

**A SELF-REFLECTION OF MY INTERACTIONS, COMMUNICATION AND
RELATIONSHIP STRUCTURES IN THE CLASSROOM**

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

CONTEXT, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Good communication and maintaining effective relationships within a school community are essential for achieving high academic standards. The aim of effective communication between teachers and learners is to elicit and ensure behaviour that will enhance the learning process. It is therefore important that teachers relate to learners in a sensitive manner when they communicate their knowledge (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004, 5). Sotto (2007, 96) further contends that teachers' communication styles reveal their core attitude towards learning and that the success of their teaching will be partially determined by how effectively they communicate.

Many schools are experiencing disciplinary problems, low teacher and learner expectations, a breakdown of the social order, and a high incidence of academic failure. Bingham and Sidorkin (2004, 5) explain the above-mentioned problems as symptoms of a breakdown in communication between educators and learners. Once relationships in a school have been jeopardised, it becomes increasingly difficult to achieve high academic standards. It is therefore essential that educators create meaningful interactions in an environment in which all individuals can develop to their full potential.

The National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996 (Education Labour Relations Council 2003, A- 4) advocates the enhancement of quality education and innovation through systematic research and development. The principles contained therein are directed towards enabling the education system to contribute to the full development of each learner, respecting each learner's right to freedom of thought, opinion and expression within a culture of respect for teaching and learning. The establishment and strengthening of relationships in a school will contribute to improved academic achievement.

1.2 CONTEXT OF STUDY

I am an educator at a school situated in a low socio-economic area in Port Elizabeth, Nelson Mandela Bay. In this area, family relationships are characterised by a breakdown in communication and a lack of discipline. Substance abuse at home and at school is rife. Such conditions contribute to a lack of motivation to learn and uncooperative and disruptive learner behaviour. This situation raised the question what I as a teacher could do to create a high-functioning classroom that supports each learner's development to self-responsibility, a sense of acceptance and belonging, and progression towards a position where all are able to attain success. In this regard, Ginnis (2002, 58) espouses the view that effective communication between teachers and learners is the vehicle that transports learners towards becoming socially skilled, independent thinkers with a strong sense of personal and collective responsibility.

The National Education Policy Act No. 27 of 1996 (Education Labour Relations Council 2003, H-25) advocates the development of learners' abilities and resilience by building their communication skills through effective social interactions. Good communication will enable learners to express their feelings and needs and so facilitate better social interactions and relationships. Educators are required to raise standards, improve learning outcomes and guide socially acceptable behaviour amidst the rapid and dramatic political, economic, technological and social changes that characterise South African society. Unfortunately, these contribute to a myriad of factors at school contributing to a deterioration in positive behaviour and meaningful learning.

Learning, according to Ginnis (2002, 4), must have a positive consequence for learners to be of any value. This implies that through learning and education, learners must come to view the world differently, and consequently attitudinal changes may occur. In order for effective learning to take place, there should finally be a sound relationship of trust between teachers and learners, which is usually established through effective communication in the classroom.

Transforming the classroom, explains Shindler (2010, 5), assumes that classroom practices are designed to create successful interactions between teachers and learners in which the expectations of both are met. Furthermore, teachers' classroom management choices can promote community, create expectations for success, contribute to social justice, and foster a climate of motivation, all contributing to the establishment of a relationship of trust.

I am of the opinion that a key contributing factor in problems in education is the way in which teachers communicate in the classroom. Teachers often reduce the teaching-learning process to a one-way process where learners become mere receptors of information. Furthermore, teachers often communicate in a less friendly tone of voice, marked by impatience, because of the urgent need to complete the work within the restricted time available. Teachers are faced with overcrowded classrooms and curricula overloaded with content. A lack of resources and a heavy load of administrative duties, as well as time constraints, may lead to frustration that contribute to negative communication patterns in the classroom.

Due to teachers' often alienating communication style, learners' emotional needs and feelings are not always acknowledged in the classroom. Such invalidation of the learners' feelings may erode their self-esteem and motivation, powerful elements that support successful teaching and learning. These unfulfilled emotional needs may create anger, which manifests in self-destructive attitudes, such as stubbornness and aggression, while boredom may lead to disengagement in the classroom. Learners may become uninterested in the learning process, resisting any challenge for fear of failure, which in turn may result in even more negative communication. I believe that unless the communicated message is important, interesting and delivered with enthusiasm, boredom, a lack of motivation and ultimately unacceptable behaviour may result.

In this regard, Martin (2010, 7) states that for learners to experience classroom 'success' by showing persistence, engaging and attaining their personal best, teachers must communicate the importance of self-belief. These elements enable learners to persevere while faced with difficult tasks, fuelled by the belief that it is worth doing.

Another important factor for the healthy social development of learners is the quality of the interaction they experience in their life worlds. With this in mind, I was concerned that my style of communication; that is my actual choice of words, tone, volume, tempo, and undoubtedly aspects of non-verbal communication, were not promoting positive communication and strong relationship structures. At its worst, my communication style might even affect some learners negatively. I therefore initiated two-way communication that exuded trust, tact and honesty that would support - rather than inhibit - my learners' motivation and self-esteem.

Learners who display low self-esteem and lack of motivation struggle to cope with challenges. They become passive and withdrawn, give up easily and become pessimistic (Education Labour Relations Council 2003, H-28). It was on the abovementioned premise that the rationale for the study emerged. I saw the need to support learners who come to school emotionally drained due to, amongst other things, a presumed breakdown in positive communication at home. They seemed unmotivated to learn. For this reason, I wished to develop a better understanding of the effect my communication style had on my learners. Therefore, I needed to reflect on my own practice, putting into effect a set of guiding principles for action and thinking, as suggested by Shindler (2010, 7), that may have lasting effects and change my life and the lives of my learners. I envisaged that this study might also help create greater awareness among my colleagues, leading them to reflect on and improve their own practices.

In the current dispensation, we as educators embrace the principles of Outcomes-Based Education. According to these principles, my purpose as an educator encapsulates the role of mediator of learning, interpreter and designer of learning programmes, leader, administrator, scholar, researcher and life-long learner (Education Labour Relations Council 2003, A-44). As such, my teaching approach must necessarily encompass the values of building relationships that support the holistic development of learners, which is possible within a context of effective communication that invites, accommodates and supports all learners. It is therefore important to remember Rogers's (2006, 32) comment that the positive relationships

teachers develop with their learners are remembered long after they have forgotten the subject content.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

My concern was that my communication style might not effectively enhance interaction, positive relationships and optimal learning in the classroom. I realised that I needed to establish rapport with my learners in order for them to trust me. To achieve this, my communication style must include observing and listening to their verbal and non-verbal feedback.

I often experienced that my learners did not readily respond to questions in the classroom. I suspected that it might be either due to a lack of knowledge, or fear of failure. This might be due to a lack of self-confidence and a fear of being ridiculed. Myhill, Jones and Hopper (2006, 2) explain that during the learning process, the emphasis is on learning as a social communicative process, which is developed through interaction. In this regard, it is important to create a safe classroom environment in which learners feel confident to interact and participate in learning activities. I therefore had to scrutinise my own communication style and its shortcomings in order to understand its influence on my learners' motivation to learn.

My quest therefore was to remediate and improve my own classroom communication patterns in order to promote the growth and development of my learners. As an educator, I was motivated by the prospect of empowering myself to engage learners in more positive forms of communication, which might result in "more positive self-motivating cycles of learning", as suggested by Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorensen (2006, 49).

Another aspect to consider is that children value adults who value them. When learners' emotional and social needs are met, they are more inclined to pay attention and are more motivated to participate (Deiro 1996, 57). In this regard, Bingham and Sidorkin (2004, 165) suggest that education is a relational process based on the care that teachers bestow on learners through appreciating their efforts and valuing their

interests. It was therefore essential for me in my teaching practice to foster trusting relationships with my learners.

I was furthermore concerned about nurturing healthy relationships with learners in order to develop pro-social behaviour. This refers to behaviour that respects societal laws and social norms. I undertook, as Elliot (McNiff and Whitehead 2006, 14) rightly refers to, a reconnaissance phase in my teaching practice to empower myself and my learners through positive communication.

The focus of this study was to put my values and standards through rigorous testing and critique in order to bring about change in my classroom practice. Self-reflection inevitably assisted me in becoming more aware of how my communication was influencing my learners' willingness to learn. The challenge for me was to re-orientate myself in my teaching practice through effective communication. These improved practices should mobilise learners from inertness and complacency to becoming motivated and responsible.

1.4 PURPOSE OF STUDY

Reflecting on my practice, I strongly came to believe that improving my communication style in general and becoming more aware of and sensitive to classroom dynamics in particular, might result in positive learner behaviour and improved learner motivation to learn.

Considering the above-mentioned, I identified and formulated the following research question:

1.4.1 Primary research question

How does my communication style influence the interaction and relationship structures in the classroom?

1.4.2 Secondary questions

From the primary question, the following secondary questions were developed:

- *How can I improve my communication and interaction in the classroom?*
- *How can improved classroom communication, interaction and relationship structures enhance learning outcomes?*

1.4.3 Research aim

The aim of this study is to determine *the ways in which my communication style influences the interaction and relationship structures in my classroom.*

1.4.4 Research objectives

To determine:

- *what I should do to improve my communication and interaction in the classroom.*
- *in which ways improved classroom communication, interaction and relationship structures can contribute to enhanced learning outcomes.*

1.5 CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

1.5.1 Communication

Van Deventer and Kruger (2003, 156) explain that communication is a message conveyed by a sender to a recipient, either verbally or non-verbally. Bingham and Sidorkin (2004, 16) define communication as the process of constructing an understanding shared by the participants who are interacting. In this regard, Moore (2009, 312) states that communication is the act of sending and receiving messages,

which may be distorted by noise and other interferences, which have some effect on the recipient and provide opportunity for feedback. For the purpose of this study, my understanding of effective communication is using both verbal and non-verbal skills to re-think conditions favourable for learning. Such communication skills would involve teaching in a logical and organised manner, while remaining composed, listening to learners, using questions to assess understanding, and giving purposeful and timely feedback to ensure understanding.

1.5.2 Interactions

Bingham and Sidorkin (2004, 12) refer to interactions as the coordinated activities between the educator and learners, with the purpose of creating an understanding of a particular aspect, while Myhill, Jones and Hopper (2006, 53) explain interactions as the way in which people relate to others when participating in relevant activities. For the purpose of this study, interactions will refer to the activities between educators and learners and how both groups are affected thereby, related to achieving the learning outcomes in the classroom.

1.5.3 Relationships

Sinclair (1987, 1217) defines relationships as the way in which people are connected, feel or behave towards each other. Bingham and Sidorkin (2004, 165) proclaim that a relationship is a socially constructed situation in which cultural meanings and practices are constructed. Relationships are based on a set of expectations that people have that direct their behaviour and interactions. As relationships are at the centre of interpersonal communication, it is incumbent on a teacher to build and maintain good teacher-learner relationships, based on mutual respect for the teacher's teaching skills, personal qualities, knowledge and professionalism, as well as respect for learners' unique potential for learning. For the purpose of this study, I will reflect upon the efficacy of my communication style, interactions and relationship structures in the classroom, exploring and devising strategies with the goal of improving learning outcomes.

1.6 LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewing the literature helped me find a focus in this research topic. It allowed me to establish what other researchers had accomplished, and what the gaps were in the area of communication, interactions and relationships in my classroom. The literature review to a large degree shaped my understanding and focus, as it revealed the connections between information and helped me to critically review the contributions made in the field of classroom communication and the value thereof. The encompassing goal of communication is to engage learners in activities and processes in which information is shared by using speech, body movements and expressions in order to create favourable conditions for learning. In addition, communication aims to elicit a response from the learners that will lead them to think, talk, listen, observe and interact in order to perform the learning tasks (Van Deventer and Kruger 2003, 156).

The interactions occurring between teachers and learners, as well as between learners themselves, are the activities and processes during which understanding is formed and insights are shared (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004, 16). In this regard, Vygotsky (Sotto 2007, 24) has concluded that learners' speech and actions are part of the mental process that is necessary to find answers to problems in their life world. The aforementioned confirms that communication entails more than the transferring of information and that to achieve learning requires meaningful interactions and participation in a social setting.

The social situation in the classroom is a personal relationship between teacher and learners, as well as between the learners themselves. Within this relationship, opportunities exist for building skills that will bring about successful interactions, facilitate acceptance and promote participation that may ultimately build learners' self-esteem (Education Labour Relations Council 2003, H-25). In this regard, Beame (2004, 55) specifies three components of the classroom situation that teachers need to manage effectively, namely the physical learning environment, which comprises the use of time and space; the affective aspects used to enhance positive relationships; and the cognitive elements, which comprise the intellectual effort employed by teachers to motivate learning. Teachers who create intellectual

challenges for their learners prioritise the learning objectives, present content with clarity, and structure activities to develop understanding of the subject.

Teachers who communicate high expectations of learner success clarify the expected learner achievement and also hold the learners responsible and accountable for meeting expectations. When teachers continually use affective strategies to build positive relationships, based on respect and trust, they improve their learners' attitude towards the subject and increase their motivation to learn more about the subject.

In classrooms that provide the above-mentioned opportunities, learners are able to gain independence, behave responsibly, and develop self-respect (Education Labour Relations Council 2003, H-25). In order to establish the above, teachers must listen to the voice of the learners, garner their ideas and opinions on the current classroom situation and collaborate with them (Stringer, Mc Fadyen and Baldwin 2010, 26).

1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN

Mouton (2001, 55) refers to a research design as a plan or blueprint of how one intends to conduct research, while Cresswell (2005, 51) states that the research design outlines the procedures that the researcher follows in data collection, the analysis thereof, and the writing of the report.

1.7.1 Interpretive paradigm

According to Basit (2010, 14), a paradigm may be seen as a network of beliefs about the nature of the world that regulates the thinking and actions of researchers. This research was conducted within the interpretive paradigm, because it is an in-depth study of human behaviour based on the experiences and perceptions of a small group of learners and teacher.

This study was furthermore grounded within a critical approach, because the purpose was to change the social context of a phenomenon, based on the principles of social justice, as explained by Lichtman (2010, 89). I view this particular approach

as the most acceptable means for a self-reflection of my communication practices, interaction and relationship structures in the classroom. Within such a critical paradigm, the researcher takes a critical stance on power, especially the unequal power relations between teachers and learners. The focus is on the empowerment and emancipation of individuals. Moreover, the aim of the study was not only to critically reflect on the social realities, but to take action to reconstruct relationships, in order to create a more equitable dispensation in the classroom.

1.7.2 Qualitative methodology

Qualitative research methods were appropriate for this study, because they rely on eye-witness accounts of events that are usually rich in detail and are constructed from the researcher's normative perspective (Lankshear and Knobel 2004, 68). The researcher was interested in understanding the socially constructed nature of communication, the intimate relationship between the researcher and the participants, and how meaning was attributed to interactions and relationships in the classroom.

Schmuck (1997, 49) describes the classroom as a miniature but complete society in which learners are the main source of the information that teachers need for self-reflection in order to change their teaching strategies. Therefore, the researcher was concerned with individuals' interpretation of their experiences, as stated by Merriam (2009, 5), and carried a personal responsibility for evaluating her work with an ethic of caring, while honouring the voices of the participants.

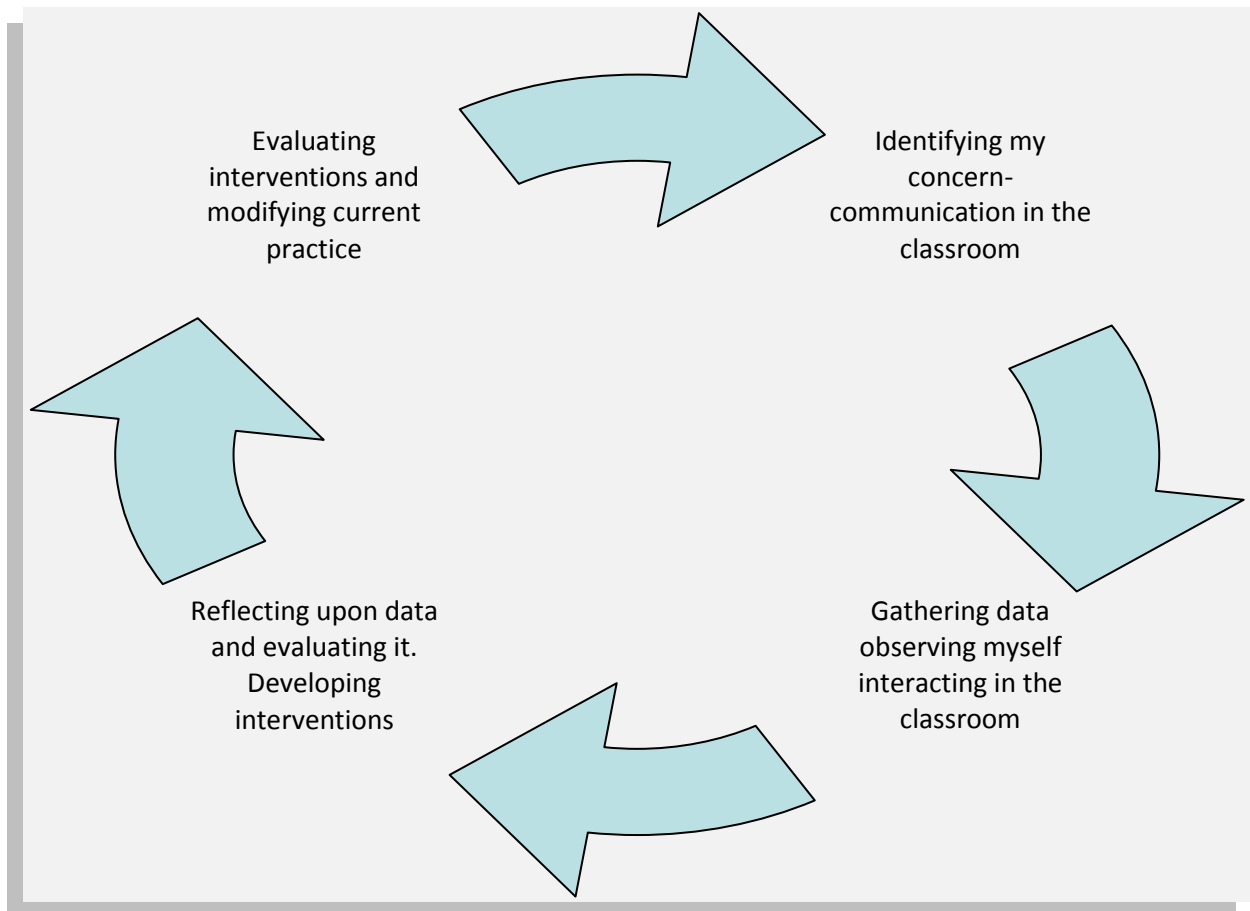
I agree with Johnson and Christensen (2008, 388) that human behaviour is dynamic and ever changing. Because of its fluidity, it should be studied over a period of time. Utilising a qualitative approach, the study developed as an emergent type of research, in which the research questions asked can be changed as they become more or less important and relevant.

1.7.3 Action research

McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 8) describe the process of action research as a liberating form of professional enquiry in which practitioners investigate their own practices and find ways of developing in the direction of their declared educational values. Somekh (2006, 7) confirms that action research as a methodology will help researchers focus on the changes that need to be effected in the classroom situation in order to improve learning outcomes. The creative nature of action research allows researchers to generate personal and practical knowledge and reports of transformations in the classroom in a multi-dimensional, nonlinear and dynamic way (McNiff and Whitehead 2009, 23).

In this study, the purpose was to find answers to my research question, namely: *How can I improve my communication, interactions, and relationship structures in the classroom?* I planned to apply the cyclical action research methodological approach, as espoused by McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 9), which encompasses the following:

FIGURE 1.7 Action-reflection cycle



McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 9) refer to the process of “observe-reflect-act-evaluate-modify-move in new directions” as an Action Reflection Cycle. The tool of the Action-Reflection Cycle enabled me to observe classroom interaction, develop innovative ways for effective communication and, based on my research findings, evaluate my practice in every cycle with the aim of improving it.

Stringer, Mc Fadyen and Baldwin (2010, 26) suggest that the collaborative nature of action research is appropriate for listening to the voice of learners, garner their ideas and opinions on the current classroom situation, and collaborate with them in order to achieve optimal learning outcomes. The action research process is empowering to both learners and teachers, because the learners are recognised for generating knowledge that will promote more effective classroom practices, while teachers carry the important responsibility of guiding, supporting and motivating learners.

- **Participatory Action Research**

Greenwood and Levin (2007, 256) explain participatory action research as a process of collectively generating knowledge through actions and evaluation in order to solve social problems. Participatory action research empowers educators to investigate a significant problem in their practice, gather data through discussions, questionnaires and interviews and, through careful analysis, plan actions and make interventions in order to improve their teaching strategies and ultimately their professional growth (Gordon 2008, 1).

Participatory action research methods create a platform for both teachers and learners to pool their knowledge and raise their concerns during the research actions and simultaneously validate the outcomes. In this regard, Greenwood and Levin (2007, 7) have established that action research places a high premise on democratising knowledge creation, so that all participants share some responsibility for this. As suggested, I monitored the progress of my research through a combination of thoughtful, extended dialogue, based on mutual respect, with critical friends, and with stringent analysis in order to improve my classroom actions. This approach enabled me to develop from being accountable to external forces (the South African Department of Education) to grow towards self-accountability in improving my teaching and learning activities, which became my primary focus (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 8).

Participatory action research processes are concerned with improving group relationships, addressing conflicts and crises, and effecting change, elucidates Pine (2009, 30). As the main focus of this study is to understand and improve classroom communication, interactions and relationship structures, I believe that when learners share power with researchers in the research process, the latter become better able to understand and improve the classroom context.

Action research has a transformative quality that invites researchers to seek the insights, reflections and questions of learners concerning the teaching and learning process. According to Beame (2004, 55), effective teachers need to employ the

following management strategies to their engage learners and effect improvement in the classroom:

- Creating intellectual challenges.
- Communicating high expectations for behaviour, social interactions and academic engagement.
- Seeking to build positive relationships.
- Promoting learner self-management through regular questioning and evaluation.

Participatory action research is dynamic in its essence, because it not only requires participants to search together for practical improvements, but is also 'self-critical', because it gives critical feedback throughout the research process (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 5). Furthermore, the self-critical nature of this method has great potential for teachers to revitalise their practices in a way that may ultimately transform the school community into a group of inquiring reflective practitioners.

1.7.4 Sampling procedure

Sampling is a process of selecting a smaller group for a study in such a way that it represents the larger group or population from which it was selected, explains Basit (2010, 49). Purposive sampling was used in this study, because it identified information-rich individuals for an in-depth study of the phenomenon.

Johnson and Christensen (2008, 239) explain purposive sampling as a technique in terms of which researchers choose specific characteristics of a population of interest, for example the learners in a senior grade whom I taught. This sampling strategy was used for this study, because the learners were likely to be knowledgeable and informative about the phenomenon of interest. The population for this self-reflective study consisted of some of the Grades 10 and 11 learners whom I taught at a school in the Northern Areas of Nelson Mandela Bay. The selection was criterion based, because the participants were selected on the premise that they were familiar with my classroom communication. Secondly, the learners were selected because they

afforded me the opportunity for constructive engagement and continuous data gathering, which determined the structuring of classroom interventions.

1.7.5 Data collection instruments

According to James, Milenkiewicz and Bucknam (2008a, 66), qualitative data collection tools are employed when researchers require in-depth information to create an understanding of how the participants appropriate meaning to the context and, in turn, how they are influenced by it. In this study, data gathered from a questionnaire, classroom observations and focus group discussions were aimed at eliciting responses from both educators and learners on their experiences and perceptions of how my personal communication, interactions and relationship structures influenced learning outcomes in the classroom.

- **Questionnaires**

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to gather the different opinions of the learners whom I taught. The questionnaires provided opportunity for anonymous replies, which represented the participants' own interpretations, feelings, attitudes, viewpoints and behavioural responses to the research topic, as suggested by Johnson and Christensen (2008, 170). The questions asked in the questionnaire covered the research objectives and provided information that was essential to answer the research questions. The researcher complied with the prescriptions of Alasuutari, Bickman and Brannen (2009, 315), in that the questions were short and the language was clear and unambiguous, to avoid any confusion.

The questionnaire enabled me to collect data in a short amount of time, while the feedback helped me understand the learners' feelings, perceptions and attitudes towards my communication and allowed me to devise intervention strategies to improve on my interactions.

Observations

Observations, explain Johnson and Christensen (2008, 211), involve the attentive watching and systematic recording of what is seen and heard in a particular situation in order to gain valuable information about the phenomenon being researched.

In this self-reflective study, the researcher was a participant observer, allowing her to draw tentative conclusions as the research process unfolded. Qualitative observation enabled the researcher to study the learners in their natural settings, helping her to understand complex human behaviour by observing how the learners related to one another and to her (Lichtman 2010, 165). The researcher captured some of the classroom interactions using video recordings to track the learners' reaction to her communication, while the learners used self-recording check-lists to monitor the dynamics within their groups.

Furthermore, the researcher was cognisant of the participants' reactions to a particular phenomenon, specific conversations, and non-verbal feedback during interactions. These directives allowed her to remain focused without becoming overwhelmed and side-tracked by less important issues in the classroom. In order to provide an accurate account of classroom interactions, and particularly to prevent important features of events becoming vague, video recordings were made.

As the researcher and the researched, I was at the centre of the action. Using audio- and videotape recordings allowed me to capture my unrehearsed actions and their influence on the participants. Video recordings captured spontaneous actions, showed the quality of my interactions in the classroom, and had the advantage that the evidence could be viewed repeatedly to transcribe into narratives, as explained by James, Milenkiewicz *et al.* (2008, 77). The old saying "A picture is worth a thousand words" is relevant to my research, because the visual data document contained important and concrete aspects of my social interactions, considered as one of the best ways to collect rich data (Johnson and Christensen 2008, 216). This method enabled me to observe my actions closely, identify the negative aspects thereof and devise interventions to improve my practice. Besides providing descriptive detail of the phenomenon of the study, the video recording provided a record of the participants' thoughts and feelings.

- **Research diary and learners' journals**

A research diary is used to record the thoughts and feelings of the participants about daily events, focusing on issues relating to the research questions. I used my research diary, which provided flexible space for diagrams and memo's, for recording my subjective impressions of events in the classroom. My research diary was used to chart the progress of the study and could potentially achieve the following:

- Provide a detailed account of particular events and situations with descriptive notes that I could use in the written report.
- Act as a log of anecdotes, exact words as well as the subjective impressions of the actions unfolding in the classroom.
- Serve as an introspective and self-evaluative account of my experiences, thoughts and feelings in order to help me understand my own actions.
- It may allow me to distance myself from my actions in order to evaluate them.

In addition, Mills (2007, 70) suggest that learners' journals may provide valuable "windows" into their insights, thoughts and impressions of classroom interactions. Journals, conceptualised in the above-mentioned manner, provide a continuous, systematic reflection of the researcher's practice that honours the unique and powerful voice of all the participants, explains Mills (2007, 70). Moreover, it does not only keep track of observations, but the feelings associated with and accompanying the action research.

1.8 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis started early in the action research design, because a cyclical process of collecting and analysing data was involved. Data analysis followed a recursive cyclical process that was repeated throughout the study until the researcher understood the topic that was being studied, as explained by Johnson and Christensen (2008, 531).

Reflection occurred at every session of the data collection process, providing an iterative, unbroken chain of impressions.

- **Cycle one of the research**

Cycle one consisted of concept identification to enlighten the researcher how the learners, focus group and critical friends were experiencing the classroom communication, interactions and relationship structures. A questionnaire, which was self-explanatory and completed by learners to garner their opinions and insights on the research topic, served as the baseline for the study. Personal journal entries supplied valuable information on feelings and impressions and the focus group, comprising colleagues, facilitated interactive discussions that provided the research with rich material for identifying the themes that became part of the focus of the study.

Theme analysis began when the researcher formed connections between the ideas that emerged from interviews, group discussions and questionnaires, creating a map that guided the study (Thomas 2009, 200). Once the themes were established, I could work through the data searching for words illustrating and elucidating the themes emerging from the study. I continued processing segments of the data into meaningful units by marking them with a code or symbol that depicted a specific category or cluster of data that emerged during the study, as suggested by Johnson and Christensen (2008, 534). This method of collecting data, analysing the data, and collecting additional data prescribes a continuous and cyclical process, while simultaneous and appropriate intervention strategies were planned and implemented.

