et al. 2008)

3.4 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Kim and Kang (2012, p. 912-913) explain that professional development through workshops initiated by district officials often results in teachers being instructed to implement teaching strategies in their classrooms which have been decided on by persons from outside a classroom. Such changes are not initiated by the teachers themselves. The new teaching strategies which have to be implemented were not developed by the teachers and are therefore not based on teachers' classroom experiences. Furthermore, these workshops seldom provide opportunities for personal

growth through self-reflection (Kim & Kang 2012, p. 912-913). As an alternative for the professional development of teachers Kim and Kang (2012, p. 904) suggest “teacher research” which they define as qualitative research, initiated by the teachers themselves, using their own experiences and perspectives to improve their teaching practice. In this study “teacher research” is referred to as participatory action research (PAR) and is implemented as tool for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers, as well as the personal learning and growth of participating Grade 1 teachers. Furthermore, PAR is used as tool for establishing a relationship of trust between the Grade 1 teachers and the researcher and to initiate collaboration amongst the participating teachers.

3.4.1 PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS TOOL FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS

When participatory action research is used as a tool for the professional development of teachers, the teachers act as research partners and get the opportunity to explore and address issues in their classrooms which they experience as problematic (see 1.8.1). The research project is designed in collaboration with the teachers and they each conduct an action research project in their own classrooms, while being supported by the researcher (Duncan & Conner 2013, p. 154). Through participatory action research, teachers get opportunities to reflect on their own teaching and adapt their own teaching philosophies where necessary, instead of implementing a curriculum or teaching strategies that were compiled by officials with whom they have little or no contact (Kim & Kang 2012, p. 904, 913). As research partners, teachers can initiate their own professional development while strengthening their independence and enhancing their professionalism (Hughes 2010, p. 51).

Reflecting on their own teaching in order to promote their relationships and interactions with their learners, leads to personal growth which results in changes within the individual teachers, their teaching methods, philosophies and attitudes towards their learners (Pill 2005, p. 178; Kim & Kang, 2012, p. 904). Processes of growth and change happen over time, therefore the professional development of teachers through participatory action research should be planned over months, rather than days (Hughes, 2010, p. 51). With support, teachers can internalise changes that will promote school readiness within six months, which is regarded by Heller, Rice,

Boothe, Sidell, Vaughn, Keyes and Nagle (2012, p. 937) as a relatively short period of time.

As mentioned before, teachers have a vast amount of professional knowledge and practical experience (see 1.8.1) and may only need the researcher as facilitator to guide them through the cyclic process of participatory action research. Pill (2005, p. 179) however, points out that the role of theory should not be overlooked and recommends a balance between learning from own experiences and those of others by taking note of previous studies. In this regard, the researcher has an important role to play in providing knowledge about relevant theories and previous research, which can assist the teachers in rationalising their thoughts and decisions for change (Pill 2005, p. 179). In addition, Pianta et al. (2008, p. 433) recommend that in order to ensure high quality professional development of teachers, the researcher should guide the teachers in setting objectives for improving their teaching by focussing on specific interactions with their learners. Valid methods of measurement should be implemented to determine whether these aims were reached (Pianta et al. 2008, p. 433), while opportunities for continuous reflection on classroom-based feedback are provided (Hughes 2010, p. 51) (see 2.4.5 and Table 2.1).

3.4.2 PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS TOOL FOR PERSONAL LEARNING AND GROWTH OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS

Participatory action research is an effective tool for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers, as it recognises the needs of the teachers as point of departure (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 85). Issues that teachers experience as problematic in their daily teaching are discussed in collaboration with the researcher and possible solutions are considered. The teachers set their own aims according to the changes they wish to make and initiate the intervention strategies which are necessary in order to address their needs in the classroom. Through applying the chosen intervention strategies in their classrooms, as well as the knowledge they have gained during the collaborative discussions, new knowledge is gained through new experiences (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 86-87). An essential step in this personal learning journey is reflection on both professional and personal experiences (Kim & Kang, 2012, p. 903).

Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 84-85) emphasise that critical self-reflection is an important part of the professional development programme, as it strengthens the teachers' self-awareness during their learning experiences. Through reflecting on their own teaching, they become aware of the aspects of their teaching which are good, and those they can improve on (Duncan 2013, p. 145). In this regard Parnell (2011, p. 2) explains that through self-reflection and analysis of experiences in the classroom, teachers come to understand their own development. This learning process is further enhanced by sharing personal and professional experiences with colleagues during collaborative reflection sessions. As this personal learning journey progresses, teachers become increasingly willing to take on the responsibility of analysing and improving on their own teaching practice through constant critical self-reflection (Parnell 2011, p. 2).

Research findings (Brown et al. 2009, p. 494-500; Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 85; Raver, Jones, Li-Grining, Metzger, Champion & Sardin 2008, p. 11) indicate that teachers experience such learning journeys as empowering. Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 85) mention that after a few months of taking part in a participatory action research project, teachers expressed their feelings of renewed energy, enthusiasm and confidence to take on the challenges they face in their classrooms. It was clear that their levels of self-efficacy were increasing as they were equipped with new knowledge, understandings and skills which made an immediate difference in their day-to-day teaching.

Similarly, Raver et al. (2008, p. 11) found that deciding on new intervention strategies, applying them and joining in collaborative reflection about the success thereof, lead to the improvement of teaching skills. Furthermore, the emotional support teachers experienced during the participatory action research sessions seemed to counteract feelings of "burnout" which were caused by overwhelming challenges in their classrooms (Raver et al. 2008, p. 11). Brown et al. (2009, p. 494-500) confirm that the benefits of teachers acting as researchers and initiating their own professional development, is clearly visible in the enhanced confidence and competence of the teachers. Positive changes were reported in both the professional skills of the participating teachers, and their personal perspectives on teaching issues which they used to regard as problematic (Brown et al. 2009, p. 494-500).

3.4.3 PATICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS TOOL FOR ESTABLISHING A RELATIONSHIP OF TRUST BETWEEN GRADE 1 TEACHERS AND THE RESEARCHER

When participatory action research is used as pathway for the professional development of teachers, the teachers who take part in the study work in collaboration with the researcher as research partners. Brown et al. (2009, p. 501-502) point out that this model for professional development is based on relationships and emphasise that in such a collaborative endeavour a relationship of trust between the teachers and the researcher is vital. In order to ensure maximum participation, the researcher needs to focus on and be responsive to the needs of the teachers, which will also encourage them to remain committed to the study (Brown et al. 2009, p. 501-502). A relationship of trust is established when the researcher creates an atmosphere of acceptance during the collaborative sessions, provides constructive feedback and encourages open communication (Brown et al. 2009, p. 494-500).

A relationship between the teachers and the researcher which is characterised by collaboration and support, results in higher levels of engagement by the teachers. They are then more willing to take on the challenges they experience in their classrooms in order to make the changes which are necessary to support vulnerable learners (Heller et al. 2012, p. 923). Teachers become more dedicated to their own professional development when they share the commitment to improve their classroom practice with their colleagues and the researcher in a relationship of trust (Raver et al. 2008, p. 23). Heller et al. (2012, p. 923) emphasise that such a relationship of trust is essential for change to occur.

Brown et al. (2009, p. 503-504) found that a collaborative and trusting relationship between the researcher and the teachers proved to be beneficial for both the teachers and the researcher. Continuous support by the researcher ensured that the teachers could implement intervention strategies effectively and regular feedback from the teachers assisted the researcher in the planning and refinement of the professional development process. Fostering a “mutual give-and-take” relationship strengthens communication, support and trust (Brown et al. 2009, p. 503-504).

3.4.4 PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS TOOL FOR INITIATING COLLABORATION AMONGST GRADE 1 TEACHERS

Participatory action research is characterised by collaborative sessions or workshops which involve the researcher and the teachers as research partners. During these workshops opportunities are created for the teachers to share their classroom experiences with each other as colleagues with similar teaching conditions and challenges (Brown et al. 2009, p. 494-500). In seeking solutions to problematic teaching issues, the teachers can all contribute from their unique personal and professional experiences, resulting in shared understandings of their teaching realities (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 81).

Teachers who participated in a study conducted by Parnell (2011) stated that they regard collaboration as essential in the process of personal growth and professional development as teachers. They claim that their relationships with each other and the collaboration amongst them were the aspects that mattered most to them during their search for solutions to the challenges they faced in their classrooms. These relationships are strengthened by accepting each other as unique individuals with shortcomings, but also with valuable contributions to make to each other's professional development (Parnell 2011, p. 2).

Although conflict between the participating teachers may occur from time to time due to differences in opinions and personalities (Brown 2009, p. 494-500), the collaboration amongst them is essential for their professional growth. Cadwell (2003, p. 100) refers to these incidences of conflict during collaborative sessions when saying:

> "(W)e had to 'rub up against each other's rough edges' enough and to the point that it hurt sometimes a lot, and sometimes repeatedly—in order to begin to polish each other. There have been periods of personal suffering and tears and tension and unhappiness . . . Slowly, it has dawned on us that if we wanted this truth, we would have to lose some of our personal righteousness and the need to be right".

Cadwell (2003) emphasises that in order for the participating teachers to strengthen their collaborative relationships, they need to be willing to listen to each other, make adjustments to their own beliefs and opinions and accept each other. Through continuous reflection the collaborative process of PAR can be successful and extremely rewarding, despite occasional conflict (Parnell 2011, p. 3).

3.4.5 THE PROCESS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEACH AS TOOL FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

The model for action research (CRASP I) and the model for the professional development of teachers through action research (CRASP II), which was proposed by Zuber-Skerritt (1992, p. 2), indicate the process of participatory action research and the resulting professional development (see 1.7.1, Figure 1.1 and Figure 3.4).

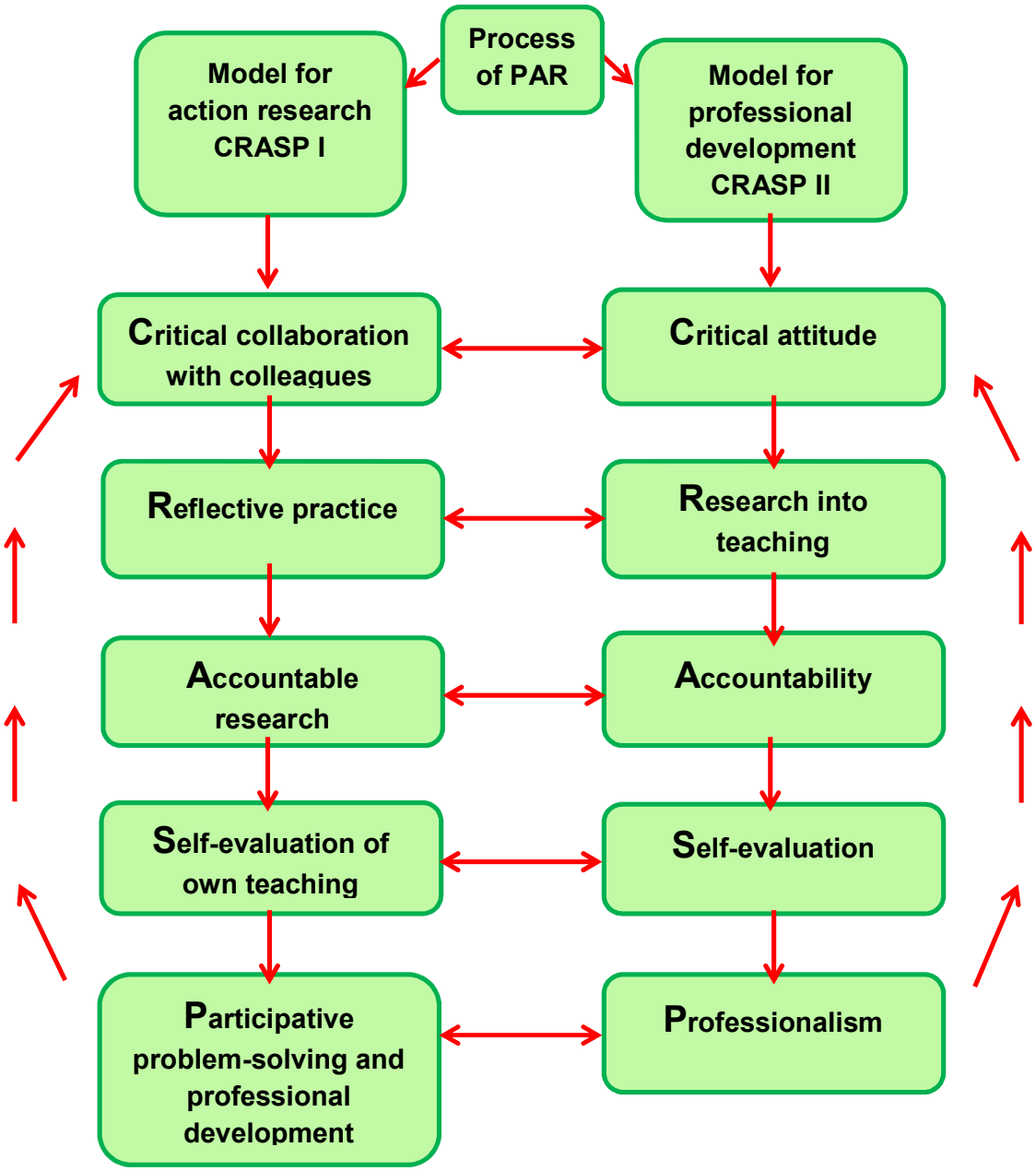


Figure 3.4: The process of participatory action research as tool for the professional development of teachers (Adapted from Zuber-Skerritt 1992, p. 2)

The need for the professional development of teachers emerges from the concerns they have about their own competency, their teaching task and the impact of their teaching on the progress of their learners (see 3.2). PAR can be implemented as a tool through which teachers are provided with opportunities to address problematic issues in their inclusive classrooms, and in doing so initiate their own professional development. The process of PAR as a tool for the professional development of teachers is characterised by collaboration between the researcher and the teachers, as well as collaboration amongst the participating teachers. In order to address problematic issues in their classrooms, these challenges are discussed from a critical point of view and the teachers have the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences. Intervention strategies are planned and implemented in their respective classrooms, in order to address their challenges. The teachers keep personal reflection journals to ensure that they will be able to account for their own research and provide feedback during the collaborative sessions. Continuous self-reflection and self-evaluation enhances personal growth and results in professional development (see Figure 3.4).

3.5 TEACHER PARTICIPATION IN THE PROCESS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

When researchers plan participatory action research projects with the purpose of creating an opportunity for the professional development of the participating teachers, they trust that the teachers will participate fully in order to get the maximum benefit from the process, while their learners get the maximum benefit from the interventions being implemented (Raver et al. 2008, p. 12). However, this might not always be the case. Several researchers (Raver et al. 2008; Duncan 2013; Brown et al. 2009; Kim & Kang 2012) report on their experiences with teachers who were hesitant to take part in research projects for various reasons, which will consequently be discussed.

3.5.1 FACTORS THAT MIGHT CAUSE HESITATION WHEN TEACHERS ARE APPROACHED TO TAKE PART IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS

Raver et al. (2008, p. 12) explain that teachers who doubt their own abilities as teachers and have low levels of self-efficacy, might feel uncomfortable when approached by the researcher and hesitate to accept the support offered by joining the research project. Duncan (2013, p. 140) reports that some of the teachers she

approached to take part in a participatory action research project were suspicious at first, thinking that their principals arranged for “an outsider from a university” to address problematic issues in their classrooms. Some of these teachers were also concerned about the effect the research project might have on their daily teaching and were cautious in giving their consent to participate. Furthermore, Duncan (2013, p. 140) found that some of the participating teachers experienced feelings of vulnerability when they were requested to reflect on their own teaching experiences.

In addition, Brown et al. (2009, p. 494-500) experienced that teachers who felt overwhelmed by their workload and the time pressure, were reluctant to get involved in a research project as they were afraid of the extra expectations they would have to live up to. Similarly, Kim and Kang (2012, p. 910-911) report that some of their participants were initially unwilling to participate, since they did not regard their participation in research as professional development, but rather as extra work which they were not prepared to do. These teachers stated that they will only participate in the research if they were instructed to do so by their authorities (Kim & Kang 2012, p. 910-911).

Due to the above mentioned reluctance of some teachers to participate in research projects which were aimed at their professional development, several authors have investigated the characteristics of teachers that might predict their willingness to take part in such research endeavours. These characteristics of teachers will be discussed in the following section.

3.5.2 CHARACTERISTICS OF TEACHERS THAT PREDICT THEIR WILLINGNESS TO TAKE PART IN PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS AIMED AT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Baker, Kupersmidt, Voegler-Lee, Arnold and Willoughby (2010, p. 280) conducted a study to investigate factors that predict teachers’ participation in an intervention programme, and found that those teachers who expressed concerns about the interventions at the beginning of the programme, implemented fewer intervention strategies than the other teachers. These teachers anticipated that the interventions they were expected to implement would be overwhelming when added to their workload and might not be the solutions they were looking for in addressing the

challenges they were facing. They were also concerned about the possibility that the interventions would be difficult to implement (Baker et al. 2010, p. 272).

The degree to which teachers were willing to participate in research projects also seemed to be determined by their perceptions of the support they would receive from their principals and colleagues. The teachers who implemented most of the intervention strategies, were those who were committed to their teaching careers and experienced their teaching conditions as favourable and supportive (Baker et al. 2010, p. 280).

Furthermore, the teachers who were committed to their careers were more eager to participate. Both Baker et al. (2010, p. 272) and Downer et al. (2009, p. 436) found that teachers who were more willing to participate in the implementation of intervention strategies as part of a research project, were those who were enthusiastic about their work as teachers and were known to be efficient in their teaching. These teachers were the ones with high levels of self-efficacy and good teaching skills. They also tended to be more lenient in their teaching methods (Baker et al. 2010, p. 272).

Another variable that predicted the level of teacher participation in previous studies is the amount of teaching experience. Teachers who had fewer years of teaching experience were more prepared to take part in intervention projects as research partners (Downer et al. 2009, p. 436). Similarly, Baker et al. (2010, p. 272) report that teachers with more years of experience were unwilling to implement the proposed intervention strategies and were sceptical about the potential success thereof. This may be because teachers with more years of teaching experience tend to be set in their ways of teaching and therefore are hesitant to try new teaching strategies.

Pre-service training and previous opportunities for professional development also proved to be important in predicting teacher participation in research projects involving intervention. Teachers with more training and knowledge of different intervention strategies were more enthusiastic about implementing additional intervention strategies in order to address the challenges they were experiencing in their daily teaching (Baker et al. 2010, p. 272).

3.5.3 FEEDBACK FROM TEACHERS ABOUT THEIR PARTICIPATION IN INTERVENTION PROGRAMMES

According to Raver et al. (2008, p. 23), positive responses were received from participating teachers regarding the high levels of collaboration with the researcher and amongst themselves. After a study conducted by Brown et al. (2009, p. 503) the teachers indicated that they regard the support they received from the researcher as essential for the successful completion of an intervention programme (Brown et al. 2009, p. 503). They pointed out that the researchers were willing to listen to them and that their needs were taken into consideration when intervention strategies were planned. The fact that the commitment to implement intervention strategies in order to find solutions to teaching challenges was shared amongst all the participating teachers, contributed to their willingness to participate and made it easier for them to take responsibility for addressing the needs of vulnerable learners (Raver et al. 2008, p. 23).

Duncan (2013, p. 141) received feedback from a participating teacher stating that she and her colleagues experienced the support by the researcher as helpful and inspiring. The participant specifically mentioned the readings which the researcher provided to them, relating to the issues they were addressing at different times during the research project. These readings led to rich discussions, which in turn led to a decision to make provision for such discussions on the agenda for their weekly staff meetings (Duncan 2013, p. 141).

In the above mentioned studies the participating teachers reported that they experienced the intervention programmes as informative and empowering. They implemented and internalised the proposed intervention strategies and could see visible results in their classrooms (Brown et al. 2009, p. 501, 503; Raver et al. 2008, p. 23). The findings of this study were similar and exceeded my expectations, as well as those of the participating Grade 1 teachers (see 5.3).

3.6 PUTTING PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Although PAR is known to be unpredictable (Ebersöhn et al. 2007, p. 130), it is important for the researcher to understand how it is applied for the purpose of the

professional development of teachers, how the workshops should be structured and how the intervention strategies are implemented.

3.6.1 UNDERSTANDING HOW A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IS USED FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

In a participatory action research project, the participating teachers act as research partners and initiate their own professional development. Brown et al. (2009, p. 488) explain that as facilitator, the researcher needs to determine the needs of the participating teachers regarding the challenges they face in their classrooms. These needs then have to be responded to through conducting the participatory action research project (Brown et al. 2009, p. 488). Through this process an opportunity is created for the participating teachers to address the challenges they encounter and in doing so, initiate their own professional development.

Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 76) explain that the participating teachers learn from their own experiences in their classrooms when taking action to address problematic issues and implementing intervention strategies which were collaboratively decided on. The participants meet after a pre-determined period of time to reflect on their experiences and share what they have learned. In this process the experiences and opinions of every participating teacher is of great value, and may vary from rich feedback by experienced teachers to fresh perspectives from novice teachers (Parnell, 2011, p. 3). Through collaborative discussions and continuous critical self-reflection (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 76), professional as well as personal growth take place and solutions are found for classroom challenges.

The programme for a participatory action research project is not predetermined and the intervention strategies that will be implemented during the project are not based on practices which have been proven to be successful in other contexts (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 78). Similarly, the collaborative discussions and workshops are not based on predetermined content, but rather on the needs and experiences of the participating teachers (Brown et al. 2009, p. 486). Therefore, the researcher has to take the lead in analysing the needs of the teachers and negotiate the schedule of the research programme with the participants (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 79). In other words, the way in which the research project will proceed, will be determined by the knowledge, skills, experiences and needs of the participants.

The participatory action research project can thus be seen as a process, based on the needs of the participating teachers, through which professional development takes place. Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 80) explain that the aim of participatory action research is twofold, namely to improve the classroom situation by addressing the challenges identified by the participating teachers and to contribute to the professional development of the participants. Furthermore, the process of enhancing the professional development of the participating teachers and improving classroom practice is regarded as formative rather than summative, since the purpose thereof is not to reach a specific outcome or predetermined aim (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 80; Conner & Duncan 2013, p. 2). The professional and personal growth each participating teacher undergoes is an ongoing process and cannot be predicted (Conner & Duncan 2013, p. 2).

3.6.2 UNDERSTANDING HOW WORKSHOPS ARE STRUCTURED AND INTERVENTION IS IMPLEMENTED FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

As mentioned above, the content of the collaborative workshops is determined by analysing the needs of the participating teachers. In doing so, specific issues regarding the challenges they face in their classrooms are identified and used as the primary focus points for the workshops (Brown et al. 2009, p. 486). Similarly, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo (2013, p. 19) state that the purpose of participatory action research is not for the researcher to provide answers for classroom challenges, but to create opportunities for solutions to emerge from collaborative discussions and continuous reflections. The researcher acts as facilitator during the collaborative workshops by asking questions and guiding the participating teachers in the process of determining professional goals for each challenge they need to address. Furthermore, the researcher provides support in analysing the specific challenges and identifying strengths and intervention strategies which can be implemented to address the problematic issues which were identified during the analysis of the teachers' needs (Brown et al. 2009, p. 486).

The collaborative workshops provide opportunities for the participating teachers to develop supportive relationships with their colleagues. They learn form and with each other by sharing their classroom experiences and ideas for solutions to the challenges

they encounter. Possible intervention strategies are discussed and the implementation thereof is planned (Brown et al. 2009, p. 486). The researcher facilitates this process and keeps the teachers informed about current research (Kim & Kang 2012, p. 903).

After each collaborative workshop the participating teachers implement the intervention strategies which were decided on, in their classrooms. Baker et al. (2010, p. 271) emphasise the importance of the researcher's assistance and frequent contact with the teachers during these phases of the project in order to motivate them and enhance the implementation of the intervention strategies. The participating teachers need to implement the intervention strategies they have decided on frequently enough for it to be effective and well enough to ensure positive outcomes.

In this regard Baker et al. (2010, p. 271) explain that some of the participating teachers might not implement the intervention strategies to the extent expected by the researcher, despite continuous support. This will result in learners being exposed to different degrees of intervention and even effective intervention strategies might not be as successful in all the classrooms of the participating teachers. Therefore, the expectations of the researcher need to be realistic. Full participation by all participating teachers is not always possible and some of the learners will miss parts of the intervention (Baker et al. 2010, p. 279-280). These and other challenges that might occur during a participatory action research project will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.7 STEPPING BACK TO CONCEPTUALISE THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Warm and close relationships between Grade 1 teachers and their learners are essential in creating high quality classrooms where learners with diverse levels of school readiness can be supported. This can only be achieved when Grade 1 teachers provide their learners with emotional support by firstly creating a classroom atmosphere that is secure and supportive and by being responsive to their learners' needs (see 2.4.1). Secondly, teacher-learner relationships should be characterised by low levels of dependency which can be achieved by providing high levels of instructional support, which include intensive language instruction, academic concept development and quality feedback to learners regarding their performance and

progress (see 2.4.2). In the third place, low levels of conflict within teacher-learner relationships can be achieved through classroom organisation, which include setting class rules and routines, organising social interactions amongst learners and managing learner behaviour by providing clear expectations (see 2.4.3).

In an inclusive education environment where the majority of the learners are not ready for formal learning due to inadequate preschool stimulation, the learners are traumatised by the transition to Grade 1 and the expectations of the formal learning environment (see 2.2). In the South African context, Grade 1 teachers regard the current curriculum as inaccessible for learners who lack school readiness skills and experience the pressure placed on them to implement the curriculum as overwhelming. These teachers experience an urgent need for support in order to address the concerns they have about their teaching task and the negative impact of the current situation on their learners (see 3.2.3). From these concerns emerges the need for professional development that will empower the teachers to make the changes that are necessary in order to promote the school readiness of their learners and provide them with a better chance of a successful school career.

The literature on the professional development of teachers suggests that teachers prefer to initiate their own professional development by participating in research projects as research partners (see 3.4.1). Through collaboration with the researcher and their colleagues (see 3.4.3 and 3.4.4) they critically review their teaching reality and search for solutions to the issues they regard as problematic. Continuous reflection about their experiences with the interventions they decided on as a group, leads to personal growth and enhances levels of self-efficacy (see 3.4.2). High levels of self-efficacy, in turn strengthens teacher-learner relationships and leads to high quality teacher-learner interactions (see 3.3.1). As a result, the learners are provided with high quality individual learning experiences that enable them to develop positive academic identities (see 2.3.3) which are essential for a successful school career. See Figure 3.5 for a visual presentation of this section.

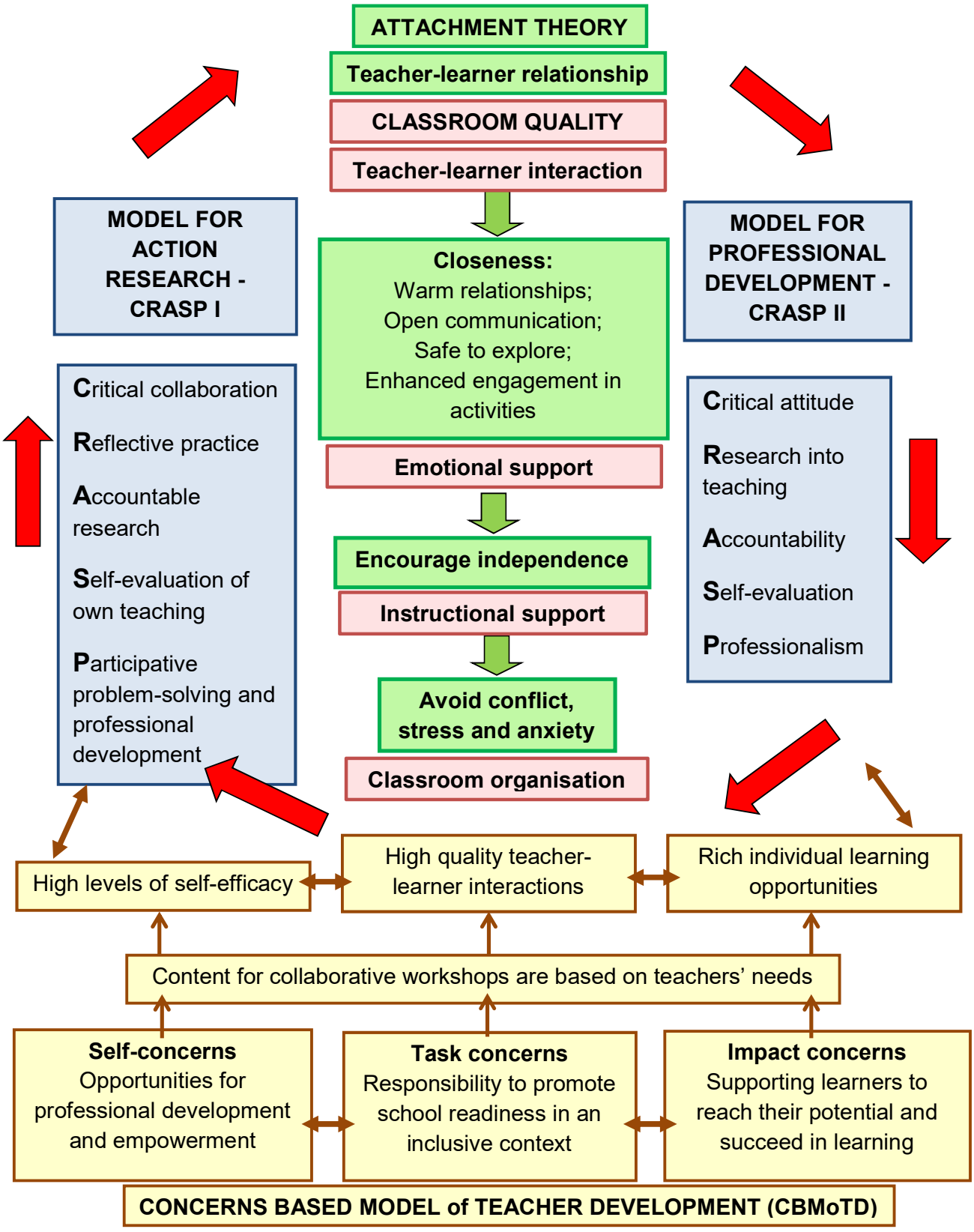


Figure 3.5: Conceptualising the professional development of teachers through participatory action research

3.8 SUMMARY

The role and responsibility of Grade 1 teachers in supporting vulnerable learners who are not ready for formal learning, was described in Chapter 2 by using the lens of attachment theory. It was established that Grade 1 teachers' relationships with their learners are of crucial importance in providing high quality teaching that can promote school readiness in inclusive contexts. Essential criteria for high quality classrooms were discussed, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation. Chapter 2 was concluded by pointing out that continuous professional development is needed to empower teachers in addressing classroom challenges.

In Chapter 3, the need for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers was explored through the lens of the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development, which indicates that a need for professional development emerges from teachers' concerns about their own competency as teachers, their teaching task and the impact of their teaching on the progress of their learners. Different models for the professional development of teachers were examined and the conclusion was made that participatory action research as a tool for the professional development of teachers is preferred by many researchers as well as by teachers themselves. The benefits of participatory action research for teachers were discussed and the process thereof was briefly indicated by making use of the models for action research and professional development of teachers respectively (CRASP I and II). Chapter 3 was concluded by bringing together the main concepts and theories that inform this study as summarised in the conceptual framework (Figure 3.5).

In Chapter 4, the methodological underpinning of this study is thoroughly scrutinised by focussing on the implementation of a participatory action research programme for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers. The launching of the research project is explained, including the sampling process, gaining access to the research sites and the first meeting with the Grade 1 teachers. The research process is discussed and the role of the researcher in each phase of the cyclic process is indicated. The structuring of collaborative workshops is carefully examined, since much of the data was collected during such workshops. Criteria for high quality workshops are explored and the practical implementation thereof is discussed.

CHAPTER 4

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The need for continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers in order to empower and support them in their daunting task of supporting vulnerable learners who lack school readiness skills, emerged from the discussion in Chapter 2. The essentiality of close and warm teacher-learner relationships was emphasised and the criteria for quality teaching, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation were discussed. In Chapter 3, research findings from studies on the professional development of teachers were presented. These findings indicate that teachers acting as research partners, were able to initiate their own professional development and find solutions to classroom challenges. Furthermore, different models for the continuous professional development of teachers were discussed and participatory action research was indicated as the method preferred by many researchers as well as teachers themselves.

In Chapter 4, the process of launching this participatory action research project for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context, is presented and explained. Essential criteria for the successful professional development of teachers and the implementation thereof in this study, are also discussed (see 4.7). Furthermore, important aspects that contribute to the quality of such a professional development programme and the role these aspects played in this study, are considered in retrospect (see 4.8). The steps which were followed in the analysis of the data are briefly explained and the chapter is concluded by reflecting on my role as researcher and facilitator.

4.2 DESIGNING A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS

The design for this participatory action research project was discussed in detail in Chapter 1 (see 1.8.1 & Figure 1.2). Therefore, the focus of Chapter 4 is on the

implementation of the research project with the aim to develop a professional development programme for Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness.

4.3 SELECTING RESEARCH SITES THROUGH PURPOSEFUL SAMPLING

As explained in Chapter 1 (see 1.2 and 1.8.1), I recently conducted a qualitative case study with the aim to investigate the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1 (Bruwer 2014). I selected two public schools and conducted focus group interviews with the Grade 1 teachers to explore their experiences and concerns regarding the school readiness levels of their learners. The research findings painted an alarming picture of young learners being traumatised by the demands of formal learning and the experiences of failure they faced on a daily basis in the classroom, while their teachers were desperately trying to voice their concerns, but could not find a platform to do so.

I was determined to return to the same research sites, hoping to be able to make a difference. For this reason, I made use of purposeful sampling for this study and was thankful to be granted permission by the Department of Basic Education to conduct my research project at the same two schools. These two schools will subsequently be referred to as School D and School E. Unfortunately, I could not gain access to School E, since the receptionist at the school acted as a gatekeeper and refused to let me interview the principal. After several telephone calls and e-mails which remained unanswered, I decided not to include School E in the study. In order to create opportunities for ample collaboration, I selected three additional public schools in Pretoria with similar conditions to take part in the research project. These three schools will be referred to as School A, School B and School C.

The four selected schools are all public schools situated in urban areas of Pretoria, with well trained teachers and good resources. Many of their learners however, come from disadvantaged backgrounds where little or no preschool stimulation is available. Consequently, a large number of their Grade 1 learners lack the necessary school readiness skills for formal learning and therefore these schools would benefit by this study aiming to promote school readiness through the professional development of the Grade 1 teachers (see Table 4.1 for information on the learners of the selected schools).

