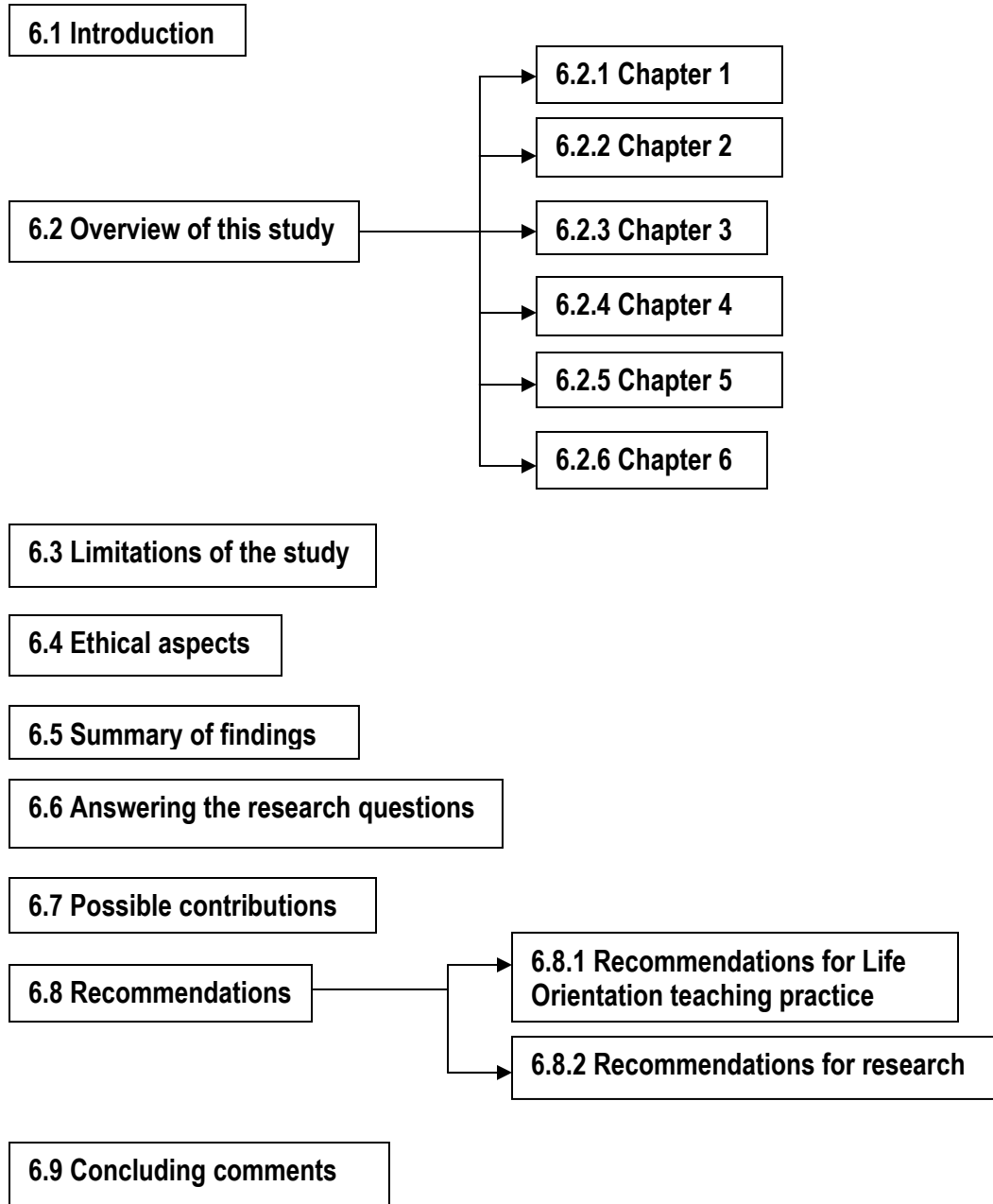




Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations



Chapter 6

6 Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

In chapter 5 the results of this study were given in response to the following secondary research questions posed in chapter 1:

- How do individuals from diverse backgrounds respond to narrative arts activities?
- How does the arts-based approach impact on group dynamics?
- How does the facilitator (teacher-researcher) experience the arts-based approach?