- **Cycle two of the research**

This is the phase in which the intervention strategies and action plans were formulated and implemented. The researcher strategised with critical friends and colleagues in order to re-orientate her thinking and decide on ways in which she could improve on communication, interactions and relationship structures in the classroom. This phase happened concurrently with the analysis, and not as a separate phase. As I learnt more about effective ways of communication, action plans were devised and implemented. A detailed description of the research design and data analysis follows in Chapters Three and Four respectively.

1.9 VALIDATION OF MY ACCOUNT OF LEARNING

The main criticism levelled at action research is the challenge around the validation of data. In this regard, Whitehead and McNiff (2006, 97) explain that validity involves establishing the truth or trustworthiness of a claim to knowledge by comprehensively questioning it. Validity is concerned with the accuracy of findings. An account is considered true if it accurately represents those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe or explain. I was obligated to report and interpret the realities as truthfully as possible.

Greenwood and Levin (2007, 66) explain credibility as the arguments and processes that must be followed in order for someone to trust the research results. I endeavoured to comply with the aspect of internal credibility by applying the following elements:

- *Internal credibility*: I demonstrated how the knowledge created during the study influenced the behaviour and interactions of my learners in the classroom.
- *External judgment of credibility*: The results of my research convinced others outside the research environment that the new knowledge has the power to influence or alter existing theories of classroom communication, interaction and relationship patterns.

- *Workability*: I believe, in line with Dewey's thinking, (en.wikipedia.org 2011) that this self-reflective action research process of knowledge creation must always be through interaction with my learners and colleagues within a classroom environment in which all participants are honoured for their contributions.
- *Making sense*: In this study I not only offered my best judgment, but also showed how knowledge was continually formed and that the process was never final; within one cycle of reflection, resided the potential for the next research process. Moreover, the research showed and emphasised the power of the emotions of the learners and the influence of inequalities in power relations as key factors in validity testing.
- *Trans-contextual credibility*: This study reflected a wide variety of classroom encounters and situations in which meaningful knowledge was created in a specific classroom situation that could be transferred and applied in another and similar context.
- *Triangulation*: Cresswell (2004, 196) recommends more than one strategy to check the accuracy of findings. In order to establish the validity of my research findings, I showed how different sources offer the same information and themes in a consistent manner. This strategy dictated that I apply member-checking by taking the findings back to participants to determine the accuracy of my reporting.

When researchers declare their bias, they bring into the study honesty and openness, which resonates well with readers. I had the preconceived idea that learners might be viewing my communication in a negative way, which made me vulnerable to their feedback. By admitting to this preconception, I used it as a strategy to check the accuracy of research data.

Authenticity is increased when the researcher spends a prolonged time in the context under investigation and portrays the situation in detail. Furthermore, research findings conveyed in a rich, in-depth, descriptive style may transport the reader into the context, thus creating a shared experience (Cresswell 2004. 196).

I endeavoured to produce authentic evidence to indicate the validity of the account of my self-reflection on my communication in the classroom. McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 103) suggest using both self-validation, by stating personal convictions, and social validations, which refer to validation by critical friends. The evidence of my investigation was subjected to rigorous scrutiny by using debriefing sessions with my supervisor and critical friends and colleagues, utilising the above-mentioned criteria. Furthermore, the validity and reliability of a study depends largely on the credibility of the researcher. Therefore, the research process was guided by ethical procedures.

1.10 ETHICAL MEASURES

In order to do justice to any research project, researchers' behaviour and procedures have to be guided by acceptable moral principles and rules. Research ethics provide researchers with a code of moral guidelines on how to conduct research in a morally acceptable way. McNiff and Whitehead (2002, 88) refer to some widely accepted criteria of ethically informed research as the promise of confidentiality, negotiating access with authorities, participants and parents, safeguarding rights and ensuring good faith, and respecting the dignity and integrity and maintaining the trust of the participants.

In this study, the following ethical considerations, as suggested by Cresswell (2004, 202) were addressed and followed to protect the privacy and anonymity of participants. A clear written statement of the research objectives and how the data would be used, was given to the participants (see Appendix 5). The researcher gained the written consent of the learners' parents, with the promise of confidentiality and the protection of the participants' privacy. The transcripts, written reports and interpretations of the learners' reflections of their classroom experiences and the perspectives of the researcher will be made available to participants.

Throughout the study, I protected the participants' right to confidentiality, as well as their right to withdraw from the research. I was guided by the principles set out in the previous paragraph, the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's rules and ethical code, as well as my personal views on integrity, sincerity and social justice.

1.11 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

The study will be presented as follows:

In **Chapter One**, a presentation of the background, reasons for and purpose of the study is given. The chapter also contains an overview of the study methods to be employed, as well as a brief outline of the study.

The literature review, in **Chapter Two**, focuses on the aspects of communication, interactions and relationship structures in the classroom. An in-depth study of the relevant literature is conducted in order to present previous research findings, to find a theoretical framework for the study.

In **Chapter Three**, an outline of the research design is provided, justifying the choice of a particular methodology for this study. It explains the research approach from a critical paradigm, while focusing on participatory research methods. The chapter provides reasons for employing specific data collection tools and techniques and addresses the issue of validity and ethical considerations.

The research findings are discussed and analysed in **Chapter Four**. These contain the voices of the participants who have shaped the study and whose combined efforts have provided meaningful knowledge on the research topic.

Chapter Five evaluates the account of my learning and demonstrates how the knowledge and insights gained from this study improved my classroom practice.

Each chapter contains extracts of my personal experiences in the classroom, my reflections on encounters with my learners, and the intervention strategies that were implemented.

1.12 CONCLUSION

The aim of this chapter was to describe the context that gave rise to the research problem. The researcher provided an outline of the context, formulated the research questions, and defined the research aims. A discussion of the research design followed, and the use of the critical research paradigm for investigating the research phenomenon was justified.

An account was given of the research methodology, and the data collection tools and techniques best suited to the context were explained. Issues concerning and increasing the validity and trustworthiness of the knowledge creation were discussed. This chapter also identified aspects of ethical and moral approaches that ensured that the participants were respected. Chapter One provided a distinct focus and definitive guidelines for the rest of the investigation.

Chapter Two will highlight key issues relating to the development of effective communication, interactions and relationship structures to enhance the learning outcomes in the classroom.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION, RELATIONSHIP AND CLASSROOM CHANGE

Teach a youth about the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22:6

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to outline, by means of a comprehensive literature review, the importance of effective communication and to discuss the role of meaningful interactions and relationships in bringing about positive classroom change. The contents of this chapter will form the point of departure for a critical analysis and reflection of my practice in the classroom and will guide the research actions.

2.2 BACKGROUND

Teaching is an exacting vocation. To illustrate this point, Alexander and Potter (2005, 30) state that the function of a teacher is to harness learners' natural interest in the world around them in order for them to become accomplished in developing their potential. The teacher's challenge is therefore to ensure that all learners' interest is roused to participate in the communication and learning process.

In the 21st century world, learners, perhaps more than ever before, need to develop a wide range of skills to live successful lives. Therefore, they must be encouraged to develop their analytical abilities to solve problems, and their creative and practical skills to face and overcome daily challenges. The question that bothered the researcher was how teachers could facilitate processes in the classroom to allow

learners to develop and practise the skills they clearly lacked. The careful selection of communication strategies, interactions, and which relationships must be fostered to provide the best possible learning environment, becomes extremely important in teachers' planning processes.

As teachers desire to develop their learners' innate abilities, they have to use communication skills that will enable the learners to engage with the learning material, attribute meaning to it, and apply it in relevant contexts. Interactions must be planned that will encourage learners to make contributions and exchange opinions. In this way, learners learn to trust and value their own contributions, which in turn will motivate them to continue learning.

Another aspect to consider is that learners' motivation to partake and continue with the learning task will depend on how meaningful the task itself is. Hart, Dixon, Drummond and McIntyre (2004, 111) explain that this kind of engagement will require that learners make an intellectual effort by grappling with the problem, seeking connections, and finding solutions by applying creative thought. Learners usually indicate their willingness to learn by the quality of their responses and by remaining focused on the learning task. However, this type of involvement does not happen automatically: teachers have to continually create and sustain their learners' interest by building a sense of security and affirming their contributions. The quality of the engagements usually elicits a renewed willingness to interact with the learning material and the teacher.

In order to establish and maintain effective communication and interaction, some teachers' thoughts concerning their learners' capacity to learn must undergo a change. Such change is based on a strong belief in the potential to transform from the current practice into something better, explain Hart, Dixon *et al.* (2004, 167). In this regard, Sternberg and Grigorenko (2007, 16) state that varied teaching techniques must be employed in the classroom to develop learners' memory and their analytical, practical and creative skills before change will occur. They argue that when teachers use a wide repertoire of teaching strategies and view learners' potential in totality, a supportive classroom environment will be established.

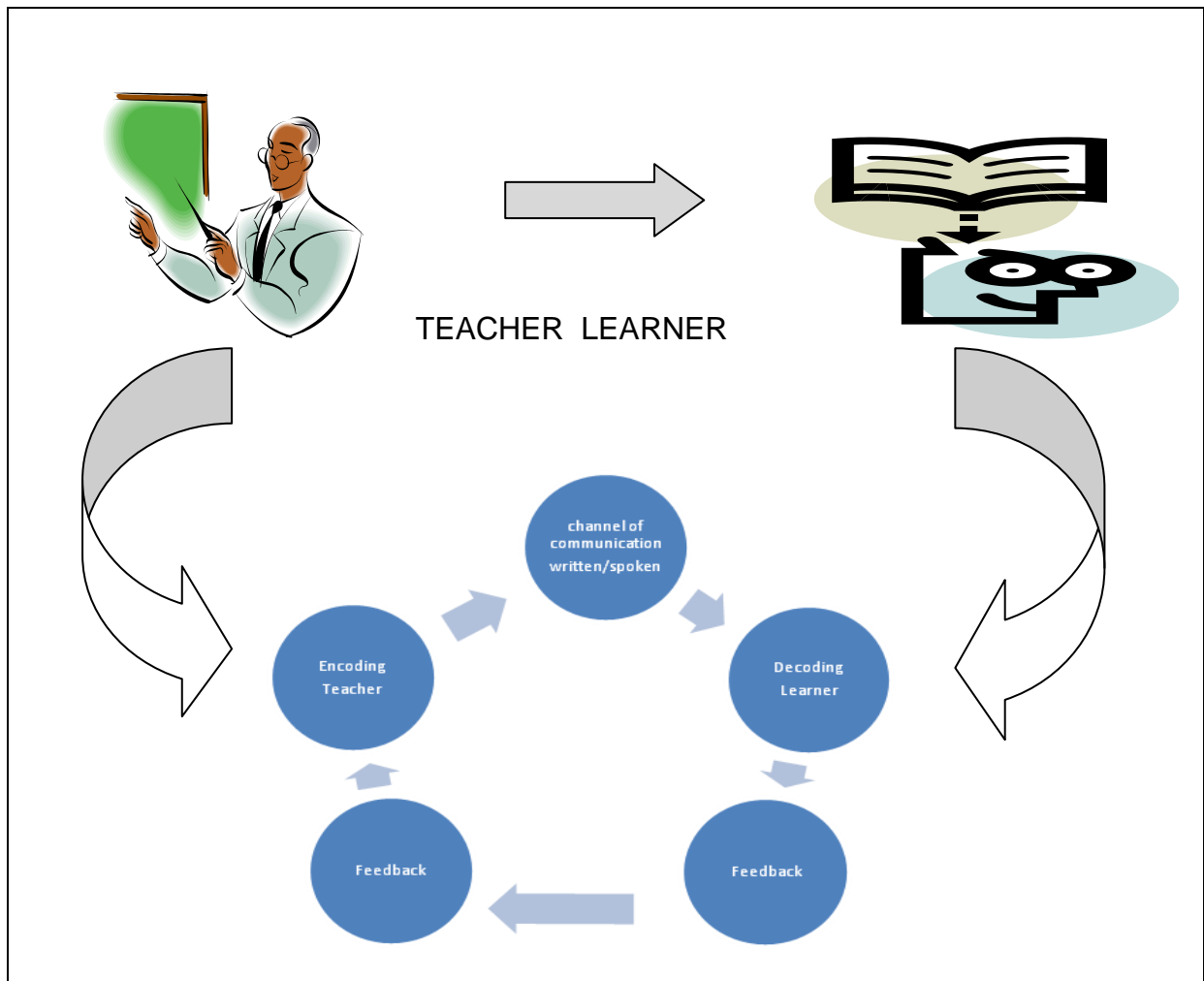
2.3 ASPECTS OF EFFECTIVE HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Communication is described by Van Heerden (2005, 82) as a process of relaying information from one person to another. However, Bingham and Sidorkin (2004, 13) point out that the sender-receiver model is not an adequate way to describe human communication. The reason is that human communication requires an understanding of the messages and images being conveyed. Understanding is achieved by attaching meaning through an interpretation of the message; interpretation is usually based on personal experience.

In the classroom, the teacher's communication is often interpreted in a completely different way from what she or he intended. It is therefore important that the teacher obtain and analyse all feedback from learners to establish whether they have decoded the message correctly. Such feedback enables the teacher to assess whether the message has been received, interpreted and understood as was intended.

Classroom communication, whether verbal or non-verbal, is an intentional process aimed at facilitating effective learning for the learners' self-actualisation. To teach effectively, teachers must harness their skills to explain and communicate ideas, meanings and feelings in such a way that their learners are able to question, discuss and form new insights. Polk (2006, 25) contends that many behaviours and characteristics constitute effective communication; however, the clarity of the communication is the defining factor that increases learners' understanding. Clarity is a quality of the teacher's ability to be expressive, structure the learning material effectively, provide scaffolding, and use images to explain difficult concepts, as illustrated in Figure 2.1 below.

FIGURE 2.1: Communication Model



- **Verbal communication**

Verbal communication refers to spoken messages. It involves both the choice and order of words used to convey a specific meaning. According to Vialle, Lysaght and Verenikina (2005, 54), Vygotsky emphasises the importance of language and verbal interaction as a cultural tool to promote thinking. People often experience and respond to words differently, due to different cultural backgrounds. It is therefore important for the teacher to know what connotation learners assign to certain words in order to choose the appropriate language to promote complete understanding.

In the classroom, teacher-learner communication revolves mostly around the sending of verbal and non-verbal messages about the learners' abilities and potential

for mastering tasks. Both verbal and non-verbal communication has the advantage that it is two-way communication, which provides for immediate feedback.

Recent studies suggest that learners perceive effective teachers as those who teach with energy and enthusiasm, maintaining eye contact and closeness with learners, and using encouraging gestures and expressions, relates Polk (2006, 25).

- **Non-verbal communication**

Coetzee, Van Niekerk and Wydeman (2008, 84) state that non-verbal communication, which consists of facial expressions, body movements, physical appearance, dress and posture, often carries considerably more power than the spoken word. It is therefore important that the two forms of communication support one another, because when learners do not understand the spoken word, they may rely on non-verbal messages, such as body language, gestures, pauses or silence, eye movement and distance between the speaker and those who are to receive the message. Teachers who do not recognise the quality and power of their non-verbal messages could unintentionally humiliate their learners and harm the communication process. Learners who are vulnerable interpret and experience any negative communication as more personal and intense than learners who have positive self-esteem. Such negative messages make indelible impressions that may contribute to lower self-esteem, subsequently leading to poor performance and negative behaviour. In this regard, research has shown that learners with a low self-concept are less driven and more easily distracted, while learners with a positive self-concept show higher levels of classroom participation (Muijs and Reynolds 2005, 143).

2.3.1 Interactions

In education and for the purpose of this study, interactions refer to the activities between teachers and learners (Bingham and Sidorkin 2004, 12). Positive interaction, based on clear communication and cooperation between teachers and learners, is fundamental to create understanding through instruction, demonstrations, questioning, conceptual mapping and prompting. In this regard,

Gilbert (2004, 4), explains that understanding is embedded in the interactions between teachers and learners. These interactions form the platform for assessing what the learners are capable of, as it also acts as the training ground for learners to practise their academic and social skills.

I believe that teachers who maximise their learners' engagement in learning tasks, reap the benefit of higher levels of learner achievement. These engagements open doors for teachers to become enquirers through structured learning activities, while the learners are still held accountable when working independently.

In my teaching practice, I have favoured structured and whole class teaching, because learners are then generally more engaged than during small-group interactions. Learners who are normally easily distracted, find it hard to remain focused during small group discussions. These engagements could be used for higher order questioning in the form of class discussions, which will encourage learners to remain focused on the learning task. Pondering on ways to enhance classroom engagement and discussions, I recently introduced a merit system. This system of allocating merits is based on the times when learners respond and interact during class activities. The learners were given the responsibility to allocate their own merits, because I felt that this would develop integrity and responsibility. My experience has been that the more often learners voice their opinions, the more they learn to trust their own judgement. I have received both positive and negative feedback about the merit system from learners. Some learners lauded the system, saying that it built their self-confidence. The learners who expressed doubt, were sceptical about the other learners' ability to be honest. I have, however, noticed a marked improvement in learner participation. Though this is only an external form of motivation, it has been a learning curve. I am more convinced than ever that all learners have the need to be affirmed and want to achieve success.

2.3.2 Questions

Questions are the cornerstone of communication in the classroom. They are an important medium for learning, can be utilised to develop ideas, issue challenges to

learners, assess the level of their understanding, and keep them interested and thinking (Dymoke and Harrison 2008, 134). Learners usually find the questioning approach interesting, because they are actively involved in creating an understanding, and it challenges their assumptions and prior knowledge. The teacher can use lower order questions to test knowledge and understanding, and higher order questions for applying, analysing, synthesising and evaluating ideas and content. Questioning is an effective part of the lesson, because it allows the teacher to practise the content until the learners have mastered it. When learners are given the opportunity to answer questions, they are able to clarify their own thinking and understanding of the concepts being taught, especially when the teacher uses prompts such as a scaffold to assist them (Muijs and Reynolds 2005, 47). In this regard, Petty (2009, 200) suggests that teachers use both open questions, which require a detailed response from the learners, and closed questions, which have a single correct answer.

Questioning as a teaching technique has the advantage of encouraging understanding. It ensures that learning is built on prior knowledge. Feedback is instantaneous, thereby uncovering incorrect assumptions, and it allows opportunity for unlearning of the incorrect, elucidates Petty (2009, 192). Furthermore, it is suggested that a good questioning technique should encourage all learners to participate by distributing the questions as widely as possible in the classroom. Questioning as a communication tool can enhance learning outcomes when questions are stated clearly, used purposefully, formulated concisely in simple language, and are thought-provoking.

2.3.3 Listening

Give every man thine ear, but few thy voice
(William Shakespeare)

Gilbert (2004, 20) maintains that listening is the beginning of the communication process. He furthermore states that it is an action of “attending to” in order to form an

understanding of verbal and non-verbal stimuli. Shindler (2010, 84) states that when learners perceive that the teacher is firm about attention, a culture of listening will develop. Furthermore, listening fosters a deep level of respect for the ideas and opinions of others. Moreover, listening focuses learners on the present and develops an increasing awakening to the world around them.

Listening is a crucial element for building a fulfilling teacher-learner relationship. A teacher who listens attentively creates an environment of trust. Learners feel that their thoughts and opinions are respected and valued. It is important for both teachers and learners to listen carefully to what is being communicated before replying. Careful listening indicates that the receiver cares about and wants to understand what is being said. When learners do not listen attentively, they are unable to solve problems and perform the learning tasks properly; conversely, when teachers fail to listen attentively, they cannot heed the feedback they are receiving. As a result, they convey the message to learners that what they are saying is unimportant and does not warrant any attention. Johnson (2006, 152) states that when teachers listen attentively to their learners, they establish trust, which results in higher levels of learner participation.

When learners are able to paraphrase what their teacher has said, it indicates their level of commitment to the communication process. Paraphrasing furthermore demonstrates the learners' understanding of the message, enabling the teacher to assess whether the learner has decoded the message as intended. In my experience, this occurs when learners ask, "*Is this what you are saying? Is this what you want us to do?*" In this regard, Killen (2007, 145) explains that when learners listen attentively to the contributions of others, they are able to build their own understanding as the discussion progresses.

Gilbert (2004, 9) refers to the highest form of listening as *empathic listening*. This refers to teachers' ability to place themselves in their learners' shoes in order to understand the learners' perceptions and level of knowledge, and the additional knowledge they require to fully understand the learning material. It is true that

listening in the classroom is influenced by our expectations, beliefs, attitudes and our past experiences, declares Johnson (2006, 156).

Alexander and Potter (2005, 172) state that schools with policies that incorporate the opinions of their learners have experienced more mutual respect and less confrontation between teachers and learners, as the learners experience their 'voice' as being heard. Moreover, Killen (2007, 119) states that soliciting ideas from learners provides teachers with important feedback on the learners' attitudes, understanding and misconceptions, which is needed to help learners improve their learning outcomes.

2.3.4 Feedback

Feedback from learners (verbal and non-verbal) provides the teacher with information about the success rate of learning tasks, while assessments done by the teacher determine whether the information communicated was decoded correctly, states Squires (2003, 39). Feedback to any learner should not be about the learner him- or herself, but about the particular qualities of the learner's work, with information regarding his/her understanding of the learning objectives of the particular learning task measured against a set of criteria, explains Philpott (2009, 73). Feedback is a powerful element of assessment that provides specific guidelines regarding the strengths and weaknesses of a learner.

Feedback is based on different forms of evidence, including marked work, verbal contribution, and the practical work of the learner. Written feedback has a great impact on learner achievement, because it focuses on the learning objectives, assessing whether the learner is on the right track, and supplies information for the learner to reflect on, with the aim of improving his/her learning.

The purpose of feedback is to improve learning. The timing thereof is important, as it guides and shapes learners' progress. Feedback is most effective when it is delivered promptly, if it allows for learner reflection, and if it provides an opportunity to act on it, with the purpose to improve the task. It is therefore important that

teachers plan lessons so that regular opportunity is provided for feedback, to maximise the impact thereof. However, marking and feedback alone cannot guarantee successful learning outcomes. Teachers must build into the assessment framework the targets their learners need to achieve. These targets will serve as a benchmark for measuring the learners' achievements.

The quality of the learners' feedback will indicate whether they have connected with their teachers and the learning material. Hart, Dixon *et al.* (2004, 111) refer to this connection as an 'intellectual engagement where there is opportunity for individual input, exchanging of opinions, and learners' thinking are challenged'. Positive feedback provides encouragement for learners to remain engaged in the learning task. This supportive relationship fostered by teachers forms a platform for further learning, because learners will feel valued and accept that the tasks are worth doing.

2.4 LEARNING THEORIES AND COMMUNICATION

Effective communication in the classroom refers to a sustained interchange or dialogue between teachers and learners, using speech, body language and various signals, states Killen (2007, 24). The primary aim thereof is to communicate ideas to facilitate thinking, refine reasoning and enhance the learners' understanding in order to execute tasks.

The emerging question in this study was to ascertain how effective communication could enhance the learning process. In order to increase my understanding, I considered the opinions of different theories concerning learning.

2.4.1 Behaviourism

The behaviouristic learning theory accentuates that learning occurs when changes in behaviour can be detected (Muijs and Reynolds 2005, 13). The emphasis is on observable behaviour, therefore, learning is seen in the actions people perform in response to stimuli from their external environment. Behaviourist theorists furthermore declare that all behaviour can be divided into two categories, namely

reflexive/involuntary behaviour and voluntary/operant behaviour. An involuntary response is learnt and will occur automatically in particular situations, while voluntary responses are the direct result of the individual's preferred chosen response to his/her environment, explain Muijs and Reynolds (2005, 58).

The significance of behaviourist theory in the classroom is that learners' positive behaviour can be increased by using the positive consequence of their behaviour as encouragement (in negative behaviour the same can conversely be applied as a deterrent) (Vialle, Lysaght *et al.* 2005, 8). The theory is especially useful in the classroom when the teacher uses cues and prompts to elicit a specific feedback and encourage participation in the communication process. Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 146) further conclude that the stimuli that the teacher offer in the form of the subject content, followed by either a form of reward or punishment, create an environment of optimal conditioning. However, much criticism has been levelled at the behaviourist theory. For example, it is alleged that its foundations are based on experiments on animals; and it is perceived as unethical, because it is a form of manipulation. The most significant criticism is that although it can explain low-level learning, it offers no explanation for creative skills and innovative actions.

2.4.2 Cognitive developmental view

In contrast to the behaviourists' thinking, the cognitive developmental view, of which Jean Piaget is a major exponent, contributes to learning theories in the form of constructivism and structuralism. Piaget regards children as 'active constructors' of meaning (Vialle, Lysaght *et al.* 2005, 26), based on the assumption that people want to make sense of the world around them (Woolfolk 2010, 60).

Knowledge creation is established through direct communication and interaction with things, people and ideas. Piaget has identified the key stages and elements that influence cognitive development as maturation, interactions and social transmission. Maturation refers to the biological changes that occur and is genetically determined. A child reaches maturation through his/her interaction with the environment. Social transmission is the way in which people adapt to their environment as they increase

and organise their way of thinking (Muijs and Reynolds 2005, 14). Proponents of this theory also believe that although children learn under different social conditions, they will learn at a certain stage of “readiness”. The theory is meaningful for teaching, because of the challenge for teachers to create conditions in the classroom in which learners can form an understanding at their level of readiness. Teachers who rely exclusively on the learners’ state of readiness and natural abilities may structure learning tasks that offer fewer challenges as well as fewer teacher interventions. As learning does not occur in isolation, but in company with others, it is important to take social and cultural factors into account.

2.4.3 Socio-cultural perspective

Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 151) explain that human learning is social in nature, and therefore different from any other animal learning. It is therefore important to understand human behavior against the background of interactions with culture (Woolfolk 2010, 61). The main thrust of Vygotsky’s theory is that children’s mental structures and processes can be attributed to their cultures through the medium of language. I strongly believe that learners can learn from one another, because children’s capacity to think is embodied in their language structure; therefore, they learn in a social context, based on cooperation with peers and others who are more knowledgeable. When teachers assist their learner by means of scaffolding (manageable steps) in their stage of development or ‘zone of proximal development’, learners are able to build their understanding and work independently in order to solve present and future problems, explains Killen (2007, 9).

The social-cognitive theory emphasises the social aspect of learning. In terms of this theory, teachers need to devise quality interactions where learners’ capacity to learn is exercised and knowledge resources are provided. Because learning is a conscious process, it is important that teachers provide a challenge to their learners with every encounter in the class, within the boundaries of the learners’ developmental stage. For this reason, Vygotsky places a premium value on the language used by teachers and peers while communicating and interacting, because it helps the learners develop their problem-solving abilities (Sotto 2007, 24).

Bruner, (cited in Muijs and Reynolds 2005, 14) argues that in order to understand the thinking of an individual, one needs to consider the cultural context in which the action occurs (Pollard 2005, 123). The symbols that individuals use to construct meaning are situated in their culture and language. These symbols reflect their communities, and their history. It is therefore important for the teacher to consider all the socio-cultural elements constituting the classroom and how learners respond to them.

2.4.4 Social cognitive theory

Bandura (1977, vii) has expanded on the behavioural perspective of learning by including the social elements that influence learning. Although his work is based on the principles of reinforcement and punishment, he emphasises the value of learning from observing others (Woolfolk 2010, 220). Bandura (1977) suggests that learners know more than they divulge; consequently, he refers to acquired knowledge as learning and to performed knowledge as behaviour.

Bandura's (1977) research indicates that learners will demonstrate some of their knowledge under certain conditions. However, where incentives are present, they will demonstrate all their knowledge. He identifies cognitive factors, such as beliefs, self-perceptions and expectations, which influence learning. This is called observational or vicarious learning, which includes aspects such as attention, retention, performance and motivation. It is therefore important that teachers make clear presentations for learners so that they will remember the learning material and be motivated to complete the learning activity.

Considering the above theories, I came to realise the importance of verbal interaction as a catalyst for promoting thinking and reasoning. Ginnis (2002, 307) agrees that language has a dramatic effect on the way people think. Furthermore, Gillies (2006, 271) elaborates that when learners are taught to engage in exploratory talk, they constructively and critically improve their reasoning. These studies demonstrate that teachers who provide rich cultural settings when using familiar

words and symbols, are able to stimulate their learners' natural curiosity through quality interactions that increase the learners' level of achievement.

