Conceptualising a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities

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I dedicate this study to my father,

**WESSEL MARTHINUS VAN SITTERT** (1926-1992),
and I thank God that he was part of my life journey.
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SUMMARY

South African schools face many challenges as they are inundated with dysfunctional behaviour. The research on South African schools indicates that behavioural challenges such as disobedience, swearing, truancy, violence, and bullying are evident in many school contexts. From a reductionist, individualist approach, the focus when addressing these challenges is often on causal factors and dysfunctional individuals rather than on ways in which people relate and interact in schools. It is however evident from a social ecological perspective, that in order to facilitate social change, we need to understand people’s experiences of social interaction in schools as an important context for the enhancement of wellbeing.

The first phase of the PhD project is a base-line exploration of the learners’, educators’ and parents’ experiences of relating and interacting in school communities. A qualitative phenomenological investigation was applied in combination with a cross-sectional descriptive survey design. 1170 learners, ages ranging from 11 to 18 years, 150 parents and 85 educators, from 12 South African schools, participated in the research. The participants completed written assignments that were analysed through the application of global analysis followed by thematic analysis. The findings indicated that enabling ways of relating and interacting were patterned by active engagement and acknowledgement of people. Disenabling social interaction was patterned by disengagement and disregard for people. The findings indicated that both enabling and disenabling ways of relating and interacting, play a crucial role in the enhancement of mental wellbeing in schools, and suggest that schools need to focus more seriously on the ways in which people in schools relate and interact on the everyday micro-levels of social interaction, as suggested by complexity theory.

The second phase of the study comprised a more in-depth investigation into nurturing and restraining relationships between parents, learners and educators in a school community. A single instrumental case study design was applied to gain an in-depth understanding of the complex dynamic interactions between the members of the school community. All the learners and educators in the school were involved
during the work sessions. Nominal group technique was applied to obtain information about their perceptions of relationships in the school community. The work sessions were followed by focus group interviews with 18 educators, 40 learners, the management team, six members of the administrative and terrain staff and two parents. A thematic analysis of the data indicated that nurturing relationships could be understood with reference to connectedness: respect, care and transparent communication; whilst restrained relationships could be understood with reference to limited connectedness between people: abuse of power, shifting of responsibility and disrespect for one another. The findings indicated the need for a sensitive, empathic and non-patronising approach to people in school communities that acknowledge that restrained relationships are inevitably part of the human interaction and understand schools in terms of inter-subjective recursive processes that pattern the relationships between the members of the school community.

In the third phase, the findings of the first two stages of the study were integrated with theoretical perspectives and critical reflections on the findings to conceptualise a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of an enabling school community. The approach encompasses the facilitation of continuous conversations using identified facets of interrelatedness as focal points for the understanding of being together in school communities on a meta-level. It is recommended that the implementation of a relationship-focused approach conceptualised in this study, should be considered as an alternative approach for dealing with the challenges associated with human behaviour that currently prevail in schools. Further research on the implementation of the approach in schools is recommended.

**Key words:**

Social interaction, complexity, school communities, relationships, relationship-focused approach
OPSOMMING

Suid-Afrikaanse skole kom tans voor talle uitdaginge te staan wat verband hou met disfunksionele gedrag. Navorsing wat betrekking het op Suid-Afrikaanse skole toon dat gedragsuitdaginge soos ongehoorsaamheid, vloektaal, ontduiking van skool, geweld en boelie, aan die orde van die dag is in die meeste skole. Vanaf ’n reduksionisties, individualistiese perspektief word daar by die aanspreek van die probleme hoofsaaklik gefokus op die individue wat die gedrag openbaar en die identifisering van moontlike oorsake van die gedrag. Die dinamiese interaksie tussen mense wat moontlik verband kan hou met die probleem word derhalwe geïgnoreer. Vanuit ’n sosiaal-ekologiese perspektief is dit egter voor die hand liggend dat sosiale verandering in skole slegs bewerk kan word indien ons verstaan hoe sosiale interaksie in skole as belangrike kontekste vir die bevordering van welstand ervaar word.

In die eerste fase van die PhD projek is ’n basislyn-studie onderneem om te bepaal hoe sosiale interaksie in skole deur leerders, ouers en opvoeders ervaar word. ’n Kwalitatiewe, fenomenologiese ondersoek is gekombineer met ’n dwars-snit beskrywende opname-ontwerp. 1170 leerders tussen die ouderdomme van 11 en 18 jaar, 150 ouers en 85 opvoeders uit 12 Suid-Afrikaanse skole, het aan die studie deelgeneem. Die deelnemers het geskrewe opdragte voltooi wat ontleed is deur gebruik te maak van globale-analise, gevolge deur tematiese-analise. Die bevindinge het getoon dat instaatstellende wyse van interaksie moontlik verband hou met aktiewe deelname en erkenning van mense. Nie-instaatstellende wyses van interaksie hou moontlik verband met onbetrokkenheid en minagting vir mense. Beide instaatstellende, en nie-instaatstellende patrones, speel ’n wesenlike rol in die bevordering van welstand in skole. Dit is daarom belangrik dat skole meer aandag gee aan die wyses waarop die lede van die skoolgemeenskap met mekaar in interaksie tree, soos aangetoon deur kompleksiteitsteorie.

Die tweede fase van die studie het ’n in-diepe ondersoek na versorgende en beperkende verhoudinge in ’n skoolgemeenskap behels. ’n Enkel-instrumentele-
gevallestudie-ontwerp is gebruik om die in-diepte ondersoek te doen. Al die leerders, onderwysers, administratiewe en terrein personeel van die skool, is by werksessies betrek met die versoek om, aan die hand van nominale groeptegniek, te reflekteer oor verhoudinge in die skool. Hulle is daarna versoek om ’n visuele beelding te maak van die wyse waarop hulle verhoudinge in die skool ervaar. Die werksessies is opgevolg met fokus-groep-onderhoude met 18 onderwysers, 40 leerders, die bestuurspan, ses lede van die administratiewe en terrein personeel en twee ouers. Tematiese analyse van die data het getoon dat versorgende verhoudinge verstaan kan word in terme van verbondenheid tussen mense: respek, sorg en deursigte kommunikasie; terwyl beperkende verhoudinge verstaan kan word met verwysing na beperkte verbondenheid tussen mense: misbruik van mag, die verskuiwing van verantwoordelikheid en disrespek teenoor ander mense. Die bevindinge van die tweede fase het getoon dat daar ’n behoefte is aan ’n meer sensitiewe, empatiese, verhoudingsgerigte benadering in skoolgemeenskappe.

In die derde fase is die bevindinge van die navorsing in die eerste twee fases geïntegreer met die teoretiese perspektiewe en kritiese refleksies van ’n groep kollegas ten einde ’n verhoudingsgebaseerde benadering tot die ko-konstruering van skoolgemeenskappe te konseptualiseer. Die benadering word gekonseptualiseer as die fasilitering van voortdurende gesprekvoering aan die hand van die fasette van interverwantskap. Die fasette dien as fokuspunte vir gesprekke wat die verstaan van saam-wees in skoolgemeenskappe op ’n metavlak fasiliteer. Daar word aanbeveel dat die implementering van die benadering, wat in die studie gekonseptualiseer is, oorweg word as ’n alternatiewe benadering vir die hantering van die uitdagings met betrekking tot menslike gedrag wat tans in skole voorkom. Verdere navorsing oor die implementering van die benadering in skole word derhalwe aanbeveel.

**Sleutelwoorde:**

Sosiale interaksie, kompleksiteit, skole as gemeenskappe, verhouding, verhoudings-gebaseerde benadering
PREFACE

- The thesis is presented in article format as indicated in rule A.14.4.2 of the yearbook of the North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus.

- For purposes of examination the articles are presented as part of a single document consisting of three parts that include an introduction, four articles and the conclusions and recommendations, followed by a single reference list.

- Please note that the term "I", is used in part one and three. In part two the term "researcher" is used to refer to the first author who conducted the research for this study. In article 4 the term "we" is used to include all the authors.

- The articles are formatted according to the guidelines for authors of the Journal of Psychology in Africa (p viii). The articles will be shortened before submission.

- References are formatted according to the American Psychology Association (APA) guidelines (6th edition), throughout the document. Where in-text references refer to three to five authors, the names of all the authors were used the first time the reference appears in each of the four articles as each article is viewed as a separate unit.

- Process documents, raw data and visual images that relate to the research process are presented on the enclosed CD.

- A letter of permission from the co-authors to submit the articles for examination purposes is included on p ix.
LETTER OF PERMISSION

We, the promoter and co-promoter, declare that the input and effort of Ansie Elizabeth Kitching in writing these articles, reflects the research done by her. We hereby grant permission that she may submit these articles for examination purposes in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Doctor Philosophiae in Psychology.

__________________________  ________________________
Vera Roos                        Ronel Ferreira
Promoter                          Co-promoter
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INTRODUCTION TO CONCEPTUALISING A RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED APPROACH TO THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF ENABLING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

CONTEXTUALISING THE STUDY

Schools across the globe are facing serious challenges as human behaviour demands are becoming more complex and problematic due to the social ills besetting society (Colquhoun, 2005). In South Africa, research reveals that social ills such as the destruction of family life, poverty and post-traumatic stress are increasing (Barbarin, Richter & De Wet, 2001). South African schools have become negative contexts characterised by behavioural, emotional and social problems (De Jong, 2000; Lazarus, 2006). Schools today have to deal with complex, emotion-charged human interactions that reflect the complexity of contemporary society (Cilliers, 1998; Radford, 2006). Ontologically, it is accepted that as human beings we are all part of what is essentially a social world. Our lives are closely interwoven with the lives of others in a web of interconnectedness (Gergen, 2009; Josselson, 1996) where schools are one of the most influential social contexts.

The promotion of mental health and wellbeing in schools is consequently receiving increased attention locally and globally. In the Ottawa Charter, the World Health Organisation calls for the construction of enabling school environments as a way of promoting the overall health and wellbeing of young people across the world (McMurray, 1999; Sánchez, Colón & Esparza, 2005; WHO, 1986). The call is echoed in the Salamanca Statement, signed by 92 countries, in 1994 (UNESCO, 1994), which proposes the development of an education and training system that will enable all children to participate actively in the education process and thereby develop their potential and participate as equal members of society. In the Index for Inclusion, a resource for the implementation of inclusion in schools, the creation of a secure, accepting, collaborating and stimulating community is considered essential for learners to perform optimally (Booth & Ainscow, 2001).
The European network of health-promoting schools proposes the development of a healthy lifestyle for all school community members through the creation of supportive environments. In Australian schools, Mind Matters (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling & Carson, 2000) has been developed to advance the mental health and wellbeing of young people. The programme forms a key part of the core business of educators since it is argued that all educators need to be prepared and equipped to promote the mental health of learners. According to Patton et al. (2000), who developed a systemic approach to mental health promotion in secondary schools in Australia, schools are ideal settings for mental health promotion since they allow access to young people at a time when they are struggling with emotional problems and behaviours that may have long-lasting effects on them. The development of health-promoting schools has also received attention in Hong Kong where it was found that schools that adopted a health promotion framework heightened learners’ satisfaction with life (Lee, Cheng & St.Leger, 2005).

In South Africa, the national policy guidelines for the development of health-promoting schools and sites of wellbeing (Department of Health, 2001; 2008), emphasise the holistic development of schools. An approach that has been explored over the past ten years as a way to address human behaviour problems is the Health Promoting Schools Network (Swart & Reddy, 1999). Five areas of action recommended in the framework are the development of policies that promote the wellbeing of members of school communities, the building of safe and supportive teaching and learning environments, the development of strong school-community partnerships, the pursuit of curriculum intervention that focuses on skills development and the development of accessible education support services that include preventative and health promotion programmes (Lazarus, 2006). The framework argues that the promotion of mental health and wellbeing takes place continuously in the physical environment, in the relationships between all those in the school, in the relationships with the community, in the quality of the learning experience, in the systems of discipline, care and support and in the general ethos of the school (Naidoo & Willis, 2000).
Research suggests that the best way to promote mental health and wellbeing in schools is to work with schools as entire communities (Kelly, 2000; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003). The challenge is to make the promotion of mental health and psychological wellbeing the business of every school community member. Every member therefore has to be involved in ways that facilitate ownership and participation. Fox and Prilleltensky (2001), who maintain that in order to co-construct enabling school communities the focus needs to shift from merely dealing with risk factors and individuals at risk to the enhancement of wellbeing on a universal level as argued by Weissberg, Kumpfer and Seligman (2003).

However, despite the awareness of the importance of health promotion in South African schools, little has been done to understand how such enabling environments can be co-constructed. Informed by the current situation in South Africa, the aim of the study was to contribute to the body of knowledge on the co-construction of enabling school communities as social spaces in which the mental health and wellbeing of people can be actively enhanced.

**STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

Despite the awareness of the importance of health promotion in South African schools, mental health and psychological wellbeing are still widely perceived as issues that have to be dealt with by professionals. The behavioural, social and emotional problems experienced in school contexts are therefore referred to professionals who are expected to deal only with the individuals concerned. These referrals tend to involve education support services that include various health, social and learning support services (Lazarus, 2006) of the Department of Education since private professional services are generally not affordable by low and a majority of middle-income households (Visser, 2005).

However, as indicated the support services of the Department of Education face serious challenges due to limited human resources available to provide the services. The services are therefore incapable of dealing satisfactorily
with the challenges faced by schools (Pillay & Wasielewski, 2007). The Whole School Evaluation Project indicated that many schools complained that district officials often have to play a monitoring role due to the lack of human, physical and financial resources in the Department of Education (De Clercq, 2007; Robinson, 2002). Although policy as stated in White Paper 6 (DoE, 2001) aims to strengthen education support services and is committed to an integrated community-based approach, numerous difficulties remain regarding the efficiency of services.

Despite the limited availability of services, schools need to be strengthened to operate as centers of wellbeing where the mental health and psychological wellbeing of learners, educators and parents are enhanced. However, to the contrary the main focus in schools rather is on academic achievement. Mental health and psychological wellbeing are often merely attended to as a way to improve the academic achievement of learners. It is assumed that their emotional needs as well as those of educators and parents are met outside the classroom and school context (Gonzalez & Padilla 1997). The emphasis on academic achievement, according to Smyth (2006), goes hand in hand with the traditional modernist approach, which is based on the principles of Newtonian science and models of orderliness that celebrate logic, reason and calculation and use the language of progress and competition (Saleebey, 2001; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh & DiGuiseppe, 2004). Imbued with metaphors of the machine, this approach seems to hold that human behaviour is explicable and understandable (Morrison, 2002).

The approach has particular implications for the ways in which schools deal with contemporary social, emotional and behavioural problems. Such problems are generally addressed by identifying the symptoms followed by linear, causal explanations and reductionist solutions that do not acknowledge the dynamic interactive nature of the social context. Problems experienced by some learners could, for example, be linked to the non-involvement of the parents. Workshops for parents could then be presented as a way of solving the problems. Other problems could be linked to peer pressure, and the school could then
organise an intervention - often a once-off programme - to inform learners how to take a stance against violence, drug abuse and truancy. Although the programmes may have value for specific individuals for a limited period of time, they are often merely add-ons that are not sustainable in the long term (Patton et al., 2000).

In response to the problems experienced in schools, the traditional modernist approach strives for stability and equilibrium (Bloch, 2005) by introducing stricter behaviour control in schools. The focus is thus on learner conduct and discipline (De Klerk-Luttig & Heystek, 2007; Masitsa, 2008; Oosthuizen & Beckmann, 1998) with the aim of maintaining order and stability within specific parameters for behaviour. Codes of conduct are drawn up to ensure that learners and educators operate within the set parameters and that a culture of human rights is created (DoE, 1996a; 1996b; 2000; Küng & De Waal, 2007). Learners and educators who operate beyond the parameters are punished to constrain them to adhere to the codes of conduct. Behaviour such as bullying, violence, truancy and drug abuse is often explained in linear, causal and reductionist terms as reactive individual behaviour due to inter-psychic conflict. Underlying factors that may cause these behaviours are identified and dealt with in punitive ways without exploring the dynamic interactive relationships between the role-players. Smyth (2006) maintains that disengagement from school by young adolescents often intensifies due to the hardening of educational policy regimes that have made schools less hospitable places for learners, educators and parents.

Departing from a social constructivist ontological position, individuals are viewed as inextricably embedded in their social context as indicated in the literature (Creswell, 2007; Dyer, 2006; Snape & Spencer, 2003; Trickett, Barone & Buchanan, 1996). The co-construction of enabling school communities can therefore not take place when individual members are perceived as monads cut off from others (Stacey, 2007b). Individuals’ behaviour can be understood only in the context of their interactions with others in the school context.
Curative and punitive approaches as ways of addressing social and emotional problems in schools constrain the co-construction of enabling school communities. It is therefore imperative to explore alternatives to individual-based interventions that emphasise dialogue, conscientisation and community engagement (Yen, 2007). Morrison (2002), arguing from a complexity-based perspective, suggests that the focus should be shifted to the relationships between people.

The importance of relationships in school contexts is emphasised in the literature (Fullen, 2001; Howes, 2000; Kruger & Van Schalkwyk, 1997). Konu and Rimpelä (2002) include social relations as an important category in the evaluation of wellbeing in schools. Meier and Wood (2004), in their work on transforming schools into communities, argued that it is through human relationships that a sense of community can be created in a school. She found that the creation of community through relationships impacted on the entire school community. Relationships in schools are also regarded as an important aspect of school climate (Cohen, Pickeral & McCloskey, 2009; Howes, 2000; Hernández and Seem, 2004; Stewart, 2007). In a study by Pretorius and De Villiers (2009), communication, open relationships and trust are identified as critical aspects of a positive climate in schools.

