

# **Vulnerable youth as agents of change: a YPAR approach to making schools enabling spaces for learners**

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## **Declaration**

I Maite Sara Mathikithela declare herewith that the thesis entitled: Vulnerable youth as agents of change: a YPAR approach to making schools enabling spaces for learners, which I herewith submit to the North-West University is in compliance with the requirements sets for the degree Philosophiae Doctor in Learner Support. It is my own work, has been text edited in accordance with the requirements and has not already been submitted to any other university



Signature

10.10.2019

Date

## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to my late father, Ngoako Johannes Sape, who did not have formal education but strongly believed in its emancipatory power. You gave me a strong foundation to grow holistically and through your motivation I was inspired to reach the highest level of education. Thank you for being such a caring and supportive father. May your soul rest in perfect peace.

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## Abstract

Schools are supposed to be enabling spaces, environments that allow and support children to reach their potential. Yet, education in rural and township schools in South Africa is affected by grave social problems such as HIV and AIDS and increasing poverty which render learners vulnerable. The role of the school as a site of care and support becomes increasingly important in this context, but schools themselves are often disabling due to stigmatisation, discrimination and bullying by peers and even teachers. This results in feelings of inferiority, fear and unhappiness, which negatively impacts on learners' academic performance and their general well-being. As a teacher in one such school, I was motivated by my values of love and social justice to do something to turn the situation around. Previous work has failed to address this problem as the majority of studies focused on the negative outcomes for young people and the challenges faced by them; rather than understanding adaptive protective processes that contribute to their resilience. Positioning vulnerable youth as helpless, denies their right to participation in matters that concern them and reinforces their inability to change their lives. In this study, I proposed that learners themselves have to realise that they can turn their own lives around because change is more likely to be lasting if it comes from within. The research question guiding the study was: *How can vulnerable youth actively contribute to making school an enabling space?* Drawing on an emancipatory critical paradigm, I engaged a group of 14 Grade 11 learners with an equal mix of boys and girls in a youth participatory action research (YPAR) to develop a research agenda to bring about change in their circumstances and influence policies on issues that impact directly on their lives. Data was generated through participatory visual methods of photovoice and drawings; triangulated with group discussion and my reflective diary. Data was analysed thematically through the lens of the socio-ecological view of resilience, self-determination theory and the concept of the health promoting school. There were three cycles of action learning and action research.

Cycle 1: In response to sub-question 1 of the study, *How do vulnerable youth perceive the current school climate?* participants identified aspects that needed to change to make the school a more enabling space, using photovoice and drawings. Data were discussed during regular action learning set meetings. The findings of the study presented three main themes as areas that needed change in the school: poor infrastructure, lack of sports engagement and poor social and emotional climate of the school.

Cycle 2: In response to sub-questions 2 of the study, *What actions could vulnerable youth take to make the school an enabling space?* participants developed strategies to implement actions to create an enabling school environment, based on their findings in Cycle 1. They used artefacts of Cycle 1 to make posters that they presented to the school governing body and displayed on the wall for other learners and teachers' view to find out if they share similar experience with them. The response indicated that themes identified by participants were validated by the experience of other learners at school. A policy brief was presented to the school governing body. Participants took actions to create awareness of issues identified and involved other learners in addressing these issues. To answer sub-question 3 *To what extent could these actions benefit vulnerable youth, teachers and the school in general?* I presented evidence of the beneficial effect the project had at various levels.

Cycle 3: This cycle was researcher-driven, where I developed theoretical guidelines, to respond to sub-question 4 of the study "*What theoretical guidelines can be developed from the findings of this study of how vulnerable youth could be effectively involved in making school an enabling space?*", based on my reflections on the process and all the other data sets.

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the existing body of knowledge on YPAR as a means of social and educational transformation, by showing how YPAR could be facilitated even in a context where most learners have been rendered vulnerable by poverty and where teachers themselves increase that vulnerability. Most of the studies to date have been done in urban settings in developed countries. Here, I have shown how it can be conducted in a rural setting with few resources as an extra mural activity. The findings also add to resilience theory, in that they have shown that YPAR is an effective way to help vulnerable children increase their resilience.

Methodologically, I conclude that the findings indicate that YPAR is an effective means of helping vulnerable learners to increase their agency, and is a catalyst for transformation in specific aspects of the school to make it more akin to a health promoting school. Practically, the study, made a difference to this particular school on many levels. Through YPAR, participants started a process, which is ongoing and continues to bring about positive change in many areas of the school.

Keywords: action research, health promoting school, resilience, self-determination, youth agency, youth well-being.

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## **Glossary of abbreviations**

AIDS: Acquired immunodeficiency virus

CDO: Community development organisation

CDW: Community Development Worker

CFS: Child Friendly Schools

CJCP: Centre for Justice and crime prevention

CSTL: Care and Support for Teaching and Learning

DSM: District Senior Manager

EWP6: Education White Paper 6

HIV: Human immunodeficiency virus

HPS: Health promoting school

ISHP: Integrated School Health Policy

LO: Life Orientation

NSNP: National School Nutrition Programme

NSSF: National School Safety Framework

NWU: North-West University

OIT: Organismic Integration Theory

PAR: Participatory action research

PET: Physical education and training

PYD: Positive Youth Development

SAPS: South African Police Services

SBST: School based support team

SDT: Self-determination theory

SEL : Social and emotional learning

SERT: Socio ecological resilience theory

SGB: School governing body

SMT: School management team

STI's: Sexually transmitted infections

TB: Tuberculosis

UNAIDS: Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS.

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

US: United States

USDHHS: United States Department of Health and Human services

VISPOL: Visible Police

WHO: World Health Organisation

YCOP: Young civilians of patrol

YPAR: Youth participatory action research

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# Chapter 1

## Overview of the thesis

### 1.1 Background and rationale for the study

Schools are supposed to be enabling spaces where learners can flourish (Reiss & White, 2013). This implies that schools should foster nurturing environments where learners can feel safe, happy and wanted (Fennelly & Perry, 2014). Learners feel secure in environments where there is an absence of fear and where they perceive that they are treated fairly (UNESCO, 2007). Yet, the increasing number of children rendered vulnerable by poverty and HIV/AIDS makes it difficult for schools in South Africa to provide the necessary support to make these learners feel cared for and safe (Campbell, Andersen, Mutsikiwa, Madanhire, Nyamukapa & Gregson, 2016; Fearon; Tomlinson, Kumsta, Skeen, Murray, Cooper et al., 2017). The under-resourced state of schools in socio-economically challenged communities contributes to the problem.

Learners in South African rural schools are rendered vulnerable for one or more of the following reasons: poverty (Goodman, Gregg & Washbrook, 2011), HIV/AIDS (Schenk, Michaelis, Sapiano, Brown & Weiss, 2010); parental alcohol abuse (Pillay, 2018) and parental neglect (Carr, 2013). In short, families in poor communities face multiple stressors (Rodriguez-Jenkins & Marcenko, 2014). Many of the learners have to work to support their families, or miss school to carry out family duties their parents cannot perform (Pillay, 2016; Skovdal, 2010). Some fail to do their school work because of house chores and worry about what to eat (Levison, DeGraff & Dungumaro, 2018). This can eventually impede their academic performance (Novotney, 2010) leading to, for example, depression, withdrawing into themselves or substance abuse (Dolly & Walters, 2013), with the ultimate consequence often being that they drop out of school. And, although teachers may wish to help these learners, generally they do not have the expertise to cope with children who need additional psychosocial support (Wood & Goba, 2011).

Education has become a critical factor in determining the future of children in poor communities (Ferreira, 2011; Ogina, 2010) because it is one of the few means to take them out of their plight (Corbett & Fikkert, 2014; Takayanagi, 2010). Teachers are entrusted with directing learners towards achieving their educational goals (Deacon, 2016), but this has become a difficult task because schools

struggle to operate under the constraints imposed by socio-economically challenged environments (Jensen, 2013; Nthebe, Barkhuizen, & Schutte, 2016).

### ***1.1.1 School as a site of discrimination***

Rather than being enabling spaces, schools are often sites of discrimination where learners are treated unequally depending on their socio-economic background and academic performance (National Association of School Psychologists, 2012; Sosteric, 2012). Learners who face adversity are often made fun of by other learners (Moletsane, 2013). This is a form of emotional bullying (Al-Raqqad, Al-Bourini, Al Talahin & Aranki, 2017), which is all too common in many schools (Goodstein, 2013). Since learners who come from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot afford the material possessions that more privileged learners take for granted, they are subjected to insults, name calling and teasing by their peers. Teachers also inflict pain through derogatory remarks (Moletsane, 2013) and impose harsh punishments, especially when learners fail to meet their expectations. As a teacher in a rural school, I have witnessed learners being referred to as thieves, sex workers and street kids by their peers and have seen some of our teachers treating them harshly.

### ***1.1.2 School as a source of stress***

The school can thus be a source of stress, resulting from stigma, psychosocial distress, lack of care, and pressure to conform to requirements such as having the correct uniform and other equipment (Acosta-Gómez, De la Roca-Chiapas, Zavala-Berverna, Cisneros, Pérez, Rodrigues et al., 2018). Although the government has introduced 'no-fee' schools (Department of Basic Education, 2007), children are still unable to afford all the other financial demands of schooling. The money that families receive from social grants is not enough to put bread on the table, buy clothes and pay for electricity, not to mention the additional resources needed at school. For example, some learners may be excluded from participating in school activities, such as field trips because they cannot afford to pay the extra fee charged. Failure to have resources such as scientific calculators and files for different subjects typecast them as problematic by teachers (Smith, 2011). Due to unreliable provision of services such as water and firewood, the National School Nutrition Programme sometimes becomes dysfunctional as food handlers fail to cook for learners and send them home during lunch time. This may be a stress to learners who rely solely on the food that they get at school. When they fall asleep in the classroom due to hunger teachers shout at them without probing the reasons for their lack of attention (Chitiyo,

Changara & Chitiyo, 2010). Schools have thus become disabling, stigmatizing and unsafe spaces for many children which hampers their optimal development.

### ***1.1.3 School as a dangerous place***

Schools can also be dangerous places where children are subjected to abuse in the form of rape and sexual harassment. Reports in various newspapers indicate that sexual abuse is a problem which occurs at an alarming rate in schools, and children who are orphaned or neglected are often the easiest targets (Reintjies, Kamphuis, Prinzie & Telch, 2010). An example of such a case is an incident involving two boys in Gauteng, who were forced by their peers at school to watch a pornographic movie and to masturbate together. One of them was physically assaulted by learners for disclosing the abuse and a month later he killed himself because of stress (Serrao, 2009). A KwaZulu Natal newspaper (Mthethwa, 2016) reported that 382 children, most of whom were from disadvantaged backgrounds, were abused by educators in that province alone. However, sexual abuse often goes unreported, especially in rural areas (Magwa, 2015). In the South African province of Limpopo, for example, 9 boys were sodomised by a security guard in their school but the principal decided to keep the matter hidden from the education authorities because he did not want adverse publicity (Maponyane, 2011). In other cases, children enter into sexual relations with teachers because they benefit materially from the relationships (Dzanibe, 2013). The fact that they agree to the relationship does not excuse the behaviour of the teacher.

### ***1.1.4 Negative influence of challenging social and economic circumstances on school***

Many schools, especially in rural areas, are faced with the following challenges that impede development and growth within the school: a dearth of infrastructure; overcrowded classrooms; inadequate resources for teaching, learning and extra-mural activities (Du Plessis, 2014); a lack of basic services, such as clean water and sanitation; and insufficient access to social welfare services (Sedibe, 2011). The school premises may also be damaged by graffiti and other forms of learner vandalism (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). The poverty and resultant social problems in the surrounding community impact on the school environment and the learners. The school becomes a disabling environment wherein learners who need additional psychosocial support become disillusioned and feel disconnected from the school (Khuzwayo, Taylor & Connolly, 2016).

### ***1.1.5 How can we bring about change?***

This situation is untenable to me. I believe that the school has to be a safe place where learners not only gain academic knowledge but also learn about themselves and how to interact with others (Hurst, Wallace & Nixon, 2013). The literature indicates that some schools in Sub-Saharan Africa were successful in providing emotional support to children by strengthening the capacity of internal support (Ebersoehn & Ferreira, 2011). To help learners flourish and reach their full potential, the school should support and inspire them to bring their own ideas to life. According to education policy, teachers should fulfill a pastoral role and have a duty of providing care and support to their learners (Department of Basic Education, 2010; Ogina, 2010). Teachers have a great deal of influence on learners, whether positive or negative, by dint of the fact that they spend so much time with them. For vulnerable children in particular, teachers may represent the only stable adult contact they have (Chitiyo et al., 2010). Teachers should be creating enabling spaces through an effective implementation of rules and educational policies and providing care and support for the safety of their learners (Mampane & Bouwer, 2011). However, my experience and that of others (Motsa & Morojele, 2016), is that many teachers are insensitive to the feelings and needs of learners.

As a teacher in a rural school, I experience teacher insensitivity on a daily basis and believe that there are many factors which contribute to this. I have noticed that stigma and discrimination are still pervasive. Children who are victims of prejudice and discrimination in the community are often treated the same way by teachers at school (Shann, Bryant, Brooks, Bukuluki, Muhangi, Lugalla et al., 2014). For example, I witnessed an incident where a learner rendered vulnerable by poverty was denied stationery by the teacher because he was wearing a torn uniform and improper black school shoes, which his uncle had given him as a hand-me-down. Other teachers joined in and yelled at him demanding that he should have proper school shoes before he could be provided with stationery. They were blind to the fact that the learner had made a great effort to try to meet school regulations. Many teachers consider such learners difficult to educate, blaming them rather than helping them. However, not all teachers are like this. There are teachers who go the extra mile to assist needy learners through donations of clothes and food. Yet while they are well intentioned, the same teachers still perceive vulnerable children as passive recipients of support in need of pity rather than viewing them as possessing agency to improve their own circumstances (Skovdal & Campbell, 2010).

I undertook this study because I perceive schools as potentially enabling spaces for learners to better their life circumstances through education. Moreover, I view all children as having the ability to address the barriers that hinder the attainment of their goals (Ungar, 2011). As a teacher, I believe I have a moral responsibility to help them reach their potential. In general, there is a move away from seeing children as victims, towards a more positive perception that recognises their innate resilience (Skovdal et al., 2010). Educators are possibly not addressing the needs of challenged children because they subjectively interpret their needs and impose intervention strategies to resolve their problems (Mavise, 2010; Skovdal et al., 2010). However, to understand children's needs, educators need to be more objective and adopt a participatory approach (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011) to turn the situation around. Children themselves are the best agents to sensitise people to their needs and wants (Skovdal et al., 2010). Thus, this study investigated how vulnerable youth in a specific rural school could take action themselves in creating a more enabling environment. The intention was not to expose any educators or insensitive behaviour, but to build a sound relationship between all stakeholders and to promote a healthy environment within the school.

A participatory approach is appropriate and necessary because the children themselves know best what is currently happening and what change they want to effect. Educators need to invest in young people's capacities and skills (Sukati, 2013) to help them develop confidence in their abilities. However, reviews of literature on vulnerable children have concluded that the majority of studies only focused on the negative outcomes for young people and challenges faced by them (Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow & Hansen, 2013; Schenk et al., 2010). Positioning youth as helpless denies their right to participation in matters that concern them and reinforces their inability to change their lives. Betancourt et al., (2013) suggest that there is a need for a greater understanding of adaptive protective processes that contribute to resilience in the mental health of adolescents. In this study, I propose that learners themselves have to realise that they can turn their own lives around because change is more likely to be lasting if it comes from within. Moreover, the participatory process is enabling in, and of, itself (Powers & Allaman, 2012). Being involved in such a process raises children's awareness that they are complete human beings and can take action to make life better for themselves (Kohfeldt & Langhout, 2010).

## 1.2. Problem statement

Poverty and HIV/AIDS have worsened the social and economic circumstances of increasing numbers of children in South Africa, rendering them vulnerable and in need of increased socio-emotional support. Schools are supposed to be enabling spaces that create an environment that allows and supports children to reach their potential. However they can often be places where children are stigmatised, ostracised and demeaned by both their peers and teachers. This results in feelings of inferiority, fear and unhappiness, which negatively impact on academic performance and general well-being. The question is how can we turn the situation around? Teachers are not coping with the challenges of providing pastoral support as they are often overwhelmed themselves. In many cases, teachers are the source of discrimination. In this study, I argue that vulnerable youth have the potential to create a more positive environment for themselves, if they are guided and enabled to do so. The very fact of being involved in the process of change may promote well-being among children. This study engaged vulnerable youth through a participatory approach, which meant that they took action themselves in making their school a more child-friendly, enabling space.

## 1.3 Research questions

Based on the problem statement above, I formulated the following research questions to guide the study:

- **Primary question:** How can vulnerable youth actively contribute to making school an enabling space?

The following **sub-questions** of the study support the main question

- How do vulnerable youth perceive the current school climate?
- What actions could vulnerable youth take to make the school an enabling space?
- To what extent could these actions benefit vulnerable youth, teachers and the school in general?
- What theoretical guidelines can be developed from the findings of this study of how vulnerable youth could be effectively involved in making school an enabling space?

## 1.4 Purpose of the study

This study aimed to engage vulnerable youth through participatory action research with a view to making school a more child-friendly, enabling space. I intended to achieve the aim of the study by working collaboratively with vulnerable youth to do the following:

- investigate how they perceive the current school climate



- assist them in deciding on and implementing actions to make the school a more enabling space
- collectively evaluate the extent to which the actions taken have been of benefit to the youth themselves, the teachers and the school in general.
- develop theoretical guidelines from the findings of the study about how to effectively involve school-going vulnerable youth in making school a more enabling space.

## **1.5 Clarification of concepts**

I now explain the following concepts as they were used in this study.

### ***1.5.1 Agents of change***

Agents of change are entrusted with the responsibility to ensure that they effect change in physical environments or social contexts. The literature defines agents of change as anyone who has the agency and the zeal to facilitate and coordinate the change effort (Lunenburg, 2010). In this study, youth are perceived as agents of change when they are empowered to take action to change their school social and physical environments to better meet their needs and wants.

### ***1.5.2 School as enabling space***

An enabling space allows individuals the freedom to confide in, or share their experiences with others without fear of ridicule or reprisal. According to the literature a school is an enabling space if it provides an environment where learners feel safe, happy and wanted (Reiss et al., 2013) and supports them in reaching their potential. In this study, the concept of the school as enabling space implies a healthy physical and social environment where all stakeholders can freely and actively participate in their daily activities.

### ***1.5.3 Youth participatory action research (YPAR)***

YPAR is a research design that empowers youth to take action for social change and creates new opportunities for youth leadership (Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott & Morrel, 2017; Powers et al., 2012). In this study, through participating in a particular YPAR project youth were given the opportunity to lead and take action to make their school a child-friendly, enabling space. I worked collaboratively with the youth to do the following: identify their problems; decide on the method and plan of action to change their situation; evaluate the change and reflect on the significance of the learning. YPAR as a research design is explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

#### ***1.5.4 Vulnerable youth***

There is no universal definition of the concept 'vulnerable'. However, in this study, all children under the age of 18 years who fall under one or more of the following categories are perceived as vulnerable: poverty; parental neglect; parental illness; parental absence; HIV positive; family experiencing multiple stressors and parental alcohol abuse. Youth is a transitional stage from childhood to adolescence and eventually to adulthood (Harlan, 2016). The literature defines youth as a stage of life and a social construct used to discuss, reckon and assess a specific cohort sharing similar characteristics of transition (Goldin, 2014). In the South African context, youth are young people between the ages of 15 and 35 years (Graham & Mlatsheni, 2015). In my study, I am referring to school-going youth between 16 and 19 years in Grade 11 in a particular school.

#### **1.6. Theoretical and conceptual frameworks**

A theoretical framework outlines the theory that explains the research problem under study (Swanson, 2013). Its purpose is to demonstrate an understanding of theories and concepts that are relevant to the topic and that relate to the broader areas of knowledge being considered (Adom, Adu-Gyamfi, Agyekum, Ayarkwa, Dwumah, Abass et al., 2016). In this study, I drew on three main theories to help me to make sense of the findings, namely self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008), the socio-ecological view of resilience (Cesana, Giordano, Boerchi, Rivolta & Castelli, 2018; Ungar, 2012) and the concept of the health promoting school (Du Plessis, Koornhof, Daniels, Sowden & Adams, 2014).

##### ***1.6.1 Self-determination theory***

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theory of motivation which explains how people are driven by the need to grow and gain fulfillment (Ryan & Deci, 2008). It involves exploring concepts of self-awareness, volition, socio-economic attachment, and political and cultural consideration of factors which in this study concern children and the school they find themselves in. The question guiding this study is how can youth improve the school climate to make it a more child-friendly, enabling space? In terms of self-determination theory, vulnerable children should be able to solve their own problems. Self-determined regulation refers to an individual's willingness and ability to take the initiative to change/improve their lives (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017). In this study, I aimed to increase the participants' ability to regulate their own behaviour because I wanted them to develop a sense of volition in the process of change, which is more likely to last if it comes from within. Self-determination theory can be used to strengthen individuals' capacity to access and negotiate resources that will help them to cope with adversity (Deci &

Ryan, 2010). Children in adverse situations might not be able to access many external protective resources; strengthening internal assets will, therefore, help them to effectively manage the challenges of life (Deci et al., 2010). SDT identifies three innate needs that promote function and growth namely, competence, relatedness and autonomy (Vansteenkiste, Ryan & Deci, 2008). I make the assumption that by taking part in participatory action research (PAR), the young participants can develop competence through learning how to take action to improve their own circumstances; and working in groups can improve their relatedness and sense of belonging, which will eventually help them develop agency, or the autonomy to improve their own circumstances.

### ***1.6.2 Socio-ecological view of resilience***

The term resilience is defined as the outcome of a process of active negotiation between individuals and their social environments (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick & Yehuda, 2014). Current resilience theory places the onus on social ecologies (Ungar, 2012) to provide helping resources; and the school should be such a resource (Cameron, Ungar & Liebenberg, 2007). A socio-ecological model of resilience provides balance by recognising both risk and protective factors (Theron, Liebenberg & Ungar, 2015). The school is seen as a protective factor but it can also be a risk factor when the climate is not supportive (Ungar, 2012). School should be an enabling space, with a climate that promotes resilience in the child. To cope with adversities, children need both internal and external support (Lee & Stewart, 2013). Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) should help children develop internal protective factors and teach them how to take action to increase external protective factors. School should promote healthy behaviours as well as successful learning in young people by creating a climate and teaching practice that honour and meet children's needs (Fan, Williams & Corkin, 2011). Participatory research is well suited to achieving this aim.

### ***1.6.3 Health Promoting Schools***

The Health Promoting Schools model ensures and encourages a healthy setting for living, learning and working in the school and its surrounding community. The literature indicates that this model aims to persuade young people to determine values and accept responsibility for their own health and social behaviour (Turunen, Sormunen, Jourdan, Von Seelen, & Buijs, 2017). In this study, Self-Determination Theory helped me understand how I could provide guidance to youth to enable them to become more resilient and thus more capable of negotiating support from their social ecologies (teachers/school management) and navigating towards the use of these helping resources. This was done within the

context of the model of the Health Promoting School where a holistic view of health is taken (Stewart & Wang, 2012). Hence, the young people of the study were empowered through YPAR to initiate strategies that all stakeholders could adopt to promote the health of their school through policies, services and the improvement of physical and social conditions.

## **1.7 Research design**

A research design is a general plan of how research will be carried out; it is a specified strategy for generating empirical evidence that will be used to answer the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The design of this study is youth participatory action research (YPAR), which is a methodology that empowers youth to take action for social change and to create new opportunities for youth leadership (Powers et al., 2012). It is an approach that involves the adult researcher and the youth participating in the study working collaboratively to decide on research strategies to identify problems and generate solutions. The approach requires the research team to engage in reiterative cycles of learning through ongoing dialogue and self-reflection (Bergold & Thomas, 2012). The YPAR design is discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

### ***1.7.1 Research paradigm***

A paradigm is a distinct concept or thought pattern (Harris, 2011) upon which researchers base their studies. Paradigms are important in research because they serve as a basis for a researcher's beliefs in relation to ontology, epistemology and methodology (Mertens, 2010a). Ontology is a philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality (Krieger, 2011). Epistemology is a philosophical belief system about how one might acquire knowledge (Fui, Khin & Ying, 2011). Methodology offers theoretical base and insight to enable the choice of relevant research methods (Howell, 2013). This study was based on the paradigm of critical theory. Critical theory is a school of thought that stresses critical thinking and a detailed analysis of society and culture through application of knowledge from social sciences and humanities (Payne & Barbera, 2013). The choice of this theory was prompted by the intention to emancipate children by helping them realise that they can take action to improve their own circumstances. These children were emancipated through a youth participatory action research (YPAR) process which raised their consciousness about their situation.

### ***1.7.2 Research approach***

The approach of the study was qualitative because I wished to gain a broad understanding of how school-going youth perceived their school and what they thought could be done to make it a more

enabling environment. This approach enabled us to uncover the prevalent trends that make the school disabling because it allowed informants to provide rich information about their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Harding, 2013).

### ***1.7.3 Methods***

Research methods are tools that researchers use to conduct research (Long, 2014). A research method can either be quantitative, qualitative or participatory. In this study, I adopted participatory methods which involve the research participants in data generation and analysis (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019).

#### *1.7.3.1 Site of study and participant selection*

This research was confined to a particular secondary school in a South African rural area, where I worked as a teacher. I decided to conduct my research in this school because I was conversant with the situation and it would not have been possible to work closely with learners from another school. Participants in this study were recruited by homogeneous purposive sampling (Creswell, 2012; Suri, 2011), a method that allowed me to select participants based on my knowledge of whether they possessed specific experience, knowledge or exposure to the phenomenon under study. I chose to use homogenous purposive sampling because I intended to recruit participants who were in the same grade and age group as well as from similar cultural backgrounds (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2015). To avoid bias, I requested the teacher liaison officer to purposefully select such participants who had leadership qualities and the ability to communicate well with others because they were expected to work as a team to accomplish a common goal of influencing school policy. The participants were not learners that I taught and were, recruited from Grade 11 learners based on the argument that they had more experience in the school than others in the lower grades, were over the age of 16 and, thus, possessed a certain degree of maturity. I recruited 14 learners, with an equal mix of males and females. Almost all the learners in our school were vulnerable, owing to the poverty of the context they lived in, and some more than others.

#### *1.7.3.2 Data generation strategies*

Data was mainly generated through visual methodologies such as photo voice (Nykiforuk, Vallianatos & Nieuwendyk, 2011; Nind & Vinha, 2016), and drawings (Theron, Mitchell, Smith & Stuart, 2011) triangulated with group discussions and my reflective diary (Lawson, Brown, Coughlan, Floyde, Baurley, Elliott et al., 2018). The data generation and analysis methods were participatory and explained clearly to the participants of the study. We formed an action learning group that met regularly to collaboratively generate and interpret the findings.

- *Visual methods*

Visual methods are processes in which research participants use images to capture aspects of their environment and experiences, which they share with others (Mitchell, 2011). In this study, I used photovoice and drawings (Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane; 2011). These methods encouraged the youth to participate in critical conversations and promoted a feeling of empowerment (Smith, Bratini & Appio, 2012). I provided participants with a prompt, for example, about their current perception of the school or what changes they would like to make. I then asked them to make a visual representation with written explanatory narratives.

- *Recorded group discussions*

Participants met as an action learning group (Flynn & McDermott, 2016) on a weekly basis at school for a few hours to share their experiences, perceptions and opinions as they progressed through the research cycles. Firstly, they identified issues, and then decided on actions, which they carried out and finally evaluated the process. I recorded the meetings and transcribed them to produce data.

- *Reflective diary*

Reflective diaries are tools used to record experiences during the research journey, to aid critical reflection on what is happening (Sendall & Domocol, 2013). I used a reflective diary to record my experiences in the meetings and other insights I gained while conducting the study. I critically reflected on my learning throughout research process.

### *1.7.3.3 Data analysis*

Data was analysed on two levels through a thematic process. Thematic analysis is a form of data analysis in qualitative research, where the focus is on identifying, analysing and recording patterns within the data (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). Firstly, participants generated data through photovoice, drawings and group discussions. They then analysed this data to decide the main themes or subjects that appeared to recur in, for example, the photos or discussion. This process helped them to identify the perceived problems that participants wished to address and to decide on the way forward. I then analysed the data on a theoretical level through the lens of self-determination theory, resilience theory and the concept of the health promoting school for the purposes of my study.

## **1.8 Measures to ensure trustworthiness**

To ensure trustworthiness in the study, I used five validity criteria namely; process, dialogic, outcome, catalytic and democratic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

*Process validity* refers to the methods and the extent of relations between the participants. In this study I ensured that problems were framed and addressed in a way that permits ongoing learning of the participants.

*Dialogic validity* refers to the degree to which participants are given a chance to talk about the research process and to devise a plan of action. Dialogic validity in this study was established through participatory visual methodologies of photo voice and drawings, triangulated with participant meetings and reflections. The participants had opportunity to collaboratively create new knowledge that could be used as a reference point for future action.

*Outcome validity* is determined by whether the actions taken yielded the desired results or not. This study ensured that the participants were reflecting on the extent to which the actions led to the desired outcomes.

In *catalytic validity*, participants must have the ability to understand the research situation so that they can transform the knowledge they gained into reality. In this study, the nature of the problem urged the participants and energised them to take action in order to bring social change to the research site. The participation in research changed the participants' understanding and behaviour.

*Democratic validity* is concerned with the degree of collaboration between participants. In this study I ensured that all decisions made by the participants were democratic and that all participants had a chance to put forward their ideas and opinions. All were involved in data generation and analysis.

## **1.9 Ethical considerations**

I sought ethical clearance from the university committee before undertaking the research. Moreover, I requested permission to conduct my study at the school from the Department of Basic Education and assured them I would respect the anonymity of the principal and the school. All interested participants, together with their guardians, were provided with relevant information about the research and asked to sign consent forms. Moreover, I informed the participants that they could withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons (Marshall, Adebamowo, Adeyemo, Ogundiran, Strenski, Zhou et al.,

2014). To protect identity, participants were referred to as P1 to P 14 in the report, but in the group and at school their identity was known. However, the participants requested that their pictures must not be masqueraded in the thesis as they felt that they owned the work. I ensured that the participants were protected from any physical or psychological harm by having a referral procedure in place should I notice the need for counseling or other help. I was debriefed after each session by my promoter, who is a registered social worker with extensive counselling experience to help me to recognise any signs of stress in participants and adjust my behaviour and interventions accordingly. Participating in this study empowered the learners with leadership experience and external psychosocial support for counseling was ready in case any sensitive matter arose. I monitored the situation throughout the research project to make sure that they felt comfortable sharing freely with me or one another in my presence. Although teachers attempted to victimise participants at some points, I protected participants by confronting the perpetrators and reporting the unprofessional behaviour to the management of the school.

### **1.10 Outline of chapters**

Chapter 1: Overview of the study

Chapter 2: A critical discussion on the potential role of youth to make school an enabling space.

Chapter 3: A critical discussion of theories applied in the study.

Chapter 4: A theoretical discussion of the research methodology.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings of the first cycle.

Chapter 6: Discussion of the actions taken by youth to make school an enabling space.

Chapter 7: Summary, conclusion, theoretical guidelines and contribution to knowledge.

### **1.11 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the rationale for the study and explained the problem statement. Moreover, I outlined the research questions guiding the study and their purpose. I also discussed the design of the study, gave a full account of the choice of methods and explained the theoretical frameworks used in the study. In addition I discussed the measures to ensure trustworthiness and the ethical considerations. In the next chapter, I discuss the potential role of youth to make school an enabling space.



## Chapter 2

### **A critical discussion on the potential role of youth to make school an enabling space**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 1, I presented an overview of my thesis which argues that youth possess the agency to bring about positive change in their educational circumstances, if they receive the guidance to do so. This research is a response to a growing international vision of schools as enabling spaces that provide care and support to all learners, especially those who are classed as vulnerable in the context of poverty and HIV and AIDS (Ebersöhn et al., 2011). In this chapter, I present a critical discussion on the potential role of youth to make their school environment a more child-friendly place. I provide an extensive critical review of the literature with a focus on two key issues, namely, i) school as an enabling space and ii) youth as agents of change. The presumption around the concept of school as an enabling space is that in 2000, the Department of Health brought forth the National Guidelines for the development of Health Promoting Schools in South Africa (Department of Health, 2000). The national policy guidelines (Department of Health, 2000) emphasise the holistic development of schools, with a specific focus on safe and supportive teaching and learning environments, strong school-community partnerships, the pursuit of curriculum interventions that focus on skills development and the development of accessible educational support services such as preventative and health promotion programmes (Lazarus, 2006). In 2012, the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP) replaced the Health Promotion Policy and the Health and Wellness in Education Framework developed in 2006, as well as the School Health Policy developed in 2003. The ISHP aims to enhance the growth, health and development of children and the communities they reside in through collaboration between the Department of Basic Education and the Department of Health. Various policies govern and influence the ISHP, including Education White Paper 6 (Special Needs Education): Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (2001), which is aimed at providing access to quality education for all learners through the development of environment in which all learners regardless of differences in ability, culture, gender, language, class and ethnicity can experience a sense of belonging and nurturing and can be supported to achieve their optimal potential, irrespective of intrinsic or extrinsic barriers to learning (Engelbrecht, Savolainen, Nel, Koskela & Okkolin, 2017). The Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) programme in turn is aimed at operationalising the strategic intent

of the above-mentioned policies into the development of an integrated multi-level process to facilitate the promotion of holistic well-being in schools (Kitching & van Rooyen, 2019). However, these education policies have not had the desired influence in most cases in South Africa. For this reason, my discussion on the concept of school as an enabling space will explore the reasons why such policies have not resulted in sustainable change. Furthermore, I conceptualise youth as agents of change and conclude the chapter by critically discussing how involvement in a YPAR process can help youth to contribute to making schools more enabling spaces.

## **2.2 School as an enabling space**

The concept of school as an enabling space refers to a school situation which allows youth to reach their full potential by providing a healthy, safe and supportive learning environment (Reiss et al., 2013). Moreover, the concept emphasises that school environments should promote the holistic development of youth by encouraging team building, creative thinking and strengthening leadership capacity (Wright, 2015).

Research has shown that there is an increasing number of children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by different causes, such as the death of parents from AIDS-related illnesses (Kasayira & Chireshe, 2010; Mayaba & Wood, 2015), poverty (Goodman et al., 2011), parental abandonment with little chance of reunion (UNAIDS, 2007), parental alcohol abuse, (Carr, 2013), and parental neglect (Rodriguez-Jenkins & Marcenko, 2014). These problems place families under stress and affect youth's well-being by making them vulnerable to emotional stress (Sancassiani, Pintus, Holte, Paulus, Moro, Cossu, et al., 2015), bullying, discrimination and stigma at schools (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim & Sadek, 2010); the high risk of abuse and mistreatment by family and community members (Burgess, Welner & Willis, 2010); and a lack of resources to meet basic needs such as food, health care and shelter (Gennetian, Castells & Morris, 2010). Moreover, vulnerable children who are unable to cope with adversity may end up finding other outlets, such as substance abuse, theft, gangsterism and violence to numb their unhappy feelings or attain a sense of belonging (Chick & Reyna, 2012). Such challenges threaten the physical and psychological well-being of youth.

Worldwide, research has positioned the school as the most suitable place for addressing the challenges experienced by vulnerable children (Mwoma & Pillay, 2015; U.S Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 2016). According to Osher, Kidron, DeCandia, Kendziora & Weissberg (2016), the school should create an enabling space, a place where learners feel safe and receive emotional and

material support. An enabling space refers to a school environment that has the potential to provide quality education to promote skills development (Wright, 2015), foster peer and teacher relationships (Claessens, van Tartwijk, van der Want, Pennings, Verloop & den Brok et al., 2017) and meet the social, physical, and emotional needs of all learners to improve their wellness (Cicognani, 2011). Traditionally, education has been tasked with developing problem solving skills, critical thinking and the development of learners' social skills (Dewey, 1938) and this can be possible if learners are given space to demonstrate their capability through active and democratic participation that promotes team work (Love, Dietrich, Fitzgerald & Gordon, 2014). The school is responsible for creating an environment to influence positively learners' academic, social, emotional and ethical development and growth (Boccanfuso, Moore & Whitney, 2010). For this reason, the school can be seen as a second home (Danial & Felix, 2014) and a stabilising force (Dolan & Brandy, 2011) for children, because apart from academic teaching, they also acquire social and emotional skills to improve their well-being (Esen-Aygun & Sahin-Taskin, 2017).

In the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion adopted on 21 November 1986 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) countries signed an agreement to create enabling schools (Kitching, 2010). The WHO's global School Health Initiative launched in 1995, seeks to mobilise (Turunen et al., 2017) and increase the number of schools that can be truly health promoting schools. Health promoting schools are those that promote health and well-being of the learners by providing support to meet their basic psychological, physical, social and material needs. In an effort to broaden the scope of this research study, I have reviewed literature on the concept of school as an enabling space from both Eurocentric (Western cultural values) and Afrocentric (African traditional values) perspectives.

Eurocentric perspectives on the concept of school as an enabling space take various approaches to the creation of health promoting school. In the United States, a number of strategies were used to make school an enabling space, such as the creation of a supportive school environment (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011), social and emotional learning (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Learner, 2013) and school climate reform (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey & Higgings-D'Allessandro, 2013).

The creation of a supportive school environment was introduced to replace the zero-tolerance (Skiba, 2014) policies (policies that refuse to accept antisocial behaviour of learners) which were used as punitive measures to control learner behaviour in schools from the mid-1990s onward. From this perspective, learners were seen as the cause of an unhealthy environment. The strategy did not work,

as it merely punished those who did not follow the rules, rather than being proactive in creating healthy environments (Educational Development Centre, Inc., 2011). Punitive measures increased behavioural problem and the risk of violence, and was seen to lead to other unhealthy behaviour such as substance abuse, and in many cases causing school dropout (Balfanz, Byrnes & Fox, 2012).