Schools B, C and D are situated in middle-class communities which are all more or less five kilometres from the city centre and have similar socio-economic circumstances. However, many of their learners are transported to school form less advantaged communities much further away from the centre of Pretoria. The communities in which Schools B, C and D are situated have plenty of well-equipped preschools with Grade R classes, apart from the Grade R classes at the selected schools, and many of the learners could attend these preschools prior to their enrolment in Grade 1. At the time of data collection, 50% of the Grade 1 learners at School B came from Grade R classes other than the Grade R classes at the school itself and 44.5% of the Grade 1 learners at School D attended Grade R classes at preschools in the community. School A, however is situated much closer to the city centre in a small, poor community with high levels of unemployment. Most of the learners of School A come from this community, which only has one preschool with one Grade R class. In comparison to the other participating schools, only 22.8% of the Grade 1 learners at School A, attended Grade R at the preschool mentioned above, before enrolling for Grade 1. Consequently, School A had the highest number of Grade 1 learners who did not attend Grade R before entering the formal learning environment, namely 37.6%, while this number is much lower at School B (10.3%) and School D (4.2%) (see Table 4.1).

It is interesting to note that at the time of data collection, School A had a higher number of learners in Grade 1 who were enrolled at an age of five, than the other participating schools. At School A, the learners who turned six in Grade 1 made up 10.9% of the Grade 1 learners, while at Schools B and D the five year olds made up only 1.7% and 0.8% of the Grade 1 learners respectively. The effect of the poor socio-economic conditions on the school readiness of the Grade 1 learners at School A was clearly visible in the higher number of learners who were at risk of retention at the time of data collection, namely 32.7%, in relation to the numbers at School B (21.6%) and School D (21.0%) (see Table 4.1). Note that School C is not included in this discussion, as they withdrew from the research project after the first workshop, due to a change in their time schedule.

Table 4.1: Information on the Grade 1 learners of the three participating schools (note that School C is not included, since they withdrew from the project at an early stage)

	Number of learners
	Academic progress
	Possible retention

	Age
	Grade R attendance
	Language

	Participating schools							
	School A		School B		School D		Total	
Grade 1 learners	101		116		119		336	
Academically ***strong*** learners	27	26.7%	42	36.2%	29	24.4%	98	30%
Academically ***average*** learners	35	34.7%	42	36.2%	57	47.9%	134	39%
Academically ***struggling*** learners	39	38.6%	32	27.6%	33	27.7%	104	31%
Learners who are at risk of retention	33	32.7%	25	21.6%	25	21.0%	83	24.7%
Learners turning 6 in 2016	11	10.9%	2	1.7%	1	0.8%	14	4.2%
Learners turning 7 in 2016	70	69.3%	104	89.7%	99	83.2%	273	81.2%
Learners turning 8 in 2016 (repeating Gr 1)	19	18.8%	8	6.9%	19	16.0%	46	13.7%
Learners turning 9 in 2016 (repeating Gr 1)	1	1%	2	1.7%	0	0%	3	0.9%
Learners who attended Gr R at current school	40	39.6%	46	39.7%	61	51.3%	147	43.7%
Learners who attended Gr R elsewhere	23	22.8%	58	50.0%	53	44.5%	134	39.9%
Learners who did not attend Gr R	38	37.6%	12	10.3%	5	4.2%	55	16.4%
Second language learners	101	100%	112	96.6%	111	93.3%	324	96.4%
Mother tongue learners	0	0%	4	3.4%	8	6.7%	12	3.6%

The information presented in Table 4.1 was obtained from the participating Grade 1 teachers at the selected schools, once the research project was in progress.

4.4 GAINING ACCESS TO THE RESEARCH SITES

Gaining access to the research sites was relatively easy, since the principals at the selected schools were interested in opportunities for professional development for their teachers. When I spoke to the principal at School A, he was very excited about the study and immediately agreed to speak to the Head of Department (HOD) of the Foundation Phase and the Grade 1 teachers about it. I received confirmation of their willingness to participate shortly after that. I arranged a meeting with the principal and he signed the letter of informed consent.

The principal at School B was very interested in the research project when I first spoke to him telephonically and we arranged a meeting. I explained the purpose and the procedure of the project to him. He was concerned about the workload of the teachers, since they had to attend training sessions and workshops arranged by the Department of Basic Education regularly. He agreed to discuss it with the management team at their next meeting. I had to wait a week for the feedback, but the outcome was positive. The HOD of the Foundation Phase contacted me and I could arrange to meet the Grade 1 teachers. The letter of informed consent was signed by the HOD and e-mailed to me.

The principal of School C was excited about the research project when I contacted him and we scheduled a meeting. When I arrived at the school, he had already called in the HOD of the Foundation Phase. I explained the purpose and procedure of the project and they both agreed that it would be beneficial for the school to take part. The principal then called in the grade leader of the Grade 1 teachers. I explained everything to her and she responded positively. The principal signed the letter of informed consent and I could arrange to meet with the rest of the Grade 1 teachers.

The principal at School D was also very interested when she heard about the research project and we scheduled a meeting. When I arrived at the school she had already discussed it with the HOD of the Foundation Phase and they were both very excited about taking part in the project. After I explained the purpose and procedure of the research project, the principal signed the letter of informed consent. She asked me to wait for two weeks before speaking to the Grade 1 teachers, since they were busy with preparations for their school concert and she thought it would be best to introduce the

research project to them once the concert was over. This would enable them to focus more clearly on the research project.

All the principals I spoke to, were positive and excited about the research project. I was pleasantly surprised by the level of trust they displayed and realised that they were all open for new intervention strategies to support the learners, as well as for opportunities for teacher development. It was clear to me that the principals of all four schools were passionate about their work. All the schools are extremely well managed. I experienced the atmosphere at the schools as calm and peaceful and the learners I came across during my visits to the research sites were all friendly and polite.

4.5 MEETING MY PARTICIPANTS FOR THE FIRST TIME

I arranged a meeting with the Grade 1 teachers at School A to explain the purpose and procedure of the research project and they were extremely excited when they heard about the project. They were especially excited about the prospect of being part of the research team. The teacher who was acting as the grade leader was an experienced Grade 1 teacher (further on referred to as Researcher A1), while the other two teachers had a few years of teaching experience, but it was their first year of teaching Grade 1 learners (Researchers A2 and A3) (see Table 4.2). They were all eager to learn something new and to share their teaching experiences with others. They were all passionate about teaching and they loved their learners. They did however, raise concerns about their busy schedules and their extramural responsibilities, but at the same time they were determined to find a way to make it work. They explained that it would not be possible to set dates for our workshops too far in advance, since meetings and training sessions were often scheduled by the DBE at very short notice. We agreed to look at everybody's schedules at each workshop before setting a date for the next one. All three teachers signed the letters of informed consent and we discussed the date for the first workshop.

The Grade 1 teachers at School B were friendly and polite, but a bit reserved at first. It was clear that they did not know what to expect. I explained the purpose and procedure of the research project to them and I could see their faces lighting up. Once they realised that they will form part of the research team and that the focus will be on their professional development, they were eager to take part and immediately started telling me about their learners' school readiness. It was clear that they had an

overwhelming need to discuss it and to look for solutions to the problematic issues they were experiencing in their classrooms. They were excited about the fact that three other schools with similar circumstances would also take part in the research project. The teacher who was acting as the grade leader was an experienced Grade 1 teacher (further on referred to as Researcher B1), while the other two teachers were less experienced. One of them had two years of experience (Researcher B2) and the other one had only started her teaching career at that time (Researcher B3) (See Table 4.2). All three teachers signed the letters of informed consent and we agreed on a date for the first workshop.

At School C there were four Grade 1 teachers of whom two were experienced in Grade 1 teaching and the other two were novice teachers. When I met them for the first time, they appeared very quiet and even a bit suspicious. It made me wonder whether they might have had a negative experience with a research project before. I explained the purpose and procedure of the research project to them and I could clearly see the relief when they realised I was not there to assess them. They were more relaxed and opened up to me. We had a relaxing conversation and all four teachers signed the letters of informed consent. They offered to host the first workshop and by the time I left, they were excited and enthusiastic about the project. Unfortunately, School C withdrew from the research project shortly after Workshop 1, due to a series of departmental visits to their school arranged on short notice by the DBE.

During my first meetings with the Grade 1 teachers at Schools A, B and C, I could clearly see their excitement when I explained to them that they will form part of the research team, instead of 'being researched'. I realised that they all longed for an opportunity to share their successes and their challenges with colleagues and people with the same interest and passion. The prospect of working in collaboration with me and the other schools to promote school readiness and enhance their professional development, created an enthusiasm and energy amongst them which I found encouraging and inspiring.

When I arrived at School D for my first meeting with the Grade 1 teachers, only two of the four teachers were available for the meeting. The HOD of the Foundation Phase (who was a Grade 3 teacher) joined us and I explained the purpose and the procedure of the research project to them. They were willing to participate, but less eager than

the Grade 1 teachers at the other three schools. Their circumstances at the time were more complicated, since two of the four Grade 1 teachers were substitute teachers who would not be able to join the project for the full time. We agreed that the grade leader who was the only permanently appointed Grade 1 teacher at that time (further on referred to as Reacher D1), would participate and the substitute teachers would join us for as long as they were teaching at School D. The fourth teacher (Researcher D2) was also an experienced Grade 1 teacher, but could not attend the first meeting, due to extramural responsibilities. The two teachers who were on maternity leave would join us once they were back at work (Researchers D3 and D4) (See Table 4.2). The two teachers who were present at the first meeting, signed the letters of informed consent. I had doubts about their commitment to the research project, since I did not observe the excitement I would have liked to, but in the end I was pleasantly surprised by the positive contributions, especially of the grade leader (Researcher D1).

Table 4.2: Summary of the information on the participating Grade 1 teachers

	Participant information									
	School A			**School B**			**School D**			
	A1	**A2**	**A3**	**B1**	**B2**	**B3**	**D1**	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**
Years of teaching experience	30	6	7	38	2	1	27	30	9	5
Years of Grade 1 teaching experience	23	1	1	21	2	1	15	19	4	4

4.6 LAUNCHING THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT FOR THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADE 1 TEACHERS

After eighteen months of preparation including the initial planning of my study, conducting a thorough literature study, interviewing experienced researchers at the University of Pretoria, gaining permission to continue with my data collection from the ethics committee of the University of Pretoria and the Department of Basic Education, gaining access to the research sites and meeting my participants, I was finally ready to launch the research project. I was both excited and nervous, realising the extent of the research project which I was about to launch, and the impact it would have on the lives and of the participating teachers and their learners. I realised that there was no margin for error and proceeded with extreme caution and thorough preparation.

4.6.1 WORKSHOP 1 – GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

I launched the research project by scheduling the first workshop where the participating teachers of the selected schools could meet each other. During my first interview with the Grade 1 teachers of School C, they offered to host the first workshop which was an indication of their willingness to reach out to colleagues from other schools in anticipation of a collaborative working relationship. They prepared the venue, arranged parking for the visiting teachers and served refreshments on the arrival of their guests. I introduced the participating Grade 1 teachers to each other and they did not need any encouragement to engage in spontaneous conversations.

When everyone was seated, I handed out name tags (see image 4.1) and the agenda for Workshop 1 (see Addendum C). I welcomed them, explained again why I decided to conduct this study and reminded them that their participation was voluntary. I introduced and explained the title of our participatory action research project to them, namely *'Professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context'.*

I used symbolism to explain the participatory action research project to my participants (see Addendum A). The Grade 1 teacher was symbolised as an anchor and the Grade 1 learners as young sailors on their respective life journeys. I used the same symbolism on the name tags, to remind my participants during every workshop of their important role and responsibility towards their learners.

Image 4.1: Name tags for participating teachers

I made sure that the participating teachers understood the purpose of the research project, namely to conduct a study during which they could be actively involved as research partners, rather than being researched by somebody from outside. I explained that opportunities would be created for them to collaboratively discuss and address problematic issues regarding the school readiness levels of their learners, during which they could initiate their own professional development.

I then proceeded to present the procedure which we would follow during the research project. For the purpose of this study, the five step action research cycle of McNiff (2002, p. 7) was a suitable model to implement and I explained that according to this

cycle: a problematic educational issue is identified, a possible solution is proposed, the proposed solution is implemented, the effect of the implementation is evaluated and practical changes are made accordingly (see Figure 4.1).

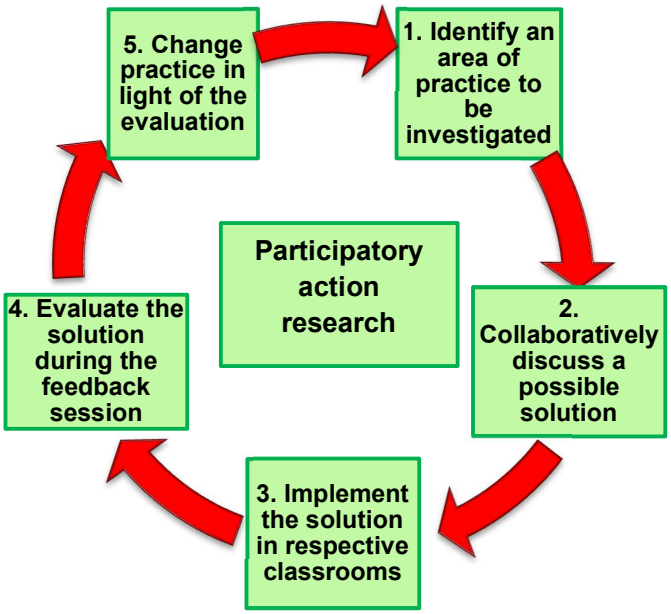


Figure 4.1: The five step action research cycle of McNiff (2002, p. 7) (Adapted for participatory action research)

After explaining the purpose of the research project and the procedure we would follow to my participants, I introduced the study to them using symbolism (see Addendum A). I used my conceptual framework which includes the underpinning theories for my study (see 1.7.4 & Figures 1.1 and 3.5), namely the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD), the attachment theory and the models for action research and the professional development of teachers through action research (CRASP I and II) as the framework for the symbolic presentation of the research project. I explained to the participating teachers that the need for professional development emerges from the concerns they have about themselves, their teaching task and the effect of their teaching on the progress of their learners (see 3.2.3, Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.5).

I handed out an A3 sheet of paper to the teachers of each school and asked them to divide it into three sections and write down their concerns and challenges regarding themselves as teachers, their teaching task and the effect of their teaching on the progress of their learners. After fifteen minutes, I gave them an opportunity to give feedback and as I was listening to them, I realised that their challenges were exactly

the same as the findings of the study I conducted previously (see 1.2). At this stage they were frustrated and worried about the fact that they were stuck in circumstances they felt they had no control over, but at the same time they realised that they struggled with the same challenges and could identify with each other's frustrations. This theory (CBMoTD) was the perfect foundation from where I could encourage my participants to take ownership of their own professional development and commit to the collaborative journey to search for solutions.

Furthermore, I used the symbolic presentation of the Grade 1 teacher as the anchor and the learners as young sailors on their life journeys, to explain the attachment theory which focuses on high levels of closeness, low levels of dependency and low levels of conflict in the teacher-learner relationship (see 1.7.2, Figure 3.5 and Addendum A). I explained to my participants that these three aspects of the attachment theory could be linked to the criteria for quality teaching, as found in the literature on school readiness, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation (see Figure 3.5) and that we would use these criteria for quality teaching one by one as topics for our respective research cycles. In the end, we spent two research cycles on emotional support, two on instructional support and one research cycle on classroom organisation (see Figure 4.2).

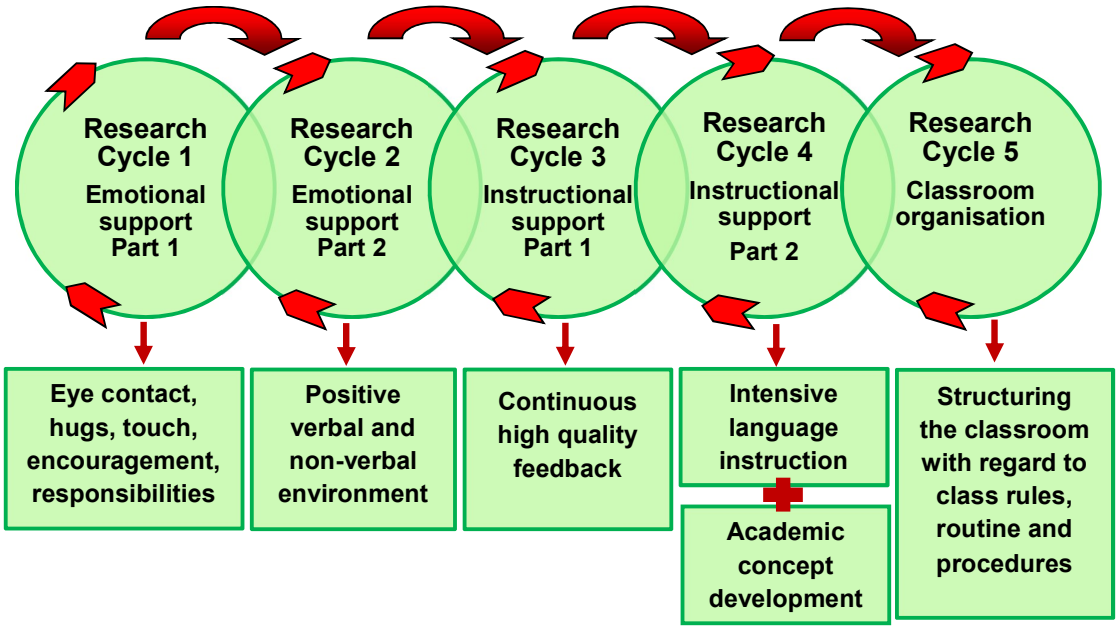


Figure 4.2: Cycles in the research process of this participatory action research study

Lastly I used the symbolic presentation of a ship's steering wheel to explain the cyclic process of participatory action research and the models for action research and professional development (CRASP I and II) (see Addendum A, Figure 3.5 and Figure 4.1). As mentioned above, the study was eventually conducted in five cycles (See Figure 4.2) and workshops were scheduled on a two to three-weekly basis. During each cycle problematic issues regarding the school readiness of the participants' Grade 1 learners were identified, intervention strategies were collaboratively discussed, implemented and evaluated. The effect of the intervention strategies (which were implemented during each cycle) on the progress of the learners, were reflected on during the following workshop (see Figure 4.3). The cyclic research process is explained in more detail in the discussion on data collection (see 4.6.3).

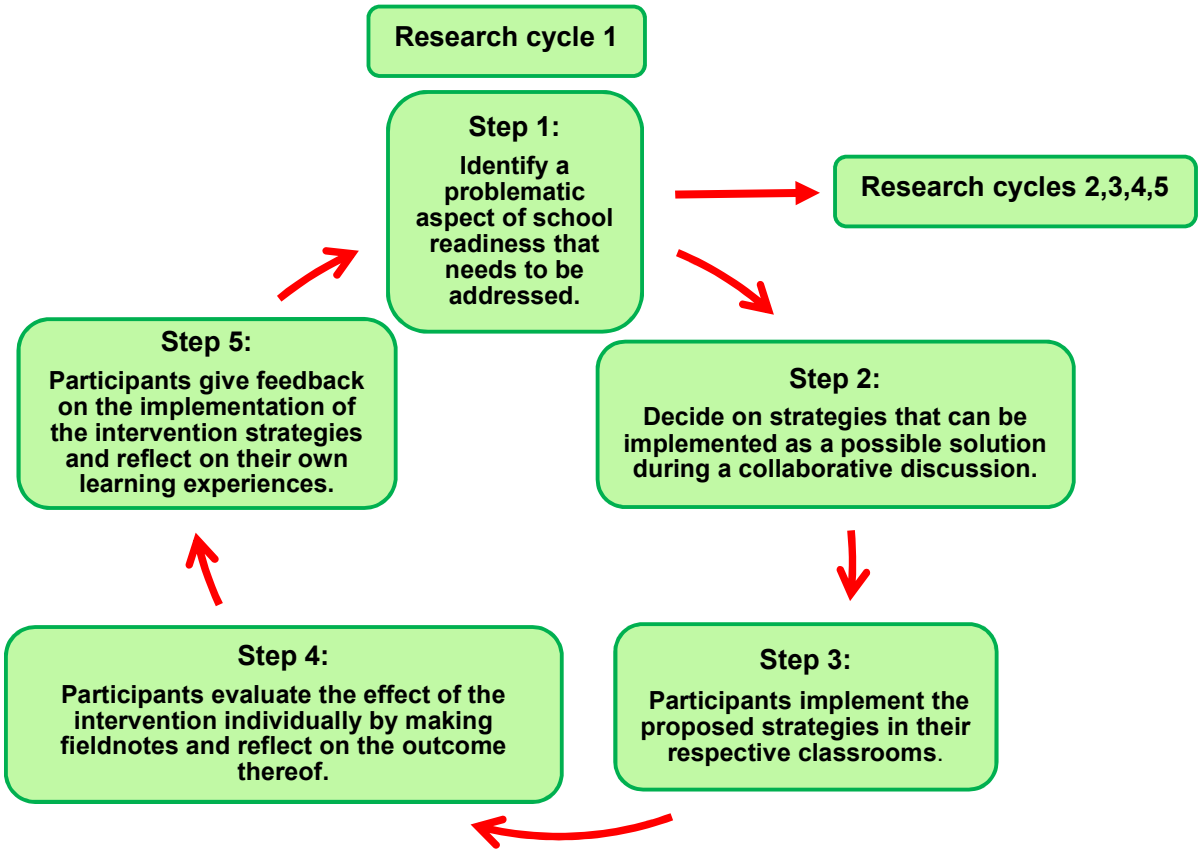


Figure 4.3: Research cycles for this study (Adapted from the five step action research cycle of McNiff 2002, p. 7)

The content for each of the five workshops is explained in more detail in the *Programme for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context* (see Addendum Z).

4.6.2 STRUCTURING THE WORKSHOPS FOR THIS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR GRADE 1 TEACHERS

Since my participants' time was extremely limited, we arranged for a one-hour workshop for each of the five research cycles. These workshops were scheduled every second or third week, depending on the extramural programmes of the participating teachers. In order to make the most of a sixty-minute workshop, I had to plan carefully for opportunities for feedback, introduction of new content as well as opportunities for collaborative discussions. Brown et al. (2009, p. 486) suggest that workshops for a professional development programme are structured as follows:

Table 4.3: Structuring of workshops in a professional development programme (Based on Brown et al. 2009)

Opening - 10% of the workshop	Indicate the purpose of the workshop, state the outcomes for the workshop and provide the agenda.
Main agenda – 80% of the workshop	Give feedback, reflect, discuss challenges and personal goals.
Closing – 10% of the workshop	Plan strategies for implementation in between workshops.

Table 4.4: Structuring of Workshops 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 of this research project

Opening – 10 minutes (16.6% of the workshop)	Welcome the participants, hand out the agenda, review what was done in the previous workshop and hand out a summary of the participants' feedback questionnaires of the previous workshop.
Main agenda – 40 minutes (66.8% of the workshop)	Participants give feedback on the intervention since the previous workshop; new information is given; intervention strategies for the next research cycle is discussed collaboratively. The template for the participants' field notes for the next research cycle is handed out and discussed.
Closing – 10 minutes (16.6% of the workshop)	Participants complete the feedback questionnaires for this particular workshop and time is provided for questions.

I structured Workshops 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 of this research project according to the suggestion of Brown et al. (2009) (see Table 4.4) and compiled an agenda for every workshop (see Addendum I for an example). By being thoroughly prepared for each of the five workshops, I managed to let things run smoothly and I was amazed by how much we could accomplish in an hour.

4.6.3 COLLECTING DATA DURING THE CYCLIC PROCESS OF THIS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

The data collection for this study took place during the third and fourth quarters of the year and commenced with a workshop to discuss the classroom challenges and determine the needs of the participating teachers (Workshop 1), followed by five research cycles (including Workshops 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6) and a focus group interview to conclude the project. During Workshop 1, the participants' concerns about the school readiness levels of their Grade 1 learners and the pressure of the current education system were discussed. Thereafter, five research cycles followed as the participating Grade 1 teachers progressed on their journey of professional development (see Figure 4.2). Each research cycle consisted of a workshop during which opportunities were provided for the participating Grade 1 teachers of the selected schools to discuss their classroom challenges (Step 1). This was followed by introducing new information on teacher-learner relationships and quality teaching, where after a collaborative discussion took place about possible intervention strategies the participating Grade 1 teachers could implement to support their struggling learners (Step 2). The intervention strategies they decided on, were implemented in their respective classrooms during the two or three weeks after each workshop (Step 3) and is further on referred to as Phases 1-5 of the intervention. The participants were asked to take field notes, evaluating the effect of the intervention on the progress of their learners and to keep reflection diaries for jotting down personal experiences and thoughts in between workshops (Step 4). When the participating teachers returned for the next workshop, they had the opportunity to give feedback on the implementation of the intervention strategies and the effect thereof during a collaborative discussion (Step 5). Similar research cycles then followed. The workshops, including all the collaborative discussions and feedback sessions, were audio recorded and transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

Due to the full extra mural programmes of the participating schools, it was not possible for the Grade 1 teachers of the three schools to attend workshops on the same day. School A and School B could attend the workshops together on Wednesday afternoons, but School D could not and therefore the workshops had to be repeated for them on Thursday afternoons. Despite this arrangement, not all the Grade 1 teachers of School D could attend the workshops and often only two of them

participated. This was not ideal, since the collaboration with the other participating teachers from Schools A and B was essential in the participatory action research project.

Similarly, not all the teachers from Schools A and B could attend all the Wednesday workshops and at times I had to settle for only one representative from each school. Although the others would send their field notes with the attending teachers, the collaborative discussions were still jeopardised.

The teachers from School D expressed their need to share their experiences and challenges with colleagues on more than one occasion and also indicated that they would like the principal of their school to look into this matter. They proposed that one afternoon per week should be set aside for professional development of teachers and that all teachers should then be free to attend.

4.6.4 CONCLUDING THE RESEARCH PROJECT WITH A SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW

A semi-structured focus group interview was scheduled after the last research cycle during which the participants had an opportunity to discuss their experiences regarding the whole research process. A template with leading questions was provided to them in advance in order for them to structure their thoughts in preparation for the focus group interview. This template included questions on their experiences during the research project regarding their own personal growth and their professional development, as well as reflections about the research procedure we followed and their needs for future professional development programmes (also see 4.8.4). In order to determine the effect of the intervention on the progress of their learners, the participants were requested to write a success story about one of their struggling learners who benefitted by the intervention strategies which were implemented during the research project. More detail regarding the participating teachers' success stories about their learners, is provided in Chapter 6.

4.7 ADHERING TO THE ESSENTIAL CRITERIA FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR GRADE 1 TEACHERS

Brown et al. (2009, p. 501-502) emphasise that the main purpose of professional development is to promote the confidence and competence of teachers. Furthermore, these authors identified collaborative relationships, purposeful reflection and the investment of time as essential criteria for the successful professional development of teachers (see Figure 4.4).

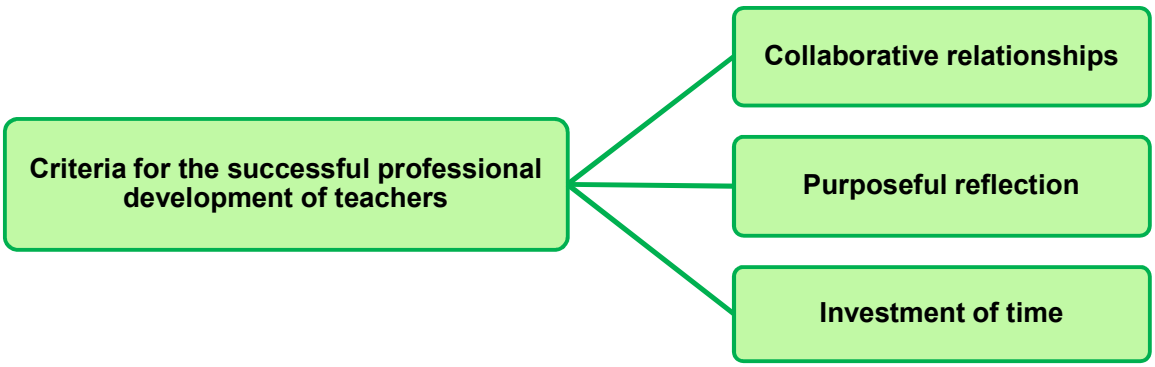


Figure 4.4: Essential criteria for the successful professional development of teachers (Based on Brown et al. 2009)

Through launching the participatory action research study, I could adhere to the first essential criterion for the successful professional development of teachers, namely providing opportunities for collaborative relationships, since the participating Grade 1 teachers acted as research partners. Their participation in the research project was maximised by the collaborative research partnerships which they established amongst themselves and with me as the researcher who facilitated the collaborative sessions. As facilitator, I needed to make provision for the participating teachers to share their classroom experiences with each other while giving feedback on the implementation of the intervention strategies which were collaboratively agreed upon. This meant that the workshops needed to be dynamic. Input by and feedback from the participants were essential elements in the process of their professional development.

Brown et al. (2009, p. 503) found that collaborative research partnerships are beneficial for the researcher as well as the participating teachers, since they share

common goals which they reach through continuous collaboration. During my first meetings with my participants at their respective schools, I explained the purpose of the research project to them and they were all eager to get involved and work towards the common goal of professional development with the prospect of being able to support vulnerable learners who lack school readiness skills. As the weeks went by, I could see the collaborative relationships amongst my participants growing stronger as they increasingly realised that they share the same passion and challenges.

Another claim made by Brown et al. (2009, p. 503) entails that the positive interactions during collaborative workshops tend to result in positive teacher-learner interactions in the classrooms of participating teachers. Thorough planning for each workshop was essential in order to ensure that I could create enough opportunities for interaction amongst my participants, allowing them ample time for discussions and feedback. There is no doubt that the collaboration with their colleagues contributed to positive teacher-learner interactions for the participating teachers in their respective classrooms. During the collaborative workshops they could share ideas, successes and challenges which contributed greatly to feelings of empowerment and self-confidence.

The second essential criterion for the successful professional development of teachers according to Brown et al. (2009, p. 502), is purposeful reflection. As facilitator I needed to create opportunities for the participating teachers to analyse their teaching experiences and reflect on the intervention strategies which were implemented to support struggling learners and promote school readiness. We started each workshop by reviewing the important decisions that were made during the previous workshop concerning intervention strategies that could be implemented and I provided a timeslot of twenty minutes on the agenda of each workshop for feedback on the outcomes of the intervention. The participants received templates for field notes and kept reflection diaries for the purpose of jotting down their thoughts and classroom experiences in between the workshops. Opportunities for purposeful reflection during the collaborative workshops enhanced both the professional development and personal growth of the participants and enabled them to address the challenges they experience in their classrooms. Through analysing, discussing and internalising the changes that needed to take place in their interactions with their learners, the participating teachers developed higher levels of self-efficacy.

To meet the third essential criterion, Brown et al. (2009, p. 502) emphasise that intervention and support which is aimed at the professional development of teachers, need to be a long term project in order to bring about sustainable results. Professional change is a time-consuming process, since the participating teachers need to acquire the necessary skills for implementing the suggested intervention strategies and furthermore they need to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying philosophy of the change they are expected to bring about (Brown et al. 2009, p.502). My involvement with my participants lasted for a period of six months from my first meetings with them at their respective schools, up to our last meeting which was a focus group interview, during which we concluded the data collection process. During this six-month period, we met for seven workshops (including the focus group interview) at intervals of two to three weeks, depending on the work schedules of the participants.

Following the cyclic process of participatory action research, the consecutive workshops built on each other and during each workshop, we revisited the decisions made during the previous discussions, reflected on new classroom experiences regarding the intervention strategies which were being implemented and took a few new steps regarding the following data collection cycle. During the workshops I often observed a bit of uncertainty and hesitance in my participants' reactions regarding the newly discussed intervention strategies, and sometimes even scepticism and doubt about whether it would really make a difference in the classroom and whether it was even worth trying. At other times, I observed enthusiasm when we discussed intervention strategies which they thought might work well and an eagerness to try it out. When they returned to the following workshop after implementing the intervention strategies we decided upon for a period of two to three weeks, I observed an enthusiasm and energy which clearly indicated a feeling of success and an eagerness to share the outcomes thereof with their colleagues.

This made me realise that a once-off workshop or training session, with no prospect of follow up meetings or opportunities for feedback on classroom interventions, cannot have the same effect than a participatory action research project that is implemented over a period of a few months or longer. Over the course of the six months' data collection period of my study, I witnessed the collaborative relationships amongst my participants growing stronger as they embarked together on this journey of

professional development. They grew in confidence as they supported each other and shared their successes and concerns. If an intervention strategy did not work well for some of the participants, they could openly discuss it with the other participants who had more success with it, get advice from them and try it out again in the next research cycle. There was always another opportunity to implement those strategies, as time was on our side. Not only did the participating teachers have to acquire new skills in applying intervention strategies which could promote the learning readiness of their learners, but at the same time their learners had to acquire new skills. In order to achieve this, time was essential.

Realising the importance of this research project for my participants, and considering the time they were prepared to invest in it, I was determined to develop a programme of high quality which would contribute to the professional development of my participants and in doing so, empower them to support their struggling learners. Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 82) identified six aspects of professional development programmes for teachers which researchers can focus on, in order to enhance the quality of such programmes. The way in which these six aspects were addressed in this study and the effect it had on the quality of the professional development of the participants, are discussed in the following section.

4.8 ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF THIS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS

As mentioned above, the quality of a professional development programme for teachers can be enhanced by focusing on six important aspects identified by Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 82). These aspects include the expertise of the researcher as the facilitator of the programme, the ability of the researcher to continuously adapt the planning of the programme according to the needs of the participants, as well as the ability of the researcher to evaluate the feedback given by the participants throughout the project. Furthermore, the researcher has to be able to focus on critical events in the programme that contribute to the development of the participants, point out opportunities for application of new knowledge and guide the participants in their journey to self-efficacy (see Figure 4.5).