Apart from what teachers communicate, the importance of the way in which they communicate cannot be overemphasised. Teachers convey both positive and negative messages through body language, to either reinforce desirable behaviour or discourage misbehaviour. When learners experience that they are respected, they are more receptive to participate in classroom activities. They thrive in a caring environment. Teachers who are successful in showing concern and respect are able to harness the positive reactions of their learners to promote learner development and simultaneously create better opportunities for effective communication.

2.5 PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Rogers (2006, 7) aptly describes the classroom as an unusual setting into which teachers and learners enter with their personal capacities, capabilities, expectations, feelings and needs and in which their rights and responsibilities need to be balanced and both teachers and learners are learning through their interactions.

2.5.1 Expressing positive messages

Teachers can prepare learners to participate in life-enriching activities by using language that shows appreciation at both cognitive and emotional levels (Rosenberg 2003, 11). Such positive language usage provides the opportunity for teachers and learners to connect and overcome difficulties in their interactions with one another. When teachers use language that is affirming and non-judgemental, learners become more willing to enter into a relationship with them.

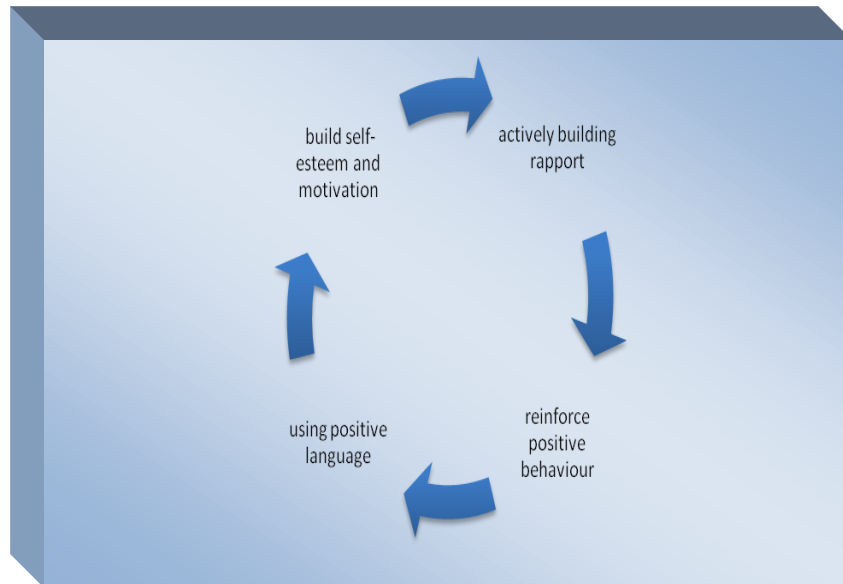
2.5.2 Collaborative communication style

In the context of this study, a communication style can be defined as a teacher's consistent personal approach to communication in the classroom. When a collaborative communication style is employed, teachers and learners are able to

work together towards developing self-discipline and making responsible choices. Collaboration is a step towards creating a democratic environment, which is empowering for learners, because it gives them a voice in the classroom (Kyle and Rogien 2004, 11). Fundamentally, it means that teachers and learners share responsibilities. Teachers and learners who share ownership for effective communication in the classroom have to formulate class rules and be involved in maintaining discipline. Subsequently, learners will be motivated to behave more responsibly. In this regard, Pollard (2005, 280) states that schools need an education policy that promotes maximum freedom of expression and conscience, and teaching that is based on teacher-learner dialogue. The learners' opinions have to be considered and communication skills need to be developed in order to help learners express their opinions and develop their decision-making abilities.

I advocate this collaborative style, because it helps learners become responsible for co-creating a learning environment conducive to realising their potential within an atmosphere of mutual trust. Learners enjoy the freedom of expressing their opinions and are valued for their contributions within a disciplined structure. Teachers who have the courage to employ a collaborative communication style have to invest in establishing sound relationships, based on mutual trust and respect, with their learners. In order to achieve this, Hook and Vass (2000b, 14) suggest the following as the key ingredients to empowering a positive relationship between teachers and their learners:

FIGURE 2.2: Model for relationship building adapted from Hook and Vass (2000b, 14)



Man is here for the sake of other men – above all, for those upon whose smile and well-being your own happiness depends. Many times a day I realize how much my outer and inner life is built upon the labours of my fellow men, and how I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received. - Albert Einstein

2.5.3 Building rapport

Shindler (2010, 114) succinctly contends that “learners do not care what you know until they know that you care” and that teachers must make this investment to show that they genuinely care for their learners.

Establishing rapport is when teachers make an essential connection with their learners at both emotional and cognitive levels, state Hook and Vass (2000b, 13). This implies that teachers and learners have to share a personal and emotional part of themselves as an investment in the relationship. When teachers and learners share rapport, classroom interactions become easier, more productive and enjoyable.

There are many ways in which teachers can build rapport with their students. Using their names in greeting indicates recognition and commitment. Showing genuine interest in them not only as learners, but also in their everyday activities and interests outside of school, indicates true concern for their wellbeing. Valuing learners' opinions without always agreeing with them demonstrates the teacher's trust and confidence.

When rapport has been established, the process of establishing and building the teacher's leadership and influence is enhanced. To influence people, you have to enter into their world to lead, guide and pace their progress and earn their willingness to follow. However, it is difficult to influence someone when there is an emotional distance between you.

2.5.4 Reinforce positive behaviour

Rogers (2006, 125) suggests that teachers should acknowledge and affirm every learner's effort, helpfulness and contributions that benefit interactions in the classroom interactions, because these form part of the teacher's supportive and descriptive feedback. When learners are acknowledged and affirmed for their positive contributions, they are emotionally uplifted, assert Hook and Vass (2000b, 16).

When learners feel good about themselves, their positive belief in their own ability to achieve success is reinforced. Teachers can help learners realize that they are in control of their achievements by praising their efforts and allowing them to assess their own progress. Learners' emotional security is linked to their feelings of competence, expound Hart, Dixon *et al.* (2004, 175). Therefore, teachers have to design classroom activities to strengthen and restore the learners' feelings of competence in the learning tasks. This objective can also be achieved by surrounding the learners with prompts, for example, placing posters on the classroom walls conveying positive images that affirm the learners. When the focus is on positive behavior, a performance culture based on cooperation and positive

relationships is created in the class. When this culture is introduced, learners no longer have to be coerced to participate in lessons.

2.5.5 Encourage learners to make positive choices

Sprick (2006, 222) suggests that teachers should regularly remind their learners that positive choices produce positive results. Learners must be encouraged to make socially acceptable choices that may, in turn, promote good relationships and academic progress. When learners choose to cooperate in the classroom instead of being disruptive, they are displaying pro-social behaviour. Learners show their determination to solve a problem by exercising sound academic choices. Teachers should acknowledge them for these positive actions, but also hold them responsible for inappropriate behaviour and state the consequences of such negative behaviour.

2.5.6 Build self-esteem by motivating learners

Self-esteem is the way in which one views one's mental and physical characteristics, as well as the opinion one has of one's own self-worth. One's self-concept is developed at an early age and is influenced by the way we in which one is treated and spoken to. Our self-concept defines what we believe about our place in the world. This in turn influences our attitudes, and the latter becomes the driving force for our behaviour, articulate Alexander and Potter (2005, 76).

Responsible actions and accountability for one's actions lead to personal empowerment and control, explains Shindler (2010, 136). Developing self-esteem is vital in any situation, but even more so in the classroom, because it is here where teachers have the opportunity to influence learners to become productive adults.

Considering all the above, it is critical that teachers become aware of what and how they communicate to learners, both verbally and non-verbally. It is important for teachers to encourage both high achievers and low-achieving learners, because in this way they convey that *all* learners are important to them.

Learners with high self-esteem have confidence in their own skills and competence and the challenges in the classroom. These learners participate and even initiate communication with their teachers and peers. Confident learners do not hesitate to wager an opinion and pursue every opportunity that offers them scope to exercise their skills in order to grow. Moreover, they are intrinsically motivated to succeed, because they believe in their own competence and want to perform well at a task. Conversely, learners who have low self-esteem need external motivation to perform a task, because they have not yet discovered the extent of their capabilities. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2007, 93) enumerate the following examples of external sources of motivation for winning the approval of peers and the teacher, namely incentives like gifts, privileges, awards and recognition for learners' achievements .

Motivation, whether external or internal, is crucial for attaining success. Coetzee, *et al.* (2008, 104) suggest that teachers should make objectives attainable by creating a balance between easy and more challenging tasks. In this way, all learners may experience successful learning. The saying "success breeds success" rings true, because learners will only embrace the challenge to solve problems when they believe that they will succeed. When teachers introduce a cooperative goal and reward structure into class activities, learners will be more likely to see learning tasks as challenges than as threats.

Teachers need to ensure that learners consistently achieve success by encouraging them to reach challenging objectives and be prepared to give regular guidance and feedback. Having a healthy self-concept does not necessarily mean that one has to achieve every goal and live up to every expectation, articulate Hook and Vass (2000b, 26). It does, however, mean that one must move steadily towards the positive and ideal image that one cherishes of oneself. Teachers need to recognise the problems learners face as they strive towards self-improvement by planning classroom activities in which goals are attainable. By doing this, teachers will not harbour unrealistic expectations of their learners and the learners' chances of achieving success will increase. When teachers provide regular and positive feedback, learners develop a readiness to accept it, and at the same time it enhances their feelings of self-worth.

2.5.7 Establishing personal competence

Learners, who experience that their basic needs of love and belonging are met, feel that they have control over their own destiny and develop a sense of self-efficacy. Teachers can therefore contribute to their learners' feelings of self-worth by focusing on their progress and not only on the end-product, recognising each achievement and helping learners attain their goals.

Classes in school usually consist of learners with mixed abilities and various levels of motivation for learning. It is important for teachers to treat their learners with consideration and as of equal value. Hart, Dixon *et al.* (2004, 138) list the following practical principles that teachers can employ in the classroom, so that all learners will develop a sense of personal competence: structuring learning activities to be accessible to all; ensuring that learners feel comfortable and positive; and that the task is worth doing. Shindler (2010, 137) furthermore suggests that teachers should give learners the freedom to choose the appropriate behaviour that will increase the possibility of attaining success and provide clear performance objectives and targets, while continually assessing the learning process. When a teacher uses these instructional practices, learners have a clear understanding of the expectations held of them as well as the consequences of their behavioural choices.

Research has indicated a strong relationship between learner self-esteem and an internal locus of control, which means that learners should learn that their behaviour determines their achievement. Shindler (2010, 138) contends that learners who are intrinsically motivated will display behavior characterised by increased risk taking, as learners feel free to take chances which lead to creativity; increased expressiveness, as learners are encouraged to participate in activities; increased effort levels; higher levels of motivation; and increased responsibility towards and a love for learning.

2.5.8 Consistency

Consistency is vital for developing trust and compliance, states Leaman (2005, 12). Sprick (2006, 89) indicates that successful teachers clearly state their expectations of what constitutes responsible learner behaviour, develop classroom rules and procedures, and consistently provide learners with feedback. When your response to learner behaviour is consistently calm, firm and thorough, learners will recognise that you are in control, which inspires confidence in your abilities. Learners will then learn to trust the way you respond to them.

Roffey (2004, 88) suggests that the way in which teachers respond to immediate challenges in the classroom will determine the long-term outcome regarding learners' behaviour. In order to build successful responses in the classroom, a teacher has to acknowledge the potential, strengths and qualities of each individual, focus on positive behaviour, ascertain why learners display certain behavior, and take appropriate action. When teachers consistently deal with outbursts in a calm and confident way, do not engage in verbal battles, which usually lead to emotional outbursts, offer a safe solution to problems and listen to learners without taking sides, the learners will develop confidence in their ability to offer a safe classroom environment. Shindler (2010, 154) refers to expectations regarding behaviour as a social contract that promotes respect, teamwork and mutual interdependence, which builds pride in the achievements of the class.

2.6 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT COMMUNICATION

Petty (2009, 162) refers to "teacher talk" as the most commonly used teaching method, which offers both advantages and disadvantages. Teacher talk as didactic method helps to provide explanations and instructions, but does not provide an opportunity for learners to become involved or use their knowledge. Moreover, some learners have a limited concentration span, which makes it difficult for them to process much information.

- **People understand when you say something**

Teaching is a much more complex practice than merely talking or telling learners what to do, states Petty (2009, 163). Teachers are often under the misconception that learners understand what is communicated in the classroom. Saying something does not automatically guarantee that the message is understood. It involves the intentions of the sender as well as the interpretations of the receiver. Misunderstandings in communication often occur when the receiver fails to understand what the sender intended to communicate, explains Johnson (2006, 129). Both teacher and learner can ascribe the wrong meaning to a message. However, when there is trust in the relationship, communication difficulties can be minimised and overcome.

- **“More communication is better communication”**

The art of explaining difficult concepts does not necessarily entail that the teacher repeats the content several times. In many instances, too much talk may aggravate a situation. Philpott (2009, 2) argues that the teacher’s exposition is necessary and important when complex subject knowledge is clarified, to enable learners to move forward. The teacher’s explanation therefore needs to be clear and descriptive. When a teacher uses specialised subject language without thoroughly explaining the concepts, misunderstandings can occur. Petty (2009, 169) suggests that redundant information unnecessarily lengthens the explanation, which often confuses the learners. Communication is accelerated when the teacher uses language in the learners’ frame of reference and when the explanation is concise and in logical order.

- **“Teachers are born communicators”**

Teachers may be skilled in their subject knowledge, but may nevertheless lack the ability to make the content understandable to their learners. Rogers (2006, 104) suggests that teachers who communicate effectively are those who genuinely attempt to actively engage all learners and who are concerned about the progress of

all learners. In this regard, Petty (2009, 168) explains that communication is not a natural ability, but a skill that must be developed and practised. Classroom communication as a participatory event that increases learning should therefore be meticulously planned for it to be purposeful and beneficial to the objectives of the lesson, explains Philpott (2009, 3).

2.7 FACTORS INFLUENCING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN CLASSROOM

Petty (2009, 104) contends that experienced teachers prevent problems from happening through effective classroom organisation, which ensures successful lessons, develops good relationships and delivers positive interactions.

2.7.1 Teacher expectations

Teachers who have a strong commitment to act in the best interests of their learners have the power to expand learners' opportunities to realise their potential (Hart, *et al.* 2004, 170). These teachers have the ability to use their personal aspirations, achievements, experiences and the critical moments in their lives to inspire their learners to achieve their learning goals. Research indicates that when teachers apply their creative skills to generate interesting learning contexts, learners will most likely enhance their capacity for learning. Tomlinson (2004, 43) refers to these conditions as creating a *performance culture* in which learners can exercise their problem-solving skills in a safe environment.

Though teachers have the power to make a difference in the way learners view themselves, building high expectations is a joint venture, because the learners also have to believe in their own capabilities. Research has shown that what learners experience and learn in school often differs vastly from what teachers intended, because the learners' attitudes and motivation may undermine the teachers' objectives. In this regard, the perceptions of the self largely determine how much or how little learners achieve in class. Learners who experience low levels of success in class usually compare themselves negatively to the rest of the class, which in turn

contributes to lower self-esteem. Learners with low self-esteem often choose friends who also show little progress in class, as they are able to identify with them.

Considering the above, teachers will have to challenge learners to engage in the learning opportunities provided. Teachers must positively influence their learners, contribute to the learners' positive self-belief and feelings of personal competence, and instill in them an attitude that they can achieve everything that they set their minds to. Teachers can create a positive learning environment by communicating high expectations and affirming learners during classroom interactions.

The comments of some of my learners recently gave me much food for thought and reflection. They responded that I was often guilty of labeling them in a negative way, like calling them "air-heads". These labels categorise learners as capable or incapable. I came to realize that learners live up or rather "down" to the level the teacher expects of them. In this way, labeling becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. I would want to dispel these low self-perceptions by promoting in them a sense of self-worth, competence and dignity through an encouraging and approachable attitude.

2.7.2 Emotional intelligence of teacher

Teachers as secondary educators have the important task of providing the conditions and experiences necessary for learners to perform at high cognitive levels and to develop social skills that will enable them to deal with their emotional needs for security and belonging. In this regard, Coetzee and Jansen (2007, 44) articulate that: *"A teacher takes a hand, opens a mind and touches a heart"*.

Emotional intelligence refers to behaviour that indicates a high degree of mental and emotional competencies that enables one to reason objectively and identify and manage emotions effectively. Roffey (2004, 14) refers to emotional intelligence as an awareness of and the ability to appropriately express one's feelings and to conduct oneself well within an emotionally charged situation, while maintaining an optimistic outlook. Teachers who display emotionally intelligent behaviour are able to show respect for the unique abilities of their learners and render unconditional support.

Such teachers set the climate for effective classroom interactions by being assertive and maintaining discipline in a gentle, though firm, manner.

Teachers who behave with emotional intelligence are learner-centred, knowledgeable about various teaching and learning styles, and able to engage with their learners in meaningful interactions. Teachers who display these engaging qualities go about their tasks with confidence and enthusiasm that is communicable, and are flexible when creating learning experiences, because they are well prepared for their task and usually skilled in recognising their learners' needs. They employ the ensuing best practices with confidence and charisma for their classroom (Arnold 2005, 23).

- **Empathy**

The value of empathy is embodied in a highly attuned awareness of the learners' needs and the teacher's ability to create a climate of acceptance, validation and understanding of their learners' welfare (Arnold 2005, 162). Teachers who demonstrate caring are able to build supportive relationships with their learners. These teachers choose to reach out to help learners, accepting them just as they are, even when they do not approve of their behaviour. Carl Rogers views empathy as "*unconditional positive regard*", because it requires you to treat others respectfully and non-judgmentally, articulates Johnson (2006, 384).

Based on the aforementioned, I need to elaborate on the act of being non-judgemental in the classroom. Though it is the teacher's professional and ethical responsibility to guide and correct inappropriate behavioural patterns and thoughts, this should be done with respect.

- **Attitude**

The teacher who has the attitude that all learners are equally entitled to the basic rights of freedom of conscience, thought, expression and freedom from coercion, is able to set the platform for classroom interactions aimed at making learners feel

comfortable to express themselves. Being civil and using appropriate language and behavior are prerequisites for meaningful dialogue between teacher and learner. When a teacher is cordial to his/her learners, it is highly likely that they will reciprocate in the same manner.

2.7.3 Teacher capacity building

Teacher capacity building is illuminated in the words of Johan Wolfgang Von Goethe: *Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Willing is not enough; we must do.*

Teaching is a professional activity that includes different core activities, namely intellectual and personal interactions, ethical aspects and social elements. The teacher has to demonstrate the ability to process, understand and effectively communicate knowledge. Moreover, it is expected of teachers to establish and maintain healthy personal relationships, by discerning what is beneficial for their learners to develop their academic and social skills.

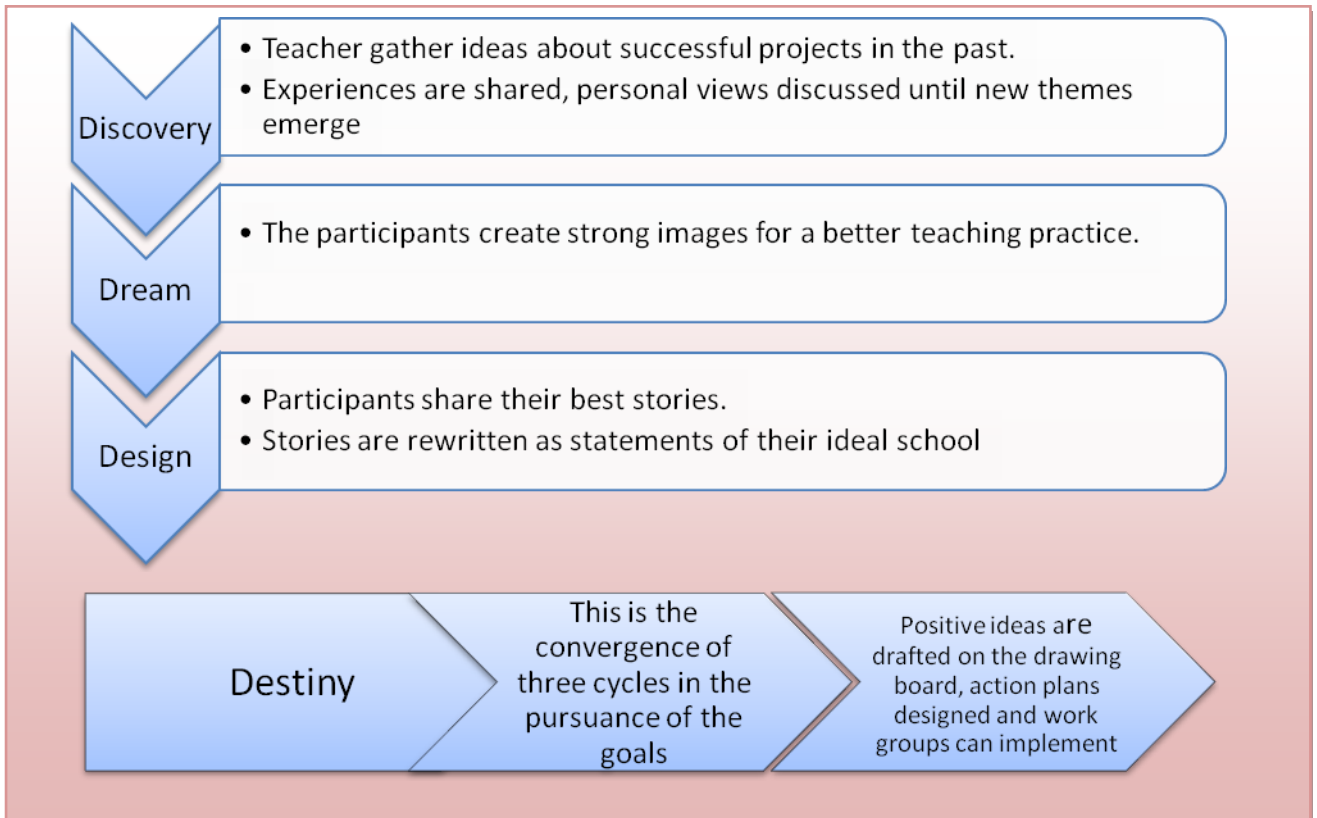
Teaching is an exacting profession. It demands that teachers remain committed to deliver high standards, often amidst confounding conditions such as utilising limited resources in their quest for learners to succeed. It takes considerable courage and effort for a teacher to remain focused on the positive aspects of teaching and to remain dedicated under challenging circumstances and the often negative comments from parents, employers and the media. The adage “you have to walk a mile” is appropriate here to appreciate teachers’ work. Teachers are not merely fountains of knowledge or disciplinarians, but also designers of social environments and experiences where learners can connect in a rapidly changing world, according to Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 220). Furthermore, teachers are also researchers, planners, implementers and assessors who measure the effectiveness of their learning outcomes. The demands placed upon teachers are rarely acknowledged, therefore the valuable contributions of teachers should be appreciated. When teachers allow themselves to reflect and critically assess their personal and professional experiences in the workplace, they will come to appreciate their contributions to improving learning outcomes.

Recognising and affirming collective beliefs, purposes and strategies for improving teaching is a powerful way of building teachers' personal and professional capacity, state Carr, Fauske and Rushton (2008, 107). Notwithstanding the aforementioned, research indicates that people are initially excited about innovation; intellectual energy is invested, information is gathered, and meetings are held in the confidence that the desired outcomes will be attained. Having studied school improvement plans, Gordon (2008, 113) concludes that there is a vast divide between plans and the implementation thereof. Teachers are often left feeling frustrated, having encountered challenges such as too little support, time constraints and numerous interruptions.

In terms of building capacity, our staff embarked upon repairing and painting our building and improving the premises. We involved members of the wider school community, for example, the School Governing Body, parents, staff and learners. Though all stakeholders realised the urgency of the project, it took considerable effort to implement the project. Individual teachers, whose enthusiasm had not been stymied, initiated individual efforts to paint their own classrooms. Finally the project took off and was recently completed. With every classroom painted, a positive learning environment was created.

Though the need for change starts with one person, it cannot be implemented and sustained by one person alone. Gordon (2008, 116) asserts that teachers are traditionally independent workers who place a high value on the practical results of their work. Change has the connotation that there is something wrong with the *status quo*, meaning that teachers are doing something wrong. This may be the reason why people tend to oppose change, as it may reflect their deficiencies. Carr, *et al.* (2008, 114) suggest a form of "appreciative enquiry", which focuses on the positive aspects within schools. In this way, individual teachers may develop enough confidence to initiate change. The aforementioned authors demonstrate how appreciative enquiry can be done in a cyclical process:

FIGURE 2.3: 4D Cycle – For appreciative enquiry (adapted from Carr, *et al.* (2008, 117))



Initially, when I embarked on the research process, I was sceptical about the prospect of effecting changes in my classroom practice. When I realised that I had been viewing my practice from a deficit approach instead of an asset-based approach, I felt encouraged to undertake this self-reflective action research project. While studying the literature and closely observing and reflecting on my own actions, I began to tap into my own potential, with much support and collaboration from participants like my learners, supervisors and colleagues. I believe that most teachers may become susceptible to change if they know exactly what it involves, how it will benefit their current practice and what measure of support they may receive from progressive friends and colleagues.

2.7.4 School culture and climate

*In pro-active behaviour we
take actions to create a
future we want, or avoid a
future we don't want*

- Jack Canfield

School culture and climate refer to whole-school actions, interactions, policies, beliefs and priorities, states Gordon (2008, 134). For classroom communication, interactions and relationships to be successful, the school community has to adopt a collaborative approach in formulating a vision, developing policies, and setting up structures within which the school can operate as a team to improve communication within the school, with the long-term aim of creating a culture conducive to achieving excellence.

Research bears out that when teachers undertake initiating change in their school in isolation, they achieve limited success only. Carr, *et al.* (2008, 125) point out that school management, teachers, learners and community members need to engage collaboratively to make the best decisions that will ensure that all learners have the opportunity to be successful in their school. Because change in the classroom and ultimately in the entire school is a continuous process of development, it cannot be achieved even by the most unrelenting efforts of one educator only. The commitment of most members of the school community is crucial for the successful development of a school culture. The incentive for involving yourself in a process of classroom change is that it is empowering, improves self-efficacy and promotes personal and professional advocacy, because in order to effect change, you will be going against the grain and challenge the *status quo*.

2.8 CONCLUSION

Teachers have the challenging task of ensuring that all learners reach their potential. Through effective communication, challenging interaction and healthy relationships

this goal can be achieved. The quality of verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as innovative classroom interactions, can lay the foundation for learning. Questioning is an important aspect of the communication process, because it adds fluidity to the process. Empathic listening and regular and meaningful feedback underpin the development of trust between the teacher and learners.

The learning theories have provided the basis for an understanding of the learners' cognitive, social and emotional development and its relevance for teaching and learning. Teachers can draw from a reservoir of knowledge contained in the learning theories to offer explanations for learner behavioural patterns in the classroom and to then devise teaching strategies that will benefit all learners.

Teachers yield tremendous power in the classroom and can influence learning through holding high expectations, providing unconditional support and displaying a caring attitude towards their learners that will ensure that all learners have equal opportunity to achieve success in the classroom.

In Chapter Three, I will explain how qualitative research, in particular action research, enabled me to explore how classroom communication, interactions and relationships could improve the learning outcomes in my classes.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to give an account of what had been foremost on my mind as a class teacher, and how I intended to address these concerns. In my teaching journey, I had been experiencing a sense of hopelessness, a notion that I had not really been making any significant difference in the learning and lives of my learners. More often, I viewed obstacles as insurmountable rather than as challenges that could be overcome. While I believed that I did my work to the best of my abilities to ensure that the learners understand the learning material, for a while I had been posing the question to myself whether I could do more to engage and motivate my learners in order to improve their learning outcomes.

These self-reflections led me to embark on a research journey with my learners in a secondary school in the Northern Suburbs of Port Elizabeth, Nelson Mandela Bay. My self-reflections and classroom observations, as well as the responses of learners through questionnaires, interviews and their reflective journals, provided fuel for the research and simultaneously generated knowledge that could be utilised to improve my classroom practice. The learners, who served as participant researchers, were required to reflect on my communication and how it impacted on their learning. Greenwood and Levin (2007, 216) assert that this is a process of social transformation that requires an openness on the part of both the researcher and the researched.