On the contrary, the adoption of policies according to the revised American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health (2016), which promoted the notion of healthy school environments, brought improvement. The attention suited to creating supportive environments through the development of teacher and learner skills, provision of guidance and healthy activities, policies and collaboration with health promoting services in the communities (Frey, 2013). The success of the supportive environment strategy motivated other schools to strive to create a positive climate, characterised by high student motivation, a safe and caring environment, and community engagement, where all stakeholders are encouraged to play a role in making the school an enabling space (Labre, Stern-Carisone, Rosiak, Becker & Wright, 2013).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is another popular approach advocated by some researchers in the US to make the school an enabling space (Osher, Poirier, Jarjoura, Kendziora & Brown, 2015). SEL as part of the US strategy to create a supportive environment, places the focus on helping learners (and teachers) to acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to enable them to manage their emotions, be responsive to the feelings of others, build positive relationships and make informed decisions about their lives (Osher et al., 2015). Proponents of SEL insist that it should be an integral part of education as it creates a supportive climate through the enhancement of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and informed decision-making.

The school climate reform approach is another strategy adopted in some states in the US to create a child-friendly school environment that promotes healthy relationships, school connectedness and the prevention of school dropout (Thapa et al., 2013). It is based on the premise that there is a mutual relationship between school climate and learner self-concept (Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan, 2011) a supportive environment that helps youth to recognise their emotions, describe their talents, assess their strengths (Osher, Kidron, Brackett, Dymnicki, Jones & Weissberg, 2016) and take advantage of opportunities to succeed in life (Hurst, Wallace & Nixon, 2013). The school climate reform approach was found to be effective the same way as SEL because it was able to create a supportive environment

where learners feel safe in and around the school. Teachers were seen to be trustworthy and responsive to their learning needs and learners came to understand the value of hard work (Hurst et al., 2013).

In Australia, one approach used to create an enabling school environment from 2006 onwards, was called MindMatters. A mental health initiative was found to be effective because it provided a framework for guidance and support to schools in creating a supportive environment which was geared to the demands of specific learners (Rigby & Griffiths, 2011). The National Safe School Framework was used in conjunction with MindMatters as a guiding principle for safe and supportive school communities that promote student well-being and encourage respectful relationships (Cross, Epstein, Hearn, Slee, Shaw & Monks, 2011; Rigby & Smith, 2011). These strategies showed potential for improving the school climate and making school a more enabling space. They are based on the premise that environments characterised by care, accepting responsibilities for own actions and that material and emotional support break the cycles of violence and negative emotional states (Lawrence, Dawson, Houghton, Goodsell & Sawyer, 2019).

Research conducted on the different (but similar) approaches described above suggests that a positive school climate increases protective factors for personal development and well-being of youth (Barton, Jensen, Kaufman, 2010). Moreover, it lessens the risk factors emanating from negative socio-economic and psychological impacts on the academic performance of the youth (Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih & Huang, 2010), and provides clear policies and supportive structures to reduce dropout rate, absenteeism, bullying and a decline in academic performance (Astor, Guerra & Van Acker, 2010). Positive teaching and learning enhances leadership skills among youth (Wright, 2015) and fosters and maintains healthy relationships based on cooperation (Osher et al., 2016).

The literature review from an Afrocentric perspective suggests that research in Africa has not focused on the concept of the school as an enabling space, perhaps owing to the challenges facing the region. In Sub-Saharan Africa, countries sharing borders with South Africa such as Zimbabwe and Swaziland are still developing economies and their education systems are in crisis owing to a shortage of resources, overcrowding in schools and a lack of teachers (Hove, Ngwerume & Muchemwa, 2013). Zimbabwe is currently faced with the problem of political unrest which has a socio-economic impact on its citizens as many parents leave children alone to find jobs in other countries (Gomba, 2018). Thus, children live in poverty and lack parental support (Chireshe, 2012), which impacts negatively on the education of these children. The Department of Education introduced school guidance and

counselling (Provincial Education Director, 2005) as a strategy to provide care and support (Gudyanga, Wadesango, Manzira, Gudyanga, 2015) for children who need additional psychosocial support. However, research (Chireshe, 2012; Mbabazi & Bagaya, 2013) conducted on the evaluation of effective school guidance and counselling in Zimbabwe revealed that the programme in schools were not effective for the following reasons: i) School counselors were mostly just teachers, not professionally qualified counsellors and they did not receive payment for counselling work; ii) these volunteer teachers had a core workload of teaching; hence, they did not have enough time to support learners, and iii) children did not trust school counselors, therefore, they were reluctant to share their problems with them. Most studies in Sub Saharan Africa were focused on problems faced by HIV positive youth and not the role of schools in providing care and support for all children who need psychosocial support (Betancourt et al., 2013). Studies were conducted in Swaziland on the changing role of the primary school teacher in the context of HIV and AIDS (Nxumalo, Wojcicki & Magowe, 2015) and in Namibia on the challenges facing school counselors (Mushaandja, Haihambo, Vergnani & Frank, 2013). In Swaziland, a study was conducted in six schools where the Schools as Centres of Care and Support project was run (Nxumalo et al., 2015). The results of studies conducted in Swaziland and Zimbabwe showed that teachers are willing and committed to provide care and support for children in need, although teachers lack professional training and family support (Mushaandja et al., 2013; Nxumalo et al., 2015).

In Sub-Saharan Africa in general, the number of children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by HIV and AIDS is escalating (UNAIDS, 2017) while their needs are hardly recognised and partially addressed (Mwoma et al., 2015). There is general agreement that schools should create supportive learning environments for the well-being of all children (Gregory, Cornell, Fan, Sheras, Shih, & Huang 2010; Rawson, 2012). However, education in rural and township schools in South Africa is adversely affected by grave social problems such as HIV and AIDS and increasing poverty, which creates vulnerability in learners (Mayaba et al., 2015). The role of the school as a site of care becomes increasingly important in this context and calls for the strengthening of protective factors, such as relationship building, emotional support, positive guidance, love, acceptance and protection (Betancourt et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2016). However, many teachers are unable to provide care and support for several reasons, some of which have been discussed above (Armstrong, Khoboko, Moleli-Habi, Rampeta & Lepelesana, 2012; Wood et al., 2011). This leads to researchers arguing that schools should not have this burden of care as it impedes teachers' primary role of teaching and

management (Armstrong, Khoboko, Moleli-Habi, Rampeta & Lepelesana, 2012). These researchers propose that schools should only assist in identifying learners who need additional support and in referring them to institutional care (Mohlakwana, 2013). Researchers also contend that teachers are not trained to cope with children who need additional psychosocial support (Chataika, Mckenzie, Swart & Lyner-Cleophas, 2012; Setlhare & Wood, 2019). As a teacher in a rural school, I agree with the notion that teachers do not have the expertise to deal with psychosocial issues. However, since social welfare systems are not functioning well in South Africa, I also agree with other authors who argue that the school has no option but to play a role in promoting the well-being of children (Littlecott, Moore & Murphy, 2018).

### **2.3 Promotion of learner wellness**

Being emotionally well does not imply that problems are solved, but does however signify the ability to recover from resulting stress, trauma and adversity (Durlak et al., 2011). Emotional wellness enables individuals to set priorities in life, build relationship with others and have a positive view of life despite, their daily challenges (Winch, 2013; Peterson, 2016). Since education can disrupt the cycle of poverty (Field, 2010) and liberate vulnerable youth from adversity, the school should respond positively to the development of the learners' emotional well-being with regard to, for example, feeling safe, trusting others and having a sense of self-worth (Thorton, 2011) by providing additional support and pastoral care (Lindsay, Gullen & Wellings, 2011). A school that focuses on promoting learner well-being in a protective environment will adequately support all learners, including the most vulnerable learners (Campbell et al., 2016). In addition, positive academic and behavioural outcomes are also possible if vulnerable youth feel safe, healthy, active, respected and included by their peers and teachers at school (Kutsyuruba, Klinger & Hussain, 2015). However, vulnerable youth are often subjected to abuse, criticism and prejudice by peers and teachers, which destroy feelings of hope and confidence in their capabilities. When learners lack a secure attachment with their peers and teachers, they can respond to life with negative feelings, which may catapult them to unruly behaviour as a way to communicate their needs (Gablinske, 2014).

Learners' emotional wellness depends on the following: ability to recognise their own emotions and values (Jones, Brown & Aber, 2011); a clear purpose in life; success in making constructive choices about personal and social behaviour (Forgeard et al., 2011); and self-management (Layous, Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Thus, I argue that socio-economic problems prevailing within the school and its

surrounding environment may have a negative effect on learner wellness if they are not given adequate support. However, youth can play an important role in promoting their wellness by advocating for this support. Personal wellness and relational wellness are mutually dependent (Kitching, 2010). Thus, learners' relationship with peers and teachers can thrive if there is respect, trust and a feeling of safety between them.

The school is a social setting which should provide the space for positive and supportive relationships (Gablinske, 2014). A mutual positive relationship among learners themselves, between teachers and learners, and between learners and an academic environment that promotes a sense of belonging, indicates connectedness (Jose, Ryan & Pryor, 2012; Sulkowski, Demaray & Lazarus, 2012). Learners who feel connected to the school are likely to perform to the best of their ability and be responsible for their actions at school (Kaminiski, Puddy, Hall, Cashman, Crosby & Ortega, 2010). Connected learners interact with their peers and educators on the basis of friendship, companionship and pastoral care (Milatz, Lüftenegger & Schober, 2015). Moreover, in order to have a sense of belonging (Sulkowski et al., 2012) they need to feel accepted, appreciated and praised (Loukas, Roalson & Herrera, 2010). However, derogatory remarks by teachers and peers, rejection, lack of emotional and academic support may discourage learners from attending school regularly (Maddock et al., 2018). Teachers are supposed to create a supportive environment by being fair, caring and helpful to learners so that they can feel connected to the school (Christenson, Reschly & Wylie, 2012); but, in many cases, teachers themselves are overwhelmed by their own life circumstances and are unable to dedicate their time or show interest in providing additional support to learners. For instance, at my work place teachers travel long distances (close to 218 km) on a daily basis to and from school. This means that they only have time for essential duties at school and thus neglect additional responsibilities, such as counselling learners who have wellness needs (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). Learners who have psychological problems need emotional support to cope (Weare & Nind, 2011) and adjust to their studies. However, teachers who are frustrated by their own work load perceive these learners as problematic and difficult to educate instead of giving them additional care (Cortina, Fazel, Hlungwani, Kahn, Tollman, Cortina-Borja et al., 2013).

Abusive relationships also affect learners' emotional well-being. Worldwide, research reveals that abuse is rife in schools where girls are sexually abused by their peers and teachers (Johnson, Burke & Gielen, 2011; Magwa, 2015; Women and Equalities Committee, 2016). In rural schools, this problem



is severe since vulnerable youth are the easiest targets for male teachers (Erooga, 2012; Krohn, 2014). What makes the situation worse is that parents who live in abject poverty often do not perceive teacher-learner sexual relationships as a problem because their children benefit materially from such relationships (Magwa, 2015); hence some parents even encourage them. Teachers who are against abuse can be reluctant to intervene as they might be afraid of victimisation by the perpetrators (Rodgers & Leschied, 2011; Wurtele, 2012).

Learners who are being sexually abused by their teachers can suffer long-term psychological and emotional stress (Burgess et al., 2010) and they may hate school, lose concentration in class or even drop out as they cannot bear to be in the same environment with the perpetrators (Rodgers et al., 2011). Such cases create unfriendly school environments and make learners less cooperative at school. For example, in my school, we had an incident of an orphaned learner who was alleged to be sexually abused by a male educator and, at the same time, was having an affair with a male peer. The learner remained silent about the abuse until other learners who were close to the teacher disclosed the issue to the boyfriend in a teasing manner. Although the learner alleged that the teacher was only harassing her and never had sexual intercourse, the issue created tension between learners and the teacher. The teacher was unable to control learners because they defied his instructions in a disrespectful manner. This is not an isolated occurrence (Magwa, 2015) as cases of abuse are rife among vulnerable youth at school owing to their socio-economic background (Knoll, 2010; Runarsdottir, Smith & Arnarsson, 2019). However, learners need to feel safe and connected to the school so that they can learn in a friendly environment that will support their academic needs. It is possible for schools to provide care and support tailored to an environment where learners are enabled to discuss their challenges and express opinions without prejudice (Bojuwoye, Moletsane, Stofile, Moolla & Sylvester, 2014). For this reason, youth need to be aided to break this silence of abuse so that they can create an enabling, child-friendly environment that will promote their emotional well-being (Van der Walt, Suliman, Martin & Seedat, 2014). Indeed; South African education policy recognizes the importance of schools providing a child-friendly and inclusive environment.

#### **2.4 Education policies in South Africa for the promotion of learner well-being**

South Africa has education policies, such as White Paper 6: Special needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001), Health Promoting Schools (Department of Health, 2011; WHO, 2007), Child Friendly Schools (CFS) (UNICEF, 2008) and an

integrated strategy on HIV, STIs and TB 2012-2016 (Department of Basic Education, 2012a) which are aimed at the provision of equal opportunities for learning and health promotion as an optimal sense of well-being in children. The concept of well-being includes the state of mind that leads to individual experiencing mostly positive emotions and the ability to cope with the challenges of daily life (Keyes, Dhingra & Simoes, 2010). A person who experiences mental well-being has a positive perception about his or her life, relates easily with other people, is confident and make a positive contribution to the world around them (Inglehart, 2010; Rath & Harter, 2010). Thus, well-being can be categorised into individual well-being, relational well-being and collective well-being (Prilleltensky, Dietz, Prilleltensky, Myers, Rubenstein, Jin, et al., 2015). Some authors advocates for the integration of the three categories into a multilevel approach to promote a holistic well-being of learners in schools (Kitching et al., 2019).

However, children's well-being can be adversely affected when they feel sad, stressed or find it difficult to cope with their challenges (Keyes et al., 2010) and receive inadequate support from adults in their environment (Jindal-Snape, Davies, Collier, Howe, Digby & Hay, 2013). The Department of Basic Education has introduced the following education policies that aim to provide guidance for schools in creating an enabling space for learners to improve their well-being.

#### ***2.4.1 Inclusive Education***

The framework for inclusive education is laid out in Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education, Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, DoE, 2001). This policy attempts to address the diverse needs of all learners who experience barriers to learning. Moreover, it calls for a cogent conceptual shift that is based on the following two main presumptions:

- All children, youth and adults have the potential to learn, given the necessary support.
- The system's inability to recognise and accommodate the diverse range of learning needs results in a breakdown of learning (Dalton, Mckenzie & Kahonde, 2012).

The policy contends that in order to make inclusive education a reality, there should be a conceptual shift from learner deficit to a systematic approach that recognises and supports learners with special abilities (Dalton et al., 2012). Inclusive education embraces strategies that attempt to promote the well-being of children such as School Based Support Team (SBST) and child-friendly schools.

In addition, teachers are supposed to be inclusive practitioners by prioritising the emotional needs of all learners to make them feel safe, comfortable and understood (Nel, Tlale, Engelbrecht & Nel, 2016). However, the reality is that the policy makes no difference to the wellbeing of learners in most South African rural schools for various reasons, which combine to create a difficult environment for the provision of support. Some of the reasons for this are discussed below.

In general, teachers are not trained to identify barriers to learning and address the diverse needs of learners (Chataika et al., 2012, Wood et al., 2011): school environments are unsafe and unhealthy (Jacobson, Riesch, Temkin, Kedrowski & Kluba, 2011); there is a lack of parental involvement (Maluleke, 2014); and a lack of implementation of enabling and protective policies since the department does not provide training for teachers (Nel, Müller, Hugo, Backmann, Dwyer & Skarind, 2011). In addition there is a shortage of resources in schools (Nel et al., 2011).

The literature also indicates that HIV and AIDS aggravate existing social and economic challenges, which make it imperative to provide additional support to children orphaned and rendered vulnerable in South African schools (Nel, et al., 2011). Inclusive education aims to create an enabling school environment that caters for the emotional, social, psychological and academic needs of all learners to help them develop to their full potential. However, in reality, children are exposed to discrimination by teachers who label them as slow learners, unmotivated, lazy and truants (Mwania & Muola, 2013; Ntaote, 2011), making them feel useless and inferior and increasing the probability that some may withdraw into themselves or even drop out of school. Such discriminatory behaviour could emanate from a lack of understanding in general that still brands vulnerable youth as helpless victims (Skovdal et al., 2010) who should be committed to institutional care (Mohlakwana, 2013), rather than acknowledging and encouraging their true potential (Thabethe, Mbatha & Mtapuri, 2016). As a teacher in a rural school, I witness the absence of civility towards learners by teachers on many occasions. Thus, instead of implementing inclusive education these teachers are acting in an excluding and harmful way. The promotion of wellbeing is also addressed within the curriculum.

#### ***2.4.2 Life Orientation: a curricular response to promote learner wellbeing***

In South Africa, the Department of Education (2002; 2003) mandated Life Orientation (LO) in the National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2008) and the subsequent Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (2011) as a subject to equip learners with knowledge, skills, attitude and values to develop confidence in their capabilities and empower them to become responsible citizens.

Life Orientation is supposed to contribute to the creation of an enabling school environment and LO teachers are expected to be role models (Pillay, 2012) who play an influential role in building social relationships and encouraging teamwork among the learners and the entire school community (Diale, 2010). Although LO has an inclusive approach in recognising the holistic development of all learners through appropriate support (Department of Education, 2002) it has largely failed to address the well-being of children (Pillay, 2012). Furthermore, the White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) argues that Life Orientation teachers should form part of the School Based Support Team (SBST) because they have the potential to foster learners' abilities (Pillay, 2012), to mobilise support within the school, and to develop strategies that identify the needs and address the challenges faced by learners at school (Makoelle, 2012). The purpose of an SBST as outlined in the White Paper 6 is to identify and address barriers to learning in order to promote effective teaching/learning (DoE, 2001). However, an SBST has not been established in the school where I teach and I imagine that the same is true for many schools in poorly resourced areas. In fact, Life Orientation teachers in my school have become agents of discrimination rather than positive social change. For example, they organise trips that must be funded by the parents of the learners for the purpose of physical education and training, knowing that many learners will not be able to participate as their parents do not possess the necessary funds. I perceive this as discrimination, because vulnerable youth may feel isolated and inferior to their peers owing to their inability to pay for the trip. However, it is unfair to blame educators for their discriminatory behaviour, as we do not have a SBST in our school and the LO teachers are not even trained to teach the subject; hence they might even be unaware of the effects of what they are doing. In addition, many of them may just be replicating how they were treated in school, since severe corporal punishment and emotional abuse was common in Black schools during the Apartheid era (Mathabane, 1986). Most of them are teaching LO as the last option because their major subjects such as Afrikaans, History and Biblical Studies are no longer offered at school. The literature review that I conducted indicates that although the subject Life Orientation alone cannot create a supportive environment (Nel et al., 2016) the attitudes and characteristics of teachers do play a vital role (Pillay, 2012), hence teachers need to be sensitised and work on their attitude to be able to provide learners with support. In addition to official policy, there are other programmes adopted by the DBE to improve support to learners.

### ***2.4.3 Child Friendly Schools***

A child friendly school (CFS) is a South African school programme implemented by the Department of Education with the support of UNICEF to create a school environment that is rights-based and inclusive (UNICEF, 2008). The purpose of child friendly schools is to ensure that all learners, especially those rendered vulnerable as a result of poverty and HIV and AIDS, experience holistic education through the promotion of life skills, community participation, and health and safety (Cross, Waters, Pearce, Shaw, Hall, Erceg et al., 2012) within the school premises. The strategy was initiated to help learners in schools flourish by creating environments that provide the holistic development of youth to meet their social, physical, psychological and emotional needs (Marishane, 2017).

Child friendly schools should create an environment that promotes the well-being and safety of children, protects them from physical or emotional harm (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011) and keeps them in school. In addition, the school can create a safe environment if there are clear school rules and constructive measures in place to respond to infringement which may arise (Bascia, Carr-Harris, Fine-Meyer & Zurzolo, 2014). However, the Delphi Survey on the programme conducted in six countries, including South Africa, reports that although CFS has been successful in many countries, South African schools are struggling to make learners feel physically and emotionally safe (Cross et al., 2012). This fact contributes to learner absenteeism and a high rate of dropout (Mogashoa & Mboweni, 2017). Research conducted by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) (Leoschut, 2012) in South Africa found that South African schools are unsafe places owing to lack of the implementation of enabling and protective policies to promote the health and safety of the learners. Inclusive education policies fail to address systemic violence in schools, which has become the worst determinant factor in the creation of unfriendly school environments (Albuquerque, & Williams, 2015).

In addition, learners are stigmatised by teachers for not having proper school uniform instead of them working to find ways in which learners can be helped (Watson & Emery, 2012). And, although the government has introduced the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), learners still cannot concentrate during lessons because of hunger (Mawela & van den Berg, 2018). The majority of children in rural schools live below the poverty line (Spies, Morgan & Matsuura, 2014) and depend solely on the food provided at school. However, due to teacher insensitivity, learners are sometimes punished by being deprived of their food during lunch (Banerjee, 2016). Such problems are common

in most rural schools where teachers become perpetrators of systemic violence (Ncontsa et al., 2013). This pushes learners to acts of vandalism at the school (Shukla, Waasdorp, Lindstrom Johnson, Orozco Solis, Nguyen, Rodríguez, et al., 2019; Vilalta & Fondevila, 2018). There is a high frequency of learners in my school asking for permission to go to the clinic during lunch time, but I suspect they want to be released from the school premises to go and eat at home as the school gates are locked.

The Department of Basic Education in collaboration with UNICEF and the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) in South Africa developed the National School Safety Framework (NSSF, 2015) which is aimed at addressing school safety in partnership with the broader community and within the existing legislation and policy context. However, in my opinion, as long as teachers are not sensitive to learners' needs, the strategy might as well address violence in a vacuum as learners may continue to engage in unhealthy and/ or criminal activities to numb their unhappy feelings. The NSSF does not deal with systemic violence as the focus is on preventing violent behaviour in the learners, without addressing the socioeconomic challenges that influence such behaviour (Ruglis & Freudenberg, 2010). Some strategies developed to help schools do not take into account the ground level challenges facing the schools, hence there is a need to mobilise change from within schools. The CJCP reports that the NSSF was approved by the Minister of Basic Education in April 2015; but, to date, the policy has not yet reached the schools, and the likelihood is that teachers will never know about the strategy (Department of Justice and Constitutional Development, 2017). Government strategies have been put in place such as SBST to help schools create an enabling space, but schools are not even aware of the programmes (Cherrington, 2017). As a teacher in a rural school I can attest to that, because currently, there is an integrated strategy on HIV, STIs and TB in schools 2017-2022 (Department of Basic Education, 2017) but teachers in schools are not aware of the policy, nor its predecessor which was in effect from 2012-2016 (Department of Education, 2012b). If such a policy was to be implemented by schools, it would go a long way towards sensitising teachers about learner vulnerability. The Department of Basic Education develops policies at national level but the problem lies with lack of implementation at provincial and district level (Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

#### ***2.4.5 Health Promoting Schools***

The concept of health promoting schools is laid out in the national guidelines for the development of health promoting schools (Department of Health, 2001, 2012) as a response to the WHO's Global School Health Initiative guided by the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion of 1986 (WHO, 2010).

The new policy on Integrated Health Promoting Schools (Department of Health; Education, 2012) aims to realise "The optimal health and development of school-going children and the communities in which they live and learn, (p10)." This is a framework that calls for a conceptual shift from individual deficit to a systemic approach based on the following premises (Langford, Bonell, Jones, Pouliou, Murphy, Waters et al., 2014):

- Provision of school policies such as HIV/AIDS, pregnancy policy, school safety, nutrition etc.
- Creating a supportive environment for the health and well-being of children through the implementation of SBST.
- Holistic development of skills through participation in extra-curricular activities.
- School-based health and nutrition services, including physical, mental and social issues.

Health promoting schools provides a healthy learning and working atmosphere (Du Plessis, 2014) both within the school and in the surrounding community as there are many socio-systemic factors in communities that impact negatively on teaching and learning. The concept of health promoting schools has been internationally recognised as an effective way of developing the health and wellness of children (Forgeard, Jayawickreme, Kern & Seligman, 2011) and addressing the challenges that they face (Langford et al., 2014). Health is defined as total physical, mental and social well-being and not just the absence of disease or physical and mental weakness (Merriam-Webster, 2011). Health promotion is aimed at promoting the general health of the school through skills (relationship, communication and leadership) development, policies and the improvement of the physical environment by strengthening external support in the surrounding community through access to social services (Evans, Hsu & Boerma, 2013).

In South Africa the concept of health promoting schools has been around for years, but, in most schools, it has not been really implemented (Preiser, Struthers, Suraya, Cameron & Lawrence, 2014). Many rural schools in South Africa are still poorly resourced (Jensen, 2013; Kirsten, 2018; Van der Berg, Taylor, Gustafsson, Spaull & Armstrong, 2011). Thus, a lack of skills monitoring and accountability on the part of both government authorities and teachers (Dalton et al., 2012) has led to poor policy implementation at school level. Although rural schools still lack adequate facilities (Du Plessis, 2017; Lingam, Lingam & Raghuwaiya, 2014; Van der Berg et al., 2011), the government has provided them with a few resources, such as desks, chalkboards, fences, water, sanitation and basic

nutrition which, can make it possible for schools to provide limited education (Shepherd, 2011; Van der Berg, et al., 2011). The government has entrusted schools with the responsibility and power through the School Governing Body (SGB) to ensure that their resources are well managed (Department of Basic Education, 2012). However, the school climate and management competence determine the extent to which school resources can be sustained (Usman, 2016). Some rural schools are able to perform well academically despite inadequate resources owing to a supportive school environment that encourages learners to work as a team, make informed decisions and be accountable for their actions (Basch, 2011; Hallal, Anderson, Bull, Guthold, Haskell & Ekelund, 2012; Owoeye & Olatunde Yara, 2011). However, in other rural schools such as my work place, buildings have deteriorated, toilets are no longer functioning, there are holes in the fence, vandalism and neglect have led to broken furniture and windows, and unsightly litter is strewn everywhere. This results in an unfriendly school environment, exacerbated by teachers' lack of care and support for learners (Maddock & Maroun, 2018), which lead learners to further vandalising school property and irresponsible behaviour, such as deliberately messing in the toilets. The teachers' inadequate support demoralises learners while those who are vulnerable continue to feel unwanted and refuse to cooperate with teachers in retaliation for the unsupportive environment at school. In order to promote the health and well-being of children, the emotional and relational wellness of learners needs to be developed (Roffey, 2012).

## **2.5 Youth as agents of change**

The concept of youth as agents of change refers to the process whereby youth are enabled to effect social changes in matters that affect their lives (Marcus & Cunningham, 2016). However, not all scholars perceive youth as agents of change and instead view them as helpless victims (Mohlakwana, 2013). This is a misconception that ignores the abilities of vulnerable youth to actualise their potential, and thus denies them the opportunity to take action to improve their own circumstances. However, in my study, and in line with researchers who view vulnerable youth as agents of change (Akom, Shah, Nakai & Cruz, 2016; Caraballo et al., 2017), I position these young people as having the potential to take action to address issues that impact on their lives at school (Skovdal, 2012). Positioning youth as helpless victims denies them their right to participate in matters that concern their lives and reinforces their inability to make changes. When youth are engaged as leaders in social change, they gain experience and confidence, which will expand their future opportunities to build social networks, and to learn and address challenges in their own environment (Wright, 2015). In addition, youth



engagement benefits young people as it allows for skills development, knowledge acquisition, an improvement in self-esteem and connectedness to the whole school community (Anyon, Kennedy, Durbahn, Jenson, 2018; Caraballo et al., 2017; Lindquist-Grantz & Abraczinskas., 2018). However, studies on school based YPAR were mostly done in the United States and in urban contexts (e.g. Carl & Ravitch, 2018; Warren & Marciano, 2018). In the rural context of South Africa, nothing has been done as far as I know to give youth a voice while schools are alleged to be places where social injustice is deep-rooted (Badat & Sayed, 2014). The gap in knowledge in this study is how YPAR can be done in a rural South African school context.

### ***2.5.1 Vulnerability versus youth agency***

The concept *vulnerability* refers to the incapacity of an individual or group of people to anticipate or cope with the impact of negative life circumstances such as death, poverty, abuse, violence, discrimination, stigma and other socio-economic factors (Dutta & Mishra, 2013) Youth vulnerability in many cases is associated with the following: HIV and AIDS; poverty; limited access to services; physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect; child-headed households; and violence (Chakravarty, Chattopadhyay, Silber & Wan, 2016). Poverty and HIV and AIDS remain the greatest threats to the future and well-being of young people, owing to the stigma associated with the myth that vulnerable children cannot make it in life, especially those who are HIV positive (Loukas et al., 2010). It becomes a serious problem because, instead of vulnerable children being supported in coping with adversity, they are made to feel inferior through derogatory remarks, which intensify their vulnerability. Many learners in rural schools, especially where I work as a teacher, are classed as vulnerable due to the poverty context they live in. Moreover, their vulnerability is intensified by a lack of care and support by both their families and teachers at school (Motsa et al., 2016). For instance, most learners receive social grants, but they do not have proper school uniforms. Some absent themselves from school for a long time because they do not have shoes. Although some parents try their best to provide for children, teachers can make it difficult for them (Basch, 2011). There are shops that sell similar school uniforms at an affordable price but the difference is that the jerseys do not have the school emblem. If learners buy uniforms from those shops, teachers do not allow them to wear them, claiming that it is not the proper uniform because it does not have the emblem. The school is actually reinforcing learners' plight, because during cold days, they would wear those jerseys; however, when they see teachers they quickly remove and hide them.

The concept of youth agency refers to the ability to effect change themselves in their social environment by expressing their needs freely and finding their own solutions to their challenges (Arora, Shah, Chaturvedi & Gupta, 2015). Every child is born with innate resilience (Gafoor & Kottalil, 2011), which can be enhanced by facing challenges competently and making their voices heard without prejudice (Iwasaki, 2016; Shean, 2015). Youth are the key informants of what is happening around them and are in a position to reach their peers at school with information that could impact positively on their lives (Marcus et al., 2016). The literature argues that when vulnerable youth are viewed as experts who can improve conditions in their school setting (Caraballo et al., 2017; Ellis & Zarbatany, 2017), they feel more effective, are likely to take the initiative in addressing issues that affect them (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore & Friant, 2010; Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010), and feel responsible for the outcomes of their decision. Thus, they discover their strengths, cope more easily with adversity, and are more able to resist factors that may lead them to irresponsible behaviour, such as alcohol abuse, crime, violence, absenteeism, school late coming and littering (Masten, 2011). When given support and the authority to take action themselves, youth can start believing in their capabilities, develop a sense of purpose, thrive (Kennedy et al., 2011), improve their well-being and transform their school environment in a positive way (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019; Strunk & Locke, 2019).

### ***2.5.2 Positive youth development***

Positive youth development (PYD) is a principle that guides schools, communities, or any organisation working with youth, in their aim to assist young people in achieving their goals by emphasising their strengths as opposed to their weakness (Lerner, Bowers, Minor, Boyd, Mueller, Schmid et al., 2013). Up until the mid-1990s, most youth development programmes focused on preventing youth 'misconduct' by imposing punitive measures (Moyo, Khewu & Bayaga, 2014) However, this did not yield positive results as it did not provide youth with opportunities to build leadership strength. Over time, scholars realised that there is a need to build capacity and to perceive youth as assets by providing care, support and skills development (Fredericks & Simpkins, 2012; Iwasaki, 2016; Lerner et al., 2013; Travis & Leech, 2013). Thus, the field of positive youth development began to recognise the role of resilience.

Resilience is the individual's ability to adapt well in the midst of adversity, threats or sources of stress (Masten, 2011). The literature further defines the concept of resilience as a process or an act of coping

with life challenges (Southwick et al., 2014; Van Breda, 2018) or bouncing back from adverse situations (Rodriguez-Llanes, Vos & Guba-Sapir, 2013). Resilience and PYD complement each other because for learners to develop the essential components of PYD, which are belonging, independence, mastery and generosity (Martz, Mincemoyer & McNeely, 2016), they should have the capacity to cope with their daily problems (Khanlou & Wray, 2014). Resilience enables learners to develop competence to challenge the oppressive systems in their environment (Kia-Keating, Dowdy, Morgan & Noam, 2011). However, in most rural schools in South Africa, support is needed to develop resilience since HIV and AIDS and increasing poverty have increased the number of children requiring care (Bridgeland et al., 2010). The role of the school as a site of care and support becomes increasingly important in helping learners to cope with their problems (Ebersöhn et al., 2011) and develop them holistically to strengthen their internal assets (Lee, Cheung & Kwong, 2012; Wright, 2015). However, school can sometimes be a risk factor if the environment is not supportive and this places youth at risk of losing an opportunity to attain their life goals as some of them might decide to drop out of school. For instance, teachers sometimes think that being harsh and rude to children can correct their behaviour (Bledsoe & Baskin, 2014), not knowing that it reinforces their inability to become productive members of their society because youth can feel that they are not wanted. Teachers are actually supposed to help young people to develop confidence in their abilities owing their relationship with them, which, if fostered by trust, could easily increase their resilience (Lee et al., 2012). However, teachers usually drive children away from them because of their attitude and some are not approachable (Gablinske, 2014), which makes it difficult for the learners to open up to them. Even if learners have solutions to some problems experienced at school, they will not be able to discuss it because they may be afraid that their views will not be heard. Positive youth development is triggered when young people are engaged in activities that develop their well-being (Travis et al., 2013). The literature argues that these activities create an in-depth understanding of the challenges in the school environment and encourage young people to take action to improve their situation (Kirshner, 2010). This implies that the idea of engaging youth in collaborative research such as a YPAR process can help youth to develop specific skills, such as teamwork, communication and leadership which will develop them holistically to become the national assets.

Participatory action research (PAR) is appropriate in empowering youth and is enabling in and of itself (Powers et al., 2012). It develops the potential of youth to improve their own lives and influence future policies in strengthening the capacity of schools to provide care in child friendly enabling school

environment (Kohfeldt et al., 2011; Ozer, Newlan, Douglas & Hubbard, 2013). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is an innovative approach to positive youth development involving the training of youth to conduct research with a view to improving their own lives and social environment at school or in the community (Bryan & Holcomb-McCoy, 2010; Cammarota & Fine, 2010; Caraballo et al., 2017). Unlike the traditional perception of youth as passive recipients of information and incapable of valuable perspectives on issues and decision making, proponents of YPAR acknowledge youth agency (Kohfeldt et al., 2010). Recent literature recognises youth as being able to effect social transformation through engagement in participatory action research (PAR) processes, (Akom et al., 2016; Anyon et al., 2018; Caraballo et al., 2017; Marciano & Warren, 2019). Moreover, as the YPAR process unfolds, youth will realise that actively taking part in the research process enables them to become agents of change (Caraballo et al., 2017; Rubin, Ayala & Zaal, 2017).

## **2.6 Chapter summary**

The chapter explained the potential role of youth in improving their lives at school with a focus on two main ideas, namely the school as an enabling space and youth as agents of change. I began by interrogating the international literature from Eurocentric and Afrocentric perspectives on the school's role in providing additional support for youth and the creation of an enabling space. The chapter gave a detailed explanation of the available education policies in South Africa and a critical discussion of their effectiveness in creating an enabling space for learners. Moreover, I suggested ways to improve the wellness of learners and create a child friendly enabling school environment.

I discussed the concept of youth as agents of change and gave an outline of the distinction between youth vulnerability and youth agency. The chapter concluded with an overview from the literature of some ways to attain positive youth development using participatory research methods. In the next chapter, I discuss the theories applied in the study.

## Chapter 3

### A critical discussion of theories applied in the study

#### 3.1 Introduction

In Chapter 2, I discussed the potential role of youth in making school an enabling space for learners with a focus on two main issues, namely, school as an enabling space and youth as agents of change. Information gained from international literature revealed that schools with supportive environments create a space where learners are able to develop into independent and responsible youth. In my argument, I positioned youth as possessing the agency to improve their experiences of school if they are guided to do so.

In this chapter, I will introduce and describe theories that help to explain the research problem. I will demonstrate the relevance of these theories in the study. As indicated in the previous chapters, South Africa is one of the countries that are unable to strike the balance in the provision of services to its citizens (Oxfam, 2013; Westaway, 2010). For instance, people in rural areas live below the poverty line (Westaway, 2010), and are unable to access basic social services for their children, which renders them vulnerable and impacts negatively on their education. This study is aimed at engaging youth in participatory action research at a rural school to improve their experience of schooling. I drew on two main theories to inform my understanding of the topic, namely the socio-ecological resilience theory (SERT) (Ungar, 2011) and self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

The purpose of these theories is to explain ways in which youth can develop strength in the face of adversity. The two theories complement each other within the context of health promoting schools where a holistic view of health is taken (Macnab, Gagnon & Stewart, 2014; Stewart et al., 2012). Youth are conceptualised in the context of health promoting schools as possessing the agency to bring transformation (Iwasaki, 2016; Torres-Harding, Baber, Hilvers, Hobbs & Maly, 2018). Current resilience theories place the responsibility on the social ecology to provide helping resources, with the school being the primary resource (Hall & Theron, 2016); self-determination theory explains how internal strengths can be improved (Hu & Zhang, 2017) so that youth can navigate towards the use of helping resources (Ungar, 2010a). I now critically discuss each of these theories and their relevance to this study.

## **3.2 The socio-ecological view of resilience**

Resilience from a socio-ecological perspective offers a framework for understanding how adaptation to the environment can improve an individual's resilience (Krasny, Lunholm & Plummer, 2010). The concept of resilience is broadly defined as the ability to bounce back from difficult experiences (Price, Mansfield & McConney, 2012). However, this study is anchored in the socio-ecological theory of Ungar (2010a; 2010b; 2012), which holds that resilience requires strength to navigate towards psychological, social, cultural and physical resources that sustain well-being (Sanders, Munford, Liebenberg & Ungar, 2014; Theron, Liebenberg & Ungar, 2015; Ungar, Liebenberg, Dudding, Armstrong & Van de Vijver, 2013). Adults have the responsibility to provide such resources in a culturally meaningful way (Ungar, 2008a). The socio-ecological view of resilience stresses the need for a balance between protective and risk factors (Bada, Bann, Whitaker, Bauer, Shankaran, LaGasse et al., 2012). Protective factors are qualities such as skills, strengths, resources, support or coping strategies that an individual person, family or broader society possess to lessen the chances of negative psychological or physical health effects (Méndez, Ruiz-Esteban & López-García, 2017). Risk factors are determinants presumed to have negative psychological, emotional, social and economic outcomes on people especially, youth. In this study, the school as a helping resource is seen as a protective factor (De Wet, 2013). However, it can also be a risk factor if it does not provide a supportive environment. In this chapter, I argue how a participatory action research process can help youth to enhance protective mechanisms, which will thus outweigh risk factors and lead to an improvement in resilience. The four protective mechanisms, as outlined by Rutter (1987) are as follows; reducing risk impact; preventing negative chain reactions; enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy and opening opportunities.