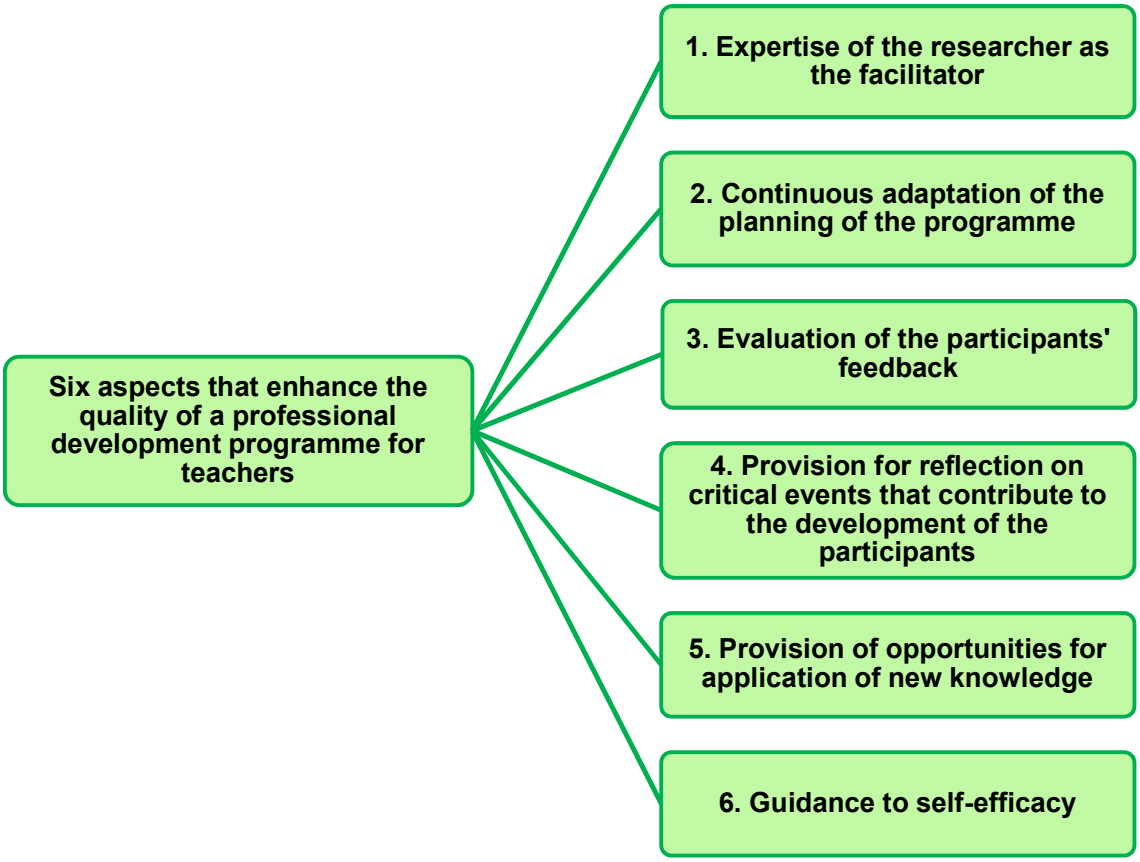


Figure 4.5: Six aspects that enhance the quality of a professional development programme for teachers (Based on Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 82-83)

4.8.1 ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS THROUGH THE EXPERTISE OF THE RESEARCHER AS FACILITATOR

The expertise of the researcher as the facilitator of a professional development programme for teachers launched as a participatory action research project, is the first aspect identified by Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 82-83) that contributes to the quality of such a programme. The participants in a participatory action research project are involved as research partners and since the research process might be new and unfamiliar to them, they rely on the guidance of the researcher as facilitator. The credibility of the researcher depends on his/her knowledge of and passion for the field of investigation. As facilitator, the researcher needs to present relevant knowledge to the participants, facilitate collaborative discussions and support the participants in their exploration of possible solutions to their teaching challenges. By guiding them with enthusiasm through collaborative reflections, the researcher can provide the

scaffolding they need to construct new knowledge which will contribute to their personal growth and professional development (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 83).

Despite my lack of experience as researcher in participatory action research, my experience as a Foundation Phase teacher and my passion for supporting vulnerable learners at school entry, enabled me to act as facilitator and guide my participants through the collaborative discussions. The knowledge I gained through my literature study, concerning the importance of close teacher-learner relationships in the first year of formal learning and the criteria for quality teaching, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation, was too valuable to keep to myself. I shared it with my participants and I could see how they enjoyed learning something new in every workshop. I introduced some of the ideas for intervention which I came across in the literature on school readiness with my participants and observed how they battled with this information during the collaborative discussions, trying to think of ways they could implement it in their classrooms. In some cases, they acted with excitement and enthusiasm, while at times they would react with scepticism. Either way, it was interesting to listen to their feedback at the following workshop on how they managed to integrate the new ideas with their own teaching methods and came up with new and inspiring ideas of their own.

4.8.2 ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS BY ADAPTING THE CONTENT TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

The second aspect that is important for ensuring the quality of a professional development programme, entails the preparedness of the researcher as facilitator to adapt the content of the collaborative workshops according to the participants' needs and requests (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 82-84). The researcher needs to keep in mind that participatory action research can be unpredictable and flexibility is often required. Therefore, the researcher continuously needs to monitor the participants' responses and participation during the collaborative workshops.

In order to address the fact that participatory action research is unpredictable and should progress according to the needs and requests of the participants, I used the first workshop to determine the needs of my participants. As discussed in Chapter 3, the need for professional development often emerges from teachers' concerns about

themselves as teachers, their teaching task and the effect of their teaching on their learners (see 3.2.3 and Figure 3.2). Keeping this in mind, I initiated a collaborative discussion at Workshop 1 about my participants' concerns regarding their struggling learners who lack essential school readiness skills and the challenges they consequently face in supporting these learners in a formal learning environment. Using the input of my participants during this discussion (see Image 4.2), I could roughly plan the rest of the workshops according to their most prominent concerns and needs. Furthermore, I closely monitored my participants' needs by requesting them to give feedback at the end of each workshop (see Images 4.3 and 4.4) and also by analysing the data from each workshop, before we met for the next one.

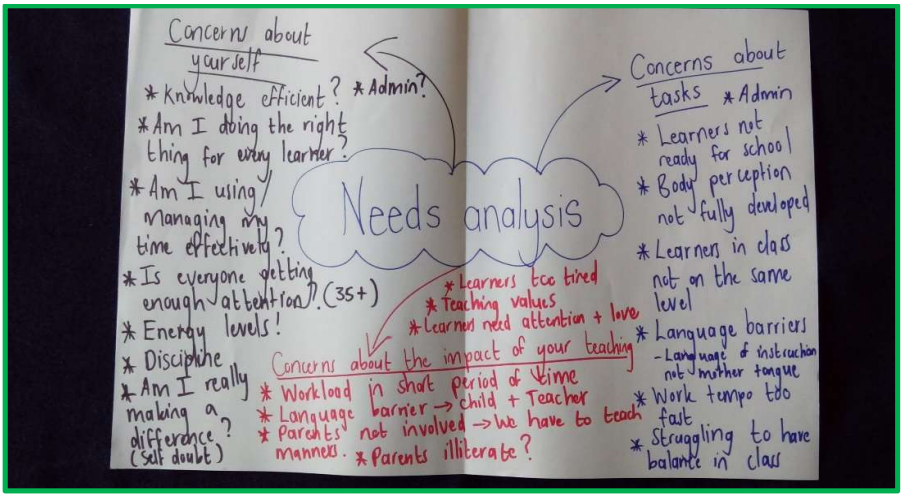


Image 4.2: An example of the participants' input during the collaborative discussion about their concerns at Workshop 1

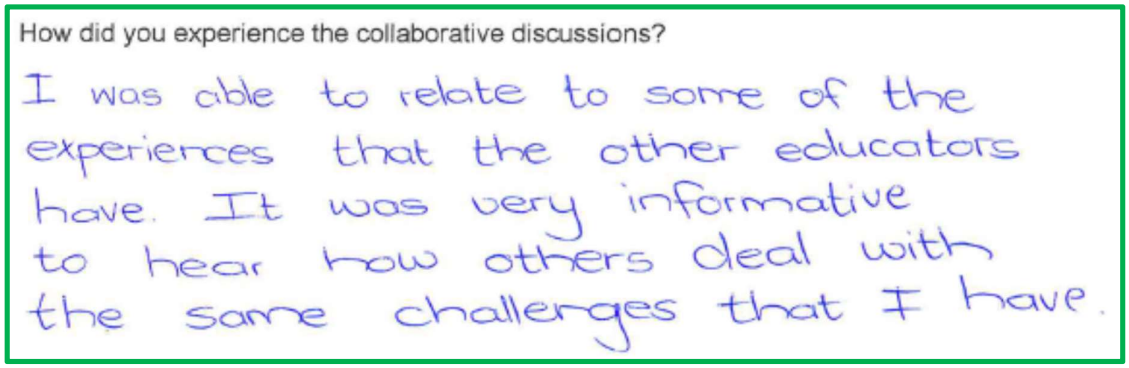


Image 4.3: Example A of the participants' feedback at the end of Workshop 1

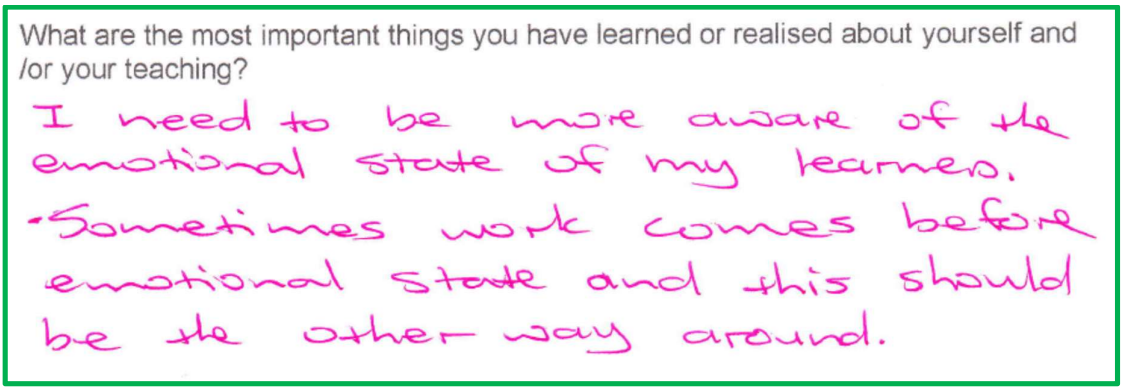


Image 4.4: Example B of the participants' feedback at the end of Workshop 2

4.8.3 ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS BY CONTINUOUSLY EVALUATING THE PARTICIPANTS' FEEDBACK

Thirdly, the researcher can contribute to the quality of a professional development programme by providing ample opportunities throughout the programme for the participants to give feedback on their learning experiences (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 84). These include their learning experiences during the collaborative discussions with each other, as well as their learning experiences in their respective classrooms in between the workshops, when implementing the intervention strategies which were agreed upon during the discussions. These learning experiences have to be carefully evaluated in order to determine the remaining needs of the participants, which in turn, will determine the content of each following research cycle of the participatory action research process (see Figures 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3).

In each workshop I made provision for three different feedback sessions (see Addendum D for an example of an agenda). I started each workshop by briefly pointing out the most important issues that were discussed in the previous workshop. Thereafter, during the first feedback session, I handed out a typed summary (see Addendum E for an example) of the participants' feedback questionnaires which they completed at the end of the previous workshop. These feedback questionnaires were completed anonymously at the end of each workshop to provide an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their learning experiences during the collaborative discussions and consisted of the following questions (see Addendum F for an example of a feedback questionnaire):

(i) How did you experience the collaborative discussions?

(ii) How do you feel about the decisions that we made?

(iii) What are the most important things you have learned or realised about yourself and / or your teaching?

In the second feedback session of each workshop, the participants had the opportunity to give feedback on their classroom experiences in between the workshops, when they implemented the intervention strategies which were decided on in the previous collaborative discussions. For each research cycle I provided the participating teachers with a template which they could use for field notes, indicating the intervention strategies they chose to implement in the long term, as well as the new strategies they decided to try out during each research cycle (see Addendum G for an example of a template for participants' field notes). We discussed their experiences of the intervention step by step and they could comment on each other's learning experiences.

The third feedback session was scheduled at the end of each workshop, as explained above, and the participants had the opportunity to give feedback on the new content that was discussed at that specific workshop. They could comment on their learning experiences during the collaborative discussions, their feelings about the decisions that were made regarding the next phase of intervention, as well as their own personal learning journeys (see Addendum F).

4.8.4 ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS BY MAKING PROVISION FOR REFLECTION ON CRITICAL EVENTS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 84-85) emphasise making provision for reflection on the critical or significant events during the research project as the fourth aspect which is essential for the quality of a professional development programme. They suggest keeping reflection diaries which enable participants to reflect on their personal growth and professional development from significant events, both during the collaborative workshops as well as during times in between workshops when they implement intervention strategies in their classrooms. According to Fletcher and Zuber-Skerritt (2008, p. 84-85), these significant events take place when the participants find the content of the collaborative discussions relevant to their teaching

task and implement it in their own classrooms in a meaningful way that contributes to their professional development.

Analysing the feedback provided by my participants after every workshop enabled me to stay informed about their experiences, progress and needs. This helped me in planning the subsequent workshops, making sure that their needs were addressed and that they would find each workshop relevant and informative. In order to make provision for the participating teachers in my study to reflect on their individual learning experiences throughout the research process, I provided an A5 notebook to each participant and explained the use of a reflection diary to them (see Image 4.5). As they progressed on their journeys of personal growth and professional development, their reflection diaries became very valuable to them and also more personal. They only shared the parts they felt comfortable with during our feedback sessions and eventually asked to keep it when the study was concluded.

I used the following note on the outside cover of the participants' reflection diaries: *'They may not remember what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.'* This reminded the participating teachers to focus on the emotional well-being of their learners.

Image 4.5: Reflection diaries for participating teachers

In order to create a final opportunity for reflection on the research project as a whole, as well as the professional development and personal growth of my participants individually, I scheduled a focus group interview as our last meeting. I designed a template with questions for reflection which I gave to my participants, asking them to complete it in preparation for the focus group interview. This template (see Addendum H) consisted of the following questions:

(i) How did you feel about the research project when you first heard about it?
(ii) Did you have any concerns or doubts regarding participation in the project?
(iii) Why did you agree to take part in the project?
(iv) How did you experience the workshops and research methods?
(v) How did you experience the fieldwork (implementing intervention strategies in your classroom)?
(vi) What did you learn about yourself as a teacher?
(vii) How did this project change your day-to-day teaching?
(viii) How did the research project change the way you think and feel about learners with insufficient school readiness?
(ix) What did you experience as negative during the research process?
(x) Do you have any advice on how similar projects can be done in future?
(xi) How do you feel about participatory action research as method for the professional development of teachers?
(xii) What are your needs for further professional development?

I also asked the participating teachers to each write a short case study about one learner in their respective classes, who benefitted from the intervention and support during the research project. Information gained from these opportunities for reflection and feedback will be presented as part of the research findings in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.8.5 ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS BY CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR APPLICATION OF NEW KNOWLEDGE

The fifth aspect contributing to the quality of a professional development programme, entails that the researcher as facilitator creates ample opportunities for the participating teachers to apply new knowledge gained through collaborative discussions and critical self-reflection. Therefore, a participatory action research project is regarded as effective when the participants can apply the content thereof in their professional lives and when such application contributes to higher levels of self-efficacy (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 85).

As explained above, this participatory action research project was conducted over a period of six months and consisted of five research cycles. We started each research cycle with a workshop during which new information and classroom experiences were shared, collaboratively discussed and reflected upon. In between the workshops, the

participating teachers implemented the intervention strategies they decided on during each workshop, in their respective classrooms for a period of two to three weeks. They each received a template for field notes (see Addendum Y) at the end of a workshop, to guide them during the intervention phase and help them to structure their observations and classroom experiences. These field notes, together with their reflection diaries, enabled them to return to the next workshop being prepared to give feedback and participate in the next round of collaborative discussions. Having had ample opportunities to implement newly gained knowledge in their classrooms to support their struggling learners and being able to observe the change in their learners' confidence and academic progress, contributed greatly to the professional development and personal growth of my participants.

4.8.6 ENHANCING THE QUALITY OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME FOR TEACHERS BY GUIDING THEM ON THEIR JOURNEY TO HIGHER LEVELS OF SELF-EFFICACY

Higher levels of self-efficacy reflect the extent to which the participating teachers experience empowerment in addressing problematic issues in their classrooms and is regarded as the sixth aspect contributing to the success of a professional development programme. This aspect is clearly reflected in the confidence and enthusiasm with which the participants join in the collaborative discussions, give feedback on their experiences and plan for future classroom interventions (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008, p. 85, 88).

At our first workshop, when we discussed the participating teachers' experiences and concerns regarding the school readiness of their Grade 1 learners, they were emotionally and physically tired, discouraged and without hope for any improvement of their problematic teaching situation. Some of them were interested in the research project and were willing to try anything that might help them in supporting their struggling learners, while others were sceptical, convinced that they had already tried everything possible and worried that the research project would be a waste of time. I felt intimidated by the situation, knowing from my own experience as a Foundation Phase teacher how difficult my participants' teaching conditions were. I had no choice but to carry on, relying on the information and positive findings from previous studies which I read about in the literature and the exciting prospect of leading a research

project that might make a difference in the lives of vulnerable young learners and their teachers. As facilitator, I followed all the guidelines and advice I could find about participatory action research and as the research project progressed, I observed my participants' enthusiasm and confidence increase. In the end, I was pleasantly surprised by my participants' journey to higher levels of self-efficacy.

4.9 ANALYSING THE DATA OF THIS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Analysing data collected during the cyclic process of a participatory action research project, was discussed in Chapter 1 (see 1.8.5) and as indicated, the data sources for this research project consisted of the recordings of the collaborative discussions during each workshop (transcriptions), the written feedback of participants at the end of each workshop (narratives), the researcher's journal with observations and reflections after each workshop (narratives), the participants' field notes and reflection diaries (narratives) and the recording of the semi-structured focus group interview (transcription) (see Figure 1.3).

During the process of data analysis, the data from the different sources was coded and compared. Emerging themes were used to categorise the raw data. The focus of the data analysis was to identify those themes that contribute to high quality professional development of the participating teachers to enhance their personal and professional learning and growth.

As indicated in Chapter 1 (see 1.8.5), data collection and data analysis were done intermittently. After each workshop, the newly collected data was coded and added to the themes that emerged from the data of the previous workshops. New insight was gained through this process which enabled me to refine and enrich my research findings as I revisited the data from previous workshops. Often new sets of data lead to a different perspective on previous interpretations of the data.

Since my participants acted as research partners, they were involved in the process of data analysis and regular member checking was done to confirm the research findings. As the participating teachers of the three different schools could not attend the workshops on the same afternoons, due to their extramural programmes, I had to present each workshop twice (on a Wednesday afternoon for School A and School B

and again on a Thursday afternoon for School D). Therefore, it was important to keep up with the data analysis after each workshop in order to inform them of each other's ideas, decisions and feedback. The research findings are presented and discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

4.10 REFLECTING ON MY ROLE AS RESEARCHER

While I was studying literature on participatory action research, I came across advice from various authors (Ebersöhn et al. 2007; Conner & Duncan 2013; McNiff 2002; Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo 2013; Burton et al. 2008; Mouton 2001; Creswell 2008; Brown et al. 2009; Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008), explaining the role and responsibilities of a researcher in a participatory action research project. This advice included guidelines regarding the partnership between the researcher and the participants, as well as the role of the researcher as facilitator who listens to the participants' challenges and ideas, encourages collaborative discussions and guides them through critical self-reflections, while remaining as objective as possible (see discussion in 1.8.3).

As a researcher, I found this advice extremely helpful and followed it to the best of my ability. Although I was nervous at first, I soon realised that the majority of my participants were very excited about the research project and I was surprised by the amount of trust they put in me to guide them on this learning journey. I was determined not to disappoint them and worked hard to make the professional development programme informative, effective and worth the effort.

I realised however, that it was difficult to sustain positive relationships with some of my participants, especially two of the less experienced Grade 1 teachers from School D and one from School B, whom I could see were somewhat resistant to take part in the research project. I suspected that they only took part in the project because they felt that their principals expected them to. Two of them were on maternity leave when the project was launched and only joined us halfway through the project. I realised that it was difficult for them to be back at school, especially with the changes in their personal lives, but I also realised as we progressed, that they were both unhappy in their careers. The third teacher was still very young and it was only her second year of teaching. I could see that she was completely overwhelmed by reality, causing her to experience teaching as a daunting career. I reached out to these three teachers

during our workshops, not showing my disappointment in the fact that they often did not complete their field notes or feedback questionnaires. Towards the end of the project I could see some improvement in their attitude towards the struggling learners in their classes.

Regarding my disappointment with the lack of enthusiasm and participation of three of the participating teachers, as mentioned above, I found reassurance in the findings of Baker et al. (2010, p. 279-280) namely that not all teachers will participate fully and that ". . . complete implementation of interventions is neither feasible nor necessary." Reflecting on my own journey and development as a researcher, I realise that I have learned much from the reluctance of these three teachers, although it has not been as pleasant as my learning experiences from working closely with my more enthusiastic participants. My reflections on my own experiences as a researcher during the implementation of this participatory action research project, are presented in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6 as part of the presentation of the research findings.

4.11 SUMMARY

In this chapter, the process of launching a participatory action research project with the purpose to contribute to the continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers, was discussed. The focus of the discussion was on my efforts as researcher to select advantageous settings for the research project, gain access to the research sites and build relationships of trust with the participating teachers, inviting them to embark on a journey of personal and professional growth. Furthermore, the emphasis was placed on my role as facilitator to conduct well-structured workshops, providing ample opportunities for collaborative discussions and feedback to ensure that a professional development programme of good quality was provided to my participants.

In Chapters 5 and 6, I present the research findings according to the themes that emerged from the data analysis, starting with the concerns of the participating Grade 1 teachers about the pressure of the current education system. Thereafter I present my participants' learning experiences as they take a leap of faith and join the research journey, aimed at their professional development as Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context. The outcome of the research journey is indicated by the participating Grade 1 teachers' professional development

and personal growth as they manage to restore their relationships with their learners and reflect on the lessons learned.

CHAPTER 5

A THEMATIC PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS PART I

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapters 1 and 4, the planning and implementation of this participatory action research project aimed at the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness, were presented. The methods I used to select the participating schools, gain access to the research sites and launch the research project, were explained, along with the process of data collection and the procedures I followed to ensure the quality of the professional development programme. I also described the process of data analysis and reflected on my role as researcher.

In Chapters 5 and 6, the research findings are presented according to the themes that emerged during the analysis of the data (see Table 5.1 for a summary of the themes and subthemes). Evidence from the empirical data is given to support the themes and subthemes. The presentation commences with Theme 1, which is based on the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) (Fuller 1969). The CBMoTD was used to determine the needs and concerns of the participating teachers regarding themselves as teachers, their teaching task and the impact of their teaching on their learners. These concerns were taken as the foundation from where the professional development programme was launched (see Figure 3.2), since the need to look for solutions to classroom challenges, emerges from such concerns.

This is followed by a discussion of Theme 2, which is based on the model for action research (CRASP I) and the model for the professional development of teachers (CRASP II) (Zuber-Skerritt 1992). CRASP I and II, together with the research cycle of McNiff (2002) (see Figure 4.3), represent the cyclic process which was followed during this participatory action research project and indicate the important processes which took place during the participating teachers' journey of professional development.

Theme 3 (see Chapter 6) is based on Attachment Theory, and the research findings indicate how the participating Grade 1 teachers managed to restore their teacher-

learner relationships by enhancing the quality of their teaching. See Figure 5.1 for an illustration of Themes 1 to 3 in relation to the conceptual framework for this study.

Table 5.1: Themes and subthemes that emerged during the analysis of the data

CBMoTD	**1. The pressure of the current education system in South Africa – challenges in the Grade 1 classroom**		
	"We don't know any more how to address the problems, we feel our hands are tied, we don't have any assistance"	(i)	Concerns about the insufficient school readiness of many of the Grade 1 learners (Impact concerns)
		(ii)	Concerns about the unrealistic expectations to implement the current curriculum (Task concerns)
		(iii)	Concerns about the lack of support for teachers (Self concerns)
		(iv)	The negative effect of the current education system on the self-efficacy of the participating Grade 1 teachers
CRASP I and CRASP II	**2. Taking a leap of faith – joining the participatory action research project**		
	"I wasn't sure whether I could make any worthwhile contributions"	(i)	Finding comfort in collaboration with colleagues
		(ii)	Participating in problem-solving decision making
		(iii)	Conducting research into own teaching by implementing collaboratively agreed upon intervention strategies
		(iv)	Facing and conquering challenges in the classroom
		(v)	Growing through critical self-reflection
Attachment Theory	**3. Making a difference by strengthening teacher-learner relationships and providing high quality teaching**		
	"And you know he managed to get 15 out of 20! I couldn't believe it!"	(i)	Achieving high levels of closeness through emotional support
		(ii)	Encouraging independence through instructional support
		(iii)	Attempting to achieve lower levels of conflict through classroom organisation
		(iv)	The positive effect of professional development on the self-efficacy of the participating Grade 1 teachers

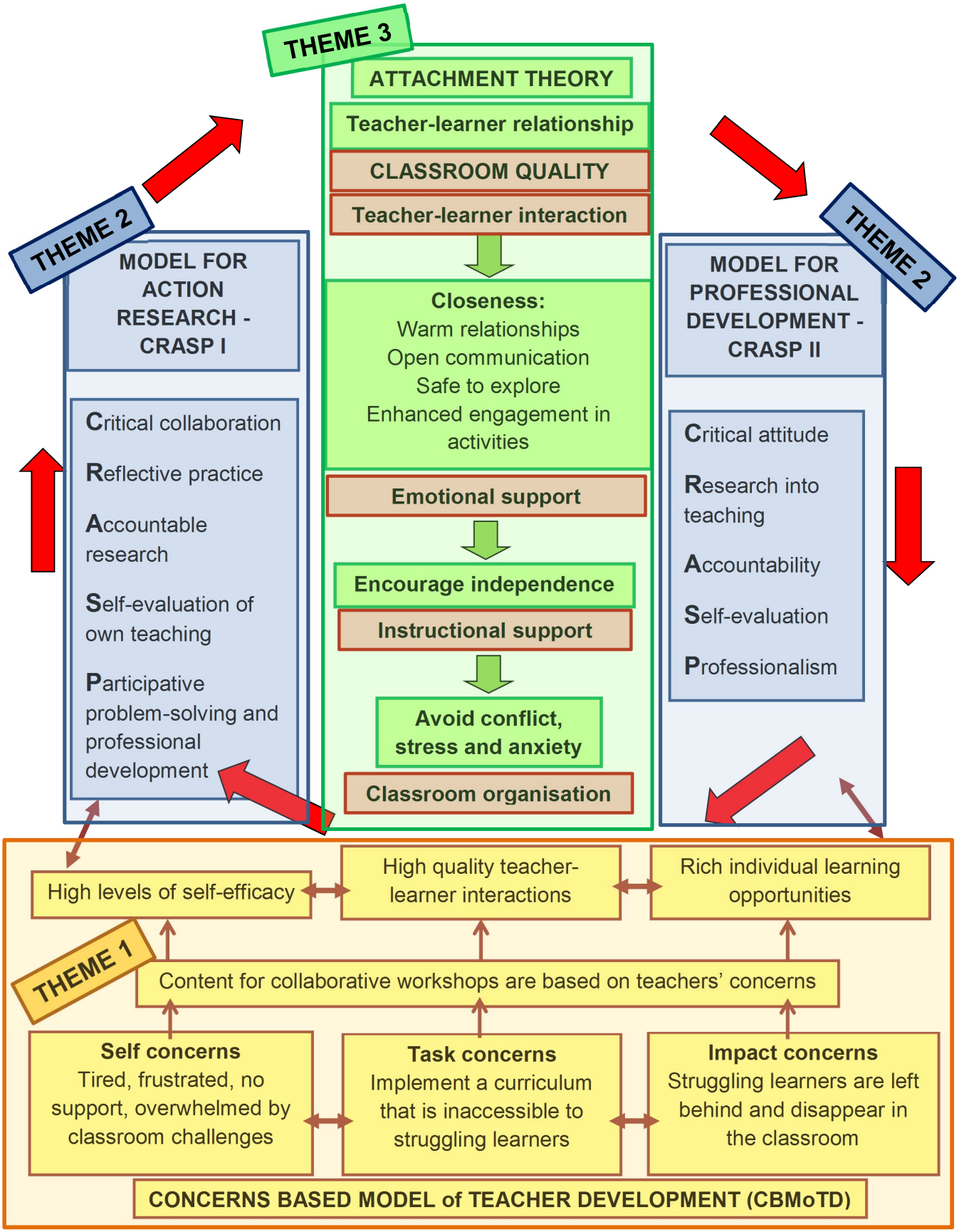


Figure 5.1: Themes which emerged from the data in relation to the conceptual framework for this study

Information on the participating Grade 1 teachers, which is relevant for the presentation of the research findings, is presented in Table 5.2. This information includes the codes used for the respective participants, indicating the schools where they were teaching at the time of data collection (Schools A, B or D). Their years of teaching experience are presented again (also see Table 4.2), since it plays an important role in the research findings (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2: Participant information relevant for the presentation of the research findings

	Participant information									
	School A			School B			School D			
Codes for participating Grade 1 teachers	**A1**	**A2**	**A3**	**B1**	**B2**	**B3**	**D1**	**D2**	**D3**	**D4**
Years of teaching experience	30	6	7	38	2	1	27	30	9	5
Years of Grade 1 teaching experience	23	1	1	21	2	1	15	19	4	4

The codes used to indicate during which workshop the presented data was collected, is presented in Table 5.3 (e.g. WS 3a). The code used for PowerPoint presentations is PP (see Table 5.3).

Table 5.3: Codes used for the respective workshops and the PowerPoint presentations

Schools A and B		**School D**	
Workshop 1a	**WS 1a**	Workshop 1b	**WS 1b**
Workshop 2a	**WS 2a**	Workshop 2b	**WS 2b**
Workshop 3a	**WS 3a**	Workshop 3b	**WS 3b**
Workshop 4a	**WS 4a**	Workshop 4b	**WS 4b**
Workshop 5a	**WS 5a**	Workshop 5b	**WS 5b**
Workshop 6a	**WS 6a**	Workshop 6b	**WS 6b**
PowerPoint presentation (with the number of the workshop)			**PP**

In addition to the empirical evidence presented, I inserted striking quotes from my participants to initiate the discussions of the subthemes and to emphasise their feelings and opinions at critical moments in the discussions.

5.2 THEME 1: THE PRESSURE OF THE CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SOUTH AFRICA – CHALLENGES IN THE GRADE 1 CLASSROOM

I used the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) to structure the first collaborative discussion and asked the participating teachers of each school to discuss their concerns regarding themselves as teachers, their teaching task and the impact of their teaching on their learners. They were asked to make notes on A3 sheets of paper (see Image 4.2 for an example and Addendum J for the typed summary of the notes). During the feedback session that followed, they had an opportunity to share their concerns with me and the other participants.

The participants were all very eager to share their classroom challenges with me and with each other. As I listened to them, I realised that it was similar to the findings of my previous study where I investigated the impact of insufficient school readiness on teaching and learning in Grade 1, through the eyes of the Grade 1 teachers (Bruwer 2014). I also realised that these Grade 1 teachers desperately needed to voice their concerns about the challenges they face in their day-to-day teaching. It was clear that they needed a forum where they could really 'speak from the heart' without the fear of being judged.

The concerns they mentioned included, amongst others, the significant number of Grade 1 learners who were not ready for formal learning, the current curriculum which they regarded as inaccessible to many learners, the tremendous pressure and pace in the classroom and the lack of support they experienced. These concerns of the participating Grade 1 teachers will subsequently be discussed as the first three subthemes, namely:

(i) Concerns about the insufficient school readiness of many of the Grade 1 learners (Impact concerns);
(ii) Concerns about the unrealistic expectations to implement the current curriculum (Task concerns);
(iii) Concerns about the lack of support for teachers (Self concerns).

The negative effect of the pressure that the current education system has on the self-efficacy of the participating Grade 1 teachers, is discussed as the fourth subtheme.

5.2.1 CONCERNS ABOUT THE INSUFFICIENT SCHOOL READINESS OF MANY OF THE GRADE 1 LEARNERS

I often find that the learners are not ready at that stage to learn what you actually have to teach them. Sometimes it's just way over their heads.

(WS 1b, D2, 123-125)

Numbers indicate lines from transcriptions.

The participating Grade 1 teachers were extremely concerned about the large number of learners who enter Grade 1 without being ready for formal learning. The information on the Grade 1 learners which was provided by the participating teachers once the research project was in progress (see Table 4.1), indicates that an average of almost one third (31%) of the Grade 1 learners were struggling academically and an average of almost one quarter (24,7%) were at risk of retention at the time of data collection. They mentioned that they only had *'a handful of children who actually cope'* and that they didn't *'think half of them will get there'* (WS 1b, D2, 13-14, 43).

When asked why the Grade 1 learners were not ready for formal learning, they pointed out that most of them have *'language barriers, because the language of instruction is not their mother tongue'* (WS 1a, A2, 21-22). They explained that they were worried, because the learners *'don't have the vocab for most of the stuff'* and often ask their teachers *"What does that mean Mam?" "What do you mean?"* Furthermore, *'when [they] discuss something, like with the prepositions they [the learners] find it horrifically difficult, [for example] inside, outside, on top, beyond, below, are words that are almost foreign to them. They find it very hard. Very, very hard'* (WS 1b, D2, 3-6, 56-60). The information provided by the participating teachers (see Table 4.1), indicates that, at the time of data collection, 96,4% of the Grade 1 learners were second language learners and less than half of them (43,7%) attended the Grade R classes at the participating schools, where they could get exposure to proper language instruction.

The second aspect of the Grade 1 learners' insufficient school readiness which their teachers were concerned about, was their physical readiness for formal learning. According to their teachers, many of these Grade 1 learners are too hungry and too tired to pay attention in class or to participate in learning activities. They explained that many learners *'have a meal at night at seven and then they only eat again the next*

morning at half past nine (which is first break). *Some of them might eat porridge at four in the morning or they eat something on the bus or the taxi, but many drivers don't want the children to eat in the taxis. So they don't get something to eat for fifteen hours and they are hungry. So when they arrive here and [we] teach them, they are hungry'* (WS 1a, C1, 79-86). Another issue resulting from the transport arrangements, is *'the fact that they have to get up so early and arrive home again very late. . . the children are tired. They have to sleep for ten hours, so that is difficult'* (WS 1b, C1, 90-92, 95-96). Many of these learners live in rural areas and are transported to the city schools on a daily basis, because their parents want to provide their children with the best education they can afford. Apart from the fact that many of the Grade 1 learners are tired and hungry when they arrive at school, there are learners with visual or hearing impairments, whose parents did either not realise it yet, or do not have the time or funds to have their eyes and ears tested. Participant C1 said *'we want visits from the school clinic again so that their eyes and ears can be tested to identify learners with problems'* (WS 1a, C1, 5-7).