Relationships according to Zins, Elias and Greenberg (2003) are an important part of social-emotional education. Cohen and Sandy (2003) indicate that social-emotional education is a powerful intervention if caring and responsive relationships are valued. Relationships are also indicated as important features of discipline management. Mokhele (2006) in his work on teacher-learner relationships in the management of discipline found that teachers who were successful in managing misbehaviour in the classroom maintained good relationships with learners. He argues that trusting, respectful and co-operative relationships promote the maintenance of discipline. Place of experience literature also highlights relationships as a significant indicator of positive place experience (Langhout, 2004).
The National Department of Education acknowledges the importance of human relationships in the Integrated Quality Management Systems for School-Based Educators (ELRC, 2003) - a performance management and development system for educators at schools in South Africa. The document indicates the following as critical performance standards for educators, sensitivity towards dealing with learner needs; human relations; skills in communicating; and interaction with and ability to co-operate with the other members of the community.

However, a recent study by Mashau, Steyn, Van der Walt and Wolhuter (2008) revealed that although most educators perceived relationships between learners and educators as critically important, they did not know how to develop such relationships. This shortcoming was confirmed by Vieno, Perkins, Smith and Santinello (2005) who indicated that very little research had been done on ways to co-construct enabling school communities from a relational perspective. The same study found that a high percentage of educators did not receive support in creating a positive relationship with learners. Research by Van der Merwe (2004) suggests that educators are often more disinviting than inviting in terms of relational engagements and that they lack the skills to promote interpersonal relationships. It seems that educators assume that by paying compliments and giving hugs they enhance relationships, yet this kind of behaviour might perpetuate a lack of in-depth engagement with learners. Furthermore, the use of metaphors from engineering to describe distant relationships, prescribed roles, expectations and changes in schools according to (Morrison, 2002) contributes to the dehumanisation of schools. In the process, relationships are apparently considered a soft issue that is not as important as academic learning.

The following problems are thus identified in South African schools regarding the challenge to co-construct enabling school communities as social spaces in which mental health and psychological wellbeing are enhanced:

Social behaviour problems are addressed in linear, reductionist ways that involve the identification of factors and efforts to control social behaviour without
insight into the dynamics of human behaviour. This notion implies that individuals who experience social, emotional and behaviour problems are often held responsible for the turbulence in school communities with little attention paid to the ways in which the members relate and interact with each other. The literature also shows that despite evidence that relationships are of critical importance in the co-construction of enabling school communities, educators seem unequipped to facilitate relational wellbeing in schools. The situation is aggravated by the tendency to disregard the relational aspect of schooling as less important than the academic aspect. What seems necessary therefore is a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the research conducted in this study was to conceptualise a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities as an alternative to individual-focused and programme-based interventions. The study thus focused on understanding human behaviour in schools within the context of relationships identified as sites of wellbeing that mediate individual and collective wellbeing in a school community (Prilleltensky, 2001; Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007).

The primary research question in this study was:

How can a relationship-focused approach that facilitates the co-construction of enabling school communities be conceptualised?

In order to answer the primary research question, three secondary questions were addressed:

- How do people relate and interact in schools from a wellbeing perspective?
- How are relationships nurtured in school communities?
- How are relationships restrained in school communities?
In view of the above the main aim of the study was to explore how a relationship-focused approach that facilitates the co-construction of enabling school communities can be conceptualised.

The following subsequent aims were set:

To explore the experiences of learners, educators and parents regarding the ways in which they relate and interact in schools.

To establish how relationships between the members of school communities are nurtured.

To establish how relationships between the members of school communities are restrained.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The research was conducted from a community psychology perspective informed by a conceptual framework that includes various theories on human behaviour and interaction on a systemic, interpersonal and relational level. A community psychology perspective (Duffy & Wong, 2000; Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Lorion & Newbrough, 1996; Levine & Perkins, 1997; Rappaport, 1992; Sarason, 1974) provided the lens through which the problem in the present study was addressed. The field of community psychology is described by Lifschitz and Oosthuizen (2001) as a pragmatic reaction against the limitations of a problem-orientated and individual-centred traditional psychology (p. 123). Sarason (1974) suggests that schools are also perceived as communities. From an educational management perspective, Sergiovanni (1994, 1996) challenges existing theories and metaphors in education that shape the way in which schools are understood as he suggests that schools should be perceived as communities rather than organisations based on the ways people are bonded together in schools.

Community as a construct is often used to refer to groups of people in particular geographical areas which have been targeted for interventions. Another
use of the construct involves the quality of human relationships (Gusfield, 1975, cited in Macmillan & Chavis, 1986). In this study, school communities were understood as relational phenomena through which individuals can act on the world by giving members opportunities to develop affiliations of support and feelings of attachment (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels & DAndrea, 2002; Royal & Rossi, 1996).

According to Strike (2004), schools need to have a sense of community. Sense of community here refers to the psychological aspects of social settings such as schools that act as mechanisms to stimulate the healthy development of an environment (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Sarason, 1974). Sense of community, according to McMillan and Chavis (1986), has four dimensions: membership, influence, integration and shared emotional connection. Membership refers to the feeling of belonging and emotional safety in the community. Influence refers to the cohesiveness and attractiveness that is dependent on the members’ sense of having control and influence in the community. Integration refers to the integrative force created by the common needs, goals and values in a community. Shared emotional connectedness refers to the bonds that develop between members based on positive interactions between them (Obst & White, 2004). According to Royal and Rossi (1997), a strong sense of community provides a more personal supportive environment that facilitates mental health and psychological wellbeing in the staff and learners in school communities by their caring for one other through meaningful interpersonal contact.

Schools as communities are thus viewed as dynamic emergent systems in which the parts are interrelated and influence each other (Flood, 2006; Foster-Fishman & Behrens, 2007). An understanding of environmental influences is therefore needed to explain and manage human behaviour in schools as systems (Trickett et al., 1996). The fundamental tenet of the ecological paradigm is that the environment impacts human behaviour and that people will be able to manage their behaviour better through deeper understanding of specific environmental influences (Dalton et al., 2001; Levine & Perkins, 1997).
As a way of explaining the influence of the environment on people, Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory provides a multi-dimensional model of human development as an alternative to the casual, linear, reductionist, traditional modernist approach. Schools, according to the eco-systemic approach, are a crucial micro-system in young peoples’ lives and therefore central in ensuring the psychological wellbeing of young people in the local community (Green & Engelbrecht, 2001; Lewis et al., 2002; Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2006).

Ecological systems theory conceptualises schools as a micro-level system within the larger macro-system that is divided into various subsystems such as the teachers, the school management, the learners, the parents and other staff members. Human behaviour is developed and maintained through the interactional processes between the various subsystems (Cooper & Upton, 1990; Duffy & Wong, 2000; Visser, 2004). The application of this model in schools has provided insight into the impact of the different systems on the problems experienced by individuals and has encouraged the involvement and participation of all the members of the school community (Donald et al., 2006).

By focusing more specifically on the interactive dynamics between the individuals concerned and the contexts to which they are exposed, socio-ecological theory indicates how individuals influence their environments while simultaneously being influenced by their environments (Dalton et al., 2001). Based on the principles of interdependence, adaptation, succession and distribution of resources identified by Kelly (1990), the theory holds that the facilitation of change requires change in individuals as well as in social systems. The behaviour of the individual members in the school as a system therefore reflects a process of adaptation that continuously changes both the environment and the persons involved in the environment (Levine & Perkins, 1997). From a social-ecological perspective, the problems in a school community are thus perceived as functions of the interaction between individual members and the context. Support should therefore be provided within the context, or the whole context should be part of the intervention (Visser, 2007).
However, due to the presence of multiple variables that are too numerous to be taken into account and the non-linear nature of the interactions between the variables and the dynamic nature of the interactions between the variables complex adaptive systems theory (Byrne, 1998; Cilliers, 1998; Waldrop, 1992), was applied to gain a deeper understanding of schools as complex adaptive systems. Schools can therefore not be described in a wholly analytical and formal way (Cilliers, 2005). In schools, the interaction between individuals as elements of the complex adaptive system is rich in the sense that any element in the system influences and is influenced by other elements in the system non-linearly (Gatrell, 2005). The interaction between individuals as elements of the system is based on a set of rules that requires them to examine and respond to each other’s behaviour in order to improve their behaviour and thus the behaviour of the system they constitute (Stacey, 1996). Owing to the abundance of direct and indirect feedback paths between the elements, the interactions constantly change (Badenhorst, 1995). The agents interacting in the system can therefore produce new outcomes that none of them ever imagined (Bloch, 2005; Stacey, 1996; Zellrmayer & Margolin, 2005). Complexity theory perceives schools as complex, adaptive systems where the interactions between people on the different levels give rise to the behaviour of the system as a whole in non-linear, self-organising ways (Morrison, 2002). The focus in addressing problems in schools should therefore be on the actual dynamic interactions (Stacey, 1997; Davis & Sumara, 2001) between the people in the school context and not only on the behaviour of individuals.

The understanding of dynamic interactions between individuals in schools as complex adaptive systems is informed by social identity theory (Hogg, 2006), which holds that the social identity of individuals is embedded in the knowledge that they belong to groups they value as significant (Brown, 2000; Fiske, 2004). The theory, developed by Tajfel (1974), maintains that social forces configure individual action and thus challenges the injunction that by taking care of individuals the group will take care of itself (Stets & Burke, 2000). By overlooking the meaning of belonging to a group, the important psychological consequences
that groups may have for individuals are disregarded. Social identity theory holds that groups play a significant role in school communities and should not be considered a threat to the mental health and psychological wellbeing of members. Haslam (2004) maintains that the psychology of groups is more than just the sum of the individuals in the group and that the group can facilitate enabling dynamics in the school context.

The understanding of dynamic interactions in schools is furthermore informed by the interpersonal theories (Bowlby, 1977; Sullivan, 1953; Winnicott, 1976). The following theoretical assumptions form the basis of the intra-psychic approaches that was explored as a background to this study (Anchin & Kiesler, 1982):

- Human activity is understood and explained in terms of people who relate to and interact with one another.
- The construct of the self is socially defined.
- Recurrent patterns of interpersonal situations represent distinct combinations of control, affiliation and inclusion.
- Social behaviours are functions of a phenomenological interpersonal stance on experiences of the self and perceptions of the interpersonal behaviour of the other in a particular situation.
- Interpersonal transactions are circular in nature. Due to this circularity, the person shapes and is shaped by the environment through a network of continued feedback.
- Verbal and non-verbal communication is the vehicle for human transactions.

However, the focus of these theories is mainly on interpersonal therapy (Robertson, 1999). The theories concentrate on the space between the self and the other and acquire knowledge associated with the motives, affective responses and images of the self and the other that influence the perceptions of new
interpersonal experiences (Baldwin, 1992). Despite accounting for human interconnectedness and recognising relatedness between individuals as central to development of people, the discourses on relatedness in these theories do not sufficiently address the phenomenon of relating. Relationships in interpersonal theories are often referred to as something that already exists rather than as something that is created in the flow of intention, action and response between people. Josselson (1996), therefore argues that relationships should rather be understood as arising from the flow of interactions between people - from this perspective, relatedness and individuality cannot be seen as dichotomous. The self is realised through the other in a relational matrix. It is accordingly imperative to move beyond the interpersonal level to a relational level where the focus is on the interrelatedness between people across different levels of interconnectedness.

The conceptualisation of relationships as fluid and non-fixed entities that continuously change is supported in the literature (Stewart 2001; Wood, 1995). According to these researchers, the best way to understand relationships as living entities is to recognise that relationships are substituted in the day-to-day communication between people. Each time people communicate, relational patterns that define, who people are with, and for each other are constructed and modified. Relationships are thus perceived as unfinished business that evolves in response to the interactive processes between members of school communities.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating provides a strong relational perspective in the quest for a deeper process-orientated understanding of relationships between school community members. The theory was developed by Stacey (2001; 2003; 2007a; 2007b) and his colleagues (Shaw, 2002; Fonesca, 2002; Griffin, 2002; Streatfield, 2001) in response to the cognitive, humanistic and psychoanalytic psychological theories that postulate the individual as primary to the group. The complex responsiveness processes of relating theory is a combination of the work of Elias and Mead and shows some similarities with inter-subjectivity theory (Stolorow, 1993), the developmental theories of Stern (1995), the theories of Bakhtin (1981) and group-analytic theory (Stacey, 2003).
The theories stress the importance of local actions that take place in the present and from which patterns of being together in school communities emerge in non-linear self-organising ways. Elias, a process sociologist, recognised the influence of interdependence when arguing that individuals always pursue their plans in relationships with one another thus challenging the idea of individual agency (Stacey, 2007a; 2007b). The theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) holds that the interaction between people is a complex non-linear, iterative process of communicative interaction in which the mind, the self and society emerge simultaneously in the living present (Charon, 2005). Inter-subjectivity theory sees people not as objects that merely affect one another but as subjects that form the experience of each other in their interaction (Stacey 2007b). According to Stacey (2007a), these theoretical developments together constitute relational psychology, which as indicated challenge human, cognitive and psycho-analytical psychology’s perspectives on human behaviour.

The essence of relational psychology, according to Stacey (2007a), is the notion that the conversations that people have in their individual minds are silent conversations that they hide from others. Yet these silent conversations arise in the relationships between them. The individual conversations in people’s minds and the relationships between people are therefore often perceived as the same phenomenon seen from different angles where one represents the singular of relationships and the other the plural of relationships. Individuals and groups are thus perceived as being on the same ontological level and as forming and being formed by each other.

The theory of complex responsiveness processes of relating provides a radically alternative way of thinking about the interaction between individuals in a social context such as schools and has been used to understand the interactive dynamics in schools (Morrison, 2002; Radford, 2006). From a complex responsive process of relating perspective, schools are viewed as reiterating patterns of being together. The members of a school community are interdependent, and individual minds are formed by the social interactions between them while they, in turn,
form the social relations in iterative, non-linear self-organising processes (Stacey, 2003).

School communities should consequently be thought of in terms of processes of people relating to and interacting with each other over time (Morrison, 2002). Owing to the complex nature of the interactions between the members of school communities, the theory of complex responsiveness process of relating does not seek causal factors or set clear programme outcomes (Suchman, 2006). Relational processes are rather observed by asking questions about the current patterns of relating and interacting and the ways in which these patterns enable or constrain people in school communities.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The research was designed within an interpretivist paradigm. The paradigm has its origins in hermeneutics and phenomenology based on the qualitative research tradition of Dilthey who emphasises “verstehen” and the studying of “lived experiences” (Niewenhuis, 2007a; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Interpretivism entails an ontology in which the social reality is regarded as the product of processes by which people as social actors construct the social world by sharing and negotiate meanings (Blaikie, 2008). The research text was therefore grounded in the social context (Stein & Mankowski, 2004) and concerned with the subjective accounts and explanations of lived experiences that occur in school communities in an attempt to understand the meaning of the experiences (Bhana & Kanjee, 2007; Swart & Bowman, 2007). The intention was to explore the richness, depth and complexity of relating and interacting in school communities as a way to develop a sense of how people are together in school communities.

Based on the ontological and epistemological positions taken by the researcher, the research methodology was qualitative in nature. Qualitative research methodology allows the use of procedures that are open-ended yet rigorous and captures the complexity of social settings as indicated by Janesick
who compares qualitative research to the choreographing of a dance. Qualitative research promotes an inductive understanding of a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2001). According to Creswell (2007), the meaning of several individuals’ experiences of a phenomenon can be explored with the intention to describe what the participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon.

The study was inductive and naturalistic so as to ensure that the complexity of the phenomenon of human relating and interacting in school communities could be captured as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The study accordingly commenced with a broader focus on the ways in which people relate and interact as explicit indicators of relationships between them, and, as the study progressed, a finer focus on a meta-level understanding of relationships emerged. The data, although collected from individuals, are presented as a composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals.

RIGOR OF THE STUDY

The aim of a rigorous study is to convince the audience that the study is worth taking note of and that the findings represent reality (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). To ensure the rigor of this study I strived to meet the core criteria for rigorous qualitative research, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and authenticity (Bryman, 2001).

The following strategies were applied to ensure credibility:

- An audit trial that includes field notes, raw data, data analysis and interpretations was kept.
- Crystallisation, as a process of telling the same tale from different viewpoints (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Ellingson, 2008), were applied throughout the study.
- Rich, thick descriptions that made it possible for readers to share the experiences of the participants were provided.
Member checking was applied to ensure the accuracy of the qualitative findings by taking the findings back to selected participants to determine whether they thought the findings were accurate (Creswell, 2003).

The findings of this study are not directly transferable to other contexts, since it is not the explicit aim of a qualitative study to generalise the findings (Henning, 2004). The intention of the baseline study conducted in the first study was to provide a representative understanding of relating and interacting in school communities in South Africa and not to generalise the findings. The findings in the second phase of the study was generalised to theory as suggested by De Jong (2000) with the intention to provide a framework for the implementation of a relationship-focused approach that may be applicable in school contexts in general. The onus for transferability at this stage lies with the readers and other researchers to recognise similarities with other contexts. Thick descriptions of the research design and the findings, was therefore provided, to facilitate judgements about possible transferability.

Dependability refers to the degree of consistency with regard to the measuring instrument and the possibility that the same results may be obtained (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Mertens, 2005). The inductive, naturalistic nature of the research conducted in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), significantly influences the processes and outcomes of the study. It may therefore not be possible to guarantee similar findings in other contexts. I did however provide extensive descriptions of the research procedures followed in this study to ensure that the research can be repeated in different contexts.

In an attempt to answer to the criteria of confirmability, I continuously reflected on the way in which my experiences as a learner, parent, lecturer and educational psychologist might have shaped the direction and depth of my understandings of the lives of the participants to become more aware of my own biases as suggested by Gilbert (2001). In addition I relied on my supervisor and peer researchers to act as auditors to ensure that my interpretations were supported by the data. I also included extensive direct quotations to enable other
researchers to acquire insight into the logic that I employed to interpret the raw data.

Authenticity of the study involved the provision of a balanced view of the various perspectives (Mertens, 2005). To ensure authenticity all the viewpoints were carefully considered in the analysis of the data. I also include a range of different perspectives and contributions from the various groups, as well as indicate contradictions, to be fair. Educative and catalytic authenticity was obtained as the members developed appreciation for one another’s viewpoints through their involvement in the work sessions and focus group interviews.

**ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Permission was obtained from the Ethics Committee to conduct the research, which formed part of Project O5K14. Permission to conduct the research was also obtained from the Departments of Education of the North West Province, KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape, Gauteng, Limpopo Province and the Free State Province.