### ***3.2.1 Resilience and protective mechanisms***

Resilience is perceived by many scholars as a process, which does not erase life difficulties but can help individuals to develop strength to cope and thrive in the midst of adversity (Hopf, 2010; Masten, 2011; Theron, 2016; Ungar, 2012). A socio-ecological view of resilience perceives the relationship between individuals and their environment as having an influence on their resilience (Ungar, 2011). Protective mechanisms are necessary to strengthen an individual's coping skills and reduce the effects of a perceived negative experience by facilitating a positive mental outlook (Rutter, 1987). They are dynamic processes that are used to reduce risk factors and help strengthen individuals to remain strong, despite their difficult life situation (Rutter, 1987; Ungar, 2011). I discuss how the four

protective mechanisms (reducing risk impact, reduction of negative chain reaction, enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy and opening opportunities) can help vulnerable youth demonstrate a typifying resilience that they can draw on to prosper.

### *3.2.1.1 Reducing risk impact*

The increasing number of vulnerable children in South African schools makes it difficult for teachers to address their needs by provision of additional support and care because they are also overwhelmed by their daily workload (Nel et al., 2016; Zwane & Malale, 2018). Vulnerable youth are often prone to abuse, stigma, discrimination and bullying which have a detrimental effect on their psychological and physical well-being (Brawner, Gomes, Jemmott, Deatrck & Coleman, 2012). Lack of adult support and care at school also has a direct influence on how youth rendered vulnerable respond to their adverse situation (Mwoma et al., 2015). Some may respond with a feeling of self-pity which impedes them from discovering the wisdom to thrive in the midst of adversity (Fuochi, Veneziani & Voci, 2018), while others may engage in unhealthy outlets such as smoking, alcohol abuse, prostitution and involvement in crime activities (Figley & Beder, 2012). Intervention to reduce the risk impact for vulnerable children is critical and the school should have the responsibility to equip youth with the skills required to cope with adversity (Baxen, Nsubuga & Botha, 2014; Ozer, Ritterman & Wanis, 2010; Ungar, 2008b). However, as I have argued, schools themselves are often risk factors. Youth participation in action research can reduce the risk impact because in the participatory process youth come to understand that adversity is inevitable and as they navigate ways to deal with the situation, they develop qualities of strength, courage, good character and perseverance which will in turn improve their resilience (Halliday, Kern, Garrett & Turnbull, 2019; Theron, 2016).

Building support systems through mentorship programs with teachers and peer group interventions can also help youth develop emotional stability and resilience (Thurman, Jarabi & Rice, 2012) because, for some vulnerable children, teachers can be the only reliable adult contact they have. Sharing problems with a trusted adult or with peers can lessen their burden, as the support provided can serve as protection against the risk factors (Lever, Mathis & Mayworm, 2017). However, in many instances teachers are not able or willing to help youth negotiate for the strengthening of internal resources. In my school for instance, teachers themselves are often the source of distress for children, or at least aggravate it through their discriminatory and unfeeling remarks and behaviour as outlined in Chapter 2. The school is a social institution outside the family where children from diverse socioeconomic

background have continuous contact. The school is, therefore, well-suited for identifying children who need additional support (Bojuwoye et al., 2014) and fostering a sense of hope by providing care (Day & Gu, 2014; Ozer et al., 2010). Schools are supposed to be active participants in intervention strategies to reduce risk impact by providing a supportive environment (Ebersöhn et al., 2011). However, teachers have become agents of systemic violence in school (Mabetha & De Wet, 2018; Magwa, 2015; Ncontsa et al., 2013), which requires a different entry point to help the youth. By engaging them in a participatory action research process, youth themselves can be enabled to advocate for support and protection against abuse, bullying, discrimination and stigma, by raising awareness for the need for a more supportive environment and hopefully influencing school policies in this direction (Caraballo et al., 2017; Marciano, et al., 2019).

### *3.2.1.2 Preventing negative chain reactions*

A negative chain reaction is a vicious cycle of systemic violence that could be caused by the pressure learners experience at school. It may be exacerbated by a lack of support and care from teachers, and result in disruptive behaviour (Crockett & Crouter, 2014).

Many children rendered vulnerable by poverty go to school with burdens from different life experiences such as being hungry, not having a stable home, or having to play a role as head of their family (Daniel & Mathias, 2012; Theron, 2012), being abused by parents and caregivers (Currie & Spatz Widom, 2010), staying alone (Jensen, 2013) or caring for younger siblings (Motsa et al., 2016). Such children go to school with the hope to find peace and help from teachers and their peers (Mwoma & Pillay, 2016). Yet, in many cases learners are being discriminated against and isolated owing to their disadvantaged background. I have witnessed such teacher insensitivity on several occasions at my work place. Even if the child is performing academically well but, due to problems, performance is not stable, teachers tend to label them as uncooperative, lazy and stubborn. Moreover, instead of supporting and encouraging the child, they make negative comments, such as “the child is having boyfriend/girlfriend” or “is uncontrollable”, which indicates a lack of understanding of the socio-systemic factors which impair the child’s ability to function optimally. Such a response makes learners lose trust and confidence in their teachers such that they cannot share their bad experiences with them (Kitching, Roos & Ferreira, 2012). Some learners are even being sexually abused by male teachers and those who refuse to have sex are being victimised in classrooms by teachers through negative remarks for minor mistakes (Magwa, 2015). In South Africa, especially in rural schools, such cases mostly go



unreported (South African Council of Educators, 2011); yet, they are taking place. Other children react negatively to adversity by causing disruptions in the school (Stone, 2013). For instance, learners resort to acts of vandalism as is the case in my school where learners do the following: break windows; open holes in the fence to access or exit the school premises when it suits them; steal other children's property (especially those who are doing well and mostly liked by teachers) such as calculators and text books; scratch teachers' cars; engage in serious physical fights with peers; and write negative comments about teachers on the walls.

The school has an obligation to provide a safe environment for youth and to respond hastily and justly to their needs and wants (Serey, Many & Sopheak, 2011) as a means to maintain stability and prevent negative chain reactions. However, many schools do not do this, and a possible solution might be to look to the vulnerable young learners themselves in search for solutions to the challenges of their adverse circumstances, particularly those inherent in the school itself. Youth are well placed to reach out to their peers and take action to campaign for a safe and enabling environment (Kohfeldt et al., 2011; Torre, 2011) that will cater for their emotional, psychosocial and academic needs.

### *3.2.1.3 Enhancing self-esteem and self-efficacy*

Self-esteem is a concept that refers to an individual's overall evaluation of him/herself (Tchombe, 2015). Some define self-esteem as a judgment about one's own worth, a reflection on how an individual perceives him/herself (Orth, Trzesniewski & Robins, 2010). A person's behaviour and response to his/her own environment indicates whether the person has a high or a low self-esteem (Baumeister, 2010). People with high self-esteem have a positive view of their image, relate well with others and are assertive in their communication, which makes them feel confident, and encourages people to respect them (Baumeister, 2010). Such people are able to deal better with their difficult experiences without allowing them to cause setbacks in their lives. However, those with a low self-esteem are more likely to feel feeble, apprehensive, incompetent, shy, introvert and may display antisocial behaviour (Simpson, Hillman, Crawford & Overton, 2010).

The concept of self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his/her capacity to define a goal, persevere in the midst of adversity and perceive him/herself as capable (Bandura, 1977). The concepts of self-esteem and self-efficacy are important in understanding how youth can develop personal strengths, skills and abilities that help them cope with their adverse situation. Vulnerable youth can become more resilient and attain their life goals if we help them develop a positive self-esteem and a

sense of self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Warner, 2013). Moreover, by helping them to recognise their strengths, skills and abilities, we can facilitate their having sense of purpose and hope for the future (Gutiérrez, Tomás, Romero & Barrica, 2017).

The school is the obvious place to ensure that vulnerable youth are fully equipped with skills required to improve their lives in future (Stone, 2013). In addition, the school environment is supposed to be supportive to help vulnerable youth reacquire a sense of normalcy and to bounce back from the impact of bad experiences outside the school (Ungar, 2008b; Tchombe, 2011). Vulnerable youth tend to develop low self-esteem and lack self-efficacy as a result of their difficult life experiences, which is compounded by a lack of support and the pressure exerted on them at school (Batra, 2013). Research reveals that going to school for many children in poverty stricken areas causes stress as they are faced with demeaning challenges: they are unable to afford school uniforms (Sabic-El-Rayess, Mansur, Batkhuyag, Otgonkhagva, 2019); they have to go to school on an empty stomach (Mwaniki & Makokha, 2013); and they are exposed to discrimination by peers and teachers (Popa, Bochi & Laurian, 2012). A lack of support and guidance from adults at school means that they retain feelings of inferiority and isolation from their peers (Scott, Daniel, Taylor, Derbyshire & Neilson, 2011). However, research also argues that the school can help vulnerable youth develop the building blocks of resilience: a sense of belonging, positive self-esteem and a sense of self-efficacy (Stone, 2013). Vulnerable youth can develop resilience if they are trained to take action to deal with their daily challenges experienced at school, which will eventually make them feel connected, capable and competent (Tough, 2012).

#### *3.2.1.4 Opening opportunities*

Vulnerable youth are not passive recipients of support (Skovdal & Belton, 2014) and need to be given opportunities to explore their talents and potential in life. However, communities tend to isolate vulnerable youth owing to the perception of them as sensitive and easily hurt (Motsa & Morojele, 2016). Such attitudes can cause vulnerable youth to withdraw into themselves, and, when they go to school, it becomes difficult for them to socialise with their peers as their need for love, acceptance and care has not been addressed (Mwoma et al., 2015). When youth feel ostracised, they become susceptible to loneliness and social anxiety, which affects their ability to interact with their peers (Maslow, 1943). However, school can provide opportunities for youth through meaningful participation in an action research process, involving them in decision making.

### ***3.2.2 Socio-ecological understanding of resilience: establishing protective factors***

Socio-ecological resilience theory indicates that people should improve their resilience by increasing protective factors to reduce risk factors (Ungar, 2010a) and by negotiating and accessing the use of available resources which are culturally and contextually meaningful (Ungar, 2010a). In Chapter 2, I indicated that in South Africa, education in rural schools is affected by grave social issues which render youth vulnerable. Since this study intends to emancipate youth from their adverse situation, this chapter presents an argument that the school as the centre of care and support (Ebersöhn et al., 2011) should provide systemic support to encourage youth to remain in schools so that they acquire skills that ensure future self-reliance. People who are self-reliant believe in their strengths and capabilities to take a course of action (Franklin, Kim, Ryan, Kelly & Montgomery, 2012). Participatory action research can enable youth to develop internal strengths through capacity building such as the ability to negotiate the use of helping resources. I, therefore, illustrate how participatory processes can be optimally used with youth, taking into account protective factors that contribute to the development of resilience. Cameron et al., (2007) identified seven protective factors which are needed to increase learners' resilience: (i) access to material resources; (ii) access to supportive relationships; (iii) development of a desirable identity; (iv) experience of power and control; (v) adherence to cultural traditions; (vi) experience of social justice and (vii) a sense of cohesion with others. I now discuss these in relation to this study.

#### ***3.2.2.1 Access to material resources***

The concept of material resources refers to both physical and health resources within a school, which provide conditions for development and growth (Gardner & Colwill, 2018) and remove stress and health hazards that threaten the well-being of learners (Stephens, 2013). In this study, physical resources include the school buildings, toilets, sports ground, water and electricity. Research indicates that access to material resources influences resilience, and a facilitative environment enhances positive development (Ungar, 2010b). Environmental structures such as the availability of water and working latrines, are critical at school as a lack of these resources impacts negatively on the well-being of all learners and affects their attendance rate (Sedibe, 2011). The absence of water and working toilets does not only cause stress to children but also poses health hazards because they are exposed to an unhygienic environment. Although it is understood that rural areas are still affected by the legacy of apartheid in terms of distribution of resources (Du Plessis, 2014; Westaway, 2010), schools are allocated funding in accordance with the National Norms and Standards for School Funding policy

encapsulated in the South African Schools Act, which can be used to improve the conditions at school (Department of Education, 1998). However, schools are unable to address the problem of a shortage of resources because attention is mostly given to curriculum activities, neglecting socio-systemic factors that play a vital role in promoting a supportive learning environment. A lack of environmental structures promotes systemic poverty because, for example, if learners cannot access toilets, they will be uncomfortable from not being able to relieve themselves and eventually absent themselves from school (Sedibe, 2011). They will also avoid going to school if they have little access to water or food from the feeding scheme (Mwambene, Muula & Leo, 2013). Missing lessons and tasks can cause teachers to be angry and harsh with children, which adds to their feeling of isolation. Some may be discouraged and opt to drop out, while others continue to learn in a stressful environment, which provides little chance to ameliorate their situation.

Teachers and other stakeholders at school may not consider issues of environmental structures as a drawback to the well-being of children because their focus might be on teaching and learning (Torstensson & Brundrett, 2011). The school, should therefore, help learners to cope with their challenging environment by providing them opportunity to navigate helping resources to keep them at school. A participatory action research process can give youth the agency to be part of the solution by raising their voices to sensitise the entire school community of their needs and wants (Brown & Westaway, 2011).

The school has the responsibility to provide access to health resources to build vulnerable children's internal and external resources to help them overcome adversity (Ebersöhn, 2013; Langford et al., 2014). Health resources can be psychosocial support, which provides for children's educational, safety, nutrition, social and emotional needs (Morgan & Roberts, 2010). Access to health resources provides children with opportunities to learn social and emotional skills to help them gain control over their lives and beseech help where necessary (Melnick, Cook-Harvey & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Many children who are rendered vulnerable by poverty are subjected to problems such as hunger, exploitation, discrimination, abuse, violence and isolation (Cook et al., 2010) which intensify their vulnerability because they become ostracised and feel devalued by their teachers. Interventions to help vulnerable children are supposed to be provided by adults at school to ensure a caring and supportive environment that strives to meet their individual needs (Ogina, 2010). Some authors perceive teachers as resources that can be used to foster youth's resilience (Ebersöhn et al., 2011), but teachers have in

fact become a source of distress for children through sexual abuse (Diraditsile, 2018; Magwa, 2015; Simuforosa & Rosemary, 2015), and stigma and discrimination which are rife in most rural schools (Devries, Kyegombe, Zuurmond, Parkes, Child, Walakira, et al., 2014).). A negative attitude towards vulnerable children impedes teachers from identifying children who need additional psychosocial support because in my observation teachers tend to see them through a deficit lens, which deprives them of the opportunity to find the support they need. For instance, at my work place, some orphans are teenage mothers, while others are taking care of their siblings, which at times interferes with their school work. Such children need support to balance their social and academic life, but teachers put more stress on them by being judgmental rather than providing guidance.

Vulnerable children are often affected by inadequate material resources at home, such as lack of food (Stewart, Watson & Campbell, 2018), which drives them to school with the hope of getting food from the school nutrition programme. However, provision of food in rural schools may not be consistent because of inadequate access to water and a shortage of wood for fuel. Inadequate provision of food can inhibit children's ability to perform academically as they may fall asleep during lessons or lack energy to concentrate owing to hunger (Chinyoka, 2014). Research affirms that hunger can have physical and psychological effects on children's learning because it can cause anxiety, depression and withdrawal (Jensen, 2013). The National School Nutrition Programme was introduced as a poverty alleviation programme and educational intervention for the well-being of children (Rendall-Mkosi, Wenhold & Sibanda, 2013), which indicates government awareness that the school should consistently provide daily meal to learners. Teachers need to be sensitised to the reality of lack of access to material resources having a negative impact on children's physical, social and emotional well-being, which can also become a barrier to learning. Youth can be enabled through a participatory action research process to explore ways in which resources can be prioritised and made available to them.

#### *3.2.2.2 Access to supportive relationships*

Access to supportive relationships strengthens positive interaction between learners and teachers and creates a learning environment that is able to meet learners' emotional, developmental and academic needs (Ager, 2013). Socio-ecological factors such as a supportive school are essential to develop the resilience of children in adversity but many rural schools in South Africa do not provide counselling services, while learners are unable to access external support (De Girolamo, Dagani, Purcell, Cocchi & McGorry, 2012). Supportive relations would help vulnerable children cope with feeling unsafe at

school (Sharp, Penner, Marais, & Skinner, 2018) where they are subjected to abuse and bullying by peers and teachers (Magwa, 2015). In many cases, girls are being sexually exploited by male teachers and a lack of access to support structures at school forces them to remain silent (Diraditsile, 2018; LaPlaca & Corlyon, 2016). For instance, a report in the newspaper about a male teacher from KwaZulu Natal province; who was caught having sex with a teenager at his cottage, reveals that he threatened to kill other children who testified that they were also his victims of rape (Mkhize, 2012). Such incidents can impact negatively on children's well-being and can even force children to drop out of the school because they feel unsafe. Literature on HIV and AIDS suggest that keeping girls in school will serve as a strong protective factor against HIV infection (Pufall, Gregson, Eaton, Masoka, Mpandaguta, Andersen, et al., 2014). Although the school has become a risk factor to girls, they might be helped if they had access to protective mechanisms, such as school counsellors and other support structures.

Teachers have an obligation to provide caring supervision, which will ensure that every child feels safe at school (Ogina, 2010). However, teachers underestimate how unsafe children can be within the school premises because they judge their behaviour to be intentional, and blame them for starting relationships with teachers in return for money. Teachers may lack understanding of socio-systemic factors that can place children's lives at risk from abuse or exploitation by adults. However, teachers should protect these vulnerable learners by allowing them to confide in them, discussing behaviours that seem inappropriate as well as identifying and addressing risky situations (Jackson, Geddes, Haw & Frank, 2012). Fostering social emotional competencies and a moral sense in teachers could promote a safe environment at school because it would promote their ability to empathise and would improve relationships with their learners (Durlak et al., 2011).

### *3.2.2.3 Development of a desirable identity*

A strong self-esteem and a sense of purpose in life increase resilience because they help people to believe in their abilities. However, it starts with developing inner strength that allows individuals to pursue their dreams and goals to live their lives to the fullest (Karatas, Alci, Aydin, 2013). Learners facing adversity need support, guidance, assistance and advice in developing a sense of self and good self-esteem, gaining control of their lives, and thereby embracing their individuality (Nene, 2017). This happens when learners feel safe, supported and respected by their peers and teachers, but if social support does not exist, they become vulnerable to external stressors, which robs them of their identity

(Francisco, Loios & Pedro, 2016). When learners believe that they are in charge of their lives, their self-esteem and resilience increase. The school is therefore best positioned to provide a caring and encouraging environment, while teachers as part of social ecologies, should model behaviour as learners often learn by imitating what they say and do (Nearchou, 2018; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011). However, teachers can be the perpetrators of insensitive behaviour through discrimination and stigmatisations, making vulnerable learners feel unwanted and insignificant, which deprives them of their wisdom to discover their strength and talents (Thapa et al., 2013). Youth participatory action research can help learners develop their capacity and potential for growth, whilst learning how to take actions to solve problems that affect them at school (Ozer, 2017).

#### *3.2.2.4 Experience of power and control*

Power and control entail the ability to gain access to material and psychological resources with regard to the following: fulfilling basic needs, exercising participation and self-determination; and experiencing competence and self-efficacy, which instill a sense of stability and consistency in an individual's life (Morrison & Pidgeon, 2017). There needs to be a balance between internal capacity and external conditions to create opportunities for individuals to assert control over their life's circumstances (Artuch-Garde, González-Torres, de la Fuente, Vera, Fernández-Cabezas & López-García, 2017). However, learners' interaction with their social environment should help them develop the capacity to have a sense of control over their lives (Walton, 2013). This is only possible if their social environment is supportive. However teachers working in adverse contexts may not be available to provide support (e.g. the teachers in this school leave promptly after classes to start the long journey back to the city) and they often blame learners for their problems instead of empathising with them and taking their socio-economic context into account (Fearon et al., 2017). I witnessed such insensitivity in my school where a learner who was abused by her father was accused of lying by the teacher and her mother. Such behaviour disempowers learners with regard to having control over their lives and disposes them to meekly accept abuse.

#### *3.2.2.5 Adherence to cultural traditions*

Cultural and spiritual factors involve knowledge of one's cultural values and beliefs, which is a fulfillment of self-identity as it contributes in shaping the behaviour of people (Castro & Martins, 2010). Understanding and embracing learners' cultural diversity make them feel valued and understood, while spiritual support boosts resilience (Heath, Donald, Theron & Lyon, 2014).

However, adherence to tradition can impact negatively on the growth and well-being of children. For instance, a male-dominated society can be a catalyst for girls' abuse since traditional norms mean that they are expected to remain silent and many people turn a blind eye to the abusive behaviour of men (Namy, Carlson, O'Hara, Nakuti, Bukuluki, Lwanyaaga, et al., 2017). YPAR empowers female learners to resist oppressive cultural systems by disrupting such normative thinking, and opening their eyes to cultural ways of being that denies their rights under the South African constitution.

#### *3.2.2.6 Experience of social justice*

Social justice is when all people are treated fairly and there is equal distribution of resources amongst them (Cappy, 2016). The school setting in many instances affects vulnerable youth's well-being owing to the absence of policies that can address their needs and wants. Children become victims of abuse, violence, discrimination and stigma because of a lack of implementation of policies designed to protect their rights and promote their well-being. In my observation as a teacher I have realised that many teachers show interest in vulnerable children's social problems not because they care about their well-being, but just to get information that they enjoy sharing with colleagues. Perhaps one of the reasons teachers become insensitive to the feelings of vulnerable children could be a lack of knowledge of how problems impact on the well-being of the victim.

If the authority figure models abuse, degradation, discrimination and insensitivity towards vulnerable children, people who are watching will do the same (Cote & Nightingale, 2012). This implies that teachers as part of social ecologies, at school, can be an indirect cause of abuse and discrimination (Ali, Kock, Molteno, Mfiki, Kidd, Ali, King et al., 2012). Moreover, a lack of sensitivity to temper behaviour and attitudes of teachers towards children makes the school an unfriendly place (Department of Education, 2001), increasing risk factors instead of safeguarding the well-being of children.

#### *3.2.2.7 A sense of cohesion with others*

Social cohesion is the capacity of all members in the school community to work together in order to flourish as a team and experience equal positive outcomes (Phillips, Tse, Johnson & Mori, 2011). The school is best positioned to develop social cohesion by ensuring that learners feel safe (Ali, Hassiotis, Strydom & King, 2012), encouraging creative activities to nurture critical thinking skills (Quintini & Martin, 2014) and establishing a strong foundation of knowledge and understanding of current affairs (Hightower, Delgado, Lloyd, Wittenstein, Sellers, et al., 2011). Teachers should create a school



environment that is free from discrimination and ascertain that learners have equal opportunities to access material resources and emotional support, which would ensure empowerment to those rendered vulnerable (Ebersöhn et al., 2011). The school ethos can help to reinforce social cohesion (Phillips et al., 2011). For instance; discipline, safety, fairness in the treatment of learners and good behaviour coupled with increased opportunities for extra-mural activities can assist in occupying learners in healthier activities (Theron, Liebenberg & Malindi, 2014). When learners experience integration and bonding among one another and teachers and feel connected to the school, they will perform well in class and have better mental and physical health (Ebersöhn et al., 2011; Osier, 2011). Learners should be enabled to form strong positive relationships with all members of the school community to improve their well-being and resilience (Denmack, Platts-Fowler, Robinson, Stevens & Wilson, 2010). Learners, who lack the feeling of belonging to a group, need the school to provide a feeling of togetherness with others. Empathy and recognition on the part of teachers can help learners develop a sense of cohesion with other learners and teachers at school, increasing their coping skills (Thapa, et al., 2013). However, teachers can sometimes be biased and unfair to learners owing to their diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, leading to a feeling of disempowerment and loss of trust. Although in SERT the onus is on social ecologies to provide support for children, it does not ignore the importance of developing internal strengths (Ungar, 2011) and self-determination theory can help us understand how this can be done.

### **3.3 Self-determination theory**

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a theoretical framework that works from an organism perspective and posits that all people are active organisms that engage with their environment to have their basic psychological needs satisfied and overcome adversity (Deci & Ryan, 2012 ). SDT as a framework consists of basic psychological theory, which is underpinned by the three innate needs of autonomy, relatedness and competence, and organismic integration theory (OIT), (Clevenger, 2014). Basic psychological theory asserts that people are driven by the willingness to succeed in life (Deci et al., 2012) and organismic integration theory (OIT) proposes that, by giving learners opportunity to broaden their capacity and express their talents and propensities, they can actualise their true potentials (Vansteenkiste, Niemiec & Soenens, 2010). Organismic integration theory explains how people assimilate external factors in the environment, turning them into motivators or de-motivators (Ryan et al., 2008).

Physical factors fulfill learners' physical needs and well-being. For instance, nutrition, sports and the school surroundings can either support or demoralise learners (Sorkkila, Tolvanen, Aunola & Ryba, 2019). As already indicated in Chapter 2, some learners go to school hungry; OIT would support the notion that the ecological environment should meet their physical needs to keep them healthy and psychologically well. When learners' nutrition is well maintained, they become energetic and intrinsically motivated to participate in physical activities that help them to grow physically and mentally. However, physical factors can be de-motivators as learners may not receive their meal daily owing to a lack of wood for fuel and shortage of water.

Through the support of adults at school, learners' well-being and self-determination can be promoted by fostering a sense of agency, self-efficacy, social competence and hope for the future (Koestern & Hope, 2014). The school, therefore, has the capacity to strengthen learners' internal resources by helping them to navigate the use of helping resources to address problems that affect them at school. Self-determination theory in this study helps to understand how youth can be supported by their environment to emotionally evolve and develop in a healthy way. The three basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, relatedness and competence, which promote well-being and resilience, are discussed below.

### ***3.3.1 Autonomy***

The concept of autonomy, according to SDT, is defined as regulation by self where individuals regard their behaviour as self-directed (Weinstein, Przybylski & Ryan, 2012). A person who is self-directed has the ability to do something without being influenced by other people, although positive feedback can also encourage one to be autonomous as it signifies competence (Skipper & Douglas, 2011). Autonomy in individual behaviour is associated with positive and sustainable outcomes, where individuals feel that they are in full control of their lives (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). When young people are in control of their lives, they are strengthened to resist negative influences and dangerous situations (Heath et al., 2014). However, when individuals' autonomy is thwarted, they become enervated, and at times, try to protect their ego by behaving in a certain way to draw attention of people around them (Skipper et al, 2011).

Vulnerable youth in the context of my study are confronted with problems that affect their basic psychological needs, and this prevents them from attaining their life goals because they feel devalued. Providing youth with care and support helps them to believe in their own self-worth to gain control

over their lives, which is a fulfillment of the need for autonomy (Yasmin & Sohail, 2018). However, teachers can aggravate their situation because they may lack skills to support them towards making decisions that will enhance their life opportunities (Donohoe & Bornman, 2014). For instance, in many cases vulnerable youth have low academic achievement due to psychosocial problems and the approach used by teachers to support learners through rewards for academic achievement can make them feel incompetent and despondent as these discriminate learners with low achievement scores (Geldenhuis & Wevers, 2013). Such practices encourage inappropriate ways of showing autonomy, such as cheating or even flirting with teachers to gain favour. Lack of access to material resources can also influence learners to develop introjections which lead to a thwarted autonomy, because when they feel dejected they may start reacting to all forms of triggers in order to fulfill their need (Moreau & Mageau, 2011). This study intends to help vulnerable children emancipate themselves from their adverse situation through taking action to improve their schooling experience. Self-determination theory suggests that learners should be volitional so that they can perform to the best of their ability; hence they need to be intrinsically motivated (Vansteenkiste et al., 2008). Vulnerable children can overcome adversity if they are willing to learn to take action to address their problems, and if a supportive environment is created to allow them to do so. Some authors indicate that, if people are motivated by external factors, their performance might not be reliable because they may be just trying to please other people or gain external reward (Muskens, 2013).

Vulnerable children need to be supported in developing a sense of volition to improve their life circumstances at school. This can be possible if adults at school create a safe space where learners are free to express their opinions. A participatory action research process can give learners the opportunity to address problems that impact on their lives and this will encourage them to take action because their voices are recognised. By so doing, vulnerable youth will develop autonomy to deal with any challenge in their lives because they believe that they are competent. A participatory process also requires youth to develop relationship with others.

### **3.3.2 *Relatedness***

Relationship building appears to be one of the most effective factors for emancipation because people feel supported and connected to one another (Ryan, Patrick, Deci & Williams, 2008). Relatedness as a need suggests that people need others in order to have a sense of belonging and connectedness. This facilitates autonomy and competence, which are intrinsically stimulated (Deci et al., 2012). Positive

and supportive relationships encourage young people to work as teams that develop strong guiding values, which help them to make healthy choices. Young people at school need to be surrounded by people who take their ambitions seriously so that they can feel accepted. Although organismic integration theory supports intrinsic motivation, it contends that people can also be extrinsically motivated to develop autonomy depending on their relationship with the environment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This suggests that the environment can open up opportunities that encourage people to work as a team or interact with one another in a positive way to stimulate intrinsic motivation, which will be a fulfillment of the need for relatedness.

Adults in schools should foster relatedness, which will strengthen learners' intrinsic motivation and the willingness to succeed despite their daily challenges (Fortier, Duda, Guerin & Teixeira, 2012). For instance, teachers can build learners trust and confidence by encouraging open communication (Osier, 2011), engaging learners in extra-mural activities and allowing them to be part of decision-making with regard to issues that affect them directly (Fortier et al., 2012). Some learners may not be able to access help outside the school owing to socio-economic challenges but the school as a helping resource and teachers as part of social ecologies can enable learners to meet their needs.

However, teachers may be reluctant to provide additional support for learners owing to workload. Moreover, teachers who do not provide support make learners feel ostracised and inclined to withdraw into themselves, which is a deprivation of their relatedness need (Nene, 2017). It is, therefore, necessary that vulnerable youth be enabled to work with their peers as this will foster the development of coping mechanisms to reduce negative outcomes, such as stress, poor academic performance and feelings of inferiority. In order to liberate vulnerable youth from adverse situations, we need to create supportive relationships by listening and accepting their views to make them feel valued and understood which will develop a sense of belonging for them. Equal opportunities to access material resources and the experience of social justice improve learners' connectedness to the school encouraging the development of relatedness (Goodman & Gorski, 2014). Enabling learners to work as a team will not only enhance their interpersonal relations, but also improves their communication, listening, negotiating and leadership skills (Mendo Lázaro, León Del Barco, Felipe-Castaño, Polo-del-Río & Iglesias-Gallego, 2018). Engaging youth in a participatory action research process is enabling because it helps with the holistic development of skills which are necessary in later life and help them thrive despite their adverse situation (Wright, 2015).

### **3.3.3 Competence**

The concept of competence refers to the ability to use knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable individuals to develop mastery over tasks that are important to them (Ryan et al., 2008). People who are competent are influenced by positive feedback and assurance of their capabilities (Cerasoli, Nicklin & Ford, 2014). According to SDT, competence in individuals is the compulsion to feel satisfaction in exercising and extending their capabilities when given the skills to cultivate the development of coping mechanism in times of adversity (Deci et al., 2008). Competence as a need is steered by a feeling of autonomy (Riley, 2016). In other words, people cannot feel competent if they have not developed a sense of autonomy. The school is best placed to give youth the opportunity to assert their rights and participate in activities that allow them to express their voices and make meaningful choices about their lives. This will enable them to experience power and control which are the catalyst of competence. Most vulnerable youth have the potential to succeed but owing to exposure to risk factors that intensify their vulnerability they are unable to function optimally (Reiss, 2013; Henry, Knight & Thornberry, 2012). For instance, socio-systemic factors, such as abuse, poverty, discrimination and stigma coupled with a lack of support and care by teachers increase the risk of negative outcomes for vulnerable children (Daniel et al., 2012; Reiss, 2013). Social ecologies should create a supportive environment that allows learners to freely develop and grow so that they feel competent about their lives.

The school as a helping resource is a potential setting through which vulnerable youth can be emancipated from the confines of desolation. However, this requires ensuring that internal assets (self-esteem, a sense of purpose, responsibility, decision-making ability, resilience and interpersonal relationship skills) and external assets (after-school programmes, sports, creative activities, adult support, school boundaries, safety and caring school climate) are strengthened (Thapa et al., 2013). Teachers can particularly help learners to fulfill their competence need by offering opportunities to participate in the school's extra-curricular activities. Internal and external assets are components of a robust development that helps youth to flourish and grow up to be healthy, caring and responsible (Evans & Winson, 2014). In this study, competence can be developed if vulnerable youth are enabled through a participatory action research process to identify and address problems that impact on their lives at school (Kirshner, 2010; Theron, 2016).

### **3.4 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the two theories underpinning the study, namely the socio-ecological view of resilience and self-determination theory. I then explained how resilience and self-determination complement each other in the context of a health promoting school where a holistic view of health is taken. In explaining the theory of resilience, I indicated that vulnerable youth can be helped to cope with adversity through provision of both internal and external support. I argued that the school as a protective factor can create an enabling space with a climate that promotes resilience in a child. I have indicated how youth participatory action research can be optimally used in enhancing protective mechanisms to foster the resilience of vulnerable youth. The YPAR approach could help children to develop internal protective factors and teach them how to take action to increase external protective factors. In explaining self-determination theory, I demonstrated how three innate needs, namely competence, relatedness and autonomy, complement one other in strengthening internal and external resources. For instance, vulnerable youth will develop competence through learning how to take action to address problems that affect them in school while working in groups will improve their relatedness or a sense of belonging. This will eventually develop a sense of volition or autonomy that will empower them to take action, improve their own situation and to make school an enabling space. The next chapter provides a theoretical discussion of the research methodology used in the study.

## **Chapter 4**

### **A theoretical discussion of the research methodology**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 3, I discussed the theories applied in the study, namely the socio-ecological view of resilience and self-determination theory. I have indicated how the two theories complement each other within the context of health promoting schools where a holistic view of health is taken.

In this chapter, I describe my philosophical viewpoint and the methodology underpinning the study. The chapter starts with an account of my choice of an epistemological paradigm for the study, followed by an explanation of youth participatory action research as methodology. The chapter concludes with an account of the measures I took to ensure the research was ethical. A summary of the research methodology in the study is given in Table 4.1 below:

**Table 4.1. Overview of research methodology**

<b>Research paradigm</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical theory</li> </ul>
<b>Research methodology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YPAR</li> </ul>
<b>Primary research question</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can vulnerable youth actively contribute to making school an enabling space?</li> </ul>
<b>Sub-questions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do vulnerable youth perceive the current school climate?</li> <li>• What actions could vulnerable youth take to make the school an enabling space?</li> <li>• To what extent do these actions benefit vulnerable youth, teachers and school in general?</li> <li>• What theoretical guidelines can be developed from the findings of the study of how vulnerable youth could be effectively involved in making school an enabling space?</li> </ul>
<b>Research methods</b>	
Site of study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rural school in South African context</li> </ul>
Research participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purposive sampling</li> </ul>
Data generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photovoice</li> <li>• Drawings</li> <li>• Transcriptions of the project meetings</li> <li>• Researchers' reflective diary</li> </ul>
Data analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thematic analysis, through lens of resilience and self-determination theories and concept of health promoting school</li> </ul>
Measures to ensure trustworthiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process validity</li> <li>• Dialogic validity</li> <li>• Outcome validity</li> <li>• Catalytic validity</li> <li>• Democratic validity</li> </ul>
Ethical considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informed consent forms for participants' parents</li> <li>• Assent forms for participants</li> <li>• Voluntary participation</li> <li>• Provision of counselling services</li> <li>• Protection of participants from victimisation</li> </ul>

The purpose of this study was to engage youth through participatory action research to make school a more child-friendly and enabling space. To attain this aim, I worked collaboratively with youth to:

- investigate how they perceived the current school climate.
- assist them in deciding on and implementing actions to make the school a more enabling space.
- evaluate the extent to which the actions taken have been of benefit to the youth themselves, the teachers and the school in general.
- develop theoretical guidelines from the findings of the study about how to effectively involve school-going youth in making their school a more enabling space.

## **4.2 Research methodology**

Research methodology provides an overall picture of how the research methods will be used to address the research questions, as well as to generate and analyse data in order to achieve the research objectives (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Research methodology is defined by the literature as a plan of action that describes how research could be carried out and specifies the methods to be used (Creswell, 2017). I explain my methodological choices in the following sections:

### **4.2.1 Research paradigm**

A research paradigm is a set of belief systems that guides researchers in informing an opinion (Huitt, 2011; Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011; Thanh & Thanh, 2015). Some authors define a paradigm as a common understanding of reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017), while others perceive it as a well-defined thought pattern (Harris, 2011) upon which researchers base their studies. Thus, it is necessary that I first explain the paradigm that informed my methodological choices. There are four sets of philosophical assumptions of paradigms as basic belief systems listed by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), namely ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology. Ontology is the theory of the nature of social reality (Doerr, Kritsotaki, Christophides & Kotzinos, 2012; Krieger, 2011). Ontological assumptions are concerned with the nature of reality at abstract levels (Mertens, 2010a). Epistemology is the theory of knowledge concerning how it can be understood and acquired (Willig, 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). Epistemological assumptions are concerned with the relationship between the knower and what should be known. Methodology presents the basis for understanding the choice of relevant set of methods applicable to a specific study (Howell, 2013; Willig, 2013). Axiology is the study of the nature of ethics and how the researcher addresses the issues of ethics when conducting research (Mertens, 2010b). These philosophical assumptions comprehensively devote the researcher to a specific method of data generation and analysis (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche` & Delpont, 2011). In this



study I have chosen critical theory as the epistemological paradigm and YPAR as the methodological paradigm, which implies specific ontological and axiological choices.