In the third place, the participating Grade 1 teachers were also concerned about the social and emotional readiness of their learners. They explained that: *'the learners do not have any values, we have to teach them values and good manners, basic good manners, for example not to push [a] friend out of the way so that [he/she] can be first in the line or just treat people with respect'* (WS 1a, B1, 103-106). They struggle to maintain discipline in the classroom, because according to them *'there is no discipline'* (WS 1a, B1, 102 and C1, 16). The learners do not have the social skills they need to meet the expectations of the formal learning environment. As far as emotional readiness is concerned, the teachers said that the learners *'seek love and attention, as they do not get it at home'* (WS 1a, B1, 111-112).

The words of participant D1 painted an alarming picture of the concerns these Grade1 teachers have to deal with, when she said: *'it's so sad that when a child is not ready, they will just get pushed through because they've already repeated their year, but the child's not ready. I have this wonderful boy now. I don't know what to do with him. He cannot go through to Grade 2, but he has already repeated Grade 1. And my Lord, now he has to go through to Grade 2 because the parents don't want to send him to special ed. What do you do? Your hands are tied. What can you do? It's so sad. What is he going to do next year? That's what worries me'* (WS 1b, D1, 195-207).

It was clear to me that my participants were extremely concerned about their learners and their teaching efforts which are unsuccessful, because their learners are not ready for formal learning. I observed their anxiety and frustration as they shared these daily classroom challenges. The fact that these findings were similar to the findings of my previous study (Bruwer 2014), made me realise that the voices of these teachers are still not heard and their concerns are not being addressed.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-04

Supporting a few learners who lack the necessary school readiness skills in a Grade 1 classroom where the majority of the learners are coping well and the teacher has time to attend to struggling learners, is manageable. However, listening to the concerns of my participants regarding the large number of learners who were not ready for formal learning and the expectations of the current education system, made me realise that they were working under tremendous pressure.

5.2.2 CONCERNS ABOUT THE UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS TO IMPLEMENT THE CURRENT CURRICULUM

Get the children happy, because they spend so much time at school, it's better to be happy at school, because they learn when they are happy. How can they be happy when they are under huge pressure?

(WS 1b, D2, 87-91)

The Grade 1 teachers of all the participating schools mentioned that a major concern regarding their task as teachers was the pressure they experience as a result of the expectations to implement the current curriculum. They are concerned about the fact that a large number of their learners are not ready for formal learning, yet they have to start with the curriculum right away, because *'the department has other requirements'* (WS 1a, A3, 52). Participant A3 explained that they *'know what is right for the learners, but they [the DBE] say no, you have to start with the curriculum and you just need to carry on. There is no time for consolidation. You carry on with the next concept, knowing that the learners have not mastered it yet, but you know you have to carry on'* (WS 1a, A3, 54-59). The participating teachers expressed their concerns about the struggling learners who are left behind, because they cannot cope with the work and there is no way their teachers can help them. *'I have tried to help to the best*

of my ability, but because of the time factor, you just do not have the time in the class to help them individually. You just don't' (WS 1b, D2, 113-116).

Even the learners who attended the Grade R classes at the participating schools, who are ready for formal learning and are expected to make average or good progress, struggle to keep up *'because the curriculum is too heavy. There is no time to review or consolidate'* (WS 1b, D2, 135-137). Participant A3 said that the *'work tempo is too fast; [they] are struggling to have balance in [their] classes'* and Participant C1 added that due to *'the work tempo of CAPS [the current curriculum], there is no time for consolidation, it is too much and you just have to finish'* (WS 1a, A3, 22-23 and C1, 62-63). Similarly, Participant D2 proclaimed that she is *'devastated about how much these children must do'* and added that the work '*they've got to cover is very scary, very, very scary'.* She referred to the *departmental books* which are provided by the DBE and explained that the learners are unable to do the work independently, which means that they *'need assistance and a lot of them come back and back and back all the time'* (WS 1b, D2, 2-3, 49-50, 97-100). This happens because they have to rush through the work, they do not have time to introduce new concepts on a concrete level and the learners are exposed to the semi-concrete and abstract levels too soon when they complete the work in the departmental books (WS 1b, D1, 46).

Due to the pressure regarding the implementation of the current curriculum and trying to keep up with the expectations of the Department of Basic Education, the Grade 1 teachers do not have time to work with learners individually. In this regard, Participant D1 said *'my biggest worry is – the child in the class who REALLY needs help and you are not getting to him. You can't, I mean the special needs children. What do you do? There isn't a chance'* (WS 1b, D1, 107-110). They also do not have time to let the learners read to them individually (WS 1b, D2, 100-102) and according to Participant D1, they are even *'too scared to miss a day, because there's too much to catch up'.* She explained: *'I panic when a child is not at school, because you have to try to catch up with that work and how do you do that, because there's too many, the numbers are too much'* (WS 1b, D1, 143-149). According to the information provided by the participating teachers at the time of data collection, School A had an average of thirty-three Grade 1 learners per class, School B had thirty-eight learners per class and School D had thirty learners per class.

Besides the number of learners in the classes, which the participating teachers regard as too many for a Grade 1 class, they also mentioned that the *'learners in the class [are] not on the same level'* (WS 1a, A2, 21). This is another factor that complicates their teaching task, because *'now you have strong learners, average learners and weak learners. Who suffers now? The strong learners suffer, the average learners just carry on and you struggle with the weak learners'* (WS 1a, C1, 76-79). Participant C1 explained that in earlier years *'all the strong learners were grouped together in a class, then also the average learners together and the weaker learners together,'* which meant that '*you work with all the strong learners [together], and . . . when you work with only the weaker learners, you can work on the same level with them',* but she pointed out that they *'are not allowed to do that anymore'* (WS 1a, C1, 70-75).

I realised that my participants were overwhelmed by the pressure placed on them by the Department of Basic Education. They have to cope with a large number of Grade 1 learners in a class, of whom more or less one third is not ready for formal learning. Furthermore, they have to implement a curriculum which they regard as too difficult and too loaded for their learners. The learners have to complete the work in the workbooks provided by the DBE, which means that all the learners do the same work, whether they are ready for it, or not, and no individual assistance or differentiation is possible.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-04

The participating teachers admitted that they were tired, worried and overwhelmed by the expectations of the education system neither they, nor their learners could live up to. They also declared that they cannot rely on the parents of their Grade 1 learners, or even on the DBE for any assistance regarding their concerns.

5.2.3 CONCERNS ABOUT THE LACK OF SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

We don't know any more how to address the problems, we feel our hands are tied . . . we don't have any assistance.

(WS 1a, C1, 28-29; 32-33)

In addition to the concerns the participating Grade 1 teachers raised about the insufficient school readiness of their learners and the tremendous pressure they experience when trying to implement the current curriculum, they revealed that they receive very little or no support from their learners' parents, or the DBE in order to address their classroom challenges.

They stated that the parents do not listen to the advice they give them regarding their children's school readiness and that when *'the parents feel that their children are ready at an age of five . . . [they] send them to school'* (WS 1a, C1, 8-10). Many of these young learners, as well as some of the others, who turned six the year before but did not attend a Grade R class, enter the formal learning environment with a tremendous backlog. The participants argued that *'Grade R should be compulsory and then the learners [would] be better prepared for Grade 1, [furthermore] admission requirements [should be set and] the learners should all write a screening test before they are admitted to Grade 1'* (WS 1a, C1, 2-5). Since these measures are not in place, the Grade 1 teachers cannot turn to the DBE or the education authorities for assistance when advising parents. It seems as if there is no way the Grade 1 teachers can prevent learners who are not ready for formal learning, to enter Grade 1.

Neither a compulsory Grade R year, nor screening tests before admission to Grade 1, are currently done, which means that Grade1 teachers cannot rely on support from the DBE when trying to address this issue with parents. Consequently, learners who lack the essential school readiness skills are admitted to Grade 1 and the teachers are expected to implement a curriculum which these learners are not ready for. Keeping in mind the large number of learners per Grade 1 class, the fact that the teachers are not allowed to divide the learners homogeneously and the tempo at which they have to rush through the curriculum, I can fully understand the frustration and concerns of my participants.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-04

As the primary educators of their children and important role-players in their children's academic progress, parents should work with, and support the teachers in their efforts to assist the struggling Grade 1 learners. The participating teachers however, claimed that they experience a lack of support from many of the parents, especially regarding the social skills of the learners and the challenges they face with maintaining discipline

in their classrooms. Participant A2 explained *'there is no discipline, the learners do not have any values, that is where the parents should come in and we are worried about it, because it is our teaching time that we use to teach basic values'* (WS 1a, A2, 102-103, 106-109). This lack of parental support is probably due to the fact that the parents work long hours and spend very little time with their children. For the same reason, they are not available to support their children with their homework, as stated by Participant C1: *'there is not always time for homework, because the parents work late'*, and confirmed by Participant D3: *'I got a few today that haven't done any homework, because, you don't know what's going on at home'* (WS 1a, C1, 93-94; WS 1b, D2, 70-81). In some cases, learners do not live with their parents, but *'with grandparents who cannot read or write, or who cannot communicate'* (WS 1a, C1, 96-97), which means that they are unable to assist with homework.

The Grade 1 teachers of all the participating schools pointed out that they need assistants in their classrooms, because *'it would make a huge difference'* (WS 1b, D2, 156-157) and they would be able to give individual attention to struggling learners. They see the difference it makes when they have visiting students. Participant D1 explained: *'If you had somebody . . . that's why I am so grateful for my student. While she's busy doing her lesson and they are busy with their things and she is walking around, then I quickly call them up to do the reading. Otherwise, when do you do it?'* (WS 1b, D1, 159-163).

Struggling with so many challenges day after day eventually leads to discouragement and a lack of confidence in the education authorities. Participant D3 declared: *'I think people who put that curriculum together have never been in classrooms themselves . . . for me it's very clear'* and later desperately asked: *'do you think that they, the education department, is aware of the fact that it's tough, that they have made it too difficult?'* (WS 1b, D2, 60-62; 190-192).

Having to face all these challenges in their classrooms, with no support from the parents or the DBE and nowhere to voice their concerns, it is understandable that these Grade 1 teachers have lost their trust in the education system. They doubt their own abilities and lose confidence in themselves, leading to low levels of self-efficacy.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-10

5.2.4 THE NEGATIVE EFFECT OF THE CURRENT EDUCATION SYSTEM ON THE SELF-EFFICACY OF THE PARTICIPATING GRADE 1 TEACHERS

. . . the departmental books, I am so behind with that . . . and I mean I am worried. Grade 1 used to work from numbers 1-10, Grade 2 up to 20 and then you could count beyond to a hundred . . . for me, this has now blown me out of the water.

(WS 1b, D2, 50-53)

As the participating Grade 1 teachers raised their concerns about the insufficient school readiness of their learners, the pressure of the current education system and the fact that they desperately need support from the parents and the Department of Basic Education, it became clear that they were overwhelmed by the challenges they face on a daily basis. Both the novice and the experienced teachers admitted that they were extremely concerned about the current situation in their classrooms. They said: *'we have such big classes; our energy levels; discipline . . . we are . . . struggling' [and] 'we don't have any assistance'* (WS 1a, A2, 45-47; WS 1a, C1, 28-29). The pressure to implement a heavily loaded curriculum, while a large number of their learners were not ready for formal learning, inevitably led to a situation where the majority of the learners could not keep up.

Participant D2 exclaimed: *'I am very behind with the DBE books right now . . . I get nervous. I panic with work load, I do, I panic . . . I am always worried that I am behind, and I don't even know how thoroughly I've done it. And I feel like tomorrow I am not even going to look what's on the prep'* (WS 1b, D2, 93-94; 141). She admitted that she actually feels relieved when her colleagues say that they are also not keeping up: *'when I get to school, I go to Miss . . . and I ask 'Miss . . ., have you guys done this?' and she says 'no, I haven't got there' and I go 'I'm so happy' does that sound terrible?'* (WS 1b, D2, 64-67). Participant D2 is an experienced teacher with thirty years of teaching experience, of which nineteen years has been Grade 1 teaching experience, but still the current expectations are too much. She said: *'I feel bad as a teacher. I am so irritable, because there is so much to do'* (WS 1b, D2, 6-7). She referred back to previous years with a different curriculum and said: *'. . . I just remember being such a happy, calm teacher'* (WS 1b, D2, 38-39).

Looking at my participants' facial expressions and body language, and listening to their concerns, I could definitely not describe them as 'happy, calm teachers'. The opposite was true. They were irritated, stressed and unhappy. They were frustrated and angry. They were stuck in a teaching situation they regarded as 'virtually impossible' (WS 1b, D2, 26-27), with nowhere to go and no one to turn to for assistance.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-10

The participating Grade 1 teachers lost a great deal of trust in the Department of Basic Education, due to curriculum changes they do not agree with, for example: *'What makes this curriculum better than what we were taught years ago? We all came out okay? And we actually have a better knowledge of literature, our spelling skills are a lot better, so, who opted to change it?* (WS 1b, D2, 117-121). However, it was evident that these teachers were losing confidence in themselves as well, since they cannot meet the expectations of the current education system. Although they mentioned possible reasons for their classroom challenges, like the insufficient school readiness of many of their learners, the unrealistic expectations of the education system and the lack of support for teachers, they eventually turned the magnifying glass onto themselves as well. They had doubts about their own competency as teachers, even though they were well-trained and have a passion for teaching. They asked questions such as: *'Is my knowledge sufficient? Am I doing the right thing for every learner? Am I using and managing my time effectively? Is everyone getting enough attention? Am I really making a difference?'* (WS 1a, A3, 43-47).

My participants seemed to be frustrated, angry, overwhelmed and worried, but I observed a sense of relief as they realised that they were all struggling with the same issues. They seemed to find comfort in knowing that they were not alone and that their feelings and concerns were similar to those of Grade 1 teachers from other schools and were above all, *'normal'*. I was not surprised to find confirmation of this hunch when I read their feedback at the end of the first workshop (see Addendum K). Every single one of the participants expressed their relief that they all *'struggle with the same problems'*, that they were all *'normal'* and that *'everybody feels the same'* (WS 1a and 1b, written feedback, anonymous) (see Addendum K).

I was well aware of the fact that there were a number of things we would not be able to change, for example the number of learners in a Grade 1 classroom, the large number of learners who did not attend Grade R before they entered Grade 1, the heavily packed curriculum, the long working hours of parents or the long distances some of the learners had to travel to get to school. I was convinced however, that I could create opportunities to build up the self-confidence of the participating Grade 1 teachers, if I could manage to get them actively involved in the research project.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-12

5.3 THEME 2: TAKING A LEAP OF FAITH – JOINING THE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Some of the Grade 1 teachers were excited about the research project when they first heard about it. They said: *'[I feel] very positive and excited to be part of it'* (A2), *'it sounds interesting and I want to know and learn more about the research project'* (B3) and *'I am interested to hear what it is all about'* (D3). Others, however, admitted that they were hesitant about getting involved, because it might mean *'more work and paper work in [their] already full programme'* (B1).

When asked whether they had any concerns or doubts regarding participation in the research project, Participant A3 replied that she *'[has] concerns about the meeting times and whether there will be time to fit it all in'*. Participant A2 was worried because at times her *'schedule is just too hectic to participate wholeheartedly'* and Participant B3 was afraid that she might get busy in her class and then forget to implement some of the interventions. On the other hand, Participant D1 *'wasn't sure whether [she] could make any worthwhile contributions'*.

Despite these concerns and doubts, all ten Grade 1 teachers agreed to take a leap of faith and join the research project, because: *'I like to experience new things and grow as a person and as a professional'* (D1); *'I want to support the researcher and learn new things from the research that I can implement and [then] experience the results'* (B3); *'[I want] to learn more from the teachers from other schools and try different*

strategies in my own class' (A3). Participant A1 said that she *'is always willing to learn new things'* and that she *'likes to help fellow colleagues'*. For Participant A2 it was *'an honour to be part of a study that can possibly benefit the children of South Africa'*. (These quotes were taken from written responses by the participants, see Addendum W, Questions 1, 2 and 3).

5.3.1 FINDING COMFORT IN COLLABORATION WITH COLLEAGUES

It's nice to be able to voice your opinions and share with others your experiences and hear about theirs.

(WS 3a and 3b, written feedback, anonymous)

Collaborating with each other on a regular basis, gave the participating Grade 1 teachers a platform where their classroom challenges could be discussed and solutions could be found. It was clear from the beginning of the research project that they enjoyed the collaboration and increasingly became aware of the value thereof. Being able to share their successes and concerns and openly voice their shortcomings and self-reflections, meant that they could admit to themselves *'[it's] nice to know that I am on the right track'*, because *'everyone feels the same and sees the same things'* (WS 5a and 5b, written feedback, anonymous).

Where some of them felt a little obliged to attend the workshops at the beginning of the project, they were soon looking forward to our meetings. They enjoyed visiting each other's schools and put a lot of effort into making each other feel welcome at their schools by preparing delightful and appetizing refreshments.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-30

I could clearly see that my participants were enjoying the research project. They felt at ease once they realised that they could just be themselves and openly share their successes and challenges without being judged, assessed or criticised. They often expressed their need to share their classroom experiences with colleagues who truly understand, because they have similar experiences. It was rewarding to see how they enjoyed the company of colleagues from other schools and how they could relate to one another. They often said: *'It's so nice to know that I am not alone'*, or *'It's so nice*

to know that I am normal' (WS 3a and 3b, written feedback, anonymous), (see Addendum E).

The written feedback which was done anonymously at the end of every workshop, gave them an opportunity to reflect on the value of the collaborative discussions. They described it as *'most enriching', 'informative'* and *'insightful'* (WS 2a and 2b, written feedback, anonymous) (see Addendum M). Some of their remarks included:

- *'Interesting to hear what everybody said about their classes and their learners. Nice to hear that our experiences are similar and that everybody feels the same about their learners.'*
- *'I have learned a lot from the other teachers. New ideas on how to use and implement positive reinforcement'.*
- *'Most informative as it made me reflect on how I perform as a teacher. It will assist me in the future to be more compassionate with problem students.'*
- *'It's nice to be able to voice your opinions and share with others your experiences and hear about theirs.'*

  (WS 3a and 3b, written feedback, anonymous), (see Addendum E)

It was interesting to observe how the participating teachers grew closer together as a group with the same passion, concerns and challenges. They shared ideas and successes, as well as issues they experienced as problematic. At times some of them would go through a rough time and get discouraged, but it was rewarding to see that they rely on each other for advice and comfort. They openly discussed their classroom challenges with each other, looking for explanations and solutions and usually coming up with the answers. Participants D1, A3 and D3 specifically mentioned that they *'enjoyed the interactive approach'* and *'the discussions'*, while Participant B3 added that *'the information was very relevant for us and we could benefit and learn from it'*. Participant D3 mentioned that she regretted the fact that she *'was unable to attend all the workshops, as [she] had extra-murals to do'* (see Addendum W, Question 4).

Meeting with the participants from the other schools on a regular basis, fulfilled their need to share their daily classroom experiences. They enjoyed learning from each other and were excited about the decisions they made as a team.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-30

5.3.2 PARTICIPATING IN PROBLEM-SOLVING DECISION MAKING

I am looking forward to implementing the new ideas and seeing how my learners react to it.

(WS 4c, written feedback, anonymous)

During each meeting, the participating Grade 1 teachers engaged in collaborative discussions to decide on intervention strategies which could be implemented as part of the action research they were conducting in their respective classrooms. Our first problem-solving discussion focused on providing emotional support to struggling learners, which would also lead to closer teacher-learner relationships. The participating teachers all took part in the discussion and suggested possible intervention strategies. These included *'[give] them easier assignments which they will be able to do; [give] a lot of praise and acknowledgement'* (WS 2a, B1 and B3, 10-12); *look into their eyes; make them group leaders and let them hand out the books; they can take in the pencils; look for their strengths; they need physical contact . . . say 'well done', it means so much to them'* (WS 2a, A2, B1 and B3, 26-47). Participant A2 pointed out that *'it is important for them to shine and to get their place in the spotlight,* (WS 2a, A2, 41-42), while Participant D1 added that *'there's always something good in a child. Find something that they are good at, just say 'well done, look how neatly you write'. Just try and find that thing'* (WS 2b, D1, 150-154).

Even Participant D2, who initially said: *'Mam, no offence, but you are unrealistic a little bit, with all the pressure of the work',* eventually acknowledged *'I feel very guilty now. I think I'm gonna have to change my modus tomorrow. Because really, . . . you know it's not their fault, it's my fault I know – the pressure . . . I tend to be quite nervous and with so much work to get through'* (WS 2b, D2, 142-143; 158-162).

Giving the participating Grade 1 teachers a bit of new information and then providing an opportunity for them to discuss it and come up with their own ideas for intervention strategies to implement in their classrooms, worked extremely well. They enjoyed the new information and were excited about sharing their own experiences and commenting on each other's suggestions.

After sharing their concerns about their teaching challenges at the first meeting, the participating teachers were frustrated, angry and overwhelmed. They placed the blame for the challenges they faced in their classrooms on the Department of Basic Education, the curriculum, the parents and the lack of support for teachers.

After sharing a little bit of information with them at our second meeting, about the vulnerability of their struggling learners and the importance of a close and warm teacher-learner relationship, they forgot all about their own concerns and frustrations. They focused on finding solutions in order to provide emotional support to their struggling learners. They were enthusiastic and caring.

I was very proud of my participants after the first collaborative discussions for putting their frustrations aside and actively taking part in finding solutions to their challenges.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-18

The participating Grade 1 teachers embarked on the journey of taking hands, collaboratively discussing their classroom challenges and deciding on possible intervention strategies to implement. They were excited about the action research they were about to conduct in their classrooms. When asked how they felt about the decisions that were made during the first collaborative discussions, they replied:

- *'Good. I cannot wait to implement it. Very positive.'*
- *'(It) made me feel eager to try out new approaches.'*
- *'I think they are practical guidelines that could work.'*
- *'I feel good about it. I feel that we are going to reach some interesting findings.'* (WS 2a and 2b, written feedback, anonymous) (see Addendum M)

When I read the feedback my participants wrote at the end of Workshops 2a and 2b, I was thankful for the change that was taking place in them. They were excited about the research journey they had started and were ready to take responsibility for the changes they want to establish in their classrooms. Their enthusiasm was heart-warming and I was looking forward to our next meeting.

Researcher's reflection 2016-08-18

During our second problem-solving discussion (Workshop 2), which also focussed on emotional support for struggling learners, I shared an article on creating a positive verbal and non-verbal learning environment with the participating teachers. Giving the participating teachers a few ideas from the literature, helped them to recall some of their own experiences, which led to spontaneous discussions. At times I used a few questions to guide them in their decision making, for example:

i) How can we provide high quality feedback regarding behaviour? (Both positive and negative behaviour.)

ii) How can we provide high quality feedback to struggling learners regarding participation in learning activities?

At the end of Workshop 3, some of the remarks about the decisions they made together, included:

- *'Excited to apply the strategies.'*
- *'Learned a lot from the other teachers. Would like to apply some of the suggestions. I am feeling very positive.'*
- *'I am happy and agree with everything that was said. It is very informative.'*
- *'I feel positive, because I saw that it is working and I want to implement the others' ideas as well to positively influence my learners.'*
- *'You can always learn from others. Let's make a difference!'*

  (WS 3a and 3b, written feedback, anonymous), (see Addendum E)

Each time, after taking part in collaborative decision making, the participating teachers were excited, positive and eager to try the new intervention strategies. They were really looking forward to each opportunity they had to conduct research into their own teaching.

5.3.3 CONDUCTING RESEARCH INTO OWN TEACHING BY IMPLEMENTING COLLABORATIVELY AGREED UPON INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

All these things that I did, I think benefitted them. There's nothing that I would say I don't want to carry on with. You know, because all these things that I tried out, actually worked positively.

(WS 3b, D1, 110-113)

After the first collaborative discussions, I explained to my participants how to commence with Phase 1 of the intervention in their respective classrooms and how to start collecting data (see PP2, slide 15). I suggested that they each focus on their struggling learners and start by writing a short report, describing the current level of emotional development of those learners. I recommended that they choose three to five intervention strategies which they could implement to provide emotional support to their struggling learners and then do so for the following three weeks, while observing the effect thereof on their struggling learners, as well as on the rest of their learners. I introduced and explained the template for their first field notes (see Addendum Y, p. 1-4) and reminded them to use their reflection diaries to make notes of their thoughts and experiences.

When the participating teachers returned to our next meeting, after Phase 1 of the intervention, they were very excited and eager to share their experiences with the group. I could see the change in them from concerned, tired and worried to enthusiastic and very positive. Participant D1 reported: *'[I] gave them easier questions to answer, encouraged them with a smile, hugs and high fives; gave them stars and stickers for improvement and showed them what they did well, even if it was just one letter that was neat. [I] praised them in front of the class. Some thrived with the attention given'* (WS 3b, D1, 46-50). Participant D2 added*: '[I] let them know that I care and try to be patient at the best of times, praise them for achievements, always focus on the positive qualities, rather than the negative . . .'* (WS 3b, D2, 72-76). Participant A2 clearly enjoyed the intervention a lot and reported: *'[I use] positive reinforcement, give praise when they listened or got something right, reassurance and being positive and encourage them. So when they do something right, I make a big fuss about it and I give them easier work which they are able to do. Then I praise them when they get it right. Eye contact and touch, "Wow you did well", smile, . . . uplift them and focus on their strengths, rather than their weaknesses; give them responsibilities, like sweeping or emptying the dustbin, all those things; yes, that is what I did'* (WS 3a, A2, 86-95).

The participating Grade 1 teachers were pleasantly surprised by the way their struggling learners reacted to the intervention and they found that there was an improvement in their attitude, behaviour, co-operation and the effort they put into completing tasks: *'the one boy did amazingly well, I saw an incredible change in his behaviour'* (WS 3b, D2, 20-22). According to them, their struggling learners paid more

attention, tried harder and understood instructions better. Participant A2 eagerly shared that: *'their attitude and behaviour have improved. They try really hard and they pay more attention when you explain something. And the individual attention, if you sit with one learner, then he suddenly understands, like a light that goes on, wow, they lit up!* (WS 3a, A2, 176-179). They reported that they experienced a much more positive atmosphere in their classrooms: *'I don't have to fight with them so much. We all work together and they see that they get positive responses, so they want to work together, [and they feel] 'I can also do it'* (WS 3a, B3, 182-185).

Even after just three weeks they could see that their struggling learners were gaining confidence and started to believe in their own abilities. They were looking forward to receiving positive feedback from their teachers regarding their written work: *'When I hand out my books they count all the stickers from the beginning. They love their stickers'* (WS 3a, B1, 245-246). Participant D3 found that *'some [learners] enjoy the attention and really smile when attention is given. Two learners in particular are getting more confident'* (WS 3b, D3, 60-62). The struggling learners performed much better in the formal assessment tasks, especially when their teachers made constant eye contact with them and gave them individual attention, e.g. *'I took all my struggling learners one by one. And they did a lot better than in the previous assessment. I said 'Look, can you see? Look at this picture', that type of thing, using their names. In general, all my struggling learners did better'* (WS 3a, B1, 151-155, 161-162).

According to my participants, the intervention was beneficial for the rest of their learners as well and most of them reacted positively to the new approach their teachers were using. When they saw that the struggling learners were encouraged and praised for their efforts and achievements, they also put in more effort in order to get acknowledgement. Participant B2 experienced that *'as soon as I give attention to one learner, for instance one who does not usually perform well, and I make a big fuss when he did something right, I saw that the other learners all want their work to be correct'* (WS 3a, B2, 221-224). She shared the following with us: *'I have one little boy, we cannot say [for sure], but we suspect cerebral palsy, he writes over the lines, the one day he nearly wrote on the line, not 100% but almost, and I made a fuss about it. When I marked the books that Friday, I saw that the learners really tried their best that day. All of them worked a lot neater than usual. You can see, it was that one learner*

who can never write neatly, whom I praised that day and then they all wanted me to make a fuss over their work' (WS 3a, B2, 227-235).

We followed this procedure throughout the research project. After the collaborative discussions and problem-solving decision making, I explained the next phase of intervention and handed out the template for the participating teachers' field notes. When they returned for the next meeting, they had an opportunity to share their research experiences with each other. At the end of the research project, I asked them to reflect on our research methods.

As far as the intervention in their respective classrooms was concerned, Participant D4 replied that it was *'nice to try different things and to see whether it works for the class or not'*, and Participant D1 agreed that *'it was nice to have some fresh ideas and seeing how the children responded'*. Participant A2 found the intervention *'very productive and effective'* and added that *'it was interesting to see the outcomes and effect that it had'*. Sometimes the participating teachers found it difficult to implement the intervention strategies, because *'some strategies only worked for a short period [of time]'* (A3) and the success thereof *'depended on the moods and emotional well-being of the learners'* (B3). Participants D2 and D3 identified challenges within themselves, regarding the implementation of the intervention strategies and reported: *'I found that I often forget about the interventions, as I am very much set in my ways'* (D2) and *'it was difficult, because you have to be aware all the time, but it was rewarding'* (D3) (see Addendum W, Question 5).

5.3.4 FACING AND CONQUERING CHALLENGES IN THE CLASSROOM

> *Some days, things go well, everything is functioning well, and other days are chaotic and nothing works.*
>
> (WS 4c, B3, 92-93)

Even though the participating teachers experienced the intervention predominantly positive, there were some challenges they came across. Participant B3 admitted that *'it is sometimes very difficult to [emphasise] the positive all the time, because they take advantage of it . . . I just couldn't keep it up'* (WS 3a, B3, 133-135). Participant A1

explained that *'they all want that attention. If I say to a struggling learner 'You really coloured in very well', the rest will jump up. And they never do that in my class. They know they have to sit. Now they jump up and shout 'Mam, I also coloured!'* (WS 3a, A3, 166-171). Participant A3 agreed and said that *'they will all jump up and disrupt the learning process, just to come and show you their work'* (WS 3a, A3, 241-242). If one learner is praised for good work, others would immediately jump up and show their work to their teacher in order to get the same praise and rewards. This behaviour was also confirmed by Participant D1 when she said: *'others started playing up, because they wanted more attention, they want attention all the time'* (WS 3b, D1, 50-52). She added that *'some of my brighter children became frustrated [because] they wanted to answer the questions and I said 'No, just wait your turn'* (WS 3b, D1, 98-100). The stronger learners found it hard giving the struggling learners a chance to answer questions and then losing the attention they were used to. Participant A3 admitted that *'it is emotionally very demanding . . . you start out positively, but then all of a sudden you just cannot do it anymore'* (WS 3a, A3, 297, 300-302). According to Participant A1 *'there is a lot of positive, but the major issue is to keep a balance'* (WS 3a, A1, 239-240).

Making changes is not easy. It takes courage and a lot of effort to change the status quo. I was very proud of my participants for trying so hard to implement intervention strategies to provide support to their struggling learners, despite the fact that their concerns regarding the pressure of the education system, the loaded curriculum, the large classes and the lack of support for teachers were not being addressed. Despite these daunting conditions, they managed to achieve success.

Researcher's reflection 2016-09-01

One of the challenges they mentioned every time, was the disruptive behaviour of both the struggling learners and the stronger learners. Participant D3 complained that *'as soon as I smile too much, they think I am their friend now and they can have discussions with me the whole time and then there is chaos'.* She explained that *'I did try some of it [the intervention strategies], some of it did work. In the beginning, if I praised them 'well done', or if they got a sticker for their work and the positive reinforcement and things . . . but they see it as a nice new game that we are playing'* (WS 4b, D3, 16-18; 21-24). Participant D4 had a similar experience and added: *'it went*

well for a while . . . seriously, if you pay too much attention, they want more' (WS 4b, D4, 29-30). Both Participants D3 and D4 are young teachers and were on maternity leave for a part of the year. They both struggle tremendously with the discipline in their classrooms, but their Grade leader, Participant D1, encouraged them and said: *'That's the one thing you know. You can be loving and all of that, but you have to be firm as well, because you know you have to be, otherwise they run riot'* (WS 4b, D1, 69-71).

When discussing the possible explanations for this behaviour, Participant A3 said: *'I think they get discouraged when they cannot get something right and that is the reason for bad behaviour'* and Participant A2 mentioned: *'it is as if the stronger learners feel a bit left out, as if to say: 'do you still remember about me?' So they become competitive. I have a few very strong learners in my class and they begin to wonder what is going on now. But competition is good, because it pushes them to try harder'* (WS 4a, A3, 213-215 and A2, 223-227). It was good to see that the participating teachers were looking for the causes of their learners' difficult behaviour, instead of just trying to cope with it. They were really trying to understand their learners.

The participating teachers from all three schools had similar experiences. Participant B3 explained: *'our strong learners are the naughty ones at the moment. You praise the weaker ones all the time and they [have] improved and also know some of the answers. The stronger learners feel neglected. We focused a lot on the weaker learners and tried to build them up. But now we realise that we have to focus on the others as well and praise them for good work. Often when a strong learner gives an answer, you just say 'thank you' or 'okay', but you don't really make a fuss about it, but when a struggling learner gives an answer, you praise him a lot more. He couldn't do it, now he can. So the strong learners feel 'why don't I get the same praise?'* (WS 5a, B3, 44-55).

Despite these challenges, the participating Grade 1 teachers carried on with the intervention strategies, since the positive outcomes outweighed the negative ones and they realised the value thereof for their learners.

Researcher's reflection 2016-09-15

Although concerned about the stronger learners who were *'acting out'* and *'becoming jealous'*, the participating teachers had a plan of action in mind. They had already discussed the issue amongst each other at their respective schools and decided that they had to *'keep the balance between the weak and the strong learners'* (WS 5a, B3, 62-63). *'We can give more attention to the stronger learners now, because our weaker learners are more confident. At the beginning of the project, we had to do what we had to do, to pick up the struggling learners, but now they are doing okay'* (WS 5a, B3, 63-67). Participant A2 agreed: *'yes, we have to do both sides, but we can do it now that the struggling learners are more confident'* and added: *'what is nice about the stronger learners, is that you can now challenge them more, they are more independent now. So when you do a little bit of revision with the weaker learners, they can carry on'* (WS 5a, A2, 108-115).

I was pleasantly surprised by the feedback given by the participating teachers. Apparently they started their own collaborative discussions amongst each other at their respective schools during the phases of intervention in between our workshops. This was a very positive turn of events! It meant that they were taking the intervention very seriously (I never doubted this) and that they were sharing their experiences, asking advice from each other and learning from one another. I was impressed with the insight they had in their own teaching and it was rewarding to watch them grow, both professionally and personally.

Researcher's reflection 2016-09-15

5.3.5 GROWING THROUGH CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION

It is always interesting to hear everybody's ideas and how they handle a situation. It helps you to do self-reflection and look at things you can do differently.