3.2 MY CONCERN

I was concerned that my learners entered the classroom with a set of factors over which I had little control. These factors were their potential that they had been born with and the environment they had been born into. In my deliberation I realised that there were some aspects of their living environment over which I had control, namely the learning environment at school. My focus would be to create a more democratic

environment in which learners could present their personal opinions and experiences in order to participate fully in classroom activities.

Furthermore, I felt that I was not living my educational values in my communication and interactions in the classroom, because I was not always listening to the voices of my learners about what they considered to be important.

My values of democracy in education occupied the centre of my practice and research. I aimed to reflect on my practice, giving quality research to the reader, and simultaneously creating knowledge that could help me in my classroom. Learners became co-researchers as they reflected on my teaching and how it impacted on their learning. Learners became involved, because it was a means of improving their own learning. In this regard, Greenwood and Levin (2007, 216) declare that this kind of social transformation requires that teachers become self-transformed and encourage their learners to improve their attitude towards learning.

By encouraging my learners to reflect on my communication, I helped them develop their own theory of what constitutes effective communication as well as a critical approach so that they would no longer rely only on the opinion of others, but form their own opinion, assert McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 166). Ultimately, a school culture may develop through such interactions in which learners will think independently, question intermittently, and improve constantly. Through action research, I might be able to contribute to educational transformation so that learners' voices would be heard in the classroom. The learners would possibly be contributing to a creative process, as part of 'human capital'; in which they would be valued as contributors towards a value system, namely the educational process. In this regard, Graca Machel, well-known children's rights activist, states that Africa must invest in its youth and developing them as an important resource (SAPA. October 7, 2010).

3.3 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

How does my communication style influence the interactions and relationship structures in the classroom?

3.3.1 Secondary questions

From the primary question the following secondary questions developed:

- *How can I improve my communication and interactions?*
- *How can improved classroom communication, interactions and relationship structure enhance learning outcomes?*

3.3.2 Research aim

The aim of this study is to determine *the ways in which my communication style influences the interactions and relationship structures in the classroom.*

3.3.3 Research objectives

To determine:

- *What I should do to improve my communication and interactions in the classroom.*
- *In which ways can improved classroom communication, interactions and relationship structures contribute to enhanced learning outcomes.*

3.4 RESEARCH PARADIGM

Lichtman (2010, 7) indicates that a paradigm is a way of viewing or making assumptions about the world. It provides a framework that researchers can use to organise and categorise observations and reasoning against a basic set of values, elaborate De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2002, 266).

I chose to work within the qualitative research paradigm, because it is concerned with how people experience, understand, interpret and participate in their social and cultural worlds. The qualitative paradigm enabled me to describe the reality in the classroom, the role of the researcher, and the values, concerns and perceptions of the participants. Lichtman (2010, 10) explains that this approach is a strategy that represents the multiple realities of the participants, with the aim of understanding and interpreting their social interactions.

3.4.1 Qualitative research approach

This research challenged me to examine myself and exhibits my willingness to change, to create a platform for my learners' voices to be heard, and to make a contribution to educational transformation, even if only in a small way. In order to do justice to the study and give a voice to my learners, I contemplated various research paradigms, concluding that for the study to be credible, I had to honour the responses of the learners and all other participants. I have chosen the qualitative research paradigm, and in particular the participatory action research approach, as seemed to be the most suitable to answer my research question because:

- **Qualitative research has a descriptive core**

Lichtman (2010, 120) contends that the purpose of qualitative research is to offer an in-depth description and understanding of human interaction. The dynamic element of qualitative research would allow me to explore communication, interactions and relationships in the classroom, because the classroom landscape is fluid and changes from moment to moment. My self-reflections, conversations with colleagues and the views of the learners would shape this study.

Qualitative research relies on eye-witness accounts of events that are usually rich in detail and are in narrative form, states Springer (2010, 143). In this regard, Lichtman (2010, 5) declares that qualitative research relies a great deal on the voices of humans; its emphasis is on words; and it makes the influence and voice of the researcher more evident. Collaborative action research constructs knowledge that is

relevant in the lives of people who are involved in the research, explain Lankshear and Knobel (2004, 68). Furthermore, participatory action research is not only developed from the lives and experiences of participants, but is written as a narrative that makes it understandable. Its immediacy makes it possible to change and act upon data, with the aim of improving lives, contends Gordon (2008, 70). The self-reflective context of this study implied that I would be relying on meaningful interactions with my learners and would necessarily have to be flexible in the way I collected relevant data in order to make my learners comfortable and confident enough to respond in an honest manner.

- **Qualitative research is dynamic**

This method of inquiry is fluid and dynamic; always posing questions and exploring novel ways of answering them, states Lichtman (2010, 13). Qualitative research integrates investigation with actions; it offers critical feedback from participants enabling the researcher to monitor progress through extended dialogue and rigorous analysis, explain Greenwood and Levin (2007, 5).

Participatory action research would afford me and those learners who were willing to participate an opportunity to change our practice through interactions in which a common goal was pursued, namely improved relationships, which would lay the foundation for more effective learning outcomes. I would be shaped by my learners, and they would in turn be shaped by my communications; collectively, we would learn from the experience. The collaborative nature of action research is suitable for the classroom, because when teachers and learners work together in the classroom and observe ineffective practises, they are enabled to rectify what is not beneficial and reconstruct meaningful engagements.

Atweh, Kemmis and Weeks (1998, 24) emphasise the fact that qualitative research is emancipatory, because it aims to liberate one from negative and unproductive behaviour. I hoped that it would enable me to change from the negative communication and interactions that were limiting both my own development and also the development of my learners. It might be emancipatory for my learners, because the study would give them the opportunity to express their level of

satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the classroom. Greenwood and Levin (2007, 6) confirm this point, stating that qualitative research is a liberating process that is sustained through the self-realisation of the participants. Learners would be given the platform to critique my current practice; this would be an empowering experience, because they would be able to offer suggestions to improve the *status quo*. I undertook to achieve this through interviewing the learners as well as reading their journal entries.

Participatory action research combines 'research with action', because the participant is central to the process, explains Gordon (2008, 71). I believed that this research method would reveal my learners' immediate and honest responses to classroom interactions. Additionally, the participant-researchers or 'insider'-researchers (the teacher and learners) combinations bring various benefits to the research, such as the knowledge that is relevant to their lives, developed from their experiences, written and presented in understandable ways, and that is current, because changes are effected as the research proceeds.

- **Qualitative research is critical in nature**

Studies must be critical in nature, state Atweh, *et al.* (1998, 24), because they help researchers identify ineffective practices and learn to ascribe to improved forms of behaviour. The key aspect of critical research is its interest in "enlightenment," which challenges the idea of truth and objectivity, states Mills (2007, 6). This method marries research and practice in such a way that participants are enabled to challenge historical and cultural truths in order to articulate their own lived reality, explain McNiff and Whitehead (2002, 33). I chose qualitative action research as the most appropriate method for this study, because it would challenge the researcher's traditional practices while reflecting the truth about the current situation.

This study would be a journey of discovery for the researcher and participants, not only to improve their educational situation, but to become "self-critical agents" who provided feedback to inspire change. Gordon (2008, 62) confirms that critical engagement within the situation will provide the tools for exploring how communication impacts on learning outcomes and how negative communication may

diminish learners' capacity in the classroom. The key elements of participatory action research make it a suitable vehicle for exploring, because it provides a passage for mutual learning, while it explores the notion of power in the classroom. These distinctive features of action research allow the researcher and the learners to find ways of communicating and interacting that may provide the learners with a sense of self-determination in and co-ownership of the classroom.

- **Qualitative research is democratic and empowering**

When learners exercise their voice in the classroom, participatory action research addresses the aspect of social justice; as I reflect on my communication I am advocating social change for a better learning environment in which oppressive behavioural patterns and debilitating conditions are removed, advocates Mills (2007, 7). Considering that there is no blueprint of an ideal classroom; one can only aspire to work towards just classroom practices that serve learners' best interests. This is by no means an easy undertaking, because teacher-researchers have experienced that the mandate to teach leaves little time and energy for further exploration in the classroom.

James, *et al.* (2008a, 2) illustrate that educators who dedicate time and effort to participatory action research produce valid, credible and reliable results. This methodology is suitable for solving locally identified problems and encourages personal self-reflection. Participatory action research as a 'growth-producing tool' would enable researchers to pose the question whether they are prepared to sacrifice their position of power, embedded in their position as teachers, and the authority it confers on them in the classroom. The negative comments and feedback in the classroom were cause for concern. Stenhouse (cited in James, *et al.* 2008, 9), a pioneer of action research, explains that "we shall only teach better if we learn intelligently from the experience of shortfall". In this regard, Greenwood and Lewin (2007, 7) elaborate that collaborative action research addresses values that are committed to changing the original status of the group, while everyone takes responsibility for generating new knowledge. I was encouraged that the research would yield positive change, because James, *et al.* (2008a, 2) expound that participatory action research incorporates and pursues the values and principles of

human justice, because of a belief in human capacity and a steadfast obligation to social justice and equity. In its pursuit of professional development, participatory action research seeks to be accountable to the community by honouring and simultaneously empowering all the participants.

I was optimistic that through the process of participatory action research, I would be transformed and empowered to improve my own learning and that of my learners. Participants in action research gain disproportionately; in this study, the researcher would be producing a project based on the collaboration and investments of others. Mills (2007, 6) expounds that participatory action research is focused on illumination, liberating individuals from the constraints of habits, and seeking reform. In order for collaboration to be effective, I had to be aware of and value the energy, attitudes, dynamics and talent that the participants contributed to the project in order to develop a shared understanding of the topic.

- **Qualitative research is non-linear**

I hoped that the participatory action research methodology would enable me to use cycles of change to explore ways in which to express myself better, structure interactions, and build healthy relationships, based on mutual respect, while learners would be learning by exploring their potential. The researcher would adopt self-reflective actions, involving identifying and explaining a concern and developing interventions in order to improve the practice. McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 100) state that the process encompasses 'systematic action-reflection cycles' of articulating concerns, producing action plans, acting and gathering data, and reflecting on the effectiveness of the changing practice. The process is ongoing; the end of one cycle of action-reflection heralds the beginning of a new one.

3.4.2 Social Constructivist discourse

Qualitative researchers who conduct research within the post-modern or constructivist paradigm propose to describe a reality from their own perspectives, influenced by their experiences, elucidates Lichtman (2010, 11). The researcher's role is critical, because it constitutes his/her world view; it is subjective and socially

constructed. The researcher adopts an activist's stance, advocating for human rights and recognising the need for co-operation and collusion with the participants. This study thus had a political agenda, as it was interested in creating a platform for the multiple voices of the learners in the classroom to construct knowledge of their lived realities.

The social constructivist paradigm indicates and encourages continuous co-creation of self and social science, contend Denzin and Lincoln (2000, 929). It stems from the belief that, knowing the self and knowing about the subject, are interlinked. The constructivist approach invites researchers to reflect on their research method with the aim of finding new ways of exploring and creating knowledge. This method validates the voices of all participants in this study as a particular way of knowing; their opinions about classroom communication as they experience it were encouraged.

3.4.3 Critical Approach

McNiff and Whitehead (2002, 30) declare that the critical approach enables people to find ways to create their personal and social realities. When they take action and critically reflect on these actions, they are able to reconstruct relationships to create a more equitable dispensation. For the purpose of this study, I chose to situate my study within a Critical Theory approach. I viewed this particular methodology as the most acceptable means for a self-reflection of my communication, interaction and relationship structures in the classroom, because it will allow me to give a critical explanation of my classroom communication, enabled me to question actions that had been taken for granted, and allowed me to implement improved actions in the classroom, as suggested by McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 140). This process involves reflections and actions that will emancipate researchers from their traditional approach in the classroom, as well as from self-deception, declare Somekh and Lewin (2005, 90). This approach will enable practitioners to collect and analyse data with a measure of objectivity, while looking at their practices from a different point of view. The fact that data is collected during research makes interpretation immediate, as there is no reliance on a distant memory. I envisaged that my participants would

be enriched by the study, emerging as more accomplished learners and teachers who would continuously reflect on their actions.

Somekh (2006, 7) states that action research is not value neutral, but it involves a high level of reflection and sensitivity to the role of self, and is rooted in the values of the participants. According to Lichtman (2010, 89), action research executed in the critical theory paradigm aims to change the social context, while striving for social justice. This implies that the researcher's identity will be influenced by the interpersonal and professional interactions of the participants.

3.4.4 Action Research

McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 8) describe the process of action research as an energising form of professional investigation where practitioners examine their own practices and find ways of developing and practising their educational values. Somekh (2006, 7) confirms that action research as methodology will help one focus on the changes that need to develop in one's natural social situation at school, therefore gaining access to important information. In this regard, Gordon (2008, 80) asserts that action research can be beneficial in various ways, namely creating a mind-set of school improvement, promoting the process of decision-making, enhancing self-reflection in the classroom, impacting directly on classroom-practice, empowering teachers and creating a positive school climate.

The rationale for choosing action research as methodology has been the need to improve on my teaching practice. Action research has been described as "multi-layered", because it is concerned about improving one's own practice, in this study, my classroom teaching, as well as improving writing about one's practice. According to McNiff and Whitehead (2010, 27), action research is concerned with real-life practices and generating new knowledge about practices in order to improve these. In this chapter, I will attempt to unpack the multi-faceted nature of action research by means of a literature review and describe my own observations and research in the classroom.

Secondly, I chose action research as my preferred methodology, because it affords practitioner-researchers the opportunity of knowledge creation as they are telling

their own story, explaining why it is unfolding the way that it is and offering an important examination of their teaching practices. McNiff and Whitehead (2010, 69) explain that because personal and practical knowledge is now regarded as valuable, teaching is being acknowledged as research-based practice. In this study, I realised the importance of engaging in a discussion with myself (as participant-researcher), with my learners (as participants and co-researchers) and with my colleagues (as critical friends) in order to give an account of my learning in a manner which would contribute to educational knowledge where the participants' voices are amplified, and that this knowledge creation might ultimately lead to change in the classroom.

The third reason for my choice is that action research, as a systematic and disciplined process allowed me to research a topic that was not known before, showing the validity of the knowledge, and putting it under the scrutiny of other people. It was a way of creating new knowledge and theory about my personal practice, because this knowledge was situated in my professional experience and personal expertise. It was personal, because it described the way I thought about things and what guided my actions. When I talk about my work as 'how I understand what I do,' I am theorising about my practice, explain McNiff and Whitehead (2009 12). There is therefore no separation between theory and practice; the one is created through and because of, the other.

- **Ontological and epistemological values**

Whitehead and McNiff (2006, 22) acknowledge that our ontological values are the deeply spiritual connections between ourselves and others: the values that influence how we perceive ourselves and others.

I subscribe to the view held by Day (2004, 8), namely that teaching is a courageous profession and that the best teachers are those who are committed and passionate in their pursuit of the "betterment" of the individual. This is what is referred to as democratisation in education, where teachers, in partnership with their learners, and other stakeholders, embark on an educational journey in order to lead more meaningful lives. Moreover, teachers are viewed as key assets in creating a learning

culture. Through their commitment, knowledge and skills, learners develop self-esteem, achieve success and realise learning possibilities for the future.

McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 14) state that when research is undertaken with the purpose of helping people learn to improve their processes and living conditions. It becomes praxis, and is a morally committed action. This study enabled me, the researcher-teacher, to make decisions in terms of how to communicate and interact with my learners in order to benefit their learning. Action research helped me to deconstruct, synthesise and de-synthesise my own thoughts and actions and simultaneously allowed me to reflect on my own actions with the intention to improve these. In the process, I questioned whether I was employing democratic forms of communication, whether I was considering my learners' needs and well-being when planning my teaching strategies and when introducing new ways of communicating. Greenwood and Levin (2007, 213) assert that this human inquiry creates experiential knowledge about a common subject, as teachers and learners become immersed in each others' realities.

My ontological commitment to democracy in education developed from the context in which I found myself. Over the previous few years, in the face of poor learning outcomes in secondary education in general and in particular at the school of which I was teaching, battling with limited resources, I had been asking myself the question, *"How can I improve my communication, interaction and relationship structures in the classroom to enhance learning outcomes?"* With this question in mind, I had been questioning my values of being optimistic in reaching the minds of learners by improving communication, hopeful of effecting a change in their attitudes through classroom interactions, and a self-belief that I was able to communicate the importance of effective learning and sound educational values to my learners by building healthy relationships.

Day (2004, 18) declares that teaching has at its core the vision of improving the current situation and the social responsibility of creating a better world. He further contends that passionate teachers are never satisfied with the *status quo*, but undertake a journey to improve the learning of their learners. Passionate teachers hold the abovementioned goals, despite the constraints of limited resources, the

often poor socio-economic conditions of the learners, and an education system over which they hold little control.

For my continued development and self-enrichment, I was compelled to ask the following questions in my self-reflections, as articulated by Day (2004, 22) namely:

- *Who am I as a teacher?*
- *How well am I doing my job as a teacher?*
- *What motivates me to remain a teacher?*
- *What must I do to be a good teacher, and what actions can I take to improve my situation?*
- *What are my expectations for the future, and how do I feel about them?*

While my enquiry would focus on my communication, interactions and relationship structures in the classroom, I would be revisiting and redefining my standards and judging my actions. I was putting my methodology, educational, and social standards under the scrutiny of others in order to improve.

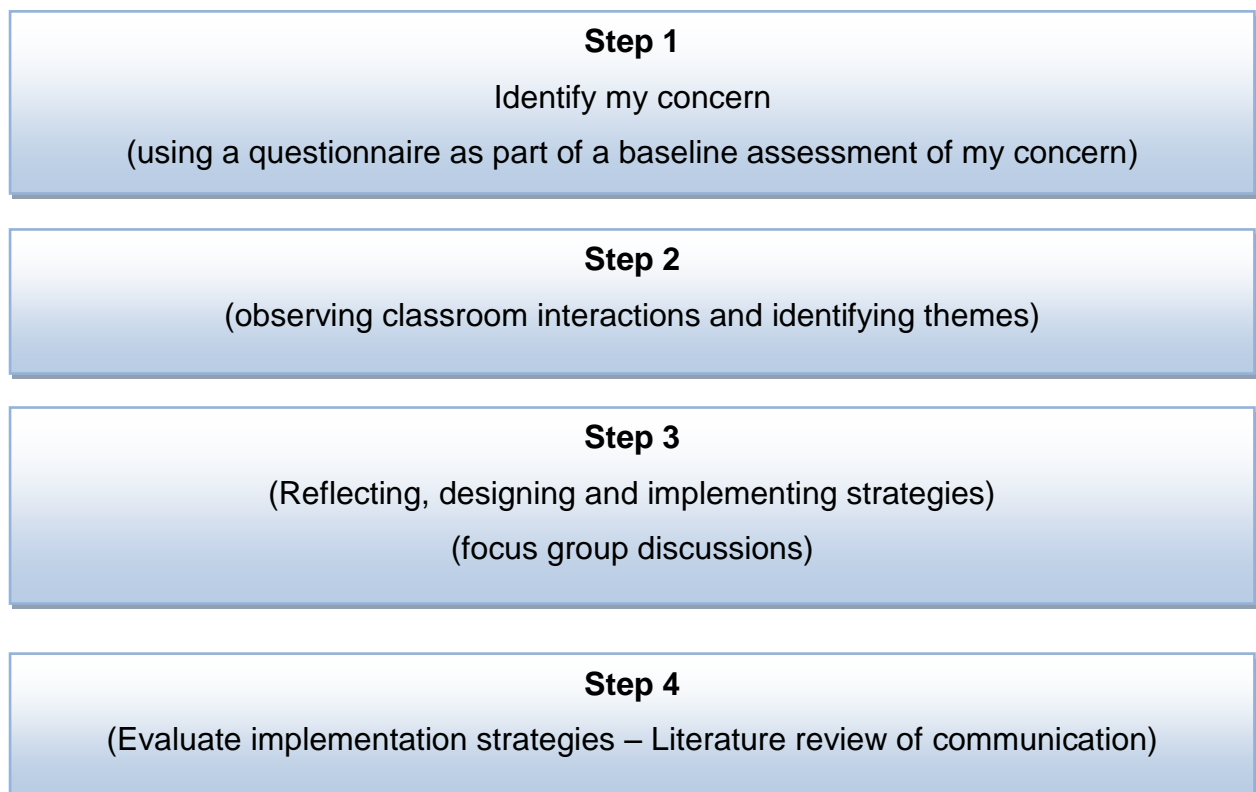
I needed to “see” myself interacting through the eyes of my learners’ understanding of what effective communication is and how it could improve their learning and my teaching practice. I undertook to draw on their comments, responses, actions, body language and their interactions with other learners to build a body of knowledge of my communication in the classroom. Considering my current practice, this would help me decide if it reflected my values by seeing an improvement in my learners’ learning. The way in which I would come to know my practice better, was through a dialectical form, where I was at the centre of the study, because I would be testing my values against my own practice. McNiff and Whitehead (2002, 21) refer to the aforementioned as a way of creating one’s own theory, based on the beliefs and ideas of researchers and participants. I chose to understand knowledge and the creation thereof from the perspective offered by Dewey (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 59), namely that action research approaches science as a way of studying people who value democracy as a process in which all levels of society contribute in order to improve all aspects of their lives.

3.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

Research design refers to a plan or blueprint for selecting participants and data collection procedures to investigate the research problem, explain De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 137). Research design specifies how the research will proceed; how the participants will be involved and what methods of data collection that will be utilised.

In this study, my purpose was to find answers to my research question: *How can I improve on my interaction, communication and relationship structures in the classroom?* I plan to apply the cyclical action research methodological approach, as espoused by McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 9), which will encompass the following:

FIGURE 3.2: Action-reflection cycles



The research design comprised four steps as illustrated in Figure 3.5.2, based on the work of McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 9), i.e. the process of 'observe-reflect-act-evaluate-modify-move in new directions' as an Action Reflection Cycle. The objective

of this study was to observe the researcher interacting in the classroom, develop intervention strategies for effective communication and, based on research findings, evaluate my current practice with the aim of improving it. Educational practice has a progressive option of discovery and unveiling the truth, explains Freire (1994, 7) which offers the teacher hope and an imperative to transform the teaching reality. Mills (2007, 158) contends that the hope of making a difference in the classroom is that critical resource that sustains teachers amidst many challenges while doing research.

The revelatory, gnostic, sociological and transformative nature of education implies that the journey of discovery is made in the company of others and is steeped in history and culture, with the expectancy to improve the classroom reality. Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 32) posit that transformative education requires that teachers become “agenda-setters and change-makers,” based on an optimism that they can contribute to change. This study was an attempt to find new ways of interacting in the classroom that will possibly achieve the following:

- Recognising a realistic view of contemporary society and the knowledge and skills that learners require to participate in that society.
- Nurturing learners who understand that they determine their own world by their actions.
- Creating learners who understand that their needs are linked to responsibilities.

3.6 SAMPLING

A sample is a group of individuals who participate in a study and is representative of a population, states Springer (2010, 100). According to Johnson and Christensen (2008, 244), the purpose of sampling is to find ‘information-rich’ individuals to study, who are available and accessible. The cost of locating such participants must be reasonable.

For this study, I selected a sample that would serve the purpose of this study, meaning that the participants would be able to supply answers to the research questions, while cost and other limitations are also met. The sample used for this study involved the learners from two Grade 10 and two Grade 11 classes, totalling approximately 140 learners, whom I teach at a school in the Northern areas of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan. I chose purposive sampling because I wanted to discover and understand how my learners experience my communication in the classroom therefore the criterion was that they had to be familiar with my classroom practice.

De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 335) contend that purposive sampling supplies a detailed range of information about a context that is typical and divergent. The researcher chose to use purposive sampling, because it is composed of elements that contain most of the population, namely learners in my class. These learners would be requested to participate by completing questionnaires, interviews, and discussion groups to glean information for an in-depth interpretation and understanding of the topic. This small group would serve as a sub-group of a larger body of learners.

In qualitative research, the sample size is usually small and requires more intimate contact with the participants. In this study, I purposefully selected the senior learners whom I was teaching, because De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 335) explain that this is the 'setting where the process of communication and interaction was likely to occur'. In addition six colleagues were selected particularly for their expertise knowledge of the research topic, their articulate way of formulating opinions and their passion for pursuing excellence in communication. I believed that the participants would provide important, specific and rich information on the research topic.

3.7 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

The aim of gathering data was to generate evidence on how my learning was developing and how my learning was influencing my learners. According to Whitehead and McNiff (2006, 64), data collection can be compared to journalism, as the shared aim is to find information on a specific subject, to present the facts as well as one's interpretation of it. In order to produce journalistic work of a high standard,

one needs to carry and use the appropriate tools, such as a notebook and a camera, to capture the actions as they occur. This process requires fieldwork and strong observation skills, appropriate documented research, and accuracy reporting to establish the reporter's credibility.

Action researchers monitor their practice and collect data by means of qualitative (words or narratives) surveys and assessments. For the purpose of this study, I chose to use the following data instruments:

3.7.1 Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a survey establishing the different opinions from people who provide anonymous replies, explains Macintyre (2000, 74). Johnson and Christensen (2008, 170) describe a questionnaire as a 'self-report' data-collection method completed by participants in order to obtain their thinking, feelings, beliefs, values and perceptions on the research topic.

Johnson and Christensen (2008, 172) furthermore identify important principles that need to be considered when constructing a questionnaire. A short overview follows of the authors' suggestions, which the researcher diligently applied in her questionnaire, included in this study as an appendix: the questions were formulated to explore the research topic; the questions were carefully formulated to match the learners' level of understanding; the questions were kept short to avoid confusion and did not contain emotive words, which may lead them in a particular direction. Open-ended questions were used for their exploratory quality, because it allowed the respondents to elaborate on their feelings and experiences.

A letter was drafted to the district manager of the Department of Education, to the principal where the research was conducted and the parents requesting permission to do the research (see Appendix 1, 2, 3 & 4). All parties acceded to the request and a questionnaire in Afrikaans was constructed seeking to elicit responses from the learners on issues pertaining to my communication, interactions and relationship structures in the classroom.

Guided by these principles, I emerged with considerable data. Using questionnaires enabled me to collect data in a short period of time. The feedback helped me understand the learners' feelings and perceptions of and attitudes to my communication, interactions and relationship structures in the classroom. The data collected formed part of the baseline assessment for this study. The responses obtained from the questionnaire became a vantage point from where intervention strategies could be planned to improve the current practice.

3.7.2 Observations

In order to illustrate the value of observations, Lichtman (2010, 163) has extracted the following quotations:

"There is an art to living fully and paying attention to the details" – Anne Copland

"I hear and forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand" – Confucius

According to Johnson and Christensen (2008), observation is defined as watching the behavioural patterns of people in certain situations, to gather information about a specific topic. Thomas (2009, 183) regards observation as one of the most important ways of collecting data in social research, as it affords one the opportunity to systematically observe particular kinds of behaviour in a natural setting. Lichtman (2010, 165) furthermore declares that observing humans in their natural environment helps one understand the intricacies of human behaviour and the interaction between humans. Participant observation is typical of the qualitative paradigm, because data is in the form of narratives, through which the researcher is emotionally engaged in the lives of others, declare De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 279). In this study, the researcher diligently and carefully observed how the learners reacted to the classroom communication and systematically recorded in a journal what was seen and heard.

For this study, however, unstructured observation was used, to enable the researcher to immerse herself in the social situation in order to understand what was

happening. De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 280) state that participant observation seeks to develop in-depth insight into the research topic. It requires that the researcher forms part of the experiences being studied, with the goal of setting a platform for open-ended inquiry. Somekh and Lewin (2005, 138) argue that the subjectivity of the researcher as the observer, observed and interpreter of data may be a problematic issue; however, in this study, the researcher was able to gain unique insights into the behaviour and activities of the participants.

Johnson and Christensen (2008, 212) state that when conducting qualitative observation, it is imperative that one recalls exactly what one has observed. For this purpose, the researcher made copious notes of what was observed and transcribed these notes soon afterwards to ensure that important details were not overlooked.