Operating from a position of respect for people and their knowledge and experience, the researcher did the following to ensure that the ethical principles were adhered to.

- Informed consent was obtained from all the participants as well as the parents and guardians who acted as *gatekeepers* (Fraser, Lewis, Ding, Kellett & Robinson, 2004) for participants younger than 18 to safeguard them from exploitation. Informed consent was based on the principles of autonomy and implied that the participants were informed about the nature of the research and participated freely without any coercion (Brydon-Miller, 2008). The researcher also assured those participants who were not comfortable answering the questions that they could withdraw from the research without being punished or penalised in any way.
- Confidentiality and the anonymity were maintained by protecting the identity of the participating schools.
• Care was taken to ensure that no harm was done to any participant during the research process by consulting colleagues who formed part of the community of practice about the methodology and the research process (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005).
• The participants were informed that, in the event of their experiencing any distress in the course of completing the written assignments or participated in the work sessions and focus group interviews they could contact persons listed in their area as capable of providing support.

STRUCTURING THE RESEARCH

The study comprised three consecutive phases (Figure 2). The first two phases included the fieldwork, which was conducted over a period of two years. In the third phase, a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities was conceptualised based on the data from the first two phases and the input of peer researchers.

Diagram 1: The three phases of the study
PHASE 1

Exploring experiences of relating and interacting in school communities

The purpose of the first phase of the research was to conduct a baseline study of learners’, educators’ and parents’ experiences of being together in school communities. A qualitative phenomenological approach was combined with a cross-sectional descriptive design to obtain baseline data across various contexts. The intention with the cross-sectional descriptive survey was to include multiple samples across various sites in order to gain a representative picture of how people are together in school communities and not to generalise the findings. Informed by my ontological position, I therefore considered it more important to understand the socially constructed meanings of the participants than merely to obtain descriptive statistics. Also informed by an inductive interpretative epistemology, I decided to conduct a qualitative survey to obtain written texts created by the participants and to use these texts to describe the phenomenon of relating and interacting in school communities with reference to the experiences of individuals who shared the experience of relating and interacting in school communities (Creswell, 2007) as the unit of analysis.

The selection of the participants took place on two levels: on the contextual level, 12 schools located in four of the nine provinces were selected from the 35 schools that were involved in a larger project. Six schools were in the North West Province, two in Gauteng Province, two in Limpopo Province and two in the Western Cape Province. These four provinces were included based on the availability of trained fieldworkers. The schools included five primary schools (Grades R-7) and seven secondary schools (Grades 8-12). The selection was done through stratified purposive sampling to ensure a variation of the particular phenomenon. The schools were situated in urban, semi-urban and rural areas, thus representing different contexts, and the learners, educators and parents reflected the major ethnic groups in South African society. On an individual level, 1 170 learners aged between 11 and 18 years, 150 parents and 85 educators were selected. The participants were selected on the basis of opportunistic sampling
described by Ritchie (2009) as a flexible approach to the selection of participants using the opportunities that arise in the fieldwork process.

Because of the inductive, emergent approach of the research design, an open-ended assignment was developed to create space in which the participants could share as many experiences as possible. The assignment included two main questions and five sub-questions as a means of structuring the assignment after it was clear from a pilot study that one open-ended question would not provide sufficient data to describe the phenomenon of relating and interacting in school communities. The selected learners were given written assignments that they completed in an hour under the supervision of the researcher or a trained fieldworker. Although present during the research, the researcher and the fieldworkers took on the roles of impassioned listeners in the process of collecting the data to ensure the authenticity of the data. The assignments of the parents and educators were completed in the absence of the researcher or a fieldworker and collected at a later stage from the school.

The data collected in this phase were analyzed using global analysis (Henning, 2004) that involved a holistic reading of the text. After having obtained a sense of the phenomenon in the first phase, thematic analysis of selected data-rich assignments from each school was conducted based on an interpretative reading (Schutt, 2006) of the text. The same process was repeated with the data from all the schools. The data sets were also constantly compared (Merriam, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and finally integrated into a general structure that described the experiences of relating and interacting in schools.

The findings of this phase of the research are reported in Article 1: An exploration of learners’, educators’ and parents’ experiences of relating and interacting in schools.

PHASE 2

The purpose of this phase of the study was to obtain a deeper understanding of the relationships in school communities and to identify the
factors that nurture or restrain relationships between the members of a school community. A single instrumental case study design was applied. An instrumental case study is examined to gain insight into the phenomenon of relating and interacting (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2005). The intention with a single case study is to develop an in-depth description and analysis of a particular case. The closeness of the case study to real-life situations allows for a nuanced view of reality.

The case in this study was selected due to its accessibility and the representation of a more typical context. The school community was not a homogeneous entity but consisted of various subgroups with differing access to power and resources (Kelly & Van der Riet, 2001). The participants consequently included all the learners (N=736), educators (N=33), administrative staff (N=8) and two parents. The researcher entered the school with the aim of understanding what Shaw (2002) refers to as intricate narratives and abstract systematic frameworks that people construct in their relational communication with one another.

Based on the argument that the research data will be much more valid if the participants are actively involved in the research, as argued by Schein (2008), it was decided to explore ways of collecting data that would actively engage as many members of the school community as possible. The principles of participatory action were consequently applied in the data collection process (Borda, 2006). The participatory ethos of community psychology values members of the community as participants and never as subjects – where the researcher is an active participant who endeavours to involve as many stakeholders as possible (Kelly & Van der Riet, 2001). According to Swantz (2008), participatory action research breaks away from positivist and empiricist science, as researchers walk shoulder to shoulder with participants in search of the common good and in a mutual spirit of wellbeing rather than assuming an “expert” positions one step ahead of participants. Through the application of these principles the study gave voice to parents, children and educators as equally important members of the school community.
The inclusion of learners as participants was particularly important in the study since it was noted that, despite the important role that schools play in learners’ lives, most studies do not include learner voices about matters that concern them (Buchanan-Barrow, 2005; Hood, Kelly & Mayhall, 2007). Due to the anticipated prolonged engagement in the school, I negotiated my entry into the school community and established a working relationship with the school community members before starting the research by visiting the school to explain the purpose of the research and familiarise myself with the context.

In terms of the data collection, Phase 2 consisted of two separate stages:

In the first stage, the learners and educators in the school community participated in work sessions. Each work session involved all the learners in a particular grade group - the groups fluctuated between 100 and 149 members. According to Martin (2006), large group processes are increasingly used to promote the active engagement of all participants in sharing their individual experiences and generating a more collective understanding of their experiences. During the work sessions, the participants created visual images in the form of posters to illustrate these collective experiences (See examples on the CD).

In the second stage, nine open-ended focus group interviews were conducted. Following Niewenhuis (2007b), the open-ended interviews took the form of conversations about the ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviour of the participants. Aware that my position as researcher could be experienced as intimidating due to the hierarchal power relationships that exist in the school community, I facilitated an open, relaxed atmosphere in the focus groups that allowed participants to guide the conversations (Bryman, 2001).

The focus group interviews included the following subgroups in the school community: the learners (four focus groups, Grade 8-11); the educators (two focus groups); the management team (one focus group); the administrative and terrain staff (one focus group) and the parents (one focus group). Focus groups were selected as this choice allowed critical interactional dynamics that constitute
collective meaning-making. With the exception of the learner focus groups, all the other focus groups involved all the members of the particular sub-grouping. The participants in the learner focus groups were selected through stratified purposive sampling so that a group that displayed variation on a particular phenomenon could be selected (Ritchie, 2009). It was borne in mind that conducting interviews with adolescents could pose particular problems since they might be reluctant to talk about certain aspects of their lives. The challenge was to create as natural a context as possible and to address the power relations between the researcher and the group at the onset of the interview (Eder & Fingerson, 2001).

Fontana & Frey (2005) describe interviewing as one of the most powerful ways in which to understand fellow human beings. Interviews as conversation involve the art of listening and asking questions and provide a way to overcome distance in space and time as various experiences across a certain time span can be discussed (Peräkylä, 2005). The interviewer becomes a partner who facilitates the space for the participants to express their own voices unconditionally (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). In the process, situated understandings that are grounded in specific interactional episodes are created (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The data were analyzed inductively. An inductive approach means that identified themes link up strongly with the obtained data. In this study, reading the text was a multi-stage process as described by Dyer (2006). The reading implied the identification of large-scale themes followed by a close look at the form taken by instances of the themes in relation to each other. In the first phase, the thematic analysis was more semantic as it focused on the explicit level of relating and interacting in schools. In the second phase, the focus shifted to a more latent thematic analysis that involved a meta-level analysis. Thematic analysis is compatible with constructionist paradigms in psychology based on its ability to provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data.
PHASE 3

In this phase, a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities was conceptualised based on the research in the first two phases. Theoretical perspectives and the findings of the first and second phase of the study were integrated though a process of crystallisation (Ellingson, 2008).

1.9 LAYOUT OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

PART 1

Introduction: Context, conceptual framework and research design

PART 2

Article 1: An exploration of learners’, educators’ and parents’ experiences of relating and interacting in school communities

PART 3

Article 2: Towards an understanding of nurturing relationships in school communities

Article 3: Towards an understanding of restraining relationships in school communities

PART 4

Article 4: A relationship-focused approach to facilitate the co-construction of enabling school communities

PART 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

1.10 JOURNAL CONSIDERED FOR PUBLICATION

Journal of Psychology in Africa
ARTICLE 1: AN EXPLORATION OF LEARNERS’, EDUCATORS’ AND PARENTS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES OF RELATING AND INTERACTING IN SCHOOLS: A BASELINE STUDY

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Abstract

The current challenges school face in dealing with human behaviour is often ascribed to the behaviour of individuals who experience social and emotional while little attention is paid to the ways in which the members relate and interact with each other. The purpose of this article was to conduct a base-line study on social interaction in schools as experienced by learners, educators and parents. A qualitative phenomenological approach was followed combined with a cross-sectional descriptive survey design. All told, 170 learners aged between 11 and 18 years, 150 parents and 85 educators from 12 South African schools participated in the research. The participants completed written assignments that were analyzed using global analysis followed by thematic analysis. The findings revealed that social interaction plays a crucial role in schools and that, if we want to bring about social change in South African schools, we will have to focus more closely on the ways people in schools relate to and interact with one another in their daily social interaction as suggested by complexity theory.
Introduction

Schools are considered important contexts for promoting the psychological wellbeing of people (Farmer & Farmer, 1999; Langhout, 2004). The promotion of psychological wellbeing in schools is particularly important in South Africa because of social issues such as poverty, unemployment, HIV/Aids, violence and substance abuse. Research conducted in South African schools indicates that disobedience, swearing, truancy, violence, bullying and peer victimisation are widespread (Burton, 2008; De Wet, 2003; Masitsa, 2008; Nesor, Van der Merwe, Maseko, Ovens, Ladikos & Prinsloo, 2003; Du Plessis, Conley & Du Plessis, 2007). In 2006, the Department of Education announced that violence and ill-discipline in schools required urgent attention (Hindle, 2006). Other recurring issues are teacher absenteeism, teacher stress and teacher burnout (Mostert, Jackson & Montgomery, 2005; Motseko, 2005).

The above challenges are met by applying an individualistic, linear, causal and reductionist approach (Morrison, 2002; Radford, 2006). Such an approach is based on logic, reason and calculation and is often described in terms of machines and engineering (Morrison, 2002; Saleebey 2001; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh & DiGuisepppe, 2004). Schools are seen as collections of autonomous, rational individuals who have to be controlled to ensure that order is maintained. In the endeavour to control individuals, codes of conduct are developed (De Klerk-Luttig & Heystek, 2007; Küng & De Waal, 2007; Cherian & Maree, 2009). In terms of this approach, various forms of punishment are furthermore introduced to ensure that learners and educators operate within certain specific parameters to control learners (Badenhorst, Steyn & Beukes, 2007; Masitsa, 2008; Oosthuizen, 2007). Similarly, learners, who experience serious emotional and behavioural problems, are referred for support to professionals. After the treatment they have to return to the same environment where the problems arose in the first instance. Scant attention is given to the extent to which the social interaction between people in the school environment could have contributed to the development of such learners.
The primary focus on the control of individual behaviour as a way of dealing with the problems in South African schools is challenged from a community psychology perspective. A contextual approach is proposed because of the significant effect of the environment on human behaviour, wellbeing can be promoted more effectively through a better understanding of specific environmental influences (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Levine & Perkins, 1997). This view is based on the premise that human behaviour, including dysfunctional behaviour, does not develop in a social vacuum (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2006), as suggested by social ecological theory (Trickett, Barone & Buchanan, 1996). According to these theories all parts of a school system are interconnected, and individuals are closely linked to their immediate settings (Cooper & Upton, 1990). The principles of interdependence, distribution of resources, adaptation and succession are at the heart of social ecological theory (Kelly, 1990). If the theory is applied to schools, the implication is that schools are regarded as non-linear feedback systems that generate complex behaviour as proposed by complex adaptive systems theory (Badenhorst, 1995; Cilliers, 1998; Morrison, 2002; Stacey, 2007a; Radford, 2006; Waldrop, 1992). According to this theory, behaviour co-evolves in the ordinary, everyday social interactions between the people in the school system in self-organising ways without intention or direction (Minas, 2005; Stacey 2003). Morrison (2002) suggests that the focus in schools should be on the exploration of ordinary, everyday experiences as a way to gain insight into the enabling and disenabling patterns of being together in school communities. However, there seems to be a gap in our understanding of these ordinary, everyday experiences (Buhs, Ladd & Herald, 2006) despite the indications in research that an understanding of how youths and adults experience social interactions is critical to the improvement of setting outcomes (Tseng & Seideman, 2007).

The purpose of the study was to identify and describe ways of relating and interacting experienced as enabling and disenabling from a wellbeing perspective. The aim therefore was to explore the lived experiences of learners, educators and parents in South African schools. More specifically, the questions asked in this
study were: how do people relate to and interact with one another in school communities, what enabling patterns emerge in their interactions, what disenabling patterns emerge in their interactions, and what is the interplay between the ways in which people relate to and interact with one another and wellbeing in schools?

**Research design and methodology**

The research was conducted from an interpretative, phenomenological point of view in order to describe what the participants had in common regarding their lived experiences of relating and interacting in schools (Creswell, 2003; Niewenhuis, 2007a). The research described the ways in which the learners, educators and parents experienced the lived reality of social interaction in schools (Giorgi, 2000). Ontologically, it was assumed that the social world is constructed through the shared meanings that people ascribe to social interactions through ongoing communication and negotiation (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008; Neuman, 2006). Epistemologically, it was assumed that humans are meaning-making, meaning-ascribing beings. The participants’ descriptions of their social interactions with others thus contributed to an understanding of their experiences of and the meaning they attached to social interaction in the schools in the study (Willig, 2001).

The phenomenological method developed by Giorgi (1997) was applied to obtain descriptions of the lived experiences of the social interactions of the learners, parents and educators in the particular schools. Personal, subjective experiences were therefore used to obtain an understanding of human behaviour in the schools as a particular context of social life (McNiff, 2002; Lincoln, 2002). Although samples in this kind of research are usually small, it was decided to involve a larger group of participants to ensure that the study represented multiple realities. A further objective was to obtain baseline data on the phenomenon of relating and interacting in schools (Krefting, 1991). The inclusion of a wide range of experiences also ensured that a-typical and non-normative participants took part in the research, which strengthened the credibility of the
data (Mertens, 2005). To enable the inclusion of a larger group of participants, primary documents in the form of written assignments completed by the participants were used instead of face-to-face interviews.

Research context

As the research context for the study was schools in South Africa, some background information on the functioning of schools in the country is needed. The education system has undergone radical changes since 1994, changing from a fragmented system based on segregation and racial inequality characteristic of the apartheid system to a single non-discriminatory system. However, major discrepancies still exist between schools in terms of representation of the population, number of learners in classrooms and resources (Mashau, Steyn, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2008). The number of learners in classrooms, for example, ranges between 30 and 70 depending on the area and the financial resources of the school. Many schools also report concern about the lack of involvement of parents (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2004) and stress among educators (Eloff & Kriel, 2005; Mostert, Jackson & Montgomery, 2005; Schulze & Steyn, 2007). Corporal punishment has been abolished, and new strategies for the maintenance of discipline in schools have been provided by the Department of Education in the form of codes of conduct and disciplinary procedures (DoE, 2002; Naong, 2007). The maintenance of discipline is one of the most researched topics in the literature on South African schools (Mokhele, 2006; Pienaar, 2003), and the lack of psychological and social support provided by schools remains a major shortcoming in the South African education system (Pillay & Waseleski, 2007).

Participants

The larger project of which this study formed part included participants from 35 schools in six provinces selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the project. The 12 schools included in this study, as well as the participants in each context were selected purposively to ensure maximum
variation in contexts and participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The decision to include participants from these schools was furthermore based on the fact that the fieldwork was conducted either by the researcher herself or trained fieldworkers. The participants from the 12 schools included learners (n=1 170), educators (n=85) and parents (n=150).

The 12 schools are situated in four of the nine provinces in South Africa: six in the North West, two in Gauteng, two in Limpopo and two in the Western Cape. The schools include five primary schools (Grades R-7) and seven secondary schools (Grades 8-12). The schools are situated in urban, semi-urban and rural areas thus representing different settlement contexts, and the learners, educators and parents in the schools represent the major ethnic groups in South African society.

Research process

An in-depth description of the research methods and procedures is given to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bryman, 2001). The research process commenced, by obtaining permission for the research from the departments of education of the four provinces in which the 12 schools are located. After permission was obtained, the school principals were contacted to inform them about the study and to request their consent.

In order to obtain baseline data on social interaction in school systems, participants from different contexts were included in the research and asked to write assignments that included an open question. The initial open question was: *There are times at school when you feel good and times when you do not feel good. Write a letter to someone whom you trust and tell the person about those times. You can also write a story or a poem or draw a picture to tell about these times.* The assignment was piloted with a group of 30 learners, two parents and two educators. The feedback indicated that the question was too vague. The question was then rephrased and re-piloted with the same group, and the new feedback indicated that the question was now clear and understandable. The final
assignment as adapted after the pilot study consisted of two open-ended questions each followed respectively by two and three specifying questions to guide the participants in describing their lived experiences of social interaction in their particular school context (see data gathering).