The above-mentioned questions provided insight into the primary research question:

How is an individual's (or a Grade 9 learner's) self-concept affected by narrative arts activities in group context?

This chapter offers a concluding synopsis of this study by providing an overview and a summary of the conclusions and recommendations.

6.2 Overview of this study

This study was conducted at the faith-based educational institution at which I am employed and the narrative arts-based episodes designed in response to a suggestion in the Life Orientation curriculum. The two-month research project was based on the (educational) group context scenarios contained in the narrative arts episodes. Forty-seven learners completed the narrative arts activities Life Orientation learning programme at school and 14 of the 47 learners volunteered to be interviewed while the programme was in progress. The participants' views of how the individual self experienced the narrative arts group episodes were highlighted in the data analysis sections.

Essential focus areas and important components of this study include the following:

- Teacher-researcher and teacher-facilitator privileges and frustration
- Data presentation and analysis by means of an esteemed and image-based approach

- Triangulating the results of the two data analysis approaches
- Revealing the nature of participants' self-concept definitions in response to particular or specific arts episodes and activities according to gender
- Investigating which predetermined self-concept domains and codes were activated or altered by particular arts activities
- Determining the possible "global" changes to the participants' self-concept domains as the result of the two-month structured narrative arts activities
- Determining how the Grade 9 (learner) collective perceived the completed two-month narrative arts activities by means informal group interviews
- The impact or effect of exposing learners to themselves by employing video recordings and professional video editing to conclude the narrative arts learning programme (three months later)
- Determining how parents perceived the edited video screening and the relevance of the programme for their children's Life Orientation learning area

An outline and summary of each of the chapters are provided below.

6.2.1 Chapter 1

An overview of the arts-based nature of this study is sketched and the rationale is defined. The need for this study is revealed by referring to the relevant government documents that suggest this particular approach. The research site, the multimethod data collection plan, the nature of the inquiry, data analysis strategies and ethical considerations are made known and how they pertain to the primary research question: **How is an individual's (or the individual learner's) self-concept affected by narrative arts activities in a group context?**

6.2.2 Chapter 2

In this chapter the narrative and arts-based components of the conceptual framework are addressed. The nature of narrative therapy is explained and contextualised in practice. The arts and their therapeutic properties are revealed and varied appropriate examples are presented to support the nature of the arts activities employed in this study.

6.2.3 Chapter 3

The origins of the self-concept are traced and major movements and individuals whose contributions led up to the current postmodern view of self and the self-concept are recognised. The self-concept is further elucidated by focusing on self-esteem and identity. The Rogerian perspective – which is an integral part of the conceptual framework – is explained and the five predetermined self-concept categories investigated in this study are specified.

6.2.4 Chapter 4

The conceptual framework, philosophical assumptions, research strategy, intended data analysis procedures, delimiters and limitations pertaining to this study are discussed.

6.2.5 Chapter 5

The data analysis procedures within the research context are defined and the role players introduced. The data analysis findings are linked to primary and secondary research questions and presented in two triangulating data approaches. The chapter is concluded by summarising role players' reflections linked to the completed research Life Orientation school programme and contextualising teacher-researcher findings.

6.2.6 Chapter 6

An overview that links the various components of the study is presented. The conclusions reached during this research process are highlighted and recommendations are made and extrapolated to possible further research.

6.3 Limitations of this study

The following limitations existed and are acknowledged below:

- The two-month data collection (or research) period occurred at the school where I teach, where a specific faith-based culture prevails.
- I was teacher-researcher and was assisted in the data collection by two (specific) interviewers and five (specific) observers.
- I was the only agent conducting the data analysis (reviewed by an external coder).