#### *4.2.1.1 Epistemological paradigm informing the study*

This study was constructed through the lens of critical theory. A critical paradigm honours the voices of the marginalised group by giving them the right to effect social transformation in their environment (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2011). Critical theory was developed by Horkheimer at the Frankfurt school under the influence of the work of Karl Marx whose philosophy emphasised the reduction of power inequalities (Campbell, Cornish & Gibbs, 2010); self-emancipation and systemic understanding of socioeconomic change (Bloom, 2012). Epistemologically, a critical paradigm provides the basis for understanding what is wrong with current social realities (Scotland, 2012). Ontologically, the paradigm should be able to identify the participants who should change the situation and provide clear guidelines to bring about social transformation (Payne & Barbera, 2013; Scotland, 2012). Critical theory was adopted as the epistemological paradigm of this study because of its transformative and emancipatory nature (Callaghan, 2016). Through this paradigm, I sought to help youth liberate themselves from the confines of adversity (Freire, 1998; Mertens, 2010a) by developing their skills holistically (Wright, 2015) through participation in YPAR to understand the cause of problems in their school environment and motivate them to take action to influence policies that affect their lives on daily basis. I have decided to draw on this paradigm because it is explanatory, practical and normative (Callaghan, 2016). The youth participants were enabled to identify issues that make the school an unpleasant environment (explanatory). Moreover, the principles of YPAR guided them in taking action to improve the situation (practical) and inform school policy at school level (normative).

#### *4.2.1.2 Methodological paradigm*

This study adopts youth participatory action research as methodology to enable the participants to bring about changes in their environment (Fine, 2012). Youth participatory action research empowers youth to conduct research with their peers and guided by an adult researcher, to improve their lives, giving them a voice to their own views and providing them with skills that are important for their development (Caraballo, Lozenski, Lyiscott, & Morrel, 2017; Wright, 2015). YPAR has adopted the vision of action research in that it puts anthropological theories and methods at the centre (Akom et al., 2016). In action research, there is a belief that people are capable of producing their own knowledge and there is no one truth or reality, since knowledge is socially constructed (Mirra, Garcia & Morrell, 2016). This implies that youth participants take a leading role in developing ideas, facilitating

meetings and making decisions (Fox et al., 2010). The critical paradigm employs dialogic and dialectic approaches which influenced my methodological choice because in YPAR the participants are engaged in critical thinking and a cyclical process of learning and action to bring about solutions to problems that impact on their lives. The axiology implied by YPAR promotes values that are democratic and inclusive in nature (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011); hence, it embraces the knowledge and skills the participants bring into the learning experience (Fletcher, 2015). YPAR gives participants an opportunity to experience learning moments and develop their leadership skills through engagement in action research (MacDonald, 2012). YPAR as my preferred methodology in the study enabled the participants to uncover and address issues in relation to their lived experiences. Moreover, they shared their views and learned from each other whilst doing research in partnership with their peers under the guidance of the adult researcher as the facilitator.

#### ***4.2.2 Research design***

A research design is a specified plan for generating data that will be used to answer the research questions (McMillan et al., 2010). The choice of research design in a study depends largely upon the research questions (Yin, 2014). An appropriate research design for a study provides a well-defined layout that demonstrates coherence between the proposed research questions and methods. This ensures the generation of data that is valid and credible (McMillan et al., 2010). In this study, the design is youth participatory action research (YPAR), which is qualitative in nature. This design was chosen for the purpose of demonstrating that youth possess the agency to make improvements in their own circumstances if they are guided to do so.

##### *4.2.2.1 Nature and purpose of youth participatory action research*

Youth participatory action research is a process of involving youth in research that is aimed at social transformation through creating opportunities for youth leadership (Powers et al., 2012). The YPAR process has been used by researchers in schools to increase youth advocacy by honouring their voices (Camarota et al., 2010) and focuses on engaging youth to identify and take action to address problems that impact on their lives (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty & Aoun, 2010). In the YPAR process, youth work collaboratively with the researcher to identify problems, decide on methodologies, co-own results, co-interpret the findings (Iwasaki, 2016) and collectively implement actions to be taken to bring about social change to the environment (Kohfeldt & Langhout, 2010). YPAR assists youth to view things through their own particular lens to enable them to influence

policies on issues that impact on their lives (Powers et al., 2012). The YPAR process is emancipatory because, when youth participate in action research (AR), there is ongoing dialogue and self- reflection (Smith, Beck, Bernstein & Dashtguard, 2014), which enables them to share their knowledge and experiences. The process helps them to develop critical thinking, planning, communication, teamwork and leadership skills (Akom et al., 2016). Taking part in YPAR can help increase their resilience, giving them the confidence to believe in their capabilities and to perceive themselves as agents of change in their school (Kirshner, 2015).

#### *4.2.2.2 Characteristics of youth participatory action research*

**YPAR is a form of critical pedagogy** (Poon & Cohen, 2012) because it empowers youth to challenge oppressive social systems (McLaren, Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2011). Critical pedagogy is a teaching approach motivated by Marxist critical theory which strives to capacitate students to think critically about their daily challenges within their education setting and encourage them to take constructive actions to bring about social transformation (Freire, 1998). In this study, vulnerable youth are enabled through a YPAR process to take action to improve their lives at school.

**YPAR honours and accentuates the voices of youth** (Fox, 2013; Quijada Cerecer, Cahill & Bradley, 2013) by recognising their right to effect social transformation in their environments. YPAR helps youth to perceive themselves as advocates and agents of change in their own spheres of influence. In this study, YPAR recognises that vulnerable youth possess the agency to analyse their unsupportive school environment and navigate the solutions to turn the situation around.

**YPAR is collaborative and participatory** (Powers et al., 2012). In YPAR, the adult researcher and the participants work as a team to identify problems; decide on methods and generate/analyse data and develop actions based on the findings of the study (Ozer et al., 2012; Powers et al., 2012). In this study, the participants were enabled to work as a team in the process of developing leadership skills, which empowered them to take action to improve their own circumstances.

**YPAR is cyclical and reflective** (Smith et al., 2014). Research proceeds through iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.

#### *4.2.2.3 The role of the facilitator and participants in YPAR*

Since YPAR is a collaborative and participatory process, the adult researcher assumes the role of being the facilitator, observer and reporter of the participant group. The primary role of the adult

researcher is to guide the participants with regard to the research principles and process (Caraballo et al., 2017; Winborne, 2014). As a facilitator, the adult researcher is responsible for building the participants' confidence and independence by listening to and validating their inputs. In the process, the researcher facilitates dialogue and reflective analysis among the participants in the action learning group and provides them with ongoing reflections based on their input (Zuber-Skerritt, 2011).

The participants are researchers who work collaboratively with the adult researcher as an action learning group (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2013). An action learning group is a small group of participants in action research who meet regularly and work collaboratively in a specified area to address issues of concern (Wood, 2019). In YPAR, the adult researcher acts as the facilitator (Caraballo et al., 2017). The participants' role is to do the following: identify the problem about the phenomenon under study; navigate and implement ways of solving the problem; evaluate if their efforts were successful; and if not satisfied repeat the process until their objectives are achieved (Wood, 2019).

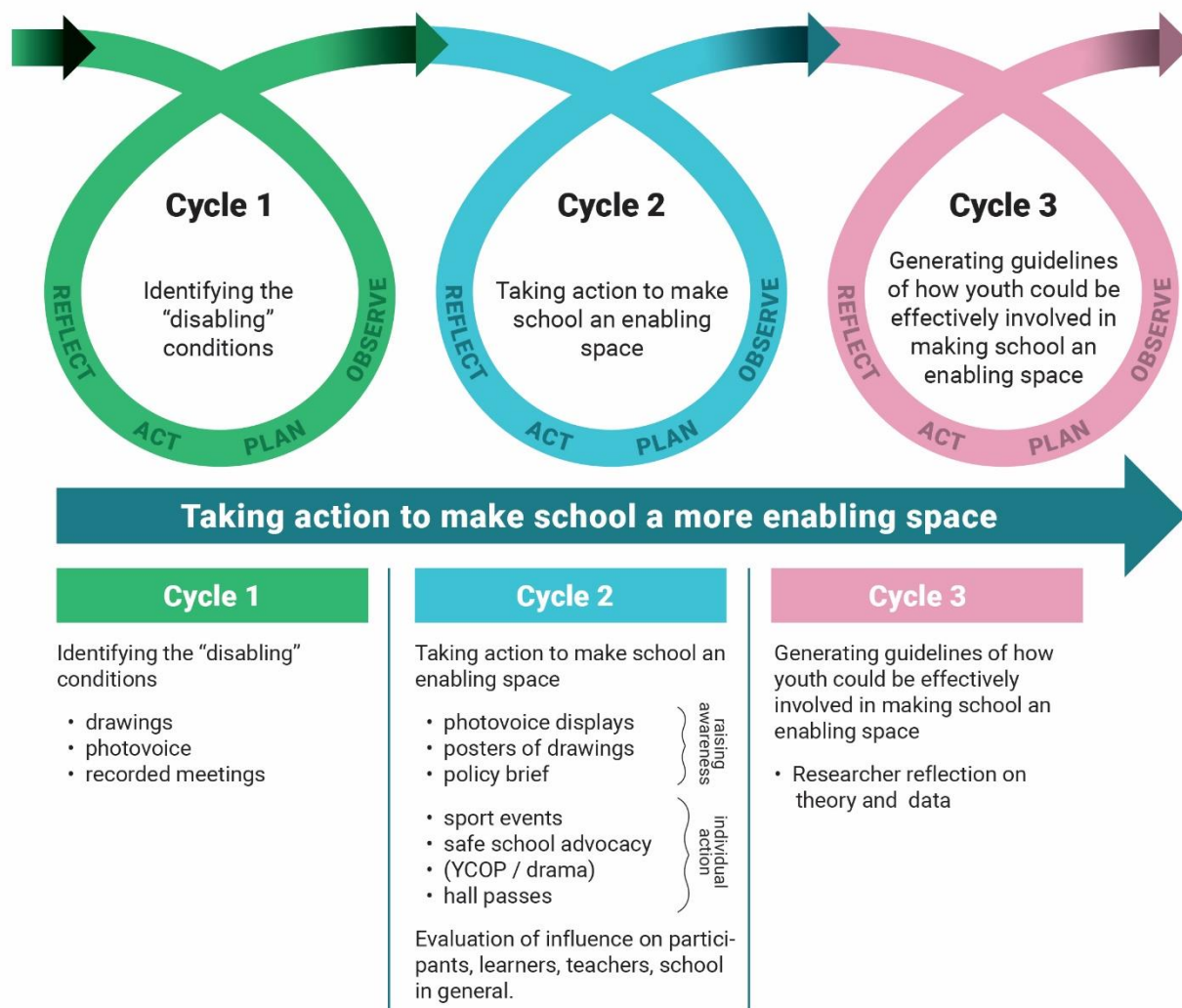
In this study, vulnerable youth took part in participatory action research to address issues that impacted on their lives at school with the aim of creating a child-friendly, enabling environment for all learners. They engaged as an action learning group in critical cycles of enquiry to identify issues that create an unsupportive learning environment in the school. The purpose was to investigate ways of creating a warm and welcoming climate in the school to make learners feel safe and wanted. The participants created the name of the project group, which they named Leihlo la Baswa (the Eye of the Youth), designed the logo of the group (see Figure 4.1) and formulated their research questions. As the facilitator I introduced different methods of data generation used in participatory action research to the participants by explaining how each of them works. They then decided on the methods to be used to generate data and analysed it to decide on actions to be taken to make school an enabling space. We then evaluated the actions to check if they were beneficial to the participants, their peers, teachers and school policy.



**Figure 4.1 Logo designed by the participants: Leihlo la Baswa**

#### *4.2.2.4 Cycles of the study*

Since participatory action research (PAR) is cyclical, in this study, there were three cycles of action research shown in Figure 4.2 below, which youth participated in to address ways of making the environment in their school more enabling.



**Figure 4.2 . Action research cycles of the study**

**Cycle 1: How do youth perceive the current school climate?**

This cycle was about identifying what could be changed in the school. The participants identified areas that needed improvement to make school an enabling space. To generate data, they used drawings and photovoice, which were discussed in their group meetings. As YPAR creates a space for vulnerable children to critically analyse structural inequalities and injustices at school (Cammarota et al., 2010), there were four stages which the participant group took part in through iterative cycles of reflection and action.

### Stage 1: Introduction, orientation and relationship building

During this stage I facilitated introduction of participants to one another and orientated them to the study. The purpose of orientating the participants was to keep them informed about the whole research process so that they could understand what they were supposed to do throughout. The participants decided on the name of the project group and pseudonyms to be used when writing report if wished. Although participants agreed on the use of pseudonyms for me to use in my report, they requested that their pictures should not be blurred, as they had a sense of ownership of the project. To promote a cooperative working atmosphere, the action learning group agreed on the ground rules. I also engaged the participants in relationship building activities to inculcate a team spirit. Relationship building in this study was critical (MacDonald, 2012), because our aim was to create a supportive learning environment for learners at school; hence, learners themselves were supposed to develop the culture of teamwork. At the end of the stage, I requested the participants to reflect on their learning experience to ensure that everyone understood what was expected of them. I recorded their reflections in my reflective diary to evaluate if participants were able to take ownership of their learning experiences (Vinjamuri, Warde & Kolb, 2017), and for future use in my thesis report.

### Stage 2: Identifying problems and deciding on methods

In YPAR, all participants are researchers (Powers et al., 2012), and the process emphasises recognition of the voices of the marginalised youth to bring about transformation to their situation (Akom et al., 2016; Fox et al., 2010). As an action learning group, participants deliberated on how they perceived their current school climate. They then decided on the data generation methods they wished to use as drawings, photovoice and group discussion.

### Stage 3: Data generation

To generate data, participants made drawings and took photos of areas and issues that they wished to address in the school, explaining them through written narratives and used these as the focus of discussion in the group.

### Stage 4: Discussion and analysis of data generated by participants

Participants analysed data together by grouping their ideas under specific categories to generate broad themes. In their discussions, participants showed that they were troubled by the problems they had

identified and eager to take action to address them. The findings of data generated by participants motivated them to navigate ways of taking action to create a supportive school environment.

### **Cycle 2: What actions could vulnerable youth take to make school an enabling space?**

This cycle was divided into 3 stages.

#### **Stage 1: Participants' discussions to develop strategies**

During this stage, participants used data from Cycle 1 to develop strategies to be taken to find out how other learners, teachers and the school governing body (SGB) felt about the problems. Participants decided on the use of artefacts generated through drawings and photovoice to develop posters as the strategy to disseminate their findings. Moreover, they developed a policy brief to document their findings.

#### **Stage 2: Presentation of the findings**

Participants used posters to present their findings to the members of the SGB orally. The same posters were displayed on the wall for learners' and teachers' view. The policy brief was presented to the SGB by a participant learner, who was the president, and a representative of the council of learners in the SGB.

#### **Stage 3: Discussion of feedback and implementation of participants' actions**

Participants reflected on the feedback from the SGB, learners and teachers to enable them to take further action to bring about change in the school. Discussion of the feedback helped participants to decide on the issues that needed involvement of their peers to influence change. For instance, learners initiated campaigns to clean the sports ground; they hosted a sport event to campaign for a formal sports in the school, and they developed a drama to advocate for a safe school. I evaluated the influence of these actions on the school at all levels.

### **Cycle 3: Theoretical guidelines**

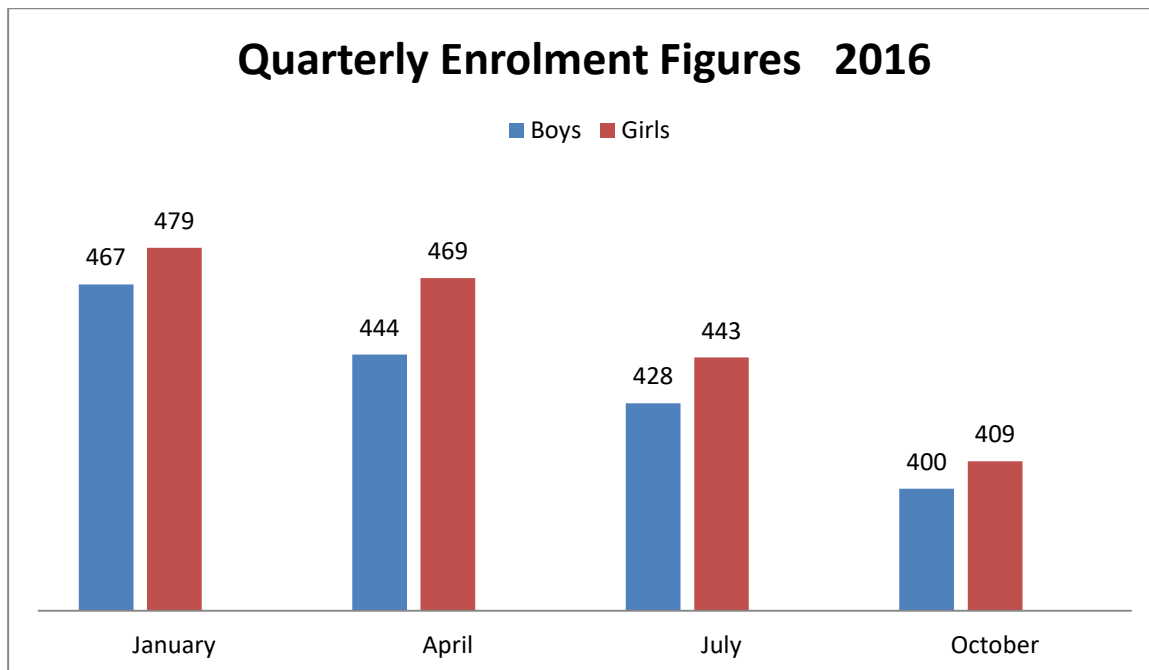
During Cycle 3 I developed theoretical guidelines based on my reflections on the process and all the other data sets. This cycle was thus more researcher-driven.



### 4.2.3 Research methods

#### 4.2.3.1 Research setting

This study was conducted in the secondary school where I work as a teacher in a rural area. I chose this site because I am conversant with the current situation, and it was convenient in terms of the proximity. It is the only secondary school in the village and admits learners from two feeder schools and from other neighbouring villages. At the beginning of the year, the school enrolls many learners but the enrolment drops as time goes on during the course of the year. For example in 2016 alone, the enrolment started with 946 in January, i.e. 467 boys and 479 girls, and dropped to 804 by November, which translates to 142 learner dropouts in one year (South African School Administration and Management Systems of school A, 2016). The enrolment of learners per quarter is illustrated in figure 4.5 below:



**Figure 4.3 Quarterly enrolment of learners for 2016**

According to the 2016 staff establishment, the school was allocated 30 posts structured as follows; one principal, two deputy principals, four heads of department and twenty three educators. The language of

teaching and learning is English and Sepedi is the home language offered to learners as a subject. Children belong to different ethnic groups, with Ndebele and Tsonga being dominant although their languages are not offered at school. There are only fourteen classrooms to accommodate over 400 learners and only two functioning toilets, which are also in a poor condition. A shortage of water is a major problem at school.

The majority of learners live in abject poverty; hence, the school has been categorised as Quintile 1, which means that it is declared a no-fee school and its learners have access to the National School Nutrition Programme. Of the total number of learners in 2016, about one third were single or double orphans; just under a quarter have parents who work away from home, leaving the high school child in charge, and less than 50% are living with at least one biological parent. (South African School Administration and Management Systems of the school under study, 2016).

#### *4.2.3.2 Research participants*

Participants in this study were recruited by homogeneous purposive sampling (Etikan & Alkassim, 2016), a method that allows the selection of participants based on knowledge of whether they possess specific experience, knowledge or exposure to the phenomenon under study. I chose to use homogenous sampling because the participants recruited were from the same grade and age group (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg & McKibbin, 2015) and came from similar backgrounds and cultures. Since this method requires a small group of participants and there was a possibility of having many interested participants, I requested the Teacher Liaison Officer (TLO) to purposefully select participants whom she deemed to have leadership potential and who were able to communicate well with other learners. Leadership and communication skills are important in this study because the participants were expected to work as a team to accomplish the common goal of influencing school policy. Participants were recruited from Grade 11 based on the argument that they have longer experience in the school than others and they are over the age of 16, thus possessing a certain degree of maturity. The Grade 12 learners were focused on preparation for final examination. The TLO identified 14 learners with an equal mix of boys and girls and invited them to participate. We designed a recruitment card where the learners indicated with an X whether they were interested in taking part in the project or not, before submitting it back to the TLO. All fourteen learners replied positively and I decided to take them all in case others might withdraw from the project or drop out of school while research was still underway. Recruitment was done according to the following criteria:

- Youth between the ages 16 and 19
- Those who had leadership potential for example; learners who serve on the representative council for learners (RCL) and those who participated actively in any school activity such as sport and competitions.
- Volunteers who were keen to participate in the project.

The biographic data of the participants is illustrated in the table below.

Participant	Age	Grade	Gender
P1	17	11	M
P2	16	11	F
P3	16	11	M
P4	16	11	F
P5	17	11	M
P6	18	11	F
P7	16	11	M
P8	17	11	F
P9	17	11	M
P10	17	11	F
P11	19	11	M
P12	18	11	F
P13	19	11	F
P14	17	11	F

**Table 4.2 Biographic data of the participants**

#### *4.2.3.3 Data generation strategies*

In this study data was generated through visual methods such as photovoice (Emmel & Clark, 2011), and drawings (De Lange, Mitchell, Moletsane, Balfour, Wedekind, Pillay et al., 2010) triangulated with recording and transcribing of group discussions, participant observation by myself as the facilitator and my reflective diaries. The use of multiple methods allowed the participants to express themselves in different ways (MacDonald, 2012). These methods of data generation are discussed below.

## *Visual methods*

In visual methods participants make use of video or image based data to share aspects of their environment and experience with others (Mitchell, 2011). Visual data can involve any physical object, people, area, incident or occurrence that can be observed with a naked eye (Hayhurst, 2017). These methods can be used to create permanent records that can be illustrated during reporting or to generate theoretical insight when engaging others in your findings (Banks, 2018). In this study, visual methods used include photovoice and drawings (Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2017) for the purpose of encouraging youth to engage in critical discussions (Mitchell, De Lange & Moletsane, 2011). The relevance of each of these methods is discussed below.

**Photovoice** is a group analysis method that integrates photography and social interaction with people at grass root level (Budig, Diez, Conde, Sastre, Hernán & Franco, 2018). It is a participatory method that empowers people to identify and be agents of change through photography, accompanied by narratives (Kohfeldt, Chhun, Grace & Langhout, 2011). The method is commonly used in the field of community development, health and education (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). Photovoice is mostly used with disadvantaged groups to provide an understanding of how they perceive their own circumstances and envisage their future (Budig et al., 2018). In this study, I suggested youth use photovoice because it is enjoyable for participants and can enable youth to record and enliven their concerns. Moreover, it promotes critical dialogue about issues through discussion (Voight & Velez, 2018) and can be used to inform policy makers. However, the use of photovoice can be a disadvantage as some viewers may misinterpret the images (Gubrium & Harper, 2013). The participants were conscientised not to take pictures of people without their written consent, and I also demonstrated how objects could be photographed symbolically to represent their ideas. As the facilitator, I led a general discussion about the school and how they learners experienced it and then I gave learners a prompt: "Take photos of objects and places you would like to change in the school to make it nicer place to be." I also asked them to make short notes on what their pictures depicted (De Lange et al., 2010). The participants took five photos each, and then worked in groups to make posters and to write captions for the photographs. The posters were then explained to the whole group. After that, they then worked with individual photos too and wrote narratives using the SHOWeD questions devised by Wang and Burris (1997), as a guide.

**S-** (See) – What do you see?

**H**-(Happening) - What is happening?

**O**- (Own lives)-How does this relate to our lives?

**W**-(Why) - Why is it happening?

**D**- (Do) - What can we do about it?

The participants produced group posters and individual photos with narratives, which they used to discuss and identify issues they would like to work on further. As the facilitator, I then explained to the participants how to categorise photographs and narratives according to themes. The participants selected photos they wanted to display in an exhibition to the whole school. I recorded and transcribed discussions of the photovoice session. In Cycle 2, participants displayed the artefacts generated through photovoice, to the learners, teachers and the school governing body. Data generated through photovoice thus becomes a tool for advocacy.

**Symbolic drawings** in qualitative research provide an effective means of engaging the participants creatively and holistically to explore their experience and make sense of their world (Theron, Mitchel, Smith & Stuart, 2011). Drawings provide an objective knowledge and people can attach different interpretations to the same image, thus eliciting rich data (Theron et al., 2011). When discussing the drawings, participants learn from one another and see matters from different perspectives. Symbolic drawings have both advantages and disadvantages (Theron, et al., 2011).

The advantages of symbolic drawings are as follows:

- Drawings are fun and non-threatening.
- They are inexpensive and easily accessible.
- They give the participants personal space to express their emotions on issues that might be difficult to voice out aloud (Radley, 2010).
- They help the participants to visualise the changes they would like to see in their lives or environment (Theron et al., 2011).
- They can be therapeutic; hence, it strengthens the participants' coping skills (Smith et al., 2014).

Drawings can also have disadvantages.

- Participants might feel inferior if not talented in drawings (Mitchell, 2011)
- Participants might also find it difficult to interpret drawings.

To counter the disadvantages, I specifically said that it did not matter how well they drew, and that stick figures and symbols could be used. I also assisted them in analyzing the data by asking probing questions when I saw that they were stuck. The use of the SHOWED anagram also aided in interpretation. In this study, symbolic drawings were used to generate data to assess how they perceived the school climate, to support and validate the photovoice data.

The participants, through dialogue and reflections in dialectic discussions, shared their thoughts about the pictures of their team partners and decided on the changes they wanted to effect.

#### *Recorded group discussions*

Group discussions are important because they promote teamwork and improve the participants' communication, leadership and listening skills and help to identify if the participants are flexible, assertive and confident in decision making (Smith et al., 2012). Youth participants were enabled to share their expertise and address problems that impacted on their lives at school through regular action learning group meetings. Taking part in group discussions helped the participants to be creative and also raised their awareness of what was happening in their lives, thus enabling them to navigate ways of overcoming the problem (Wood, 2019). Meetings were held regularly to plan and reflect on the activities. The action learning group met on a weekly basis at school for a couple of hours to share their experiences, perceptions and opinions as they progressed through the research cycles. Through the meetings the participants identified issues that made the school an unsafe and unattractive place. They then decided on the actions they would implement to change the situation for the better. Discussions on the reflections of their learning experiences were recorded on video and transcribed by the researcher after the meeting. This process was guided by the facilitator with an emphasis on learning and taking action to achieve the research goals (Torres-Harding et al., 2018). Group discussions helped the participants to develop the skill of openness, respect and listening (Birks & Mills, 2011), which helped them to generate new ideas about their lived experiences to collaboratively plan and agree on the actions that influenced school policy.

### *Reflective diary of the researcher*

Reflective diaries are tools used to record experiences during the research journey, to aid critical reflection on what is happening (Sendall et al., 2013). I used a reflective diary to record my experiences in the meetings and other insights I gained while conducting the study. I critically reflected on my learning throughout the research process, using the following questions: What I was trying to achieve? What went so well and not well? How did I feel about it? What can I do differently next time? What actions do I need to take now? This process helped me to guide the participants to refine the methodology continuously to suit different stages of data generation.

#### *4.2.3.4 Data analysis*

In this study, data analysis was done on two levels. Participants analysed the data thematically as they understood it, and I also analysed the same data at through my theoretical lenses. Thematic analysis is the method commonly used in qualitative research that focuses on extracting themes within data to identify constructive and specific ideas (Guest & MacQueen, 2012). Data in thematic analysis can be reduced through the process of coding to generate distinct patterns or themes (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Coding is the translation of data from direct observations to make it manageable for analysis. The codes are then grouped together to create various themes (Maguire et al., 2017). A theme is an agglomeration of combined categories that convey the same meaning (Houghton & Houghton, 2018) and can be analysed through an inductive or deductive approach. An inductive approach is appropriate to the generation of new theory derived from data while a deductive approach is aimed at confirming hypothesis (MacDonald, 2012). In an inductive approach, patterns and themes emerge from data rather than the researcher beginning to think about the theory, which must be tested (Guest et al., 2012). I completed the following steps during data analysis, based on the process as outlined (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Maguire et al., 2017).

#### *Familiarising myself with the data*

I read through the data generated from photovoice, drawings and transcriptions of group meetings, and my reflective diary and checked for general patterns. I then generated a list of ideas about what was in the data.

### *Generating initial codes*

Having familiarised myself with the data, I began coding and trying to establish the patterns. I coded the main ideas manually using a highlighter, grouped them into categories and generated themes.

### *Searching for themes*

I then sorted the codes using a mind map and organised them into themes. Some codes were categorised as main themes, while others were used as sub-themes.

### *Reviewing themes*

I reviewed and refined the themes checking if they formed a coherent pattern.

### *Defining and naming themes*

After I completed the mind map of the data, I then gave themes names and wrote a short description for each.

## **4.3 Measures to ensure trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness in research is an attestation that the findings of the research are true and unbiased (Anney, 2014). In the qualitative approach, there are different criteria to ensure a valid interpretation of data. Since this study involved YPAR process, which is dialogic and reflective in nature, to ensure trustworthiness, I used five validity criteria, namely process, dialogic, outcome, catalytic and democratic validity (Herr & Anderson, 2005).

### *Process validity*

Process validity exists when the study is conducted in a reliable and competent manner. Literature indicates that triangulation of data and the relationship of trust between the participants increases the credibility and validity of the research findings (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Process validity can be achieved if the participants work as a team and use different methods to generate data based on the same research problem (Anney, 2014). As the facilitator of this group I encouraged team spirit in the group through relationship building activities where participants were encouraged to strengthen one another's arguments rather than criticising them. I also guided them in the use of appropriate methods



of data generation, such as triangulation in order to have a clear and a balanced picture of the situation (Anney, 2014). To ensure that all participants understood the problem under study and the agreed plan of action, the whole process was validated through individual oral reflections at the start and end of each session.

### *Dialogic validity*

Dialogic validity refers to the degree to which the research data, methods and interpretations are subjected to peer review (Herr & Anderson, 2005). During the process, the participants were given a chance to review the research process and devise a plan of action (Anney, 2014). Dialogic validity in this study was established through visual methodologies such as photovoice and narrative drawings triangulated with group discussion and reflective diaries that reflected the participants' inputs. In Cycle 1, the participants were given the opportunity to discuss methods to be used to identify issues and possible points of intervention which led to the next step in Cycle 2, where they implemented actions to create a supportive school environment. Their findings were presented to the wider school to encourage dialogue and raise awareness about the issue. The fact that the feedback from other learners supported their data increased the dialogic validity.

### *Outcome validity*

Outcome validity is determined by whether the actions taken during the research process yielded the desired results or not. In this study, I ensured that all processes were evaluated through a dialogic process of reflection and learning. I also monitored, through the use of information recorded in my reflective diary, that methods were frequently altered to suit the process. The action learning group decided on actions to improve their school experience, based on the data they had generated. The evaluation revealed that they did attain positive outcomes on various levels.

### *Catalytic validity*

In catalytic validity, the participants must have the ability to understand the research situation so that they can transform the knowledge into reality (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this study, the nature of the problem urged the participants and energised them to take action to navigate ways of improving the lives of vulnerable children at school by creating a supportive environment. Having understood the nature of the problem, participants took the initiative in Cycle 1 to identify issues that needed to be

addressed and possible points of intervention to improve the situation. In Cycle 2, they implemented their actions to influence change and policies in the school to create a more child-friendly enabling space in the school. Through this process, it became evident that youth possess the agency to bring about transformation and their actions helped people to view them through the lens of capability.

#### *Democratic validity*

Democratic validity is concerned with the degree of collaboration between the participants and stakeholders (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The purpose of this study was to create a sound relationship between all stakeholders in the school, while exposing insensitive behaviour or negative conditions which impacted on learner wellbeing. The participants identified areas that needed to be improved at school during Cycle 1 using drawings and photovoice, and in Cycle 2, they used artefacts of Cycle 1 to raise awareness without compromising the welfare of other stakeholders in the school. In this study I ensured that all decisions made by the participants were democratic and that they were all granted the opportunity to present their opinions and ideas. The participants made input into all the cycles of research process: identification of problem, planning to take action, implementation and evaluation. The participants used the data to speak for them, thus highlighting areas for change without exposing any individual perpetrators.

#### **4.4 Ethical considerations**

Ethics regulate the manner in which people conduct themselves towards others and draw a boundary between what is morally wrong or right when conducting research, taking into cognisance the rights, needs, values and desires of the participants (Creswell, 2017). The importance of ethical consideration in research is to protect the participants, to ensure that research is conducted in a manner that prioritises the interests of the group and, finally, to ascertain that the right procedure is followed for conducting research (Arthur, Waring, Coe & Hedges, 2012). In this study, the objectives of ethical considerations were addressed. Permission to conduct youth participatory action research was granted by the Ethics Committee of North-West University, the District Senior Manager of the Limpopo Department of Basic Education and the school governing body of a particular secondary school in the rural area that served as the site of my study

As already alluded to in the explanation of the selection of participants, I worked with 14 participants in the school with an equal mix of males and females. I sought permission from the participants'

parents or guardians, who were made aware that participation was not compulsory and that youth could withdraw at any time without penalty.

My study entailed youth participatory action research, which implied that youth had to act as collaborative researchers. This called for reinforcement of ethical considerations as the participants were entrusted with a high degree of responsibility in all stages of research processes, such as taking photos and identifying objects and areas that needed to be transformed in the school. I, therefore, ensured that the participants were informed about all procedures. For example, I obtained their consent before taking photos and protected their identity and that of others who were directly and indirectly involved in the project. Although YPAR gives youth the right to challenge existing oppressive social norms and to effect social transformation (MacDonald, 2012; Fox & Fine, 2013), I made sure that the participants understood that the project was not intended to expose teachers or any insensitive behaviour but to build relationships between all stakeholders in the school with the purpose of influencing school policies that would eventually create an enabling space. However, ethics in this study were delimiting because the participants were restricted from specifically identifying any of the alleged perpetrators of abuse.

Almost all learners in my school are classed as vulnerable owing to the poverty context they live in, and I understood that some of the discussions might trigger emotions. Hence, I organised a local professional psychologist to provide counseling services. I was also debriefed after each session by my promoter, who is a registered social worker with extensive counselling experience, to help me to recognise any signs of stress in my participants and adjust my behaviour and interventions accordingly.

To protect identity, the names of the school and participants were not disclosed in the written report. However, participants requested that their photos should not be blurred in the thesis. Since the study was conducted in my school, and learners perceived me as a figure in authority, I actively took part in relationship building activities to establish rapport with them. To invoke the free expression of the participants' true feelings and opinions in my presence, I asked them to address me by my first name.

#### **4.5 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I presented how my methodological choices and paradigm informed this study. I explained the research design and how data were generated using visual methodologies in

triangulation with group discussions and reflective diaries. I also highlighted how cycles of reflection and action were conducted. The following were also explained: methods of data analysis; measures to ensure trustworthiness using five validity criteria and the procedure with regard to ethical issues. In the next chapter, I report on the findings of the first cycle of the study.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion of findings of the first cycle

#### 5.1 Introduction

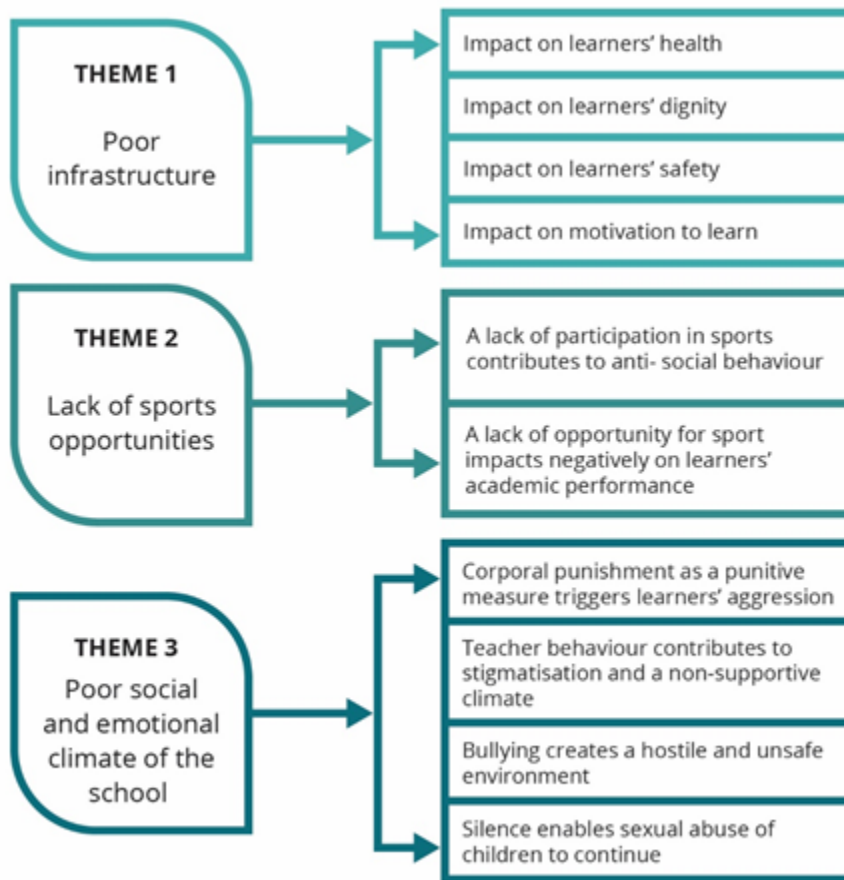
In the previous chapter, I discussed the research methodology used in the study. I also explained the choice of critical theory as my epistemological and ontological paradigm, youth participatory action research as the methodological paradigm, and the data generation methods and analysis used in the study.