The researcher trained four fieldworkers to assist her with the research. The training included orientation on the ethical principles of research (Berg, 2004; Babbie, 1999), a discussion on the rationale of the research, and a discussion on the assignment and the procedure to gather the data. Learners between Grade 5 and 12 were selected with the help of the principal and educators. After consent and assent had been obtained from the parents and the learners, the data collection commenced. The learners at the selected schools completed the written assignment under the supervision of the researcher or a fieldworker after they had received a briefing on the project and the ethical considerations. In order to ensure that the learners participated voluntarily, they were given the choice to withdraw from the research without any negative consequences to themselves while the other learners proceeded with the assignment. The educators and principals were not present during these sessions to ensure anonymity and confidentiality (Berg, 2004). The learners had an hour to complete the assignment. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the research, the researcher and the fieldworkers made sure that the written assignments were clearly understood. The participating educators and parents were selected on the basis of their willingness and availability. They received the written assignments in sealed envelopes and were asked to fill them in for collection later by the researcher or the field workers. In order to ensure the authenticity of the written assignments, all the assignments were completed anonymously - the learners completed the assignments under the supervision of the researcher or a trained fieldworker; and the parents and educators completed the assignments on their own and sent them back to the school for collection in sealed envelopes.
Data gathering

Hayes (2004) argues that one cannot know about peoples’ lives without understanding their experiences. Lived experiences refer to peoples’ subjective experiences of a social interaction at a particular time in a particular setting (McNiff, 2002). In this study, as indicated the participants’ lived experiences of their everyday social interactions in the school context were obtained through written assignments containing open-ended questions. Primary data sources classified by Neuman (2006) as original written material of the participants’ own experiences and observations of others’ experiences were generated through the completed assignments. The assignments were considered personal documents that provided accounts of the participants’ subjective interpretation of relating to and interacting with others (Strydom & Delport, 2002).

The assignment questions were:

Write about times with other people at school when you feel excited and involved.
Why do you feel excited and involved?
How does feeling excited and involved influence you?
Write about times with other people at school when you feel unhappy and uninvolved.
Why do you feel unhappy and uninvolved?
How does feeling unhappy and uninvolved influence you?
How do you deal with these unhappy feelings?

The participants could also describe their experiences by writing an essay or a poem that dealt with their experience and included their answers to these questions.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis - an iterative, reflexive process (Schutt, 2006) - enabled the researcher to explore the written texts as artefacts of social
communication. The unit of analysis (Babbie, 1999) was the experiences of being together in schools. In the first phase of the analysis, the researcher adopted a phenomenological approach by bracketing past knowledge about the phenomenon and positing the phenomenon as experienced (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008) by the participants. Global analysis (Henning, 2004) was done during the first reading of the texts, that is, the textual data were read holistically to obtain an integrated view of the information. While reading the texts, the researcher made notes and drew concept maps to obtain a global understanding of the learners’ lived experiences of the social context in South African schools. In the process, she selected data-rich assignments for further analysis.

After having obtained a sense of the phenomenon in the first phase, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the selected data-rich assignments from each school. This analysis involved an interpretative reading (Schutt, 2006) of the descriptions of individual lived experiences as described by the participants with the aim of identifying meaning units that conveyed partial meanings of the whole. This was followed by a process whereby meaning units were transformed into expressions that conveyed the psychological sense of the participants’ descriptions. The same process was repeated with the data from all the schools. The data sets were constantly compared (Merriam, 2001), and finally the themes and subthemes relating to the lived experiences of participants were listed, integrated and refined by introducing a structure that indicated the relationships between the themes and the subthemes. The final themes were those arrived at after integrating, refining and structuring all the themes each of which had quotations that illustrated the particular theme. Ultimately, a general structure of the lived experience was developed to gain an understanding of how the meaning units of analysis related to each other.

In order to ensure rigorous data analysis, the researcher took note of the way in which her own assumptions and biases might shape the direction of the analysis (Gilbert, 2001; Willig, 2001). Besides the bracketing of past experiences, throughout the analysis of the study, the researcher also critically reflected on her own assumptions and biases toward school contexts based on personal
experiences as a learner, an educator and a parent. She also challenged these assumptions during the data analysis by discussing the findings with her supervisor and peers as suggested by Mertens (2005).

**Ethical considerations**

This study is part of a project entitled “An exploration of enabling contexts” for which ethical approval has been granted by the Ethics Committee of the North-West University (ethical number 05K14). Permission was obtained to do the research from the departments of education of the four provinces concerned. The school principals, parents and learners were also informed about the research project and the reason for the study, and they were told that the aim was to gain a better understanding of social interaction in schools. Informed consent was given by the participants and, in the case of learners, their parents as well. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. The trust of the participants was gained through the personal involvement of the researcher and the fieldworkers in the data collection process. The participants were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. In order to protect the participants, the researcher did all she could to ensure that they were comfortable with answering the questions before they proceeded with them. If they were not comfortable, they were encouraged to withdraw from the process. In the event of the participants experiencing distress in the course of completing the written assignments, they could contact the researcher who is a registered psychologist or request a list of names of people in their area who could assist them.

**Findings**

The study was conducted as a baseline study, and the inductive data analysis revealed two main themes, namely enabling and disenabling ways of relating to and interacting with other people. Each main theme revealed subthemes and supportive themes as indicated in Diagram 2 below.
Diagram 2: Themes, subthemes and supportive themes emerging from the baseline data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Supportive themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ENABLING WAYS OF RELATING AND INTERACTING | Active engagement between people | ❖ Participation in activities and events  
❖ Collaborating with one another  
❖ Sharing information, ideas and stories |
|                                      | Acknowledging people                | ❖ Recognition of peoples’ opinions and achievements  
❖ Supporting one another  
❖ Encouraging one another |
| DISENABLING WAYS OF RELATING AND INTERACTING | Disengagement between people       | ❖ Pretending to be in control  
❖ Stereotyping people  
❖ Favouring people |
|                                      | Disregard for people                | ❖ Harming people’s integrity and reputation  
❖ Humiliating people through teasing and ridicule  
❖ Excluding people from involvement  
❖ Fighting with one another |

ENABLING WAYS OF RELATING TO AND INTERACTING WITH OTHER PEOPLE as a main theme refers to the ways of relating and interacting experienced as promoting a sense of happiness and involvement about being together in a school. The main theme and subthemes discussed below reflect enabling experiences of being together in schools. The quotations are verbatim and have not been edited for the sake of authenticity.

ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN PEOPLE refers to active involvement with one another in schools and was evident in participation in events and
activities; collaborating with one another and sharing information, ideas and stories.

**Participation in activities and events**

Participants refer to participation in sports meetings, derby days, choirs, camps, school tours, school dances and musicals as a way of enhancing a sense of being actively engaged in the school community. According to the parents and the learners, participation in these events and activities provided opportunities to connect with other people thus promoting a sense of inclusion: *I get excited when games are played among the grades. You get to know each other and involvement is essential since we need all people to win a game and to have fun together.* The participants apparently felt included irrespective of whether they were part of a team or merely spectators, as reported by a parent: *It makes me feel excited and happy when there are sport and cultural activities at the school in which my children are involved and I can support them.*

**Collaborating with one other**

The participants reported that, when they worked together with other people in the school, they experienced a sense of unity with the people in the group or those involved in the project and were motivated by the collaborative efforts: *I feel involved because I actually do get a chance to work with other people, being in the company of friends, helping each other with our work or projects, even assignments. It influences me in a very good way because this is what makes me wake up in the morning and get ready for school.* They also indicated that when they worked together in groups in the classroom or on projects, as well as in the organising of events, they felt appreciated for their creativity and talents: *Then there are the functions where you can help to prepare and decorate the hall – just letting your creativity flow makes you feel excited and part of the school.* The learners particularly enjoyed the opportunity to collaborate with their friends: *It is during times when my friends are maybe organising something for the school and they ask me to help that I feel involved,*
because it is an opportunity for me to show them what I can do and what my talents are. The collaboration motivated them to accept joint responsibility and accountability.

Sharing information, ideas and stories

The learners said that they told one another jokes, secrets and stories about their own lives. They also talked to one another about their dreams for the future: I feel excited when I am with friends, especially when we are chatting about our future or when we share jokes. Sharing between the learners took place during breaks. They were also allowed time to share the details of their experiences in life orientation classes and sometimes in other classes. The learners said that they felt energised when they shared their joys as well as their sorrows with friends: I feel excited and involved when I am socialising with my friends. To me friendships are very important because when times are tough, I need friends to be there for me, but not only when times are tough, I also need them when times are exciting.

The parents reported that they shared what happened to their children in the classroom in informal discussions with one another when they attended events at the school. They also shared information about important issues during meetings. Through sharing, they apparently also gained insight into what was going on in their children’s lives: As parents we stand around and chat with each other at such events and one finds out what is going on in the school, in particular about what is going on in the classrooms. They also shared their thoughts about school issues: I feel involved when we attend meetings, because we can discuss burning issues. It influences me to disclose my feelings. Contrary to the disclosures of the parents, the educators reported that although they sometimes shared concerns with colleagues, they preferred to share their problems with their partners or their friends who were not involved in the school.
**ACKNOWLEDGING PEOPLE** refers to an empathetic awareness of people’s needs and a willingness to engage with people who are in a disposition and, if necessary, act on their behalf.

**Recognition of people’s opinions and achievements**

The learners reported that when they were allowed to express their opinions, they felt valued by others and part of the group. The learners had such opportunities when they worked together in class: *I feel involved when we do group work and group discussions. You share different ideas with people you know. It makes me feel part of something.* The learners also said that they achieved recognition when they did well in academic work, cultural activities and sport. They also gained recognition through the opportunities they were given to showcase their talents: *It is times when they are maybe organising something for the school and they ask me to help them ... because it is an opportunity for me to show them what I can do and what my talents are.*

The parents felt recognised when they were given the opportunity to take part in decisions about the school even though they could not necessarily attend meetings. They also felt energised when their contributions were acknowledged: *I feel excited and involved when we acknowledge one another and work together for the benefit of the school.*

For the educators, recognition implied being involved in decisions that influenced their own lives. They reported that learners expressed their appreciation by saying thank you, writing letters of appreciation or giving them hugs. The parents thanked them for their hard work, and their fellow educators congratulated them on tasks well done.

**Supporting one other**

According to the learners, they most often experienced support in the social networks formed by friends. The support of friends evidently gave them the strength to cope with situations that they might otherwise not have been able to
face. Friends also supported one another when they experienced the same problems: *I have a strong support system, a system made of friends and circles of friendships. I feel excited because I realise that we are there for one another and we care about each other as friends. It influences me in many ways because it shows that we care and respect each other the way we should. If you have a problem at home they [friends] are there for you and they give you support, they don’t stab you in the back.*

The educators apparently supported learners who experienced problems, and they were prepared to listen to them when they confided in them about their problems. The learners experienced the support from educators as comforting: *Knowing that the teachers are there to help me and are there to listen to whatever problems I have ... they care for me makes me feel safe.* The educators reported that they found it easier to support learners when they were involved on a more informal level with them, for example during sports practices or when they worked together on projects. The educators also offered support when they contacted parents about their child’s school work or when there was illness or trouble at home. When the educators invited parents to talk to them about their children, it was perceived by some parents as an opportunity to show their support for their children: *I believe it is my responsibility to get to know the teachers and assist where possible to be aware of any problem my child might be having at school. It also shows my children that I do care about them.*

**Encouraging one another**

The encouragement among the learners included being challenged to persevere: *When I take part in athletics everybody says: “Run you are almost there, you are going to win”.* The learners reportedly also encouraged one another to deal with the problems they encountered in their lives and challenged one another to behave well: *Friends appreciate who I am, respect me and show me the light when I am doing something wrong - have my best interests at heart - encourages me to do my best in everything.*
Some of the educators evidently encouraged learners to excel in academic work, and they also provided challenges that contributed to the development of learners as human beings. One participant described the encouragement of an educator as follows: *The day we had an assignment our teacher helped us to be confident and stop being shy. She taught me how to speak in front of the class without being scared and panicking.* The parents said that they acknowledged and appreciated the encouragement from educators since it enabled their children to do well. One parent stated: *Encouragement from educators makes my child bloom.*

**DISENABLING WAYS OF RELATING AND INTERACTING** as a main theme refers to the ways of relating to and interacting with others that evoke a sense of being uninvolved and unhappy about being together in schools. The subthemes and supportive themes discussed below indicate the disenabling experiences of being together in schools.

**DISENGAGEMENT BETWEEN PEOPLE** refers to ways of relating and interacting that create distance in terms of social coherence between people in schools. Such distance promotes a lack of social coherence between people in schools.

**Pretending to be in control**

The participants reported that they pretended to be in control by hiding their feelings and intentions since it seemed the only option for dealing with conflict in most instances. The participants who hid their true feelings seemingly experienced strong inner conflict: *I feel alone and unwanted as if nobody cares about me. I never cry, I always keep everything bottled inside. Sometimes I wish I could burst out of my own skin so that I can be free.*

The learners who felt frustrated apparently did not talk about their experiences but rather kept their feelings to themselves and even pretended to be happy. Some of the learners reported that they pretended to be friends with learners whom they not really consider to be their friends: *Lately at school I have
been feeling unhappy with my friends because I don’t feel I could trust them. Some of them smile at you and pretend to like you while in actual fact they’re spreading rumours about you. They furthermore often pretended that they were coping when, in fact, they were struggling: There are many times when I just feel like I’ve got to show a happy face while it hurts inside. Well there is nothing much I can do than keeping it to myself.

The parents reported that they often pretended to accept certain situations by quietly withdrawing from them rather than expressing their true feelings or confronting the people involved: There is no opportunities in the form of parent, teacher forums where matters can be discussed. The negative feelings are therefore bottled up inside and there is no positive relationship between myself and the school.

Some educators said that they hid their true feelings to avoid conflict: I do not handle fighting between educators very well. I usually try to ignore it, since I do not like to participate in confrontations. The educators added that some colleagues who did not do their work properly covered up their shortcomings by pretending that everything was under control.

**Stereotyping people**

Stereotyping was evident in the generalisations about people based on their characteristics or circumstances. One participant described stereotyping as being classified and put in a frame from which you find it hard to escape. The learners indicated that stereotyping was most often based on appearance, gender, culture, class, achievement in school, performance in sport and associations with particular groups in the school. In some instances, stereotyping was expressed explicitly, and, in other instances, it was indicated through non-verbal cues: It hurts me when they stare at me when I do not wear the right shoes, because my mother as a single parent cannot afford other shoes. The learners in the study who perceived themselves as more powerful than other learners tended to stereotype others: Some children think they are better than me and consider
themselves higher because I do not stay with my parents and get everything that I want. At the same time, the learners who blamed others for stereotyping often behaved similarly in that they reportedly labelled those who stereotyped them as the “in-group” or the “rich kids” or the “macho rugby dudes”.

There were indications that some of the parents and even the educators condoned the stereotyping of fellow learners since they reportedly also looked down on parents and educators whom they considered less powerful or who had different perspectives on life. Stereotyping based on ethnicity was also evident, particularly in contexts where certain ethnic groups were in the minority. Some educators and, on occasion, even principals stereotyped learners by calling them derogatory names.

**Favouring people**

According to the learners, some educators explicitly distinguished between their favourite learners and other learners by treating them differently. One participant described this practice as follows: *The teachers always have favourites. They will treat you like crap and carry their favourites on their hands.* The perceived unfairness associated with favouritism seemingly evoked sadness and pain in the participants who were not favoured: *It sometimes makes me so sad because I know that I work hard, however I will never get good marks because the teacher does not like me.*

The parents confirmed that educators had favourites. According to them, some educators tended to address the needs only of learners who succeeded and did not explain the work to other learners who made mistakes. The parents added that educators sometimes included their favourites in sports teams without taking merit into account. The learners who were favoured seemingly received more opportunities, did better and escaped punishment when they misbehaved. Sometimes other learners might even be blamed when the favourites were at fault.
The parents also reported that some parents were favoured because of their financial contributions to the school. The educators suggested that some educators were favoured by management and reported that the opinions of favoured educators seemed to be valued higher than those of other educators: *My suggestions are swept of the table without being properly listened to ... while other educators always get a chance to make suggestions.*

**DISREGARD FOR PEOPLE** means disrespect and a lack of consideration for other people and negates other people’s rights through mean behaviour.

**Harming people’s integrity and reputation**

The harming of people’s integrity and reputation involves interaction in the course of which other people are in some way harmed in their absence. The learners said that some learners tended to gossip about the problems of fellow learners in their absence. Even learners who were friends gossiped about one another when they experienced problems in their friendships.

The educators complained about the false stories that learners and parents reportedly told about them. They mentioned that these stories were often apparently accepted as the truth by the principals without discussing the issues with them. One participant responded as follows: *Learners tell lies at home and their parents and even principals often believe their stories.* The parents were seemingly also disturbed by the false stories spread among parents: *What is upsetting is the gossip-talk that is spread amongst the parents.* The parents and the learners also reported that they were aware that educators gossiped about them.

The notion to harm people’s integrity, evoked resentment and anger and although participants talked to others about the harming of their reputation they did not always find it easy to deal with their own feelings: *I stay angry for a while and just hate her. One cannot do much more.*
Humiliating people through teasing and ridicule

Humiliating people means putting other people down in front of a group. In this study, the participants often referred to teasing as a form of humiliation where teasing involved nasty, insensitive and rude remarks such as: Hey microphone head / hey, skinny. One learner who lost his parents was reportedly teased about his “six feet under” parents. Other participants referred to being teased about their appearance: Many children tease me about my weight because they know that it is my weak spot and that I quickly get emotional when teased.

The learners reported being ridiculed by educators because they did not understand the work. Educators apparently humiliated learners by making remarks about poor performance in front of the whole class or in front of the whole sports team. One participant described the humiliation as follows: I feel unhappy when the teacher picks on me and makes rude remarks or shouts at me in front of the class.