- The learners and participants knew me and they knew they were being video recorded occasionally and that the Life Orientation programme was also a two-month research project. The Hawthorne effect¹² certainly could be prominent here.
- I compiled the narrative arts learning programme according to **my understanding of manageable arts activities** – based on literature examples and personal Art teaching experience.
- The personalities of the 47 learners, the 14 participants and the three teacher-facilitators certainly provided contextualised nuances of meaning.
- The nature of the six particular small groups (established by means of judgemental sampling) and the subsequent two-month interactions are localised units.
- The personal selections made by the various video recorders employed in this study pertain to this research setting.
- The arts activities and arts episodes with their peculiar selections of media and imagery cannot be repeated.
- The personalities of the interviewers and participants during data collection provided data from specified perspectives.

6.4 Ethical aspects

In accordance with ethical requirements I acknowledge the following:

- I obtained written permission from the school executive where I teach that I conduct the research at the school.
- I asked the Head of the Life Orientation department to scrutinise the intended narrative arts learning programme in order to elicit approval from the school executive.
- I obtained written permission from the parents or guardians of the 47 learners to video record segments of the Life Orientation classes.
- I obtained written permission from the parents of the 14 learners who wanted to be interviewed.
- I ensured that the school ethos was not compromised and that all the observers and role players were acceptable to the school executive. I supervised every aspect of the process

¹² Hawthorne effect: People behave differently because they are participating in a study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

as far as humanly possible and in so doing I could ensure physical and psychological safety for the participants.

- Data obtained and analysed during this project will be available after this study for at least a year and the two 35-minute edited video overviews can be viewed at the school once school executive authorisation has been obtained.

6.5 Summary of findings

Based on my findings discussed in this study, an understanding of the impact of narrative arts activities on the self-concept of Grade 9 learners in a group context emerged.

The findings of revealing the impact of the episodic narrative arts activities on the self-concept of the individual learner and the learner collective were established primarily through the participant interviews and questionnaires. These findings were supported by the evidence of class assignments, group (class) interviews and questionnaires. The participant data were analysed using two triangulating approaches, namely the rigorous and the spontaneous approaches. My findings are presented below:

- The rigorous approach established that the two-month narrative arts Life Orientation learning programme essentially affected the social and personal-emotional self-concept domains of the 14 participants (collectively).
- The small group narrative arts context allowed the participants to become gradually more other-focused as they learnt from each other over the course of the two-month process and their self-descriptor social roles and subsequent values indicate this.
- The narrative arts activities assisted the participants to become bolder in their self-estimations or self-evaluations and their levels of personal honesty were heightened as the two-month narrative arts process progressed. Learners could externalise challenges meaningfully and were able to specify specific steps for ameliorating the effects of their challenges.
- The narrative arts process as a whole stimulated self-growth and self-insight in the participants.
- The spontaneous (image-based) approach revealed that nine (of the 14) participants experienced growth in both the social and personal-emotional self-concept domains, whilst

five (of the 14) participants experienced growth principally in the personal-emotional domain.

My discussions of research findings and contextualising of results are *only* relevant to *my* study. It was not my intention to generalise the findings to other settings. The findings of my study may offer suggestions for practice or further research in other contexts.

6.6 Answering the research questions

In response to the primary research question I concluded that:

- Narrative arts activities in group context (over a two-month period) did have an impact on the self-concept domains of Grade 9 learners in *my* study. As indicated, of the five domains investigated, the impact of the narrative arts process was foremost in the social and personal-emotional domains.

In response to the secondary research questions I concluded that:

- Learners from diverse racial backgrounds (but adhering to the same faith-based subculture) revealed similar growth in their self-concept domains.
- Group dynamics were enhanced in the sense that learners became more willing to share in the smaller groups and the arts activities allowed them to focus on individuals. Gradually they discovered similarities between themselves and others and as a result a greater appreciation for others developed.
- Facilitating this approach was (deeply) challenging because of the practical arts components and the logistical detail, but also (richly) rewarding when it appeared that the learners were becoming aware of themselves and their peers.