This chapter provides a report on the first cycle of the investigation into the main research question of the study: How can vulnerable youth actively contribute to making school an enabling space? In response to the main research question, I engaged a group of youth participants in youth participatory action research. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings derived from the data generated by the participants during the YPAR processes in an attempt to answer the sub-question of the study:

*How do vulnerable youth perceive the current school climate?*

#### 5.2 Data analysis and presentation

To analyse data for this study, I followed a thematic analysis process. This allowed me to identify, examine and record patterns in the form of pictures, field notes, videos or transcriptions of interviews (Guest et al., 2012). The data were analysed on two levels. Firstly, the participants analysed the data, which they had generated through drawings, photovoice, and group discussions, to find themes and sub-themes relating to the research sub-question referred to above. By formulating these themes, the participants could clearly determine the issues they perceived to be problematic. I also analysed the data in light of my understanding of self-determination theory, resilience theory and the concept of the health promoting school. The figure below shows the themes and sub-themes formulated by the participants. In order to protect the identity of the participants, I refer to them as P1, P2, P3 and so forth. I used quotations of learners' own words that I considered to be apt as captions for the figures that contain the photos.



**Figure 5.1 Overview of themes and sub-themes emanating from Cycle 1**

### **5.3 Theme 1: Poor infrastructure**

Theme 1 concerns the physical environment that learners perceived as having a negative impact on their health, dignity, safety and motivation to learn.

#### **5.3.1. *Impact on learners' health***

Dirty toilets, a shortage of water and an unpleasant physical environment due to littering posed health hazards and were stressful for learners. Most of the responses indicated that learners were unable to tolerate the smell from the toilets. They blamed this situation as the cause of their increased sinus and asthma attacks, which in turn led to absenteeism.




*I often get attacked by asthma especially during summer season as the smell gets intensified [P2].*

Learners said that they found it difficult to touch food after visiting the toilet since there was no water to wash their hands, which meant that they did not eat at school.

*We do not eat food from the feeding scheme because flies from the open toilets and bins kept with left overs waste the food [P4].*

They perceived that the bowls full of spoiled foods placed their health at risk as they thought they were likely to suffer from food poisoning. The learners also feared that sitting on dirty toilet seats would lead to infections.

Figure 5.2 shows photographs taken by learners that reflect how they felt about the problem of a lack of infrastructure with regard to its impact on their health.

		<p>Pit toilets without lids release bad smell and give flies freedom of movement in transporting faeces to the kitchen [P1]</p>
	<p>Rotten food kept in the bowl incubates bacteria and can be dangerous to the health of learners [P3].</p>	

**Figure 5.2 “Health hazards” [P1].**

### 5.3.2. Impact on learners' dignity

Toilets were identified as a major problem since, according to learners, they offered them no privacy at all. This made learners feeling worthless as they thought the school did not care about their dignity. They felt that their rights to human dignity were violated. Since the toilet seats were broken and unstable, learners opted not to use them and resorted to public urination, which contributed to the foul odour in the schoolyard. Menstruating girls could also not change their sanitary pads in the toilet block for lack of privacy.

*We hide behind the toilets to relieve ourselves but it is stressful because other learners and people passing on the street can see us [P5].*

Figure 5.3 below, indicates how the condition of the toilets made girls feel.

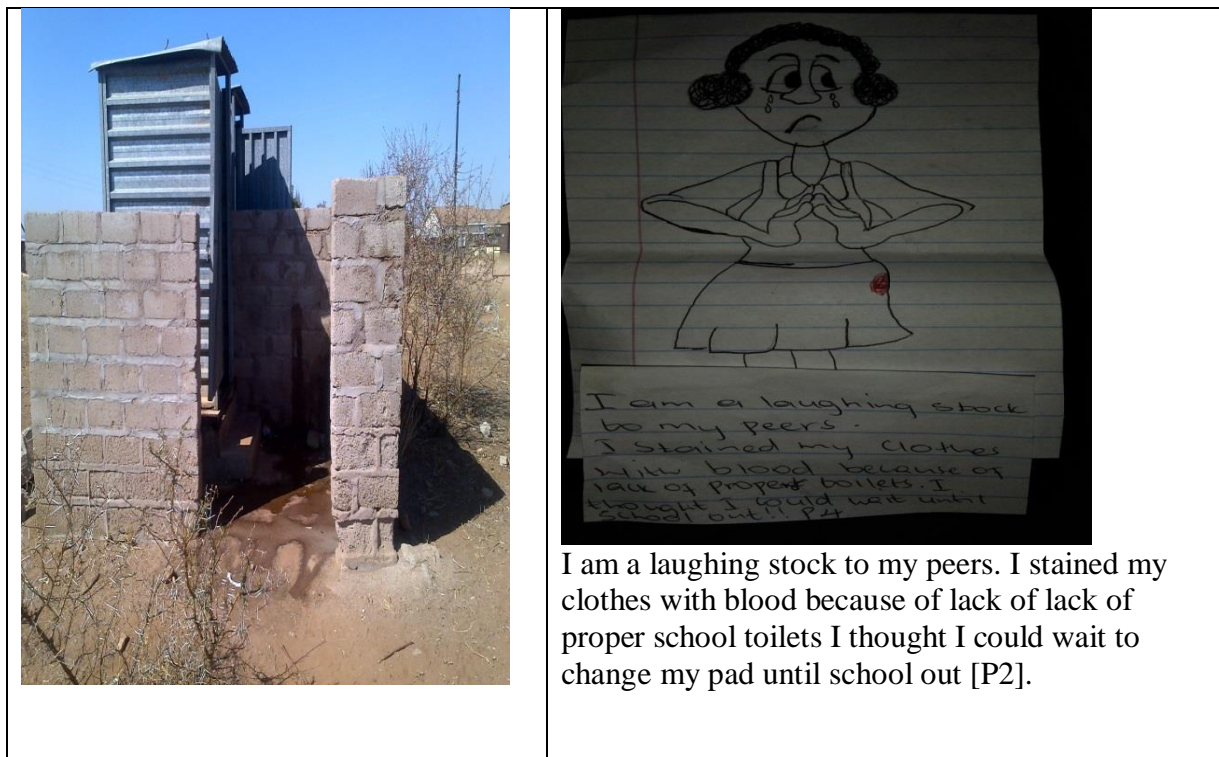


**Figure 5.3 “What else can I be proud of?” [P4].**

*We lose dignity because other learners make funny jokes about our plight if they saw girls using toilet paper or a piece of cloth for menstruation and it leaves us with emotional scar [P2].*

*It's horrible and embarrassing especially if the periods come unexpectedly when we are already at school. The thought of going to the toilet which actually exposes and shames us makes me sick [P8].*





**Figure 5.4 “Absenteeism is not a choice but compulsion” [P2, P9].**

Girls felt “*tortured, shamed and deprived of their privacy*” [P4] because their basic need to go to the bathroom caused them so much embarrassment, shame and pain. It became impossible for them to be on the school premises for the whole day, which led to absenteeism, as explained in Figure 5.4.

*Many girls fake illnesses during menstruation so that we can be released earlier because it is difficult to change pads in a toilet where urine stagnates on the floor and toilet seat [P2].*

*Toilets are dirty, there is no water to wash our hands, the gates are locked but we spend many hours at school. The solution is to stay at home if we have running stomach or menstruating [P4].*

As Figures 5.5 and 5.6 indicate, the learners were concerned about the dirty environment and roaming the school grounds, which degraded the school and devalued its property.

*We are ashamed to tell our peers where we are schooling as they will read from the general appearance of the school that our education is of poor quality [P7].*



Littering and roaming animals make the school unsightly. We feel ashamed to be associated with the school. Our school is like a ghost town and it feels like teachers do not take our ambitions seriously [P4].

Figure 5.5 “We are frustrated and disheartened by the school surrounding” [P3].



Figure 5.6 “We feel demeaned when people visit our school” [P8].

Learners felt ashamed of the school grounds that were full of litter and resembled a garbage dump rather than a learning environment. They also indicated that this threatened their safety.

### 5.3.3. *Impact on learners' safety*

Learners were scared to come to school owing to the poor conditions of toilets as they thought they might collapse on them while they were using them, or that learners could slip and fall into latrine toilets while playing.

*School infrastructure must be maintained and be given priority as we spend most of our time at school [P1].*

The learners saw this as a safety issue that evoked fear, yet they thought the teachers did not seem concerned about it, as illustrated in Figure 5.7.



**Figure 5.7 "We fear for our lives" [P1].**

*A learner can be pushed into the pit by bullies [P7].*

Learners were also worried about vandalised furniture, which was piled up in the school yard, as it harboured animals like snakes and rats. Although cases of learners being bitten by snakes have never been reported to date, participants thought that the school should not wait for such incidents to happen before it addressed the problem as snakes had in fact, infested the school premises (Figure 5.8).





We feel terrorised by snakes because once we see it we become restless even during lessons [P9].

**Figure 5.8 “We are at risk of being bitten by snakes” [P8].**

The learners also perceived the unused furniture in the yard as unsafe and they were concerned about pieces of corrugated iron or frame structures injuring them as they walked around the school. In addition, participants feared for their lives because some of the materials were used as weapons by bullies during fights, as shown in Figure 5.9.

*When learners are fighting they use chair frames and they hurt each other badly [P5].*



**Figure 5.9 “Weapons for learners” [P7].**

*We become scared when learners start argument because they use anything to fight and neglected frames make it easier for them [P7].*

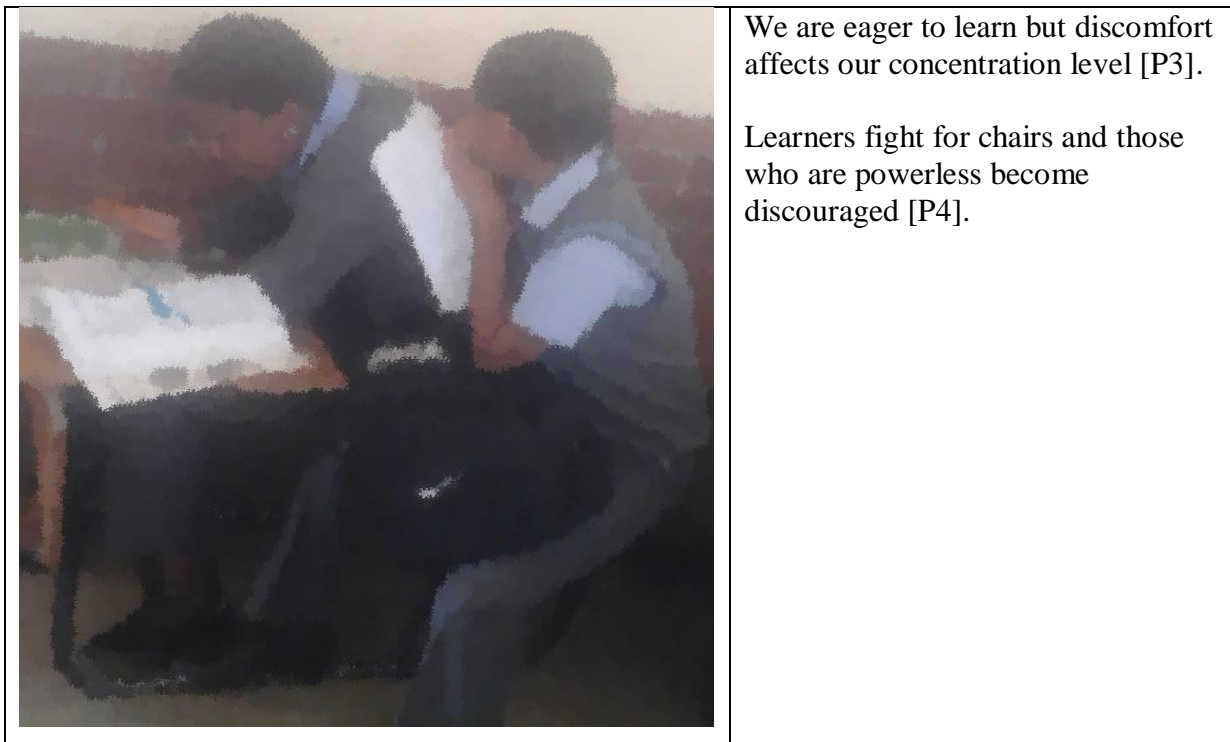
Fear for their own safety also added to the other factors that affected the learners' ability and motivation to learn.

#### **5.3.4. Impact on motivation to learn**

A shortage of furniture, such as chairs and tables, was found to be a problem at school, which made it difficult for learners to concentrate in classrooms. They thought that the lack of motivation to learn and to engage fully in their academic activities was caused by poor seating in overcrowded classrooms where learners had to share chairs.

*Shortage of furniture creates a stressful environment and demotivates us to pay attention during lessons [P10].*

Figure 5.10 illustrates how learners manage to carry on with their lessons despite the shortage of furniture.



**Figure 5.10 “Despite the discomfort of sharing one chair, they display the agency to learn” [P11].**

It was indicated that most of the learners came to school on empty stomach and, if the school was unable to provide food owing to shortage of water, learners lost concentration because of hunger.

Some learners mentioned that they were able to endure the affliction of not having food and drinking water. Moreover, they even suppressed the call of nature, although this, as in the case of hunger and thirst, also negatively affected their focus on learning.

*At some point we tolerate hunger, thirst and the pressure to defecate although these distract us because we end up having a divided attention [P6].*

Figure 5.11 indicates the effect the poor infrastructure had on the learners' feelings about school.



**Figure 5.11 “I can’t take it anymore” [P5].**

Learners were concerned about the lack of a functioning library and science laboratory at school. Although these facilities did exist, they were being used as staffrooms for teachers, rather than for their intended purpose.

*We do not have library but when we bring phones to school to research they confiscate them [P3].*

The learners not only viewed the school physical environment as a problem, they also perceived a lack of engagement in sports as a cause of concern.



## 5.4 Theme 2: Lack of sports opportunities

Learners felt deprived of the opportunity to take part in sports, which they said contributed to anti-social behaviour, affected learners sense of belonging and their academic performance.

### 5.4.1 *A lack of participation in sports contributes to anti-social behaviour*

A sports day had been allocated on the timetable but the teachers used the excuse of not having any equipment or facilities and so there was nothing organised. According to the participants, learners just loitered on the school premises waiting for home time instead of being constructively occupied playing sports, both on the designated sports day and in fact, every afternoon of the week. The learners interpreted the lack of sport opportunity to be another sign that the teachers did not really care about their well-being, as illustrated in Figure 5.12.

*Our sports ground has been abandoned and we get bored during sports day [P4].*



**Figure 5.12 “Our sports ground has been turned into a grazing land for goats” [P6].**

Learners who did not perform well academically found school boring and began to look for other outlets within the school yard to keep themselves busy as there were no sports or official extra-mural activities to keep them occupied. Figure 5.13 illustrates how learners get involved in unhealthy activities due to lack of healthy alternatives, such as sport.

*On Wednesdays, learners use time for sports for different activities like playing cards, smoking and boys hanging out with girls behind the classrooms [P2].*



Learners find pleasure in smoking with teachers. No more respect [P12].

**Figure 5.13 “Deny them an opportunity to play sport and help them destroy their lives” [P12].**

Learners claimed that teachers were perpetrators of anti-social behaviour because they allegedly smoked with learners behind classrooms during sports time. They bemoaned the bad examples the teachers were setting. Some girls were allegedly stripping in the taverns where they kept company with teachers. These girls were under the impression that their behaviour was acceptable since teachers who watched them appeared to condone and encourage it (see Figure 5.14).





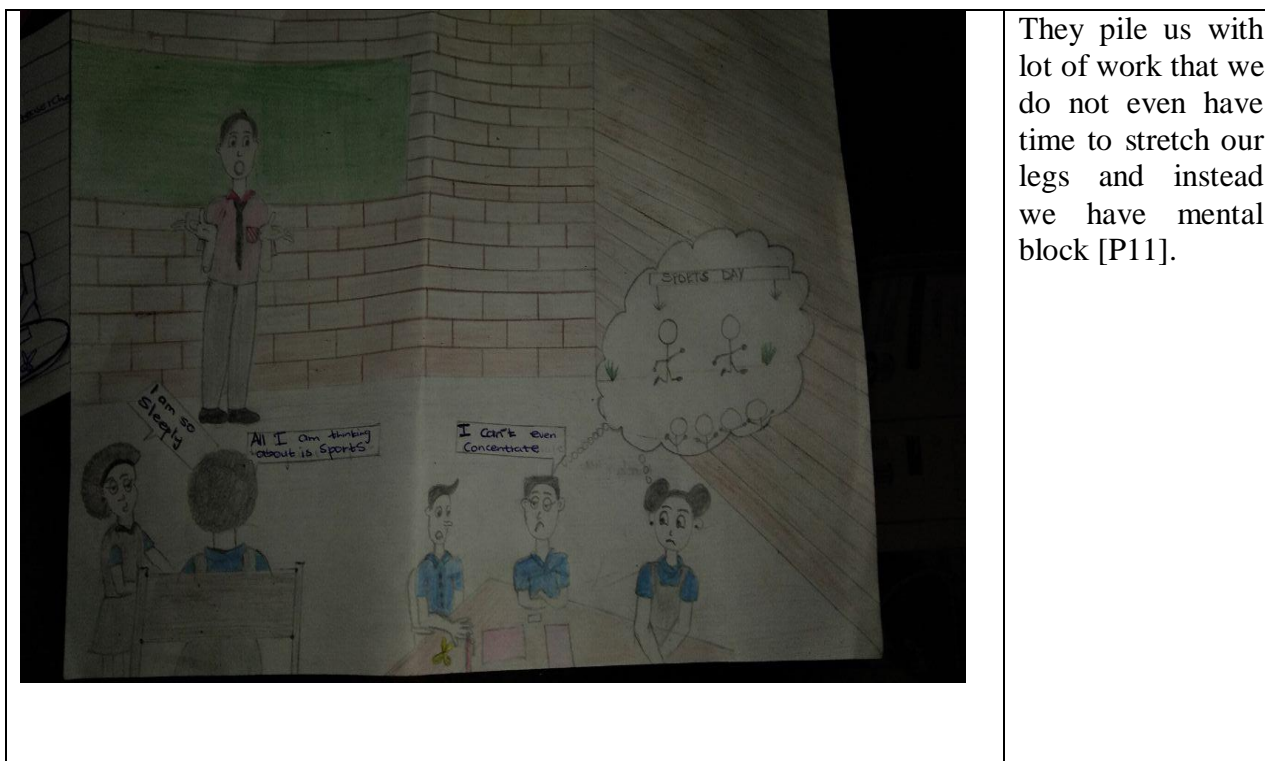
Thursday night is a special entertainment night for girls at taverns where they dance wearing underwear and are given free alcohol [P4].

**Figure 5.14 “Girls drink to gain confidence in social situations” [P10].**

The learners said that a lack of engagement in sports or other recreational opportunities led to some of them finding pleasure at risky places like taverns, where they explored drugs, alcohol and ended up having multiple partners which put their health at risk.

**5.4.2. A lack of opportunity for sport impacts negatively on learners’ academic performance**

Staying the whole week in class without physical activities affected the learners’ concentration span, and some learners resorted to sleeping even during lessons. Participants complained that teachers forced them to come early and leave late with the hope of improving results, but that did not work as learners felt overwhelmed (see Figure 5.15). In general, the learners complained of a poor social and emotional climate in the school.



They pile us with lot of work that we do not even have time to stretch our legs and instead we have mental block [P11].

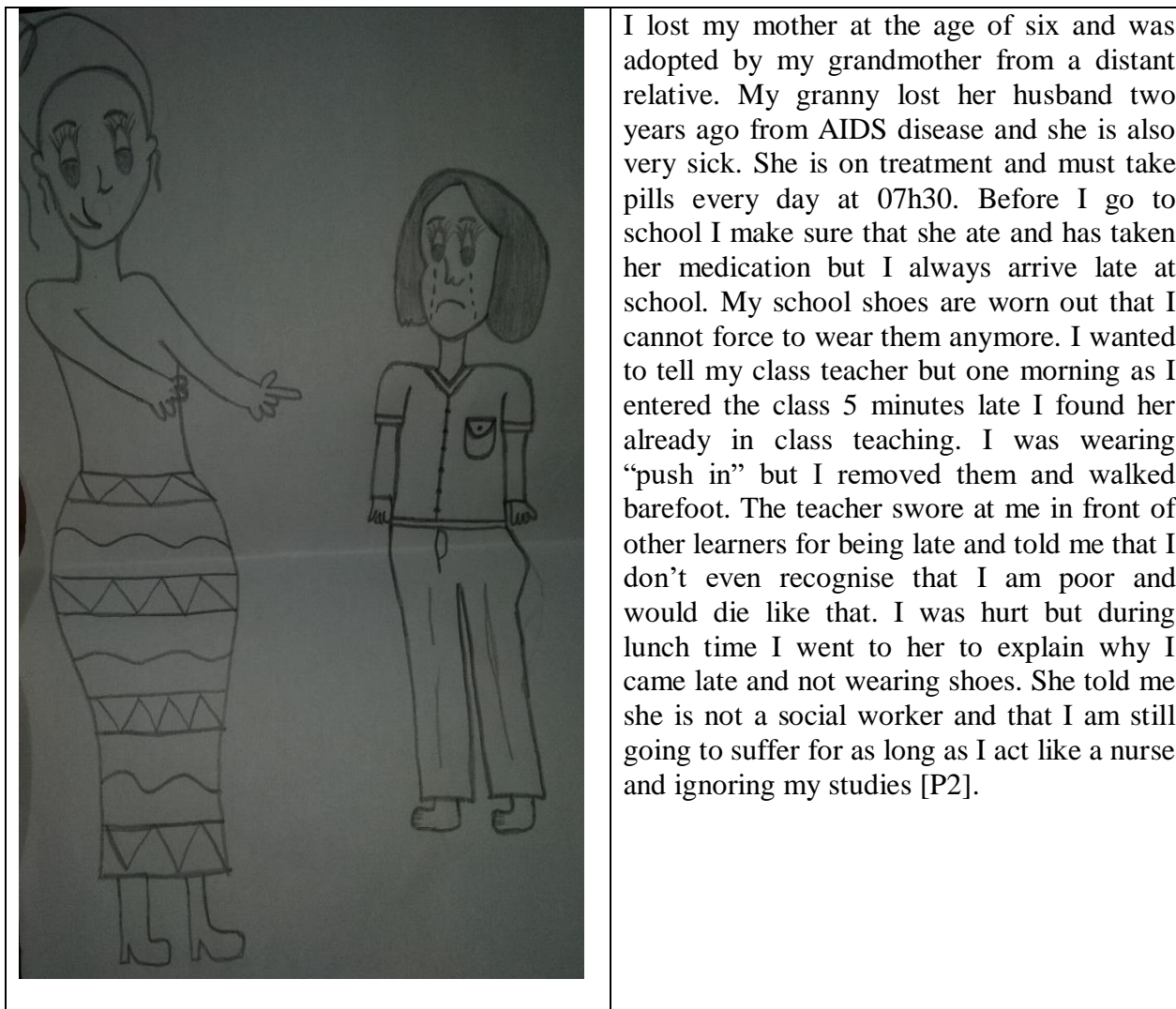
**Figure 5.15 “Sitting the whole day in class increases our stress level and muscular tensions” [P11].**

### 5.5. Theme 3: Poor social and emotional climate of the school

The data indicated that the social and emotional climate of the school was poor. Learners mentioned that most of them were from poor families, or their parents were either sick or no longer alive. They said that school was supposed to be a safe haven for all learners especially those who lacked parental care and support, but it had become a place of rejection and emotional/physical abuse.

*There is no difference between being at home where your mother is lying helpless on the bed and in the school where the teacher will torment you about things you do not have control over them like being poor [P13].*

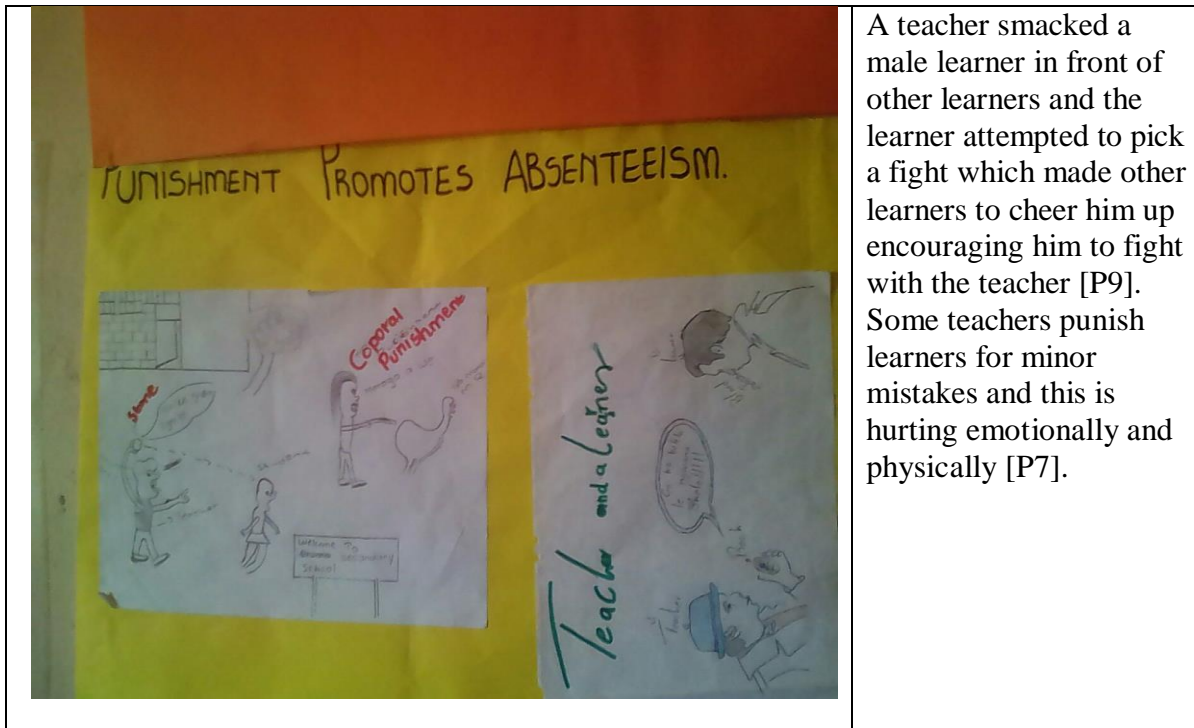
One participant alleged that she was herself a victim of emotional torture by a class teacher, which made her feel hopeless about schooling, as explained in Figure 5.16.



**Figure 5.16 “I was slumped in deep dejection by my teacher” [P2].**

**5.5.1. Corporal punishment as a punitive measure triggers learner aggression**

Corporal punishment as a punitive measure at school had deleterious effects on the learners. In spite of corporal punishment being disallowed by policy (see Section 10 (1), of the South African Schools Act of 1996), teachers still practised it. Participants mentioned that it not only caused physical harm to learners but also affected their mental well-being. As a result, some learners absented themselves from school or retaliated by attacking teachers verbally and, at times, attempted to pick a fight as explained in Figure 5.17.



A teacher smacked a male learner in front of other learners and the learner attempted to pick a fight which made other learners to cheer him up encouraging him to fight with the teacher [P9]. Some teachers punish learners for minor mistakes and this is hurting emotionally and physically [P7].

**Figure 5.17 “We need a safe school but corporal punishment is not the answer” [P8].**

The participants in general felt that corporal punishment is not a successful method of instilling discipline and leads to enmity between learners and educators.

*We no longer enjoy periods of some educators because they beat us for not doing well and at times we don't even understand them [P5].*

They thought that when they are subjected to harsh disciplinary measures, they develop hatred and fear, which reduce their motivation to learn. When they perform badly, they face more discrimination from teachers, which demotivates them further and so the cycle continues.

### **5.5.2. Teacher behaviour contributes to stigmatisation and a non-supportive climate**

Stigma and discrimination were rife at school and they affected learners' emotional well-being, making them feel inferior and ostracised. For example, teachers subjected them to name calling owing to their poor academic performance, physical appearance, physical ailments or social problems.

*Some girls are called night shift workers because they are teenage mothers and are unable to attend morning lessons as they must first take children to preschool before they come to school [P7].*

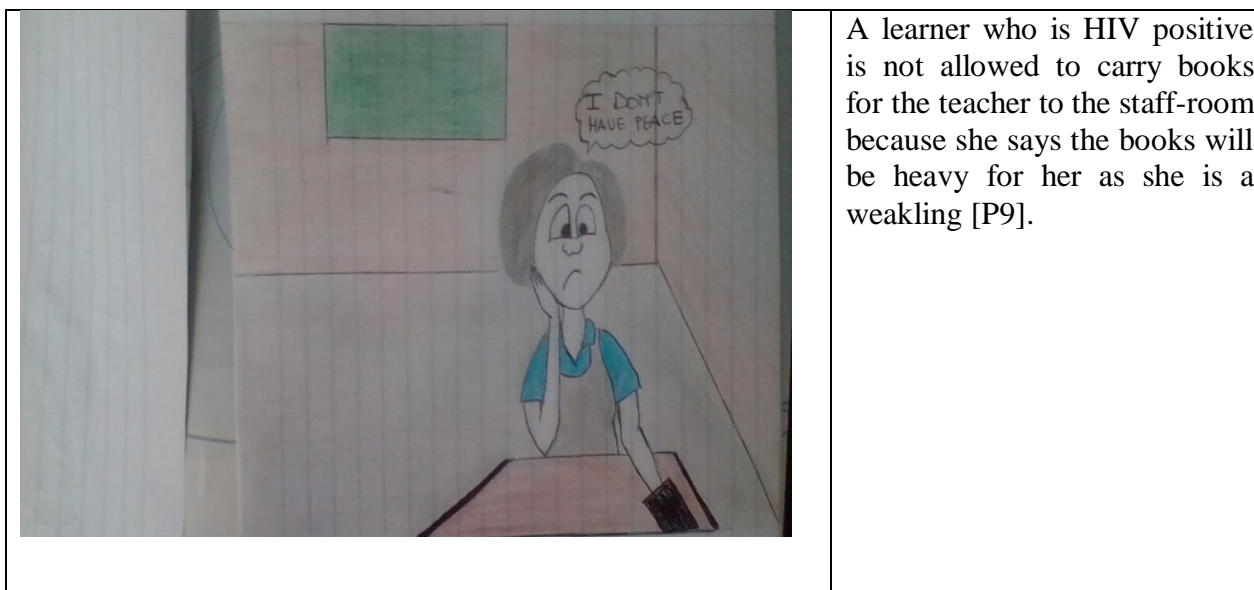
*Some teachers call learners who are not doing well 'Code 14', meaning that they are abnormal as code 14 license is for drivers of abnormal load trucks' [P10].*

There was a feeling that learners with barriers to learning needed additional support rather than being demoralised as a result of name calling.

There was also a concern that teachers were insensitive to the learners' feelings because they talked carelessly about issues, such as HIV, in the classroom and that made some learners withdraw into themselves. It was alleged a teacher said:

*You girls are dating old men; some of you are already worn out as if you are HIV positive [P6].*

Learners felt stigmatised by such comments as some were taking antiretroviral medication for HIV infection. Moreover, there might have been other learners who were born HIV positive and remarks like the one above tended to make them feel rejected as explained in Figure 5.18.



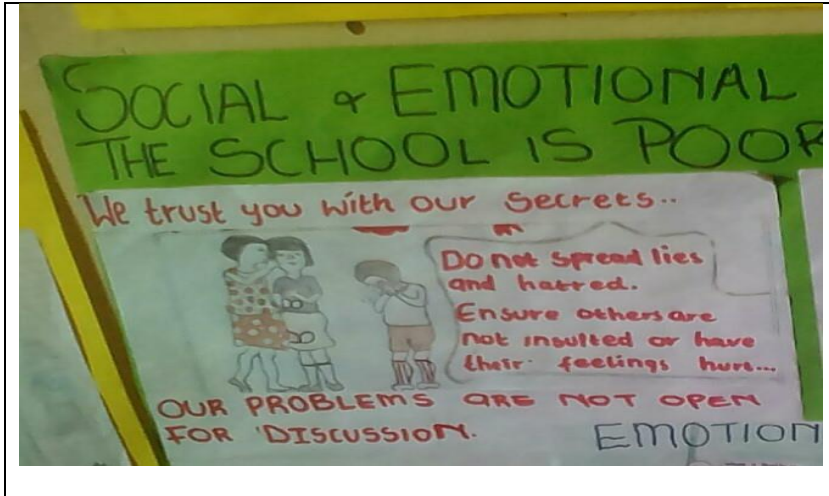
**Figure 5.18 “People with HIV/AIDS should be helped, embraced and not dismissed” [P9].**

Some learners confided in teachers, but these same teachers referred to their problems in class and made other learners aware of the situation. This made learners feel ashamed, and thus, they became withdrawn. One teacher was alleged to have said:

*Lena banenyana, le no tsama le rekisa dirotswana, ba le kate le tle le re ba le rapile (meaning, You girls, go around advertising your thighs and the next thing you claim that you were raped) [P2].*

Despite the unpleasant situation of stigma and discrimination which they were subjected to at school, learners still felt that they should confide in teachers with the hope of support because, to some learners, the school was the only place where they could find comfort. Figure 5.19 illustrates their plea for support.





**Figure 5.19 “We plead for your support and not rejection” [P8].**

There were complaints that teachers discriminated against learners as a result of poor academic performance. Learners said that unequal treatment demoralised them, especially when teachers gave preferential treatment to the best performing learners.

*We are not given equal opportunities. If books are few, good performing learners are given first and the rest of us will share one book being four [P6].*

Teachers were perceived to discriminate against learners who were from the poorest backgrounds, as indicated in Figure 5.20.



A learner in my class was denied to attend lessons because he did not have proper school shoes. When he walked barefoot, the teacher swore at him alleging that he is making jokes [P14].

We are being discriminated on the basis of socio-economic background [P10].

**Figure 5. 20 “Embrace our differences” [P10].**

Participants perceived some teachers as perpetrators of discrimination when, for example, they talked openly in the classrooms about learners from a neighbouring village, whom they said came to school just for food and not to learn.

*We walk 7 Km daily in the bushes to school. The school gates are locked at 07h30 and the periods start at 08h00. Most of us from that village arrive at 07H50 because we wait for each other as it is not safe to walk alone in the bush. Teachers lock us out until lunch and we miss tests and lessons [P7].*

*I think teachers don't want us to attend school here anymore because they always say hurtful things about us [P2].*

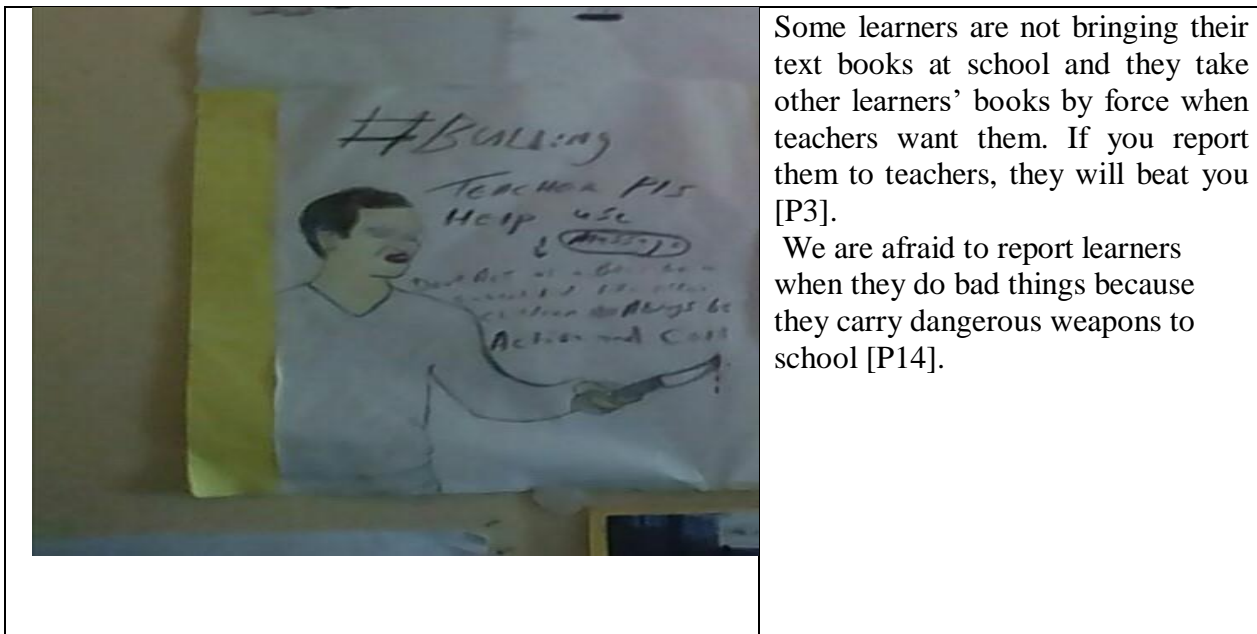


Discrimination left learners confused and broken when treated unfairly as they hoped for support and protection from the teachers.

### 5.5.3. *Bullying creates a hostile and unsafe environment*

Participants found bullying a problem for most of the learners as it created anxiety, fear and insecurity amongst them. Teachers did not know how to deal with bullies and so did not help in addressing the problem (Figure 5.21).

*The bullies are suspended for five days and when they return to school they continue with their bullying activity and nothing further is done about it [P8].*



**Figure 5.21** “Help us eliminate bullying” [P9].

Teachers modelled bullying because they would tease learners from a neighbouring village, which resulted in fights when other learners imitated the teachers' behaviour.

*We are afraid of other learners because they are always ready to pick a fight [P6].*



**Figure 5.22 “Fighting is the order of the day” [P3].**

Learners felt insecure because when others were fighting they could accidentally sustain physical injuries too. They said that experiencing violence at school led to depressive disorders and their becoming victims of sexual abuse when they tried to find protection from others.

#### ***5.5.4 Silence enables sexual abuse of children to continue***

Learners mentioned that sexual abuse was common between male teachers and female learners, which impacted on teaching and learning as it affected dignity, promoted stress and learner disrespect. They maintained that mostly learners who were from poor families and those who had lost their parents to death were targets of sexual exploitation by teachers. These learners were willing to have sex with teachers for material reasons, although legally it is statutory rape and thus a criminal offence if the learner is under 16. However, no matter the age of the learner, it is a disciplinary offence for teachers to have sexual relations with learners as amended in the Code of Professional Ethics, section 1(10) (South African Council of Educators Act, No. 15 of 2000).