(WS 4c written feedback, anonymous)

In retrospect, it is rewarding to look at the amazing change this research project has brought about in the participating Grade 1 teachers. At the beginning of the research project, I introduced the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) which was

developed by Pianta (1992), to my participants (see Addendum B; PP2, slide 12), explaining to them that this instrument can be used to determine the nature of the relationship between a teacher and his/her learners (see 2.3.4). I gave them each a copy of the STRS-short form which consists of seven statements regarding the levels of closeness in the teacher-learner relationship and eight statements regarding the levels of conflict. I asked them to each think of one learner in their classes who is struggling as a result of insufficient school readiness and then complete the STRS-short form with that specific learner in mind. Participant D2 immediately said: *'. . . to answer that is very tough for me. . . it's going to be a very negative outcome. . .'* (WS 2b, D2, 92-93), as she realised that she did not have a close and warm relationship with the specific learner she had in mind for this activity.

> *The Grade 1 teachers were curious and eager to complete the STRS-short form. As I watched them, I could see a definite change in their facial expressions and body language, which I can describe as an uneasiness. They looked worried and concerned as they began to realise that the relationships they had with their struggling learners were far from ideal.*
>
> Researcher's reflection 2016-08-18

I explained to them how the scoring works and how they could determine the percentage of closeness and the percentage of conflict in their relationships with these learners. As they calculated their scores for the levels of closeness and conflict in their relationships with their struggling learners, they became even more concerned. I told them that they did not have to share the outcome thereof with the group, as the purpose was only to make them aware of the nature of their relationships with their struggling learners. Without sharing their scores, they could see in each other's reactions that their scores were predominantly negative.

This was when they admitted that *'these learners tend to disappear . . . it is sad, very, very sad'* (WS 2a, B1, 17-19), and *'I sort of just give up . . . you have to move on . . . finish the work . . . you can't keep everyone back because of that one child'* (WS 2b, D4, 197-199). Participant D2 was noticeably upset and said: *'Oh, mine must hate me at the moment! . . . because I'm one of those, like I'm strict and I scream and whatever'* (WS 2b, D2, 65; 70-71).

I was impressed and excited when Participant D1 remarked: *'You know what I would like to do – make a copy of this and actually. . . I would like to do it with all my low performers and see what the results are and if it's the same kind of thing or if it's actually different, you know'* (WS 2b, D1, 96-101). She immediately recognised the value of being able to assess and reflect on her relationship with her learners.

> *It was clear that this activity has awakened critical self-reflection in the participants, which was essential for their professional development and growth.*
>
> *At this stage I could see that they realised the seriousness and urgency of their responsibility towards vulnerable learners. I think this was the point where they became aware of their need for professional development.*
>
> Researcher's reflection 2016-08-18

In their written feedback at the end of the session, their statements included:

- *'I need to be more aware of the emotional state of my learners. Sometimes work comes before emotional state and this should be the other way around.'*
- *'I realise once again how important emotional support is for the academic development of our learners.'*
- *'I enjoyed all the research about the Attachment Theory. It puts things into perspective.'*
- *'I need to give my attention to each child, I must remember to give praise more often.'* (WS 2a and 2b, written feedback, anonymous), (see Addendum M)

During the course of the research project, the participating teachers often shared their self-reflections with each other, for example when Participant A3 said: *'it is as if I complain out loud, and I try not to do that anymore'* (WS 3a, A3, 275-276) and Participant B1 admitted: *'previously I just left them [the struggling learners], but now I worked with them individually and I could see the results. But it is difficult'* (WS 3a, B1, 293-295). Participant A2 often placed the blame for her classroom challenges on herself and regularly engaged in self-reflection: *'and I am beginning to wonder, first I thought it was me, I had a very calm attitude towards them, specifically the ones that are difficult, so I didn't actually lose my temper'* (WS 3b, A2, 12-15). On one occasion, Participant B1 shared her efforts with us: *'I was more positive this week, I said positive things, I just had to. This whole week, my learners were more calm. I praised them a*

lot, I spoke nicely to them, I gave them positive feedback. I really tried very hard. But the previous two weeks I wanted to kill them. But you can ask my student, I really tried hard. I also tried to control my tone of voice better, I tried to talk softer and it worked. This last week was better' (WS 4c, B1, 136-142).

I asked my participants to each write a short self-reflection, indicating the effect that the research project had on them as Grade 1 teachers up until the end of Research Cycle 2. Some of their responses included:

- *'So far it had a very good influence on everything that happens in my class. I am very aware of what I do in class all the time. Thank you! There is definitely a positive influence in my class atmosphere.'*
- *'I came to realise that I need to pay more attention to motivating my learners in a positive way. I need to control my tone of voice.'*
- *'It is interesting and lets us think a bit about ourselves and how we teach. It reminds us to talk in calming voices and to look at them and encourage them and praise them. This project also helps us to find ourselves again and to just sit and think what we can do to improve our teaching methods or how and what to do extra to help the learners in our classes.'*
- *'It made me realise how little things can affect a learner's self-esteem and how important the role of the teacher is in developing the learner.'*
- *'I'm looking at my class in a different way. I am trying new teaching methods. I'm watching my verbal and non-verbal way of communicating.'*

  (Participants' field notes, Research Cycle 2)

> *My participants were really focusing on their learners' needs and through constant self-reflection, they were trying their best to find ways to provide for it.*
>
> Researcher's reflection 2016-11-03

When asked at the end of the research project what they have learned about themselves as teachers, some of the responses from the participating Grade 1 teachers were: *'there is always room for improvement and change, everything is possible with a positive attitude'* (B1); *'I'm too set in my ways, I need to try some new approaches'* (D2); *'do not stagnate'* (A1); *'change is good, there is always something*

to learn and improve' (D3); *'I am not too old to learn new things'* (D4) and *'in order for me to be a good teacher and get the best out of my learners, I need to keep on trying new strategies'* (A3). Furthermore, they realised that they *'have to be more patient with [their] learners'* (D4 and B3) and *'sometimes just stop, listen and think'* (B2). Participant D1 came to the conclusion that *'I need to be more aware of my learners' needs'*, while Participant A2 emphasised that *'every learner is an individual and should be handled accordingly'*. Participant B3 added that she *'understands [her] learners better due to the research project'* and that she *'will now focus more on the learners' emotional well-being'*. Participant A2 also learned that *'there are many different ways to approach any situation that you find yourself in'* (see Addendum W, Question 6).

The participating teachers reported that their day-to-day teaching has changed because of the research project, in the sense that *'I became more aware of the needs of my children [and I have] a more sensitive way of teaching'* (D3); *'it made me more conscious about how I approach certain learners'* (A3) and *'how aware I am of myself in the class'* (A2). Participant D2 found that participating in the project *'made me think twice before doing or saying something'* and Participant B3 said: *'I now apply the stop, think and do method'*. Participant D1 reported: *'I try to make the lessons more fun with a hands-on approach, I praise learners a lot more and encourage them to share ideas'*. Two of the participating teachers who tended to be a bit sceptical at times, replied more vaguely: *'I am trying to use other methods than the ones I used to'* (D4) and *'[it is] not always impossible to apply changes in big classes'* (B1) (see Addendum W, Question 7).

Participatory action research as a method for the professional development of teachers, was experienced as positive by the participating teachers, since they learned a lot from each other (B1 and A1). Participant A3 reported that *'it is good to hear from other educators and to be able to share information'*, while Participant B3 said that she *'looks at things from a different perspective'* and addresses challenges differently. She liked the way the *'theoretical and practical were brought in'* (B3) and Participant A3 agreed that it was good to be able to apply new information in their own classrooms. Similarly, Participant D1 said that *'it's a better way to see if things work out or not'*, while Participant D2 was convinced that *'it's the best way, [because] there are a lot of good ideas in theory, but aren't [necessarily] practical with the learners'*. The participating teachers especially enjoyed being research partners, as *'it is the only*

effective method of acquiring data that is reliable' (A2) and *'you feel as though you are making a contribution'* (D1) (see Addendum W, Question 11).

5.4 SUMMARY

In Chapter 5, I presented the first part of the research findings, namely the concerns of the participating Grade 1 teachers regarding the pressure of the current education system and the effect thereof on their confidence as teachers. Furthermore, the research findings regarding the participatory action research project as tool for the professional development of the participating Grade 1 teachers, were presented. The focus of the presentation was on the value of collaboration, problem-solving decision making and self-reflection for the personal growth and professional development of these teachers. Their experiences while conducting research into their own teaching were presented, reporting on both their challenges and successes.

In Chapter 6, the second part of the research findings is presented, focussing on the efforts of the participating Grade 1 teachers in strengthening their relationships with their struggling learners by implementing intervention strategies for both emotional and instructional support. The research findings indicate that in doing so, they improved the quality of their teaching and achieved higher levels of self-efficacy, while their learners showed progress in both their self-confidence and their academic achievements.

CHAPTER 6

A THEMATIC PRESENTATION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS PART II

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 5, Part I of the research findings was presented, revealing the pressure of the current education system on the Grade 1 learners who participated in the study. The research findings indicate that the participating teachers felt overwhelmed by the daily challenges they face in their classrooms. A significant percentage of their learners were not ready for formal learning, yet they had to implement a curriculum they regard as overloaded and too difficult for their learners. They have a large number of learners in their classrooms, making it difficult to give individual attention to learners who struggle. Furthermore, the Grade 1 teachers felt that they do not get any support from the parents of the Grade1 learners, or from the Department of Basic Education. These conditions led to frustration, a lack of trust in the education authorities and a lack of confidence in their own teaching abilities (Theme 1).

All the Grade 1 teachers of the participating schools agreed to take a leap of faith, and join the research project which was aimed at the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context. Right from the beginning of the participatory action research project, the participating teachers discovered the value of collaboration and joint decision making. They were eager to learn from each other and apply their new knowledge in their classrooms, while conducting research into their own teaching. They faced many challenges and conquered some of them, but the success of their journey was in growing both personally and professionally through critical self-reflection (Theme 2).

In Chapter 6, the participating Grade 1 teachers' journey (which was based on the Attachment Theory), is presented, as they worked through five intervention phases in an attempt to strengthen their teacher-learner relationships and enhance the quality of their teaching. They provided emotional and instructional support to their struggling learners and attempted to address the lack of discipline in their classrooms by focussing on classroom organisation (see Table 5.1). The research findings indicate their challenges, but also their heart-warming success stories (Theme 3).

6.2 THEME 3: MAKING A DIFFERENCE BY STRENGTHENING TEACHER-LEARNER RELATIONSHIPS AND PROVIDING HIGH QUALITY TEACHING

When you pay closer attention to them, you often see another side of them. They might not be academically strong, but the way they smile . . .

(WS 2a, B3, 20-22)

Apart from the different activities of the research cycles described in Chapter 5 (Theme 2), each research cycle also included an intervention phase (see Figure 6.1), during which the participating Grade 1 teachers implemented the intervention strategies they had decided upon, in their respective classrooms. The aim of the professional development of the Grade 1 teachers, was to empower them in order to address the classroom challenges they were facing. During the course of the five phases of intervention, they had the opportunity to strengthen their relationships with their learners (see 2.3, 2.4 and Figures 1.1 and 3.5).

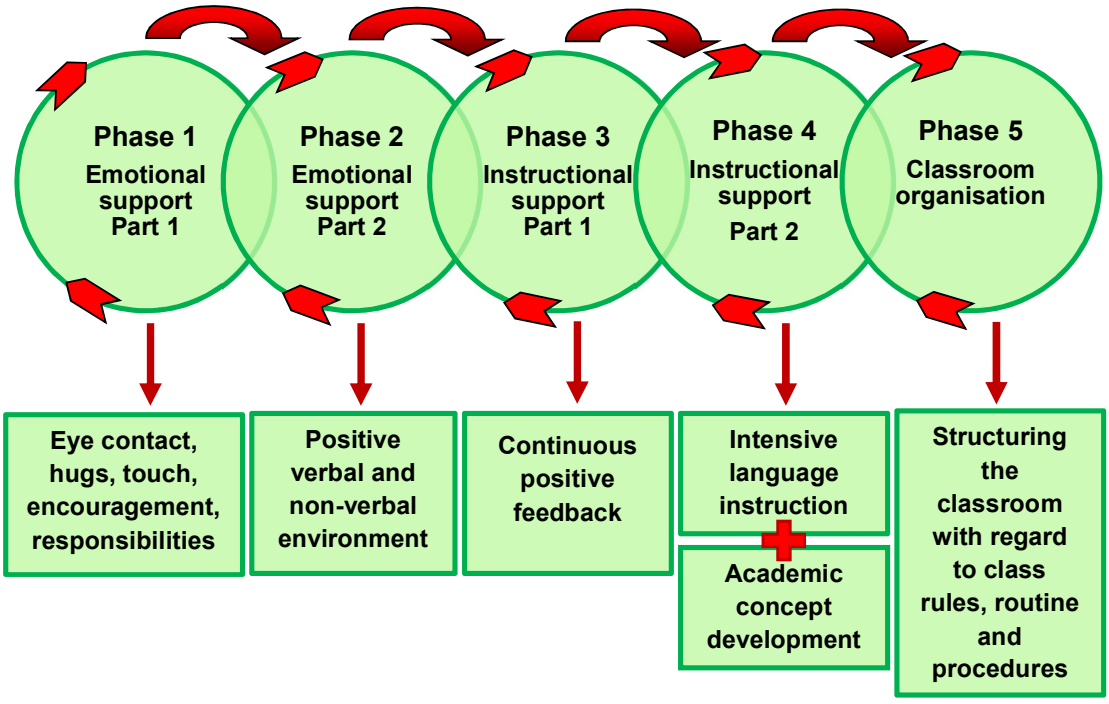


Figure 6.1 Phases 1 – 5 of the intervention provided by the participating Grade 1 teachers in their respective classrooms

The purpose of the intervention was to focus on support for vulnerable learners in the Grade 1 classroom and to make the participating teachers aware of the importance of close and warm teacher-learner relationships. I shared information with my participants regarding the needs and vulnerability of learners with insufficient school readiness (see 2.2 and PP2, slides 6 and 7). I also explained the Attachment Theory to them, pointing out that high levels of closeness, low levels of dependency and low levels of conflict would enable these vulnerable learners to participate in learning activities (see 2.3, Table 1.1 and PP2, slides 10 and 11).

I explained to my participants that according to my literature study, the criteria for quality teaching are emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation, which correlate with high levels of closeness, low levels of dependency and low levels of conflict, as found in the Attachment Theory (see PP2, slide 13). Our first step in supporting struggling learners and promote school readiness, would be to identify intervention strategies which could be implemented in order to provide emotional support to vulnerable learners. These would, at the same time, lead to higher levels of closeness in the participating teachers' relationships with their learners.

6.2.1 ACHIEVING HIGH LEVELS OF CLOSENESS THROUGH EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

But how do you let them feel good, if they can't do it?

(WS 2b, D4, 201)

As mentioned in Chapter 5, the participating teachers admitted that they often left the struggling leaners behind and moved on with the stronger learners, since they had to get through the curriculum. They also mentioned that the learners who were not ready for formal learning, 'disappeared' in the classroom and after completing the Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS), they admitted that they did not have close relationships with their struggling learners (see 6.3.5).

I knew that there were many aspects of their teaching conditions that we could not change, but I was convinced that the participating teachers would be less worried and frustrated if they could experience success with their struggling learners. We had a

lengthy discussion on the emotional state and the emotional needs of struggling learners who were not ready for formal learning. The participating teachers mentioned that their struggling learners were *'unsure of themselves, very insecure and very unorganised'.* Most of them had *'a low self-esteem, very little confidence and a negative academic identity'* and because of that, *'they struggled to work independently'* (WS 3a, A2, 5-9). Participant A1 added that *'they basically refused to carry out certain instructions when they were unsure of how to do it'.* She mentioned that one learner *'refused to do the work, he did not want to do it at all, he simply lay down on his arms or started crying'* (WS 3a, A1, 21-23). Similarly, Participant A3 experienced that *'they don't believe in their own abilities, they don't even want to try'* (WS 3a, A3, 31-32) and Participant B1 added *'they just give up, if you give an instruction that's just a little bit challenging, they just give up very easily and start to cry'* (WS 3a, B1, 57-60).

We discussed possible strategies to support learners emotionally and all the participating teachers gave suggestions for intervention strategies which could be implemented to provide emotional support to their struggling learners. Apart from the suggestions mentioned in Chapter 5 (see 6.3.2), Participant B1 also suggested that *'you can let them work in small groups, and let them achieve there. You can help them in their small group and let them experience success there. They don't always have to perform in the big group'* (WS 2a, B1, 42-44). Participant D4 explained: *'usually if a child gets 7 out of 10 we give them a star. But if he gets 5 out of 10, I still give him a star, because for him it was much better than what he used to get'* (WS 2b, D4, 155-157). Another very important aspect, raised by Participants D3 and D4 was *'not to allow your brighter children to make them feel bad, laugh at them or . . . humiliate them'* (WS 2b, D3 and D4, 187-189). They compiled a list of intervention strategies which they would like to implement in their classrooms during the three weeks that followed, before reconvening for the next workshop.

When they returned for our next meeting, the participating teachers were very eager to share their experiences of the first phase of intervention with each other. Participant B1 happily reported: *'I did an assessment today and *David is one of my borderline learners. I said to him '*David, look at me'. I talked to him nicely 'Can you see this picture?' And you know he managed to get 15 out of 20! I couldn't believe it!'* (WS 3a, B1, 147-150).

* Pseudonyms are used for learners.

It was interesting that the participating Grade 1 teachers mentioned the changes they made in their own performance first. They all made an effort to stay calm and not lose their temper. Participant A2 said what worked well for her was *'staying calm, instead of getting angry or discouraged, I just lift up the learner's chin and say 'look at me', and then I talk to him calmly . . . so just stay calm instead of getting angry'* (WS 3a, A2, 268-270, 272). Participant A3 added: *'If you look them in the eyes and say 'do you understand?' . . . So I think [what's important is] one to one attention and remaining calm'* (WS 3a, A3, 276-277, 278-279). Making eye contact with learners and really noticing them, made a big difference as Participant B1 reported: *'Making eye contact worked well for me . . . I go to them, look them in the eyes and remind them to carry on with their work . . . just the touch on the shoulder, 'Look at me, do you understand what you must do?' I think that helped a lot and then the individual contact during the formal assessment really worked for me'* (WS 3a, B1, 284-293).

The participating teachers found that giving easier work and encouraging the learners with a smile, resulted in positive outcomes. Furthermore, they mentioned giving recognition for improved work by handing out stickers and stars, praising them and giving hugs, as strategies which worked well for supporting struggling learners emotionally (see Addendum N).

I saw an interesting change in my participants' ideas for emotional support. When we discussed strategies for emotional support for the first time in Workshops 2a and 2b, they focused a lot on giving the struggling learners responsibilities and chores in the classroom, e.g. 'let him open the windows' or 'he can hand out the pencils', in order to get recognition and feel important. They admitted that the struggling learners tended to 'disappear' and that they just 'left them' as far as their scholastic progress was concerned. Now, after focusing on their struggling learners for three weeks and making an effort to notice them individually and building up their confidence, they hardly mention the chores. The strategies they regarded as successful, were mostly related to the learners' academic work. They realised that these learners were scholastically neglected and they were ready to take up their responsibility as teachers again, instead of waiting for support from somewhere else.

Researcher's reflection 2016-09-01

See Figure 6.2 for a summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 1.

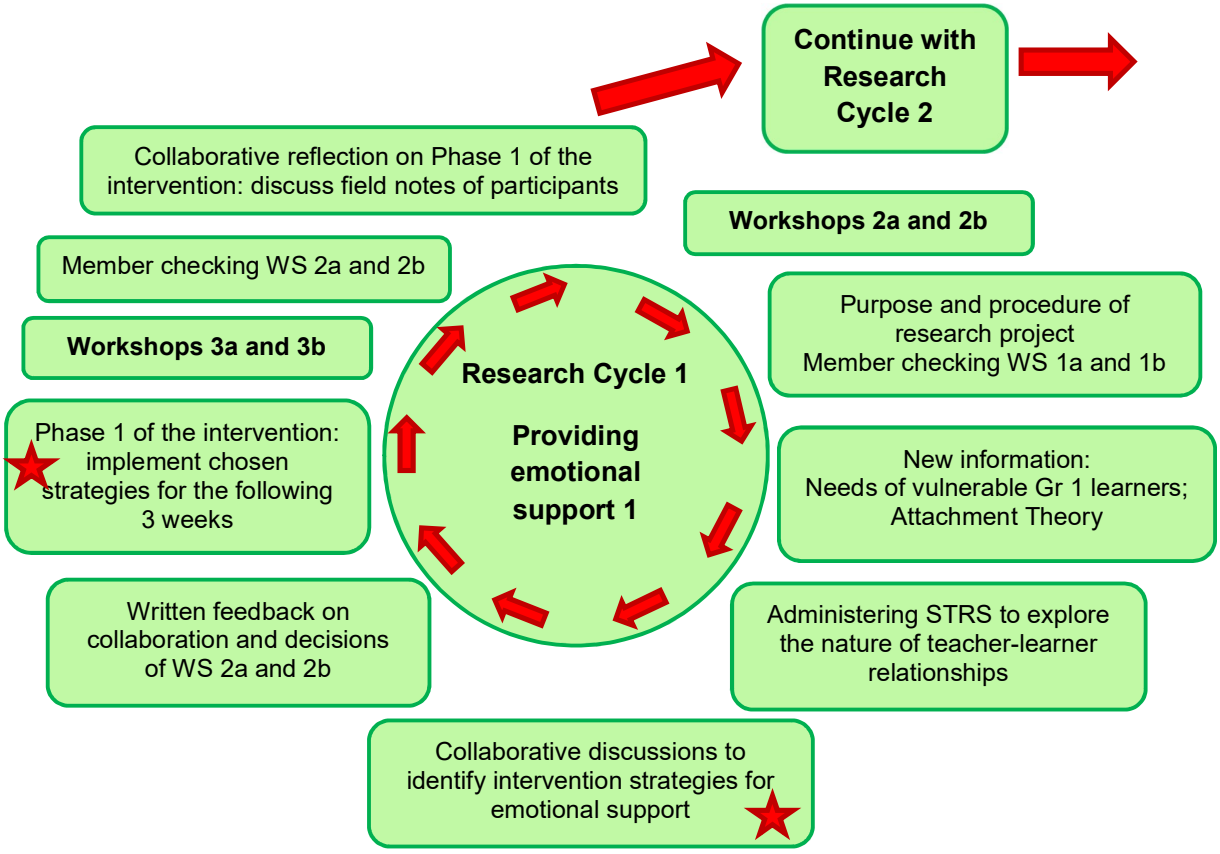


Figure 6.2 Summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 1

The purpose of Phase 2 of the intervention was to continue with *emotional support* for vulnerable learners in order to encourage them to take part in learning activities, strengthen their confidence and guide them to foster positive academic identities. The participating Grade 1 teachers identified the intervention strategies from Phase 1 which were the most successful and could be implemented on a long-term basis. In addition, we discussed strategies to create a positive verbal and non-verbal classroom environment in order to enhance *emotional support* for struggling learners (see PP3, slides 10 and 11).

Your tone of voice is very important, it has to be clear and on their level. Definitely on their level. Learners must feel safe. If you have an angry face and body language, they know. That is my experience in my class. Talk calmly, use their names. That is very important. It helps.

(WS 4c, B1, 100-105)

I shared an article with the participating teachers on how to create a positive verbal and non-verbal environment in their classrooms, by focusing on positive *teacher talk*, *learner talk* and *learner self-talk*, as well as being aware of their own body language, facial expressions and tone of voice (Stanulis and Manning 2002) (see PP3, slides 10 and 11). I explained that positive *'teacher talk'* includes encouragement, praise and acknowledgement, which they had been doing in Phase 1 of the intervention, while *'learner talk'* is the way they allow their learners to talk to each other and *'learner self-talk'* is when they guide their learners to make use of a positive inner voice.

(WS 4c, B3, 11-12)

'I don't want to shout and get angry any more.

The participating Grade 1 teachers started implementing positive *teacher talk* (as part of emotional support) since the beginning of our research project, and have already experienced the positive effect thereof: *'she actually read better and the moment I told her that she did good, I could see her face lighting up'* (WS 4a, A3, 205-207). Participant D1 added: *'[I said] 'wow, your sentences have improved tremendously' and then she felt good about herself. I had quite a couple of them. As soon as you praise one child, they all want to try'* (WS 4b, D1, 98-103). Similarly, Participant B1 experienced that *'if you talk to the learner calmly and if you call the learner by his name, and he hears his name and you talk nicely, then you get a good reaction from him'* (WS 4c, B1, 97-99).

To get their learners to practise positive *learner talk* however, turned out to be a bit more challenging for some of the participants, because some of the learners *'tend to be so nasty to one another'* (WS 4b, D3, 118). Participant A1 reported that *'the learners struggle to do that. What is very bad for me, is when they laugh at each other. I just cannot take it. When a learner tries and the others laugh at him. I cannot handle that. I tell them to rather help each other'* (WS 4a, A1, 242-246). Being an experienced Grade 1 teacher, Participant B1 implemented an intervention strategy which proved to be very successful. She explained: *'I let my emotional learners, my weak learners sit next to the stronger learners. And do you know how the stronger learners helped them? They spoke to them. They were more calm. They learned more from their friends than from me. One of them even rubbed out one learner's work and said: 'no, no, you have to do it like this.' They spoke to each other and helped each other. Like*

a buddy system' (WS 4c, B1, 108-116). Furthermore, she pointed out how important it was to *'make sure that the learner will be able to answer a question, before you let him answer, otherwise the others will laugh at him. But if they answer correctly, they feel so good about themselves'* (WS 4c, B1, 118-121).

Participant A3 remarked that, in her experience, *learner talk* depends a lot on *teacher talk*. She explained that *'if a learner does something right and I praise him, his friends clap and say 'good!' They are very clever. They know who the ones are who are struggling. So the moment I give positive feedback or praise, they are proud of their friend. I have this one girl who then says: 'well done!' She says exactly what I said. You see yourself in the way they talk and react to each other'* (WS 4a, A3, 257-262).

In guiding her learners to make use of positive *learner self-talk* in order to build their confidence, Participant D1 let them repeat the following phrases each morning: *'I am special', 'I am the best me that there is', 'I can do it'*, which she found to be very successful (WS 4b, D1, 126). Similarly, Participant A1 let her learners *'put their hands on their hearts and say 'I am smart, I am special, I am going to work very hard, I am going to be kind to my friends, I am going to be a smart friend, I am going to share'*. She skilfully used this strategy to work on their *learner talk* as well. She explained: *'If something negative happened, then we focus on the positive the next morning. If one of them laughs at another one, I say to him: 'you said this morning that you are going to be a smart friend, and now you are doing this'. So if something negative happens, I use it the next day for positive learner self-talk'* (WS 4a, A1, 247-256).

One of the younger participants really struggled with this part of the intervention. When I asked them for feedback on creating a positive verbal and non-verbal classroom environment, I could see that she was confused. She said: *'I didn't really do that one'* and later asked *'sorry, the positive learner-talk, is it that where they have to say good things about other learners?'* She also mentioned *'I am strict and a bit set in my ways, the moment I get too friendly, they take advantage. So I can't really do these things the whole time every day, because it doesn't work in my class. Maybe it is because I am still new and they are taking advantage of me'* (WS 4b, D3, 15-21, 89, 115-116).

I realised again how hard it was for young teachers to cope with the pressure of the current education system. Researcher's reflection 2016-09-15

So many of them I could see, have more confidence, they are more at ease and more eager to work. And the rest of my learners also want to do better now.

(WS 4b, A3, 207-209)

I asked the participating Grade 1 teachers to give feedback on the effect Phase 1 and 2 of the intervention for *emotional support*, which they had been providing to their learners during the previous five weeks (Research Cycles 1 and 2). Participant A2 eagerly reported: *'There are learners who you can suddenly see, wow, there is a light going on. There are some of my weak learners who could never get something right, and now all of a sudden in a test – and I can see he is listening to me – I really think something has made a change, whether it was this intervention, or the hard work of the past eight months, but all of a sudden *Thomas has completed his test. Previously he never wrote anything. Now I can see he is listening – wow, I gave him a big sticker. So something is happening and I am very happy about it'* (WS 4a, A2, 29-37). Participant D1 also noticed an improvement in the written work of her struggling learners and said: *'the learners felt better about themselves and were also more eager to try new activities . . . I actually have two learners in whom I can see a major improvement in their sentence writing for example . . . so that has started to improve'* (WS 4b, D1, 11-14).

As soon as these struggling learners experienced success in their work and *'they get something right, you can see the change in their attitude, they are positive'* (WS 4c, B3, 117-118). The other participants had similar success stories to share, for example: *'that boy, *Lehlogonolo, his behaviour, everything has improved, just when he felt he could do something right and he saw that I noticed it'* (WS 4a, A3, 211-213), and *'one little boy came to me today to ask for a sheet of paper, so that he can practise his spelling words at home. It proves to me that they are taking that responsibility'* (WS 4a, A1, 83-85). Even Participant D3, who was very sceptical about the intervention, admitted: *'Yes, just a little bit of extra acknowledgement did make a difference. I must say, I had a little girl who was very naughty . . . and for her specifically I tried that positive reinforcement thing and extra attention and 'wow, that's nice, you are sitting so nice and quiet today'. It actually works for her. I put stickers in her book if her work is a little bit nicer than the day before. She is actually now starting to work much nicer*

* Pseudonyms are used for learners.

and shows me 'look how nice this is' and 'my mom is going to be so proud of me'. So for some of them it does work' (WS 4b, D3, 43-52).

The participating teachers experienced an improvement in their struggling learners' academic progress, their confidence as well as their behaviour. Participant B2 summarised it well when she said: *'they have more confidence to try, when you do those things. They listen better when you speak to a specific learner and make eye contact and they understand instructions better. They feel special and know that the teacher trusts them. They start to trust themselves that they can answer a question or they can do the work'* (WS 4c, B2, 66-71). See Figure 6.3 for a summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 2.

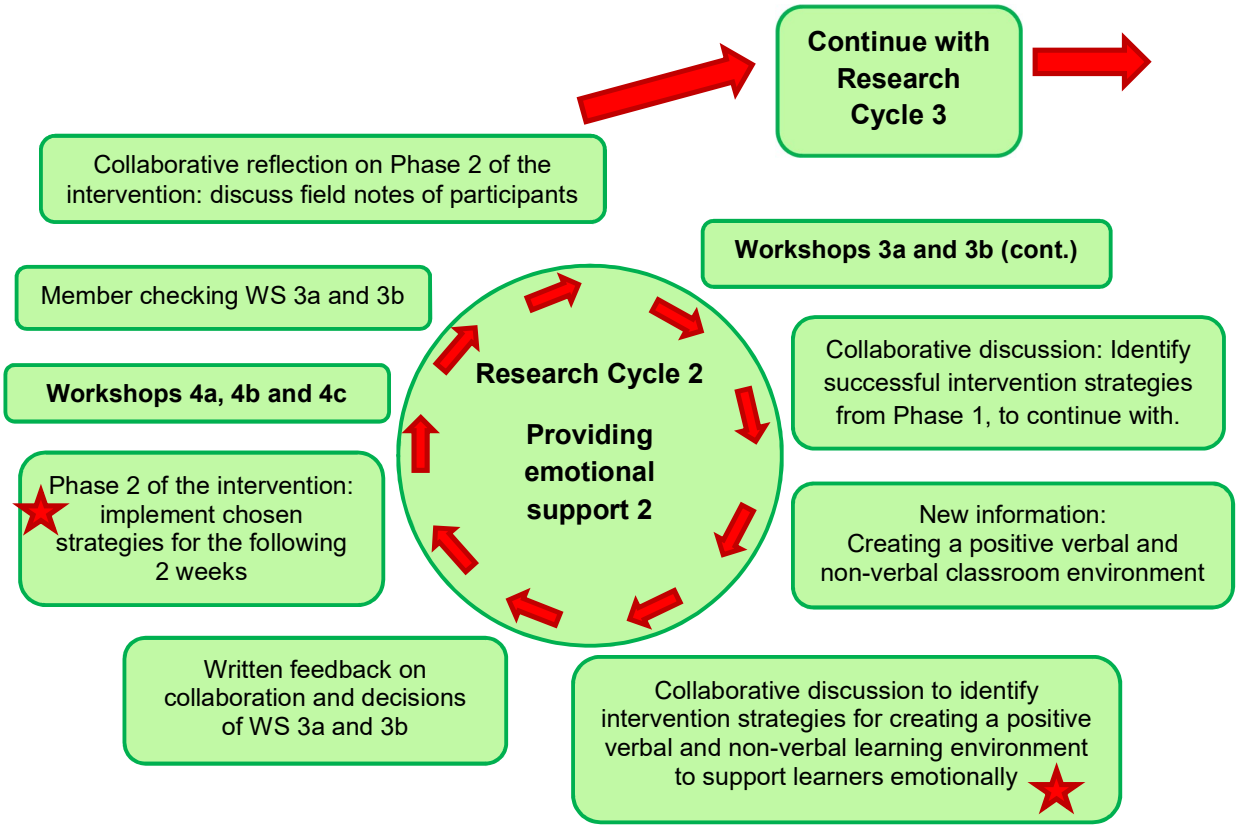


Figure 6.3 Summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 2

Although we focused on providing emotional support during Phases 1 and 2 of the intervention, and then moved on to instructional support in Phase 3, the participating teachers continued with the intervention strategies for emotional support which they found were most successful. After providing emotional support to their struggling learners for eight weeks, they could see yet a further positive change in the confidence,

as well as the academic progress of these learners. Both Participants A2 and B1 said that they could *'definitely see a difference'* (WS 5a, Field notes A2, B1), while Participant B3 mentioned that her *'struggling learners were responding better'* and *'their self-esteem has improved'* (WS 5a, Field notes, B3). Participant D1 agreed that her weaker learners were *'more self-confident and more willing to try things on their own'*, but added that *'they want constant praise and reassurance'* (WS 5b, Field notes, D1).

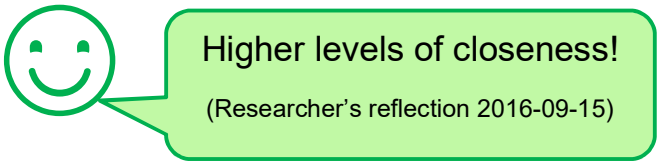
The following success story was shared by Participant A2: *'the one boy, we wrote a maths test and he got full marks, because he listened and went through the test with me. I explained the questions, and he actually got it right, and then I made a big fuss about it. At the end of the day he wrote me a letter, it was a heart with a lot of random letters. Many learners write letters for me: 'I love you Mam', and he also wanted to write a letter to me because he felt good about himself. I thought it was very cute. I put the letter up on the wall. That actually made an impact on him'* (WS 5a, A2, 87-95).