6.7 Possible contributions

I believe this study could contribute to arts-based facilitation practices and to specific learning outcomes or foci in Life Orientation at high school level specifically. The possible contributions as a result of this study can be linked to the following components of this study:

- The structure of the narrative arts learning programme with its unique collection of arts activities based on literature and my experience as an art educator

- The use of video recordings (as an integrating medium) and video editing to compile a positive overview of the process for the benefit of the learners – from a positive psychology perspective
- The “team teaching” element – three teacher-facilitators work simultaneously in smaller groups employing the arts and discussion

The (possible or exemplar) narrative arts Life Orientation programme contained in this study could also possibly contribute to the overall well-being of a school, because it allows various role players to become engaged in “guiding” learners. The narrative arts programme may assist some learners to come to terms with certain self-issues in a relaxed manner in an educational setting – even without them knowing that the arts activities actually have a solid base in the arts and narrative therapies. This arts-based narrative approach, I believe, can be seen as a possible example of how the need for psychological support that exists in some (South African) schools can be alleviated to a degree in a small group Life Orientation scenario, seen in the light of, for example, the recent study by Pillay and Wasielewski (2007), who highlighted the need for psychological support in a small sample of South African Primary schools.

The narrative arts activities examined in practice in this study also has links with the ecosystemic approach (see 4.2.5.1) – and it could possibly also be contributing to that domain – as it sees the learners as creative beings contextualised within a community where the various role players are interconnected and contribute meaningfully to each other’s well-being.

Mark Savickas (2006), in a personal communication with my supervisor, expressed the view that identity is the responsibility of the individual. By linking my research project with the views expressed by Savickas (2006), I wish to place my research project and its possible contributions within a broader identity context.

Today in the global economy, the postmodern world, we’re focusing more on projects and the formulation of personal identity. Identity is the capacity to keep your story going, no longer can you rely on the corporation, the company, to give you identity, you must negotiate your identity position in each new transition you make and the way you do it is by using the story of your life. It is the fundamental means of you charting your personal direction and pursuing purpose ... What people do must matter to them and must matter to us at the same time. It’s an

emphasis on the pursuit of values – meaning purpose in a world that is difficult to negotiate (Mark Savickas, 2006).

This study with its two-month (postmodern) narrative arts focus in the Life Orientation classroom, I believe, allowed the 47 learners (based on the designed programme and the findings in chapter 5) an opportunity not only to formulate their identities but also to strengthen (the positive) aspects of their identities, because they were actively writing and living the stories of their individual and collective lives (if they utilised the opportunity). The arts process provided scope for self-expression and personal choice. Each learner (who participated in this study) had the opportunity to chart his or her individual direction and purpose, as clearly as it is possible to define it from a Grade 9 perspective. These pupils were thus able to give visual and verbal substance to those elements that they regarded as significant and in so doing they could have uncovered the values within their stories they live by or want to live by.

The design of the narrative arts activities included a future focus as it allowed the learners to create a future map and to imagine their future careers. The Life Orientation arts process thus included career counselling as an “artistic” exercise. The “artistic” disguise of the career counselling aspect linked to the positive psychology component of this study, which undergirds the arts episodes and looks for the positive or the expert in the learner, could also be seen as a contribution to techniques that could enhance aspects of solution-focused therapy (or strengths-based thinking), when aligned to the views of Burwell and Chen (2006). I believe the narrative arts approach could possibly offer some suggestions as to how career counsellors could assist clients to solve some vocational challenges – or at least to feel like experts as they hold their future maps in their hands (for example). (See 2.4.10 for more information regarding the strengths-based perspective.)

6.8 Recommendations

As a result of the extended period of involvement with this study and its components, I can offer the following recommendations for practice and research. These are recommendations and they should not be viewed as restrictions I place on the implications of this study.