The educators, at the same time, were apparently humiliated by learners who made noises in class and did not listen to them when they spoke. In addition educators complained about being humiliated by colleagues. Some of the younger educators reported that their tasks were sometimes allocated in humiliating ways: I do not understand why they have to bark at use when they allocate tasks.

Excluding people from involvement

Excluding people refers to the process of preventing people from being involved by shutting them out. Exclusion can be seen as a continuum of interactions involving exclusion in different degrees. The following descriptions by the learners reflect a continuum of exclusive interactions:

I feel very bad when my friends at school are not interested in what I am saying to them, and ignore me.

When I came to school and everyone was sitting under the trees and I went to them and no one even noticed me. I said “hi” to them but no one even responded.
My classmates make me feel like an alien, inferior and out of line and I don’t want to think about it. This makes me hate everybody and makes me want to kill them with a sharp sword.

The learners reported that they were sometimes excluded by educators when the educators were cross with them. These educators reportedly excluded learners by not asking them questions or sending them out of the class. One parent considered this kind of behaviour on the part of the educators as immature.

The parents indicated that they were excluded from school activities when they could not be present at meetings due to their work situation or were unable to make substantial financial contributions to the school. The parents also reported that they experienced exclusion when decisions that involved them were made without consulting them. Some of the parents were apparently excluded because they belonged to a minority group at the school. For example, an Indian parent felt isolated, a Pedi parent had the impression that Tsonga parents were considered more important, and one parent whose child attended a school where the staff was 99,9% white, but where there was a racial mix of learners, described her experience as follows: The situation does not give a fair chance to parents to engage as necessary since the activities are dominated by one racial group.

The educators reported that they experienced exclusion when decisions were made without asking their opinion: I feel left out when decisions are made involving me, without asking my opinion, especially when it involves changing of my working environment and personal space; when other staff members did not want to share work with them: The staff that I am working with is not very generous, they do not like to share ideas, work-cards etc., but take what I offer and when information was given only to some staff members: I feel unhappy when only a handful of people are informed. It makes me feel uninvolved.

The educators also referred to the formation of cliques which indicated that educators, learners and parents formed their own small groups and engaged
in activities or communications that tended to exclude those outside the group: *Sometimes when my friends do not want to talk to me, because I do not talk too much, I feel that they push me away.* Those participants, who were seemingly excluded from involvement, indicated that they felt rejected and sad: *When my friend and I get upset with one another, I feel unhappy at school and try to ignore the situation, but it makes me very sad.*

Learners who were not selected for certain positions, for example the Representative Student Council, reported that they experienced feelings of rejection: *I was one of the six finalists for head girl but I wasn’t chosen. So I was very unhappy and I felt like the school was not recognising my hard work as prefect. I felt useless and my self-image deteriorated.*

Exclusion from involvement apparently distanced the participants from one another as vividly described in a short poem by one of the learners: *At times you go to strange places where no-one is friendly. At times you feel that you are not willing to be friendly, because of what you hear. You feel so closed up that you are not willing to open up because of what people do.*

**Fighting with one another**

Fighting refers to verbal and physical quarrels between the participants. The learners said that fighting involved swearing or shouting at one another. Fighting, however, also involved physical violence. It seems that friends were sometimes involved in physical fights. They might, for example, hit one another due to a misunderstanding: *I do not like it when my friends tackle one another and hit one another due to misunderstandings.* The fights were not always viewed as serious as they were apparently often dealt with simply by talking to the friend or a family member involved. The learners and the parents reported that physical fighting was often resorted to by learners who were perceived as bullies and who wanted to intimidate other learners. The sense of intimidation associated with
bullying is evident in the following quotations: *I do not feel happy when we get bullied by some children who think they are superior or bigger than us.*

*I don’t cope with these problems because these naughty children are boys and they have more power than me, so they threaten me.*

One participant openly described how he resorted to physical violence to intimidate others: *Last week I beat up a Grade 9 boy and now I have to beat up his brother too.* The learners also referred to fights between learners and educators. They said that educators sometimes shouted and swore at them when they asked questions about work that the educator had previously explained.

**Discussion of the findings**

The exploration of the lived experience of learners, educators and parents in South African schools revealed four broad patterns of relating to and interacting with others: active engagement between people in schools; acknowledging people, disengagement between people and disregard for other people. These patterns are all part of the dynamic interaction between people in schools as complex adaptive systems. The qualitative patterns of relating and interacting are considered as enabling and disenabling with reference to the enhancement of individual, relational and collective wellbeing of people in school contexts (Prilleltensky, 2005; Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). Enabling and disenabling ways of relating and interacting in schools will now be discussed with particular reference to how the experiences of the different groups differed and corresponded followed by a discussion of how these patterns relate to the enhancement of health and wellbeing in these contexts.

In terms of active engagement, the learners in the study were enabled when they participated in events and activities. The findings indicated that extracurricular activities helped the learners to form new connections with peers and in the process acquire social support associated with wellbeing. This was confirmed by other research findings (Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls & Smith, 2004; Dworkin, Larson & Hansen, 2003; Harrison & Narayan, 2003). The research
indicated that participation in sport and other activities apparently promoted individual wellbeing.

The study also revealed that the learners were enabled when they worked collaboratively on class projects or organised functions at school. The literature on collaboration and wellbeing focuses mainly on the value of collaboration for enhancing wellbeing in adults (Wyn, Cahill, Holdsworth, Rowling & Carson, 2000; Deschesnes, Martin & Hill, 2003). In view of the findings of this study, it is suggested that the collaboration between learners should also be acknowledged as a way of enhancing the wellbeing of young people in schools as it apparently confirmed acceptance and promoted a sense of involvement and connectedness among learners.

The parents in the study experienced enablement when they actively engaged in events and activities at school and had opportunities to share information about their children and the school with each other. Parents’ involvement in school activities should therefore not be perceived as contributing only to their children’s wellbeing as often indicated in the literature (Donald et al., 2006; Pienaar, 2006). The present study suggested that parents also gain social support by forming new connections through their involvement in schools.

Active engagement through participation, collaboration and sharing seemingly promoted a sense of personal investment and commitment to the school context for the learners and parents in the study. As a result of the active collaboration individuals evidently connected with each other. Based on the literature, such connectedness to others could enhance resilience and pro-social behaviour in schools (Constantine & Benard, 2001; Libbey, 2004; Roffey, 2008). Connectedness also seems positively associated with social confidence and negatively associated with anger, stress and loneliness (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler & Williams, 1996). On an individual and relational level, connectedness promotes hope and life satisfaction and decreased levels of suicidal ideation, depression, the risk of violent or deviant behaviour and teen pregnancy (Thompson, Iachan, Overpeck, Ross & Gross, 2006; You et al. 2008). On a
collective level, active engagement apparently fosters membership and a sense of belonging in the school context (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Royal & Rossi, 1996).

In view of the above, the lack of active engagement of the educators is cause for concern. The educators did not refer to participation in events and activities or collaborative interactions but, rather, indicated that they preferred to share their experiences with people who were not involved in the school. Hypothetically, this could mean that they saw their role in schools merely as employees who had to meet the needs of learners and parents as clients. They did not seem to consider themselves part of the school as a community (Sergiovanni, 1994). If the significant role that active engagement plays in connecting people is considered, the question is to what extent does the lack of experience of active engagement relate to the stress currently experienced by educators?

The findings suggest that acknowledging people promotes understanding of interdependence. Interdependence, in turn, implies that people are dependent upon each other’s behaviour to reach their goals (Fiske, 2004) and is therefore critical to the enhancement of wellbeing from a social ecological as well as a complex adaptive systems perspective (Donald et al., 2006; O’Day, 2002). In this study, interdependence was apparently promoted on a collective level through the involvement of the learners, parents and educators in decision-making processes. The recognition of their opinions seemingly confirmed that they had been appreciated and accepted as individuals. Being valued as individuals evidently made them feel part of the school thus promoting enabling relationships where they felt involved and connected to one another. The finding is confirmed by research (Konu & Rimpelä, 2002) that reveals how participation in decision-making processes enables learners and educators to become active participants in a particular context and promotes interdependence between them. Schools should therefore recognise the value of giving a voice to all stakeholders in their endeavours to co-construct enabling contexts.

It was furthermore evident from the study that support enhanced an awareness of interdependence between the learners, educators and parents. The
role that friendships between learners played in this regard was significant. The importance of friendships is emphasised in the literature on adolescent development (Louw & Louw, 2007; Rubin et al., 2004). Contrary to the negative image often created about the influence of peer groups (Myers, 1996), the learners seemingly created strong support networks that motivated fellow learners and enhanced their ability to cope with problems and adversity, as found by Ryan (2001) The learners in the study also extended support to each other beyond the network of friends to fellow learners who were in weak dispositions or in need of assistance. The finding thus highlighted the learners’ ability to show empathy for others and to understand one another’s position and emotional state (Fiske, 2004; Tudor, Keemar, Tudor, Valentine & Worrall, 2004).

The support for learners shown by the educators who were prepared to listen to learners when they had problems was significant in terms of the enhancement of the health and wellbeing of the learners. It confirmed the importance of maintaining an ethos of care in schools as suggested by the literature (Parsons & Stears, 2002; Main & Hill, 2007). The educators’ active involvement also promoted a sense of trust and comfort among learners as well as their parents as confirmed by the literature on social support (Bailey, Wolfe & Wolfe, 1994; Langford Bowsher, Maloney & Lills, 2008). It was also noted that the educators provided support to learners, and indirectly to parents, while there was no indication that they experienced support themselves.

In terms of disengagement between people, the learners, the educators and the parents apparently disengaged from each other by pretending that they could cope with situations. Instead of being open and honest, they hid their true feelings to avoid conflict or to mask feelings of frustration and powerlessness about situations in which they were involved. Such pretence could have serious consequences for individual wellbeing as it implies the suppression of frustrations and concerns associated with emotional distress. What was most concerning was that the pretence was apparently seen as a way to survive in schools.
Disengagement was also associated with stereotyping and favouritism. Stereotyping and favouritism created in-groups and out-groups in the schools. Interestingly, though, the in-group in some instances became the out-group due to the threat it posed to other groups in the school (Fiske, 2004). Stereotyping manifested in subtle ways, for example as innocent remarks about people’s appearance as confirmed by the literature (Chalker & O’Dea, 2009). It also involved references to people’s positions or situations and non-verbal actions. In the study, stereotyping seemed often to be condoned silently. In the process, the values of respect and inclusion that were intended to provide a basis for enabling contexts were undermined, which left stereotyped learners with feelings of powerlessness and pain. Favouritism has been identified in the literature as an indicator of negative school experiences for learners (Barnett & McCormick, 2004; Pretty, et al., 1996) which is confirmed by the findings of the present study. Interestingly, the parents and educators in the study also experienced disengagement due to favouritism.

Based on the findings on disengagement, the question is whether the tension between being in an out-group and powerless and being in an in-group and having power may not underpin some of the misbehaviour that occurs in schools? When the participants felt disengaged, they seemed to categorise each other based on the biases and expectancies of those who have power in the school. In the process, they created in-groups and out-groups as indicated by social identity theory developed by Tajfel (Fiske, 2004). This evoked inclusion-exclusion dynamics that, according to Stacey (2003), conferred feelings of superiority and inferiority and reinforced power difference between the participants in the schools. In the process, the values that should provide a basis for behaviour were undermined, and the participants experienced the school environment as unfair.

The disenabling ways of relating and interacting encountered in the study also implied disregard for people expressed as harming one another’s integrity, humiliating one another, excluding one another and fighting with one another. The learners, educators and parents reported experiences of their integrity been
harmed by others through gossip and the spreading of rumours. From a complexity perspective (Stacey, 2003), gossip is a self-organising process that stigmatises and blames outsider groups and praises insider groups. Gossip thus contributed to the inclusion-exclusion dynamics in the schools in the study.

The findings also revealed that the way in which the learners and educators were exposed to teasing and ridicule in front of other people accentuated their vulnerability. Pain and sadness were seemingly evoked in the participants, which apparently led to a sense of powerlessness to change their situation. A major concern was that the educators were apparently involved in the teasing and ridiculing of learners and even in the humiliation of fellow educators, especially those who were more vulnerable. The anger and pain associated with exclusion is cause for concern about the wellbeing of the excluded individuals. A question that emerges in the light of recent incidents of violence is whether the continued exclusion of learners by fellow learners and educators could underlie acts of violence in schools? Macrae, Macquire and Milbourne (2003) maintain that social exclusion should be looked at more seriously in schools since it seemingly poses threats to the wellbeing of learners in particular as indicated in research by Patton et al. (2000).

In addition disregard involves fighting with one another, which apparently links up strongly with social exclusion as indicated in research by Debarbieux (2003). Fighting was reported mainly by the learners in the study. Interestingly, some of the learners reported friendly fights that could be interpreted as ways of exploring their identity in their interactions with others as suggested by Gergen (2009). Ways should therefore be found to distinguish this kind of fighting from malicious fighting. The intentions of learners who get involved in malicious fighting should be regarded as a major concern in the co-construction of enabling schools. Some learners seemingly reported that they picked fights with the intention of intimidate other learners. This kind of fighting may indicate an apathetic attitude towards other people that needs addressing if we intend to re-humanise schools as suggested by Morrison (2002).
Disregard for people in the study seemed to be corrosive in the sense that it evoked feelings of rejection, anger and resentment on an intra-psychic level. Apparently, disregard also promoted a sense of insecurity and fear in the school environment. The intensity with which all the participants reported their experiences of explicit disregard for people suggests that disregarding ways of relating in schools may contribute to the current challenges of dysfunctional behaviour in schools. Cause for concern is that explicit disregard for people as a pattern of relating and interacting was addressed mainly as a discipline problem displayed by individuals (Badenhorst, et al., 2007; Masitsa, 2008; De Wet, 2003). Hypothetically, this may relate to the assumption that individuals are responsible for their behaviour and that changes in their behaviour can promote social change in school contexts. However, from a complexity perspective, the behaviour of individuals cannot be controlled since behaviour emerges in self-organising ways in the dynamic interactions between people. The agency should therefore be shifted to the ways in which people relate to and interact with one another rather than situate it in individuals (Stacey, 2001). Because of the complex nature of human interaction (Stacey, 2007a; Shaw, 2002), it is not possible to explain linearly the interplay between the ways of relating and interacting and individual and collective wellbeing. The interplay should rather be seen as part of a complex, dynamic self-organising process of being together in schools that involves the constant flow of energy to maintain the system (Cilliers, 1998). It is also important to remember that complex, dynamic processes always include enabling and disenabling patterns of relating and interacting in the same temporal spaces. In co-construction endeavours, both should be considered naturally occurring phenomena in the same temporal spaces (Radford, 2007).

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings and the theoretical perspectives of this study, it is proposed that learners, educators and parents should be regarded as interdependent individuals who co-construct the school system in their interactions with one another. The current challenges regarding human behaviour in schools should be seen as emerging from the interaction between people in a
social environment. The focus in dealing with these challenges should therefore be shifted to the everyday ways of relating and interacting between people. In our exploration of preventative and curative interventions, we need to recognise the enabling and disenabling everyday micro-level interactions between people in schools.

It is also in these interactions between people that order emerges and support systems are developed. An in-depth exploration of relating and interacting should therefore be conducted in order to understand how such order and support emerge in the interactions between people in school contexts.

**Limitations of the study**

The findings are based on once-off descriptions of a large number of people’s lived experiences of social interaction in various school contexts. The findings thus provide an explorative description rather than an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon over time. The lack of in-depth understanding of people being together in schools due to the limited face-to face interaction is acknowledged and will be dealt with in the next phase of the project.

The non-attendance to cultural and racial differences could result in criticism from social cultural theorists and critical psychology, particularly in view of South Africa’s history of apartheid (Fiske & Ladd, 2004). However, the intention was not to ignore culture and race but to focus on everyday ways of relating and interacting that form the basis for social interactions across the boundaries of culture and race as part of our common humanity (Nussbaum, 2003).

**Conclusion**

Exploring ways of relating to and interacting with one another on the basis of complexity theory provides a particular perspective on our understanding of human behaviour in schools. In our quest for alternative ways of providing support and dealing with the challenges currently facing schools, the ways in
which people relate to and interact with one another are important for the wellbeing of individual members and the school as a setting. We therefore need to shift our focus to the web of relations in which people in schools are enmeshed since we are born and formed within our relationships (Gergen, 2009).
ARTICLE 2: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to report the findings of a study aimed at identifying the aspects perceived as nurturing the relationships between them. A single instrumental case study design was applied to obtain an in-depth understanding of how relationships are nurtured and restrained in the school community. All the learners (n=720), educators (n=33) and administrative and terrain staff members (N=8) and two parents were involved in the research. Work sessions using nominal group technique and visual representations, and focus group interviews were used to obtain information on the participants’ perceptions of relationships in the school community. Thematic analysis of the data revealed connectedness, respect, care and transparent communication as aspects that nurture relationships. Based on the findings, it is recommended that schools should develop supportive psycho-social environments that could embrace a sensitive, empathic and non-patronising approach to people.
Introduction

In terms of community psychology, schools are social contexts that influence and are influenced by the learners, parents, educators and other staff members in the school community (Ahmed & Pretorius-Heuchert, 2001; Levine & Perkins, 1997). The interaction between individuals and the social contexts in schools is important for the promotion of people’s health and wellbeing (Lazarus, 2007; De Jong, 2000; Sharratt, 1995). Yet, despite the support in current policies for deliberations on the importance of the social contexts in schools (Baker, 1998; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Hofman, Hofman & Guldemond, 2001; Sergiovanni, 1994), schools are still perceived largely as consisting of individuals interacting with each other for the purpose of academic learning (Steyn, 2007). The interactions between individuals are controlled by rules and regulations (Maree & Cherian, 2004; Van Louw & Waghid, 2008) aimed at providing stable environments conducive to effective teaching and learning.