I was pleasantly surprised when Participant D3 (who initially struggled with the intervention and her class discipline) reported that her struggling learners *'were more relaxed and seemed to feel more part of the class.'* She added that *'the other learners were accepting them'* and that *'everyone's work seemed to have improved'* (WS 5b, Field notes, D3). The other participating teachers agreed that the rest of their learners also benefitted by the emotional support and worked harder in order to be praised. They did however, point out as before, that the stronger learners *'take a lot of advantage, because they [the teachers] focused on the struggling learners for a long time'* (WS 5a, B3, 80-81). In this regard, Participant A2 mentioned: *'I have a little girl, who has a bit of an attitude, but can also be very cute at times. She saw that I gave a lot of attention to the struggling learners and then she would say: 'Mam, also me'. So they start getting a little bit jealous'* (WS 5a, A2, 82-85).

Participant D3 reported: *'I also have those learners, a couple of them actually, if you praise the struggling ones or if you ask them to answer questions, the others interrupt and takes everything over and the focus is shifted to [them], the clever ones, the fast thinkers. And then everybody listens to those children and then the poor little one that actually had to answer or have his moment, it's all lost. Then the question is answered and then the moment was stolen. That's what happened in my class at times, they*

blurt out everything. So I don't really know what to do about them' (WS 5b, D3, 44-53). Having had the same situation in her own classroom, her more experienced colleague, Participant D1 replied: *'I just say to them 'no, sorry, it's not your turn'* (WS 5b, D1, 54).

At the end of the research project, I asked my participants to comment on what they have learned regarding the provision of emotional support for struggling learners and they replied that they were *'more sympathetic'* and *'more sensitive to their [the struggling learners'] needs'* (Participants D4 and D3). Participant B2 replied: *'I realised that they need a lot more attention than the rest, they need to feel secure, loved and special'*. Participant A3 felt *'the need to pay more attention to them [and] to create a better learning environment'*, while Participant A2 admitted that *'even though they show progress slower than the others, there is always hope for them and I can't give up on them'*. Participant B1 declared: *'I need to be more aware of the emotional state of my learners. I have to be more patient with the learners. I need to acknowledge them. I want to be more positive, be more aware of how I react to the learners, what I say and my tone of voice'*. In her reflection, Participant D1 stated: *'I need to give those learners more attention and try to get them to be independent. I think I'm better equipped to deal with those learners now'* (see Addendum W, Question 8).



6.2.2 ENCOURAGING INDEPENDENCE THROUGH INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

I want to be positive every day. I want to be more aware of how I react to my learners. I want to focus on what I say to my learners.

(WS 4a, 4b and 4c, written feedback, anonymous)

The purpose of Phases 3 and 4 of the intervention was to provide *instructional support* to vulnerable learners in the Grade 1 classroom, in order to encourage them to take part in learning activities, experience success and become more independent. I explained to the participating teachers that, according to school readiness literature, instructional support consists of three aspects, namely:

i) providing high quality feedback,
ii) focusing on intensive language instruction and
iii) strengthening academic concept development (see 2.4.2; PP4, slide 11).

For Research Cycle 3, the focus would be on the first aspect of *instructional support*, namely to *provide high quality feedback* to the struggling Grade 1 learners, regarding their behaviour, engagement in learning activities, effort and persistence, as well as the mastering of new concepts. In order to provide high quality feedback, the teachers had to ensure that their feedback to these learners would:

i) be informative, clear and encouraging;
ii) confirm what has been mastered and encourage the learner to take the next step;
iii) provide scaffolding to perform on a higher level;

Furthermore, they had to respond individually to their learners' performance and progress, and continue giving positive feedback throughout the day (see 2.4.2; PP4, slide 13).

A collaborative discussion followed (see PP4, slide 14) and the participating teachers had an opportunity to share their ideas regarding high quality feedback with each other. The collaborative discussion was guided by the following questions (some of the suggestions made by the participating Grade 1 teachers are included):

iii) How can we provide high quality feedback regarding behaviour?
- *'Thank you for being such a good example to the rest of the class'* (WS 4b, D3, 150-151).
- *'You can ask the learner 'do you think what you did was the right thing to do?' and 'why was it wrong?' And then we can have a discussion about it'* (WS 4c, B2, 159-161).

iv) How can we provide high quality feedback to struggling learners regarding participation in learning activities?
- *'That was a good answer, that made you think further'* (WS 4a, A2, 305-306).

v) How can we provide high quality feedback to struggling learners regarding their effort and persistence?

- *'Usually I walk with a learner to one of the other Grade 1 teachers and say: 'last week *Lehlogonolo had 9 out of 33, this week he has 13 out of 33. He improved so much.' And his face would light up. He would feel so good. So he realises that he is making progress'* (WS 4a, A3, 319-323).

- *'I will give them stars and that, I will send a child to [the principal], just for that extra encouragement, so that they know, 'ok, this is my best, I have tried'. It's not just my top children who I send'* (WS 4b, D1, 202-206).
- *Provide proof of progress by pointing out what they have achieved or mastered – specific according to content* (see Addendum O).

vi) How can we provide high quality feedback for the mastering of concepts?

- '*Stars and stickers'* (WS 4b, D4, 227).
- *Mention specifically what has been achieved* (see Addendum O).

During the collaborative discussions, I realised that some of the participating teachers were unsure of how to provide feedback that is informative. They also struggled to think of ideas of how to provide scaffolding through informative feedback. They had a few ideas regarding behaviour, but not much for academic work. They suggested praising the learners for good work and rewarding them with stars and stickers, as they have been doing for emotional support, but could not come up with suggestions for any informative feedback. I gave them a few examples. Researcher's reflection 2016-09-15

At our next meeting, the participating teachers reported on their experiences during Phase 3 of the intervention. As far as the behaviour of the Grade 1 learners was concerned, the participating teachers preferred to continue making use of rewards for good behaviour, instead of providing informative feedback for both good and bad behaviour. Participant A2 reported: *'I hand out puzzles at the end of the day, or they play with the Unifix blocks to reward them when they obey the class rules. I also use a lollypop system, or you can use a reward chart with golden dots and then reward them with sweets on a Friday. Once I made crowns for the [most well-behaved] boy and girl'* (WS 5a, A2, 132-137). Furthermore, she explained: *'I have groups, which*

* Pseudonyms are used for learners.

works for me. They remind each other of the class rules. Each group has a chart for stars. If the whole group behaved well and their tables are neat, they get a star. At the end of the week I reward the winners with sweets. Sometimes it works well in groups, sometimes you have to switch to individual rewards again' (WS 5a, A2, 142-147).

Participant A2 remarked, however, that *'sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't'*, and Participant B3 agreed that *'it only works for a while'* (WS 5a, A2, 134; B3, 137). Sounding discouraged, Participant A2 admitted: *'you always need something new. They get used to your methods and then don't care about it anymore. You need new tricks all the time, like a magician. You have to surprise them the whole time'* (WS 5a, A2, 138-141). They realised that giving rewards was not the answer. Being an experienced Grade 1 teacher, Participant D1 explained that her learners *'tried very hard to listen, but they would do it basically in order to get a reward, so it's not intrinsic, it's more extrinsic. So they are not [at the point] where everything is internalised. It's more because they want something in return. It's not that they want to do something just because it's the right thing to do'* (WS 5b, 65-69). Participant B3 tried out the informative feedback regarding her learners' behaviour, but did not keep it up: *'I let the naughty ones stand in the corner. They can still see what I explain, but I take them out of the group. I ask them about their behaviour and why it is wrong, then they apologize and are allowed to sit down again. It helps to just take them out of the group for a while. Sometimes I let them sit at the back of the class with their hands on their heads, just for time out, but they can still see the black board and everything else. This is a negative way - I prefer to work with rewards'* (WS 5a, B3, 148-155).

Considering the pressure of the overloaded curriculum and the large number of learners in the Grade 1 classes, I can understand that these teachers neither have the time, nor the energy to give detailed informative feedback for positive and/or negative behaviour throughout the day. It is much easier to just give rewards, even though they realise that it only works for short periods of time and it is not the best way to educate their learners.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-03

Providing high quality feedback to their struggling learners' regarding their engagement in learning activities and their academic progress, was also a daunting task and something the participating teachers were not used to. They tried to give *'positive feedback [and] accurate information for example 'well done, you've got it right this time'* (WS 5a, B3, 74-75), but mostly went back to *'continuously praising, uplifting [and] rewarding'* (WS 5a, B3, 170). Participant D1 did, however, found the feedback useful, and said: *'I think all the children in my class benefited, because with continuous feedback, the remediation could be done immediately, you know, if you pick up on a mistake, you can address it then and there. Because the feedback is continuous, it's immediate, it's there'* (WS 5b, D1, 87-91). See Figure 6.4 for a summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 3.

As far as high quality feedback was concerned, I realised that the participating teachers would need intensive training in how to give feedback that is informative and could provide scaffolding to individual learners. I also realised that it is very difficult to do in a Grade 1 classroom with thirty to forty learners.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-03

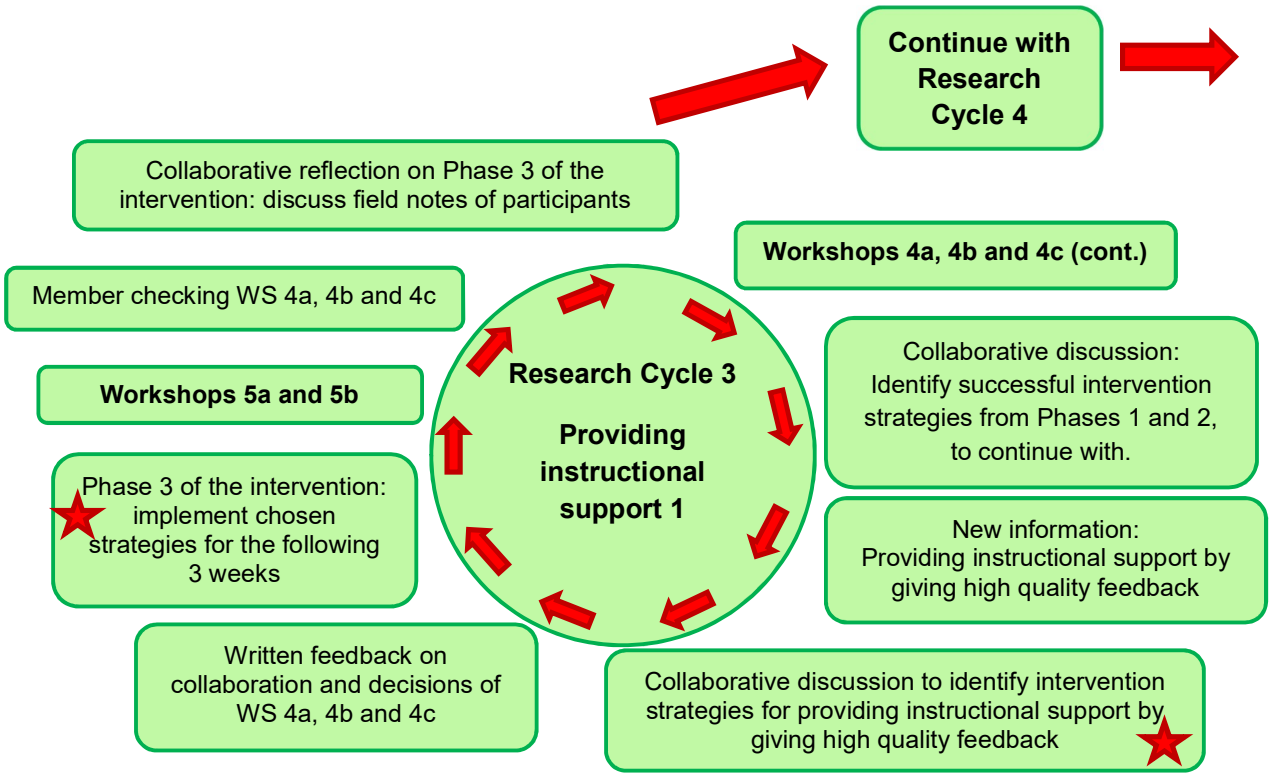


Figure 6.4 Summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 3

During Phase 4 of the intervention, the focus was on the second and third aspects of *instructional support,* namely *intensive language instruction* and *strengthening academic concept development.* The participating Grade 1 teachers would, however, also continue with intervention strategies they experienced as successful from the previous research cycles. Focusing on providing *intensive language instruction* to their struggling learners, would improve their language usage and expand their vocabulary. To prepare them for this phase of the intervention, I shared information from my literature study with them, namely that they should try to:

- set an example with her own language usage;
- continuously encourage the learners to communicate in the language of instruction;
- positively involve learners in language activities;
- have frequent conversations with the learners;
- encourage learners to express their thoughts and feelings;
- give constant responsive feedback (see 2.4.2; PP5, slide 12).

A collaborative discussion followed (see PP5, slide 13) and Participant D1 expressed the following concern: *'that we have a problem with, because of the time limitation and the number of learners in the class. I just find that that part [oral work] has been neglected. When I first started teaching, it used to be 80% oral and 20% written. Now it doesn't feel like that'* (WS 5b, D1, 98-101). This was due to the large number of written assessment tasks the learners had to complete and the workbooks from the DBE they had to keep up to date. I asked whether they still have opportunities to discuss the themes they covered, with their learners and Participant D1 replied: *'we do, but it's not as often as it should be . . . and then as soon as you start conversations, your top children immediately take over and they don't allow the others to share something'* (WS 5b, D1, 104-106). Participant D3 added: *'when I have discussions with them, the top ones do everything and it's always the same ones that raise their hands and as soon as you ask the ones who just sit there, they just sit there and look at me. And I would say 'just think a little bit, what would you do?' And I don't have time for them, to wait for them to get their thoughts together for ten minutes, so then*

obviously I will go to the one whose hand is up, whose hand is always up. So then the weaker ones don't give their input' (WS 5b, D3, 107-115).

Why would the Department of Basic Education put so much pressure on teachers, expecting them to rush through an overloaded curriculum, do countless written assessments with Grade 1 learners and complete printed workbooks, which is clearly not the best way to apply new knowledge? All going against the better judgement of these well-trained teachers? These learners need time to master the language of instruction, but time is one thing their teachers don't have!

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-03

At our next meeting, the participating teachers were ready and eager to give feedback on their experiences during Phase 4 of the intervention. They continued with the first aspect of instructional support (providing high quality feedback), and they were getting better at it! They provided high quality feedback to their learners regarding their academic progress, enabling them to believe in their own abilities and boosting their confidence. They shared the strategies they have been implementing to encourage the weaker learners to engage in learning activities with each other.

That was interesting for me, because you forget to tell them how they have done, their progress, you just carry on and hand out the next work, so it was interesting for me to remember that.

(WS 5a, B3, 6-9)

Participant A1 reported: *'I keep the learners involved, I ask them 'what do you think?', they have to be part of the decision making process in the class, they have to feel part of it'* and added *'I let a learner stand in front to read to the learners, so that they can see they are also able to do it'* (WS 6a, A1, 30-34). Participant A3 agreed and said: *'I allow them to demonstrate what they have learned, so I give them that opportunity to show it to the class. It also helps them to set realistic goals for themselves. I always tell them they are not allowed to say to themselves 'I can't do this', they should rather say 'I am not yet good at this'. So help them to see the things they are good at . . . and use their strengths'* (WS 6a, A3, 35-40). Furthermore, Participant B3 pointed out that: *'you should also plan your activities in a way that it is not too difficult, so that everyone*

can benefit and so that the weaker learners don't feel that they cannot do it. So you have to take that into consideration' (WS 6a, B3, 41-44).

To support their struggling learners in *mastering the language of instruction* (the second aspect of instructional support), the participating teachers made use of different strategies for both oral and writing skills. Participant A2 suggested *'having basic conversations with the ones where [affected by] language barriers, using flash cards and hand gestures, assisting them with words when they struggle to express themselves'* and added that *'you just have to go slow'* (WS 6a, A2, 84-87). For the beginning of the year, Participant A3 found that *'you can let them sit next to a friend, because many times you have those children who do not understand a word of English, they feel uncomfortable and confused. If they have a buddy and they can see what their friend does, it helps in the beginning',* while Participant B3 suggested *'repetition, lots of repetition'* (WS 6a, A3 and B3, 88-94). Furthermore, Participant A3 mentioned that *'encouraging conversations in an informal, relaxed environment, so that they can just speak a little more'*, worked well and Participant A2 explained that *'they have to speak English in the class. They learn very quickly, so those who cannot speak English, can hear the language from their friends and from me'* (WS 6a, A3 and A2, 95-99).

Participant D2 rightly pointed out that intensive language instruction should go hand in hand with emotional support and encouragement. She explained: *'when we do 'show and tell', I find that the weaker learners are often shy, they don't always have the confidence, so I tell them come and stand by my table next to me and then they do their oral like that, instead of in front of the whole class where they are embarrassed. I don't allow anyone to make comments or laugh at them at all, but I find they are more confident and they actually do better if they stand next to me and I've got my hand around them, just that little bit of emotional support'* (WS 6b, D2, 51-61). Being an experienced Grade 1 teacher, Participant D1 shared the following advice: *'I like to pick up on common mistakes made and teach the whole class so that they don't feel isolated and then reinforce that by singing songs; make sure that the learners hear the correct pronunciation of words, say the words out loud; point out the differences in words; then the written mistakes – show them the two words and explain the difference*

of meaning between the two words, and also encourage them to participate in class discussions' (WS 6b, D1, 65-72).

The participating teachers were confident in teaching their learners English as the language of learning and teaching (LoLT). They were definitely already applying all the strategies I shared with them from the literature. Although they did not agree with the little time they had for oral work and the large amount of written work that was expected from their learners in the current curriculum, they still tried their best and did a great job.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-17

Furthermore, the focus of the intervention in Phase 4 would also be on supporting struggling learners through *strengthening academic concept development*. In this regard, I shared the following advice from the literature with the participating teachers:

- create a rich learning environment;
- introduce concepts systematically through direct instruction;
- provide opportunities for practical experience;
- provide opportunities for learners to explore with learning materials;
- expose learners to reasoning and problem solving;
- provide the necessary scaffolding;
- present learning activities in a playful manner;
- link new concepts to the learners' lifeworld (see 2.4.2, PP5, slide 14).

I had no doubt that my participants were really good in teaching new concepts. They were all well-trained teachers, some of them had fifteen to twenty years of teaching experience and just by looking at their beautifully decorated and equipped classrooms, I knew that they were excellent Grade 1 teachers. The above mentioned points of advice regarding academic concept development, were second nature to them.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-03

When asked how they *strengthen academic concept development*, Participant A2 reported: *'always work with the concrete objects when you introduce a new concept, for example the Unifix blocks, try to be as practical as possible, so show them the cards for tens and units so they can understand, try to work as visual as possible'* (WS 6a, A2, 101-105). Similarly, Participant D1 replied: *'have a hands-on approach; learners must do things for themselves, not where the teacher demonstrates and the learners watch the whole time, I want them to actually be involved; practical work; teach action rhyme songs, that helps them learn new concepts'* (WS 6b, D1, 75-79). Participant D3 added that *'it's nice to have video clips on your themes and make the new concepts more visual, try to involve as many senses as possible when you introduce new concepts'* (WS 6b, D3, 80-82). They also explained how they use weather charts and let the learners work with real coins, in order to link the concepts to the lifeworld of the learners. Participant D1 explained: *'I brought all my cents, because I always have a lot of cents and [that I put] in a bottle. I made the kids work with it, but when you say to them 'ok, show me so much money', then they can't. [These are] practical things and they can't do. When it's an easy one like R7 and I can say it is a R5 and a R2. The rand is easier than the cents . . . and I don't mix rand and cents. They can't do it'* (WS 5b, D1, 157-163).

> *As I expected, the participating teachers were already applying all the strategies I shared with them from the literature regarding the strengthening of academic concept development, since they are all well-trained and some of them have many years of Grade 1 teaching experience.*
>
> *I could sense though, that they were upset and frustrated. After a very short while of giving feedback, their frustration with the current curriculum and the unrealistic expectations of the DBE took over.*
>
> Researcher's reflection 2016-11-17

According to the participating Grade 1 teachers, the struggling learners really have a difficult time mastering new concepts, especially in mathematics. They did not have the necessary stimulation before they entered Grade 1 and they also struggle with the language of instruction, which means that they are not ready for the expectations of the current curriculum. Participant D1 said: *'my kids are struggling a lot with the*

sharing. If you do it concretely, they can do it, but when we get to the bookwork, they struggle' (WS 6b, D1, 89-91). Participant A1 explained that *'there [are shortcomings] in the curriculum. They don't do addition and subtraction up to number ten, but now they already have to do groups of 2 and 5 and 10. It's a big problem. We practice it a lot, but I feel they should first master addition up to ten, and subtraction, but the curriculum does not have that. In the old days, the groups of 2, 5 and 10 was Grade 2 work, but now it is Grade 1 work. Cognitively they are not ready for it. I tried handing out sweets, I tried everything, they just don't understand it, but the basic number concept was not mastered'* (WS 6a, A1, 109-117). The other participants had the same experience: *'They struggle with groups'* (WS 6a, B1, 106). *'I used hula hoops. I let them sit in groups inside the hula hoops, I let them join hands, but they still struggle'* (WS 6a, A3, 107-108).

The participating teachers found that it was difficult to explain new concepts without being able to integrate it with an overarching theme as they used to do before. Participant A1 explained: *'In the past we had a theme to work from, English, Afrikaans, Life Skills, Maths – when you were busy with fruit, they do calculations with fruit . . . now we don't have themes at all and the learners don't even have [the basic vocabulary], so you cannot link anything to anything [else]. The DBE books are very problematic. And then the Life Skills is something completely different. I just feel the subjects have to link to each other . . . it is a very big gap in the DBE books . . . there is nothing to link to'* (WS 6a, A1, 126-132). Participant A3 added that *'you teach them something today - tomorrow there's something new'*, while Participant B1 exclaimed out of frustration: *'it's stupid, it's difficult'* and then sighed *'there is no time for repetition, there is no time'* (WS 6a, A3 and B1, 133-139).

As mentioned by both Participants D1 and A1 (see above), using the printed workbooks that were provided by the Department of Basic Education, seemed to be problematic, especially as far as the struggling learners were concerned. Participant A3 found that *'the struggling learners, if you show them something practical, they cannot apply it on paper. They might understand the concept, but cannot write a test about it or do a written activity in a book'* (WS 6a, A3, 147-149) and Participant A2 confirmed: *'yes, they cannot apply it'* (WS 6a, A2, 152-153). Participant A3 also explained *'where they have to break down the numbers, for example 23, then we have cards and the put the 20 and the 3 together, then they can tell you '23 is 20 and 3' '20*

plus 3'. So they all do it and they all get it right with the cards, but when they have to complete it in the DBE books, even though they have an example in the books, they get confused and just write the same answer for all the sums'. This was due to the fact that the learners' number concept has not been properly laid down (WS 6a, A3, 164-170). Another challenge regarding the DBE workbooks was raised by Participant B1, namely that *'you cannot show it from the front of the class, because it is too small and you don't have time to go to each individual learner'* (WS 6a, B1, 118-120).

When I asked the participating teachers why they didn't leave the books if they felt it didn't work for their learners, Participant B1 replied: *'we are not allowed to, it has to be marked and signed every day'* (WS 6a, B1, 123) and Participant A2 confirmed: *'they are very strict about that'* (WS 6a, A2, 125). Participant A3 desperately said: *'the Department has to listen to the teachers . . . everybody is complaining about the same things . . . I attended the SIAS meeting and it is exactly the same. All the teachers are complaining about the same thing. And the people who present the course understand and they hear, but they are not in the position to do something about it. It is not in their hands'* (WS 6a, A3, 140-145).

Participant D1 agreed that the DBE will have to listen to the teachers in order to improve the teaching conditions in Grade 1 classrooms and added: *'Especially with the numbers in a Grade 1 classroom, I mean that's where they must really think strongly about it. That's where we lay the foundation, so ideally you want small classes so you can actually do the basics. Once they've got that, then your classes can be bigger and the tempo can pick up. But you first have to get there. That foundation has to be laid correctly'* (WS 6b, D1, 117-123).

It was clear to me that the participating Grade 1 teachers knew exactly how to introduce new academic concepts to their learners and how to strengthen academic concept development. They were, however, extremely frustrated by the pressure from the DBE, expecting them to implement an overloaded curriculum which their learners were not ready for and the pressure from the district officials who often visited their schools to check whether the departmental workbooks have been completed and marked.

I realised that, even though this professional development programme was successful and I could see an amazing change in my participants, I could not change the current education system they had to cope with every day.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-17

Even though the participating teachers were upset and frustrated when they gave feedback on the strengthening of academic concept development, their individual field notes (see Addendum Y, p. 18) on how their struggling learners reacted to Phase 4 of the intervention, were predominantly positive (see Table 6.1).

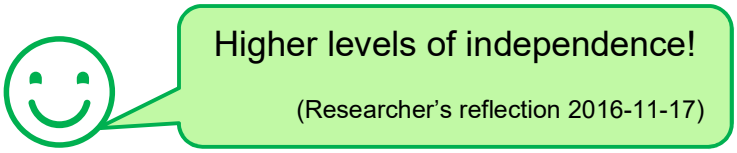
The ones who understand it and can apply it, get so excited, it's like an 'aha moment' and it is nice to see that. And then you feel good, because at least they understand something, something 'clicked'. They get so excited.

(WS 6a, A2, 172-175)

Table 6.1 An excerpt from the individual field notes of the participating teachers after completing Phase 4 of the intervention

Participant	What was the effect of Phase 4 of the intervention on the struggling learners in your classroom? (Intensive language instruction and strengthening of academic concept development)
A1	It only worked for some of the learners. Those learners who really struggle realise now that they are doing different work.
A2	They enjoy applying their new knowledge. 'Aha' moment – light bulbs come on. Very rewarding to witness. They still struggle to apply concepts learned through practical activities and concrete apparatus to paper.
A3	They enjoyed the practical activities and most of them showed improvement (it felt like a game). Learners were more eager and willing to try doing the tasks.
B1	They have a more positive attitude. They feel part of the group and their self-confidence has improved. They delivered more work, with better results.
B2	Learners understood the work better and their work showed improvement. Learners felt part of the group and did better work. They felt good about themselves because they could follow the instructions.
B3	They could do most of the work with proper instructions and support. They felt good about themselves. Their attitude is more positive.
D1	They are not afraid to try new things. They enjoyed the 'hands-on' approach.
D2	No comments
D3	They enjoyed the positive feedback and TLC (tender loving care) they got. They felt like they were achieving something. More confident in trying new things – did not give up so easily.

D4	They have more self-confidence. They feel chuffed with themselves after being able to answer questions. They are more eager to answer the next time.



See Figure 6.5 for a summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 4.

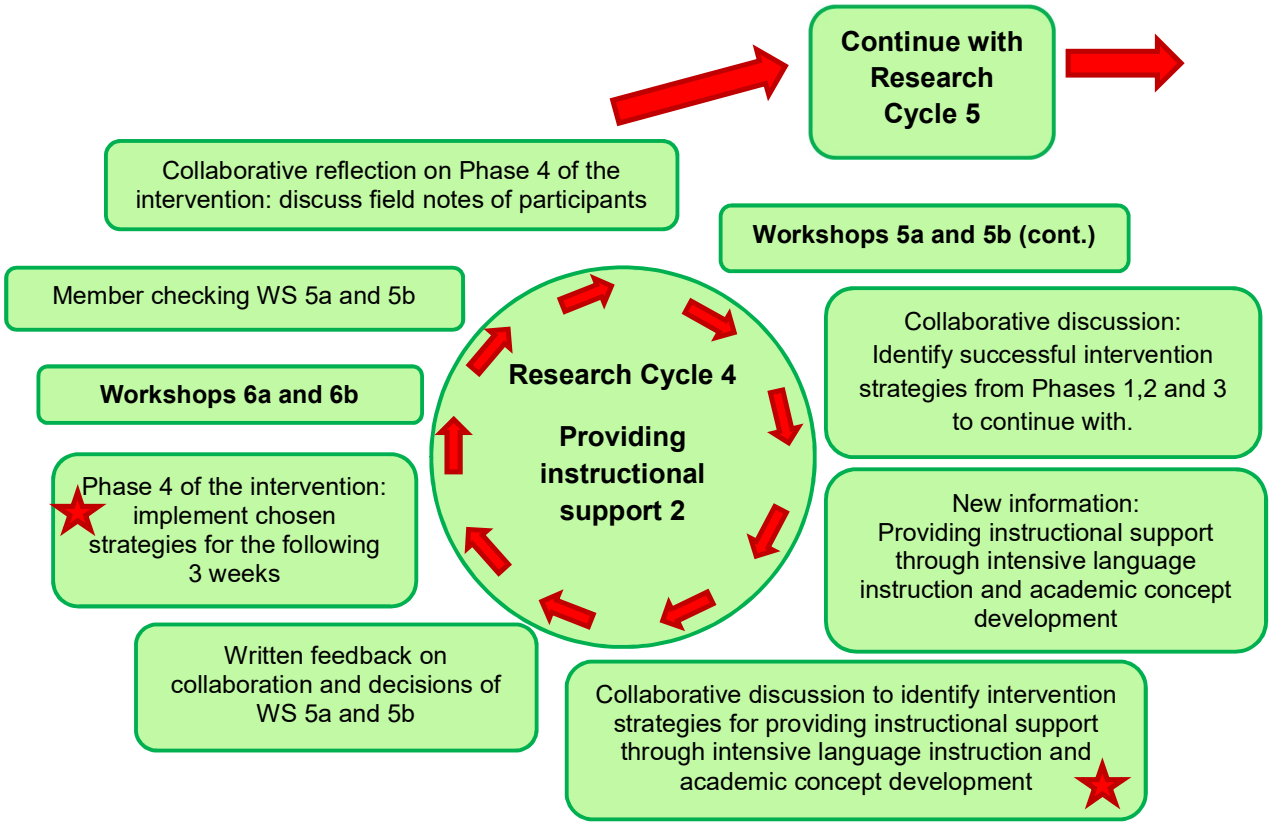


Figure 6.5 Summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 4

6.2.3 ATTEMPTING TO ACHIEVE LOWER LEVELS OF CONFLICT THROUGH CLASSROOM ORGANISATION

We normally have a little discussion, so we sit and we talk about why we have rules . . . then I ask them 'Okay, which rules do you think we can keep?

(WS 6b, D1, 152-153, 155-156)

The purpose of Phase 5 of the intervention was to focus on classroom organisation, in order to achieve lower levels of conflict in the classroom, since a lack of discipline was a challenge all the participating teachers struggled with. I briefly revisited the Attachment Theory (see PP6, slides 4, 5, 8 and 9), pointing out that we would focus on *classroom organisation* in order to achieve *lower levels of conflict*. I shared advice on how teachers can structure their classrooms with regard to class rules, routines and procedures from my literature study, with the participating Grade 1 teachers, namely:

- share responsibilities and assign specific jobs to individual learners to foster a sense of belonging;
- include the learners when the class rules are being set;
- organise social interactions between yourself and the learners and amongst the learners themselves during group or class activities;
- implement proactive strategies to manage learner behaviour;
- provide clear expectations to enable learners to regulate their own behaviour;
- use time effectively to ensure productive teaching and learning.

I planned for a collaborative discussion on identifying possible intervention strategies for improving *classroom organisation* (see PP6, slide 13) and I asked my participants to share their successful strategies regarding class rules and routine with the group. Participant B1 immediately reacted and asked: *'What if we do not have strategies that work? . . . What do you do? I don't know. I am looking for advice . . . I, as a teacher, need advice. Can't you give us advice? Really, it is a big problem'* (WS 6a, B1, 236, 240, 250-251).

Thereafter it was like an erupting volcano. I just let them talk:

'I've told my learners from day 1 that when another teacher enters the classroom, you fold your arms and keep quiet, but they don't do it. The moment someone enters the classroom, they take the gap and start talking' (Participant B1). *'You cannot expect them to greet the teacher that enters the room. I do not even allow them to do it'* (Participant A1). *'When they talk my rule is you get up with your hands on your head*

and stand for 5 minutes' (Participant B1). *'And even that does not work. They laugh when they stand. He will kick his friend when he is standing and the others will start laughing. This one kicks that one and that one kicks his table'* (Participant A1).

'I just punish the whole class, the whole class' (Participant B1). *'I let them stand and when they 'ride on their chairs', I take the chairs and let them stand. I ask them: 'Are you going to appreciate your chair?' and then they must say 'Sorry chair'* (Participant B3). *'I let them stay in for break time, but that doesn't even work'* (Participant A3). *'No, because you punish yourself . . . we don't have any more plans. You cannot punish them in any way'* (Participant A1).

'And they see on TV that people toi-toi for anything and everything. The influence thereof comes all the way into our classrooms. If they don't like something you say, they toi-toi. You see that every break time. They have their own protests and they charge each other up. Also when there is a fight between two learners, they cheer for them. There is no pride in themselves or in their work anymore' (Participant A1). *'And the marches they see on TV – One boy walked past my class and said 'today they gonna burn the school', but he said it with a sort of pride. And it was a Grade 1 boy talking like that. And I said to him: 'no, it's your school, you love your school. Nothing is going to happen here today'. This comes from their homes. But it is not all the children. We still have our good children'* (Participant A3).

'It is becoming worse all the time. You always had the ones looking for trouble, but now, the television, that influence, it's getting worse' (Participant A1). *'It is a problem right throughout our country . . . you can try your best. Every day you work so hard for these learners and then they go home – there's no mom or dad at home, they have to look after themselves and I don't know, their attitude towards school and their teachers is negative. I don't know. I wanted my teacher to think that I was a hard worker. But these learners, our Grade 1's, they don't worry about that. If you send them to detention, they think it is nice. We reprimand them and then we try to talk to them: 'Why do you do this?' You talk to them nicely. And you realise that the learner needs love and attention, so you encourage him, tell him that he looks neat today or his hair is nice. And for a while it seems to work, but then they behave badly again. Especially after a holiday. The learners are wild . . . it is as if they forget everything you taught them'* (Participant A3).

'And they have an attitude. Some of the girls will even click their tongues at me . . . it is simply unacceptable . . . it comes from home and it is terrible that young learners behave like that' (Participant A1). *'They really have bad manners'* (Participant B3). *'And the parents just throw their hands in the air. I tell them: 'you have to discipline your child, you have to give him structure and routine, there are some things he has to learn.' Then the mother says: 'O, Mam this one!' . . . They don't have respect for their parents . . . the parents are afraid to punish them, and say they can go to jail if their children [report them] to the police . . . the children even threaten their parents that they will go to the police'* (Participant A1).

'If there were less learners in a class it would have been manageable . . . at least you could separate the naughty ones . . . now you don't know where to move them . . . they fight over stationery, they do not mark their stuff and when it falls, they fight over it . . . I cannot solve it. I don't know whose stationery it is' (Participant A3) (WS 6a, 236-315).