Somekh and Lewin (2005, 141) state that careful observation is the foundation of good teaching. In this study, by observing the classroom practice, the researcher was able to identify strengths and weaknesses and devise interventions. Additionally, the researcher enjoyed the benefits of participatory observation, as listed by De Vos *et al.* (2008, 286), including its direct application and flexible nature, which enabled the researcher to revisit the research question; and its wide application for social science, particularly suitable for gathering information on non-verbal behaviour.

Because participant observation was largely used in this study, it was important that it was done as stringently as possible to maximise the efficacy thereof. In order to strengthen the objectivity of data, the researcher found it necessary to conduct in-depth interviews.

3.7.3 Interviews and focus group discussions

Macintyre (2000, 84) describes an interview as face-to-face interaction that allows the interviewer to ask carefully prepared questions and, in addition, to probe the respondents for further information. It enables the researcher to gather information from students who find it difficult to share their thoughts and feelings. De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 292) emphasise that the interview does not only have a central focus, but also

contain a description as well as a reflection of the participants' experiences. This is the most important goal of the interview: to allow the participants to articulate their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Lichtman (2010, 140) adds that the goal of an interview is to explore the shared meanings of people who live and work together. For this reason, I believed that this method of data collection would provide me with the appropriate tools to harness the experiences of the participants. Johnson and Christensen (2008, 207) refer to qualitative interviews as 'depth interviews', because they can be used to glean in-depth information about participants' thoughts, reasoning motives and feelings about a topic.

Since an interview takes place in a social setting, the sampling strategy that the researcher used was to actively recruit groups of grade 11 learners in a class to participate, particularly because they already have a relationship that offers a level of confidence in the group's ability to freely discuss and interact explains King and Horrocks (2010, 67). It was essential for the interviewer to create a relaxed atmosphere in which the participants felt safe and confident to reveal their feelings, intentions, and understanding of the research topic. For this reason, the researcher in this study chose a language teacher employed at the relevant school to conduct the interviews, because it was essential that a measure of trust and rapport existed between the interviewer and the interviewees. I believed that the learners might reveal information during these interviews that they might not have divulged in the classroom situation.

For the purpose of this study, I selected the guided approach as the most suitable, because the interviewer would remain focused by posing predetermined questions in the course of the interview. Johnson and Christensen (2008, 205) confirm the advantage of standardised open-ended interviews as it increases comparability, reduces bias, allows for reviews of the instrument, and facilitates the organisation and analysis of the data. To augment the collecting and recording of data from the interviews, audiotape recordings were made, with the knowledge and permission of all the interviewees, which were subsequently transcribed into written text, as

suggested by De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 304). The following open-ended question, aimed at gaining insight into the learners' perceptions, was put to the participants:

“How do you experience the teacher’s communication in your classroom”?

Lichtman (2010, 144) suggests that the following interviewing techniques and strategies are important to remember when conducting interviews, namely “grand tour questions, which enable the interviewer to learn more about the respondent; specific questions, which generate specific and relevant information; and comparisons to similar situations”. In this study, the interviewer used probing for clarification and elaboration (*could you explain*) and to gather underlying meanings. The challenge for the interviewer was to remain impartial by allowing the learners to relate their experiences in their own words.

In addition to interviewing the learners, a focus group comprising of six teachers was formed to obtain perceptions and opinions on the research topic. The aim of a focus group discussion is to invite professionals who have experience of a particular topic to share their knowledge, and to learn from one another, states Lichtman (2010, 152). The focus group is defined by De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 306) as a technique of inquiry that uses group interaction in a non-threatening way. The researcher commenced the process by explaining in a covering letter what the purpose of the research and the role of the focus group were (see Appendix E), and thereafter acted as a facilitator of the discussion, occasionally asking a question or making a summary as suggested by Basit (2010, 104).

Interaction within a focus group was critical, because this could generate more discussion and insight. In this study, the purpose of the focus group used in this study was to gain insight in what participants' understanding of effective classroom communication was. The group interaction initiated further dialogue on the subject. The focus group discussions elicited diverse viewpoints on the topic, which stimulated further inquiry. People who could provide in-depth information on the topic in a relatively short time were specifically selected, as suggested by Gordon (2008, 84). The knowledge garnered from these groups discussions was empowering and

provided continuous data for the purpose of improving the classroom situation and ultimately for whole-school improvement.

Johnson and Christensen (2008, 209) contend that the focus group discussions are able to provide general and specific background information about the research topic. Such discussions stimulate creative ideas; diagnosis and discuss potential problems during the research, and generate programmes for further research. In this study, the focus group consisted of six colleagues and homogenous in terms of experience and expertise, met in comfortable surroundings.

De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 306) contend that a focus group discussion facilitates a process of sharing and caring. Bringing people together constitutes a powerful tool for investigating complex behaviour. This study benefited from the efficacy of the focus group; through listening in a friendly and respectful manner. Krueger and Casey (in De Vos, *et al.* 2002, 307) concur with this view, suggesting that this method is useful when the object is to: uncover a range of ideas or feelings that people may have about something, uncover factors that influence opinions, behaviour or motivation; encourage ideas to emerge from the group.

I regarded this method of data collection as suitable for my study, because the focus group members were carefully selected for their expertise knowledge on the topic, articulate way of formulating opinions, and passion for pursuing excellence in communication. During the interviews, the researcher remained in the background, while the participants did most of the talking, yet guiding and encouraging the course of the discussions, as suggested by De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 293). The researcher allowed the participants to relate their experiences, while remaining unobtrusive, yet guiding and encouraging the course of the discussion. The following questions were asked to guide the discussion:

- *How can communication, interactions and relationships improve learning outcomes?*

- *What is your deepest concern about how effective communication is practised, interactions are conducted and relationships currently developed in the classroom?*

The focus group sessions were initially scheduled for 30 minutes, but provision was made for longer sessions when the need arose. I was guided by De Vos, *et al.* (2002, 315), who suggest that the researcher listens carefully to whether the participants held similar or contrasting views on the subject, because it is from these similarities and diverse opinions of participants that themes and patterns emerged. The discussions were recorded on tape to ensure uninterrupted data capturing, producing a complete record and freeing the researcher from taking notes. The researcher transcribed the tapes after each group session while the interviews were still fresh, and subsequently made them available to the participants for their verification at the following group discussion.

Though research relies largely on the written word, visual information can be very powerful and comes in different forms.

3.7.4 Visual data

Lichtman (2010, 174) believes that the images captured by researchers could augment and enliven the words, sending more powerful messages of a reality. Visual images come in different forms, namely images that already exist, for example, photos, images that one asks the participants to create, images that the researcher creates, images that the researcher asks the participants to create, images that the researcher creates, or images created by the researcher's critical friends or the focus group. I asked my learners who agreed to participate in this study, to draw an image or choose a picture that depicted my communication, interactions and relationship structures in our classroom. We undertook to construct a 'visual gallery' in the classroom, and both learners and colleagues were invited to offer their interpretations of my communication style, interactions and relationships.

Visual data form concrete evidence that may generate alternative interpretations of the topic under investigation. I have compiled video footage of 'a typical day in my

class'. I then submitted the data for scrutiny to my colleagues. Their comments and critique proved to be invaluable for this study, because critical friends offer a different perspective, ask provocative questions (even controversial ones), and could become advocates for the success of one's project, states Gordon (2008, 27).

I chose to make video recordings of interviews, as this would enable me to capture how I interacted and related to my learners, implement intervention strategies, where necessary, and capture any changes in the learners' responses to my communication. It could be used to test my claim to knowledge, and also a standard of judgement when presenting a personal theory to show that particular interventions have led to positive forms of behaviour.

3.7.5 Research diary

A research diary was used to record thoughts and feelings about daily events, focusing on issues relating to the research.

I started a research diary to chart the progress of the study, because it would express the feelings associated with the actions. This would serve the following purposes, as explained by McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (2003, 115); providing a detailed account of particular events and situations with descriptive data that I may use in written reports; providing a log of anecdotes, exact words and the subjective impressions of actions as they unfold in the classroom; providing an introspective and self-evaluative account of my experiences, thoughts and feelings in order to understand my own actions; allowing me to distance myself from my action in order to evaluate it.

My research diary became my social conscience. It was particularly helpful in guiding my behaviour in the classroom. It spoke to me whenever I was acting contrary to the principles of democracy and justice in the classroom.

3.7.6 Learners' journals

The learners' journals are their personal narratives, perceptions and experiences in the classroom. The researcher refrained from being prescriptive by allowing them to write about the research topic in their own way. I have, however, experienced how difficult it was to sustain the learners' interest for a long period. The journals were particularly helpful as it contained a record of the participants' feelings and impressions about the researcher that they would not divulge in a face-to-face interview.

3.8 VALIDATION OF MY ACCOUNT OF LEARNING

Whitehead and McNiff (2006, 97) suggest that validity entails establishing the truth value or trustworthiness of a claim to knowledge and involves a process of thorough interrogation. Validity is concerned with the accuracy of the research findings, meaning that an account is true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena that it is intended to describe or explain. Obligated to report and interpret the realities as truthfully as possible, I undertook to use my values of fairness and integrity as living standards of judgement for generating and interpreting the evidence.

Lincoln and Guba (in De Vos, *et al.* 2002, 351) propose the following model to ensure the trustworthiness of a study, namely:

- *Credibility*: a true reflection of the findings.
- *Transferability*: applying a method to achieve applicability.
- *Dependability*: establishing the consistency of the findings.
- *Confirmability*: establishing whether the data support the general findings.

Cresswell (2005, 196) recommends that more than one strategy be used to check the accuracy of research findings. When researchers declare their bias, they bring into the study honesty and openness, which will resonate well with the readers. I believed that learners might be viewing my communication in a negative way,

making me vulnerable to their feedback. My admission to this preconception could be used as a strategy to check the accuracy of my research data.

The use of multiple research methods, or triangulation, is a strategy to improve the validity of qualitative research. The purpose of triangulation, according to Johnson and Christensen (2008, 280), is to overcome the weaknesses of one method with the strength of another.

Another way of improving authenticity is for the researcher to spend a prolonged time in the context under investigation and portrays the situation in detail. Research findings conveyed in a rich, in-depth, descriptive style may transport the reader into the context, thus creating a shared experience.

McNiff and Whitehead (2005a, 52) suggest that authentication should, whenever possible, include participants and the researcher, signing and dating one's records. When recordings are made of conversations, the participants should countersign. Outside observers could also be asked to authenticate, as this would lend more validity to the data.

I applied the concept of 'replication logic', as cited by Johnson and Christensen (2008, 282); the more times a research finding is shown to be true with different people, the greater the confidence can be placed in the findings, as it is applicable in a broad sense. I therefore used different groups of grade 10 and 11 learners, from different subjects and abilities to establish how they experienced my communication style and interactions in the classroom. I undertook to augment this method by the interpretations of the focus group, consisting of colleagues who were valued for their experience and expertise.

The purpose of this self-reflective study was to seek the improvement of my practice. McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 116) claim that one's first validity check has been done when one has shown evidence of improvement in the workplace. In addition, I produced evidence of my own reflections and the responses of my learners and

colleagues, transcribed into documentation. I ensured that the learners made copious notes of incidents and interactions in their research journals.

A second validity check is social validation, measured by the criteria of comprehensibility, authenticity, truthfulness and appropriateness, as suggested by Habermas (cited in McNiff and Whitehead 2002, 88). This implies that the researchers must act rationally, consider others' opinions, operate in others' best interests, with the aim of transforming the current situation into a better one.

McNiff and Whitehead (2006, 103) suggest using both self-validation, by stating personal convictions, as well as social validation by critical friends. The evidence of my investigation was subjected to rigorous scrutiny by various critical friends, educated audiences and colleagues.

3.9 ETHICAL MEASURES

Ethics refer to a system of moral behaviour. Research ethics provide researchers with a code of moral guidelines on how to conduct research in a morally acceptable way. McNiff and Whitehead (2002, 88) refer to some principles of ethical research, namely the promise of confidentiality; negotiating access with authorities, participants and parents; safeguarding rights and assuring good faith; and respecting dignity and integrity and maintaining the trust of participants.

Johnson and Christensen (2008, 101) explain ethics as the morals and rules that help us defend the things that we value. They identify three basic approaches to ethical research, namely, the deontological approach, which takes the position that ethical issues must be judged on the basis of some universal code; ethical scepticism, which claims that no tangible or inviolate code of ethics exists; utilitarian approach, which claims that ethics are dependent on the outcomes of the study for the research participants and the benefits that may arise from the study.

I was guided by a combination of the above-mentioned; upholding the universal code of truth; recognising the benefits that an ethical study would bring to the school community; and respecting all participants who availed themselves unselfishly.

Research ethics, according to Johnson and Christensen (2008, 102), function as guiding principles for conducting research, ensuring that morals and values. Therefore, it is important to identify ethical concerns such as the relationship between society and science; professional issues; and the treatment of research participants.

- **Professional concern**

Increasingly, researchers are guilty of misconduct in terms of 'fabrication, plagiarism in proposing, reporting and reviewing research results, and the tendency of researchers to manipulate data or selectively report data, state Johnson and Christensen (2008, 103). Research has shown that there are various ways in which one may engage in fraudulent activities, namely overlooking others' use of flawed data, and changing the design and results of a study. Fraudulent conduct on the part of researchers can have a detrimental effect on the integrity and could damage the researcher's reputation and his/her professional career.

As an educator, I was concerned about upholding and maintaining a study that would capacitate my learners and the researcher, as well as the school community, which in turn might lead to continuous self-renewal. In this regard, I endeavour to undertake quality research by conducting the study with sensitivity, respecting the school timetable and in my report, honouring the opinions of all the participants.

- **Treatment of research participants**

Johnson and Christensen (2008, 108) state that the treatment of research participants is a key issue in research. In educational research, the ethical issues may not be as obvious or are physically and emotionally harmful as in medical research, but require the same understanding. The researcher sought to maintain the continuous participation without detracting from the main focus, namely the education of the learners.

Johnson and Christensen (2008, 109) suggest that the research participants must give their informed consent before they participate in a study or before a researcher may use existing records for research purposes. Informed consent is more than an agreement to participate (Somekh and Lewin 2005, 3). Because knowledge confers power, the researcher needs to be guided by the principle of respect for the participants when collecting data. Therefore, the latter should understand what they are agreeing to.

In this study, the participants were given a choice about participating in the study, declared their willingness to participate without any coercion, as suggested by Lichtman (2010, 56). Seeking consent was important, because of the unequal power embedded in the relationship between the researcher and the learners. I was concerned that in view of the inequality of the relationship, the learners might feel coerced, which could influence their responses. This investigation was guided by a code of ethics that addressed the need for confidentiality, voluntary participation and anonymity, as well as guaranteeing participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time.

- **Concepts of privacy**

Privacy refers to having control over and access to information about the participants. It includes the time at and circumstances under which information is shared with or withheld from others.

For the purpose of this study, individuals' response to sensitive questioning was protected; however I made use of interviewing, entailing face-to-face contact as well as video-taping classroom interactions. I needed to record the spontaneous responses of the learners in order to ascertain the quality of communication and interactions in the classroom.

I ensured the protection of the participants' rights to confidentiality as well as their right to withdraw from the research if they should so desire. I was guided by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's rules and ethical code pertaining to

qualifying for a Master's Degree, as well as my personal commitment to integrity, sincerity and social justice throughout this study.

3.10 DATA ANALYSIS

Lichtman (2010, 195) proposes that the goal of qualitative analysis is to condense a large volume of data, to enable researchers to interact with it in a meaningful way.

James, et al. (2008a, 85) compare data analysis to the work of an archaeologist, because data comes bundled with irrelevant material that needs to be sorted and resorted until the researcher gleans new insights and perspectives. Data collection and analysis are iterative processes that happen concurrently; meaning they are ongoing circular processes. The researcher continued gathering and sorting the data until new understandings were formed.

Springer (2010, 383) defines data analysis as a process in terms of which the researcher sorts and resorts data until overarching conclusions or theoretical understandings emerge. This method comprises three steps, namely **organising** the information; **identifying themes** by means of **codes**; and **interpreting** the data.

For the purpose of this study, I made use of the data analysis process postulated by Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtler (2010, 180), common to most qualitative studies. The researcher proceeded in ongoing investigative spirals. The first step in the process was the organising of the data; I started reading the responses to the questionnaires and interviews and made an in-depth study of individual and group discussions. This required working inductively, reading the data repeatedly to get an overall view of the data, followed by drawing diagrams and mind-maps that assisted me in forming an understanding of the transcripts. I proceeded by organising the data into files, jotting notes in margins, and coding the data and placing it into different categories.

The second step encompassed the identification of themes through a system of coding. The codes consisted of words or phrases that captured a pattern of ideas, grouped together until a theme emerged. This was an ongoing process in which categories were compared and new categories were created as new data emerged.

This method enabled the researcher to distinguish similarities and identify causalities and consequences. James, *et al.* (2008a, 88) are of the opinion that a code allows researchers to carefully organise and document their work in categories, which enable them to review the data with a fresh perspective. The codes were attached to different categories, and overarching themes emerged. As the data was examined repeatedly, more nuances of the phenomenon were uncovered. The process was repeated until no new categories emerged. The final step involved writing up my interpretations while remaining true to the participants' views, respectfully detailing their experiences and comments.

3.11 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I presented the reasons for choosing action research as my research methodology. I based my choice on the fact that it was most suitable for finding answers to my research question: ***How can I improve my communication style, interactions and relationship structures?*** I defined the process of action research, expounded the characteristics thereof, and illustrated the benefits of participatory research.

I explicated the research design, the varied data collection tools and strategies, demonstrated their philosophical underpinnings, and justified their appropriateness for this study. I remained cognisant of ethical measures, and complied with the various requirements. The processes of validation to ensure authenticity, was also discussed.

In the following chapter, the action plan depicting action cycles designed for the classroom will be discussed. The research findings will be discussed in detail, supported by participants' comments, extracts from journals, and views from literature.

CHAPTER FOUR

MY JOURNEY

*He who looks outside
Dreams*

He who looks inside

Awakens

– Carl Jung

*Carr, Fauske and Rushton
(2008, 1)*

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter of this study presented the research design and methodology. This chapter will focus on the research findings derived from learners' responses to questionnaires, in-depth personal interviews, focus group discussions and an outsider witness. A literature study was undertaken to help me define more exactly what was necessary to illuminate and address the research question and to ensure that the study was undertaken in context with what was already known about the research topic (Thomas 2009, 30). According to Cresswell (2009, 25), a literature review connects a study with the larger, ongoing dialogue in the literature, which provides a framework for establishing the relevance thereof and a benchmark for comparing the research findings.

The research comprised four research cycles (see Figure 3.1) with **Step One** of the action research concerned with identifying the problem with classroom communication, interactions and relationships in order to improve the classroom practice. The study took the form of ongoing "action-reflection-cycles" (adapted from McNiff and Whitehead 2006, 9), exploring the topic in order to find answers to the research questions. The data-gathering process in **Step Two** utilised the following tools: questionnaires, observations, journals, and focus group discussions. The

cycles were ongoing and provided opportunity for reflection and developing interventions in **Step Three** and in **Step Four**, after which changes were implemented in the classroom practice.

Analysing the data collected, a central theme emerged, namely: **Effective communication is pivotal for successful interactions and relationships that will ensure improved learning outcomes.**

4.2 MY JOURNEY

My journey started when I paused to think about my classroom communication and what my learners' views were thereon. I began an earnest introspection into my communication and interactions and whether I was doing enough to inspire my learners. I had reached a crossroad in my professional life, feeling dissatisfied with my day-to-day classroom practices, as well as the negative and unmotivated attitudes of the learners. I was not concerned only about the general lack of discipline and motivation among learners at my school, but also about what I could do myself to improve my classroom practice.

The journey on which I embarked, often took surprising turns, low dips and peaks that offered me insights into landscapes that would surprise even the most seasoned traveller. The contours of the land I travelled and explored were written in small episodes called cycles. My travel companions, the learners whom I taught, were the ones who shared their views, insights, experiences and anecdotes of the classroom practice. My colleagues offered critical feedback, scrutinised the data to determine whether it was addressing the research question by listening, observing, questioning and reflecting to establish if the evidence was relevant and meaningful.

This chapter will chart the individual and social encounters of the research and my diary entries on some of the highlights of my journey. The nature of this study is reflective; therefore, not about preconceptions or generalised research findings. It will, however, illustrate my teaching context and describe changes in my thinking about the classroom practice and the learning resulting from discussions and inquiry, as suggested by Lichtman (2011, 171).

I agree with Wedell (2009, 14) that schools as educational institutions serve both as sites for the perpetuation of society and as sites for changing, developing and creating a better society. Through effective communication and interactions, the classroom must become a centre for:

- creating knowledge through enquiry and discussion;
- teaching learners how to learn;
- teaching learners to express themselves;
- supporting learners' participation in the learning process.

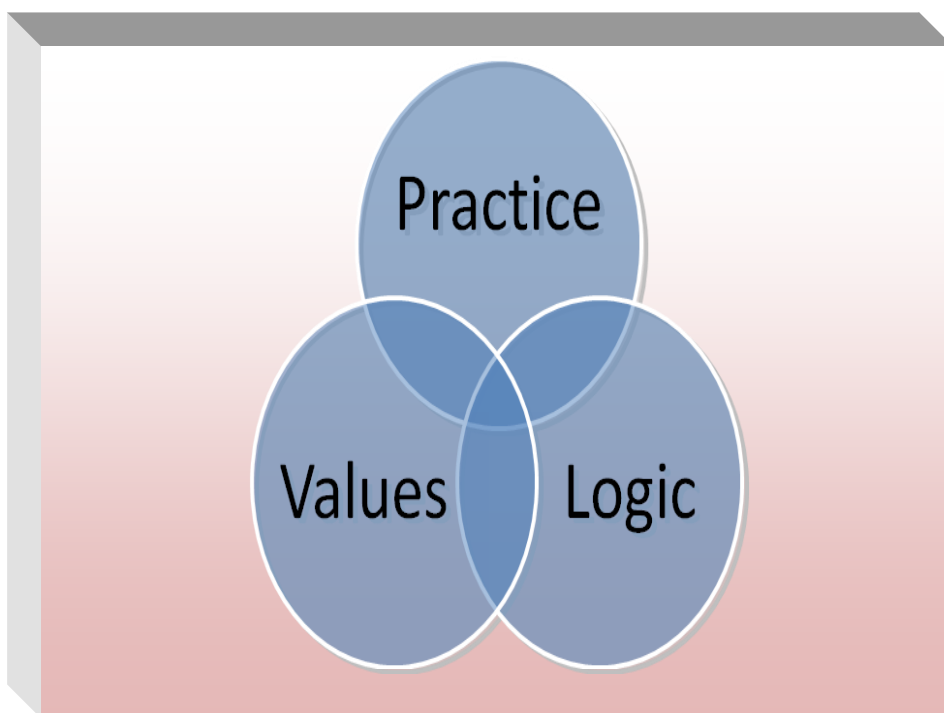
The research context was relevant and immediate, in the sense that it afforded me opportunity for self-reflection, in collaboration with my Grades Ten and Eleven learners. The collaborative nature of the research awakened the learners to their important role, as they reflected and recorded some of their classroom experiences and interactions, as suggested by Lichtman (2011, 142). The learners completed a questionnaire (see Appendix C) which formed the baseline assessment for the study. The responses of the learners provided ample information on which to base the itinerary for my research journey. This process filled me with apprehension, because learners are known to often express themselves; in outspoken, tactless and even extreme terms. However, I soon realised that the data provided by the learners, in the early stages of the data collection process, stimulated the research and guided the ensuing cycles.

This study focused on my communication as practitioner in the classroom, describing classroom circumstances, interactions and interventions that had considerable influence on learning outcomes. The process of action research enabled me to plan and implement interventions to improve practice. In this regard, Pine (2009, 31) articulates that there is growing recognition that teachers should change and reform education from the inside, rather than have reform imposed upon them from external sources.

The research compelled me to listen to my learners and in that way focused my attention on important aspects of my instructional practices. Through reflection I was able to closely monitor myself in action with my learners, recognising how my own actions and didactical strategies affected their actions. As I listened and read their responses, I made new discoveries about my learners, my teaching and about myself.

Data collection started in May 2010 and continued throughout the study. I was guided by the interrelatedness of my values and logic, and that my values defined my practice. To illustrate this, I use the following diagram from McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 9):

FIGURE 4.2: Interrelatedness of values, logic and practice



The process of action research revealed my philosophical stance towards the world, namely the democratisation of society, and explained my attitude of enquiry, which enabled me to question and improve my personal and professional ways of thinking and acting. This study embodied social action, in which my personal energy was utilised to reflect on classroom activities, plan interventions, and assess the

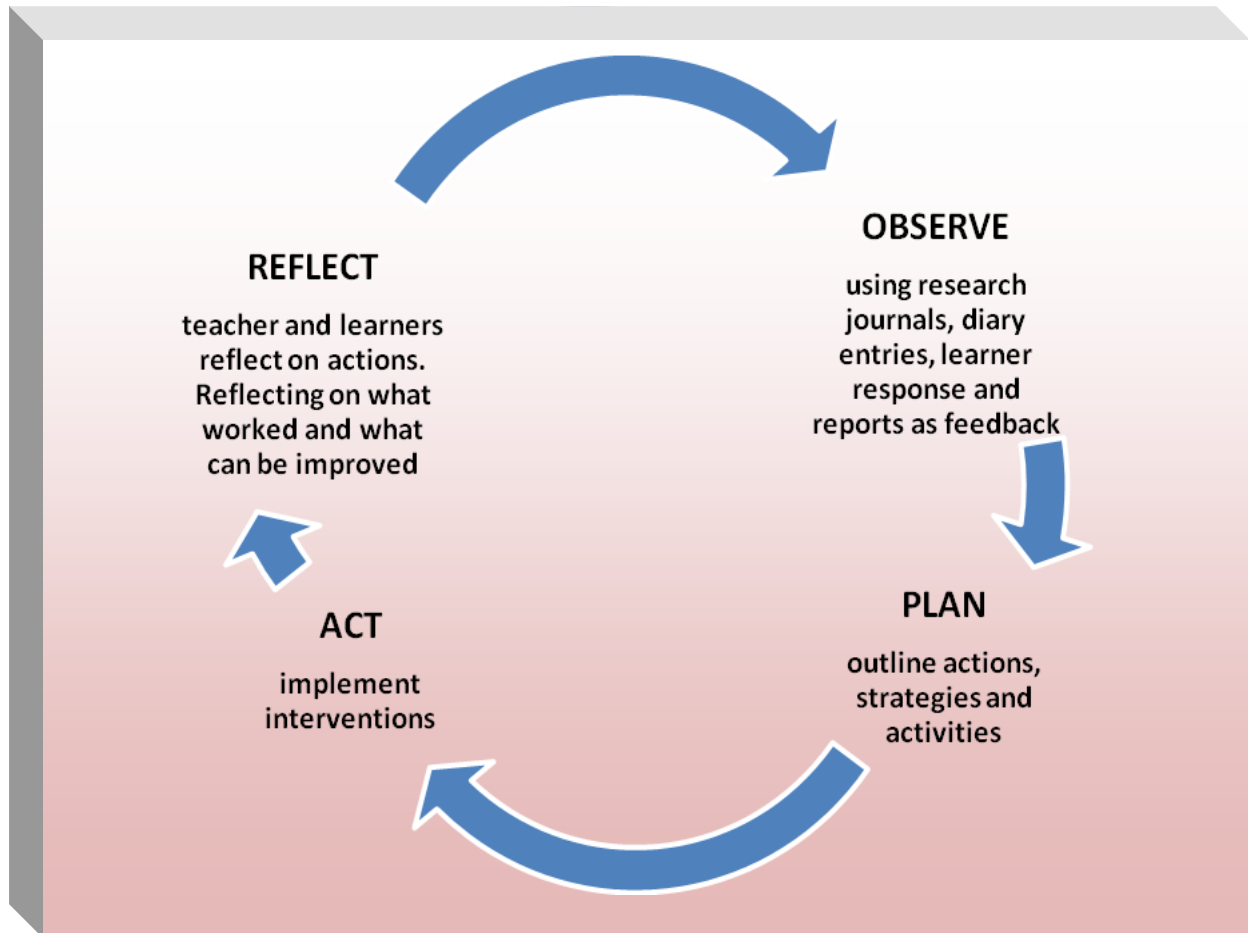
outcomes. Moreover, I was driven by a sense of wellbeing and fulfilment when I realised that I was able to make a meaningful albeit small contribution to teaching.