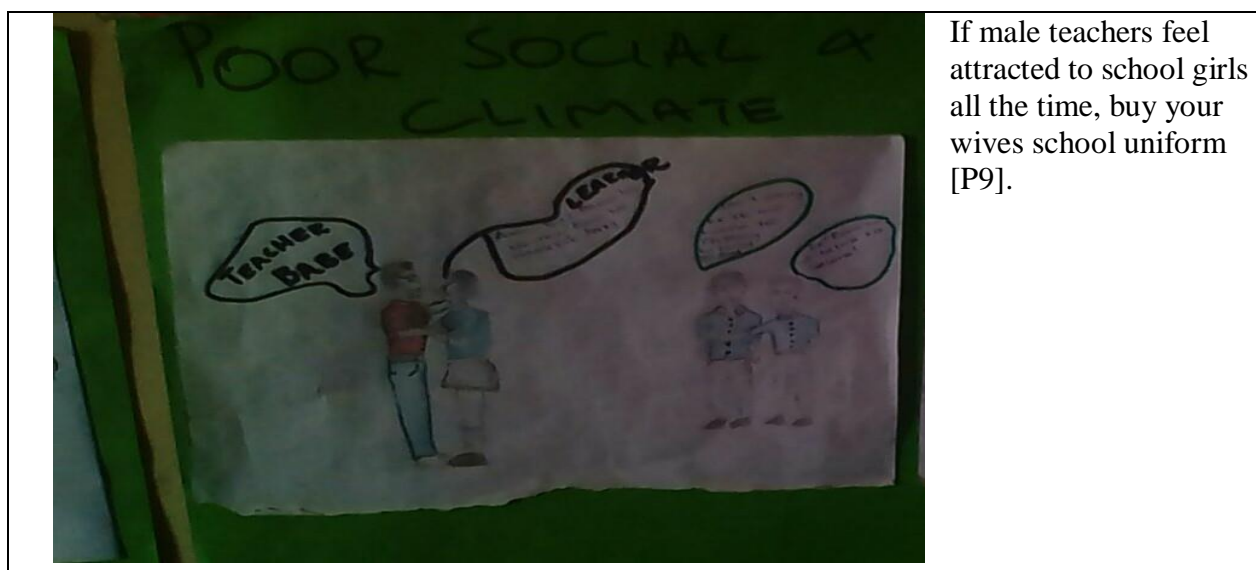
*Many girls fall in love with teachers with the hope to have a better life since their parents are struggling financially [P10].*

*Some teachers have multiple affairs within the school yard and this causes conflicts between girls [P1].*

*Male teachers who share girlfriends with male learners are being disrespected by boys and at times they cause disorder even during lessons as retaliation [P5].*

It was reported that some learners benefitted from the relationship by obtaining the memorandum before tests or being given a second chance to rewrite tests if they did not do well. Such favouritism broke the trust of learners for their teachers, which had a damaging effect as they lost interest in working hard. It also meant that learners lost respect for teachers as indicated in Figure 5.23.

*Some learners are given memoranda for tests by teachers because they have a romantic relationship [P3].*



**Figure 5.23**“Help us attain our goals and not to destroy our future” [P8].

Learners were concerned about male teachers who victimised girls in class if they refused to have sex with them. They mentioned that male teachers would even pass obscene negative remarks which, it affected their participation during the lessons as other learners would laugh at them. It was alleged that a male teacher said to one female participant that:

*You have a big body; you must find a blesser [an older man with material mean] otherwise your peers will not satisfy your sexual desires [P4].*

This section presented the participants’ analysis of data generated through visual methodologies to explore how they perceived their current school climate. In the next section, I analyse the data through

a theoretical lens and consider the implications of the findings for the creation of an enabling school environment.

## **5.6. Implications of the findings for learners and the creation of an enabling school environment**

In this section, I analyse data from the perspective of the concept of the health promoting school and the theories of resilience and self-determination. The aim of this analysis is to determine the implications for the creation of a school environment which enables learners to have an opportunity to reach their potential.

### **5.6.1 Health promoting school**

A health promoting school (HPS) follows a systematic approach that seeks to support teaching and learning by improving and protecting the health and general well-being of all members in a school community (Langford et al., 2014). The successful implementation of a health promoting school requires collaboration that involves parents, teachers, learners, local community members to form a strong network of support and sharing of resources (Keshavarn, Nutbeam, Rowling & Khavarpour, 2010). However, this is not happening in most South African rural schools and definitely not in the school featured in this study. Looking at the data presented by the participants through the SPECS (Skills, Policies, Environment, Community and Services) model, one can deduce that health promotion is not being created in the school under study as the components of a HPS are not adequately addressed.

**Skills:** In order to be considered a HPS, schools need to have the following: good and effective management systems; basic rules and regulations, which are understood and adhered to by all stakeholders; and provision of a formal and informal curriculum, which supports learners in acquiring knowledge, attitudes and skills to improve their personal autonomy and responsibility in dealing with health matters (Haverinen-Shaughnessy, Moschandreas & Shaughnessy, 2011). These are basic skills that the management of a school should possess to promote the holistic health of all stakeholders in the school. Yet, grave social issues such as poverty and HIV and AIDS in schools create a situation where youth adopt risky behaviours in order to survive (Harder, Knorth & Kalverboer 2015). The allegation of sexual exploitation by the teachers in this school is a matter of concern as sexual relationships between teachers and learners have deeply adverse effects on learners (Kaminer, Du Plessis, Hardy, & Benjamin, 2013). This behaviour impeded learners' personal autonomy and their right to education

(Magwa 2015). Victims of sexual abuse did not report the teachers as they were socially isolated and lacked self-confidence to do so. Teachers who might have known about the abuse were afraid to report it out of fear for their personal security and fear of victimisation by perpetrators (Magwa, 2015). Moreover, some parents owing to poverty, may have approved of the abusive relationship as their children benefitted materially; hence teachers were reluctant to speak out (Diraditsile, 2018). Teachers might have also protected perpetrators from losing their jobs as what they have done is a dismissible offence (McDonald, 2014). Teachers should be aware of their responsibility to help vulnerable youth reclaim their dignity by building relationships that help them turn vulnerability into strength and feel safe, thereby avoiding risky and unhealthy situations (World Health Organisation, 1996). However, teachers in this particular school are doing the opposite by making the situation worse, rather than helping learners cope with their daily difficulties. For example, teachers incite learners to smoke, parents of pregnant learners are punished by being forced to stay at school daily to monitor their children, and school gates are always locked, even when there is no water and food at school. It is ironic that teachers expect learners to perform academically while they themselves are imposing barriers to learning.

Another area where it is evident that teachers lack skills is in discipline, as they administer harsh punishments. Maphosa and Shumba (2010) found that teachers discriminated against learners and punished them more severely when they were not aware of more health-promoting options to discipline. Harsh punishment is dangerous as it triggers anger and hatred (South African Human Rights Commission, 2012), which may lead to reprisals by learners. Cases of fatalities in South African schools are rife nowadays because learners are not supported in coping with their adversities, hence they retaliate in a violent manner (De Wet, 2016; Ncontsa et al., 2013). Stress caused by hunger, thirst and fear resulting from infestation of snakes in the school yard and unhappiness due to inability to connect with peers, deprives learners of the energy to learn. This resulted in learners, in the school under study, opening holes in the fence to abscond because they could not cope with the situation. Health promotion in schools should go beyond academic attainment and include the realisation of physical, psychosocial and environmental health in order to equip learners with skills that will improve their knowledge, understanding and attitude (Turunen et al., 2017). This will create a positive balance between learners' personal autonomy and their education (Haverinen-Shaughness et al., 2011). However, inadequate infrastructure, a lack of sports opportunities and the poor emotional and social climate of the school reflect the teachers' lack of skills in responding to the material, emotional and

academic needs of the learners. Skills which need to be developed to empower learners to adopt healthier life styles include self-awareness, interpersonal skills, critical/creative thinking and decision making (Ghildiyal, 2015; MacDonald, Côté, Eys & Deakin, 2011). Engaging learners in sports is also part of a holistic approach that helps individual learners develop social skills and talents that boost their self-esteem. However, this is not happening in the school explored in this study. Hence, learners were vulnerable to social influences that disposed them to unhealthy behaviours. Skills need to be operationalised through fair and transparent school policies.

**Policies:** An HPS encourages the development of school health policies to promote the health and well-being of learners (Department of Health and Basic Education, 2012). A school is supposed to have policies that regulate learner conduct, ensure the safety of learners against any form of abuse, support those who are HIV positive (Department of Basic Education, 1995) and protect the rights of pregnant girls to access education without any prejudice. However, these policies do not seem to be in place at this school which could be the reason why inappropriate measures of discipline, discrimination, stigma, bullying and incidents of sexual exploitation seem to be rife. A lack of a School Based Support Team (SBST) means that socio-systemic factors that affect learning are not adequately addressed at school, while teachers themselves make the school a dangerous place through the sexual exploitation of learners and by inciting them to smoke and drink. Even if an SBST was in existence, it would not be effective in improving the social-emotional climate if teachers are still reluctant to change their negative attitude towards learners. For instance, some teachers might still believe that vulnerable learners are stubborn and disrespectful (Nel, et al., 2016) while others use their workload as an excuse not to support learners (Zwane et al., 2018). School policies as part of the school plan also regulate the school nutrition programmes (Department of Health and Basic Education, 2012). In an HPS all learners should have access to food to improve their concentration in class, encourage regular school attendance and ensure punctuality (Stewart, 2014). Yet, in the study, the provision of food was inconsistent and unhygienic conditions made learners loath to eat. As some children rely solely on food provided at school, a lack of food has physical and psychological consequences, which makes learning substantially difficult for them (McKenna, 2010). When learners are disengaged they often resort to anti-social coping mechanisms (Slopen, Fitzmaurice, Williams & Gilman, 2010). I know for a fact that a large quantity of unperishable food in this school is distributed amongst teachers and the SGB at the end of each term, while learners continue to go hungry. The absence of a policy to deal with HIV and related issues is also a serious problem because learners who

are affected are subject to gossip and rejection and receive no material or emotional help from the school. I find it distressing that teachers, who are supposed to educate learners to be compassionate and caring, are actually the perpetrators of discrimination and gossip. A comprehensive HIV policy in the school, as outlined by the Department of Health (2012) could help to eliminate stigma and create supportive measures.

**Environment:** The environment of the school under study was not conducive to learning as it failed to support the social, emotional and physical health of the learners. This school could not expect learners to perform to the best of their ability under such stressful conditions as explained by learners' research findings. The issue of learners being unable to eat food from the school nutrition programme owing to the dirty environment where food was prepared and, in some instances, where they were forced to "*hold it in*" until they left the school owing to the dirty toilets, were clear violations of the concept of a health promoting school. Behaviour such as this can lead to health problems such as urinary tract infections (Ramesh, Blanchet, Ensink & Roberts, 2015), not to mention that learners are unable to concentrate in class when they are so uncomfortable. Owing to poverty, most of the learners, who participated in this study, did not have easy access to quality medical care, or even over-the-counter medication, and therefore any health risk became potentially more serious. School toilets, which were pit latrines without doors, did not only pose threats to the safety of learners but also lowered their sense of dignity. A lack of sanitary surroundings and privacy makes it difficult for girls to cope with menstruation at school (Hennegan, & Montgomery, 2016; House, Mahon & Cavill, 2013). In addition, cases of learners dying as a result of falling into pit latrines, which are fairly common in South African rural schools (Maddock et al., 2018), terrorised learners and deterred them from using school toilets. This fear of using pit latrines renders schools disabling environments and contributes to a high rate of learner absenteeism (Greene, Freeman Akoko, Saboori, Moe & Rheingans, 2012). A lack of space in classrooms due to overcrowding and a shortage of furniture leads to learner (and I would suspect also teacher) disengagement in the classroom (Marais, 2016).

**Community:** An HPS is supposed to strengthen its engagement with the surrounding community (Tse, Laverack, Nayar & Foroughian, 2011). When parents, community groups, local business people and the school work together to support education, learners feel connected to the school, are able to take responsibility for their actions, and they are more likely to work hard to achieve academic success (Crowson & Bower, 2012). A partnership between the community and the school might ensure a

collaborative effort to find ways to meet the needs of learners with available resources in the community (Semke & Sheridan, 2012). However, the role of the community in this study is invisible as there is poor communication between parents and the SGB parent component, which, in my opinion, appears to be serving its own personal interests at the expense of the school as it does not attend to a numbers of issues affecting learners. For example; the SGB has not addressed the policy of locking out learners, who walk long distances (about 15 km) in the dense bushes to the school, for late-coming. This threatens the safety of the learners as they might be at risk of accidents since the school is beside the main road. An active school community cannot wait for the government to address issues that their children face on a daily basis and which impact negatively on their education. For instance, issues of animals invading the school premises suggest that there is no secure fencing, which some parents in the community could assist in repairing. A lack of security does not only affect motivation to learn but could also be dangerous (Spaull, 2013) to the safety of learners as strangers can easily the school yard. A shortage of water which impedes learners from receiving their daily meal at school could be addressed by the community through discussion with the local municipality. These are just some of the examples of how community assets could be better utilised to make the school environment healthy.

**Services:** Linked to better engagement with the community, is the use of services that reside in the surrounding area. Rural communities are, in most cases, located far away from services and they lack professional help and support (Du Plessis, 2014). For instance, participants indicated that there were learners who were orphaned and rendered vulnerable by the death of both parents, yet they did not receive social grants. Some learners did not have birth certificates to enable them to obtain social grants. The school as a site of care and support is supposed to make services accessible to the learners (Griffin & Shelvin, 2011). However, most of the teachers employed at the school travel more than 100km daily to the city which restricts their contact time with learners. In addition, the lack of a School Based Support Team at school makes it difficult for teachers to identify learners who need additional support and to network with external professionals from sister departments to help learners gain access to the required services.

### ***5.6.2 The role of parents and teachers as social ecologies to foster resilient coping***

Social ecological resilience theory places the responsibility on adults to enable children facing adversity to access and use protective resources (Ungar, 2012). The school as a helping resource is



seen as a centre of care and support (Ebersöhn et al., 2011), while parents and teachers who form part of the social ecology are responsible for promoting healthy behaviour and successful learning by providing learners with opportunities for growth and development (Mampane, Ebersöhn, Cherrington & Moen, 2014). For learners to overcome their daily difficulties at school, seven protective factors are needed to increase their resilience (Cameron et al., 2007).

**Access to material resources:** This includes access to primary health care, a stable income and other basic needs, such as food, clothing and a stable home. However, according to the findings of this study, there is an inconsistent provision of food, a shortage of water for drinking and sanitation and insufficient infrastructure at the school under study. This is a management issue, since the school is classified as Quintile 1 and has a high enrolment rate, which means it qualifies for access to the National School Nutrition Programme. Moreover, it receives a large sum of money from the Norms and Standards, which could enable them to ensure that learners have access to material resources.

**Access to supportive relationships:** This entails creating a network of support that mutually benefits individuals or groups of people in different structures such as the home, community, school and church. The school constitutes different structures, such as the SMT, the SGB, the RCL (Representative Council of Learners), teachers and union representatives but in the school under study, such structures exist only in principle. The findings showed that learners did not feel supported, and in fact, experienced the social and emotional climate of the school as downright dangerous. Some learners go to school to escape their family woes (Cook et al., 2010; Strand, 2012), but acts of victimisation, discrimination; stigmatisation, violence and sexual exploitation by male teachers inflict more psychological and emotional pain. Pregnant learners and their relatives are subjected to emotional stress by teachers. Learners who are affected by HIV and AIDS issues in their families are made to suffer the consequences. Teachers have become perpetrators of violence in the school as girls fight for male teachers and boys also fight with teachers over girls. Yet, teachers still position learners as the problem despite the challenges that they are going through. Consequently, learners have lost trust in and respect for teachers, which further problematises their relationships.

**Development of a desirable personal identity:** A strong self-esteem and a sense of purpose in life increases resilience. According to the findings, cases of discrimination and stigma are robbing learners of dignity, leaving them confused and broken. Psychological and emotional stress obviously impacts

negatively on learners and this makes them feel worthless and incompetent and thus prevents the formation of a strong sense of self.

**Experience of power and control:** Resilient people are independent and autonomous. They are able to assert their rights to access material resources. However, learners in the school under study had no recourse to report their grievances. Participants in the study reported that learners found other ways of exerting power and control over their lives through relationships with teachers, smoking, bullying and joining gangs.

**Adherence to cultural traditions:** When learners have a strong cultural identity, they gain a sense of belonging to the school and develop self-esteem which improves their mental health and well-being. However, in the school featured in the study, discrimination based on socio-economic and cultural background left learners confused and broken. Team sports are a good way of learners pride in their school (Khan, Jamil, Khan & Kareem, 2012) but the lack of sporting activities in this school meant that this was missing.

**Experience of social justice:** When individuals are able to identify and fulfill their roles in the community and access opportunities and privileges, they experience social justice. In a public school like the one under study, learners should have equal access to opportunities regardless of their background. However, teachers served the interests of only some learners by privileging them with access to books and memoranda. They also disparaged children who were not from well-to-do families. In addition to the findings, a recent incident illustrates these unfair practices: Only 38 Grade 12 learners had the privilege of using R15000 which was allocated for 142 learners for a farewell function hosted at a venue very far from the school. Other learners did not attend because they could not afford to pay R250 for transport. This was very unfair to the poor learners because farewell functions are usually held on the school premises, so if they are taken out of the school premises, learners who do not afford to pay are disadvantaged.

**A sense of cohesion with others:** Feeling that you belong and that you can work with others and flourish in life facilitates the ability to deal with living in severely challenged environments. In the study, there did not appear to be any sense of belonging or feeling of cohesion between learners or between learners and teachers.

### ***5.6.3 Implications of the findings for the development of self-determination***

Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation that strengthens youth to become more resilient in navigating towards the use of helping resources (Theron, 2016). It is, thus, important that learners are motivated to access helping resources in their social ecologies. Some self-determination is moreover, an essential component of the socio-ecological theory of resilience (Ungar, 2012). The theory suggests that people should be driven by the need to succeed in life (Ryan et al., 2008). Learners living in contexts of extreme poverty are not often able to imagine alternative possibilities. Thus the role of the school becomes even more important as an alternative site of support to help learners attain their life goals (Ebersöhn et al., 2011). Yet, the findings indicate that the conditions in the school under study perpetuate feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among learners. The only way to be able to gain control over their lives was to develop inappropriate coping mechanisms, such as bullying, entering into relationships with older people and joining gangs. In addition, dysfunctional toilets, a shortage of water and inconsistent food provisioning, as identified by the participants, were major barriers to learning, which affected their concentration in class. The social, physical and emotional climate of the school was not conducive to developing the competence of the learners or of helping them to gain autonomy. In fact, it did the opposite by making them feel unvalued, stripping them of dignity and robbing them of any pride in themselves or their school.

The findings also indicated that the relationships among learners on the one hand and between learners and teachers on the other, were strained. The factors of competence, autonomy and relatedness are key to developing intrinsic motivation (Ryan et al., 2008). Without intrinsic motivation, resilience is unlikely to develop and learners will remain trapped by their circumstances, perpetrating poverty and the social ills related to it. This is linked to self-determination theory and learners' competence, which is especially denied to girls who miss school during menstruation since the school cannot provide appropriate toilet facilities to help them manage their periods with dignity. The issue of hungry learners being squeezed into overcrowded classrooms impacts on learners' autonomy and learning, which reduces their chances of getting better education (Marais, 2016). Relatedness is not supported because learners feel rejected, abused, valueless and not liked by their teachers, which does not create a good space for them to grow emotionally, socially and psychologically (Hartnett, 2015).

### **5.8. Personal reflections on what I have learnt from this cycle**

The findings of Cycle 1 of the youth participatory action research proved to be an eye opener for me as an educator and a secondary parent to the learners. Although I had previously sympathised with children orphaned and rendered vulnerable by the death of their parents, I realised that there were also many other children who needed support, despite having both parents. This helped me to redefine my purpose as an educator because we tend to view our role in teaching and producing good academic results in terms of our own growth. The three areas identified by the participants for improvement (inadequate infrastructure, a lack of sports opportunity and the poor social and emotional climate of the school) came as a shock. I was not aware of what these learners were going through as we educators only look at what is happening around us as we move from staff-room to the classrooms, and we do not concern ourselves with what lies beyond the limits of the main school building. I only saw the conditions of the pit latrines for the first time in the pictures that the participants took. This has stopped me from being harsh to learners when they go to toilets in groups because I now understand that they need to provide safety for one another. Although the littering and vandalism of school property were caused by learners themselves, it was interesting and encouraging to realise that most of the learners were not happy about that and were willing to take action to eliminate the problems.

I was shocked when participants revealed that male teachers had sexual relations with learners and that one teacher used his powers as a class teacher to force learners into having sexual relationships with him, threatening to fail them if they did not comply. As soon as I became aware of this illegal issue, I reported it to the School Management Team and requested that the head of the particular department concerned investigate the matter further. I also requested that the head of department investigate the matter of teachers allegedly seducing girls by giving them memoranda in return for sexual favours. As teachers/secondary parents we need to protect the learners' welfare, and eliminate the silence surrounding the sexual exploitation of the learners. Actions need to be taken to ensure that learners are protected from all forms of abuse. However, it appears that teachers are more concerned about their job security than fulfilling their professional roles and, thus, they often turn a blind eye to the illegal and shameful behaviour of their colleagues.

I began to regard the participants of the study through a different lens because I could see that they were able to discern between right and wrong and were willing to make a positive impact on their school. I learnt that they were determined to change the situation at school because they displayed

passion when discussing and identifying issues that affected them on a daily basis. All they needed was someone to create this space and support them. I also realised that they were developing resilience through participation in the project. Initially, other learners in the school did not understand what they were doing and tried to discourage them by tearing up their posters and making negative comments about the participants; yet, the participants did not give up. Other teachers would yell at them or even talk badly about their involvement in the project to their parents in an effort to discourage them from participating, but they did not quit.

I have learnt that YPAR is an effective methodology when working with youth because it engages them in creative activities while simultaneously exploring their own lives and circumstances. The only challenge I experienced with this methodology was that youth need to clearly understand research ethics because some participants took pictures of teachers behaving inappropriately without their consent and without understanding the consequences. Thus, when I told them it was unethical to use the pictures, they felt discouraged and that their voices were being subdued, which could have been avoided if I had informed them about ethical implications beforehand. Training participants about research ethics was helpful when it was done properly because the participants also learnt to be discreet about the many sensitive issues referred to by the learners in their responses to the posters about the problems in the school. I used this learning to help me guide the participants in Cycle 2 of the research.

## **5.9 Chapter summary**

This chapter presented the findings of the analysis of data generated by the research participants through group discussions, and visual data such as photovoice and narrative drawings. Data were analysed thematically on two levels. Firstly participants practically identified areas where they felt the school impacted negatively on their well-being. I analysed the data through the theoretical lenses of health promotion, a socio-ecological view of resilience and self-determination theory. I concluded the chapter with reflections on my own learning from the first cycle of the YPAR project. The findings generated by participants during the first cycle of research were used to decide on and implement strategies to make school a more enabling space in Cycle 2 which I report on in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Cycle 2: Discussion of the actions taken by youth to make school an enabling space

#### 6.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I presented the findings of Cycle 1 and discussed the themes that emerged from the data generated by the participants through the photovoice and drawing activities. The participants identified the three areas that needed improvement to make the school an enabling space. These included the following: the poor physical infrastructure in the school and, specifically, the lack of adequate toilet facilities; the lack of sporting facilities and opportunity to engage in physical exercise; and the poor socio-emotional climate, which led to some learners, particularly those who came from disadvantaged backgrounds, feeling unsupported and stigmatised. I discussed the implications of the findings for the creation of an enabling school environment from the perspective of the socio-ecological view of resilience theory (SERT); the self-determination theory (SDT); and the concept of the health promoting school (HPS). In addition, I shared my reflections on the project and the findings. This chapter reports on Cycle 2 of the study in which I aimed to answer the second and the third research sub-questions:

- *What actions could vulnerable youth take to make the school an enabling space?*
- *To what extent could these actions benefit vulnerable youth, teachers and the school in general?*

In this chapter, I explain the actions that the participants decided on to address the themes identified in Cycle 1. Moreover, I critically discuss how these actions improved the challenging circumstances that the participants faced in their school environment. Table 6.1 provides an overview of what the participants learnt from their analysis of data in Cycle 1 and what they decided to do about creating an enabling school environment.

**Table 6.1 Overview of how the findings from Cycle 1 informed the subsequent action taken by the participants**

Themes that emerged from Cycle 1	What the participants learned from their analysis of data	Strategy that the participants chose to improve the situation	Individuals responsible for the action
The school's poor infrastructure has a negative impact on our emotions, motivation and learning	The school is our haven, so we need to keep our environment clean. Moreover, we need basic resources such as water, food and proper sanitation.	Participants used the visual artefacts and narratives from the photovoice and drawing activity of Cycle 1 to make posters. They used the posters to present their findings to the school governing body and also displayed them to other learners and teachers to raise awareness about how the issues depicted had an impact on their emotional, psychological and physical well-being.	Participants.
Lack of opportunity for physical exercise at school impacts negatively on our emotions, motivation and learning.	We need to have opportunity for physical exercise as it helps us how to get along with us; develop self-discipline; increase our self-confidence. In	Participants organised a sports day to raise awareness about the importance of physical exercise as a regular feature of school life. They decided to use	Participants in collaboration with other learners.

	addition, it improves our concentration in class.	this event to address the issue of girls not being able to attend school during menstruation by having a sanitary towel campaign. They decided to invite other learners to help with organisation.	
The poor social and emotional climate of the school is not conducive to our holistic learning and development.	We need the school to be a safe and welcoming place for all.	Participants created and presented a short drama to raise awareness of the need for a safe school against bullying, stigmatisation and sexual exploitation. In addition, they created a policy brief to present to the school governing body to influence school policies.	Participants in collaboration with other learners.

## 6.2 Strategies to effect the desired change

### 6.2.1 Presentation of themes to the school governing body

Participants suggested presenting the themes that emerged from Cycle 1 to members of the school governing body (SGB) during their meeting on Wednesday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2017. The participants aimed to make the SGB aware of the problems experienced at school since this body has the power to make changes to school policy, infrastructure and processes. The SGB comprises two learners from the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) (the president and the secretary), two teacher representatives, seven parent members and the principal as an *ex-officio* member. Participants



requested permission from the principal to present their findings to the members of the SGB, targeting the parent members in particular since they intended to also present them to the teachers and the learners at another time. Moreover, the participants thought that parents would be more sympathetic to their cause. Since they did the presentation during lesson time, when the meeting was scheduled, participants were not allowed to stay to discuss the problems with the SGB. Instead, they gave cards to the parent members and asked them to respond in writing how they felt about the problems presented and what they thought could be done to improve the situation. Response through writing was also convenient because it allowed SGB members to express their opinions freely (Chevalier et al., 2013). One participant collected the cards from the SGB members immediately after the meeting, and the feedback was analysed and discussed during the participants' meeting in the afternoon. Some of the responses are quoted as follows:

*Re kwele ebile re bone. Re swabile nko go feta molomo go lemosa seemo sa sekolo ke bana. Re a tshepisa gore re tla lokisa ntlwana tsa boithomelo ka pela” (We have heard and seen. We are very ashamed to be made aware of the school’s condition by children. We promise to fix the problem of toilets immediately) [SGB parent 1].*

*Re tla leka ka maatla go sekegela selo sa lena tsebe. Ke kwa bohloko ka mokgwa wo le phelang boimeng ka gona. (We will try our best to respond to your requests. I am hurt that you are subjected to a difficult situation) [SGB parent 2].*

*This is disgracing and it points at us as the governing body that someone is not doing his job. We will look into this problem carefully [SGB parent 3].*

*Re tla leka ka go lokiša kgopelo tsa lena. Ke nnete bana ba ka gobala goba ba longwa ke dinoga ka dikgerekgere tseo di tletsego le jarata (We will try our best to respond to your requests. It is true that children can be injured or be bitten by snakes because of vandalised furniture, which is piled up in the school yard) [SGB parent 4].*

*Ga ke na molomo bana ba ka, taba ye ya ntlwana tsa boithomelo e re gobaditse moyeng (I am speechless my children. This issue of toilets is torturing us [SGB parent 5].*

According to the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, the SGB is responsible for the development and management of the school’s infrastructure. Thus, parents were distressed to learn about the issues

that learners shared, as it appeared that the SGB was not fulfilling its role. The presentation had the desired effect in that the SGB promised to attend promptly to the issue of the poor physical infrastructure. The participants were encouraged by this positive response, but noted that the SGB did not address the other two themes of the lack of sports opportunity and the poor social and emotional climate of the school. They assumed that the SGB might have thought that the problem of inadequate physical infrastructure was perhaps the most straightforward to deal with. However, the positive response showed that the SGB listened to the voices of the youth, and it gave participants assurance that they had adult support, which strengthened their resolve to address the other problems faced by learners at school.

### ***6.2.2 Displaying their findings to the learners and teachers***

Participants decided to display the photographs and narratives that depicted the challenges they faced on a daily basis and how they had a negative impact on their lives to the whole school. They used these artefacts as an advocacy tool to raise awareness about their findings and also to find out if other learners had similar experiences. They made posters that were displayed on the wall for three days for learners and teachers to view at the spot where assembly was held. Figure 6.1 below, shows learners looking at the display.



**Figure 6.1 Learners viewing posters**

Participants put a suggestion box and cards next to the display to allow learners and members of the staff who visited the display to write down their reactions. Next to the box there was an instruction that

read “Use the card to write how you feel about the problems displayed in the pictures and what you think should be done to improve the situation and put it inside the box”.

### **6.3 Reading and analysing the learners’ and teachers’ feedback**

Almost all the teachers viewed the display because it was on show for three days, but only two responded to the request for comments. In contrast, 578 learners wrote responses that indicated that they agreed with the experiences displayed in the photographs and drawings. They also made suggestions for improvement. It was not surprising that most of the teachers did not respond because many of the photos and pictures portrayed them as perpetrators of the injustices.

The two teachers who did respond agreed with the participants and other learners that the school should address the issues raised to make the school an enabling space. However, one teacher stressed that learners also had to take the responsibility for keeping the school clean.

*I agree with the move against sexual abuse, fixing of school toilets, water and sports. I just disagree with the issue of filthy environment because you are the ones littering. Do something about this problem [Teacher 1].*

The other teacher focused more on the lack of sporting opportunity and support for learners who needed it.

*We are also demotivated as teachers because the management is not supporting sports. Secondly, learners from Letlapeng<sup>1</sup> are coming to school in the morning; the school must make sure that food is always available. I give your idea a thumbs up [Teacher 2].*

Participants analysed the feedback from the 578 cards submitted by the learners. The responses indicated that the themes identified by the participants (see Table 6.1) were validated by the experience of other learners at the school. I discuss the responses of the learners to the visual display below, using the learning identified by the participants as headings.

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<sup>1</sup> Letlapeng- is a pseudonym for the neighbouring village to the school

**6.3.1 School is our haven, so we need to keep the environment clean. In addition, we need basic resources such, as water, food and proper toilets.**

The responses on the cards indicated that other learners were in agreement with the findings shared by the participants. The remarks indicated that they perceived their education to be severely affected by circumstances that make learning substantially difficult.

*Something must be done with the animals in the school because they leave their dung everywhere and this makes our classrooms filthy. Some of us are having sinuses, so dirty environment is not good for our health [Learner 56].*

*Shortage of water is a big problem to us because we cannot stay the whole day without drinking water. We get tired and fall asleep in class [Learner 78].*

However, the feedback also indicated that some learners were not helpless victims. These learners were already taking action to ensure that they attended school in spite of the disabling circumstances. Some mentioned that they arrived at school as early as half past six for morning lessons and left the school at three o' clock without having eaten because they want to achieve their goals. They also had suggestions for dealing with the situation. Learners suggested that gates should be opened during breaks for learners who could run home to eat or relieve themselves as most of them lived close to the school.

*There are many learners who stay just close to the school. If teachers can open the gate during break, at least we can go home and eat rather than locking us inside the yard when they cannot feed us [Learner 35].*

Some suggested having a tuck shop<sup>2</sup> on the school premises for learners who can afford to buy food. Others proposed that the number of water tanks at school should be increased to provide enough drinking water, as the learners remain thirsty for the whole day. Some pointed out that the learners themselves were causing the problem.

*Learners are throwing papers and plastics of Simba chips all over the yard. We must keep the yard clean or else we are inviting the goats to come to school, that is why they are many here because they want to eat the papers [Learner 4].*

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<sup>2</sup> Tuck shop- is a small shop selling food to learners

There was a general feeling that learners should take it upon their shoulders to ensure that the school is free from litter. This suggests that the display of the findings enabled some learners to reflect critically on the situation and to move forward to thinking about what they could do to improve it.

***6. 3. 2 We need to have the opportunity for physical exercise as it helps us to learn how to get along with others; develop self-discipline; increase our self-confidence; and also improve our concentration in class.***

Most of the learners showed an interest in sports, yet the school denied them the opportunity to participate. This made learners feel that the school was not taking their ambitions seriously.

*Many learners are gifted in sports but teachers don't care about that [Learner 346].*

From a resilience perspective (Ungar, 2013), their social environment consisting of parents, teacher and school management team, were not providing them with the opportunity to develop holistically since they were missing out on the benefits of participation in sport (health, psychological well-being, discipline, social interaction and teamwork) (Armour & Sandford, 2013). In addition, participating in sport or exercise would have a positive influence on their academic performance (Bang, Chang, Lee, Kim & Taliaferro, 2019).

*We want to play sport but problem is that we don't have good grounds. There is lot of grass and stones and the teachers think it is none of their business because they don't say anything. We cannot play there because it is dangerous. We can be bitten by thorns or injure our feet. Teachers must please help us with this problem [Learner 216].*

*Soccer is my favourite sport and I play it at home but here at school, they don't give me chance because there is no sport activity. We have a very big ground but it is not working because there are no poles. Please tell the principal to fix this problem by buying poles and balls. They must hire tractor to clean our grounds [Learner 149].*

*We want sports because other learners are not good in class but are good in sports and maybe can be a soccer star in future and play for big teams like Pirates and Chiefs. If they refuse to let them play, they kill his future and can't focus in class. They start to do bad things here at school and we blame them [Learner 511].*

Some learners perceived the time allocated for sport on Wednesday afternoons as useless because they spent it loitering, while other learners take part in risky behaviours such as smoking and gambling. Most of the responses highlighted a shortage of sports equipment and an uneven sports field without goal posts, crossbar and net to be the major barriers to participation in sport. However, learners agreed that taking part in physical exercises would develop their talents, improve social skills, increase self-confidence (Bang et al., 2019) and mitigate the risks of negative influences on learners (Badri, Al Nuaimi, Guang & Al Rashedi, 2017). Most of the responses indicated that they expected the school to do something about the problem.

### ***6. 3. 3 We need the school to be a safe and welcoming place for all.***

Most disturbingly, in their responses, learners attested to prevalent cases of sexual exploitation, discrimination, stigmatisation and bullying on the school premises, which made the school a disabling rather than an enabling place. They indicated that some of the learners had already dropped out of the school because of sexual harassment, bullying and rejection by teachers and learners.

*Some teachers make learners to change school. If they propose love and you don't agree, every time you make a small mistake, they punish you or they say get out of my class. This is hurting because you don't enjoy at school. We want this to stop because other learners are now attending school far from home and transport is a problem because of teachers. I say # sexual abuse must fall [Learner 397].*

*Other teachers hate learners so much. I don't know what the problem is or what learners did to them. They beat them for nothing and call them names and other learners they laugh and start teasing them. Some learners start dodging from school. At home parents think they come to school but they hide somewhere until they withdraw them at school. Now, they drop out because they absented themselves for more than ten days in succession and this was because of the teacher and bully learners who make them run away from school [Learner 142].*

Learners agreed that teachers were perpetrators of injustices at school, which made the school unwelcoming, and dangerous, for learners. Instead of supporting learners to develop resilience, teachers were in fact adding to the risk factors (Magwa, 2015), owing to their illegal, cruel and spiteful behavior.

Learners suggested that the punitive measures used against those who came late (locking them out of school until break time), actually led to more problems. These learners went to the village, and were

thus rendered vulnerable to unhealthy influences, for example, smoking cannabis or drinking to pass the time. They said that violence in the school yard was often caused by learners who entered the schoolyard late because in most cases they would be intoxicated. In addition, the very same learners who were locked outside the gate could be at risk of accidents since the school is situated on the main road. Some learners made an earnest request not to be locked out as their family situation meant that they had to first take care of preschool siblings or sick parents before coming to school.

*Please tell teachers not to lock us outside the gate because a person like me must take the child to the preschool before we come to school and they open at half past seven. If I come to school early it means I must leave the child stranded at home [Learner 274].*

*Teachers must have sympathy on us. I stay with my grandmother and she drink pills. Before I come to school I must make sure she eats and drink her pills exactly at half past seven. When I am done, I must quickly run to school and every time they close the gate when I am just closer to the school. This is hurting because we miss tests and lessons and teachers think we just want to come late [Learner 155].*

There was also a request that sanitary towels should be made available for free at school to help girls who could not afford them.

#### **6.4 Participants reflecting on the feedback**

Participants held a meeting to reflect on the feedback from the learners, the SGB and teachers. In their discussion, they highlighted and categorised issues that needed the involvement of learners and adults in the school. They agreed that the issues of the lack of emotional support, the sourcing of sport equipment, the provision of nutrition, clean drinking water and sanitation were issues that school management and teachers should address. They thought that learners themselves could do something about the cleaning up of the schoolyard, organising a sports event and starting a campaign to obtain sanitary pads for girls. They decided to involve other learners in these activities to promote teamwork and to make learners feel that they were also part of change in the school. They thought this would lead to a more lasting change, as learners would then have a sense of ownership and the SGB and management would take them more seriously, if other learners were also involved.

*I was suggesting that we start by cleaning the grounds to show the SGB and teachers that we are serious about the issue of sports [P4].*

*Let's ask the RCL president to invite learners who are willing to help but it should be voluntary because we don't want them to feel like they are being punished as this is not an easy work to do. It must come from their hearts that they want to make changes in their school [P7].*

*I support the idea that we involve learners but on voluntary basis. I think this should be done in all other activities that we planned [P1].*

The sections below explain the actions they took as a result of their reflections.