> *Having worked with these Grade 1 teachers for almost five months now, I know how hard they work and how well they plan for each day's learning activities. Some of them have twenty or more years of teaching experience. They know how to structure a classroom, how to set class rules and how to plan their daily routine. The fact that they struggle so much to maintain the discipline in their classrooms, is definitely due to their teaching conditions, namely: too many learners in the class, learners who are not ready for formal education, an inaccessible curriculum, no support from the parents and unrealistic pressure from the DBE.*
>
> Researcher's reflection 2016-11-17

Being a calm, relaxed and very experienced Grade 1 teacher, Participant D1 shared some of her successful strategies for classroom organisation at the beginning of the year: *'for the first week in Grade 1, I put my learners in little groups and at least they are with their friends. I let them choose where they want to sit. After the first week I change it according to how I see their behaviour and their actions and that sort of thing. But for that first week, just for them to feel at home. Especially those little tearful ones, I move them closer to me'* (WS 6b, D1, 140-145). Regarding her class rules she explained: *'We normally have a little discussion, so we sit and we talk about why we*

have rules, for example, you can't eat in class, so why do you think you can't eat in class? Then they will tell me 'it makes your hands dirty.' And then I ask them 'okay, which rules do you think we can keep?' So I basically go through my rules with them and ask them 'So why do you think we need this rule?' (WS 6b, D1, 1520157). As far as the 'stationery war' was concerned, her plan of action was: *'I take all my stationery in and then I just give them what they need. Then I will also have it packed per term – this is what you need for this term, so they don't use the stationery for the next term. Then I will hand [everything] out on a Monday, 'here's your pencil that you need for the week', and they must use one pencil for about two weeks before I give them a new pencil. If they lose a pencil, they must go to the lost property, the stationery that was picked up on the floor and that's the only one they can use'* (WS 6b, D1, 164-171).

I knew, and accepted, that participatory action research is regarded as unpredictable and 'messy' and therefore I was prepared to make changes to our plans. I realised that it would not be beneficial for the participating teachers or their learners to continue with Phase 5 of the intervention, which would focus on classroom organisation. We were close to the end of the year and the teachers were tired. I decided to call it a day and requested my participants to focus only on the preparation for our last meeting, which was scheduled for two weeks later.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-17

I explained to the participating teachers that it would not be beneficial for them or their learners to implement any strategies for classroom organisation, other than the ones their learners were used to, at such a late stage of the year. They could rather make changes to their individual ways of doing, should they wish to do so, at the start of the new academic year with a new Grade 1 group. Our final meeting, during which we would conclude our research journey, was scheduled for two weeks later. In preparation for this meeting, I asked my participants to each write a success story about one of their struggling learners who benefitted from our research project, which we would use as feedback for Phase 5 of the intervention. See Figure 6.6 for a summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 5.

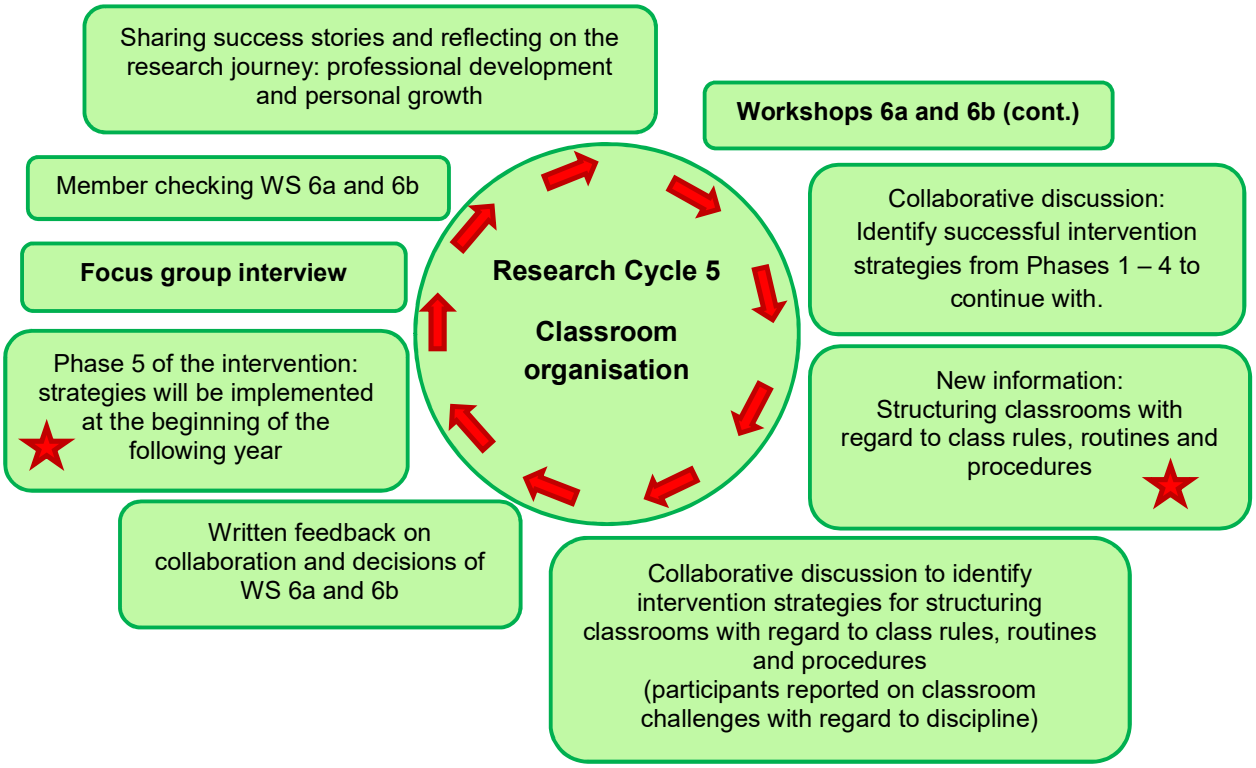
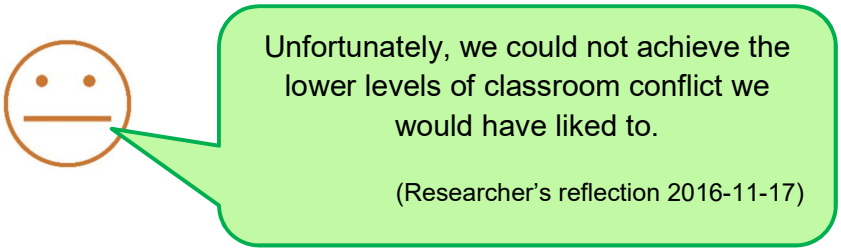


Figure 6.6 Summary of the important processes of Research Cycle 5



6.2.4 THE POSITIVE EFFECT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE SELF-EFFICACY OF THE PARTICIPATING GRADE 1 TEACHERS

It's nice to compare, where we started, with where we are now. And next year we can start with the intervention sooner, we can focus on emotional support for our struggling learners immediately.

(WS 5a, B3, 183-186)

After providing emotional and instructional support to their struggling learners for almost four months, the participating Grade 1 teachers shared their success stories (see Addendum V, for full versions of the success stories). Participant A2 reported: *'I was much more aware of how I treated him compared to the rest of the class. There*

was a definite positive change in him. He was more confident and believed in himself more. I could see his marks improving.' Participant B1 wrote her success story about a learner who *'could not even hold his pencil properly'* and explained that *'I helped him every day. I gave special attention. His marks improved every quarter. I praised him a lot. I let him feel good and that helped him to believe in himself. He is now going to Grade 2. A case like this makes teaching worthwhile.'*

Participant B2 used some of the strategies which were discussed in the workshops, *'like smiling more and making more eye contact'* to provide emotional support to a struggling girl in her class. Furthermore, she *'also praised her and gave her a lot more attention'* and for instructional support, she *'sat with her and helped her individually with her work.'* As a result, *'her marks have improved from a 2 to a 5'* and Participant B2 declared: *'I was so proud of this little girl and what she had achieved in only one quarter'.*

The success story of Participant D2 painted a picture of a little Grade 1 boy with very low self-esteem, who *'never took part in any activities'.* After being made aware of the emotional needs of vulnerable learners, Participant D2 admitted: *'just a little effort from my side helped to make him feel at ease, and he started asking and answering questions.'* Another Grade 1 boy, in Participant D3's class, was failing all the learning areas and was disrupting the class on a daily basis. Participant D3 reported: *'after changing a few things in the classroom and being more positive, his marks improved to such an extent that he can now pass Grade 1. He is now one of the better behaving learners in the class.'* Similarly, the success story of Participant D4 was about a Grade 1 girl who *'was very insecure.'* Participant D4 explained that she *'made use of encouragement, giving easier questions and extra stickers and stars.'* She also made an effort to boost the little girl's self-esteem and soon found that *'she was more eager to try and not so afraid of failure.'*

I have decided to include the whole success story provided by Participant B3, who was a novice teacher in her first year of teaching at the time of data collection. She gave a detailed description of her efforts to address the disruptive behaviour of this Grade 1 learner. After weeks of patience and forcing herself to stay positive, she could finally enjoy the results:

'I had a boy in my class who came to our school in the middle of the first quarter. At first he was very quiet and didn't speak or socialise at all. I reached out to him, but he seemed to resist my efforts.

He started behaving in negative ways, e.g. he would throw his stationery off the table out of frustration when he could not do the work. I encouraged him with positive feedback, but it did not seem to work. I used 'time out', by letting him sit on the carpet for a while and then called him to have an individual talk with him. I explained to him why his behaviour was unacceptable and he had to apologise. Sometimes he just went to sit on the carpet by himself, even before I could tell him to do so. He knew that his behaviour was unacceptable and would come to apologise after a while.

He also started bullying the other learners. I handled every incident by talking to him and explaining why his behaviour was unacceptable and he had to apologise to the other learners. I made an effort to stay positive.

By the fourth quarter I could see a positive change in both his behaviour and his work. He tried his best with his work and did not disrupt the class any more. Instead he surprised me by starting to show leadership qualities. It became important to him to complete his work correctly so that I could send him to other teachers for even more acknowledgement. It was amazing to see how my positive attitude and intervention changed this learner.' (see Addendum V, for full versions of the success stories)

It was rewarding to listen to my participants' success stories. I joined them on their respective research journeys and listened to their concerns and classroom challenges, but also to their positive learning experiences over the past four months. It was good to see that they each had success stories to tell at the end of the journey.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-30

The participating Grade 1 teachers had been focusing on emotional support for their struggling learners for eleven weeks by the end of the research project, and provided feedback on the positive outcomes thereof at every workshop. They had established closer relationships with their Grade 1 learners and regularly mentioned the learners' growing confidence. Participant A3 reported that she *'continued with the praise for*

good work and the feedback for positive behaviour, because it motivates them to keep trying and not give up. They are not academically strong, but they try hard' (WS 6a, A3, 5-8). She added that *'they are willing to work and so I focused my attention on motivating my learners to work harder'* (WS 6a, A3, 10-11, 13-14).

The struggling learners who would have to repeat Grade 1 had been identified, but their teachers kept motivating and encouraging them. Participant D1 explained: *'they know that they are going to stay behind, but they are still working – they don't have a choice. I don't give them a choice they still have to carry on with their work. And I just say to them they must try and work a little bit harder now, so that next year when they do it, it's a little bit easier for them. So whatever they learn now, it's easier for them next year'* (WS 6b, D1, 13-19). Similarly, Participant D3 mentioned: *'I have a repeater that is really trying. I just encourage her and, yes I don't think her mom has told her that she is going to repeat again – the mom is still hoping that she will pass. But she hasn't given up. She is still working and I can see there is still progress happening'* (WS 6b, D3, 23-27). Participant D1 added: *'I have another little boy, he is sort of able to write a sentence now, it's getting there, he hasn't just given up, especially the mom and the dad – they are working very hard to help him. There's no stopping there. We just carry on'* (WS 6b, D1, 29-32).

Even though my participants were extremely happy about the progress their struggling learners were making, they still felt very sad about the fact that many of them would not be able to pass Grade 1. They really love their learners and it was breaking their hearts to see that despite the effort those little ones were putting in, they still had to repeat Grade 1. Participant B1 said: *'I have a few learners who are very emotional . . . and I have thirty-five others that I have to get through Grade 1. If only we had smaller classes, then we could focus more on them, and then they would probably not have to repeat Grade 1'* (WS 6a, B1, 73-77). Participant A1 agreed: *'That is a fact. According to intellectual ability, not one of my current learners should have to repeat Grade 1, you know who has the ability and who doesn't, but these learners are not stupid, they are just not stimulated. Not one of them should have to repeat Grade 1 . . . all of them should pass'* (WS 6a, A1, 78-82).

The participating Grade 1 teachers all enjoyed the research project and were very excited about the progress their struggling learners made. They realised that they

could make a difference in those learners' school careers, despite everything that was working against them.

I was so proud of my participants. At the beginning of the research project (Workshops 2a and 2b) they said: 'these learners tend to disappear . . . it is sad, very, very sad' (WS 2a, B1, 17-19), and 'I sort of just give up . . . you have to move on . . . finish the work . . . you can't keep everyone back because of that one child' (WS 2b, D4, 197-199) (see 5.3.1). ***Now, they were not willing to give up and they were not willing to let these learners give up!*** *They might not have realized it yet, but they gave those vulnerable learners a new chance in life.*

What an amazing change! I knew then, that I have reached my goal with the professional development of these caring Grade 1 teachers.

Researcher's reflection 2016-11-17

Focus on the positive rather than the negative, reward everything positive, ignore the negative as far as possible. You cannot always ignore the negative. Stay positive as much as possible, it is not always easy, but we try.

(WS 6a, A2, 25-28)

6.3 SUMMARY

It was wonderful to see how my participants have changed from tired, worried and frustrated teachers to positive, enthusiastic and passionate teachers. Their teaching conditions have not changed. They still experience the same pressure from the current education system, they still have to implement the same curriculum and the majority of the parents are still unable to support them. What has changed, however, was the participating teachers' attitude. They needed to voice their concerns, they needed to be heard, they needed to take responsibility for addressing the challenges they face in their classrooms and they needed to experience success which could bring back the joy in teaching. This participatory action research project gave them the opportunity and platform to do so.

In Chapter 7, I reflect on my research findings by comparing it to the existing knowledge found in the literature on school readiness and the professional development of teachers. In this comparison, I indicate which findings from previous studies support the findings from this study and which findings contradict mine. I also make final conclusions by answering the secondary research questions and the main research question which guided this study. Finally, I make recommendations for the road ahead and reflect on my own professional and personal growth during this research journey.

CHAPTER 7

LESSONS LEARNED, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Having reached the end of my research journey, I use this final chapter to reflect on my experiences by comparing my findings to those of previous studies and pointing out which similarities and contradictions I could detect, which trends seemed to be silent in my data and which new insights I arrived at. Furthermore, I draw final conclusions on the research findings, by answering the main and the secondary research questions which guided the study. Finally, I make recommendations for the way forward and reflect on the effect the study had on both my professional and my personal growth.

For comparing the research findings to existing knowledge, I make use of the template drafted by Ebersöhn (2012) and implemented by Steyn (2014), amongst others. The comparison is done according to the themes and subthemes which emerged during the analysis of the data. I include short quotes from the empirical data to strengthen the comparative discussions.

7.2 REFLECTING ON THE LESSONS LEARNED BY COMPARING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

In this section I reflect on the lessons I have learned during this research journey, by comparing the findings of this study to those of previous studies which I came across in the literature on school readiness and the professional development of teachers. In the first place I present supportive evidence between the research findings of this study and findings from previous studies (see Tables 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3). Thereafter, I provide an overview of the contradictions between the findings of this study and those of previous studies (see Table 7.4). Table 7.5 is a presentation of silences in the data of this study, while Table 7.6 presents the new insights I arrived at, which reveal the significance of this study and the contribution that can be made in this area of research.

7.2.1 EVIDENCE IN EXISTING KNOWLEDGE THAT SUPPORTS THE RESEARCH FINDINGS: THEME 1

Table 7.1 Comparing the research findings to existing knowledge: supportive evidence for Theme 1

Author and year	Existing knowledge	Interpretive discussion of the findings of this study
Theme 1: The pressure of the current education system in South Africa – challenges in the Grade 1 classroom		
Subtheme (i): Concerns about the insufficient school readiness of many of the Grade 1 learners		
Seay 2012	Low-income families have no choice but to spend all available money on basic survival, with nothing to spare for preschool attendance, leaving their children vulnerable and unprepared for formal learning.	Only 43,7% of the Grade 1 learners in this study, attended a good Grade R class and even less attended preschool before Grade R. *'I often find that the learners are not ready at that stage to learn what you actually have to teach them. Sometimes it's just way over their heads'.*
Sherry & Draper 2012	More than two-thirds of primary school learners in South Africa start school with disadvantages due to poverty and as a result, experience academic difficulties.	The majority of the learners from this study, live in disadvantaged communities and are transported to city schools. School A is situated within such a poor community. '*[We only have a] handful of children who actually cope'.*
Bruwer 2014	Learners from poor communities who attend city schools, are often exposed to long and unsafe travelling distances. They need to get up very early in order to be on time for school and as a result, they arrive at school feeling tired and without having had breakfast.	The same conditions were relevant for the Grade 1 learners of this study. The participating teachers mentioned that the learners are unable to concentrate in class, due to fatigue and hunger. *'So they don't get something to eat for fifteen hours and they are hungry . . . they have to get up so early and arrive home again very late. . . the children are tired'.*
Mashburn & Pianta 2006	Learners who are struggling in class academically often display a negative attitude towards learning, tend to withdraw themselves form classroom activities and act aggressively towards their peers.	The Grade 1 teachers reported that some of their struggling learners refused to take part in activities which they found challenging and complained about the disruptive behaviour of these learners. *'He refused to do the work, he did not want to do it at all, he simply lay down on his*
Pianta & Stuhlman 2004; Palermo 2007	These learners develop negative attitudes towards learning, often withdraw themselves from the	

	activities in the class and experience academic failure. They may even refuse to cooperate in the class and avoid school altogether.	*arms or started crying'; 'there is no discipline'.*
Subtheme (ii): Concerns about the unrealistic expectations to implement the current curriculum		
Bruwer 2014	The Grade1 teachers regarded the curriculum which was being implemented at the time as inaccessible for their learners.	The findings of this study were similar. The participating Grade 1 teachers were very concerned about the pressure they experienced to implement a curriculum their learners were not ready for. *'The work tempo of CAPS [the current curriculum], there is no time for consolidation, it is too much and you just have to finish'.*
Subtheme (iii): Concerns about the lack of support for teachers		
Bruwer 2014	The Grade 1 teachers expressed an overwhelming need for support from parents, district officials and the Department of Basic Education. According to them, the district officials were not prepared to listen to them and the only feedback they received from the Department of Basic Education was critique when their learners did not perform well in the Annual National Assessment.	In this study, the participating teachers had the same experiences. The parents were unable to support them in terms of the learners' social development or as far as assistance with homework was concerned. *'The learners do not have any values, that is where the parents should come in'; 'there is not always time for homework, because the parents work late'.* Due to the fact that the teachers were experiencing unrealistic expectations and pressure from the Department of Basic Education to implement the curriculum, they felt that they do not have anywhere to go in order to voice their concerns and ask for assistance. *'We don't know how to address the problems anymore, we feel our hands are tied . . . we don't have any assistance'.*
Subtheme (iv): The negative effect of the current education system on the self-efficacy of the participating Grade 1 teachers		
Merriam 2010	Teachers who are confronted with particular classroom challenges,	The participating teachers in this study, were facing a number of

	which seems to be beyond their control, might unconsciously accept it the way it is, and in doing so, reinforce the status quo.	classroom challenges and were working under tremendous pressure. Still, they seemed to accept it as the way the education system works, unaware of the fact that they could actually do something about it. *'Am I really making a difference?'*
Guo et al. 2010	When teachers lack confidence in their own abilities, they may be reluctant to take up the responsibility for guiding and motivating their learners.	The Grade 1 teachers were overwhelmed by the challenges they faced on a daily basis. They said that they didn't know how to address the problems anymore. As far as their struggling learners were concerned, some of the teachers just gave up trying to support them. *'How do you let them feel good, if they can't do it?'*
Raver et al. 2008	Teachers who doubt their own abilities as teachers and have low levels of self-efficacy, might feel uncomfortable when approached by the researcher and hesitate to accept support by joining the research project.	Three of the less experienced teachers, were hesitant to take part in the collaborative discussions. They were very quiet at first and seldom shared their opinions with the group. Although all the Grade 1 teachers at the selected schools agreed to take part in the research project, some of them were sceptical and less enthusiastic than their colleagues. When asked about concerns they had about joining the project, they all mentioned the limited time they had due to their full programmes. *'My schedule is just too hectic to participate wholeheartedly'.*
Duncan 2013	Some teachers were suspicious at first, and concerned about the effect the research project might have on their daily teaching and were cautious in giving their consent to participate.	
Brown et al. 2009; Kim & Kang 2012	Teachers who felt overwhelmed by their workload and the time pressure, were reluctant to get involved in a research project as they were afraid of the extra expectations they would have to live up to.	

My research findings regarding the participating Grade 1 teachers' concerns about their learners who lack the essential school readiness skills for formal learning, are similar to those of numerous authors of school readiness literature. Previous studies worldwide confirmed that poverty is the main cause of insufficient school readiness at the time of school entry. Since the majority of South African children grow up in underprivileged communities, with limited or no access to preschool stimulation, these learners are extremely vulnerable when they enter Grade 1.

Regarding the participating teachers' concerns about the fact that they are expected to implement a curriculum which they regard as inaccessible for many of their learners, the only supportive evidence I came across, was from the study I previously conducted to investigate the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 (Bruwer 2014) (see 1.2). Similarly, the only supportive evidence I could find in school readiness literature regarding teachers' concerns about a lack of support from their education authorities, was from the same study mentioned above (Bruwer 2014). These issues are further addressed in the section about the new insights which emerged from in the findings of this study (see 7.2.6).

When teachers lose confidence in their own teaching abilities due to continuously challenging teaching conditions, their levels of self-efficacy decrease and they are reluctant to take responsibility for finding solutions to their problems. This was evident in this study, as well as previous studies, for example those conducted by Merriam (2010) and Guo et al. (2010). Feeling overwhelmed and frustrated, these teachers might be hesitant when approached by researchers offering assistance in the form of participating action research projects, as reported by Raver et al. (2008), Duncan (2013), Brown et al. (2009) as well as Kim and Kang (2012). While some of the Grade 1 teachers at the selected schools in this study, were eager to join the research project, others were sceptical and worried about their workload and busy schedules. They did not seem to have the energy, neither physical nor emotional, to embark on the journey of professional development and only agreed to take part because their colleagues agreed to do so.

7.2.2 EVIDENCE IN EXISTING KNOWLEDGE THAT SUPPORTS THE RESEARCH FINDINGS: THEME 2

Table 7.2 Comparing the research findings to existing knowledge: supportive evidence for Theme 2

Author and year	Existing knowledge	Interpretive discussion of the findings of this study
Theme 2: Taking a leap of faith – joining the participatory action research project		
Hindman et al. 2012; Downer et al. 2009	Pre-service training of teachers alone, is not sufficient in preparing teachers for the reality of supporting learners with diverse	The participating teachers in this study, were overwhelmed by the challenges in they faced in their classrooms and desperately

	needs in an inclusive classroom. Intensive professional development is seen as a 'key resource' in this regard.	needed support, especially the less experienced teachers, who were about to give up their teaching careers. Their initial teacher training did not equip them to deal with these challenges.
Pianta et al. 2014; Hamre et al. 2012; Downer et al. 2009	Continuous professional development is needed, since language instruction, concept development and the feedback provided to learners are insufficient. The quality of teacher-learner interactions and the quality of teaching are well below the ideal level which is needed to support struggling learners, even though teachers are well qualified and experienced.	Although the participating teachers in this study, were all well trained and some of them have been teaching Grade 1 for several years, I realised that they would still need intensive training in providing emotional support as well as instructional support. They did not have close relationships with their struggling learners when we started with the research project and admitted to *'just leaving them'*. They also struggled with providing high quality feedback which was informative and would provide scaffolding to their learners.
Hughes 2010	Classroom quality is determined by the quality of teacher-learner interactions, and not by the pre-service training and qualifications of the teachers.	This was proven to be true in this study, since the teachers did not fall back on their initial training automatically for insight in their teaching conditions, but needed to be reminded thereof through the professional development programme. *'One tends to forget a lot that you've been taught, so it is nice to be reminded'.* They also realised that they could still learn new teaching strategies. *'There is so much still to learn'.*
Jeon et al. 2010	Quality education depends on continuous professional development and training in teacher-learner relationships, emotional support and instructional support, in order to enhance the individual learning experiences of learners.	The Grade 1 teachers who took part in this research project, succeeded in enhancing the quality of the learning experiences of their struggling learners and could all share success stories at the end of the project. *''Aha' moment – light bulbs come on. Very rewarding to witness'.*
Pianta et al. 2014	Professional development of teachers focusses on teacher-learner relationships and teaching skills, enhancing both the competency of the teachers and the development of the learners.	The findings of this study confirmed that the emphasis of professional development of teachers should be on their relationships with their learners. It made such a big difference!

		'There is always hope for them and I can't give up on them'.
Mc Niff 2002; Kim & Kang 2012	Teachers have experience and professional knowledge, and are capable of initiating their own professional development, to improve their teaching.	It was clear throughout this study, that the participating teachers had valuable experience and knowledge which they could share with each other. *'I have learned a lot from the other teachers'.*
Conner & Duncan 2013	Teachers get better insight into their own personal growth and professional development when they are actively involved in research partnerships, rather than being researched by someone from outside.	I found through conducting this study, that participatory action research is an effective method to provide an opportunity for teachers to grow personally and professionally by being actively involved in research in their own classrooms. The Grade 1 teachers in this study never felt that they were criticised or assessed. They enjoyed their research journey and were pleasantly surprised by their own achievements. *'It's so nice to compare, where we started, with where we are now'.*
Subtheme (i): Finding comfort in collaboration with colleagues		
Downer et al. 2009	Teachers prefer a more interactive approach and a professional development programme that is relevant to their daily experiences and their interactions with their learners.	From the first meeting, the participating teachers enjoyed the company of their colleagues from their own school, as well as from the other participating schools. They enjoyed the collaborative discussions and feedback sessions and often mentioned how much they learned from each other. They found comfort in knowing that they were all facing the same challenges. *'Everyone feels the same'.* They all experienced the intervention strategies they were implementing in their classrooms as relevant with regard to their classroom challenges.
Parnell 2011	Teachers working in collaboration have valuable contributions to make to each other's professional development.	The participating teachers in this study valued the collaborative discussions, offered advice to each other and learned from one another. *'[It is] most enriching, 'informative and insightful'.*

Raver et al. 2008	The emotional support teachers experienced during collaborative sessions seemed to counteract feelings of "burnout" which were caused by the challenges in their classrooms.	The participating teachers were looking forward to our meetings and were eager to share their experiences with each other. These experiences were not always positive, but they felt comfortable sharing their less successful attempts with each other as well. *'It's so nice to know that I am not alone'.*
Subtheme (ii): Participating in problem-solving decision making		
Conner & Duncan 2013	Working as a team with the researcher provides teachers with the opportunity to consider possible solutions "from an informed base", instead of just relying on past experiences.	The information I shared with my participants from my literature study during each meeting, provided them with fresh and new ideas for intervention. They mentioned on a few occasions that it was nice to learn something new each time. *'The information was very relevant for us and we could benefit and learn from it'*.
Pill 2005	The role of theory should not be overlooked. The researcher has an important role to play in providing knowledge about relevant theories and previous research, which can assist the teachers in making decisions.	I explained the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) to my participants, to structure the session during which we discussed their concerns. This enabled them to understand their own feelings and frustrations. Furthermore, the Attachment Theory played an important role throughout the research project. *'I enjoyed all the research about the attachment theory. It puts things into perspective'.*
Subtheme (iii): Conducting research into own teaching by implementing collaboratively agreed upon intervention strategies		
Mashburn et al. 2010	In-service professional development is an effective way to improve teacher-learner relationships and the quality of classroom interactions.	Conducting research in their respective classrooms on a cyclical basis, proved to be very successful. The participating teachers could immediately see results, share the outcomes with their colleagues and continue with the next cycle. *'I am looking forward to implementing the new*

		ideas and seeing how my learners react to it'.
Guo et al. 2010	High levels of self-efficacy obtained through continuous professional development, has been proven to positively predict higher quality of instruction, which consequently leads to a positive effect on learner performance.	As the research project progressed, the participating teachers became increasingly more confident, enthusiastic and proud of the progress their struggling learners were making. *'This project also helps us to find ourselves again and to just sit and think what we can do to improve our teaching methods or how and what to do extra to help the learners in our classes'.*
Subtheme (iv): Facing and conquering challenges in the classroom		
Raver et al. 2008	Teachers who doubt their own abilities as teachers and have low levels of self-efficacy, might feel uncomfortable and hesitate to join a research project.	Three of the less experienced participating teachers did not seem to be comfortable taking part at first. It was clear that they were under a lot of pressure and seemed to be unhappy in their teaching careers. They agreed to participate, mainly because the rest of their colleagues all agreed to join the project. They attended less workshops than the more enthusiastic participants and did not always hand in their field notes. As the project progressed, they admitted that some of the intervention strategies were successful, but they struggled to address the challenges they faced in their classrooms. *'I did try some of it [the intervention strategies], some of it did work'.*
Duncan 2013	Some teachers are concerned about the effect a research project might have on their daily teaching while some experience feelings of vulnerability when they are requested to reflect on their own teaching experiences.	
Brown et al. 2009; Kim & Kang 2012	Teachers who feel overwhelmed by their workload and the time pressure, might be reluctant to get involved in a research project as they are afraid of the extra expectations.	
Baker et al. 2010	Teachers who express concerns about the interventions at the beginning of the programme, implement fewer intervention strategies than the others. These teachers anticipate that the interventions they are expected to implement will be overwhelming when added to their workload and might not be the solutions they are looking for in addressing the challenges they are facing.	One of the more experienced participating teachers, was very sceptical about the intervention strategies and often complained about her difficulties with her learners. She did not contribute much to the collaborative discussions and gave very little feedback after a period of intervention. *'Mam, no offence, but you are unrealistic a little bit [sic], with all the pressure of the work'.* She did however, experience some success with her efforts.

Baker et al. 2010; Downer et al. 2009	Teachers who are committed to their careers are more eager to participate, those who are enthusiastic about their work as teachers and are known to be efficient in their teaching.	I was fortunate to have mostly enthusiastic and committed teachers participating in the research project. They were eager to join the journey of personal growth and professional development and did a great job! *'You feel as though you are making a contribution'.*
Subtheme (v): Growing through critical self-reflection		
Pill 2005; Kim & Kang 2012	Reflecting on their own teaching, leads to personal growth which results in changes within the individual teachers, their teaching methods, their philosophies and attitudes towards their learners.	The participating Grade 1 teachers mentioned being more aware of themselves while they were teaching. They focussed more on things they were saying and things they did not want to say or do in their classes. They often shared their self-reflections with each other. *'I must remember to give praise more often'; 'I don't want to shout and get angry any more'.*
Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008	Critical self-reflection is an important part of the professional development programme, as it strengthens the teachers' self-awareness during their learning experiences.	
Duncan 2013	Through reflecting on their own teaching, they become aware of the aspects of their teaching which are good, and those they can improve on.	
Parnell 2011	Through constant critical self-reflection, teachers become increasingly willing to take on the responsibility of analysing and improving on their own teaching practice.	It was a rewarding experience to see how my participants grew personally and professionally through constantly reflecting on their own teaching. I provided opportunities for them to do so by including sections on self-reflection in both the template for written feedback which we used at the end of each workshop, and the templates for their field notes. Furthermore, they could use their reflection diaries for this purpose. *'I'm looking at my class in a different way. I am trying new teaching methods'.*
Hughes 2010	Growth and change happen over time, therefore the professional development of teachers should be planned over months, rather than days.	This research journey lasted for four months. I was worried that the participating teachers would withdraw as the time went by, but the opposite happened. They were more eager to learn and grow as the project progressed. I realised that it would not be possible to achieve the same

		success in a shorter period of time.

It has been confirmed by previous researchers (Hindman et al. 2012; Downer et al. 2009) that teachers need more than just their pre-service training in order to equip them for supporting learners with diverse needs in inclusive classrooms. Findings from previous studies (Pianta et al. 2014; Hamre et al. 2012; Downer et al. 2009) have proven that continuous professional development for teachers, is essential to ensure quality teaching, especially in the early grades. Similarly, the findings of this study indicated that the participating Grade 1 teachers were overwhelmed by the challenges they faced in their classrooms, but the positive effect of this participatory action research project on their professional development exceeded our highest expectations.

According to existing knowledge (Conner & Duncan 2013; Kim & Kang 2012), the most effective tool for the continuous professional development of teachers, is to provide them with opportunities to do research into their own teaching, while collaborating with colleagues who share the same passion for teaching (Downer et al. 2009; Parnell 2011; Raver et al. 2008), and researchers who can provide the latest research findings within their field of interest (Conner & Duncan 2013; Pill 2005). The findings of this study proved that the participating teachers enjoyed and valued the collaboration with each other, while finding comfort in knowing that they were all facing the same challenges. They appreciated my support as the researcher and facilitator, were eager to learn new strategies for intervention and enjoyed learning new theories which they could implement in their classrooms.

Implementing intervention strategies in their own classrooms as part of a professional development programme, was found to be an effective way to improve both the quality of teacher-learner relationships and the academic progress of the learners (Mashburn et al. 2010), while the teachers' levels of self-efficacy also increased (Guo et al. 2010). In this study, the participating teachers could immediately see positive results in the progress of their learners, while their own confidence and enthusiasm increased as the research project progressed.

The degree of success the participating teachers in this study experienced, depended to a great extent on their attitude and willingness to implement the collaboratively agreed upon intervention strategies. The participating teachers who were sceptical from the beginning of the project, struggled more to address their classroom challenges. These findings correlate with those of studies conducted by Raver et al. (2008), Duncan (2013), Brown et al. (2009), Kim and Kang (2012); Downer et al. (2009) as well as Baker et al. (2010).

Another very important aspect which contributes to the success teachers experience while conducting research into their own teaching, is the degree to which the individual teachers are prepared to engage in self-reflection (Parnell 2011; Kim & Kang 2012; Duncan 2013). In this study, I was pleasantly surprised by the willingness of the participating teachers to share their self-reflections with each other. It was clear that they felt at ease in each other's company, knowing that they will not be criticised or judged. They learned from each other's classroom experiences, as well as from each other's self-reflections, when they gave feedback after each phase of intervention and shared their own learning curves with each other. They grew both professionally and personally through constant self-reflection.