This study afforded me as researcher, together with the participants, an opportunity to reflect on my classroom practice, study related literature and, more importantly, consider alternate strategies to build and improve relationships. It is in line with the view of Conner and Clawson (2004, 3) on successful learning, namely that it happens in the company of others; what we choose to learn, depends on who we are, who we want to become, and what we care about. Gimbert (2002, 2) terms it 'the social curriculum', in terms of which cognitive growth occurs through social interaction and causes profound changes to occur in the attitudes and mindsets of the researcher and the participants.

In the ensuing paragraphs, the educational sites are mapped in the form of cycles depicting the contours of academic, social and emotional landscapes.

4.3 ACTION PLAN

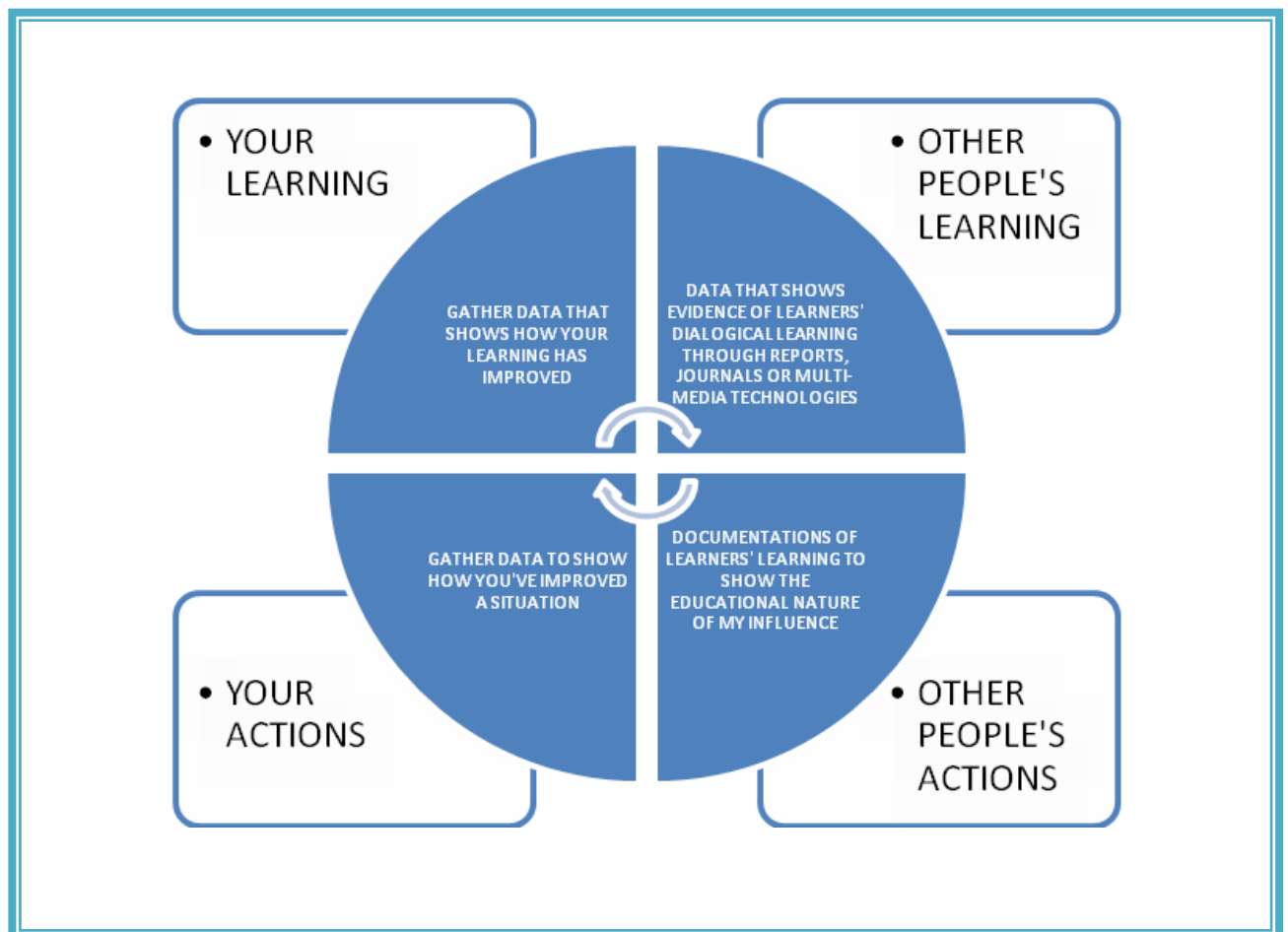
FIGURE 4.3.1 Action-reflection cycles



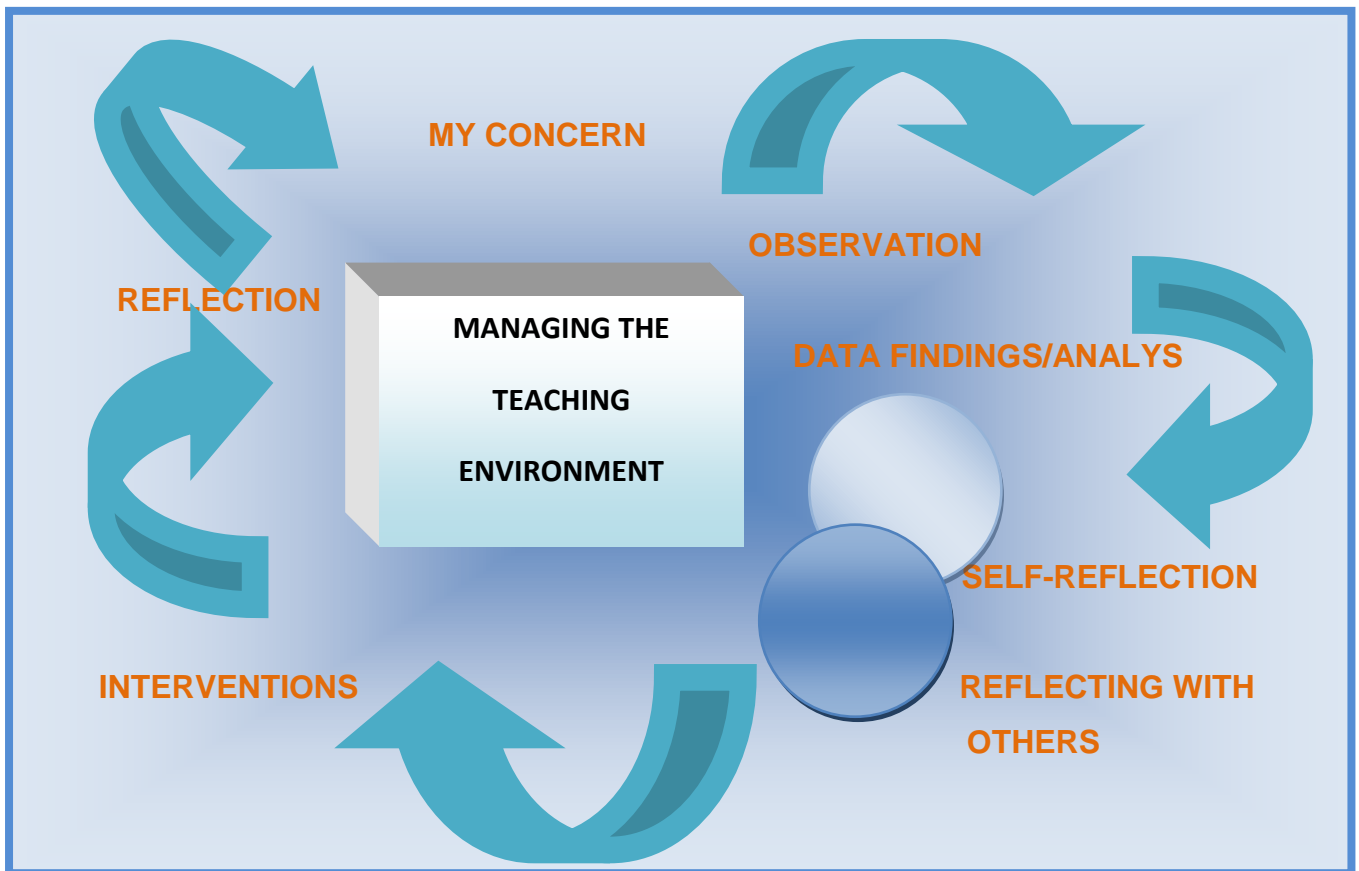
I needed to devise an action plan to show how the class was engaged in gaining a better understanding of how communication influenced interactions and relationship structures in the classroom. My action plan illustrates how the research was set out and how it proceeded in a systematic way (McNiff and Whitehead 2005, 26). It shows what the goals were and indicates the steps taken to achieve these goals. The action plan functioned as a story-board that received its directions from the classroom reality. The action plan furthermore offered enriching material, which lead to a better understanding of the communicative practice in the classroom. Moreover, Somekh and Lewin (2005, 7) emphasise that educational research is not concerned only with the immediate activities of the teachers, learners and schools, but also with life-long learning.

The action plan followed the cycles set out in Figure 4.3, encompassing observation; taking action; reflecting upon actions; and keeping records of the learning taking place. Developing an action plan required considerable thought and planning. The action plan demanded a clear focus, and purposefully pursued the improvement of learning outcomes. The ensuing paragraphs will relate data that shows the changing relationships in the classroom and how the learners were affected by it. The following is an illustration of this ‘transformational learning’, adapted from McNiff and Whitehead (2010, 144).

FIGURE 4.3.2 Transformational learning



4.3.3 Action-reflection cycle one



4.3.1.1 My concern

I was concerned that not all my learners were participating in lessons. I believe that learners should enjoy the opportunity to contribute to knowledge construction in the classroom. They must feel free to form an opinion and have the boldness and conviction to share it with the rest of the class. I was concerned, as McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 133) explain, that I might not be fully living my personal values of freedom, fairness and participation in the classroom, as too few learners were engaged in learning activities.

4.3.1.2 Observation

I employed the following methods of gathering data in the classroom:

- Writing reports of some interventions, teaching strategies and learner activities.
- Video- and voice-recordings.
- The researcher's diary and the learners' journals, comments and responses.

From the video recordings, I observed that too few learners were actively participating in lessons. Some learners were fidgeting and distracted, chatting to others while lessons were in progress. Others learners were clearly intent on disrupting lessons.

- Some learners were talkative and disruptive while lessons were in progress.
- Learners were not asking questions or responding when questioned by me.

4.3.1.3 Data gathered from questionnaires

- **Learners: Describe how you experience the educator's classroom.**

Some learners felt reluctant to come to my class, because they felt that there was too much work. Other learners wrote that they did not understand the terminology that the educator used. One of the learners wrote, "*Ek is totally weg*". ("..... I am totally lost"). Other learners cited that I spoke too loud and shouted. One learner stated, ".... *Ek voel om te leer in 'n goeie atmosfeer*". ("I want to learn in a pleasant atmosphere"). Some learners felt that I often criticised them, making them feel bad. One learner responded, "*die juffrou druk jou soms af gee jou name wat jou sleg laat voel*" ("The educator sometimes calls us names, which makes us feel bad").

4.3.1.4 Data gathered from interviews

- **Educators: What are your deepest concerns about communication in the classroom?**

Most educators felt that "*we do not reach the learners*". One educator expressed his concern that "*we are going nowhere slowly*". The general concern expressed by the

group was that educators had to re-connect with their goals and how they would achieve those goals in the classroom.

The general perception was that learners were stuck in a “*comfort zone*”. The educators felt powerless to do anything to address the situation. Some educators attributed the *status quo* to the learners’ use of slang, which caused miscommunication. Educators felt that “*positive symbols of respect*”, namely language, etiquette and role models, were disappearing and were being supplanted by “*popular culture*” (fashions and trends).

The majority expressed the concern that educators lacked the inclination or vision to address the communication problems in the classroom. There was consensus among my colleagues that change always required courage and a collective effort from all the stakeholders at school. The educators expressed the desire for the focus group discussions to be ongoing, because of the platform it provided for initiating change.

4.3.1.5 Data gathered from video footage

The video recordings of classroom actions further mapped the educational journey I had to undertake. Viewing video recordings helped me identify my strengths and weaknesses. The data analysis process served as a form of catharsis: “*I felt myself being opened like a seed, exposed and vulnerable. This was a personal epiphany where I was given the opportunity to ‘step outside myself’ to objectively evaluate myself in order to emerge as a better person and educator.*”

Video footage highlighted the following aspects of my classroom interactions:

- My voice was overpowering, and I talked too much.
- Some learners fidgeted about, while others looked bored.
- When learners were disruptive, I would single out some learners, which caused further interruptions. This consumed valuable time and further poisoned the classroom atmosphere.

- My hand gestures were distracting to the learners.
- Despite regular questioning, learner participation remained minimal.

However, the following video evidence also encouraged me that I was doing some things right:

- I praised learners for their contributions.
- Lesson structures emerged on the writing board as the lesson progressed.
- Cues were given to learners to stimulate their thoughts.

4.3.1.6 Self-reflection

After much reflection, I realised that I could influence the learners to think differently about their role/responsibilities in the classroom by doing the following:

- Adopting a collaborative style, as suggested by Kyle and Rogien (2004, 11), in communicating with learners, based on the principle of giving them an incentive to voice their opinions (the merit system mentioned in the preceding chapter). Some learners were eagerly participating, because they felt that they could improve on their communication and interactions with the teacher and fellow learners, while others expressed that: *“It’s a crappy system a waste of time”*. One learner said, *“Ek stel geen belang in sulke snert nie ek wil nie praat nie”*. (*“I am not interested in such nonsense I don’t feel like talking”*)
- Using encouraging and positive words such as *“You can!”* saw learners become more amenable to cooperate. The affirmation they received when I used praise such as *“Good!”* or *“Well done!”* made them feel good and motivated them to try harder to succeed.
- Making the task “do-able” by means of scaffolds made learners believe that they could achieve success.
- Planning each activity and question to elicit the greatest response, whether right or wrong.
- Speaking meticulously, to create a greater degree of understanding.

- Maintaining my passion for the subject ignited the learners' eagerness.
- Varying my teaching strategies and teaching aids by sometimes allowing learners to take the lead by formulating their own questions on certain sections of the lesson and introducing peer teaching (each-one-teach-one).
- Employing creative ways of presenting the learning material, such as mind maps, diagrams and comparing by tabulating.

4.3.1.7 Reflecting with colleagues

From the discussions, the following main theme emerged:

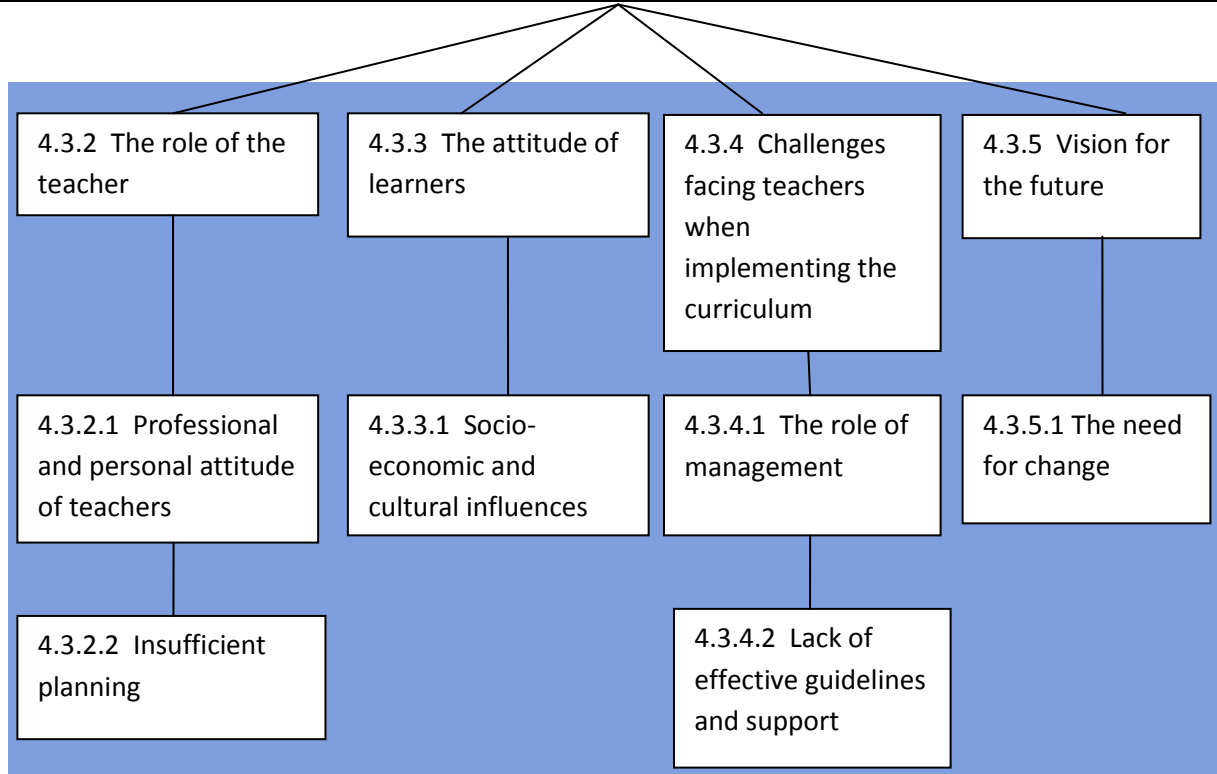
4.3.1.8 Effective communication is the key factor in establishing successful interactions and building relationships that will ensure improved learning outcomes in the classroom

My colleagues who participated in the discussions continually emphasised the imperative of establishing channels for effective communication so that learners could thrive within an atmosphere of mutual respect, bridging the divide that existed within the pedagogic relationship (between teacher and learner), without sacrificing discipline in the classroom. My colleagues arrived at the conclusion that many of the challenges experienced in the classroom could be attributed to negative communication patterns, stemming from an attitude of superiority, insensitivity and impatience on the part of teachers, the lack of disciplinary structures at school and at home, and the pervasive culture of negativity in the community that formed the learners' frame of reference.

From the main theme, four sub-themes emerged that will be discussed in the **ensuing action-reflection cycles.**

MAIN THEME

4.3.1 Effective communication is the key factor in establishing successful interactions and building relationships that will ensure improved learning outcomes



4.3.2 Sub-theme One: The role of the teacher

It was apparent from the discussions that the role of teachers in establishing and maintaining effective communication in the classroom could not be overemphasised. In this regard, Roffey (2004, 10) suggests that teachers should maintain a caring role, whilst promoting a learning environment that fosters a sense of order, purpose and behaviour, prescribed in the school’s vision and mission statement.

Based on the aforementioned and after much deliberation, the focus group and I delineated the following categories:

4.3.3 Attitude of teachers: personal and professional

According to Oduolowu (2009, 330), the effective and efficient functioning of any institution depends on the quality and commitment of its human resources. The right attitude towards the profession, involvement in teaching, professional concern and the mental health of teachers are considered to be essential prerequisites for them to contribute to a successful classroom, programme and school. For educational standards to be improved, it is essential for teachers not only to be committed, but also to be competent and creative, i.e. to be original in their thinking and practice, innovative and inventive in the classroom, flexible in their attitudes and actions, and frequently coming up with new ideas and innovations. My colleagues and I realised that in order for us to improve our teaching standards, we needed to identify and assess the deficiencies in the current system and become more self-confident in expressing and implementing our own ideas.

The focus group established that most teachers had a genuine desire to make a difference in the classroom, but that the many daily challenges often caused them to become frustrated. Many teachers displayed an attitude of simply '*getting on with the job*', constantly instructing learners to '*Keep quiet!*' in order to complete their daily teaching schedule. Some teachers' attitude was viewed by learners as negative and uncompromising and could have contributed to some learners not participating in lessons and displaying disruptive behaviour. Teachers often attributed feelings of personal success or failure to the way in which they managed learners' behavioural problems in the classroom. A seminar on the "Quantity and Quality of Nigerian Education" (Oduolowu 2009, 329) concluded that the quality of any educational system depended on the competence, commitment and motivation of the teachers. Teachers are considered as the main determinants of quality education and as such will strongly influence what the next generation will be like.

The stress experienced by teachers is considered to be directly related to how they cope with and manage the demands, disrespect, indifference and laziness displayed by learners. Rogers (2006, 24) believes that accurate and positive 'self-talk' by the teacher can help address and manage potentially stressful situations. Additionally, when teachers build and sustain a workable relationship with their learners by

creating a balance between realistic classroom goals and disciplinary skills, they may become more able to cope with day-to-day challenges.

4.3.4 Interventions

When I changed my mind-set into a “success psychology”, as explained by Shindler (2010, 6), some of my learners became more involved in and showed more enthusiasm for the subject material. Firstly, I had to accept responsibility for creating such positive mindsets. I was guided by my personal vision (an ambitious one!) of having a class who was interested and hungry for knowledge; and ready to explore through questioning, analysing and comparing. I was purposefully creating a learning environment that promoted learning, motivation and a higher level of interaction. This was achieved by clarifying my expectations to learners, being goal-directed, and setting firm boundaries for learner behaviour.

The following illustrates what can be achieved when learners are engaged during a lesson:

It has been a challenge for me to motivate my learners to fully participate in lessons. Halfway through a lesson, I would lose their attention. I became more goal-directed; determined to keep the learners' attention by giving more cues and structure to the lesson by means of mind-mapping. This was in line with the teaching strategies focusing on 'guided discovery' expounded by Gimbert (2002, 2), in terms of which new information is presented in a way that encourages inquiry, promoting increased interest, and giving learners choices in becoming self-motivated. I immediately felt the dynamics in the class changing. Learners were interacting with the learning material, with fellow learners, and with the teacher. They offered spontaneous responses, implying that they were enjoying the lesson. This was a rare and unusual response for this particular class, albeit a very welcome one. I came to realise that when I divided 'the lesson into 'bite sizes', providing scaffolds for learning, the learning material became more digestible and could be absorbed easier, ensuring a greater measure of learner success.

In this regard, Shindler (2010, 19) suggests that teachers are responsible for creating an environment in which learners experience power, belonging and freedom. When the aforementioned needs of learners are met, unwanted and problem behaviour can be largely limited and even eliminated.

4.3.5 Reflection

I began to recognise that every choice and action I took would shape the overall classroom climate. The encouraging insight drawn from this revelation is that the smallest action taken by teachers can have a profound impact on the behaviour and achievement of all learners. Petty (2009, 40) emphasises that learning is a hidden mental process over which teachers have no direct control; however, through effective teaching strategies, teachers are able to correct the misconceptions of the learners and therefore increasing the learners' understanding of the subject. I heeded and implemented the feedback received from learners and experienced positive results. I have since continued to encourage learners to voice their opinions and structure activities that will encourage them to strive for success and that will ignite their passion for learning.

4.4 ACTION-REFLECTION CYCLE TWO

4.4.1 My concern

I was concerned that my classroom atmosphere was not conducive to optimal learning. I realised that my personal demeanour had the power to create joy or hurt, because one's teaching reflects one's values, culture, bias and political preferences. I had to re-examine my values, as these defined how I taught. I had to monitor whether I was treating my learners with respect by listening to them and showing appreciation for their opinions. I was intentionally seeking ways to connect with them, whether through touch, facial expressions and posturing, to show that I cared and to inspire my learners to do better. These actions are in line with what Shindler (2010, 37) contends, namely that the unconscious, unwritten, implicit expectations, social system, display of power or the 'hidden curriculum' have a large impact on how learners experience the classroom.



4.4.2 Data gathered from questionnaires

- Learners: Describe the teacher's attitude towards you.



The responses varied from relatively positive to negative comments, as reflected below:

"Though her attitude towards learners is not bad, some learners are still disobedient".

"If she does not like you, it shows on her face".

"The teacher makes you feel bad, because she regards herself as superior ("....in 'n beter klas") to the learners".

"Ek voel sleg, want sy (die onderwyser) weet nie hoe ons voel nie". ("I feel bad because she (the teacher) does not know how we feel".

"She respects me and really wants me to pass".



4.4.3 Self-reflection

On reading the respondents' comments, I grew extremely despondent. My identity and integrity as a teacher was at stake. I was, however, encouraged by Carr, *et al.* (2008, 48), who state that integrity in itself is not a final destination, but a journey of redefining, adjusting and redirecting one's course. I decided that in order

to move forward, there were paths in my personal and professional lives that needed to be re-negotiated.



4.4.4 Reflecting with others

The learners and I started mapping how we could improve the classroom environment in order to make it more conducive for learning. We held brainstorming sessions, and the following ideas were put forward for implementation:

- Creating a vision statement for the classroom.
- Communicating the benefits of an environment that will promote teaching and learning.
- Placing a suggestion box in the classroom.
- Placing a blank chart against the wall, on which learners could write their comments (this would hopefully also deter them from writing on the walls!).
- Learners who fail to do their homework must write at least ten suggestions on how the classroom environment may be improved. This will engage them constructively and teach them a sense of responsibility.
- Arranging the classroom according to the principles of:
 - Visibility - organising desks to create optimal visibility for learners.
 - Keeping all learners accountable for their schoolwork.
 - Increasing effective communication between the learners and the teacher.
 - Developing a classroom arrangement that promotes collaboration and democracy.

- Making material, facilities and aids accessible and usable to all learners.



4.4.5 Interventions

The interior of the classroom was painted with the help of a Grade Eleven learner. I believe that when the learners saw the difference, they felt inspired and their activities and contributions helped develop their personal value systems and identities.

I rearranged the seating to enhance learner interaction. Learners now faced each other; thus creating an atmosphere conducive for interaction and building working relationships. I made resources like pens and pencils available to them to expedite participation and the completion of tasks. In this way, I also limited the excuses they could offer for not participating in the lessons.

4.4.6 Reflection

What has improved?

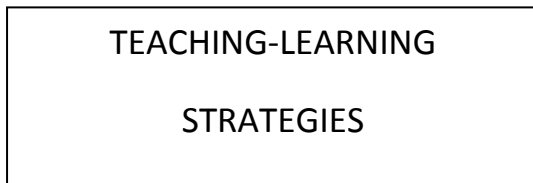


Learners became more enthused and displayed an interest in the changes that had been effected. They suggested that I display some of their projects on the walls. These changes may seem insignificant to some, but by eliminating obstacles and raising the levels of participation, a marked improvement in learners' attitudes and learning was achieved. Although the improvement in a particular class was minimal, as none of the learners passed a specific subject during the first term; several learners had improved by the end of the second term.

One learner remarked: "*When I started to do my homework in the second term, I understood the work better*". Another learner said: "*though I failed the subject, I have a better understanding of the work*".

I realised the value of self-evaluation by the learners. This process enabled them to take responsibility for their own progress and measure whether they were meeting their personal goals.

4.5 ACTION-REFLECTION CYCLE THREE



4.5.1 My concern

I was concerned that my teaching style left limited opportunity for interaction. I found myself teaching for more than 50% of the lesson. More time was spent in explaining concepts and mapping processes than allowing the learners to discover and solve problems independently. I used to hand out worksheets and tell the learners how to go about answering the questions. During this time, the learners remained passive. I adopted, practised and nearly perfected the traditional or teacher-centred style, in the face of its many shortcomings. I followed this teaching style, because it saved time and allowed me to complete my daily teaching schedule. However, this method was not conducive for motivating learners to self-discovery. While I continued to teach for most of the lesson, learner participation was limited and the learners were not motivated to form or voice an opinion. I found myself being a 'living contradiction,' as postulated by McNiff and Whitehead (2010, 93), because although I wanted my learners to grow into independent thinkers, I was denying them the opportunity to speak for themselves, because my teaching style enforced passivity. Alexander and Potter (2005, 76) emphasise the point that learners need to be engaged in challenging, problem-solving activities, in which they are enabled to explore the limits of their abilities, while still feeling safe to make mistakes.

Effective teachers, according to Rogers (2006, 103), commit to the values of respect for learners and fairness and are concerned with the progress of all learners. Various teaching methods exist, but for teaching to be effective, the teacher should choose the strategy that fits the purpose of the lesson best. Petty (2009, 141) postulates that

when teachers employ a variety of methods, it gives them the flexibility to deal with the wide range of challenges encountered in the classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to find what worked for a particular class, to learn from the experience, and to adapt, where necessary.