#### ***6.4.1 Learners initiated a campaign to clean the sports field***

Participants thought that, if they could take the lead by cleaning the sports field themselves, they would influence the school authorities to fix and/or provide sports equipment. Thus, they requested permission from the principal's office through the sports organiser (teacher) for learners to bring garden tools to clean the grounds and for supervision by teachers to avoid fights or injuries among learners. The invitation was extended to all learners through the RCL president. Of 27 teachers, 19 responded along with two members of the school management team. However, 15 withdrew suddenly leaving learners alone in the fields as they were told by other teachers that they were helping me to complete my 'assignments'/thesis – in other words, they were not willing to do this if they thought a fellow teacher would benefit, putting their own feelings before the needs of the learners. Almost all learners in the school, except those who were absent, responded positively, although some of them ran away when the 15 teachers left as they were not supervised, and the gates were opened. Figure 6.2 shows learners cleaning the sports field with the support of other teachers.





**Figure 6.2 Participants and learners cleaning the sports field**

The positive response from other learners and the success of the cleaning campaign encouraged the participants because to them it was a great achievement to gain the support of learners and other teachers. Having a positive relationship with other learners and teachers created a sense of cohesion and increased their self-confidence, which are all markers of resilience (Cameron et al., 2007). Unfortunately, at this point the school management did not follow up immediately by purchasing the equipment needed to sustain regular sporting activities during the allocated time.

#### ***6.4.2 Learners hosted a sport event***

Participants realised that the cleaning of the sports field did not really change much as there was still no response from the management to reintroduce organised sport or physical education. They then decided to organise their own sports event on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November 2017 to raise awareness about the need for sport at school. Participants involved other learners and the invitation was extended even to the members of the community, as they also intended to campaign for the donation of sanitary towels for girls at the sports event. Participants displayed initiative and took control of the preparation of the event, demonstrating the ability to work on their own, because I was on leave and not there to guide them. The event was held just four days after the final examination, but within a short space of time, everything was organised. The fact that learners took the initiative to organise this sport event, can be related to the developing of autonomy (Ryan et al., 2008), which will benefit them in later life as adults. Despite the lack of sports equipment at the school, they managed to borrow balls and a volleyball net

from neighbouring primary schools. For soccer, they used vandalised table frames as goal posts. Participants asked for donations from people in the community to buy prizes and refreshments for those who participated in the sports, and were able to raise R780.00, which they used to buy medals, bread and drinks. They also managed to secure a donation of two tog bags, with sport accessories. This demonstrated a growing capacity and competence to work out solutions to their problems (Brown et al., 2011). The bags were awarded to the top two overall winners for both male and female categories. The campaign for sanitary towels during the sports event was also successful, as they had stipulated that each person who participated should bring at least one packet. Participants were able to collect close to 500 packets of sanitary towels from parents, local business people and those who attended the event.



**Figure 6.3 Images taken during the sports event organised by the participants and other learners**

#### ***6.4.3 Presentation of drama to advocate for a safe school***

In response to the claims of sexual exploitation, discrimination, stigma and violence between learners, participants decided to take action to try to create a safer school. Although learners were the ones involved in fights, it appeared that most of the fights were caused by female learners fighting over a male teacher; learners teasing others about derogatory statements teachers had said about learners; or male learners teaming up against a male teacher due to arguments about girls. Thus, the

behaviour of teachers was actually perceived as the main cause of the school being an unsafe place, both from an emotional and physical perspective. They then thought that to make teachers and parents aware that these issues were making school a very unsafe place, they should create a short play and organise an event to convey their message. The title of the drama was “Rising from the ground: troubled youth’s voices are echoing”. Participants recruited other learners whom they knew were good actors so that the message could be clearly conveyed to adults. They planned the script together based on what they had learnt from their findings. The drama featured learners who were tired of being constantly insulted by teachers and mocked by other learners. At the end, learners had agreed that they should take care of one another to break the silence on issues that make learners uncomfortable. The drama was presented to the parents, teachers and the learners on the 19th of September 2018, during the launching of the school safety programme. Unfortunately, I could not use the video of the actual drama because the sound was not good due to high level of noise. However Figure 6.4 below shows the evidence of the event. When learners exposed teachers’ unprofessional behaviour during the presentation, the latter were shocked. In fact, the deputy principal condemned the behaviour of the teachers in the staff meeting the next day. In addition, other learners were motivated to break the silence about issues that troubled them at school; hence, they started a support group at school. Parents did not comment but some of them made a grimace during the presentation of drama, which indicated their discomfort. I was very concerned about how teachers would react to the presentation of drama but fortunately, the deputy principal was also upset about what she heard and addressed it the next morning in the briefing meeting. Link to access a rehearsal of the drama: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Bnwmjckcz8>





Figure 6.4 Evidence of school safety event and presentation of drama

## 6.5 Presentation of policy brief

Participants thought that they should also put their findings in a document to present to the SGB and highlight ideas for improving the situation. With my help, they developed a policy brief (see Annexure C). One of the participants was the president of the RCL at school and, since he was also a member of the SGB, he presented the policy brief to them. The purpose of developing a policy brief was to influence the school authorities to review existing school policies and amend them to better support the needs and welfare of the learners. As indicated in Annexure C, the policy brief summarised the findings of the participants and contained suggestions for making positive changes. The principal and the SGB responded positively and developed school policies as suggested by the participants (see Annexure D). The policy brief was also communicated to the teachers during our morning briefing session by one of the teacher representatives in the SGB when he was giving us feedback from the SGB meeting. Teachers supported some of the concerns raised in the policy brief and raised more concerns of their own.

*Locking learners outside the gate during lessons hits us back as subject teachers because we expect them to write and pass tests on the subject matter they missed [Teacher A].*

*I agree because some learners miss tests while the Principal said we should not give learners opportunity to write if they missed it due to late coming. This frustrates us because the South African School Administration and Management System (SA SAMS) mark sheet does not accept a dash and we end up giving learners spiritual mark<sup>3</sup> [Teacher B].*

*We are unable to deal with issues of substance abuse in the school because there is no clear policy about the sanctions if a learner is caught in possession of drugs on the school premises [Teacher C].*

Comments from the teachers suggested that the policy brief helped some of them to be flexible to change, which in my perception suggested that the participants' voices were heard (Ozer et al., 2010). However, it appeared that not all teachers agreed with the contents of the policy brief although they did not say anything during the discussion. They talked about it amongst themselves and one teacher told me that they had given me the name "Section 10<sup>4</sup>" to mock my connection with the policy brief.

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<sup>3</sup> Spiritual mark- free marks given to the learner who did not write the task or test.

<sup>4</sup> Section 10-A nickname given to the researcher for prohibition of unfair discrimination of learners. It refers to the section in the code of conduct which covers that topic.

The next section explains how the project influenced change at different levels of the school, in response to the sub-question of the study:

*To what extent could these actions benefit vulnerable youth, teachers and school in general?*

## **6.6 The influence of the YPAR project towards making the school an enabling space**

In this section I evaluate how YPAR influenced change in the school at different levels: on the core participants of the project; on the learners; how it brought about change on the physical environment; how it changed the attitude of teachers and how it influenced the management to bring changes in the school.

### **6.6.1 The influence of participation in the project on core participants**

Participants in this study were learners who were initially voiceless because they did not have adult support to guide them. I introduced them to youth participatory action research (YPAR), which operates from a strength-based view that recognises youth as resourceful and resilient (Cammarota et al., 2010). My observation of the social injustices that were taking place in the school prompted me to start this project with an understanding that participants would develop their own sense of agency as they identified problems and navigated ways of turning the situation around (Iwasaki, 2016). In my personal reflective diary, I noted the progress the participants made during the YPAR process as they reflected during our sessions. In the beginning, participants were skeptical of their own potential to effect changes in the school because they thought no one would listen to them, as they were children.

*I can see a big change in the learners. For instance, the initial reflections were like:*

*When I started the project, I did not have hope that our voices will make any difference in the school because we are just mere learners [P2].*

*I only joined the group because I was interested in what we were going to do but it sounded more like an extra-mural activity because I did not think we would make any impact in the school but now I see the difference [P5].*

*But looking at what they have achieved, I think it is a different story now [Diary, 2.7.16].*

The process of identifying problems in the school during Cycle 1 troubled the participants as conditions were disturbing and thus, provoked them to advocate for the transformation of existing

cultural and social systems at school. During data generation, participants enjoyed taking pictures and making drawings as they had fun. The discussion of their photographs and drawings made them realise that they were able to express their opinion about sensitive issues, which they had thought would be difficult to articulate. One participant who was the victim of sexual harassment by a male teacher mentioned that:

*I found it very light to express my emotions about how a male teacher harassed me sexually through drawings and writing but I think if I was expected to say it verbally in front of you, I would not be free to say everything. I feel relieved because my message will be delivered exactly how I wanted it to be [P3].*

Taking part in YPAR also developed competence, relatedness and autonomy, which helped to increase the self-determination of participants (Ozer et al., 2013), as they collaborated to initiate various projects and programmes. Moreover, these projects were likely to be sustainable because of the participants' cooperation with other learners. They did this out of their own initiative and not at my prompting or request. For instance, participants launched the 'Keep a girl child at school' project for the ongoing collection of sanitary towels, which gained the support of parents and learners. Some parents are still donating a packet of sanitary pads on monthly basis. Participants also established a group called Young Civilians of Patrol (YCOP) at school as an initiative for the prevention of substance abuse and other negative behaviour, such as gambling on the school premises and the vandalism of school property. They invited volunteers from outside the project group to lead the programme with the purpose of establishing a strong network of support amongst learners themselves.

The aforementioned initiatives started by the participants provide evidence of the potential of youth to bring about change if given support, a finding supported by other literature on YPAR (Anyon et al., 2018; Caraballo et al., 2017; Ozer, 2017). As they developed programmes and initiated action, the participants improved the school climate and culture to make the environment more akin to what a health promoting school should be. In addition, they learnt and demonstrated many life skills, such as communication, organising, planning, team work, assertiveness, commitment and problem solving, which are all outcomes developed in other YPAR projects (Lindquist-Grantz et al., 2018; Livingood, Monticalvo, Bernhardt, Wells, Harris, Kee, et al., 2017)

Another initiative stemming from the project group concerned the problem of learners loitering outside when they were supposed to be in class. Participants decided to design permission cards with three different messages on them. The idea behind this was to control the movement of learners during lesson time. Teachers gave a card to learners who wished to leave the classroom for valid reasons so that any learner who was not in class and did not have a card, could be disciplined. Participants suggested the use of permission cards to the school management team (SMT), after they noticed that learners often skipped classes, and the idea was gladly accepted. Although this issue was not one that was highlighted in their initial findings, the fact that they later identified it, and took action to address it, could be seen as evidence of their new-found confidence to address problems and commitment to improving the climate of the school. Participants in the YPAR project could thus be said to have developed leadership, which is a finding supported by other literature on the topic (Marciano et al., 2019; Bertrand, 2018) Figure 6.5 provides evidence of the initiatives introduced by participants in the project



	<p>Products collected during “Keep a girl child at school” project</p>
	<p>YCOP members addressing learners at morning assembly</p>
<p>..... <b>SECONDARY SCHOOL</b></p>  <p><b>GRADE 12-A</b></p> <p><b>Learner got permission to go to the:</b></p> <p><b><u>TOILET</u></b></p>	<p>An example of a permission card to control movement of learners during lessons</p>

**Figure 6.5 Projects and programmes initiated by the participants**

**6.6.2 The influence of the project on other learners**

The participants’ actions aroused the interest of other learners in also becoming part of the change in the school. Some learners volunteered to help with the collection of sanitary towels from local businesses. This helped with the sustainability of the “Keep a girl child at school” project. This idea of ensuring that sanitary pads were always available at school was done in a culturally meaningful way, as learners understood that some girls were unable to afford them; hence, they wanted to keep the program alive since it was benefitting them.

The rehabilitation of sports at school helped learners to develop an interest in various activities and some of them requested that I initiate debate as a cultural activity. I agreed to establish a debating society to developing the communication and creative thinking skills of learners. I also envisaged this would empower them to assert their rights at school, and thus help them to sustain the learning gained during the project. Recruiting learners to participate in debates was not difficult because they were motivated by what the participants had done as part of the project. In fact, learners often enquired if they could also join the project group. I set up debate meetings on Wednesdays during the allocated sports time. At this point, sports had still not been added to the curriculum, despite the SGB being aware of how this was affecting the learners. Coincidentally, the South African Police Service (SAPS) invited schools to send representatives to take part in a debate competition on crime prevention and two learners were successful enough to participate at provincial level. The SAPS rewarded these learners who were allocated the positions of Junior Cluster Commander and Junior Manager of Support, at district level and Junior Station Commander and Junior Visible Police (VISPOL) Manager, at a local police station. These positions gave learners the authority to challenge any illegal practice and to develop programmes to fight crime in schools in their jurisdiction area. This leadership achievement increased the learners' confidence and their success motivated other learners to take part in school activities that have slowly begun to emerge. Since the project has ended, teachers have volunteered to coordinate and supervise sports. A drum majorettes team has been created; and the functioning of the YCOP is strengthened as the police are now working closely with the school to eradicate violence and drug/alcohol abuse in the school. For instance, the police sometimes visit the school to conduct searches for illegal substances or give the YCOP a platform to address learners about the consequences of crime-related activities. Figure 6.6 shows the learners being awarded certificates by SAPS.

	<p>A learner receiving the award for the position of Junior VISPOL manager at district level</p>
	<p>A learner receiving the award for the position of Junior Cluster Commander at district level</p>

**Figure 6.6 Learners receiving their awards from SAPS**

A young female learner was motivated by the theme of the drama to start a support group which she named after the title of the drama “Rising from the ground”. The support group was formed recently (2018) and it is only open to female learners who are experiencing social problems in life. The purpose of the group is to share problems and to support each other to cope with their problems. The group meets every Wednesday during the time allocated for sport. A member of the newly formed School Based Support Team (SBST) (see more on this in section below), who is also a Life Orientation teacher trained in basic counselling skills, guides the group. Although the group is still in its infancy, it is an indication of the learners beginning to show self-determination and resilience because learners themselves were able to find ways to address their problems without the support of adults (Hui &

Tsaung, 2012; Olowokere & Okanlawon, 2018; Wehmeyer, Shogren & Seo, 2015). The support group provides young girls a much-needed space for sharing their problems. In addition, it informs the SBST of their support needs and of circumstances that are violating their rights to dignity and safety. This teacher shared some of the discussions of the members with me (anonymously) since they echoed the findings of the project participants:

*I am sorry to talk about teachers' names. You have to know this because it is hurting. Mam Mgidi (pseudonym) was doing experiment in class to check bacteria on the bread mould. When learners were going there one by one to observe, Lebogang (pseudonym) is taking ARV's and as her friend yes, I know about it. When it was her turn, the teacher said "Lebogang, did you see how they multiply if you don't take ARV's properly, the virus also multiply like that in your blood." Other learners laughed but it was painful. Teachers are gossiping about us. How did she know about Lebogang's problem because she told teacher Ngobeni (pseudonym) only as her class teacher? Teachers must know that we don't trust them. I hate Mam Mgidi with all my heart [Learner A].*

*Teacher Mlungisi (pseudonym) is always giving other learners second chance to write his tests. This is unfair to us learners, because we feel discriminated [Learner B].*

*I really don't like how teachers take advantage of our family background to abuse us sexually. Some teachers will ask you to visit them in their rooms afterschool to discuss school work but when you arrive there they tell you how sexy is your body and touching you in an inappropriate manner, persuading you to have sex with him [Learner C].*

*I really hate to be at this school, I just don't know where to go because this is the only school I am stuck with. To be honest, we are not treated fairly by teachers. We feel like foreigners in our own country, province and municipality. It sounds like a curse to live at Village X. Anything bad that happens in this school is caused by us according to teachers. I am happy we are given this opportunity to express our feelings. Teachers need to know that we are not the same and they must not generalise when dealing with issues. It's so sad that all of us from Village X are stupid; thieves; we play truant and we only came to school for food [Learner D].*

These issues were disturbing because they provided further evidence of ongoing discrimination and unprofessional behaviour on the part of teachers. When I first learnt about the behaviour of teachers, it was a difficult issue for me. I was shocked to learn of the behaviour of my colleagues but could not

confront them with this, as it would have put the participants in a difficult position. However, I discussed the issues with the members of the SMT without mentioning the names of the teachers. I also asked the deputy principal to use her authority as curriculum manager to address all teachers about the seriousness of unprofessional conduct, which she did. Since the perpetrators were not mentioned by names, some of the teachers alleged that learners were making these issues up. However, I hoped that those who knew that they were involved would heed the warning. Sadly, it seems that some teachers are still behaving inappropriately, but at least the support group is enabling the learners to vent their feelings in a safe space, which is a positive coping response. The issue of teacher misconduct is something that we are still trying to deal with.

### ***6.6.3 The influence of project on the physical environment of the school***

The SGB took the concerns of the participants seriously and took action to address the problems. Immediately after the initial presentation by participants using the posters, some parent members went to the Department of Basic Education personally to apply for Enviro Loo<sup>5</sup> toilets. They took some pictures of the posters to convince the Department about the urgency of the matter. Their actions yielded positive results because the Department responded within two weeks by sending their official to inspect the conditions. The school was promised 38 toilets and an additional block of three classrooms. While the school was still waiting for the government to fulfill their promise, the SGB made a plan to rehabilitate a few flushing toilets, which were no longer in use, since there is constant shortage of water in the area. To address the learners' frustrations about the lack of water for drinking and washing hands, they also upgraded the borehole to improve the water supply to the school (See figure 6.7).

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<sup>5</sup> Enviro Loo- is a waterless toilet system that provides a safe non-polluting solution to sanitation



Upgrading the borehole to address issue of toilets and drinking water

**Figure 6.7 Upgrading the borehole to solve water crisis**



The SGB also organised the Community Workers Project<sup>6</sup> (CWP) to clean the school grounds on a monthly basis at no cost. They hired a local person to cut the grass and level the sports field. However, it is still a challenge to maintain cleanliness because community members continue to vandalise the fence around the school and allow their goats and cows to graze in the schoolyard. The grounds are thus littered with animal droppings.

One direct gain, and motivation, for the participants was that the SGB eventually agreed to purchase sport equipments after seeing the success of the sports event organised by learners. Thus, Wednesday afternoons are now used for sport and other extra-mural activities, thereby reducing the number of learners hanging around with nothing to do. Hopefully, this will decrease the risk of anti-social and unhealthy behaviour and also improve the relations between learners and teachers as they participate in healthy activities (Claessens, van Tartwijk, Pennings, van der Want, Verloop, den Brok & Wubbels, 2016). Figure 6.8 shows evidence of the improvements made by the SGB.

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<sup>6</sup> Community Workers Project- a cleaning project organised by local municipality to clean streets in the community



	<p>Community Workers Project cleaning the school</p>
	<p>Tractor cleaning the sports field</p>
	<p>Fixing of goal posts on the sports field</p>

**Figure 6.8 Improvements made by the SGB to the sports facilities**

**6.6.4 The influence of the project on the teachers' attitude**

The project seemed to have a positive influence on the teachers' attitude. Initially, most of the teachers did not show any interest in sports, but after learning how learners felt about lack of sports, they supported learners in their plan to fix the sports field. The Sports Committee (which had been inactive

for some time), after reading the policy brief, wrote a letter to the SGB members requesting them to buy sport equipment. Coincidentally, seven teachers left the school because they either resigned from teaching or requested a transfer. The teachers appointed in their place worked with other teachers to support the needs of learners and the incidences of teachers behaving unprofessionally seems to have been reduced, although not eradicated as indicated in section 6.6.2. On a positive note, more teachers volunteered to supervise sport. Teachers will even take learners to the community stadium for athletics and other sports, which are not practiced at school owing to a lack of facilities. Figure 6.9 shows learners at the stadium and at an organised physical activity at school.



**Figure 6.9 Learners at the community stadium and organised physical activity at school**

A disciplinary committee had been in place before the establishment of YCOP, but after the research study, this began working cooperatively with, and listening to the ideas of, the learners. For instance, to protect school furniture from vandalism, the YCOP requested the disciplinary committee to help the RCL members to monitor the classroom blocks and ensure that learners were not taking chairs outside the classrooms during breaks. The Committee approached teachers who agreed to work with the RCL and the YCOP to monitor the situation.

In addition, two teachers started remedial lessons in the afternoon to support learners who cannot read and write. The programme is currently attended by six learners who were identified from Grades Eight, Nine and Ten.



### ***6.6.5 The influence of the project on the management of the school***

I can attest that the school management was influenced in a positive way by the actions of the learners because it has developed many structures that were not there before the initiation of the YPAR project. For instance, the establishment of a School Based Support Team (SBST) was influenced by the emotional and social issues identified by learners as having a negative effect on their learning and development. The school management team was concerned about the findings, so it decided to initiate an SBST. In fact, all schools should have a functioning SBST in place according to the Education White Paper 6 (EWP6) of 2001 and section 12 (4) of the South African Schools Act of 1996. The SBST is the internal support structure at school level that should address the socio-systemic problems affecting learning. The structure of our newly formed SBST comprises four teachers as the core members; two SGB parent members; a police officer; a ward councilor; a member of the Community Development Organisation (CDO) and a nurse from the local health clinic. The role of a SBST is to transform schools to make them inclusive and supportive by addressing barriers to teaching and learning (Department of Education, 2001). Factors that may hinder learning can involve the physical and psychosocial environment (Oliva, 2016); conditions at home and community/social dynamics (Bojuwoye et al., 2014). However, some members of the SMT indicated that the committee might not be functional, as teachers lack knowledge and skills to deal with issues of psychosocial support. Thus, they proposed the training of teachers, which was approved and funded by the principal's office and the SGB in 2017. I advised the SMT to outsource experts in the field from North-West University (NWU) (some six hours drive from our school) to train our teachers because we did not know anyone locally who could do it. The team from NWU was invited by the Deputy Principal for a two day workshop. The NWU team invited a colleague from our local university (the University of Mpumalanga) to assist, with the understanding that this person could act as advisor in future if the SBST needed assistance. On the first day, the team conducted a focus group interview with the teachers to determine their needs in preparation for the training the next day. On day two, the team focused on how to provide support for the specific psychosocial challenges facing our school. The findings of the YPAR project also provided the team with a good understanding of what psychosocial challenges that teachers and learners were facing. They also provided information about the policy requirement for setting up and maintaining SBST. Figure 6.10 shows evidence of the SBST training for teachers.



**Figure 6.10 The SBST training for teachers**

Since its inception, the SBST has been functioning very well to the benefit of the learners. One particular initiative, which is an ongoing process, is that of assisting learners who do not have compulsory identity book or Smart cards<sup>7</sup> owing to a lack of money for transport to Home Affairs<sup>8</sup> or because they were not in possession of a birth certificate. The SBST provides this vital service with the help from Community Development Worker (CDW)<sup>9</sup>. Thus, it ensures that learners over the age of sixteen are in possession of an identity document, without which they will face many barriers to, for example, claiming government grants; registering to sit for the matriculation examination; obtaining admission to institutions of higher learning; obtaining employment; accessing credit; obtaining a driver's licence; and opening bank accounts.

To promote health and safety at school, the SMT launched a safe school programme in collaboration with the local police station. The programme is led by the Head of Health and Safety, a teacher who was elected by the school and appointed officially by the <sup>10</sup>District Senior Manager (DSM) The programme comprises the Disciplinary Committee, the Health Committee and Safety Committee. All these committees report to the Head of Health and Safety pertaining to any issue that needs the

<sup>7</sup> ID book or Smart card-a personal document for positive identification

<sup>8</sup> Home Affairs- a place where people apply for ID books or Smart cards

<sup>9</sup> Community Development Worker- a person who holds a portfolio created by the governing party in the local municipal area to address social issues in the community

<sup>10</sup> District Senior Manager- the rank , which the incumbent holds office at district level of the Department of Basic Education to manage a specific district.

intervention of the school management. The purpose of launching a safe school programme was to establish a strong network of support between the school, police and surrounding community to ensure the safety of all stakeholders in the school. The establishment of a safe school programme has improved the school because it complements the YCOP programme initiated by participants, strengthening its functionality as the learners can collaborate with these committees and gain adult support for their initiatives. Thus, it seems that the YPAR project has acted as a catalyst (Caraballo et al., 2017) for the social ecologies that should have been providing learners with access to support, but failed to do so and were actually the source of many risk factors (Hong, Crosby & Lee, 2017; Ungar, 2011). Figure 6.11 shows evidence of programmes initiated by the management.



**Figure 6.11 Programmes initiated by the school management**

To address the problem of school nutrition, the principal appointed a member of the SGB to control and monitor the feeding of learners at school. The Department of Basic Education supplies enough food to the school according to learner enrolment but the people preparing it were stealing it. Hence the SBST suggested that it be controlled to ensure that all learners are fed. Learners are now getting enough food and surplus is given to learners who do not have parents who provide for them. However, the downside is that there are other learners who have both parents but are still in need of extra support since the social grants they receive for being unemployed are not sufficient to sustain their family. As a member of the SBST, I commit to finding ways to support these learners so that they do not feel the school is discriminating against them.

In conclusion, I think the project has made the school a more enabling space for learning and the development of children (Hogan, 2016). Although I cannot claim without doubt that all of the positive changes were as a direct result of the project, I do believe that the fact that learners engaged in youth participatory action research was a strong catalyst for initiating a positive change in the culture and climate of the school. In the next section I will reflect on the change I personally underwent as a result of my facilitation of the project.

### **6.7 Reflection on my learning**

Cycle 2 of our project made me realise that the disruption of any system is a messy process that requires participants to have resilience and a positive spirit of team work. I say resilience since taking action to uncover negative aspects within any environment will also give rise to resistance from those who feel threatened by change (see articles of some, Cammarota, 2017; Ozer et al., 2010). Thus, conducting participatory transformative research at your place of work has both advantages and drawbacks. The advantage is that you are able to observe everything that is happening, and your positive interaction with people can influence change. The disadvantage is that your colleagues might not be supportive especially if it requires them to change their behaviour or practices. This is what I actually experienced with our project because the school management felt threatened as they thought participants would show their photographs in public. Moreover, since they are responsible for the quality of education and the functioning of the school, it would put them in a bad light. The principal and the deputy principal complained to the participants about the display of some of the photos saying they would tarnish the reputation of the school. As the facilitator of the project, I convinced them that the purpose of the photographs was to bring the issues to the attention of teachers, other learners and school management in an effort to bring about positive change to make the school a more enabling place for learners. I argued that in the end it would improve the functioning of the school and the performance of the learners. Although he did not put a stop to the project, the principal continued to be negative about the project for some time, which in turn influenced how the other teachers viewed the project. He said the research was only concerned with theory and that the participants will not attain anything through it, more or less implying that he would not make any changes. However, this attitude seemed to dissipate as the project continued, and he realised that the participants did not want to bring the school into disrepute. I had to control my own fears (would I be able to continue with my research?) and use all the skills I possessed to convince him of the benefit of the project and how it could bring about positive change, which would reflect favourably on his leadership.

I also faced some opposition from other staff members, particularly from those whose unprofessional behavior was highlighted by the participants. I had to learn to walk a fine line between challenging such behaviour and being supportive of colleagues who wanted to change, rather than attacking those that were responsible for the negative experiences of the learners. I had to learn to control my feelings of outrage and anger and look at the bigger picture of what I was trying to achieve within the school. In this way, I can say my own strategic leadership has improved, as I managed to motivate other teachers to take positive action to make the school a more welcoming, healthy place for the learners.

I learnt that the development of a team spirit was vital if the school was to change. For example, during the cleaning of the sports field at start of the project, several teachers had agreed to supervise the learners. However, some of them withdrew at the last moment, as they had been told by other teachers, who were negative about the project, that I was just using them to further my studies (see 6.3.1). This hurt and frustrated me, but at the next staff meeting, I expressed my appreciation for the support given to learners. I had to overcome my own feelings for the good of the project, as its success was dependent on a spirit of unity and not division. The findings of the study highlighted the negative and unprofessional behaviour of the teachers, and I assumed that the attitude that some of them had towards the project-and towards me emanated from their fears of being exposed or from a general unhappiness in their work. If learners did not feel welcomed and supported at the school, I suspected some teachers were also feeling alienated and demotivated as a result of having to work in such circumstances. I realised that teachers needed as much help and support as learners (Ozer, 2017). Teachers are not used to learners leading such a project, particularly in South Africa where didactic teaching and hierarchic relations between learner and teacher is still a norm (Claessens et al., 2016). Although a learner-centred approach is mandated in policy (Department of Education, 2005), learners are still expected to keep quiet, listen and repeat only what the teacher says (Nthontho, 2017). Teachers, especially in rural communities, still perceive themselves as the sole source of knowledge, and thus deserving unquestioned respect and authority (Kohfeldt et al., 2011).

Some of the teachers were offended because they thought learners were given unnecessary freedom of speech, especially when they reported such unprofessional behaviour as teachers giving out memoranda to specific learners before they write a test or giving others the opportunity to rewrite tests in secret. However, the new learner centred approach adopted in the project challenged their paradigm and influenced them to reflect on their behaviour. Some of them might have been shamed into

changing, or perhaps the more positive behaviour that emerged as the project progressed was due to other reasons. Nevertheless, the tension lessened, and the teachers in general became more willing to display supportive behaviour towards their learners. Of course, all is still not perfect in the school, but circumstances that prevailed at the commencement of this study have definitely improved. If I have experienced personal growth, I can only assume that the other teachers have also learnt and developed when confronted with the truth of how the learners were feeling and how the school climate was impeding their motivation and ability to learn.

The changing of systems from within requires the researcher to be sensitive to the feelings of others because those in power may not know how to facilitate change. For instance, in my case, having realised that the principal and the deputy principal were not comfortable about the findings of the participants, I decided to adopt a new strategy. In every decision taken by the participants in the project we either involved or informed these leaders first so that they could discuss the decision with us, understanding our reason behind it, before actioning it. They thus became part of the decision and could inform others that they had decided to make changes to benefit the school. The strategy benefitted our project because the launching of “Keep a girl child at school” project was seen by others as something supported by the deputy principal, who gave permission for the products to be stored in her office. She was thus motivated to report on the success of the project and to encourage other teachers to support it. The collection of sanitary towels is ongoing and currently managed by members of the SBST to ensure its sustainability since the founders of the project have since graduated from the school.

I have myself learnt to develop resilience, patience and a team spirit; and this learning will help me to understand that in every institution lies a world of diversity, be it among learners or teachers and that I should embrace the views of the learners and colleagues in my future teaching to create a positive learning environment. I can also recommend my colleagues to conduct similar research because it develops the researcher’s personal growth, not to mention the positive change it brings to the place of study. This YPAR project was worth doing in my school because it has brought an improvement to the physical infrastructure and the social and emotional climate of the school and improved me as a person and as a teacher.

## **6.8 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, I discussed Cycle 2 of the research with a special focus on the actions that participants took to address problems identified in Cycle 1 and how these actions influenced change at different levels. I started by discussing strategies that the participants chose to effect changes and then discussed the themes generated when analysing feedback from strategies. This was followed by a discussion on the influence of YPAR at different levels. The chapter was concluded by a reflection on my learning experience. The next chapter will conclude the study by providing an overview of the research, and suggesting possible guidelines for those wanting to initiate a similar study, in answer to the final sub-question of the study.

## Chapter 7

### Summary, conclusion, theoretical guidelines and contribution to knowledge

#### 7.1 Introduction

In Chapter 6, I discussed Cycle 2 of the research, with a focus on the actions that the participants took to address themes generated in Cycle 1. I outlined strategies that the participants chose to share the findings with the learners, teachers and the SGB. I further discussed how the actions taken by the participants influenced changes at different levels of the school. The chapter was concluded with the reflections on my learning during Cycle 2.

In this final chapter of the thesis, I synthesise the findings and outline the new knowledge generated to deepen understanding of how vulnerable learners can be involved in making their school a more enabling space. I respond to the final sub-question of the study.

*What theoretical guidelines can be developed from the findings of this study of how vulnerable youth could be effectively involved in making school an enabling space?*

I conclude the chapter by identifying the theoretical and methodological contribution made by this study.

#### 7.2 Summary of the study

The primary research question guiding this study was:

*How can vulnerable youth actively contribute to making school an enabling space?*

**Chapter 1:** In this chapter I presented the main argument of my thesis that schools have, in many instances, become disabling rather than enabling spaces for learners. To respond to the growing international vision of schools as enabling spaces, I justified this research by identifying a gap in the literature, where I realised that although YPAR has been implemented in international contexts, and particularly in the United States, there is a gap in youth engagement in a rural South African context,. To add to the body of knowledge of how vulnerable youth could contribute to positive transformation in their school, I decided to engage them in youth participatory action research, a methodology that allowed them to work collaboratively with me as adult researcher to identify problems and suggest and implement actions to improve their circumstances.



**Chapter 2:** I discussed the potential role of youth to make the school an enabling space, by addressing the following two main issues: school as an enabling space and youth as agents of change. I interrogated international literature to gain insight into how other scholars managed to navigate ways to create a supportive school environment. My inference drawn from literature positioned the school as a suitable place to address challenges facing vulnerable learners. I then critically discussed education policies that promoted learner well-being in South Africa and found that there was a gap between policy and practice. I also found evidence in literature that teachers themselves were damaged by the system. Thus, teachers might inflict pain on learners rendered vulnerable because they did not know how to deal with issues of psycho-social support as they did not have any guidance, training in providing support or any outlet to help them deal with their own negative emotions. I discussed the concept of youth as agents of change and outlined the distinction between vulnerability and youth agency, so that the reader could understand why I positioned youth as agents of transformation at their own school. I concluded the chapter by suggesting ways to improve the well-being of the learners to create a child friendly learning environment.

**Chapter 3:** In this chapter, I discussed the theories applied in the study to help make sense of the findings. I justified my choice of the socio-ecological view of resilience, which provides balance by recognising both risk and protective factors; and self-determination theory, which promotes development of basic psychological needs (competence, autonomy and relatedness). The two theories complement each other in the context of health promoting school in this way: self-determination theory helped strengthen youth to develop the three innate needs to become more resilient and could navigate towards the use of helping resources to improve their health and well-being.

**Chapter 4:** In this chapter, I presented a theoretical discussion of the research methodology. Drawing on an emancipatory paradigm, I explained and justified the use of YPAR as a design to enable learners to improve their own circumstances at school. I then explained and justified the choice of methods used in the study, which were photovoice and drawings triangulated with group discussions and researchers' reflective diary. I also discussed measures used to ensure trustworthiness in the study devised by Herr and Anderson (2005) namely; process validity; outcome validity; catalytic validity and democratic validity. I concluded the chapter by discussing ethical consideration in the study.

**Chapter 5:** In this chapter, I discussed the findings derived from data generated by the participants during the YPAR process to address the first research sub-question of the study:

*How do vulnerable youth perceive the current school climate?*

Three main themes emerged from analysis of the visual methods and the accompanying narratives and discussions: *poor infrastructure, lack of sports opportunity and poor social and emotional climate of the school.* The findings are explained below:

*Poor infrastructure:* This theme concerns the physical environment of the school which learners perceived to have negative impact on their physical and emotional health, as well as their motivation to learn. Participants said they were stressed by having to use dirty and unsafe toilets which smelt bad and which they blamed for increasing their vulnerability to illness. They also complained about unsanitary conditions which discouraged them to eat food provided by the school, since it was prepared in an open unhygienic place.

*Lack of sports opportunity:* Learners felt deprived of the opportunity to take part in sports which they thought contributed to the anti-social behaviour of some learners, negatively affected their development of a desirable personal identity, hindered them from developing a sense of pride and belonging in the school and also affected their ability to concentrate in class. Although, time was allocated for sports on the time table, there were no facilities, so no organised sports or physical education happened in the school. More troubling was that participants claimed teachers were encouraging learners to smoke and even frequent taverns to their amusement. These girls were under the impression that their behaviour was acceptable since the teachers who watched them appeared to condone and encourage it.

*Poor social and emotional climate of the school:* Learners mentioned that most of them were from poor families or their parents either sick or no longer alive. They said that the school was supposed to be a safe haven for all learners especially those who lacked parental care and support but it had become a place of rejection and emotional/physical abuse. Teachers were also portrayed as causing emotional abuse rather than being a source of support because they were perpetrators of discrimination and stigma.

These findings helped participants to plan strategies as a way forward to bring changes in the school to make it enabling for all learners.

**Chapter 6:** This chapter reported on Cycle 2 of the study with the intention to answer the second and the third sub-questions of the study:

*What actions could vulnerable youth take to make the school an enabling space?*

*To what extent could these actions benefit vulnerable youth, teachers and school in general?*

The following strategies were chosen to effect change:

*Presentation of themes to the School Governing Body:* Participants presented their findings to the school governing body, targeting the parent members in particular since learners and teachers would have access to the display in the school. Participants thought that parents would be more sympathetic to their cause.

*Displaying their findings to the learners and teachers:* Participants displayed the same posters presented to the SGB for teachers and learners. The responses indicated that the themes identified by the participants (see Table 6.1) were validated by the experience of learners. The responses of learners using the participants' learning experiences were discussed in 6.3.

The participants analysed feedback from the SGB, learners and teachers to decide on further actions to make school an enabling space and decided on the following:

- They initiated a campaign to clean the sport field
- They hosted sport event
- Presented a drama to advocate for a safe school
- They presented a policy brief

I further explained how the project influenced change at different levels and impacted on the challenging circumstances that they faced in their school environment.

### **7.3 Revisiting the research questions**

#### ***7.3.1 How do vulnerable youth perceive the current school climate?***

Vulnerable learners perceived the school as not enabling, owing to the physical, psychological, social and emotional challenges that they faced. The school's physical environment did not support learners' physiological needs as there was shortage of water for drinking and sanitation, inconsistent provision of food from the school feeding scheme and dilapidated toilets. Added to this, they felt they were missing out on the benefits of participation in sport. The social and emotional climate of the school was perceived as unhealthy because learners were subjected to discrimination, stigma and abuse yet they did not have recourse to report their grievances. All these problems were perceived as having negative impact on their health, dignity, safety and motivation to learn.