7.2.3 EVIDENCE IN EXISTING KNOWLEDGE THAT SUPPORTS THE RESEARCH FINDINGS: THEME 3

Table 7.3 Comparing the research findings to existing knowledge: supportive evidence for Theme 3

Author and year	Existing knowledge	Interpretive discussion of the findings of this study
Theme 3: Making a difference by strengthening teacher-learner relationships and providing high quality teaching		
Hindman et al. 2010	High quality classroom instruction can minimise the risk for academic failure.	As the intervention progressed, the Grade 1 teachers provided emotional and instructional support to their struggling learners, of whom most were facing retention. The learners' confidence grew as they started making progress and by the end of the project, some of them made enough progress to pass Grade 1. *'[He] completed his test.*
Lazarus & Ortega 2007	It is the responsibility of schools to prevent academic failure in cases where learners are vulnerable, by providing high quality intervention.	

		Previously he never wrote anything'.
Azzi-Lessing 2010; Liew 2012; Hindman et al. 2010	It is important for the Grade 1 teacher to initiate a warm and supportive environment in the classroom.	During Phases 1 and 2 of the intervention, the participating teachers focussed on emotional support for their struggling learners, which resulted in warm and close teacher-learner relationships. *'They feel special'.*
Lazarus & Ortega 2007	High quality communication with struggling learners and frequent encouragement can motivate these learners and build a positive self-concept which will improve academic progress.	The participants supported their learners and provided positive feedback about their progress over a period of four months. The outcome was heart-warming. *'The moment I told her that she did good, I could see her face lighting up'.*
Subtheme (i): Achieving high levels of closeness through emotional support		
Rudasill 2011	Close and warm relationships between Grade 1 teachers and their learners are important for academic success, especially in cases where learners are at risk of school failure.	At the beginning of the research project, the participating Grade 1 teachers admitted that they *'just left'* the struggling learners and that these learners *'tend to disappear'.* This unfortunate scenario changed completely when they started providing emotional support to their struggling learners. *'Look into their eyes, it means so much to them'.*
Pianta & Stuhlman 2004; Palermo et al. 2007	The school readiness of Grade 1 learners and their adjustment to school are significantly influenced by their relationships with their teachers and their behaviour, enjoyment of school, as well as their academic performance are affected by it.	The participating teachers reported seeing an immediate difference in their struggling learners' behaviour, academic progress and emotional well-being, as soon as they started implementing the intervention strategies for emotional support. *'She actually read better and the moment I told her that she did good, I could see her face lighting up'.*
Palermo et al. 2007	Due to increased individual attention and a warm, welcoming learning environment, classroom participation and engagement in learning activities are encouraged.	The learners in this study reacted positively to the intervention strategies for emotional support which their teachers were implementing. *'The learners felt better about themselves and were also more eager to try new activities'.*

Baker 2006; Palermo et al. 2007	Close relationships between Grade 1 teachers and their learners can protect vulnerable learners from academic failure and reduce the risk of grade retention.	As soon as the teachers reached out to their struggling learners, they became more confident and started to believe in their own abilities. *'Everything improved, just when he felt he could do something right and he saw that I noticed it'.*
Grazanio et al. 2007 Hamre & Pianta 2005 Palermo et al. 2007	Positive and warm relationships between Grade 1 teachers and their learners strengthen their self-confidence and enable them to engage in learning activities and complete their tasks accurately. It also helps them to socialise with their peers.	The struggling learners were more willing to take part in learning activities, demonstrating confidence in themselves which they did not do before. The participating Grade 1 teachers experienced a positive change in their classrooms and reported that the atmosphere tends to be calmer. *'They have more confidence to try, they understand instructions better'.*
Stanulis & Manning 2002	Positive verbal and nonverbal feedback will help learners to believe in their own abilities. As a result, they develop positive academic identities and learn to value themselves and each other.	The participating teachers put a lot of effort into creating positive verbal and non-verbal learning environments in their respective classrooms, and were extremely pleased with the outcomes. *'I am special', 'I am the best me that there is', 'I can do it'.*
Subtheme (ii): Encouraging independence through instructional support		
Hamre & Pianta 2005	High quality language instruction will compensate for the lack of language stimulation and learning experiences during the preschool years of vulnerable learners from disadvantaged backgrounds.	The participating Grade 1 teachers provided excellent language instruction to their learners of whom 96,4% were second-language learners at the time of data collection. The learners master English as language of learning and teaching (LoLT) fairly quickly, *'you just have to go slow'.*
Downer et al. 2009	Teachers need guidance and support with the implementation of learning activities and in providing rich language instruction and high quality feedback to their learners in order to enhance the individual learning experiences of each learner.	I realised that some participants were unsure of how to provide high quality feedback that is informative and can serve as scaffolding to guide struggling learners in learning activities. They were used to give '*stars and stickers'* and then move on, instead of providing informative feedback on what has been mastered and what the next step would be.

Subtheme (iii): Attempting to achieve lower levels of conflict through classroom organisation		
Mashburn & Pianta 2006 Palermo et al. 2007	Learners who are not ready for formal learning, often act aggressively towards their peers and may refuse to cooperate in the class. Learners who experience high levels of conflict with their teachers, develop problematic and aggressive behaviour.	The Grade 1 teachers in this study were worried about the lack of discipline they experienced and often referred to it as one of the most difficult challenges they have to deal with. *'What if we do not have strategies that work? What do you do? I don't know'.*
Mashburn & Pianta 2006 Palermo et al. 2007	Avoiding stress and anxiety in the classroom environment will result in low levels of conflict which will, in turn impact positively on the learners' social and emotional development.	During the first two phases of the intervention, while focussing on emotional support, the Grade 1 teachers experienced some degree of relief from the disruptive behaviour of their learners. *'I don't have to fight with them so much.'* Unfortunately, it did not last very long, since there were still too many other challenges.
Subtheme (iv): The positive effect of professional development on the self-efficacy of the participating Grade 1 teachers		
Guo et al. 2010; Brown et al. 2009	Teachers who take part in professional development, usually put more effort into their teaching and are more determined to deal with the challenges they face in their classrooms. Teachers who are engaged in professional development and further training are likely to have high levels of self-efficacy and will continuously try to improve their teaching strategies. Teachers find such learning journeys empowering.	The participants in this study really put a lot of effort into the research project and it was clear that their efforts increased even more as the project progressed. *'It is not always easy, but we try'.* The success the participating teachers were experiencing with their struggling learners, made them feel good and motivated them to work even harder. *'Let's make a difference!'*
Kim & Kang 2012	When teachers collaborate with colleagues in a research project, their teaching philosophies tend to change and their relationships with their learners improve.	Experiencing collaboration and support from colleagues with the same passion and the same challenges, resulted in a change of attitude, from being frustrated and tired, to sympathetic and proud. *'I sat with her and helped her. I was so proud of this little girl and what she had achieved'.*
Guo et al. 2010	Warm and close relationships between teachers and learners are associated with teachers who have high levels of self-efficacy.	The participating teachers in this study started their intervention by providing emotional support to their struggling learners, and

	These teachers also tend to create emotionally supportive learning environments. They will strive to improve their teaching to the benefit of their learners.	continued to do so for the entire project. As they observed their learners growing in confidence and making progress, the teachers themselves became more confident. *'I am a good teacher and I am doing my very best. I am making a difference'.*
Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008	While engaging in a professional development programme, their levels of self-efficacy were increasing as they were equipped with new knowledge and skills which made an immediate difference in their day-to-day teaching.	After only one phase of the intervention, the teachers in this study already reported an amazing change in their classrooms. Their struggling learners were reacting positively to the intervention and the teachers were very impressed by the fact that they can, after all, change their teaching situation. *'All these things that I tried out, actually worked positively'.*
Brown et al. 2009	The benefits of teachers acting as researchers and initiating their own professional development, is clearly visible in the enhanced confidence and competence of the teachers.	I couldn't agree more! The change that I observed in my participants was more than what I expected or could hope for. They were so desperately looking for assistance at the beginning of the research project, and at the end, they were confident and enthusiastic. *'Now I look at things from a different perspective and I address challenges differently'.*
McNiff 2002; Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008	Never accept a challenging situation as it is. Stay alert and keep searching for solutions. By taking part in a participatory action research project, the participating teachers get the opportunity to develop a critical self-awareness.	When the participating teachers in this study realised that they could make a difference in their classrooms, they immediately took responsibility for addressing the challenges they were facing. They collaboratively decided on possible intervention strategies, which they bravely implemented, with great success. *'It was nice to have some fresh ideas and to see how the children responded'.*
Hughes 2010	As research partners, teachers can initiate their own professional development, strengthening their independence and enhancing their professionalism.	As researcher and facilitator, I could guide and support my participants. I could share ideas with them from previous research findings. I could not, however, give them solutions to their daily classroom challenges. They initiated their own professional development, with proficiency and success. *'I think I'm better*

		equipped to deal with those learners now'.

To provide high quality teaching to young learners, it is essential to create a warm learning environment with close teacher-learner relationships, while providing encouragement and positive feedback, in order to strengthen the confidence of vulnerable learners and minimise the risk of academic failure (Hindman et al. 2010; Lazarus & Ortega 2007; Azzi-Lessing 2010; Liew 2012). This is especially true for a Grade 1 classroom with learners who are not ready for the formal learning environment. In this study, the participating teachers focussed on strengthening their relationships with their struggling learners by providing emotional and instructional support.

Rudasill (2011) emphasises the importance of close relationships between Grade 1 learners and their teachers for academic progress. This is confirmed by the findings of Pianta and Stuhlman (2004), as well as Palermo et al. (2007), which indicate that young learners' enjoyment of school and their engagement in learning activities, depend on their relationships with their teachers. Similarly, the findings of this study proved that the struggling Grade 1 learners immediately reacted positively when their teachers implemented intervention strategies for emotional support, their confidence improved and they were more willing to take part in learning activities.

The participating teachers in this study, succeeded in strengthening their struggling learners' independence by providing instructional support. Focussing on high quality language instruction and informative feedback (Hamre & Pianta 2005; Downer et al. 2009), provided the scaffolding the learners needed to benefit from their learning experiences.

When teachers initiate their own professional development and engage in research in their own classrooms, they see immediate changes in their day-to-day teaching, which enhances their confidence and competence, leading to higher levels of self-efficacy (Fletcher & Zuber-Skerritt 2008; Guo et al. 2010; Brown et al. 2009; Hughes 2010). The successful outcomes which the participating teachers in this study achieved through implementing intervention strategies to support their struggling learners (and

in doing so, giving them a better chance of a successful school career), increased their own levels of self-efficacy and brought back the joy of teaching.

7.2.4 EVIDENCE IN THE RESEARCH FINDINGS THAT CONTRADICTS EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

In this section, I present research findings from this study that revealed contradictory evidence when compared to existing knowledge. These findings emerged from Themes 1 and 2.

Table 7.4 Comparing the research findings to existing knowledge: contradictory evidence

Author and year	Existing knowledge	Interpretive discussion of the findings of this study which revealed contradictory evidence
Theme 1: The pressure of the current education system in South Africa – challenges in the Grade 1 classroom		
Subtheme (ii): Concerns about the unrealistic expectations to implement the current curriculum		
Burchinal et al. 2008	An essential element of quality teaching is the implementation of an appropriate curriculum. A curriculum is regarded as appropriate, when the background of the learners as well as their diverse levels of development are taken into consideration.	The participating teachers in this study, were extremely concerned about the fact that they were expected to implement the curriculum (*CAPS), even though a large percentage of their learners were not ready for it. Only a few learners were able to keep up with the pace and the amount of work. *'The curriculum is too heavy [sic]. There is no time to review or consolidate'.*
Burchinal et al. 2008	Continuous assessment of the learners' progress is necessary to provide effective instructional support according to the diverse learning needs of the learners.	The participants explained that the Department of Basic Education expects them to do a certain number of written assessments, which at times, could be up to six per day. *'Shame, these poor kids. It has just been assessment after assessment, like it's coming out of their ears. It's hardly like it should be'.*

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Theme 2: Taking a leap of faith – joining the participatory action research project		
Subtheme (i): Finding comfort in collaboration with colleagues		
Brown 2009	Conflict between the participating teachers may occur from time to time due to differences in opinions and personalities.	I did not observe any conflict amongst the participating Grade 1 teachers in this study. The collaboration meant a lot to them and they truly found comfort in each other's company. *'It's so nice to know that I am not alone'.*
Subtheme (iii): Conducting research into own teaching by implementing collaboratively agreed upon intervention strategies		
Downer et al. 2009 Baker et al. 2010	Teachers who had fewer years of teaching experience were more prepared to take part in intervention projects as research partners. Teachers with more years of experience were sceptical about the potential success of the intervention strategies and were unwilling to implement it.	Although I had three participants who had one, six and seven years of teaching experience respectively, who participated enthusiastically (it was their first year with Grade 1 learners), I had three participants with two, five and nine years teaching experience, who were sceptical and less eager to implement the intervention strategies. These three teachers taught Grade 1 learners before. Looking at the more experienced participating teachers, only one was sceptical and complained a lot about her learners. The other three participated eagerly and made valuable contributions.

Two of the contradictions between the existing knowledge and the findings of this study, which were very prominent, both emerged from Theme 1 regarding the current education system in the South African context. These included firstly, the implementation of the current curriculum for Grade 1 and in the second place, the continuous assessment tasks for Grade 1 learners. Burchinal et al. (2008) emphasise that an appropriate curriculum is essential for quality teaching and explain that a curriculum can be regarded as appropriate when the background and diverse levels of development of the learners are taken into consideration. According to the findings of this study, however, the participating teachers were convinced that the curriculum they were expected to implement, was inaccessible for the majority of their learners.

Furthermore, there was pressure on them to keep up with the tempo of work as expected by the district officials who were responsible for school visits, which meant that they had to proceed with new work, even when their learners have not mastered the previous concepts.

The findings of Burchinal et al. (2008) indicate that continuous assessment is necessary to determine which concepts the learners have mastered and whether additional support is needed. The participating teachers in this study, however, explained that they have prescribed assessment tasks which have to be done according to a predetermined schedule, which means that struggling learners are exposed to assessment tasks which they are not ready for. Most of these assessment tasks have to be done in writing, in order to provide proof thereof in case of visits from the District Office. The participating teachers were concerned about the feelings of failure their struggling learners were experiencing due to these assessment tasks and about the amount of teaching time that is lost due to the excessive assessments.

The remaining contradictions between the existing knowledge and the findings of this study were less prominent. In the first place, I did not experience any conflict amongst the participating Grade 1 teachers during the course of the research project, although such conflict might have occurred in previous studies (Brown 2009). Secondly, I experienced in my study that three of the less experienced Grade 1 teachers were sceptical about the research project and struggled to implement the intervention strategies, while previous research findings (Downer et al. 2009) indicate that less experienced teachers were mostly eager to take part in participatory action research projects. In the third place, Baker et al. (2010) found that more experienced teachers were usually sceptical about research projects and less willing to implement intervention strategies. In this study, however, three out of the four more experienced teachers participated enthusiastically and enjoyed the project.

7.2.5 SILENCES THAT BECAME EVIDENT IN THE RESEARCH FINDINGS WHEN COMPARED TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

One very important aspect in the literature that I reviewed, was completely silent in my research findings, namely support for Grade 1 teachers in the form of continuous professional development. Sometimes, silences speak louder than a million voices and desperately need to be heard.

Table 7.5 Comparing the research findings to existing knowledge: silences in the data

Trend	Author and year	Interpretive discussion
The essentiality of programmes characterised by collaboration, intervention and reflection for the continuous professional development of teachers in the early grades of formal teaching is prominent in the literature on school readiness.	Brown et al. 2009; Guo et al. 2010; Downer et al. 2009; Kim & Kang 2012; Jeon et al. 2010; Pianta et al. 2014; Mashburn et al. 2010; Hamre et al. 2012; Hughes 2010; Hindman et al. 2012; Duncan & Conner 2013; Raver et al. 2008; Heller et al. 2012	No indication could be found of support in the form of professional development programmes, for Grade 1 teachers in the South African context, with regard to the challenges they face in their classrooms. The participating teachers had no opportunities for collaboration, except amongst themselves at their respective schools. Neither did they receive any guidance or information regarding intervention or the value of self-reflection.

Although professional development for teachers through participatory action research is prominent and regarded as essential, both in the existing literature on school readiness and the literature on the professional development of teachers, I could not find any evidence of such projects for Grade 1 teachers in the South African context. The participating teachers in this study, mentioned that they often have to attend training sessions scheduled and presented by the Department of Basic Education. These sessions, however, are scheduled for one afternoon only and usually last for one to two hours, during which information is conveyed and the teachers are expected to implement it in their classrooms after attending the session. The participating teachers explained that the information they receive during such sessions, hardly ever addresses the classroom challenges they are faced with. Furthermore, they never get the opportunity to voice their concerns and no collaboration takes place.

7.2.6 NEW INSIGHTS THAT EMERGED FROM THE RESEARCH FINDINGS WHEN COMPARED TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

After listening to the concerns of the Grade 1 teachers who participated in this study, I realised that they were still struggling with the same challenges as before when I conducted my first investigation into school readiness in the South African context (see 1.2). During the course of this research project, I realised with great relief that there is a way to address the concerns of the Grade 1 teachers and promote the school

readiness of their learners. The research findings of this study brought new hope to me and the teachers who placed their trust in me, mainly because they had nobody else to turn to.

Table 7.6 Comparing the research findings to existing knowledge: new insights

Theme 1: The pressure of the current education system in South Africa – challenges in the Grade 1 classroom	
Subtheme (ii): Concerns about the unrealistic expectations to implement the current curriculum and Subtheme (iii): Concerns about the lack of support for teachers	
Description	**Interpretive discussion**
In the school readiness literature which I reviewed, I came across research findings describing young learners who were vulnerable at the time of school entry, due to insufficient school readiness which, in most cases, was a result of poverty. A vast number of previous studies which were conducted worldwide, report on efforts to support these learners in order to give them a better chance at a successful school career. Nowhere, however, did I come across research findings reporting that the teachers of these vulnerable learners were expected to implement a curriculum which they regarded as inaccessible to their struggling learners. Neither did I come across research findings indicating that the teachers of vulnerable learners in the first year of formal learning, experienced a lack of support from their respective education authorities.	The participating Grade 1 teachers in this study raised their concerns about the large number of learners who enter Grade 1 without the essential school readiness skills. These learners were deprived from preschool stimulation and started their school career completely unprepared for the demands of the formal learning environment. Their parents enrolled them in schools with well trained teachers and good resources, in order to provide them with a better chance in life. Sadly, these learners were unable to benefit from this decision their parents made, because they were confronted with an inaccessible curriculum and a work tempo which left them with daily experiences of failure. The curriculum might well be suitable for Grade 1 learners who are ready for formal learning, but it is a disaster for these vulnerable learners. Although their caring teachers tried to voice their concerns, they did not succeed in doing so and at the time of data collection, they were still not allowed to slow down the tempo or adapt the curriculum in order to accommodate their struggling learners. The participating teachers were under tremendous pressure to keep up with the expected pace and see to it that the prescribed departmental workbooks were completed and marked, in case they would receive unexpected visits from district officials. These teaching conditions left the teachers tired, overwhelmed and frustrated, with their levels of self-efficacy rapidly decreasing.

As a researcher, I was unsure whether this research project would make any difference in the classrooms of these Grade 1 teachers. The idea of participatory action research seemed so promising when I read about previous studies and the positive outcomes of such research projects. Yet, the current teaching conditions in the South African context seemed to cause numerous challenges in Grade 1 classrooms, for which the teachers had no solutions. It seemed like a hopeless situation. Nevertheless, the Grade 1 teachers from the selected schools decided to take a leap of faith and join the research project. The positive effect of the research project, even after only the first phase of intervention, came as a pleasant surprise. The change I observed in the attitude and enthusiasm of the participating teachers, made me realise that professional development through participatory action research can definitely make a huge difference in the lives of Grade 1 teachers and their learners.

7.3 DRAWING FINAL CONCLUSIONS ON THE RESEARCH FINDINGS BY ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After reflecting on the lessons learned by comparing my research findings to existing knowledge, I am prepared to draw final conclusions on the findings of this study by answering the research questions. I will proceed to do so, by firstly answering the secondary research questions and thereafter the main research question. The questions which guided this study were:

The main research question:

How can the professional development of Grade 1 teachers promote school readiness in an inclusive education context?

The secondary research questions:

- What are the main concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the school readiness of their learners in an inclusive classroom context?
- Which intervention strategies can Grade 1 teachers implement to promote school readiness?
- How can a participatory action research project contribute to the empowerment of Grade 1 teachers in addressing their classroom challenges in an inclusive education context?

- What is the effect of professional development of Grade 1 teachers on the progress of their learners?

7.3.1 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO 1

What are the main concerns of Grade 1 teachers regarding the school readiness of their learners in an inclusive classroom context?

The Grade 1 teachers who participated in this study, were concerned about the large number of Grade 1 learners who enter the formal learning environment without having mastered the skills which are essential for successful learning. This is mainly due to the fact that the majority of their learners come from disadvantaged backgrounds and were deprived from preschool stimulation. Many of these learners have to travel long distances to school, resulting in fatigue and hunger which means that they are unable to concentrate or participate in learning activities. Furthermore, the majority of these learners are second language learners, of whom many are exposed to the language of instruction for the first time when they enter the Grade 1 classroom.

As a result of the above mentioned factors, these Grade 1 learners are not prepared for the formal learning environment. They are extremely vulnerable and their risk of academic failure is very high. Due to the insufficient school readiness of these learners, the curriculum which is currently being implemented in the public schools in South Africa, is inaccessible to them. This leads to feelings of failure, the development of negative academic identities and an increase in disruptive behaviour in the classroom.

Since the Grade 1 teachers are under pressure to implement the curriculum and keep up with the prescribed work tempo, these learners fall behind and their backlog rapidly increases to such an extent that their teachers ‘just leave them’, causing them to ‘disappear in the class’.

7.3.2 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO 2

Which intervention strategies can Grade 1 teachers implement to promote school readiness?

Providing quality teaching to vulnerable young learners who are at risk of academic failure at the beginning of their school career, is vital. The essentiality of close and warm teacher-learner relationships in this regard, should never be underestimated. The first and most important phase of intervention should definitely be emotional support, which includes creating a warm and welcoming learning environment, reaching out to each individual learner by making eye contact and addressing their individual learning needs. The Grade 1 teacher should focus on providing positive feedback and recognition for every attempt by the learners to take part in learning activities, as well as appropriate praise and rewards for achievements, no matter how small. Guiding vulnerable learners to believe in their own abilities and building their confidence will help them to develop positive academic identities.

Once the Grade 1 teacher has established close and warm relationships with her learners, it is important to ensure quality teaching by providing instructional support in order to create positive learning opportunities for every individual learner. Focussing on intensive language instruction and providing continuous informative feedback during learning activities, will provide the scaffolding which is needed to support vulnerable learners in successfully mastering academic concepts. Achieving success in the learning process, will strengthen their confidence, and they will be willing to take on new challenges, as they become more independent.

Structuring the learning environment, as well as the learning process, by providing clear expectations as far as the social demands of the formal learning environment is concerned, will create a safe and secure atmosphere for young learners in which they can grow and develop. Continuous high quality feedback on the learners' actions and behaviour will provide the information they need to adapt socially, while reducing the conflict in the classroom.

7.3.3 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO 3

How can a participatory action research project contribute to the empowerment of Grade 1 teachers in addressing their classroom challenges in an inclusive education context?

The Grade 1 teachers who participated in this study were overwhelmed by the challenges they faced in their classrooms on a daily basis. They were tired and

frustrated, because they had no forum where they could voice their concerns, they had no solutions for the problems they were struggling with and they did not know where to look for support. It was clear that their levels of self-efficacy were very low, since they were not taking any responsibility for their struggling learners and admitted to just leave them behind. They also stated that the joy of teaching does not exist for them anymore.

Joining this participatory action research project and agreeing to embark on the journey of professional development, brought new hope to these teachers. They realised that they were not alone and that they could count on each other for support and advice. They enjoyed and valued the collaborative discussions, while learning from each other and coming up with new ideas for intervention. Conducting research in their respective classrooms through implementing the intervention strategies they collaboratively agreed upon, gave them a feeling of empowerment, as they could immediately experience positive results. Giving feedback and sharing their experiences after each phase of intervention, created opportunities for them to share their successes, as well as the remaining challenges. Engaging in continuous self-reflection, resulted in an increased awareness while teaching, enabling them to make adjustments and grow both professionally and personally. Their confidence increased as the project progressed, as did their levels of self-efficacy. By the end of the project, they were enthusiastic and very proud of the progress their learners were making.

7.3.4 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION NO 4

What is the effect of professional development of Grade 1 teachers on the progress of their learners?

The struggling learners of the Grade 1 teachers who participated in this study, were extremely vulnerable and most of them were identified as learners who would have to repeat Grade 1. They were not ready for formal learning and could not cope with the academic, nor the social expectations of the formal learning environment. Some of them withdrew from the learning situation in the classroom and refused to participate in any activities. According to their teachers, they often handed in empty assessment tasks, since they did not understand how to complete it. Some of them disrupted the

learning process with negative behaviour, while others were very emotional and often started crying.

An amazing change took place in these classrooms, as soon as the participating teachers commenced with the implementation of the intervention, which was part of their professional development programme. The participating teachers reported that their struggling learners reacted very positively, especially to the emotional support they were providing for them. Once they experienced close and warm interactions with their teachers, they smiled, they engaged in discussions and learning activities, they acted with more confidence, they were willing to try new tasks and they performed noticeably better in their assessment tasks. By the end of the project, every one of the participating teachers had success stories to share about the remarkable progress of their vulnerable learners (see Addendum V).

7.3.5 MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

How can the professional development of Grade 1 teachers promote school readiness in an inclusive education context?

The current situation in many Grade 1 classrooms in the South African context, is unique and challenging. The majority of young children in South Africa grow up in disadvantaged communities and start their school careers with an enormous backlog. Numerous Grade 1 teachers face the daunting task of implementing the national curriculum in a classroom where many of their learners are not ready for formal learning. The pre-service training of these teachers is not sufficient to equip them with the knowledge and skills they need to support their vulnerable learners and minimise their risk of academic failure.

Professional development programmes for Grade 1 teachers, such as the one that was implemented as part of this participatory action research project, can be very effective in providing a support network to assist teachers in addressing the challenges they face in their classrooms. For such programmes to be successful, the teachers must be able to voice their concerns and they need to be heard. The concerns of the Grade 1 teachers should be the point of departure from where the professional development programme is planned. Collaboration is essential, and it works well when

the Grade 1 teachers of three to four different schools with similar conditions, work together.

Grade 1 teachers may have the knowledge and experience to initiate their own professional development, but they need a facilitator who can assist in keeping them focussed. Furthermore, they need to be informed about the latest research on school readiness and ideas on intervention strategies from recent research, since it remains important to bring theory and practice together. Participatory action research is effective, because the participating teachers do research into their own teaching and in their respective classrooms, gaining experience as they proceed. Furthermore, the results of the intervention are available immediately and adaptations can be made where necessary.

Sharing their experiences with colleagues during collaborative feedback sessions, and engaging in critical self-reflection, are important steps in growing professionally and personally. Development and growth take time, therefore, professional development programmes need to extend over several months, and should preferably continue throughout the year. Only through maintaining high levels of self-efficacy and being prepared to take responsibility for supporting their struggling learners, will Grade 1 teachers be able to provide quality teaching and promote the school readiness of their vulnerable learners in inclusive classrooms.

7.3.6 THE VALUE OF MY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR MY STUDY

When I first started with my study, I knew that I had to find a suitable theoretical framework to underpin my study. I also knew that for a PhD study, more than one theory is required and the ideal is to combine different theories into a conceptual framework. At first I had no idea where to start. I had come across the Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) before, and decided to read more about it. The more I learned about it, the more I realised that it would serve as an excellent point of departure for my research project, since I was aware of the concerns of the Grade 1 teachers who participated in my previous study (Bruwer 2014), and the seriousness of their concerns.

Participatory Action Research was new to me, but when I came across the model for action research (CRASP I) and the model for teacher development through action

research (CRASP II), I was really excited about the different components it consists of. The cyclic process of participatory action research seemed ideal, since making worthwhile changes is a time-consuming process.

While I was reading through the literature on school readiness and quality teaching in the early years of formal schooling, I realised how perfect the Attachment Theory would fit into my study. The idea of promoting high levels of closeness, low levels of dependence and low levels of conflict was exactly what was needed to address the classroom challenges of Grade 1 teachers in the South African context. The criteria for quality teaching, namely emotional support, instructional support and classroom organisation aligned perfectly with the different components of the Attachment Theory.

After many weeks of thinking, a picture emerged in my mind, about the Grade 1 learners as young sailors on their life journeys, who were exposed to severe storms on the open sea and their teachers who were desperately holding on to them (see Addendum A). I realised that I could use this symbolism to explain the study to my participants, and everything about the different theories, started to fall into place. From there onwards, my conceptual framework (see Figures 1.1, 3.5 and 5.1) not only underpinned my study, but also gave structure and direction to me and my participants. I included my conceptual framework in every PowerPoint presentation during the research process, using it as a 'roadmap' on our research journey. We knew throughout the course of project exactly what we were working on, and what our objectives were.

My participants understood that their concerns were the platform from where their need for professional development emerged and that the professional development programme would be based on their needs and concerns (CBMoTD), to ensure that we address their classroom challenges. They were enthusiastic about the collaboration, the discussions and the reflections (CRASP I and II), and never once complained about the number of workshops or the four-month period they had committed themselves to. What excited them most of all, was the amazing results they achieved with their struggling learners, once they started provided emotional support and in doing so, restored their relationships with these learners (Attachment Theory).

What an amazing journey!

7.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE WAY FORWARD

Teaching is not an easy profession. In fact, teaching in the current South African context is nothing less than a daunting task. During the course of this research project, I saw teachers who were tired, frustrated and discouraged, change into teachers who were eager, enthusiastic, happy and proud. Change is possible, but our teachers need support. In this section, I mention a few ideas which emerged during my research journey. I hope and trust that the education authorities and the higher education institutions in South Africa will take some of these ideas and make it happen!

7.4.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION AUTHORITIES

Close collaboration amongst all the role players who are involved in the education of young learners is essential, therefore it is important for the Department of Basic Education, the District Offices and any other education authorities in South Africa, to reach out to schools, as well as Higher Education Institutions in order to create collaborative relationships. It is of paramount importance that the teachers of vulnerable young learners should have a forum, with ample opportunities to voice their concerns and inform education authorities of their needs, as well as the needs of their learners. In addressing these needs, the Department of Basic Education should work closely with Higher Educational Institutions in providing opportunities for continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers, which will equip and empower them to address the challenges they face in their classrooms.

Policy makers should be involved in the above mentioned collaboration as well, since they need to address challenges regarding large Grade 1 classrooms, adaptation of the national curriculum in order to provide for vulnerable learners, as well as the assessment tasks teachers are expected to implement, which have been reported as being too excessive and too difficult for struggling Grade 1 learners.

7.4.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

As a researcher and lecturer who is responsible for the pre-service training of teachers in Foundation Phase teaching at a higher educational institution, I realised through conducting this study, that universities and other higher educational institutions have a responsibility to build and maintain a bridge between theory and practice. I realised how important it is to reach out to teachers and initiate collaborative relationships,

which will keep them up to date with the latest research on the education of young learners and give them access to new ideas for intervention.

The responsibility of higher educational institutions who are concerned with teacher training, does not end at the graduation ceremony, but should continue as support to alumni in the form of continuous professional development as they enter the teaching profession. Higher educational institutions should therefore maintain their database by keeping the information of their alumni up to date, in order to inform them of training opportunities. Teachers who are overwhelmed by their classroom challenges and who feel that they have nowhere to turn to, should have the peace of mind that they can return to their alma mater for advice and training which can enhance their levels of self-efficacy again.

Furthermore, higher educational institutions can make a valuable contribution by conducting research on the needs of teachers for further training. Those needs can then be addressed by developing and presenting short courses or scheduling workshops which teachers can attend.

7.4.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As mentioned above, it is important for higher educational institutions to realise that they have a responsibility to provide opportunities for continuous professional development for the teachers of young learners. In order to provide such training opportunities, it will be necessary to work in collaboration with education authorities, as well as with teachers themselves. It is essential to determine the training needs of the teachers, by listening to their concerns about their classroom challenges. Extensive fieldwork is needed in this regard.

When the needs of the teachers have been determined, training courses that are both effective and sustainable need to be developed. Such training courses need to focus on relevant classroom practices in order to address the concerns of the teachers regarding their classroom challenges. As the findings of this study and those of previous studies have proven, effective professional development is characterised by dynamic collaboration over a relatively long period of time. Therefore, research is necessary to ensure that such training courses will be feasible to implement.

In this regard, it is important to investigate the factors impacting on teachers' exposure to further training. Collaboration with education authorities is essential, in determining the amount of time that can be allocated to continuous professional development of teachers and this would have to be communicated to school principals, to take into consideration when extramural programmes for teachers are planned.

7.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

McNiff (2002) states that the purpose of a participatory action research project, is to bring about a positive change in a problematic educational situation, by empowering the teachers to take responsibility for their classroom challenges and initiate the change that needs to take place (see 1.8.6). Furthermore, sufficient evidence has to be provided as proof that such a change did indeed take place as a result of the research project (McNiff 2002).

After conducting an investigation into the impact of insufficient school readiness on learning in Grade 1 (Bruwer 2014), I was alarmed by the findings of the study. The failure those vulnerable Grade 1 learners were exposed to in the formal learning environment and the devastating impact thereof on their academic identities, haunted me and urged me to look for a solution. I launched this participatory action research project in an attempt to contribute to the professional development of the participating Grade 1 teachers in order to promote the school readiness of their vulnerable learners and reduce the risk of academic failure.

The outcome of this research project exceeded my highest expectations. Not only did the participating teachers' feelings of confidence and competence increase to a level where they could enjoy their teaching again, but their struggling learners have made such amazing progress that their teachers couldn't wait to share their heart-warming success stories with me. Together with my participants, I came to realise that we can after all, do something to change the status quo and find solutions to the Grade 1 teachers' concerns about their vulnerable learners. We are facing unique challenges in the current education system in South Africa, but we (all role players involved) need to take responsibility for the education of our young learners and make it work for the sake of these vulnerable, young South African citizens, who are our leaders of tomorrow.

My contribution to the body of knowledge on the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness in an inclusive education context, is this unique research-based professional development programme, based on the input of caring teachers. I hope that this study will lead to similar research projects, that will provide a platform to teachers to make their voices heard and create opportunities for them to work collaboratively to strengthen their confidence and competence for the benefit of their learners.

The additional contribution I would like to make after conducting this study, is to put the process of continuous professional development of Grade 1 teachers through participatory action research, into motion. I intend to register a short course for the professional development of Grade 1 teachers to promote school readiness, at the University of Pretoria. In doing so, I believe that I will be able to make a difference in many Grade 1 classrooms. The preliminary application for the registration of the course is attached as Addendum Z.

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