6.8.1 Recommendations for Life Orientation teaching practice

Narrative arts activities can contribute to the enhancement of the teaching of certain aspects of Life Orientation, as revealed by the focus of this study, especially aspects pertaining to self. As an art

educator I realise that not every teacher feels comfortable with the surprises that can stem from art making. I designed the narrative arts learning programme as an example of how (manageable) art activities could work. The example I designed and implemented at the research site, I believe, reveals ample possibilities that teachers could use as a guideline. I would like to make further recommendations based on the experience of having facilitated a two-month narrative arts learning programme, which I feel might be helpful in Life Orientation teaching where the arts activities are involved:

- Use a digital audio recorder or a digital camera as a medium for reflection (if teachers wanted pupils to reflect upon the completed process). Video work can be a daunting task in addition to a busy teacher's existing schedule.
- Allow adequate time for facilitating the narrative arts episodes, preferably at the start or at the end of a school day.
- Determine the objectives of the learning programme and select activities and media that limit cleaning up and optimise learner participation.
- Use assignments and worksheets that could become more computer-based; teachers could let the learners compile a digital collage with computer imagery or clip art (for example).
- Apply cell phone technology with its camera and video functions.

6.8.2 Recommendations for research

The results of this study, with its narrative arts-based focus for an educational setting, indicate that there is indeed merit in the employment of the arts to facilitate self-growth and social insight on a Grade 9 level in a private faith-based school. The results are thus contextualised. I think the impact of the (current) narrative arts learning programme needs to be explored in other private and public schools before it can become a prescribed methodology at any level. If more research were to be undertaken, the content, the structure and the time frame inherent in the narrative arts episodes (as I have designed them) could be scrutinised with evidence from various settings to optimise teacher interest and learner usefulness.

Other recommendations for research that came to mind as I dealt with this approach and its data include the following:

- Investigating the impact of narrative arts activities on the self-concept of the individual learner when the small group members are of the same sex – my study had boys and girls in the same small group.
- Extending or shortening the time frame of the narrative arts learning programme.
- Allowing more computer-based applications as data generating sources or perhaps make it a more interactive experience.
- Using only art teachers interested in this approach as group facilitators.
- Instead of having a video recorder that moves between the groups, having one per group and using the video recordings (of complete sessions) and interactions as the primary data sources.

6.9 Concluding comments

This chapter provided an overview of the salient aspects of this study and it revisited the primary and secondary research foci which were determined by qualitative data collection and analysis.

The state of the self-concept of the individual learner is a concern in education because from it stems positive and negative achievement, experiences and perceptions (as the literature in chapter 3 revealed). The results of this study indicate (see chapter 5) that the employment of the arts in a positive educational small group environment could be of value to certain domains of the Grade 9 learner's self-concept (according to this learning programme drafted for this research setting).

This approach requires teachers to take arts-based risks and to be more approachable for learners in intimate small group settings. The feeling of discomfort the teacher-facilitator may experience (due to the practical implications of the arts) may subside when he or she perceives a "stabilisation" occurring in the learners, which is the result of the arts engagement. The aesthetic and beneficial art making elements that come to the fore as the learners create their images or constructs allow them opportunities to discover self and to become open towards the self (and others).

As the teacher-researcher who lived with this research project for the past three and half years, I have made personal discoveries that would not have been possible had I not engaged in this project. This project is actually a very important part of my "self-world". I have been "plagued" my

entire adult life with the question: *How can I use the arts to allow people a glimpse into themselves?* This was the opportunity of a lifetime! I took my first step in the right direction – at last! (I realise that the phrase “right direction” is a laden with subjective meaning and I do not expect the reader to agree with me. The narrative arts approach satisfied aspects of my personal vision.) I hope that the reader and the people who were involved in my study are able to marvel at their own uniqueness and that they can add something special to their self-concept domains – the realms where only the self can dwell.



Figure 6.1: The teacher-researcher reflecting at his desk

My final words come from the voice-over I recorded for the edited video overview: *I hope that this attempt to inspire Grade 9 learners left a splash of colour in your heart and that you will remain true to the unique and special person you are – in order to be a blessing to yourself and others. May each Grade 9 pupil who was part of this pioneering project keep growing in positive self-knowledge, enjoy the sweet fruit of fulfilled aspirations and travel meaningfully to their respective future destinations. Be blessed!*