**7.3.2 What actions could vulnerable youth take to make the school an enabling space?**

Participants decided to use artefacts generated through drawings and photovoice in Cycle 1 to establish if other stakeholders in the school share the same feeling. They developed responses to each theme they identified in Cycle 1. In some of their strategies in Cycle 2, participants involved other learners for support and to make their voice louder. See Table 6.1 for an overview of the actions they undertook.

**7.3.3 To what extent do these actions benefit vulnerable youth, teachers and school in general?**

The participants’ actions benefitted the school at different levels. Table 7.1 provides an outline of the influence the project had at the following levels: core participants, learners, teachers, physical environment and management of the school.

**Table 7.1. Influence the project had on various levels of the school**

Levels	Influence
How did participation in YPAR influence the core participants?	<p>YPAR helped them to assert their rights; and so they gained a sense of power and agency to bring about positive change in the school (6.6.1).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They acquired skills to persuade the SGB and teachers to have sympathy for their cause. (6.6.1).</li> <li>• They learnt the importance of team work (6.4).</li> <li>• They showed resilience by overcoming the victimisation and prejudice that they were faced with (6.4.1).</li> <li>• They showed initiatives by designing permission cards to control learner movement during lessons (6.6.1).</li> <li>• They demonstrated competence and autonomy by successfully organising awareness campaigns and initiating other projects (6.4.1).</li> <li>• Their communication and leadership skills improved as they negotiated to host events in the school to raise awareness campaigns (6.4.2).</li> </ul>
How did the participants’ actions influence other learners?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They were inspired to be part of the change in the school, hence they volunteered in programmes initiated by</li> </ul>

	<p>participants such as YCOP and “Keep a girl child at school” (6.6.2).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One girl initiated a support group (6.6.2)</li> <li>• Learners began to participate in sport (6.6.2).</li> </ul>
How did the project change teachers’ attitudes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The policy brief created a platform for teachers to voice out their concerns about school practices that violate the right of learners to education (6.5). This did not stop teachers from discriminating learners as some learners were still feeling rejected. However, cases of sexual exploitation seemed to have stopped especially that some of the teachers who were alleged to be perpetrators of sexual abuse have voluntarily applied for transfer or just resigned (6.6.5).</li> <li>• The sports campaign made teachers aware of the learners’ dire need to participate in sports, hence, they began to observe sports day (6.6.4)</li> <li>• Teachers organised remedial lessons for learners with barriers to learning (6.6.4).</li> <li>• Life Orientation teacher facilitates support group (6.6.2).</li> </ul>
How did the project influence change in the physical environment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The SGB secured portable toilets as interim measure and applied for permanent ones to be built (6.6.3).</li> <li>• The SGB upgraded the borehole to solve problem of water (Figure 6.7).</li> <li>• The SGB commissioned community project workers to clean the school environment on monthly basis (Figure 6.8).</li> </ul>
How did the project influence the school management team?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They were made aware of learners’ needs which led to the establishment of school based support team to support learners (6.6.5).</li> <li>• They established a school safety programme to ensure health and safety of the learners. They facilitated development of</li> </ul>

	school policies: e.g. Teachers code of conduct; policy on nutrition; learner code of conduct (see Annexure D).
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#### **7.4 Reflecting on the research process**

My research journey was not easy, yet it generated lot of personal learning and growth. Since YPAR was new to me, I initially struggled to guide the participants well. We met twice a week and I would engage them in reading information about YPAR from the internet. Apparently some found the activity boring. I think we spent almost a month designing the logo for the group. However, that was not a futile exercise as it created identity for themselves. Moreover, the activity helped to build the relationship amongst the participants and between the participants and myself. Constant feedback from my promoter and attending the workshops that she organised at the university helped me to understand how to facilitate the project. Unfortunately, at that time, the participants had already generated lot of data that I learnt was not necessary and thus, we spent too much time on this unnecessary activity. This taught me the importance of my reflections as the facilitator of YPAR because if I had sent them to my promoter after every project meeting, she would have detected the problem earlier and provided guidance.

I also learnt that conducting research at the site of study needs patience and tact, especially if it requires a change in attitude and a way of doing things. Many times I felt like my colleagues were conspiring against me. During the SBST workshop, the school made payment at the lodge for all teachers at a cost of R75 each but eleven of them decided not to attend. The same teachers complained amongst themselves that the school misused money on my studies when other demands of the school were not addressed. Some were even suggesting raising a concern to the SGB but one educator who attended the workshop explained to them the significance of the structure in the school. It was painful to me because the school management had indicated that it was mandatory for all teachers to attend as they needed skills to address issues of psychosocial support, but they decided not to attend. However, resilience and determination kept me going as the success of my project depended on teamwork. To overcome this bad feeling in future, I decided to find a way to gain the support of the SGB teacher representative, so that he could influence other teachers positively. The strategy worked for me because he managed to bring teachers together and convinced them to have a positive regard for the project. This helped the participants to gain

the support of educators when they requested sports equipment from the SGB. Through this, I learnt that there is a need to work closely with an influential person to bring other teachers on board.

Although the principal appeared to be negative and rigid, I learnt that he saw potential for improvement in the project as he constantly consulted with me on how to address other issues in the school. For, example, how to address problems of Grade 12 learners with child-headed responsibilities as they were missing out during morning lessons. It also took a long term to change the attitude of teachers towards the learners but after the participants' actions most of them are now responding positive to the school programmes. I think the project served as a catalyst because officials from the Provincial Department of Basic Education are using our school to pilot the implementation of school based support team (see Annexure D) and this influenced neighbouring schools to request help from our school.

The most important thing I learnt is the benefits of creating space for learners to voice their problems. It may be offensive to the teachers when their unprofessional behaviour is revealed, but this helps learners to find recourse to their problems and to make the school management aware of bad practices in the school so that they can amend school policies to solve the problems. Finally, as the facilitator of the project I developed critical skills such as empathy, patience and lifelong learning and they helped me to adapt as needed throughout the project.

### **7.5 What theoretical guidelines can be developed from the findings of this study of how vulnerable youth could be effectively involved in making school an enabling space?**

Although participation in YPAR gave the participants a voice to express their needs, and enabled them to take action to bring about change, however YPAR as a methodological approach in this study was accompanied by threats to the participants and the project itself. At the beginning of the project participants were mocked by their peers because they did not understand that they were advocating for their rights. The initial reluctance of the teachers and the school management to support the participants' initiatives caused tension (6.7), and I was concerned for the well-being of the participants. As the facilitator I also felt threatened because I thought the project would shut down, hence I walked a fine line between challenging negative behaviour and being supportive of a few colleagues who wanted change, rather than attacking those who were responsible for the negative experience of the learners.

In light of the advantages and threats outlined above, I therefore suggest the following as the basis for guidelines to follow to involve vulnerable youth in making school an enabling space.

### ***7.5.1 School management and key stakeholders should be brought on board from the outset.***

The school management is responsible for the smooth running of the school hence they should be informed about every development at the school. It is the school management that is responsible for the implementation of any policy and they have the authority to delegate teachers to lead any programme of the school. If the school management understands all developments in the school, they are more likely to support the project and encourage other teachers to be involved. In this study, the Principal and Deputy Principal were initially not very supportive (6.7), and at one point, the Principal even wanted to stop the project, as he was concerned about the school being exposed to the public (6.7) However, I managed to persuade him of the benefit and he conceded that the project could continue. Teachers who would like to do a YPAR project should make every effort to educate and enthuse the school management about the project so that they can gain support to enhance the progress of the project and the degree of change embraced.

### ***7.5.2 Teacher development in learner support should be prioritised***

Teachers need to be sensitised about learners' socio-emotional needs and how this could impact on learning and their well-being if not addressed. It should be the responsibility of the school to ensure that teachers are trained on how to deal with psycho-social issues, and thus arrange opportunities for training in learner support. Although I did not empirically research why teachers were acting in a non-supportive way towards learners, as it was not the scope of the study, my hunch is that they were not really aware of how their behaviour was impacting negatively on learners. Alternatively, they themselves could have been in need of support, since their work conditions are difficult and many of them have personal problems that impact on their teaching. As literature showed that teacher behaviour in many schools in South Africa (2.2.4.1) is a cause of concern, teacher development would have been beneficial before engaging youth in a YPAR study to improve their experiences of schooling. This could have mitigated some of the threats to learners by teachers who reacted negatively to their findings (6.7).

### ***7.5.3 The School Based Support Team should work closely with the youth***

The purpose of SBST is to address learners' needs; therefore, members should work with the findings of YPAR groups to inform their decisions and actions. In this way, the SBST would have a clearer picture of the overall needs of learners, rather than just dealing with individual cases on an ad-hoc basis. The SBST should be instrumental in setting up connections between the school and external support services and include learner representatives who have gone through such a process on their team. Although the setting



up of an SBST was an outcome of this project, it would have been much easier if a strong SBST had been in place at the start.

#### ***7.5.4 Set up mechanisms to protect YPAR participants from victimisation***

When doing YPAR, protective mechanisms must be in place to ensure that participants are safe from any form of emotional harm. For instance; counseling services should be readily available and a plan should be in place to deal with the sensitive issues that emerge from the research. The facilitator can discuss a process with school management or the SBST to deal with the exposure of unprofessional conduct by teachers.

#### ***7.5.5 The facilitator has to be skillful and resilient***

The facilitator is responsible for the development of participants' skills such as teamwork, communication, and leadership, problem solving and decision-making. Thus, the facilitator has to be a role model to the participants in terms of conduct; i.e. respect and accept the ideas of the participants and other people; react with positive attitude to criticism, have good relationships with colleagues, despite challenges during the research process and communicate well with others. The facilitator has to be sensitive to the feelings of others and be able to walk a fine line between challenging negative behaviour of those who victimise participants and supporting colleagues who want change in the school. The facilitator should strive to unite all stakeholders as transformation is possible where there is team spirit. The facilitator should also display resilience in the face of critique or setbacks. Finally, the facilitator should be well-grounded in the YPAR process. If an unskilled facilitator attempts to lead learners in a YPAR project, it is unlikely that the benefits would be as good.

#### ***7.5.6 Integration of YPAR into the curriculum***

As the literature reveals, YPAR is integrated into the curriculum of many schools in international contexts, particularly in citizenship education and social science subjects. It would be beneficial if it could be integrated into the Life Orientation subject in South Africa, so that learners not only learn theoretically about how to be a responsible citizen, or how to develop relationships for example – they could learn most of the skills that LO targets through participation in a YPAR project, even if on a small scale. The benefits to the participants in this study (see Table 7.1) could then be experienced by more learners.

## **7.6 Limitations of the study**

Although participation in YPAR creates opportunities for youth to improve their lives, it also has its shortcomings, which might delay the process of transformation. Lack of understanding of the project by other stakeholders in the school may lead to resistance, which slows down transformation in the school or even stops it altogether. Another limitation is that I cannot conclude that the findings are applicable to all rural schools in our province, since generalisability was not the aim of this qualitative approach.

## **7.7 Questions arising that warrant further study**

As the YPAR project progressed, I found myself pondering on questions that arose. Such questions warrant further study within the context of rural South African schools:

*How can teachers be helped to behave more supportively towards learners?*

Although other issues such as infrastructure and sports were successfully addressed, it became questionable if the issues of the negative social and emotional climate of the school could be completely eradicated. Teachers still appear demotivated and as long as their attitude towards their work is negative, it might not be simple to provide support to learners. Thus, I also think further study needs to be conducted on how to influence teachers to understand their role as secondary parents of learners, as this will help them to develop more empathetic behaviours.

*How can we ensure that other issues of sexual abuse and other misconduct do not go unreported?*

Silence around learner sexual abuse intensifies their vulnerability and other misconduct such as irregularity on administration of formal tests demotivates hard working learners. If these cases go unreported, then it harms both the learner and the school. I think there is a need to find a way to empower teachers as practitioners of education to stand for what is right as keeping silent to protect unprofessional behaviour of colleagues has a damaging effect on the well-being of learners.

*How can school management be supported to address unprofessional behaviour?*

The school management may wish to address unprofessional behaviour of teachers but lack of evidence may become a barrier as they cannot address issues based on rumours. However, the principal's responsibility is to ensure that policies are implemented in the school. Every school has support structures such as union representatives, representative council of learners, school governing body and different

committees that protect the rights of learners to learning. Research should be conducted to find a process to deal with these issues within a context where teachers are hesitant to speak against colleagues.

### **7.8 Contribution of the study**

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the existing body of knowledge on YPAR as a means of social and educational transformation, by showing how YPAR could be facilitated even in a context where most learners have been rendered vulnerable by poverty and where teachers themselves increase that vulnerability. Most of the studies to date have been done in urban settings in developed countries. Here, I have shown how it can be conducted in a rural setting with few resources as an extra mural activity. The findings also add to resilience theory, in that they have shown that YPAR is an effective way to help vulnerable children increase their resilience.

Methodologically, the findings indicate that YPAR is an effective means of helping vulnerable learners to increase their agency, and be a catalyst for transformation in specific aspects of their school to make it more akin to a health promoting school.

Practically, the study made a difference to this particular school on many levels. Through YPAR, participants started a process, which is ongoing and continues to bring about positive change in many areas of the school.

### **7.9 Conclusion**

In this chapter I summarised the thesis and my inference based on the entire research process. I also explained how the research contributed to existing theory and methodology and how it practically developed the participants and other learners at school.

My goals through this research were satisfactorily addressed and I gained personal development as the facilitator of the project and as teacher, which I hope will benefit this school and any other I work in in the future. Although our research project as such has come to an end at the school, it has cultivated a spirit of innovation as learners are continuing to explore new things. For example, participants who are now in further education,, organised successful alumni students to provide motivation and Mentoring for Grade 12 learners to help them succeed in their final exams.

As a teacher who is motivated by the values of love and social justice, I will continue to stand for what is right in the school and work with learners to help them bring about change in the system. Thanks to my experience with YPAR, I now know how to do this more effectively.

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## Annexure A: Ethics letters



17 September 2019

To Whom It May Concern

I hereby confirm that the ethics application, as stated below, was approved at the Ethics Committee meeting of the Faculty of Education of 23 July 2015.

**Ethics number: NWU-00022-13-A2**

**Project head: Prof L Wood**

**Project team: MS Mathikithela**

**Main project title: Action Research for Community Engagement: Beyond Service Learning**

**Sub project title: Vulnerable youth as agents of change: a YPAR approach to making schools enabling spaces for learners**

Should you have further enquiries in this regard, you are welcome to contact Prof Jako Olivier at 018 285 2078 or by email at [Jako.Olivier@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Jako.Olivier@nwu.ac.za) or Ms Erna Greyling at 018 299 4656 or by email at [Erna.Greyling@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Erna.Greyling@nwu.ac.za).

Yours sincerely



Prof. J. Olivier  
Chair Edu-REC

## Permission letter to the school



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY  
YUNIBESITI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA  
NOORDWES-UNIVERSITEIT  
POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS

Comber Research Project  
Faculty of Education Sciences  
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**Prof Lesley Wood**

Research Professor  
[Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za)  
Cell: +27 (0)822969202.

15 July 2015

The Principal & SGB  
School X Secondary School  
P O BOX 1039  
Marble Hall  
0450

Dear Sir

15 July 2015

### Request for permission to conduct research and to work with the learners

I am presently an educator at the above-mentioned school, as well as part-time first year PhD student at North-West university (PUK) doing research under the leadership of Prof L Wood.

My study involves engaging youth to making school an enabling space. An enabling space is an atmosphere where people work and interact freely without any fear of ridicule or reprisal. The reason why I have decided to conduct my study at this school is because I have observed the following anomalies in the school:

- Most of the learners are late for school.
- Some learners abscond during lunch time
- Others absent themselves regularly.
- Learners are fighting in the school premises.
- Learners are vandalizing school property and littering in the school yard.
- Some of the learners are withdrawn into themselves and do not take part in school activities.

The above situations impact negatively on the teaching and learning; and the overall climate of the school. It can also lower the morale of dedicated learners and teachers which will ultimately affect the performance of the school. In this study I want to engage learners in participatory action research to identify the root causes of this behaviour and decide on the actions that can be implemented to turn the situation around. By making them active participants in the research, any change is more likely to be sustained as they will be involved in deciding how to address these issues. Through this project, learners will understand the importance of

## *Youth assent forms*



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### **Prof Lesley Wood**

**Research Professor**

[Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za)

**Cell: +27 (0)822969202.**

30 July 2015

#### Assent forms for youth participants under 18 years

You are invited to participate in my research project which will be conducted at your school. The title of my study is “Vulnerable youth as agents of change: a YPAR approach to making schools enabling spaces for learners”. An enabling space is an atmosphere where people work freely without any fear of ridicule or reprisal. In this project I want us to create a warm and welcoming climate in the school to make learners feel safe and wanted. You were identified as having leadership skills and therefore I believe that through guidance your voice will have an influence to making school an enabling space for learners. Kindly go through the question and answer sheet below, which outlines the research procedure and the conditions. At the end of this form there is an option to choose if you agree or do not agree to participate and then append your signature.

#### **Explanation of the study (What will happen to me in this study?)**

The reason for this research is to find out how the school could be made a more welcoming and attractive place for learners. I am doing this study because I have realised that learners are coming late to school, abscond during lunch time and also a high rate of absenteeism. Apart from this, there is prevalence of vandalism, stigma, bullying and discrimination which make the school an unsightly and unwelcoming environment. I believe that your participation will serve as an important source of knowledge regarding the underlying causes of this situation. You will be engaged in a participatory action research to decide on and implement actions that will help to make the school an enabling space for learners. A participatory action research is a type of research where the participants together with the researcher work in a team to identify problems and decide on methods and actions to be implemented to solve the problem.

### **Your role in the project (What are we actually going to do?)**

Firstly, you will have to identify things that make the school a disabling space and then decide on the actions to be taken to help make the school an enabling space. You are going to take part in fun activities such as taking photographs and making displays to raise awareness of the need for a change. You will also make short films to address the issue. At the end of the project you will disseminate information to the school about the findings through drama.

### **Risks or discomforts of participating in the study (Can anything bad happen to me?)**

Nothing bad should happen to you, but if you feel uncomfortable, feel free to contact me anytime at 0720964415. I will arrange free counselling for you.

### **Benefits of participating in the study (Can anything good happen to me?)**

Yes. Participating in the study will improve your leadership, literacy and communication skills. You will also learn how to work in team towards a common goal. These are skills needed in future when you will be looking for a job.

### **Confidentiality (will anyone know I am in the study)**

Participation in the project is not a secret as you will be taking part in public activities such as films and drama to raise awareness. Confidentiality will only apply in the report writing. Your real names and the name of the school will not be disclosed instead you will be referred to as P1, P2 and so on in my report but in the project you will be using your names.

### **Commitment to participation (At what time are we going participate in the project and what will happen to me if I am no longer interested)**

You will participate once a week for an hour in the school premises and safe transport home will be arranged for you if necessary. The study will not interfere with your school programme or examination as you will participate after school. Participation in the project is voluntary and you are free to withdraw anytime without penalty.

### **Contact information (Who can I talk to about the study?)**

Project leader: Prof. Lesley Wood- 018 2994770 [lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za](mailto:lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za)

Researcher: Mrs. Mathikithela Maite-072 096 4415 [maite.mathikithela2@gmail.com](mailto:maite.mathikithela2@gmail.com)

Psychologist: Ms. Selepe Dorothy 0725346881 [dmselepe@yahoo.com](mailto:dmselepe@yahoo.com)

There is participation and confidentiality agreement form attached, which you must fill in. This is a declaration that you understand and will not discuss the findings or share any information about the study with people who are not part of this project.

### **Participation and confidentiality agreement form**



1. I understand what the study is all about.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
2. I understand that I am going to take part in activities such as photo shooting and drama.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand that there are no risk factors but if it happens that what we discuss triggers emotions I will get free counselling as the researcher has promised.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that participating in this study will improve my literacy, leadership and communication skills as well as help making school an enabling space.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
5. I understand that what we discuss in our project meetings will not be shared with any person who is not part of our project.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that participation in this study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>
7. I understand that what we are doing and saying will be published in report writing and that my name and the school name will not be disclosed.	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>

Do you understand this study and are you willing to participate?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
-----	--------------------------	----	--------------------------

-----

Signature of the participant

Date-----

-----

Researcher's signature

Date-----

*Parent consent forms*



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**Prof Lesley Wood**

**Research Professor**

[Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za)

**Cell: +27 (0)822969202.**

15 July 2015

**LETTER TO PARENTS OR GUARDIANS**

Dear Parent/Guardian of.....

My name is Mathikithela Maite, an educator at your child’s school and a PhD student at North-West University. I am conducting research under the leadership of Professor Lesley Wood. The topic of my research is “Vulnerable youth as agents of change: a YPAR approach to making schools enabling spaces for learners”.

I am inviting your child to participate voluntarily in my project which will be conducted at their school. The purpose of the project is to engage youth aged 16 years and above to decide on and implement actions to make the school an enabling space. I have noticed that many learners come late to school; often absent themselves or abscond during lunch time. There are many things which are happening at school which makes it difficult for the learners to cope with the situation; for example; bullying, vandalism, stigmatisation, discrimination and even littering which makes it an unsightly and unpleasant environment. I want to work with a group of learners to find out how the school could be made a more welcoming and attractive place for learners.

**What will the learners do?**

In this project I want to work with the learners to identify things that make the school an unsafe and unattractive place. Learners will be guided on how to take pictures and record videos of anything that they think make the school to be an uncomfortable place and decide on the actions that they will implement to change the situation for the better. They will be involved in fun activities such as:

- Taking photographs and making a display to raise awareness of the need for change
- Making short films to address the issue
- Presenting their findings to the school in the form of drama about the issue.

**How will learners benefit?**

Your child has been identified as having leadership skills that we would like to develop. Participation will also improve literacy, communication skills, as well as learning how to work in team towards a common goal. These are all skills that are needed to increase their chances of getting a job; therefore the project will have developmental benefits for the learners, apart from making the school a more child-friendly place. The benefits outweigh the slight risk of learners becoming upset when discussing issues such as bullying, vandalism and stigma, but I have organised external psychosocial support to provide counseling should any sensitive matters arise.

**What other benefits will there be?**

The school and parents will also benefit from this project. The voices of the learners will help to influence the school policy which will help to make the school a safer and nicer place for learners. Learners will enjoy being at school and this will make them focus on their studies and other school activities, which will help to improve behaviour and ultimately the learners' performance. In the project, the learners will learn the importance of respect and positive values which can only improve their behaviour at home.

**What commitment is expected?**

The project will take place every week after school from 15 h00 to 17h00 and will not interfere with their school programme or examinations. Learners are expected to attend and safe transport home will be arranged if needed. Participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time without penalty.

**What will I do with the information?**

Information collected will be treated with confidentiality so that learners can feel free to express their views. Learner's real names will not be used in the reports. To protect identity I will use pseudonyms. A summary of the findings will be made available to you. In addition, parents will be invited to attend any activity that the youth organise to disseminate their findings in the school.

Please discuss participation in this project with your child. To give consent for your child to participate, please complete the attached form and I will collect it from you. I will send a copy of our final report, when the study has been completed and I will come back to tell you of some of my findings.

Thanks for your kind attention when reading this information. Should you wish to speak to me or the study leader at any time please contact us on 072 096 4415/ Prof L Wood at 018 29947770.

Yours truly

Mathikithela Maite Sara

**Consent Form to be signed by parents/guardians on behalf of the participants under 18 years**

**Please place X on the relevant box. Yes if you agree or No if you disagree**

A	B	C
1	I understand the information about the study in the information letter. All my questions were answered	Yes No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
2	I realise that participation is completely voluntary and that my child can stop the project at any time. If my child is uncomfortable answering any questions, she/he may choose not to answer.	Yes No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
3	My child will read and speak in a group. He/she will not hide that she is taking part in the project.	Yes No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
4	I understand that what they say may be quoted at great length in publications, presentations and the final report. They may also ask to delete part of what they said if they are not comfortable that it be quoted.	yes No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
5	I understand that even if I give my child consent to take part in the project, the decision to participate lies with him or her and that she/he may withdraw from the study anytime without penalty.	Yes No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
6	I understand that if something troubles my child while participating, the researcher will provide support as she has promised that the psychologist will be available.	Yes No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
7	The researcher seeks consent for video recording. If my child does not wish to participate in the recordings his/her wish will be respected without penalty.	Yes No <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

I agree that my child may take part in this study.

-----  
(Research participant's Signature)

-----  
Date

-----  
(Parent/Guardian's Signature)

-----  
Date

The study has been explained to the learners and this form is signed voluntarily

-----  
(Researcher's Signature)

-----  
Date

## *Letter to the Department of Basic Education*



NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY  
YUNIBESITI YA BOKONE-BOPHIRIMA  
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**Prof Lesley Wood**

Research Professor  
[Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Lesley.wood@nwu.ac.za)  
Cell: +27 (0)822969202.

15 July 2015

The District Manager

Department of Basic Education

Sekhukhune District

Dear Sir

Re: Application for permission to conduct research in one Secondary School within your district

I am currently an educator in one particular school within your district as well as a part time PhD student at Northwest University. I intend to conduct participatory action research in my school under the leadership of Professor Lesley Wood. The title of my research is "Youth as agents of change: a YPAR approach to making schools enabling spaces for learners". An enabling space is an atmosphere where people are free to work together and share their lived experiences without any fear of ridicule or reprisal.

The reason for conducting this research is to find ways in which the school can be made a more welcoming and attractive place for learners. I have observed that many learners come late to school; abscond during lunch times and a high rate of absenteeism. There are other factors such as bullying, vandalism, stigma and discrimination which make the school an unsightly and unwelcoming place. I therefore want to engage youth from 16 years and above in a participatory action research to decide on and implement actions to make the school an enabling space. I understand that learners are the source of knowledge about the root cause of this situation and that change is more likely to be sustainable if it comes from them.

Learners will be involved in activities such as taking photographs and making a display to raise awareness of the need for change, making short films to address the issue and presenting the findings through drama. Participation in the study is voluntary and this project will increase literacy and communication skills of the learners and teach them to work in a team towards a common goal. This will improve the learners' performance and ultimately the performance of the school.

I therefore, ask for permission to conduct the research at the school and to work with 10 learners with an equal mix of both girls and boys. I will request permission from the parents of the learners by filling in consent and assent forms. Learners will be protected from psychological harm but where sensitive matters arise, the

## Annexure B: Proof of language editing

### LANGUAGE PRACTITIONER DECLARATION

I (Title, surname and full name of language practitioner)

**Dr. MAUREEN LILIAN KLOS**

Being the holder of the following qualifications

BA; STD; B Ed (Cum laude); D Ed

Certify that I am the language editor for

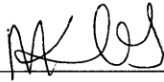
**Vulnerable youth as agents of change: a YPAR approach to making schools enabling spaces for learners**

By

**MATHIKITHELA MAITE SARA**

**Student No. 11885513**

I hereby certify that I have edited the language usage in the above document in its entirety.



**LANGUAGE PRACTITIONER**

**3 SEPTEMBER 2019**

**DATE**

## Annexure C: Policy brief

### Leihlo la baswa Youth Participatory Action Research group



Compiled by  
Lebogang, Tumisho, Thapelo, Neo,  
Innocent, Casey, Sarah, Tebogo,  
Mahlako, Zanele

### Policy brief on making school an enabling space for learners

#### Introduction

Our school is constituted by learners from different socio-economic and cultural background. Some are orphaned and rendered vulnerable by grave social issues such as increasing poverty and HIV and AIDS. As the YPAR action learning group, we conducted a research to identify problems that affect learners at school. The purpose was to address issues that affect

learners on daily basis in order to create a child friendly enabling school environment for them.

#### Methodology

We adopted Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodology which allowed us to work collaboratively with the adult researcher to identify problems, decide on methods to generate and analyse data and to come up with the solutions to the problems. We used visual methods to generate data, which was analysed thematically.

#### Findings

Our findings indicated that learners are faced with multiple problems at school of which the absence of policies to protect their rights to support learning make the school a disabling space.

#### Identified areas that need improvement at school

- Poor infrastructure
- Lack of sports opportunities
- Poor social and emotional climate of the school



*“The school is supposed to be a safe haven but this one has become a place where learners experience stress, violence and heartache” (Leihlo la baswa)*

#### Policy guideline

Guided by the findings of the study, this policy brief makes recommendations for the actions to be taken to create a child friendly enabling school environment for learners through the following guidelines:

- There is a dire need for functional and safe toilets for learners.
- Provision of food from National School Nutrition Programme should be consistent and prepared at a clean place to promote health.
- Water tanks should be increased to store enough water for learners
- Unused material from vandalised furniture can be recycled as it can be dangerous for learners or alternatively re-used to make tables and desks for learners.
- Classrooms and school surrounding should be kept clean and be rid of animal infestation.
- Sports day should be observed and supervised.
- All learners must be treated equally, including those from neighbouring villages
- Teachers should provide care and support for learners who need additional support
- Sexual exploitation must be strictly prohibited
- Policy on learner appearance and hairstyles should be revised in consultation with learners.
- Substance abuse in the school yard must be eradicated.
- Teenage mothers and pregnant girls must be supported and not destroyed.
- Bullying must be prohibited
- Sanitary towels should be made available at school

## ***Conclusion***

As Leihlo la baswa, we hope that the findings of our research and recommendations made will help teachers, SMT and SGB members to realise that learners cannot perform to the best of their abilities under such a stressful learning atmosphere. To create a supportive environment we hope that you will take action to improve areas identified.



***Students must have initiative; they should not be mere imitators. They must learn to think and act for themselves and be free.***  
 “Cesar Chavez”



## Annexure D: School policies

# SECONDARY SCHOOL



### SAFETY POLICY

#### 1. PREAMBLE

- 1.1. School violence and substance abuse have become a nightmare in schools across the country. In our school, these phenomena are manifesting themselves through weapons in school, bullying, assault, theft, sexual abuse and robbery.
- 1.2. In the light of the above statement, we found it necessary to develop school safety policy to pro-actively deal with and better manage threats to school safety
- 1.3. Through this policy, the school intends to:
  - a. Place the issue of school safety at the top of the agenda of all stakeholders
  - b. Adopt a zero-tolerance approach to all perpetrators of any form of school violence, gangsterism, sexual abuse, substance abuse and bullying
  - c. Ensure that all incidences of school violence, gangsterism, sexual abuse, substance abuse and bullying must be reported by all stakeholders to school authorities and the police once they become known
  - d. Ensure that there is appropriate support for the victim and
  - e. Ensure that abuse is managed with care, sensitivity and confidentiality to mitigate against secondary abuse

#### 2. PURPOSE OF THE POLICY

- 2.1. The overall purpose of the policy is to ensure that the school is safe for all and that effective measures are employed to address issues of discipline, drugs, dangerous objects, violence, bullying, sexual abuse, assault, theft and robbery.

#### 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY

- 3.1. To promote a safe school environment and declare a school as a violence and drug free zone
- 3.2. To put in place structures to co-ordinate School Safety Programmes and to sustain gains made
- 3.3. To clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in pursuit of an enabling school environment
- 3.4. To put in place clear protocols for the recording, reporting and management of incidents
4. Scope of applicability
  - 4.1. This policy applies to all learners, staff members and governing body of XXX Secondary School
  - 4.2. Matters related to Occupational Health and Safety Act are excluded from the application of this policy

#### 5. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

- 5.1. The Constitution of Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996)
- 5.2. The South African Schools Act, 1996 (Act No. 84 of 1996), as amended (Regulation for the Safety Measures at Public Schools, Government Notice No.1040 October 2001 as amended)
- 5.3. Employment of Educators Act, 1998 (Act No.76 of 1998), as amended
- 5.4. South African Council of Educators, 2000 (Act No 31 of 2000), as amended
- 5.5. Child Care Amendment Act, 1996 (Act No.96 of 1996)

# SECONDARY SCHOOL



## **SAFETY POLICY**

### **1. PREAMBLE**

- 1.1. School violence and substance abuse have become a nightmare in schools across the country. In our school, these phenomena are manifesting themselves through weapons in school, bullying, assault, theft, sexual abuse and robbery.
- 1.2. In the light of the above statement, we found it necessary to develop school safety policy to pro-actively deal with and better manage threats to school safety
- 1.3. Through this policy, the school intends to:
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  - c. Ensure that all incidences of school violence, gangsterism, sexual abuse, substance abuse and bullying must be reported by all stakeholders to school authorities and the police once they become known
  - d. Ensure that there is appropriate support for the victim and
  - e. Ensure that abuse is managed with care, sensitivity and confidentiality to mitigate against secondary abuse

### **2. PURPOSE OF THE POLICY**

- 2.1. The overall purpose of the policy is to ensure that the school is safe for all and that effective measures are employed to address issues of discipline, drugs, dangerous objects, violence, bullying, sexual abuse, assault, theft and robbery.

### **3. OBJECTIVES OF THE POLICY**

- 3.1. To promote a safe school environment and declare a school as a violence and drug free zone
- 3.2. To put in place structures to co-ordinate School Safety Programmes and to sustain gains made
- 3.3. To clearly set out the roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders in pursuit of an enabling school environment
- 3.4. To put in place clear protocols for the recording, reporting and management of incidents
4. Scope of applicability
  - 4.1. This policy applies to all learners, staff members and governing body of XXX Secondary School
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### **5. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK**

- 5.1. The Constitution of Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act No. 108 of 1996)
- 5.2. The South African Schools Act, 1996 (Act No. 84 of 1996), as amended (Regulation for the Safety Measures at Public Schools, Government Notice No.1040 October 2001 as amended)
- 5.3. Employment of Educators Act, 1998 (Act No.76 of 1998), as amended
- 5.4. South African Council of Educators, 2000 (Act No 31 of 2000), as amended
- 5.5. Child Care Amendment Act, 1996 (Act No.96 of 1996)

# SECONDARY SCHOOL



## Nutrition policy

The school nutrition programme is aimed at the following:

- Poverty alleviation
- To promote healthy life style
- Encourage regular learner attendance

### Feeding of learners

- Food shall be available to all learners from Monday to Friday at 10H00.
- Food handlers shall prepare enough food for all learners.
- Class representatives shall collect bowl of food from the food handlers under the supervision of class teachers.
- No learner will be allowed to eat directly from the bowl. Food must be served in the plate or portable container.

### Food allergies

- Learners who are allergic to certain food such as fish or milk, will be given alternative relish like cabbage or beans.
- In case the learner is completely allergic to school food, a parent must inform the school in writing to be granted a permission to go home during lunch time.

### Food surplus

- SGB members in collaboration with the SBST members are responsible for the management and distribution of surplus food to the learners.
- Food surplus during the closing of schools shall be distributed among learners identified by the School Based Support Team.
- A certain portion shall be reserved for Grade 12 learners during the enrichment lessons
- No educator or member of the School Governing Body shall receive food parcels from the NSNP.

# SECONDARY SCHOOL



## SCHOOL BASED SUPPORT TEAM POLICY

Name	Position	Designation
	SBST COORDINATOR	HOD
	SIAS COORDINATOR	HOD
	SECRETARY	EDUCATOR
	MEMBER	GUIDANCE TEACHER WITH COUNSELING SKILLS
	MEMBER	WARD COUNCILOR
	MEMBER	YOUTH DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION OFFICER
	MEMBER	POLICE OFFICER
	MEMBER	SGB
	MEMBER	NURSE
	MEMBER	SOCIAL WORKER

### **Roles and responsibilities**

SBST Coordinator: convene and chair meetings

SIAS coordinator: keep records of learners who need additional support

Secretary: take minutes during the meeting

Guidance teacher: provides school based support and counselling services

Other members: participate in discussions and make decisions

### **External support**

Local clinic

District support coordinator

Hospital based psychologist

### **Areas that need support in the school**

#### *Emotional support*

Guidance teacher supports learners with emotional difficulties. Concerns are addressed through emergency pop-up sessions and regular monitoring of learners. a note is given if a child misses class as one cannot predict the time required to manage an emotional crisis.

#### *Academic support*

SBST members are involved in assessing, monitoring and supporting learners with barriers to learning. Information on academic, emotional and social functioning of each learner is required.

**Annexure E: Transcription of data analysis**

<p>Dirty toilets, food not enough, no drinking water, no privacy in toilets, teachers teasing learners, overcrowded classrooms, lack of furniture,</p> <p>No sports activities, pit toilets not safe, fear of snakes, school surrounding not clean, sexual abuse of learners by male teachers unequal treatment of learners, goats disturbing learners, vandalised furniture used as weapons long queues in the toilets, teachers calling learners names, corporal punishment, bad smelling toilets, uneven sports field, teachers ignoring bullying cases, no sports equipments, food prepared on a dirty open place, male learners smoking with teachers, toilets without doors, learners gambling during sports time, littered environment</p>		
<p><b>Poor infrastructure</b></p>	<p><b>Lack of sports opportunity</b></p>	<p><b>Poor social and emotional climate</b></p>
<p>Dirty toilets no privacy in toilets littered environment food not enough pit toilets not safe long queues in the toilets no drinking water bad smelling toilets toilets without doors food prepared on a dirty open place overcrowded classrooms lack of furniture</p>	<p>No sports activities uneven sports field no sports equipments learners gambling during sports time</p>	<p>teachers teasing learners, sexual abuse of learners by male teachers sexual abuse of learners by male teachers teachers calling learners names teachers ignoring bullying cases male learners smoking with teachers</p>

## SUB-THEMES

<b>Poor infrastructure</b>	<b>Lack of sports opportunity</b>	<b>Poor social and emotional climate of the school</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Impact on learners' health</i></li> <li>• <i>Impact on learners dignity</i></li> <li>• <i>Impact on learners' safety</i></li> <li>• <i>Impact on motivation to learn</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Lack of participation in sports contribute to antisocial behaviour</i></li> <li>• <i>Lack of sports impact negatively on learners sense of belonging to the school</i></li> <li>• <i>A lack of opportunity for sport impacts negatively on learners academic performance</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Corporal punishment as a punitive measure triggers learners aggression</i></li> <li>• <i>Teacher behaviour contributes to stigmatisation and a non-supportive climate</i></li> <li>• <i>Bullying creates a hostile and unsafe environment</i></li> <li>• <i>Silence enables sexual abuse of children to continue</i></li> </ul>