4.5.2 Data gathered from questionnaires

- **LEARNERS: How would you like the teacher to respond when it looks as if someone does not understand?**



Learners' responses varied from positive to negative.

Some learners responded that, "*the teacher explains until the class understands.*" Other learners made negative comments like, "*The teacher should stop saying 'Hell!, Hell!' when we do not understand*".

Several learners wrote that I explained too fast. One learner said, "*Sy is te haastig en gebruik moeilike woorde in die klas - dan is ek weg...*" ("She is too fast, and uses difficult words that I do not understand – then I am lost").

Other comments made by learners included the following:

"Sometimes the teacher is hyper-critical".

"I feel that she does not really want to teach us".

"Other learners laugh when some learners ask questions".

"The teacher is very strict".

4.5.3 Data gathered from interviews

- **Educators: What strategies can we identify to address the shortcomings in our teaching?**

Most educators felt that powerful and transformative intervention strategies were needed to address the “gaps” in the classroom situation. These changes had to be all-encompassing; ranging from teachers’ attitudes to teaching methodologies. Some educators mentioned that our own rigidity made us resistant to change; therefore we were not equipped to function optimally within a fast-changing environment.

I strongly believe that no education can rise above the quality of its teachers. The importance of the curriculum content and the teachers’ methodologies cannot be underestimated. For teaching to become more effective, teachers must carefully plan learning activities, using a variety of illustrations and practical approaches, encouraging learner participation, selecting assessment criteria and tools to measure outcomes, and employing remedial measures to improve learner achievements.

4.5.4 Self-reflection



I grew committed to action and self-renewal, because of the benefits it brought to the learners in my care. Having invested time and energy researching various forms of literature and reviewing my classroom practice, I was persuaded to introduce the following educational interventions:

- Introducing more questions during the lessons.
- Allowing learners more time to answer those questions.
- Introducing more group/pair work.
- Being less rigid in my approach, by structuring opportunities for self-discovery.
- Being strict in ensuring and checking that learners do their homework and motivating them by allocating merits for work well done.

- Making the task “do-able” for learners for them to believe that they can achieve success.
- Planning each activity and question to elicit the greatest response, whether controversial or not.
- Speaking meticulously to create a greater degree of understanding.
- Maintaining my passion for the subject.
- Varying my teaching strategies and teaching aids by sometimes allowing learners to take the lead by formulating their own questions on certain sections of the lesson and introducing peer teaching (each-one-teach-one).
- Employing creative ways of presenting the learning material through mind maps, diagram structures and comparing by tabulating differences, and so forth.

4.5.5 Reflection with others

4.5.6 Sub-theme: Teaching strategies



The discussion group identified as a priority the need for the development of strategies to address existing gaps in teaching strategies. My colleagues commented that, “*Teachers need a new pedagogy in the classroom*”. Some participants perceived and experienced certain teachers as rigid, resistant to change and not equipped to operate within a fast-changing environment. Teachers are increasingly pressured to utilise the latest technology to capture learners’ information and to plan and present lessons in a way that will enhance classroom learning. Additionally, urgent intervention is needed to address learners’ reading problems, lack of insight and inability to transfer knowledge and solve problems. The lack of textbooks, overcrowded classrooms and a curriculum overloaded with content demand that teachers display a repertoire of creative and innovative teaching strategies to overcome the lack of resources. It is therefore important for educators to recognize the interests, goals, and “learning styles” of learners at particular ages and in particular communities and to then structure classroom experiences in order to capture the learners’ imaginations and interests, states Levine (2005, 1). He furthermore recommends that education should “start where the kids are”.

My colleagues identified specific problems that needed urgent intervention, namely:

- Learners' reading problems, which result in lack of insight.
- Their inability to transfer knowledge for problem-solving.

These problems were further being aggravated by the previously mentioned constraints at school, which is why my colleagues reached consensus that teachers should employ a wide repertoire of teaching strategies to address the multiple challenges in the classroom.

Constructivist teaching seems to be the obvious choice for facilitating a learning environment in which learners are actively involved within a democratic environment and interacting with fellow learners. Within this teaching context, teachers are required to structure learning activities in which learners will experiment in their quest for knowledge, learn through discovery, undertake more research projects and participate in classroom discussions.

The goal of constructivist strategies is that learners will find their own answers. For this purpose, a variety of teaching techniques are used, which may, for example:

- prompt students to formulate their own questions (inquiry)
- allow multiple interpretations and expressions of learning (multiple intelligences)
- encourage group work and the use of peers as resources (collaborative learning)

According to the Educational Broadcasting Corporation (2004, 1), the constructivist approach enables learners to learn more and enjoy learning more, because it actively engages learners, as opposed to them being passive listeners. This is made possible because the emphasis is on thinking and understanding, rather than on rote learning and memorisation.

Learning becomes transferable, because learners are creating and organising principles that they can take with them to other learning settings. Learners are now taking responsibility for their own learning through questioning and research; and the students often also help to design the assessment tools.

Killen (2007, 107), however, suggests four key elements that must be considered when selecting a teaching strategy in order to promote learning outcomes, namely organising and explaining materials in ways that are appropriate to learners' abilities; creating an environment that fosters learning; helping learners become autonomous; and reflecting critically. Among other teaching strategies, Killen (2007, 107), considers direct instruction to be an efficient way of introducing new subject material. It establishes and develops sound foundational knowledge; explains factual knowledge in a structured manner; conveys the teacher's passion for the subject; teaches concepts and skills; and provides learners with opportunities to offer their opinions. It is, however, true that this strategy offers learners limited opportunity to practise their communication skills. Teachers can overcome this limitation by introducing classroom discussions as a process of face-to-face group interactions in which learners exchange ideas with the purpose of solving problems. Discussions allow learners to talk, listen and respond to one another. In this way, different viewpoints are heard, considered and developed.

The constructivist process of assessment engages the students' initiatives and personal contributions in the form of journals, research reports, physical models and artistic representations. The learners' creative instincts are developed and expressed in a way that is not always possible in the traditional teaching approach.

By basing learning activities on real-world contexts, constructivism stimulates and engages students to question things and therefore engages their natural curiosity for the world. This questioning stance of the learner promotes social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasises collaboration and the exchange of ideas. Learners are now required to articulate their ideas clearly as well as to collaborate effectively on tasks by participating in group projects. Learners learn to exchange ideas and to evaluate and respect others' contributions in a socially acceptable manner. The classroom becomes a real-life context in which

learners are exposed to a variety of experiences in which they have to cooperate with others.

4.5.7 Insufficient planning

At the onset of the discussions, insufficient planning was identified as a key factor contributing to communication problems in the classroom. Teachers felt that excessive time in the classroom was being consumed by either disciplining learners or administrative duties. The primary functions of the teacher, namely teaching and assessment, were being sacrificed for secondary functions, such as administrative work. Though education has a comprehensive function, the social, cultural and spiritual development of learners may not be neglected. My colleagues and I agreed that while teaching and learning should remain the priorities, the aforementioned developmental aspects must also receive attention, to ensure the holistic development of learners.

My colleagues identified the need for urgent and innovative intervention strategies in the classroom. One colleague in the group suggested setting up an interactive 'reading room' to improve reading, insight and problem-solving skills. This intervention is in line with the contention of Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 10), that teachers should be autonomous, highly skilled, responsible designers and managers of student learning.

One colleague commented that, *"Many teachers tend to be rigid and inflexible in their methodology without being innovative"*. Cooper and McIntyre (2011, 49) suggests that teachers use concept maps when planning their lessons as a way of organising ideas and thoughts; often, the relationships between various subtopics will emerge when graphically displayed. In this way, teachers can select productive actions and strategies appropriate for teaching the content in a particular classroom situation.

I believe that when teachers plan effectively, they pay more attention to their learners' background knowledge, selecting instructional material to meet the needs of the learners, and planning evaluation processes to assess whether the goals of

the lessons have been achieved. Furthermore, Smith (2010, 231) suggests that when teachers from different subject areas plan together, they harness their creative skills and practical skills, which provides a fresh perspective to prepare more innovative lessons.

The focus group suggested that teachers should employ new and interactive communication media, such as projectors (for Power-Point presentations) and cell-phones (for research in the classroom). In this regard, Oduolowu (2009, 329) has documented the urgent need for teachers to integrate information and communication technology into teaching, because of the increasingly dominant role of these technologies in promoting the knowledge and skills necessary for effective functioning in the modern world. The participants in the focus group fervently emphasised that classroom communication should change in fundamental ways in order to remain credible for learners who are astute and easily bored and whose frustrations often translate into disciplinary problems and truancy from school. The teachers in the focus group realised the benefits of reflection in order to keep their interactions with colleagues and learners relevant, dynamic and enthusiastic.

4.5.7.1 Act

(Actions taken to improve practice)



The academic interaction between my learners and I consisted largely of questioning and giving answers. I learnt to effectively utilise the skill of questioning as a means of encouraging and engaging learners and helping me monitor the learning process, as suggested by Stronge (2007, 75). As Petty (2009, 193) postulates, the use of questions created the following learning context in my classroom: it encouraged insight, building learning based on prior learning; gave instant feedback; uncovered incorrect assumptions; gave momentum to the lessons; allowed learners to demonstrate their abilities; and encouraged the development of higher-level thinking skills. I recognised the value of using a variety of lower order questions, namely naming, data recall and observation. Some higher order questions for problem-solving and evaluation were incorporated, because they provided opportunities for

learners with different abilities to think and reason. Moreover, through questioning, I provided learners with essential feedback on their progress.

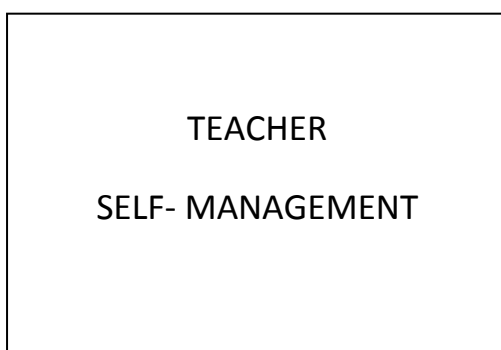
4.5.7.2 Reflect

(What has improved?)



Questioning offers an ideal opportunity for learners to practise what they know. However, learners often regard teachers as the initiators of class activities and discussions and believe that teachers hold the answer to all questions (Wedell 2009, 33). I realised that introducing change in the classroom would not be a random act, but a long journey towards developing a classroom culture in which knowledge was not seen in terms of a right or wrong answer, but built through questioning, discussion and interaction with others and the subject material. I had to change my mind-set from viewing the purpose of education as the learning of content, to a process of learning to learn. In addition to changing my mind-set, I had to initiate changes in my teaching approaches by creating more learner interaction and discussions when I realised that my existing teaching style of directly transmitting knowledge by means of a monologue was not going to increase learner participation.

4.6 ACTION-REFLECTION CYCLE FOUR



OBSERVE
What is my concern?



4.6.1 My concern

After much reflection, I acknowledged the need to create a climate of higher expectation for success in the classroom. In order to achieve this goal, Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 195) suggest that teachers shift from a “mimetic pedagogy’ in terms of

which they are the authoritative resources of knowledge and learners are passively acquiring knowledge, to a position where they become co-designers of knowledge, based on their self-discovery.



4.6.2 Observation

I noticed that very few learners entered my classroom expecting to work hard. They entered the classroom preoccupied, chatting about the latest television programme or latest event in the social network. This is in line with an observation made by Smith (2010, 134), namely that learners expect their teachers to create an atmosphere of security and order in the classroom, as well as opportunities to participate in the class, and to make it an exciting experience. He furthermore writes that learners who feel positive about themselves, positive about their peers and positive about their learning will in all likelihood be more creative, become involved, take more risks in their learning and be able to solve problems.

4.6.3 Data gathered from interviews

Learners: *How do you experience the teacher's communication, interaction, and communication in the classroom?*

Among the responses offered by the learners were:

"The teacher encourages us; she helps us to become successful".

"Her relationships with people are good, because she makes them feel good about themselves".

"I am always excited in her class, because she makes the lessons interesting".

"The teacher must stop stressing and speaking loud; otherwise, she is doing good work".

Educators: The discussions with colleagues focused mainly on the following two questions:

- ***How can the teacher's communication, interactions and relationships enhance learning outcomes?***
- ***What are your deepest concerns about the current communication, interactions and relationship structures at school?***

The focus group discussions emphasised values such as authenticity, appreciation and agency. We realised that for the group to achieve something tangible from these discussions, we were required to be true to ourselves, honour our strengths and weaknesses, and understand our practices in order to see the possibilities for improved educational classroom practice. As a group, we recognised the value of acknowledging and expressing appreciation for each member's contribution to the discussions and his/her contribution to the learners, school and community. Furthermore, we had to balance the discussions by conceding to the weaknesses in our communication in order to assess how the latter deterred teachers from reaching their lesson goals in the classroom.

As we addressed issues pertaining to communication and interaction between teacher and learners, as well as among peers, we were exercising personal agency for change to take place in the classroom. In recognising and articulating ways of addressing our shortcomings and celebrating our strengths, we were formulating guidelines for an improved classroom practice. The focus group expressed the desire to hold ongoing discussions, which could conceivably culminate in staff development workshops.

4.6.4 Plan

(Intervention strategies)



I created a learning context in which learners could learn from one another as well as from their teachers. Within this environment of collaboration, the learners were

valued for the contribution they were making in the learning environment. The value of this became evident when the learners started to display higher levels of performance in the classroom as their self-esteem increased.

Pine (2009, 182) maintains that teachers behave in their classrooms according to the personal theories they hold. Therefore, he suggests a “five-level approach,” in terms of which teachers reflect on their actions, pause and repair the situation, take time out to assess, research all aspects and, based on the findings, reformulate theory.

This process of self-reflection was invaluable in this study, because it served as a mirror through which my values and assumptions became clearer. Reflection became the microscope for illuminating the impact my behaviour had on learners in my class. Through reflection I was able to distance myself from the situation in order to identify issues, such as personal attitudes and feelings of frustrations and anger, which influenced my teaching. My own reflections served as a yield sign, allowing me to pause on this road of discovery, assess the situation and change the route I was travelling on with my learners in order to reach a common destination, namely expanding our insight and understanding as prerequisites for successful learning.

When I was able to critically reflect by suspending my usual assumptions and consider alternative behaviour, the following became possible:

- I was treating learners as assets by praising them for their contributions.
- A climate of unconditional positive regard was created.
- By listening to learners’ opinions, I was encouraging them to be independent thinkers.
- A merit system was introduced in terms of which learners were awarded for any contribution during the lesson (a star, sign of appreciation, any indication in their book that confirmed that their contribution was valued).

- Building rapport through deliberate actions (Hook and Vass 2000a, 13), by connecting with learners on an emotional level through informal discussions.

4.6.5 Reflection

(Assessing the value of the interventions)



4.6.5.1 Self-reflection

Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 222) postulate that education is premeditated, designed to build on learners' experiences. For this reason, I implemented a merit system in terms of which learners allocated themselves a merit for any positive response or interaction in the class, and a demerit for any negative behaviour. The focus of the exercise was to engage and affirm learners for their input. The learners were able to do a personal audit at the end of the term to determine the progress they had made. I intended allocating merit badges for those learners who had shown improved academic and social skills in their interaction with their peers.

Simultaneously, the purpose was to assess whether the merit/self-appraisal system had contributed to developing their self-esteem, their taking responsibility and, ultimately, to enhancing learning outcomes. In order to assess their levels of self-esteem, I required of learners to write a report on how they saw themselves on a scale of 1 – 10 at the beginning of the term. They then had to rate themselves on the same scale at the end of the term. I experienced a small measure of success with the merit system. I realised that learners needed to become self-motivated, as teachers needed to move beyond the 'behavioural mode' of external control, in which learners were motivated through a system of punishments and rewards, as explained by McLean (2009, 12). When teachers recognise and honour their learners' needs, their learners become motivated. Learners will then participate in lessons, because they want to learn more effectively.

Additionally, I have initiated contact with learners on a one-on-one basis which had shown positive results. The following entry from my personal diary (3 September 2010), illuminates that all learners want to achieve success:

It was during a public servants strike that I had the opportunity to talk to small groups of learners about their attitudes and feelings towards school. I learnt that each learner aspired to improve their academic results. I realised that even 'difficult' learners could be motivated. The personal attention given to learners inspired trust, as indicated in the frank way in which they were prepared to answer some very personal questions.

I then began to acknowledge my learners for all their achievements, however small, ranging from personal neatness, their attitude to homework, the completion of tasks, a positive attitude, and so forth. I realised that even the learners with the most difficult attitudes could be reached. Gimbert (2002, 2) suggests that knowing the learners individually, culturally and developmentally, is as important as knowing the content we teach. I took her sage advice to heart by showing personal interest in and caring for learners, realising that a relationship of respect, collaboration and trust could be established.

4.6.6 Reflecting with colleagues

From the discussions with colleagues, the following sub-themes were identified as factors contributing to the successes and challenges in our classroom communication:

4.6.7 Sub-theme Two: Background and attitude of learners

Kalantzis and Cope (2008, 92) explain that learners' personalities are shaped by their backgrounds and their personal, material and cultural attributes. These have an enormous impact on how they engage with learning, which determines their educational and social goals. My colleagues realised the existence of a divide between the learners' life-world experiences and what the education system required of them. Therefore, my colleagues concluded that teachers had to bridge the gap

between the learners' informal and formal learning. It is important for teachers to accommodate the learners' attributes and the differences in their social and economic backgrounds by providing an affirming learning environment to help them succeed despite any limitations that may present themselves. The limitations placed on learners within their society can be overcome if "schools become the centre of their communities", iterates Smith (2010, 22). It is for this reason that my colleagues identified socio-economic influence as a sub-theme that is an important factor impacting on classroom communication, interactions and relationship structures.

4.6.8 Socio-economic influences

The participants in the research project identified and recognised the differences in the attitudes and expectations of the learners and teachers as factors contributing to miscommunication, resulting in learners not achieving the learning outcomes. Society dictates the symbols of respect, role models and belief systems that influence the general behaviour and expectations of learners. Many of the learners at the relevant school come from families with a basic education only who do not place high value on the further education of their children (Petty 2009, 60). It is our task as teachers to continuously motivate learners until they become self-motivated. One way of achieving self-motivated learners is to sell the concept that knowledge and skills are the connecting factors that will secure disadvantaged learners economic opportunity. I believe that when we build the knowledge base and capacity of our learners, we increase their upward mobility into a better society.

The third sub-theme that emerged concerned the constraints facing teachers in implementing the curriculum.

4.6.9 Sub-theme Three: Challenges facing teachers when implementing the curriculum

The discussion group identified that the curriculum did not always meet the needs of learners coming from a historically disadvantaged background. The Centre for the Advancement of Science and Mathematics Education in South Africa (James, Naidoo and Benson 2008b, 1) suggests that the quality and accessibility of

education can be improved by providing in-service training for teachers, offering school-based support, and providing more resources to poor communities.

The curriculum is aimed at learners with homogenous abilities, meaning that learners of a certain grade need to achieve specific learning outcomes. It is therefore necessary for teachers to plan for learners with different abilities in the classroom. Petty (2009, 450) suggests that in order to be more flexible and effective, teachers can make use of direct whole-class teaching, in which all learners learn the same thing at the same time. Additionally, resource-based learning can be employed for practical assignments requiring learners to use their resources for individualised projects. In order to provide for individual enrichment, self-directed learning creates space for learners to set their personal goals and negotiate their own learning activities in the form of enriching exercises within the curriculum. In this way, teachers are able to individualise their teaching within the classroom and meet the objectives of the curriculum.

Not all students are alike. It is therefore necessary to differentiate instruction to give learners multiple options for accessing, making sense of and utilising information. Differentiated instruction is a teaching theory based on the premise that teaching strategies should vary and be adapted to individual and diverse student abilities in classrooms (Hall, Strangman and Meyer 2011, 1). The model of differentiated instruction requires teachers to be flexible in their approach to teaching and adjust the curriculum and presentation of information to learners, rather than expecting students to adapt to the curriculum. I believe that differentiated instruction is a method of helping more students in diverse classroom settings experience successful learning. This stance is also finding strong recognition in the United States of America, where the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is implemented.

The core of the UDL model (www.cast.org 2011) is to provide learners with a wide variety of teaching and learning options, by employing digital media that provide multiple presentations, interactive and multiple examples, highlighting critical features of the material, integrating new knowledge, and providing opportunities to practise skills. Furthermore, the UDL framework operates according to principles such as teaching learners to recognise essential cues and patterns for learning,

mastering skilful strategies for actions, and engaging with learning. This is made possible because the UDL framework focuses teachers' attention on learner differences, helping them to set clear goals and providing a certain degree of individualised instruction. Additionally, the UDL offers ongoing assessment that not only measures learners' progress, but also evaluate and adapt instruction to ensure that most of the goals are met.

The purpose of differentiating instruction is to optimise each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where him/she is and assisting him/her in the learning process. When differentiating instruction, teachers have to recognise students' diverse background, their experiences, command of the language of instruction, preferences in learning and personal interests in order to react responsively.

Teachers are required to focus on the following key elements in their instruction, which will follow a definitive pattern:

- Content – highlighting critical information, the features thereof and essential concepts.
- Process – providing multiple ways of presenting information via digital, text, colour, contrast, size, etc.
- Product – offering the learners flexible ways of demonstrating their skill (debates, presentations, models and reports) and engaging all learners in instructional tasks.

The teaching methods for individualisation are based on a definitive pattern of aligning tasks and objectives to achieve the learning goals. Instruction must be concept driven. On-going assessment is required, which will serve as a teaching tool to inspire critical and creative thinking, explain Hall, *et al.* (2011, 1). In order to improve the academic performance of learners, the collective energy of all the role-players in the school must be harnessed. Individualisation in the classroom would, however, place tremendous pressure on the already heavy workload of teachers.

4.6.10 Role of management

In order to be effective, the school requires a dynamic leadership and management team that will ensure that the core business of the school, namely quality teaching and learning, can be achieved. Management is concerned with policy formulation and organisational transformation, which require strategic leadership, a strong vision, planning, mentoring and a system to assess whether goals are being met (Bush and Middlewood 2006, 3).

Leadership, on the other hand, is the important element that harnesses the energies and commitment of staff, learners and parents and provides clear direction for the work and development of the school. In this regard, my colleagues expressed the need for a collective and concerted effort from management and leadership to encourage all stakeholders at school to continually look for ways of improving the standard of teaching, in order to improve learning outcomes. Heystek, Nieman, Van Rooyen, Mosoge and Bipath (2008, 35) contend that leaders at South African schools need to act as innovative agents of change, in order to ensure the effective functioning of schools.

Furthermore, my colleagues emphasised that all the role players in the learning environment needed to create an expectancy of and an atmosphere for success at school and to recognise and reward achievements, but act incisively where performance did not meet the acceptable standard. They furthermore suggested that the guidelines for creating a better standard of performance should be reflected in the School Improvement Plan. In this way, the strategies implemented, would remain focused on improvement through a collaborative effort involving the staff, learners and parents, who understood the purpose of the plan and their role in fulfilling it.

Heystek, *et al.* (2008, 38) suggest that effective leaders should encourage the following factors:

- For teachers to evaluate themselves
- Involving all staff members in setting standards and criteria for acceptable and exceptional performance
- Team building activities, which will enhance interaction and increase trust and openness among staff members

The above-mentioned salient points have been eloquently summarised by Kee, Anderson, Dearing, Harris and Shuster (2010, 15), who write that a cognitive shift should occur so that leaders come to believe in the teachers' potential so that they will quit telling them what to do, but rather teach them how to decide what the best course of action is to reach the best outcomes.

4.6.11 Lack of effective guideline and support from the Department of Education

We have travelled the road and been part of the vast, ever-changing educational landscape in South Africa. Firstly, Outcomes-Based Education brought uncertainty and confusion; it was followed by the Revised National Curriculum Statement, which was overloaded with content. Currently, the National Curriculum Statement requires teachers to change their day-to-day realities. Teaching and learning have been transformed from a context in which knowledge was clearly defined to a new understanding that knowledge is dynamic and is arrived at through discussion. Teachers, traditionally seen as initiators of classroom activities, are now seen as facilitators to support learners' participation. Learners, previously expected only to speak when spoken to, are now expected to express themselves freely and openly. The implementation of all these changes has placed enormous pressure on teachers who have had to unlearn traditional teaching practices and relearn new methodologies.

Wedell (2009, 32) explains that educational change requires a great deal of personal and professional 're-culturing' for those affected by it. While grappling with the new way of thinking about teaching and learning, teachers were concerned whether they

were equipped to meet the goals of the new curriculum, which caused much uncertainty and stress.

The effectiveness of education is dependent on the quality of teachers' training, the classroom activities and the quality of the learners produced. In this regard, Oduolowu (2009, 330) states that the kind of teacher trained and placed within schools may determine what the next generation will be; therefore, improvement in education would be best achieved by improving the quality of teachers. James, *et al.* (2008b, 1) have identified in-service training, school-based support and the provision of resources as key components in improving the quality of education in order to address the historic and systemic imbalances in our education system and to improve its sustainability and accessibility for all citizens.

My colleagues expressed their dissatisfaction with the large classes, limited textbooks and lack of other essential teaching resources that were placing additional strain on teachers. They concluded that it was the Department of Education's (DoE) official responsibility to support the academic development of its teachers, but conceded that the DoE simply did not have the capacity to deliver the necessary broad-based ongoing professional development of its workforce.

4.6.12 Vision for the future

Bassett (2002, 1) writes that an important question to ask when creating a vision for the future is: "*What skills and values will learners need to be successful in future educational settings, as employees in the workplace, as family members, and as citizens?*". Dewey (1929, 77) responds with the statement that education is a process of discovering values that are worthwhile to pursue (McNeil, 2009, 385). Creating a vision for the future is one that would direct the school to an educational approach that emphasises problem-solving, ethical decision-making, accessing and discriminating knowledge via the new technologies, working effectively in teams, leadership development, communication skills and conflict-resolution.

It is therefore important that all the role-players in the school community are involved in formulating a shared vision for the school. The value of what takes place in

schools and its consequences for the future should include the ideas of the teachers and their planning, observations and assessments, because it makes teachers more vigilant, reflective and critical as to what they will be implementing in the classroom.

These are the comments made by my colleagues during focus group discussions concerning a vision for the future:

“We need dynamic leadership”.

“It is a collective effort”.

“We should share ideas and have regular team talks”.

We came to the conclusion that formulating a vision for a better future for our school would require the following:

- The school would have to challenge its existing practice.
- Relationships need to become more collegial for all members to participate in the growth of the school.
- We need to be bound by our communal values to create a better workplace and learning community.

4.6.13 The need for change

Conner and Clawson (2004, 174) prescribe that several interventions are necessary for change to take place in an organisation. It requires a disciplined process, supported by the right infrastructure and effective leadership. School leadership that is interested in improving the school culture, climate and overall academic performance must turn its expectations into actions, examine and prioritise its goals, and provide for collaborations in order to develop a collective perspective of what it wants to achieve, explains Gordon (2008, 139). Leaders must be inquirers who invite staff to reflect on their day-to-day performance.

Change and innovation in schools are possible to the extent that its members believe that it is possible and necessary and that the change can enhance the school community; conversely, a school that remains passive and negative cannot innovate or be proactive. In this regard, some of my colleagues articulated the need for “*our staff to rekindle an atmosphere of renewal by propelling ourselves from our comfort zones in order to address the deficiencies in our current practice*”. As teachers, we had become mellow in our attitude to discipline, and in our teaching strategies we were not pushing back the boundaries of our creativity, because we were not harnessing our strengths collectively. Davies (2006, 60) states that a key element in engaging people to start thinking creatively about change is to engage them in ‘strategic conversations’. In this way, dialogue and conversations among stakeholders at school will promote participation, which in turn will build the motivation and capability of the participants. In this study, the educators in the focus group expressed the need for ongoing conversations to encourage the discussion of existing learning practices, but moreover, to discuss future learning.

My colleagues furthermore tabled the following changes that should occur in our communication with learners:

“We should build better relationships with learners and colleagues.”

“We need to be cognisant of our body language, which is often negative and shows our disapproval of learners”.

“Teachers need to be the catalysts to ignite the process of improving communication with learners”.