The lack of attention to the social context, according to Morrison (2002), dehumanises people with devastating consequences for the health and wellbeing of all involved. Informed by complex responsiveness process theory (Stacey, 2007a; 2007b), Morrison argues for the re-humanising of schools. Re-humanising schools from a complexity perspective implies shifting the focus from individuals to relationships. According to Evans and Prilleltensky (2007), relationships between the members of a community promote individual as well as collective wellbeing in that community. It is therefore argued that if we wish to co-construct enabling school communities where the health and wellbeing of all the members are promoted, we need to give more attention to the relationships between the members.

The importance of attending to relationships in schools is recognised in research on school climate (Haynes, Emmons & Ben-Avie, 1997; Howes, 2000; Cohen, Pickeral & McCloskey, 2009), social-emotional education (Cohen & Sandy, 2003; Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2003) and discipline in schools (Mokhele, 2006).
However, limited knowledge of relationships in schools seems evident (Fullen, 2001; Ladd, Buhs & Troop, 2002; Mashau, Steyn, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2008). The question addressed in the second phase of the doctoral study reported in this article is: How are relationships nurtured and restrained in school communities? The purpose of the article is to discuss the aspects perceived as nurturing relationships in a school community. The aspects perceived as restraining relationships will be discussed in the following article.

The research was informed by the complex responsiveness process theory (Stacey, 2001, 2007a, 2007b; Shaw, 2002; Suchman, 2006) and the social constructionist perspective on relationships suggested by Gergen (2009). Both these theoretical perspectives propagate that relationships are more than the mere interactions between separate selves. Stacey (2007a) argues that relationships mean that interacting individuals form the patterns of their interactions while they are themselves formed by the patterns of their interactions. Relationships hence imply the conversations between people either in the mind of the individual or between individuals. In these conversations, people resonate with each other in nurturing and constraining ways. Gergen (2009) also sees relationships as entries into conversations that precede all action. Relationships involve processes of relating and interacting that open up the flow of interchange between people or corrode the flow of interchange between them.

**Research design and methodology**

The research was conducted within the qualitative paradigm. Qualitative research according to Janesick (2000), much like choreography does justice to the complexity of the phenomenon of relating and interacting and facilitates a deeper understanding of relationships in social setting through rigorous, yet open-ended procedures. Ontologically, it was accepted that as humans we co-create reality in the world through our interaction with other people (Josselson, 1996; Saleebey, 2001). Epistemologically, knowledge about a phenomenon was perceived as a communal creation generated in collaboration with others through the social process of communication (Gergen, 1994; Gergen & Gergen, 2008). The notion of
the objective observer was rejected. Knowing in this study involved participation and intuition associated with sensitivity to everyday practices (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Power relations were challenged to ensure that the data generated in the school community was not influenced by those in power positions (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2006).

The study was furthermore abductive in nature. Abductive research according to Blaikie (2008) first describes the activities and meanings of everyday activities and then provides categories and concepts that form the basis of our understanding of relationships in school communities. The qualitative research text is grounded in the social context. The shared experiences of the researcher and the participants in the study then offered new understandings of how relationships are nurtured in a school community through the acts of asking, knowing, interpreting and understanding (Stein & Mankowski, 2004).

A single, instrumental case study design was used in this study in order to gain a deeper understanding of relationships in a particular context (Creswell, 2007). As a qualitative approach, it involved the exploration of a bounded system over time through detailed, in-depth data collection. The closeness of the case study to real-life situations and the wealth of detail obtained from a case study are important for the development of a nuanced view of reality (Ebersöhn, Eloff & Ferreira, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 2006). The case study inquiry was furthermore selected because it offered a multiple perspective analysis of the phenomenon. It gave a voice to those who do not often get the opportunity to make their opinions heard and provided insight into the relationships in a school community (Niewenhuis, 2007). A particular feature of the case study inquiry is its potential for analytic generalisation, which allowed the researcher to analyse the case study and look for nuances and dimensions that could help build a working hypothesis that could be generalised to theory (De Jong, 2000; Gray, 2009).

Principles of participatory action research (Smith, 2003) were applied in this research. Participatory action research is based on an action-orientated research philosophy that involves the active participation of members of the
community in the conversations about their daily lives. In the process, they generate knowledge about their life-worlds (Park, 2006; Van Vlaendere & Neves, 2004) and eventually become involved in the social change processes in their school community (Kelly & Van der Riet, 2001; Mertens, 2009). Appreciative inquiry-based strategies (Ludema, Cooperrider & Barrett, 2006) were applied to encourage the participants to focus specifically on the nurturing aspects of relationships in the school community.

**Selection and description of the case**

In qualitative research, sampling decisions are made for the explicit purpose of gaining the richest data possible (Niewenhuis, 2007b). In this study, a non-probability, purposive sample was selected using intensity sampling, which is described by Patton (1999) as the selection of an information-rich case that is more typical than extreme. The principal of the school indicated that the school faced many of the challenges associated with societal problems yet strove to provide an environment conducive to the wellbeing of all the members. From a practical point of view, the willingness of the principal, the staff members and the governing body to accommodate the researcher was also taken into consideration for selection due to the prolonged engagement that was foreseen.

The school, a former Model C school located in a large town, was established in 1915. Since 1994, the school has admitted a small group of learners from suburbs that were previously described as townships. However, the school still consists mainly of white, Afrikaans-speaking learners. Most of the learners come from middle to low socio-economic home environments where, in most instances, both parents work. In the past two years, many of the parents have lost their jobs due to the closure of one of the main sources of employment. There are many single-parent households. The school serves learners from a children’s home, and the language of teaching is Afrikaans. The school offers a wide variety of academic subjects as well as sports and cultural activities. The school building comprises a large school hall and a double-storey building. There is a tuck shop
and a computer room. The sports facilities include rugby, cricket and netball fields and a clubhouse.

In 2008, when the research was conducted, the school had a roll call of some 720 learners: 166 in Grade 9, 121 in Grade 10, 100 in Grade 11 and 149 in Grade 12. The staff component consisted of 33 educators (25 women and eight men). The management team had five members consisting of the principal, the vice-principal and three heads of department. The administrative staff consisted of five people and the grounds staff of three people.

The researcher gained entry into the school community after obtaining permission from the Department of Education and the principal in consultation with the School Management Council. On entry into the community, it was important for the researcher to negotiate her role with the community to secure the trust of the staff, the learners and the parents (Mertens, 2009; Roos, Visser, Pistorius & Nefale, 2007). First the school was visited to meet the staff during an early morning staff meeting when the principal informed them about the anticipated research. On the next visit, assembly was attended and the proposed project was introduced to the learners. During this visit, time was spent to observe the interactions between members of the school community in the staffroom, on the playground and in the classrooms. Informal conversations were held with staff members, learners and parents about their experiences of the relationships between members of the school community. Through these engagements, the researcher became a de facto member of the community as evidenced by the way in which she was received by the administrative staff, accepted in the staffroom and greeted by the learners when she visited the school. It was most certainly experienced that the researcher had gained their trust and that the relationship was considered as mutual, open and non-hierarchal rather than professional and distant (Bhana & Kanjee, 2001; Roos et al., 2007).
Participants

The participants in the study included 720 learners, 33 educators, seven administrative and terrain staff, and two parents. According to Morison, Moir and Kwanza (2000), the willingness of learners to participate is often based on perceived threats and personal benefits. It was evident that some of the learners in the study participated because of the perceived benefits, which in this case was getting away from class for the duration of the session. However, the session was organised around breaks to ensure minimum disruption of the learners’ academic work. Once the work session started, it did seem, that most learners enjoyed the group interaction to such an extent that most of them actively engaged in the discussions. Staff members were not present during the work sessions, which gave the learners the opportunity to voice their opinions freely.

The educators seemed a little reluctant to spend time in the work sessions due to their work commitments, but, after they had been informed about the purpose of the research, they were more open to the idea and enthusiastically participated in the hour-long work session. The initial idea was to combine the workshop for parents with the parents’ evenings at the school. It was evident, though, during the meetings that few parents were in a position to spend another hour at the school that late in the evening. At the parent meetings held at the school, more than 20 parents initially indicated that they were willing to take part in a work session. But eventually only two parents turned up for the session.

All the educators and administrative staff were involved in the focus group interviews, with the exception of five participants who were not available at the school at the time of the interviews. The learners who were involved in the focus group interviews were purposively selected to ensure maximum variation of experiences and perceptions across the various class and grade groups (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McLafferty, 2004).
Data collection

Two data-gathering methods were used, namely interactive work sessions and semi-structured focus group interviews.

Interactive work sessions

In the first phase of the research, one-hour interactive work sessions were conducted with each grade group in the school hall. An interactive work session was also conducted with those educators who were available. The use of work sessions was based on the assumption (Giddens, 1984 cited in Blaikie, 2008) that participants as social actors are capable of reflecting on their social situation and monitoring interaction as it happens. The interactive work sessions were conducted to enable all the learners and educators to take part in the research. Martin (2006) elaborates on the advantages of large group processes to provide an opportunity for a sizable number of participants to develop ideas for change in participatory action research. The participants were randomly divided into groups of eight to twelve participants. An assistant, who had previous experience as an educator, and who at that stage was involved in counsellor training, assisted with the large groups. The nominal group technique (Gallaher, Harres, Spencer, Bradshaw & Webb, 1993; Macphail, 2001; Williams, 2006) was used in the interactive work sessions and involved the following procedure: The researcher asked an open question to the group, namely: tell me about relationships between people in our school community?

After individual reflection, the participants were asked to work in groups and to develop integrated representations of their ideas about the relationships in their school community. The participants were then invited to share their ideas by creating a visual representation in the form of an A1 poster which illustrated their ideas about relationships in the school (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000; Coad, 2007). The use of visual images as a participatory methodology was used to facilitate active engagement through participant led activities and to stimulate reflections on relationships in the school community as indicated by Young and Barrett (2001).
The participants were encouraged to collaborate with one another and to avoid conflict. They were encouraged to incorporate all the different images into their final product, instead of trying to create one single representation. The visual images were displayed and discussed in the large group. The posters were photographed and stored digitally to ensure safe-keeping of the images (Karlsson, 2001).

**Focus group interviews**

Focus group interviews were conducted in the second phase of the study as a means of tapping into the participants’ experiences of the interactive dynamics between them (Berg, 2004; Bryman, 2001). Nine semi-structured focus group interviews of between 30 minutes and 60 minutes were conducted with parents (one group), educators (two groups), learners (four groups), administrative and terrain staff (one group), and the management team (one group). The following open question was asked to promote the active engagement of the participants after they had been provided with a brief overview of the themes that emerged from the work-sessions: *Please add to the information I have given you by describing your experiences of relationships between people in the school with reference to how relationships are nurtured (enhanced/made better) and how relationships are restrained (harmed/made bad)?*

The semi-structured focus group interviews enabled the participants to use language that resembled everyday conversations. The participants engaged in a variety of communicative processes including lively debating and even conflict that generated thick data (Niewenhuis, 2007 b; Wilkonson, 2004). Probing was used throughout the interviews to clarify and extend the quality of the replies and to encourage participants to share their experiences. Non-verbal messages as a medium for feelings and emotions were also observed. The inclusion of focus group interviews with learners allowed the acknowledgement of aspects of peer culture in the research and lessened the chances of adult-imposed interpretations of the data (Eder & Fingerson, 2001). During the interviews, the data were
captured on a digital voice recorder and transcribed according to the guidelines provided by Poland (2005).

**Data analysis**

The aim of the data analysis in the study was to make sense of the participants’ collective experience of nurturing and restraining relationships in the particular school community (Stein & Mankowski, 2004). With this being a subjective exercise, the researcher continuously reflected on the impact of her personal history and experiences of school contexts, as well as her values and social position on the research (Brinkmann & Kvale, 1995; Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005), while conducting the analysis.

Thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within and across data sets was used in the study. The phases of thematic analysis suggested by these authors were applied in the analysis of the gathered data. Firstly, the researcher immersed herself in the data to become familiar with the content of the large amount of data, as suggested by Pope, Ziebland and Mays (2000). This involved repeated reading in an active way to make sense of the meanings and patterns in the data and making notes of ideas for coding. Secondly, initial codes as identifying features of the data were generated by hand using colour markers. The raw data were also coded by an independent coder. The coding process enabled the researcher to organise the data into meaningful groups. This was followed by the identification of data-driven themes through an interpretative reading of the data. Data extracts that demonstrated the codes were collated. Thirdly, the codes were combined to form overarching themes. Mind-maps were then drawn to organise the codes into themes as suggested by Wilkonson (2003). Fourthly, a set of suggested themes was devised. A preliminary thematic map was developed and the data-driven themes were examined to determine the accuracy of the representation of the data. The map was considered on two levels: the collated extracts were read to establish whether they formed a coherent pattern, and the validity of the individual themes as being representative of the whole data set (or
not) was evaluated. Fifthly, the themes were defined and refined to present the essence of what was captured. Subthemes were identified to give structure to the rather complex main themes. The main themes and subthemes were then organised into a coherent account.

The visual data were analysed by applying the social semiotic approach suggested by Jewitt and Oyama (2001) that involved an open approach to understanding the visual data by reflecting on the pictures that participants had drawn and the inscriptions associated with the pictures and contextualise them in relation to the themes that were identified during the data analysis.

**Trustworthiness of the research**

In qualitative research, a naturalistic approach is used to understand rather than manipulate the phenomenon under consideration. According to Golafshani (2003), qualitative data should be trustworthy to convince readers that the findings of a study are worth considering (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, several strategies were applied to ensure credibility, confirmability, dependability and acceptability as described by Bryman (2001).

In terms of **credibility**, it should be noted that the researcher is a registered psychologist. In the initial planning of the research, the supervisor and co-supervisor, and experienced researchers from psychology and educational psychology were consulted on the proposed methodology. Through prolonged engagement with the participants on various occasions over a period of six months in a formal as well as in an informal manner, a clear and truthful picture emerged of how the members of the school community perceived relationships. During the research, multiple data sources within the case were used including learners, parents, educators, and administrative and terrain staff. In the work sessions, active engagement took place with all the participants to ensure that they understood the assignments given to them. The work session assignments were completed in a contained environment to avoid outside interference that could influence the process of data collection. **Member checking** was done after
the completion of the work sessions by presenting the findings to the participants in the focus groups before continuing with the focus group interviews. According to Patton (1999) the credibility of research findings is strengthened when they are credible to the constructors of the data.

In order to ensure **transferability and dependability**, a comprehensive audit trial was kept in the form of a dense description of the research methods and procedures followed to permit replication of the study. Thick descriptions of the data are also included in the report on the findings. An extensive verbatim report on the data provides references to support claims and also gives readers some insight into the local language and life-world of the social actors in the study (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000). The text was translated back and forth to ensure that the messages intended by the participants were conveyed in the report.

**Confirmability** involves carefully weighing the data without forcing the researcher’s own interpretations on the text. An independent coder was used to code some of the data, and the codes were compared with the codes the researcher had developed. Since the research involved an in-depth exploration of human meanings and constructions of being together in school communities, rather than causal explanations crystallisation that involve a deepened complex interpretation from different perspectives also enhanced confirmability (King, 2000; Ellingson, 2008). The congruency of the findings from the raw data and the tentative interpretations of the data were also discussed with the supervisor as suggested by Merriam (2001).

Finally, the researcher, critically reflected on her own assumptions throughout the study and challenged these assumptions based on discussions with colleagues and insight gained from the data analysis (Henning, 2004). Her particular biases toward school contexts based on her own experiences as a learner, an educator and a parent in these contexts were explored and shared with the supervisor and peers in order to ensure that the credibility of the interpretations was not affected.
Ethical considerations

This study is part of a project entitled “An exploration of enabling contexts” for which ethical approval has been granted by the Ethics Committee of the North-West University (ethical number 05K14). The ethical principle of benefit for the client, which in this case study was the school community involved in the research, was preceded by adhering to the guidelines for multi-client situations that involve the valuing of relationships and the understanding of interpersonal consequences as suggested by Snyman and Fasser (2004).

Permission for the research was obtained from the Department of Education in the North West Province. The principal informed the Management Board of the school and the educators about the research project and the reason for the study, which was to gain a better understanding of social interaction in schools. Permission was granted for the project, and the researcher was invited to visit the school and introduce herself to the educators, learners and parents. Active informed consent that is, formal written consent by an informed parent or guardian, (Berg, 2004), was obtained from the parents. The learners also gave informed assent to participate in the study. During the work sessions and focus group interviews, the participants were told that they could withdraw from the study at any stage. They were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their identity as well as the material with consideration for the challenges posed in this regard as explained by Brinkmann and Kvale (2005). The learners were asked to refrain from using the names of people in the group discussions. In instances where they did use names, the names were blocked out to ensure that no harm was done to any member. The researcher was supported by an assistant with teaching experience during the work sessions to help learners who may have been excluded or harmed by other members in their group. The participants were debriefed after the sessions and the interviews. Learners who approached the researcher and the assistant after the sessions were referred for support (Berg, 2004).
FINDINGS

The findings of the study are reported in two articles. In this article, the focus is on aspects that were perceived as nurturing relationships in the school community. The findings will be reported with reference to the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data in relation to the question: *How are relationships nurtured in a school community?* Diagram 2.1 below gives an overview of the themes and subthemes that emerged with reference to nurturing relationships in the school community.

![Diagram 2.1: Themes and subthemes referring to nurturing relationships](image)

Diagram 3: Themes and subthemes referring to nurturing relationships

**CONNECTING WITH ONE ANOTHER** refers to the sense of belonging to the school community and involves knowing one another on a personal level, and engaging actively across systemic boundaries.
Knowing one another on a personal level

All the groups in the study indicated knowing one another on a personal level as a way to connect to one another that nurtured the relationships between them. An educator, for example, described how her relationship with a fellow educator developed positively when they got to know one another. Their interest in one another was enhanced and opened up communication between them so that they could connect with one another: *And know that I know her name, I know much more about her and I started talking to her and we are getting to know one another well.* The educators said that changing the groups around in the classroom enhanced a sense of connectedness that nurtured the relationships between the learners: *What works is to change the groups around so that everyone gets to know one another better and that they do not judge one another and say bad things about one another.*

As the learners got to know one another on a more personal level, they apparently changed their negative assumptions about each other as indicated by a learner who described how her judgemental attitude changed when she got to know a fellow learner better: *I thought this is the most arrogant kid. The moment I saw her I judged her even before I got to know her. And when I got to know her I thought for myself, but you were stupid to judge her, because now that you get to know her she seems very nice.* The educators also said that their relationships with learners who had been labelled as troublemakers changed and became more nurturing when they get to know the learners and had access to information about them: *There was this one boy ... I realised that if you work a little more with the child and understand what lies beneath you can achieve more with the child.*

The educators indicated that they found it easier when they got to know learners better in less structured (informal) environments, such as the sports field, than in more structured environments such as classrooms: *You can build (nurture) a relationship with a child if you get to know him better - in my case this does not happen in the class, but definitely on the sport field.*
The educators, in particular, indicated that when they had time to talk to one another, their relationships improved since they could share information about their own lives and other matters rather than focus only on schoolwork and practical arrangements: *It is only when the exams started that things between us are better, because we have time to sit and talk to one another other things than schoolwork.* The parents also emphasised the importance of having time to talk to the educators when they were at the school as a way to get more closely acquainted with one another.

**Active engagements across systemic boundaries**

The learners, in particular, valued active engagement across systemic boundaries as revealed in their enthusiasm about a fun day at the school while the research was in progress. The extensive description of the fun day suggested that the day gave the learners the opportunity to engage with one another across the boundaries that normally separated them. The more informal, spontaneous nature of the day and the purposive crossing of the systemic boundaries when selecting teams enhanced the connectedness of the learners who would otherwise have been disconnected from one another. The excerpts below illustrate this:

**P1:** *This Friday we had a fun day at the school. It showed us how to work together and not be so lonely and how to do our bit. We worked together as a team, relaxed together and got to know other children.*

**P2:** *Nobody stared at one another to see whether you are wearing something that looks better than what I am wearing. It was only as it should be. You could be yourself. You could go crazy. You could run, you could shout. We even threw one another with water and nobody was upset.*

**P3:** *One actually got to know the educators from a different perspective. When you are in class, it is work, work, work there is no time to say: Hi how are you?*
Being connected to one another as a nurturing aspect of relationships was acknowledged by all the members of the school community even though they experienced connectedness in a variety of ways in different activity settings. Apparently getting to know one another on a personal level promoted a sense of belonging to the community for all the members. For the educators and parents, a sense of belonging also included the scheduling of more time for them to talk to one another. The findings of the study revealed that being connected implied more than merely becoming acquainted with other learners in the same grade. The learners, in particular, valued getting connected across grades as a way of enhancing a sense of belonging.

**RESPECTING ONE ANOTHER** refers to the way people regard one another and show consideration for one another by accepting one another as equal, appreciating one another as holistic beings; valuing one another’s input and acknowledge one another’s needs.

**Accept one another as equal**

The findings revealed that the learners, in particular, associated respect with acceptance of other people as equal irrespective of their socio-economic status, race or appearance as indicated in an inscription on one of the posters: *Accept one another and not classify one another based on race, money and outward appearance.* The parents emphasised the importance of showing respect through acceptance of people who were in a less favourable position with specific reference to nurturing relationships with car watcher parents: *There are a few parents who are car guards, they are respectable people. They are not the ‘ghorries’ of the community. They only have a difficult time and they have to survive.*

The learners said that people should accept one another without setting conditions if they wanted to improve relationships between them. Illustration 2.1 shows the learners’ view that people should refrain from discriminating against other people on the basis of race. They argued that all people are equal and
referred to the universal qualities that all people have in common to illustrate their argument.

Illustration 2.1: Visual presentation indicating that discrimination is not accepted

The learners also said that relationships would be nurtured if people reached out respectfully to one another across racial boundaries. Illustration 2.2 made by one group of learners indicates that people should take one another’s hands irrespective of the colour of their skin as a way to show respect for one another.

Illustration 2.2: Taking one another’s hands across racial boundaries
The educators, in particular, said how respect - expressed as unconditional acceptance - for a learner labelled as a troublemaker promoted a more positive response towards educators: *He is a troublemaker, but when he did something wrong in the one class we had to transfer him to another class where he was accepted by the educator. And I can tell you, it is no longer 99% trouble. He turned around completely.* The learner’s parent confirmed the change that an accepting attitude had promoted: *He is the same person but due to the acceptance that he received it is much better now. He is much calmer in class. It is unbelievable.*

**Appreciate one another as holistic beings**

The findings also indicated that respect entailed appreciation for people as holistic beings with multiple roles. In the interviews with the educators, the female educators, in particular, associated respect for them with consideration for their roles as mothers and homemakers as well. They said that the management team and their colleagues should appreciate the other roles and allow them space to fulfil these roles. The following statement by one participant was confirmed by the other participants through their non-verbal responses to the statement: *I think what is important for me is that I am not only an educator... I am also a mother and a housewife. I am a person in totality. It is not always taken into account. The school is close to my heart and I am very loyal towards the school but I do feel that when it comes to relationships I must be appreciated as a person in totality and not treated as if I am available 24 hours a day for the school.*

The parents, although in a more indirect manner, also indicated that they would prefer to be recognised as holistic beings. They expected educators to show some understanding when they could not attend functions and events at school because of work engagements or other circumstances and did not interpret their absence as a lack of interest: *It is so easy for the educators to think that you do not want to attend or that you show little interest. They must know why you cannot be there. I am a very busy parent, I have an ambulance service*
and I am seldom at home. Go look the ambulance is at home, because I am on duty.

Respect for parents also implied that educators should show appreciation for the ways in which some parents brought up their children in very challenging circumstances that for example included unemployment, being a single parent and the illness and death of a spouse.

Value one another’s input

The educators and the parents in particular, stressed that respect for one another included valuing one another’s input: We do not expect of the educators to teach our children manners; that is our work as parents. We just expect the educator to give support and identify problems of which we are not aware, because they spent so many hours with the child. The parents insisted that educators should respect them as the primary educators of their children and inform them when they had concerns about their children: If parents are not aware of a problem our children stand alone.

At the same time, the parents acknowledged that they should show respect to the educators by providing them with information about their children: I feel that as a parent one should take care that the educators are informed about your child. One should not only sit back and merely accept what happens to your child at school. If he is naughty you have to punish him, let him have it and know that when he is naughty he has to take it like a man. But if he is treated unfairly and one does not agree, one should intervene and insist that situation is investigated.

Acknowledge one another’s needs

Respect for one another, according to the data, apparently also involved the willingness to acknowledge that other people have needs and to consider ways to meet these needs. The work sessions with the learners revealed that acknowledgement of their needs was an important indicator of respect. The learners, in particular, indicated that their dream school was a place where their
needs were heard and met. Almost all the posters included some form of need as indicated in the illustrations (2.3a and 2.3b) below:

Illustrations 2.3a and 2.3b indicated the variety of needs expressed by the learners

It seemed important to understand learners’ needs as possibly reflecting problems and concerns experienced by them rather than labelling such needs as irrational or stupid. For example, when the learners were asked in the work sessions why they wanted lockers, it was evident that they did not merely want to follow an American trend as indicated by some of the educators. Some of the learners in the study really found it difficult to manage with all the things they had to bring to school – many of them had to stay after school for sport and other activities because of financial and transport constraints. Apparently, relationships might be nurtured if learners sense that their needs are considered in a respectful manner even if it is not possible to fulfil those needs immediately.
CARING FOR ONE ANOTHER

In the context of this study, caring for one another refers to the willingness to enhance one another’s wellbeing empathically. The inscriptions and the drawings on the posters suggest that caring for one another is experienced as expressing love for one’s fellow human beings, an empathic understanding for one another, and an accommodating attitude towards one another.

Expressing love for one’s fellow human beings

In the visual data generated in the work sessions, most of the groups used hearts as symbols of care associated with love for one’s fellow human beings. The learners and educators apparently believed that expression of love for one’s fellow human beings could enhance the relationships between them. Hearts was used to symbolise this love. Love is mentioned as one of the core elements of a dream school and strongly associated with care, happiness and connectedness between people, as illustrated in 2.4 b. Illustration 2.4 c indicates that love for one’s fellowmen is needed to nurture relationships between the student representative council, educators and learners.

Illustration 2.4 a: Love as a core element of nurturing relationships
Illustration 2.4 b: Heart as a symbol of love

Student Representative Council
Children
Educators

Illustration 2.4 c: Love bring people together

Empathic understanding for one another

Empathic understanding is associated with caring for one another and was indicated in the study as a way to nurture relationships between group members. Illustration 2.5 made by one group of educators apparently illustrates that care is experienced as embracing one another in an empathic way.

Illustration 2.5: Care as embracing one another

CARE
Be there for one another
Listen when other talk
Be helpful
Friendliness
Trust one another
Love for fellowmen
Care as empathic understanding was further demonstrated in the examples discussed in the focus groups. The first example illustrated how the empathic understanding of colleagues carried someone through a tough time in her career. 

*I have received much support last term when my situation was very bad. If it was not for my two colleagues who supported me, I would not have made it. I also had other staff members who supported me.*

Another example illustrated how educators stood together to relieve the pressure exerted on them by job demands by creating space for each other to be with their families: *Now I think for myself, H can rather be with her child than go home very late while I do not need her.*

A parent described how the relationship between an educator and a class was nurtured through empathic understanding when she (the parent) challenged her son to influence his classmates to be more empathic towards the educator and to talk to the other boys who misbehaved in the educator’s class:

*Then I said to him: when the other boys are nasty with her, step in and tell them that she is tired. It does not give her the right to be nasty to you, but they must also understand that it is not pleasant for her to have to stand in front of teenage boys who do not even listen when you speak, while she is pregnant … one can understand the situation.* Later, when she asked him about the situation he replied: *Mom we are much calmer in the class …*

**Accommodating attitude towards one another**

It seems that when people care for one another, they change their attitude towards one another. An example mentioned in the focus group interview with management illustrated how the relationships between people were enhanced when educators changed their attitude from being punitive to being accommodating with regard to learners who did not attend athletics practice: *If you are really positive, you will go to the children and say: Where were you yesterday afternoon? I missed you. Last week I called all the children who did not start with athletics practice, and talked to them in a nice way and take a little trouble. And then you*
get a reaction and when you go to the track you will see how many of them turned up.

The parents confirmed that educators who had a more accommodating attitude generally experienced fewer discipline problems. It gives the parents peace of mind if educators take emotional care of their children by identifying problems and resolving them. *The more you are interested and care, the more you have the children with you. Those educators, who say that they do not have any problems with discipline, are usually very attentive and caring.*

The educators in the study said that information about people’s situations and circumstances might enable them to care for one another more effectively: *When I heard what is going on, I knew why she cried in my class, yesterday. But I did not know then. I knew that P (the counsellor) keep information confidential, but I wanted to know that her father hit her and that is why she was scared.* Some of the educators acknowledged that this could pose practical and ethical difficulties as it implied the release of information. They accordingly suggested that a system should be put in place where information about learners could be made available to avoid the labelling of learners as problem children due to a lack of information about them: *One should have a system in place that if M hears something about a child she can report it so that when the child walks into the next class the educator can also be aware of the problem.*

**TRANSPARENT COMMUNICATION**

Transparent communication was perceived as a basis for nurturing relationships in the school community. Transparent communication refers to open and honest communicative interactions between all the members of the school community regarding problems that impact their lives. It also includes a willingness to address conflict between members openly and proactively.
Communication as a basis for nurturing relationships

The educators specifically emphasised that communication is critically important for the nurturing of relationships between the members of the school community, as illustrated in the visual images below:

In Illustration 2.6 the arrow emphasised that efficient communication between the principal, staff members and learners will bridge the divide between them and facilitate a more nurturing environment characterised by consequent behaviour, fairness and support. In Illustration 2.7 communication is indicated as laying the foundation in which all the other interactions were embedded.

Illustration 2.6: Communications as a bridging the divide

Illustration 2.7: Communication as the foundation of being together
Open discussions of problems

Open discussions between members regarding common problems was perceived as a critically important aspect of nurturing relationships in the school community. The management team stressed the importance of allowing time to discuss problems openly: And one should prioritise, when you see that there is a serious problem then you have to make time to discuss the matter...

The learners also believed that opportunities should be created to openly discuss problems. One group illustrated (Illustration 2.8) the need for open discussions by stating that there should not be any skeletons in the cupboard, which according to them might lead to conflict.

Illustration 2.8: No skeletons in the cupboard

Specific reference was made to learners who were less talkative and therefore often overshadowed by other learners. Their fellow learners insisted that they should also be given the opportunity to talk about their problems: I think it will be helpful to talk openly in class. It will help the learners who are quiet in our classes but one can see that something bothers him/ her. We big mouths who always talk, we will hear the child talk but would not realise that he has a problem. Yet when opportunities to talk openly are created their problems might also surface.

The interviews with the parents revealed that they also thought that open discussions about problems were necessary to nurture enabling relationships
between parents and educators as well as between learners and educators: Yes tell me if you think there is a problem, even if I may tell you that I think that you overreact. But at least the fire is kindled. You can observe from your side and say well you’re right, or say no I think you it is taken out of context, but let me keep an eye on the situation. I feel that we as educators and parents should work together to give our children the best. The parents also thought that educators should be more open about problems in their interactions with learners: I feel that for me if educators are prepared to open themselves up so that learners feel that they could talk to them things will be better for our children.

The value of open discussions was well illustrated during the focus group interview with the learners as indicated in the researcher’s field notes: A white girl openly admitted that she sometimes makes racist remarks towards her fellow learners who are black. The group then started talking openly about racism in the school and it was observed that the group physically moved closer to one another while discussing the issue. The group members did not get upset but actively engaged in the discussion and seemingly gained some insight into the ways in which these kinds of action are experienced by fellow learners.

Deal with conflict between people openly and proactively

Transparent communication also meant that members of the school community should deal openly and proactively with conflict, rather than avoiding or suppressing conflict. It seemed as if the learners more often tended to deal with conflict as it arose: ... we immediately talk about the issue when we have conflict about something. We will not just leave it or say nothing about it and sometimes we will not talk but we write letters. Then we will say listen I am sorry I did that. The learners seemed to expect the educators to intervene when there was conflict between them and to talk openly about the problems so that the learners could sort out their differences: ... if an educator can intervene and say come sit let us talk ... and we talk about the problem and she asks what the problem is I will say how I feel. And then she have to ask the other person what the
problem is so that we can be more aware of the differences between us and work it out so that in the end no-one is angry.

The parents also indicated that they expected educators to deal more openly with conflict and to accept that learners might sometimes differ from them or communicate their frustrations assertively: *If he does not agree, he must feel safe enough, without feeling that he will be attacked. Even if he goes to the educator afterwards and say: I do not think that (you) were fair here and this is why I think it is not fair and could mam (Juffrou) perhaps explain to me why? He should feel safe to do that.*

Although it appeared that educators might be reluctant to deal openly with conflict, the educators in the study acknowledged that when conflict developed between them and the learners and their parents, it should be discussed openly. They said that they would rather make time for such discussions than be kept in the dark about the situation: ... *let’s say E is a parent and he has a problem about his child who is in my class, it is probably going to take ten to fifteen minutes to discuss it, and that ten to fifteen minutes is going to make the difference between a positive and a negative experience.*

**DISCUSSION**

Four aspects of nurturing relationships emerged from the findings including connecting with one another, respecting one another, caring for one another and communicating with one another transparently. Each of these aspects of nurturing relationships encompasses patterns of relating and interacting that seemingly nurtured the relationships in this particular school community, and apparently represents what Radford (2008) refers to as recursive symmetries or attractors that could help us understand how relationships are nurtured in school as complex adaptive systems. Each aspect will now be discussed with brief reference to associated patterns, followed by indications of how the nurturing aspects can enhance the co-construction of enabling school communities.
Firstly, connecting with one another as the nurturing aspect of relationships was acknowledged by all the members of the school community even though they experienced connectedness in a variety of ways in different activity settings. Knowing one another on a personal level promoted a sense of connectedness for all the members. They indicated that having time to talk to one another promoted a sense of connectedness and suggested that more time should be scheduled for talking to one another about their experiences. The findings of the study furthermore indicated that being connected implied more than merely getting acquainted with other learners in the same grade. The learners particularly valued getting connected across grades as a way of enhancing a sense of connectedness.

The findings suggested that when members of the school community connected with one another, they became more visible as human beings and felt that they were appreciated and valued as members of the community. As they became more visible to one another, they apparently connected on a deeper emotional level and experienced a sense of belonging as described in the literature (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Sanchez, Colón & Esparza, 2005; Libbey, 2004). The sense of belonging deepened their connectedness and they could therefore draw strength from their network of relationships as suggested by Magdol and Bessell (2003). Connecting with other members thus enhanced the sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) between them. In view of the findings it is suggested that connectedness between the members of the school community should not be perceived as a nurturing aspect of relationships that only belong outside the school context. Connectedness should be embraced as a way to facilitate a sense of belonging and community within the school context that nurtures relationships, as was indicated by Sanchez et al. (2005).

Secondly, respecting one another was perceived as a nurturing aspect of relationships with different patterns emphasised by the different groups who participated in this study. Unconditional acceptance of people as equal across boundaries of race and socio-economic status was strongly advocated by the learners in the study. In addition the learners experienced being listened to when
they expressed their needs without being doubted or criticised as indicators of respect for them. The parents also stressed the need to accept people unconditionally. The educators mentioned the value of unconditional acceptance in nurturing relationships with learners who experienced behavioural problems. For the female educators, in particular, respect as a nurturing aspect of relationships included not defining them only as educators. They expected that consideration should be given to the other roles they fulfil. Interestingly, the parents also insisted that the educators should bear in mind that they had other roles besides parenting. Although parents and educators apparently have similar needs, they did not seem to recognise one another’s needs. Both educators and parents also expressed the need for mutual respect regarding the exchange of information when they have to deal with problems relating to the learners. Learners strongly emphasised respect as a mutual process and indicated that educators tended to act as if learners should respect them regardless of their behaviour towards them.