Gordon (2008, 145) concludes that the encouragement and support given to colleagues and leaders are essential ingredients for improving school culture. My colleagues agreed that relation building was critical for building school culture and for providing learners with clear role models and a positive vision of achieving success (Jensen 2009, 88).

4.7 CONCLUSION

Chapter Four comprised an analysis and discussion of the research findings by means of theme identification, presented in action-reflection-cycles, and the outcomes of discussions with a focus group. An action plan guided the implementation process, supported by relevant literature. The researcher, in collaboration with learners and colleagues, embarked on an educational journey to find ways of improving classroom communication and, after much deliberation, implemented some teaching and learning strategies.

In Chapter Five, the conclusions and limitations of the research will be presented. Recommendations for further research will also be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this study, I charted and documented the educational travels taken with my learners as companions at a particular school in the Northern Areas of Nelson Mandela Bay to realise the objective of my study, which was to understand how my communication, interactions and relationship structures could enhance the learning outcomes in the classroom. My goal was to 'step back' to view myself in interaction with my learners, to re-examine the beliefs I held about myself in practice, and to authentically commit to change in order to reach the next level of achievement.

The data collection process, which started early, was a continuous process that provided a platform from where we could proceed on our research journey. The data mapped the itinerary of the travels we undertook and provided inconceivable and extensive opportunity for enquiry, reflection, intervention and change. The data gathered from the questionnaires completed by the learners 'kick-started' the action-reflection cycles, which spear-headed the educational explorations and provided topics for discussion for the focus group interviews. My colleagues shared their teaching experiences, daily challenges and their longing for innovative methods to improve classroom communications and interactions.

5.2 ACTION-REFLECTION CYCLES

5.2.1 Managing the teaching environment

When reflecting on the teaching environment and after viewing the video footage, I came to identify the necessity and benefits of an ongoing plan for building relationships based on respect and trust and not regulated by a show of power and threats. Based on the literature, I realised that consistent learner affirmation would prevent problems and ensure the personal growth of learners. My priority then became to establish a learning environment that engaged learners' emotions and

curiosity by structuring tasks that were 'do-able,' to motivate learners to participate in learning activities. In this way, learners could develop a greater expectancy for success. I realised that it was incumbent on me to remain innovative and to incorporate stimulating activities that offered a variety of challenges to learners of diverse abilities in the classroom. I structured more collaborative learning activities for learners to work together, thus reducing the tension that often caused misbehaviour and disruptions in the classroom.

Video footage as part of the data collection process indicated that learners fidgeted around while I was teaching. Additionally, sitting in rows as well as over-crowded classrooms were factors that deterred learners from interacting effectively. Notwithstanding these facts, I came to realise that I was the co-creator of disciplinary problems in the class and that many of the challenges in classroom communication would be prevented if I managed the classroom as follows: establishing a learning climate, one in which learners would be comfortable exploring their own ideas; developing classroom procedures (that are consistently applied), like arriving on time and in an orderly manner and having the appropriate resources ready to start the lesson; engaging learners by planning lessons effectively, giving clear and inclusive instructions and keeping learners constantly engaged with stimulating activities; and creating a safe atmosphere in which learners could discuss with one another what the problems were, and how they could attempt to find solutions, as explained by Killen (2007, 229).

The members of the focus group suggested that regular discussions between teachers should take place for exchanging of ideas and improving classroom management strategies.

5.2.2 Teaching-learning strategies

Reflecting on teaching and learning, the focus group was intent on identifying ways of increasing learner engagement in learning. The members of the focus group felt that teachers were becoming too rigid and less innovative in their classroom practice; that we were approaching new challenges with age-old strategies.

Teachers need to constantly renew and hone their skills to remain relevant in the classroom.

During the focus group discussions, the participants expressed the need for teachers to think creatively, plan effectively and practise efficiently. The effectiveness of the teaching, appropriateness of the content and the cognitive challenge embedded in the learning task were identified as important elements of the teaching-learning strategies employed in the classroom. The view was succinctly expressed that teachers should have a deep understanding of the subjects that they taught, be passionate about teaching it, confident in their ability to help learners learn, explicit in their expectations and explanations, and steadfast in their endeavours for learners to achieve high standards.

We realised the importance of communicating clear objectives at the beginning of each lesson, considering and providing opportunities for learners of diverse abilities and learning styles when planning and preparing activities in which all learners could practise their skills. Participants identified the importance of receiving reliable and immediate feedback that would act as remediation and motivation for learners to improve their learning outcomes.

5.2.3 Teacher self-management

Before the onset of the investigation, I realised that I was no longer satisfied with simply coping and surviving. I found it difficult motivating myself to teach and I felt that I was scraping the bottom of the barrel when it came to finding ways to energise myself. The members of the discussion group shared the same sentiments about being taxed emotionally. We realised that we were 'going nowhere slowly,' as one colleague put it.

We reached consensus as a discussion group that if we wanted to thrive in our profession, we had to introduce changes in the way we managed ourselves by stretching our abilities and growing our knowledge and skills base. We acknowledged our responsibility for learner achievement, but identified variables responsible for low levels of achievement over which we have little control, namely

class size, lack of resources, etc. However, all the participants iterated that we would no longer allow these factors to stifle our personal and professional growth and diminish the standard of education; and that we would build our capacity by creating a platform for ongoing discussions and devising plans for improvement.

5.3 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

From the focus group discussions, a main theme emerged, with several sub-themes and categories. The main theme identified, was that ***Effective communication is the key factor for establishing successful interactions and building relationships that will ensure improved learning outcomes.*** The participants felt that the school needed to establish and develop effective channels for communication assisted by meaningful discussions and interactions that would prevent problems from occurring, provide immediate feedback and introduce interventions that would allow learners room for growth.

Based on the literature study, the data collected from learning and the outcomes of the discussion group, I set myself the goal of building healthy relationships with learners founded on mutual respect, that could serve as motivation for the learners and myself. The participants acknowledged that to achieve the aforementioned would require diligence from all parties involved, in order for the learners to realise their full potential at school.

5.3.1 Role of the teacher

The quality and commitment of its human resources determine whether any institution will function effectively and proficiently. In order to improve the standard of education and to increase their learners' achievements, teachers will not only have to be committed and competent, but also devise creative ways of teaching, find ways of overcoming the shortcomings in the education system and, above all, become reflective in their practice.

Killen (2010, 111) suggests different approaches to teacher reflection that concentrate on the achievement of objectives, the educational environment and the

moral aspect of teaching. Although the aforementioned criteria provide a framework for reflection, the aim of reflection is for teachers to learn from their experiences. As a researcher-practitioner I experienced the benefits of reflection in my classroom through which problems were identified and interventions devised and implemented, with some notable results.

- **Personal and professional attitude**

Through reflection and discussion, we realised that we were becoming stale and rigid, and that we had lost our optimistic outlook on teaching. We attributed the low morale of teachers to various factors, such as the inability to cope with personal problems, the casual attitudes of the learners towards education, limited resources, and the lack of cooperation from most parents. Killen (2010, 89) suggests that there are two factors that could curtail one's teaching, namely the 'system' and the 'self'. Taking full cognisance of these factors, I believed that we could overcome the constraints imposed by the system by utilising our time more effectively, selecting content carefully to achieve the learning outcomes, and applying the most appropriate teaching strategy to increase learner achievement.

We cultivated greater self-awareness in our attitude towards our learners, displayed empathy for their unique circumstances and communicated high expectations for learner achievements.

- **Insufficient planning**

The members of the discussion group felt that teachers were not spending enough time planning and preparing lessons. Teaching experience does not exempt teachers from planning; on the contrary, experience and expertise provide evidence that makes planning more imperative. Participants felt that with effective planning, teachers would be able to identify and address problems, which would lead to the improvement of their classroom practices.

The participants expressed the belief that if we planned effectively, we would be able to eliminate many of the behavioural problems experienced in the classroom and increase learning outcomes. The process of lesson planning can ensure that careful consideration is given to identifying the objectives and selecting appropriate content and learning activities that are structured to develop learners' knowledge and skills. In following these procedures, lesson plans could provide a framework for setting objectives, establishing prior knowledge (not based on false assumptions of what learners know) and selecting assessment strategies and tools to achieve the learning outcomes.

5.3.2 Attitude of learners

Learners are shaped by their background and material and cultural attributes, which influence their learning and social outcomes. Colleagues agreed that most learners wanted to achieve and excel, but that social, economic and emotional influences might have negative influences on their motivation to strive for success.

- **Socio-economic and cultural influences**

Teachers often underestimate the influences embedded in the community, especially elements forming part of households, namely the level of education of the parents, poverty, recurring disturbances and the high noise levels in the environment.

The discussion group felt that in order to overcome obstacles in learners' environment, it was important to develop their knowledge and skills base, to increase learners' mobility in society. Therefore, a shift in learners' expectations was necessary for them to be motivated to succeed. It is important to know to what learners attribute their success or failure. Are they stymied by prior failure and disappointment? Are learners constantly receiving negative feedback from parents and teachers? The learners' emotional reactions to their learning outcomes largely determine their expectations for success.

Considering all of the above, the participants agreed that it was important to build the learners' self-belief. Teachers need to encourage their learners' self-efficacy; a

positive reflection of their abilities as well as the belief that they are capable of achieving successful outcomes, because this will elevate the expectations of learners. Considering that learners' self-belief is determined by their previous experiences, learning tasks should be 'do-able', creating a learning community within the classroom, because learners observe themselves in relation to their peers and the quality of the encouragement they receive from the teacher.

5.3.3 Challenges facing teachers when implementing the curriculum

- **The role of management**

The participants believed that management had an important role to play in creating an ethos reflecting confidence, trust and mutual cooperation among staff, learners and the School Governing Body. Effective leaders who have high expectations do not concentrate only on securing high educational standards, but are also concerned about the general welfare of teachers and learners. They are focused on creating the best environment for teaching and learning.

The members of the focus group concurred that management, in cooperation with the teaching staff, should envision and develop a strategic and operational plan to improve the education standards and achievements of all the learners. These plans should be included in the School Improvement Plan, which informs and guides the activities of the school and reflects the school's commitment to change and improvement.

- **Effective guidelines and support from the Department of Education**

The teachers felt that the Department of Education was not rendering effectual and sufficient guidelines and support to teachers. The teachers, who had been overloaded with administrative tasks and continually changing policies, had lost confidence in the employer's ability to provide effective leadership and support.

However, the Minister of Basic Education in Curriculum News (2010, 5) recently reported steps devised by the Department of Education to alleviate the administration and reporting burden on teachers in the following ways:

- Curriculum Policy Statements (CAPS), which will streamline the curriculum documents into single documents for each grade and each subject, specifying content and assessment practices. The new policy will establish clear guidelines for the progression and promotion of learners.
- Reduction of Learning Areas in General Education and training (Get) Band. The Learning Areas will be reduced and “repackaged” into six subjects.
- The Learning and Teaching Support Material Committee, which will play a crucial role in supporting and strengthening curriculum implementation by supplying resource material.

Although they thought that the abovementioned procedures held promise, the participating teachers still had their reservations whether they would alleviate the situation at South African schools, based on past experience.

5.3.4 Vision for the future

Vision is “a hunger to see improvement”, and a “force which moulds meaning,” states Gordon (2008, 137). A vision must therefore include the development and implementation of the ideal image of an organisation.

A vision exists when people in an organisation share an explicit agreement on the values, beliefs, purposes and goals that should guide their behaviour. It creates an educational platform encompassing the school’s beliefs, aims, methods and climate, thereby creating a school community. A clear and widely understood vision enables a school to advance, because it offers standards whereby teachers can measure their own efforts and share expectations. Furthermore, a vision that reflects the needs of the surrounding community not only improves education, but also rebuilds the relationship between the school and its public, explains Bassett (2002).

The teachers had on innumerable occasions expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing classroom situation, particularly the large class size, the unavailability of resources and, in general, inadequate support for the challenges that confronted teachers on a daily basis.

- **Lack of transformation among teachers**

“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results” (Einstein).

“I must be the change I want to see.” (Gandhi).

We realised that each individual teacher would have to be the catalyst for transforming his/her classroom. The questions that each teacher had to ask, were: *How can I improve the communication, interaction and relationship structures in the classroom? What can I do to improve the learning outcomes?*

Educational change happens over a long period. The teachers expressed their doubts whether it was possible to maintain the motivation and momentum for change. It was agreed that change could not happen in isolation, but that it required collaboration in which everybody understood the purpose of the change and the plans for the implementation thereof. The group conceded that though not all teachers would be responsive to change, teachers should be persuaded that they needed each other’s ideas for stimulation and their different perspectives for enriching.

Conner and Clawson (2004, 265) propose a three-step programme for change:

- *Assessment* – Teachers need to assess themselves objectively, which requires honesty and the ability to open themselves to the judgement of others.
- *Action* – Teachers must be willing to act on what was assessed and move forward.

- *Adaptation* – We must be willing to experiment with new behaviours and processes that requires ongoing adaptation to increase our effectiveness in the classroom.

The above-mentioned programme for change can be transformed and implemented as action-reflection cycles, in which small and simple sequences can be followed. Teachers can share their understandings of what they aim to achieve with the change, drawing support from each other, while remaining alert and open to available feedback from all participants.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.4.1 Recommendations for professional development

- The Department of Education should invest in the psychological, emotional and professional potential of teachers when implementing change, to develop and grow the participants' confidence to implement the new practices.
- Interpersonal relationships must be built, founded on trust, creating effective channels of communication that will encourage the full participation of all the members of the staff.
- Action research should be encouraged within classrooms, which will serve to develop the classroom teaching practice as teachers pause to observe themselves in action with others.
- Groups must be formed that can initiate discussions to stimulate creativity and innovation in the classroom.
- Staff development should intentionally be aimed at increasing professional confidence and competence; improving teachers' capacity to identify and address their learners' needs, and the passion and drive of long-serving teachers must be preserved and rekindled.

5.4.2 Recommendations with regard to teaching

- Intervention programmes must be introduced to address deficient reading and language skills among learners that are preventing them from effectively participating and progressing in the General Education and Training (GET) Band.
- Small learning groups (subject groups) consisting of teachers and other specialists are needed to provide a platform for practising new skills, providing motivation and support, acting as sounding boards, and sharing resources and technical support.
- Individual and collective reflection is necessary, because it leads to improvement in self-understanding, as teachers begin to critically evaluate their educational practice and learning outcomes, suggest McNiff and Whitehead (2009, 120).

5.4.3 Recommendations for future research

- Action research should be made part of the daily teaching practice; it can serve as teachers' self-assessment tool to identify shortcomings and provide data to implement improvements.
- Research undertaken in any organisation challenges the *status quo*, stretches the imagination of the researcher, hones in on a specific focus area and provides data for reflection; very similar to the process of classroom teaching (Mills 2007, 14).

5.5 LIMITATIONS

- The self-reflective nature of the study and the small sample imposed limitations on generalisations and comparisons; further research is needed to determine whether other teachers are experiencing similar or different communication problems in the classroom.

- Many challenges experienced in the classroom need ongoing cycles of action-reflection to be able to observe tangible improvement in teacher-learner interactions and achievement.

5.6 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- The action-reflection cycles could be continued to establish how exactly the attitude of learners influences low school pass rates and what turnaround strategies can be implemented.
- The school culture (traditional values and belief systems) should be considered when undertaking research in a specific area, because it will help the researcher respond to the needs of the learners and encourage their participation.
- Action research as an ongoing process could offer important data that can be used in the School Improvement Plan to assist the process of Whole School Development.
- The research process can include the whole school; samples of each grade can be used to participate. This will provide information for the comparison of the attitudes of the Intermediate and Senior Phase learners.
- Schools should implement lifelong-learning initiatives that require teachers to plan, execute and summarise their professional development.
- The Department of Education could offer communication studies as a means of improving teachers' basic skills conveying information effectively.

5.7 SUMMARY

Effective communication and maintaining healthy teacher-learner relationships are the heartbeat of any school aiming for high learner achievement. The way in which teachers communicate, reveal their attitude towards learners.

The quality of classroom communication and interactions permeates the whole school environment and has a direct bearing on the standard of education. 'How' as well as 'what' we teach, is of paramount importance if we want to meet the needs of

learners and improve their achievements. The secondary school at which I teach, situated in the Northern Areas of Port Elizabeth, Nelson Mandela Bay had experienced a significant decrease in the pass rate for two consecutive years. This decline had been ascribed to the attitude of the learners towards their schoolwork. Apart from this, we had to ask ourselves if we were committing our best to ensure that our learners were receiving quality education.

It was my objective to understand how my classroom communication could contribute to improved learning outcomes.

Through a journey of critical self-reflection, based on a study of the relevant literature, education research undertaken on the phenomenon and data gathered from learners in the Senior Phase at my school, an understanding was formed of what teachers' views were of effective classroom communication and on what learners based their perceptions on the phenomenon.

The research was conducted within the qualitative paradigm, in particular a critical action research approach, which sought to improve relationships within the research context and simultaneously strived for social justice for the participants. Critical action research allowed me as practitioner-researcher to challenge my taken-for-granted assumptions of my daily classroom practice and enabled the participation of learners and colleagues. Situational truths were presented, which empowered and freed myself and my learners from practices that were not conducive to learning.

The research was conducted in action-reflection spirals. The initial action spiral consisted of a questionnaire presented to Grades Ten and Eleven learners, which formed the baseline assessment for the study. From the data gathered, themes emerged that focused the study on specific aspects concerning the quality of my classroom communications and interactions. From the baseline assessment, an action plan was devised that charted the course of the research journey. The ensuing action-reflection spirals consisted of classroom observation, studying the data, devising interventions, and reflecting on the value thereof.

The focus group discussions offered meaningful data about the actual teaching situations, which enlightened and focused the members on where we could improve. I then realised that for effective teaching and learning to occur, teachers must have a central role in the development of knowledge that affect the care, education, and development of our learners.

The data analysis process as reflected throughout the study, established that learners felt that teachers viewed them negatively, that they were not valued enough and that teachers did not really listen to what they had to say. A common feeling learners expressed, was that the classroom environment did not encourage optimal learning. Some learners referred to the physical condition of the classroom, while others mentioned the attitudes of the teachers towards them as factors that inhibited them in the classroom.

The action plan made provision for implementing improvements, particularly the way in which the researcher interacted with the learners and made the physical environment more learner-friendly. Each research project has its limitation, which was highlighted by the researcher, and recommendations were made for further research.

5.8 CONCLUSION

The focus of this self-reflective research project was to determine how my communication, interactions and relationship structures influenced the learning outcomes in the classroom. The research was undertaken within the qualitative paradigm, which attempted to capture and describe the lived experiences of the participants and how they ascribe meaning to the subject being studied. Cycles of action-reflection were undertaken, with the aim to improve the learning outcomes.

Teachers must invest in their education by continuously inviting feedback from learners and colleagues, in the interest of improving their practice. In this way, they can model to learners the value of education and serve as examples of life-long learners.

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APPENDICES



11 March 2010

Dr AJ Greyling and Ms Cheryl Rensburg
Education Faculty
NMMU

Dear Dr Greyling and Ms C Rensburg

**A SELF-REFLECTION OF MY COMMUNICATION, INTERACTION AND RELATIONSHIP
STRUCTURES IN THE CLASSROOM**

Your above-entitled application for ethics approval served at the March meeting of the Faculty Research, Technology and Innovation Committee of Education (ERTIC).

We take pleasure in informing you that the application was approved by the Committee.

The ethics clearance reference number is **H10-Edu-ERE-005**.

We wish you well with the project. Please inform your co-investigators of the outcome, and convey our best wishes.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J Elliott-Gentry'.

Ms J Elliott-Gentry

Appendix 2



EASTERN CAPE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Ethel Valentine Building * Sutton Road * Sidwell * Private Bag X3931 * North End * Port Elizabeth * 6056 *
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA * Tel: 0414034401 * Fax: 0414510193 *
Website: ecprov.gov.za * e-mail: nyathi.ntsiko@edu.ecprov.gov.za

Ms C. Rensburg
c/o Dr A.J. Greyling
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
Port Elizabeth
Fax: 0415049383

Dear Ms Rensburg

**REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT ARCADIA SECONDARY SCHOOL IN
PORT ELIZABETH**

I refer to your letter dated 14 April 2010 and received on 22 April 2010.

Permission is hereby granted for you to conduct your research on the following conditions:

1. your research must be conducted on a voluntary basis;
2. all ethical issues relating to research must be honoured;
3. your research is subject to the internal rules of the school, including its curricular programme and its code of conduct and must not interfere in the day-to-day routine of the school.

Kindly present a copy of this letter to the principal as proof of permission.

I wish you good luck in your research.

Yours faithfully,

DR N. NTSIKO
DISTRICT DIRECTOR (ACTING): PORT ELIZABETH
/ab

22 April 2010

LETTER TO SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

THE PRINCIPAL

Arcadia Secondary School

Rensburg Street

Arcadia

PORT ELIZABETH

Dear Sir/Madam

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A CLASSROOM-BASED INQUIRY

I am presently an educator at above-mentioned school, as well as a part-time first year Med student at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU), doing full research under the supervision of Dr AJ Greyling.

My study involves an investigation on interaction and communication in order to improve relationship structures. I aim to do a classroom-based inquiry.

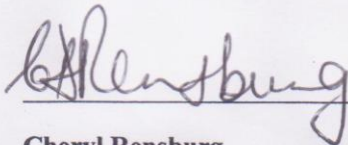
The investigation will include classroom observations, completion of questionnaires, as well as implementing my own learning and teaching strategies. The aim of my study is to improve communication in order to impact their learning.

I hereby seek permission from you and the School Governing Body to conduct my investigation in the classroom. The investigation will be guided by a strict code of ethics, as prescribed by the Ethics Committee of the NMMU. All data collected during the investigation will be treated in a strictly confidential manner.

I am available to answer any queries you may have regarding the nature of my investigation.

Thanking you in anticipation of a favourable response.

Yours sincerely,



Cheryl Rensburg

14/04/2010

Date

Persal number : 50327585

I freely and voluntarily give my permission to participate in your Action Research Project.

Signature : M. Heynes

Name in print: M. C. HEYNES

Date : 21.04.2010

ARCADIA
SEKONDÊR/SECONDARY
POSBUS / P.O. BOX 17027
SALTVILLE, PORT ELIZABETH, 6020.

A Self reflection of my communication, interaction and relationship structures in the classroom.

Project Information Statement for Parents/Guardians

Dear Parent/Guardian

My name is Cheryl Rensburg, and I am a Masters Degree student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. I am conducting research on communication under the supervision of Dr A.J Greyling.

The Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) has given its approval for the implementation of the study and the proposed study has met the requirements of the Research Ethics Committee (Human) of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. The Eastern Cape Provincial Department of Education has given approval for me to approach schools to conduct my research, and the School Principal has agreed to allow me to approach learners to participate in the study.

I am seeking your consent for your child to participate. I will also seek the assent of your child. Only children who agree and whose parents/guardians consent will participate in the study. I ask that you discuss participation in this study with your child.

The study will be used to:

1. To determine how my communication style influences interaction and relationship structures in the classroom.
2. Determining how I can improve my communication and interaction in the classroom.
3. To determine how improved communication, interaction and relationship structures help enhance learning outcomes.

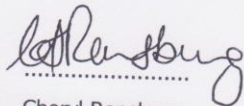
Each participating child will be asked to complete questionnaires, participate in interviews, group discussions and write a report on classroom activities. This will take approximately three

months to complete. All information obtained will be treated in strictest confidence. The children's names will not be used and individual children will not be identifiable in any written reports about the study.

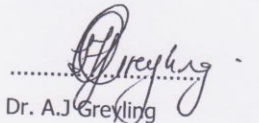
A summary report of the findings will be made available to the school. Participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty. If a student requires support as a result of their participation in the survey steps can be taken to accommodate this.

Please discuss participation in this project with your child. To give consent for your child to participate, please complete the attached form and return it to Mrs CD Rensburg, Arcadia High School.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.



.....
Cheryl Rensburg
Researcher
NMMU



.....
Dr. A.J Greyling
Supervisor
NMMU

1. Lys enige 5 goeie punte van die onderwyser.

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....

2. Lys enige 5 swak punte van die onderwyser.

- 1.....
- 2.....
- 3.....
- 4.....
- 5.....

3. Watter emosies/ gevoel ervaar jy wanneer jy na die klas kom?

-
-
-

4. Gee redes waarom jy so voel.

-
-
-

5. Gebruik die onderwyser woorde wat jy verstaan?

-
-

6. In watter mate verstaan jy dit wat die onderwyser sê en die woorde wat sy gebruik?

-
-

7. Verstaan jy as die onderwyser iets verduidelik?

-
-

8. Hoe duidelik vind jy die onderwyser se verduideliking in die algemeen?

-
-

9. Hoe dikwels kry jy/julle geleentheid om 'n vraag te beantwoord?

.....
.....
.....

10. Hoe klink die onderwyser se stemtoon vir die grootste gedeelte van die dag vir jou?

.....
.....

11. Beskryf hoe jy die onderwyser se lesaanbieding ervaar.

.....
.....
.....

12. Dink jy dat die onderwyser soms onnodig krities is? Verduidelik hoekom jy so voel?

.....
.....
.....

13. Het jy die vrymoedigheid om vrae te vra of te beantwoord in die klas? Verduidelik.

.....
.....
.....

14. Voel jy dat almal genoeg geleentheid kry om vrae te beantwoord? Hoekom voel jy so? (Gee redes vir jou antwoord)

.....
.....

15. Met hoeveel vrymoedigheid of gemak kan jy die onderwyser nader om 'n persoonlike of skool probleem te bespreek?

.....
.....
.....
.....

16. Voel jy bang/ skaam om iets in die klas te vra? Verduidelik hoekom jy so sê?

.....
.....

17. Voel jy gemaklik/ vrymoedig om te sê wanneer jy nie die werk verstaan nie? Hoekom sê jy so?

.....
.....

18. Hoe sou jy graag wou hê dat die onderwyser moet optree wanneer dit lyk of iemand nie verstaan nie.

.....
.....

19. Hoe hanteer die onderwyser die situasie waar leerders van haar of van mekaar verskil?

.....
.....
.....

20. Hoe hanteer die onderwyser dit wanneer daar steuringe / geraas is in die klas?

.....
.....
.....
.....

21. Wat dink jy van die onderwyser se houding en gesindheid teenoor julle in die algemeen?

.....
.....

22. Wat dink jy van die onderwyser se houding en gesindheid teenoor jou as persoon?

.....
.....

Appendix 6

77 Bougainvillea Drive

Westering

Port Elizabeth

6025

29 August 2010

Arcadia Secondary School

Rensburg Street

Arcadia

Dear colleagues,

I have embarked upon a self-reflective action research in my classroom in order to find answers to the research question: "**How can my communication, interactions and relationship structures enhance learning outcomes?**" Communication is a multi-faceted and dynamic tapestry that is interwoven into the very fabric of education. The term communication refers to 'how' we teach and simultaneously 'what' we teach.

I have chosen action research as methodology, because it is a form of enquiry that asks the following questions: **What am I doing? What do I need to improve? How do I improve it?** It focuses on how people interact in their environment and it is committed to understanding and improving the environment and human practices from within.

For a while I have been asking myself whether I am making a difference to how and what learners learn, and what I can do to improve my communication in the classroom. My learners are accompanying me on this research journey, because I am relying on their participation and response to my communication and interactions in the classroom.

Action research takes place in the company of others and therefore I am appealing to you, my colleagues to scrutinise the data that I am gathering in relation to my research question. You will also offer critical feedback on my communication in the classroom by listening, observing, questioning, reflecting and providing feedback whether data is relevant and meaningful in addressing the research question.

For far too long I have been satisfied with the status quo, plodding along without the desire to step out and up in order to improve my teaching practice. I could list all the wrongs in the education system and methodically elucidate the shortcomings in the education department, lack of strong leadership, limited resources, and lack of

parental involvement. I have decided to put my classroom practice under the scrutiny of participants directly involved namely, my learners, colleagues and critical friends.

Through this research project I have been propelled from my 'seat' of complacency, energised to take up the challenge in order to develop into a passionate teacher ready to accompany my learners on a journey of self-discovery.

In my quest for constructive feedback and cooperation, allow me to use the following quotation:

Show me the sensible person who likes himself or herself!

I know myself too well to like what I see. I know but too well

That I'm not what I'd like to be.

- Golda Meir

I thank you in anticipation.

Cheryl Rensburg