In view of the findings it is important to note that respect if often mainly in connection with discipline, bullying and violence in schools. The tendency in these discourses is to define respect in terms of the enhancement of obedience and the display of moral behaviour (De Klerk & Rens, 2003; Oosthuizen & Van der Walt, 2008). Such a definition encompasses a narrower notion of respect as indicated by Darwall (1977). The findings of the present study suggest, rather, that respect encompasses acceptance of and consideration for people irrespective of their dispositions as suggested by Nelson-Jones (2006). The strong indications that respect implies obedience to rules was therefore challenged by the findings. Hemmings (2004) supports this challenge when he argues that respect as a nurturing aspect of relationships rather encompasses mutual processes of giving and receiving.

Thirdly, caring for one another emerged as nurturing aspect of relationships between the members of the school community. Caring for one another encompassed love for one’s fellow human beings empathic understanding for one another and an accommodating attitude as patterns that nurture relationships in
the school community. Love for ones’ fellow human beings although strongly related to the religious views of participants, in combination with the need for empathic understanding seemingly indicated that nurturing relationships entails a humane context that could accommodate members as human beings who need care.

Caring for one another as a nurturing aspect therefore implied the ability to focus on the needs and dispositions of other people rather than only on the individual self as suggested by Neiman (2000). Care therefore entails a combination of love for other human beings and the willingness to offer the self in service of the other (Josselson, 1996). Care furthermore encompasses commitment and helpfully responses to the legitimate needs of others as argued by Noddings (2002) and McLennan, Record and Clark (2008). However, because of the mechanistic approach often maintained in many schools it is anticipated that caring for one another might be avoided as people seem to shy away from dealing with feelings in social contexts (Roos & Temane, 2007).

Fourthly, transparent communication emerged as an important aspect of being together in the school community. On the one hand the educators emphasised that communication is at the core of their activities. They suggested that more time should be allocated to communicate about the organisation of activities. The parents and the learners, on the other hand focused more on the value of communication for promoting understanding and bringing people closer together. Dealing openly with conflict was also perceived as essential for transparent communication.

The findings suggest that transparent communication as a nurturing aspect includes more than the mere linear reductionist sending of messages - it is perceived as a mutual interaction that can mediate enabling relationships between members as suggested by the interactive and transformative models of communication (Beebe, Beebe & Redmond, 2005). The responsibility for effective communication can therefore not be placed only on individuals in leadership
positions as often suggested in research. It should rather involve direct and honest communication on all levels as suggested by Miretzky (2004).

The aspects of nurturing relationships identified in this study show correlations with the signs of relational wellbeing identified by Evans and Prilleltensky (2007), namely caring, respect for diversity, nurturance, affection, support, collaboration and democratic participation in decision making. Correlations are furthermore shown with indicators of a positive school climate including the mutual supportiveness, involvement and cohesion of members as well as communication, open relationships and trust (Moos, 2002; Pretorius & De Villiers, 2009). The importance of a supportive environment that fosters a climate of cohesiveness, shared visions and support is also emphasised in a study by Beets et al., (2008). Peck (1990) argues that the ability to maintain contact with one another, honest openness and transparency, the prising of one another, the ability to understand one another empathically and a non-defensive openness towards one another are features of a community that supports nurturing relationships and could enhance wellbeing.

In addition, the aspects identified as nurturing relationships also share similarities with the characteristics of therapeutic relationships. The Adlerian approach, (Corey, 2005) for example, advocates deep caring, involvement and friendship as the basis of therapeutic relationships. This approach also suggests that relationships are promoted by a subjective stance through active, empathic listening coupled with a sense of appreciation for the other. Empathy stems from one’s comprehension of another person’s emotional state and involves experiencing what the other person is feeling or could be expected to feel (Eisenberg & Fabes & Spinard, 1999). Empathy seemingly enhances pro-social behaviour as indicated in research (Maxwell & Des Roches, 2010) and accordingly nurtured relationships between the members in the current study.

From a person-centred perspective, Rogers (1967; 1980) argues that equality plays a significant role in relationships. In an equal relationship congruence and an empathic understanding of the other will nurture relationships
(Tudor, Keemar, Tudor, Valentine & Worall, 2004). The question asked here is why these conditions traditionally apply only to therapeutic contexts when they seem relevant to all human relationships. Based on the findings of this study, it is thus posited that the conditions of therapeutic relationships described by the person-centred approach should be applied to all human relationships. In school communities where the health and wellbeing of all the members involved are at stake, such conditions may enhance nurturing relationships in a pro-active, preventative way (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003).

Finally, it is important to emphasise that the four aspects of nurturing relationships, although discussed separately, cannot be separated as indicated by Strike (2000; 2004). The aspects should be viewed as part of a complex process of relating and interacting between members of the school community that emerge in spontaneous, self-organising ways (Bloch, 2005; Cilliers, 2005; Stacey, 2007). Nurturing relationships are thus part of a process that can never be resolved into a final form but that constantly changes (Wood, 1995; Gergen, 2009; Stacey, 2007a; 2007b). The aspects perceived by members of the school community as nurturing relationships should therefore not be presented as factors that would ensure enabling relationships between people. The aspects, when present, merely create conditions for positive and reassuring relational communication between the members of the school community and stimulate the expansion and flow of meaning that brings new and enriching potential to relationships (Gergen, 2009).

**Recommendations**

From a complexity theory perspective, it is suggested that change can be promoted through small inferences that are often discarded as insignificant (Bloch, 2005; Byrne, 1998; Cilliers, 1998). In view of this perspective and the above findings, it seems important that school communities should attend more seriously to aspects that nurture relationships in their efforts to co-construct enabling school communities where social wellbeing is enhanced on all levels. The nurturing aspects and the associated patterns of relating and interacting as indicated by the themes and subthemes, emphasised the need for a more
humanised approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities that shifts the focus to the relationships between the members of the school community, as suggested in the literature (Morrison, 2002; Terjesen, Jacofsky, Froh & DiGuisepppe, 2004).

However, the nurturing aspects cannot be enforced by incorporating them in codes of conduct as values that guide the interaction of people without due consideration of the complexity of human behaviour. We therefore recommend that the aspects of nurturing relationships that emerged in the present study should be incorporated into a more comprehensive relational approach that provides a framework for acknowledging the complexity of human behaviour in school communities and emphasises relationships.

Limitations of the study

The findings obtained from a single case study cannot be generalised to the population at large. Based on the deep, rich descriptions provided, the findings might however be transferable to similar context by readers and researchers. De Jong (2000) also argues that findings obtained in a qualitative study could be generalised to theory about relationships in a school community as was done in this study.

The limited participation of parents in the study meant that their voices might not have been clearly heard. Although twenty parents indicated at the parents’ meetings that they would participate in the research, only five parents responded to the invitation to take part in the focus group interview, and eventually only two parents turned up. The two parents, however, seemed well informed about the school context, and it was therefore accepted that they sufficiently represented parents’ voices.

Conclusion

Schools should focus more pro-actively on enhancing nurturing patterns of relating and interacting in order to co-construct enabling school communities.
According to De Jong (2000), a more sensitive, empathic and non-patronising approach to people, need to be embraced. In view of the finding such an approach seemingly involve that people connect with each other, respect each other, care for each other and communicate transparently with each other in and across all the levels of the school system. In other words, a more humane approach that focuses on relationships between people should be adopted in response to the current mechanistic approach that perceives the school as an association based on the primacy of individuals (Morrison, 2002; Gergen, 2009).
ARTICLE 3: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF RESTRAINED RELATIONSHIPS IN SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

Research shows that challenging behaviour in schools and classrooms is a serious problem that implies restrained relationships between people in schools. The purpose of the study discussed in this article was to obtain an in-depth understanding of restrained relationships in school communities. A single instrumental case study design was applied based on the principles of participatory action research. All the learners, educators, administrative and terrain staff members and two parents were involved in work sessions and focus group interviews conducted to obtain information on their perceptions of relationships in the school community. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that restrained relationships in the school community participating in the study could be understood with reference to limited connectedness between people, the abuse of power, shifting of responsibility and disrespect for one another. Evidently, restrained relationships should be understood as part of the recursive processes that pattern being together in school communities and need to be considered an essential part of the conversation about the co-construction of enabling school communities.
Introduction

Current global discourses indicate that school communities are facing numerous challenges that may jeopardise the health and wellbeing of young people and educators. In the South African context, research indicates that challenging behaviour in school communities and classrooms is a serious problem (Masitsa, 2008; Ndamani, 2008; Naong, 2007; Oosthuizen, 2007). Furthermore, educators and children often experience emotional and behavioural problems as many have been victims of violence, crime, rape and physical abuse (De Wet, 2003; Neser, Van der Merwe, Ovens, Ladikos & Prinsloo, 2003; Zins, Elias & Greenberg, 2003). Alcohol and substance abuse, suicide and teenage pregnancies are also increasing (Coetzee & Underhay, 2003; Ferreira & Mattheus 2003) as is the prevalence of stress that contributes to ill-health through burnout in educators (Mostert, Jackson & Montgomery, 2005; Motseke, 2005). Common stressors include an autocratic style of management, lack of social support, interpersonal demands, classroom discipline, workload, time pressures and gossip (Coetzee, Jansen & Muller, 2009). Many parents are reportedly uninvolved in their children’s lives, and schools generally find it difficult to achieve active parent involvement (Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2004). Given the above, it is concluded that people in school communities experience restrained relationships (Gergen, 2009).

Such relationships are normally addressed by attending to observable behaviour such as fighting, swearing and bullying (Aboud & Miller, 2008; De Wet & Jacobs, 2007; Swart & Bredenkamp, 2009). This behaviour is often categorised as discipline problems (Steyn, Wolhuther, Oosthuizen & Van der Walt, 2003) and is amongst other reasons ascribed to a lack of morality (De Klerk & Rens, 2003). Interventions to correct problematic behaviour include the prescription of appropriate behaviour presented as moral values and rules and regulations (Stewart, 2004). Learners, educators and parents are also taught how to act appropriately during interactions (Dreyer, 2005; Pienaar, 2003), and the factors associated with their unhealthy behaviour are identified. Once-off programmes on the consequences of the behaviour are then presented to discourage the
behaviour. More positive approaches to dealing with restrained relationships include the application of solution-focused and asset-based approaches (Ebersöhn & Eloff, 2006; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996; Kruger & Van Schalkwyk, 1997; Sklare, 2005). The enhancement of peer group support (Visser, 2005; Ferreira & Mattheus, 2003) and the development of life skills are also reported in the literature as potential strategies for handling relationship problems in schools.

These strategies for dealing with the problems in school environments are acknowledged, but it is argued that the strategies in both approaches involve the teaching of adjustment skills to help school community members gain insight into their own behaviour and cope with their situations (Potts, 2003). According to social reproduction theory the status quo may be maintained by the application of these strategies, which could be regarded as reactive ways of dealing with negative observed behaviour or the reinforcement of positive behaviour of individuals (Olson, 2003). It is argued that school communities often sustain certain behaviour to ensure that the status quo is maintained with the implication that the focus of interventions remains on the at-risk groups in school communities. Yet, from a community psychology perspective, the status quo should be challenged if we intend the social change that enhances the co-construction of enabling school communities (Lazarus, 2007; Pretorius-Heuchert & Ahmed, 2001).

Relationship psychology (Stacey, 2007a) holds that the control of observable behaviour and the reinforcement of positive behaviour are merely responses of communicative interactions between the members of the school community. Intervening in these ways indicates ignorance of the complex responsive nature of human behaviour, which is described as a self-organising process that produces emergent patterns of communicative action and power relations in the school community. In terms of the complex responsiveness processes of relating theory (Stacey, 2007a; 2007b; Shaw, 2002; Suchman, 2006), interventions should focus rather on understanding how the ways in which people relate and interact restrain the relationships between them. The question that guided the research reported on in this article was therefore: How are
relationships restrained in a school community? The factors that nurture relationships as opposed to restraining them were discussed Article 2 of this study. The aim of the broad study was to explore the relationships between learners, educators, parents and administrative staff in a school community.

**Research design**

The findings reported on in this article were also obtained during the second phase. The research design, described in Article 2 applies to this study. A brief summary of the design is provided. The research design was qualitative in nature due to the need for a deep, rich understanding of relationships. A single, instrumental case study design was applied, based on participatory action research principles that involved all the members of the school community as active participants in the research (Kelly & Van der Riet, 2001). The emphasis was on understanding restraining relationships from the perspective of the participants and not on identifying factors that restrain relationships. The intricate narratives and abstract systematic framework that people construct in their relational communication with each other (Shaw, 2002) were hence explored by reflecting on their everyday relational activities. It was decided to report on the findings in two articles to ensure that the voices of the participants could be described in more detail.

**Integrated discussion of the findings**

The discussion of the findings will be based on themes and subthemes that related to the question: *How are relationships restrained in a school community?* Research data will be cited to ensure that the participants’ voices are accurately reflected and discussed with reference to relevant literature. Diagram 4, below provides an overview of the themes and subthemes, which emerged from the data.
LIMITED PERSONAL CONNECTEDNESS refers to the lack of personal interaction between the members of the school community due to the maintenance of a strong academic focus, lack of skills to connect on a more personal level and resistance to personal connectedness.

Maintaining a strong academic focus

The findings indicated that the personal interactions between the participants in the study, was limited due to the maintenance of a strong academic focus. The educators reported that, due to the strong academic focus, they did not have time to interact with one another on a more personal level: Our timetables are very full we cannot even spend some time together to chat. Because of their duties in the classroom, which included checking homework and completing guardian cards, they had limited time to interact with the learners on personal life issues. The management team reported that the workload of educators only allowed time for brief encounters with colleagues: Their time is
limited so they just rush to get through their daily jobs. They rush from the one thing to the other. In the process they merely have time to briefly talk to one another, about issues of immediate importance. The heavy workload associated with the pressure to maintain an academic focus at all cost seemingly deprived the participants of opportunities to interact with one another on a personal level. Illustration 3.1 below gives an indication of the extent of the pressure that these educators seemingly experienced due to the strong focus on academic work. The situation in particular frustrated educators and learners who preferred to connect on a personal level.

Illustration 3.1: Pressure experienced by educators due to strong workload

Conversely educators and learners who were more task-orientated seemed satisfied with the strong academic focus. Because of their performance-driven orientation, they preferred to concentrate on the task at hand, namely academic work. They seemed to perceive connecting on a personal level with colleagues, learners and parents as a waste of time as it kept them from performing their professional duties: *I have children who want to greet. It is not really important for me, what is important for me is that I want to start working. It makes me a nervous person who eventually has conflict with the child. So, I feel we should be more academically orientated at the school.*
The preference of these educators inevitably restrained their relationships with colleagues and learners who wanted to connect on a more personal level. Some of the learners reported that when they attempted to interact on a more personal level and wanted to talk about life issues task-orientated educators labelled them as troublemakers and blamed them for disrupting classes: Say you talk to the teacher about something that does not have to do with the work then the children will say that you cause trouble in class, while you actually just talk to make a little contact. These learners experienced that: work gets priority over people and educators do not perceive us as human beings.

Lack of skills to interact on a personal level

The management team in particular indicated that young educators lacked the skills to interact with learners on a personal level: The whole problem is that these staff members do not have the skills to handle the class as they should be handled. Staff members are not well equipped in terms of personality and background. They simply, don’t have the skills and the knowledge of people required to work with children. However, the parents suggested that some experienced educators also lacked the necessary skills to interact on a personal level with the learners as a result of their rigid thinking: But some of the experienced staff also battle to have good relationships with staff and learners. Many of them are so rigid in their thinking that they do not want to take other people’s viewpoint into consideration.

In view of the demands placed on families and the violent behaviour in schools, some of the parents expressed concern about educators’ lack of skill to develop personal connectedness. These parents evidently thought that if the educators were sufficiently connected with the learners on a personal level they would be able to anticipate serious problems and prevent crises: They (educators) literally spent so many hours with the learners that they should be equipped to identify problems and do something about it. That child with the sword the teachers were aware of the problem and what did they do about it?
Resistance to personal connectedness

The findings indicated that some of the learners resisted personal connectedness. For example, when the principal suggested that people should greet one another and get to know one another’s names, some learners responded by ridiculing the suggestion: Some of them would scream from afar and think they are funny.

The resistance to personal connectedness was furthermore illustrated by the way in which members of a subgroup, the Goths, responded in the work session of the study. Four members of this subgroup sat together with other learners, but, when they were given the assignment, they said that they were not interested in participating in the discussion on relationships in the school. The other members of the group challenged them, and they became angry when the researchers had to intervene. After the intervention, they wrote: Leave us alone, get lost, Goths only; don’t think you know us, cause you don’t, as indicated in the visual representation (Illustration 3.2) below.

Illustration 3.2: Resistance to personal connectedness

In view of the findings discussed above, limited connectedness as an aspect of restraining relationships are evidently patterned by the maintenance of a strong academic focus, a lack of skills to connect and resistance to connectedness.
The limited personal interaction between the members of the school community due to the strong focus on academic work seemed to restrain relationships, since personal interaction is essential for the development of personal connectedness (Fiske, 2004). The lack of time for personal interaction in particular frustrated educators and learners who preferred to connect on a personal level, due to a more person-orientated perspective on life. However, educators and learners with a more performance-orientated perspective on life preferred a strong academic focus. The strong academic focus hence polarised members of the school community due to the divergent positions they took towards personal connectedness. In the process, those members who prefer personal connectedness experience a sense of dehumanisation of the context as indicated by Morrison (2002), while members who prefer a strong academic focus seemed frustrated by the drive for personal connectedness.

The findings regarding the educators lack of skills to connect on a personal level resonates with findings of studies indicating that educators who might want learners to develop positive relationships often lacked the competencies to initiate such relationships (Cohen & Sandy, 2003; Payton, et al., 2000). In a recent South African study, Steyn, Van der Walt, Mashau and Wolhuter (2008) found that although educators acknowledged the importance of developing positive relationships with learners, they admitted that they were not sufficiently equipped to develop personal connectedness. A concern that arose in view of the findings was that educators who prefer a strong academic focus might not consider attending to their relationships skills as a priority.

According to Fiske (2004), the resistance to personal connectedness could indicate that the participants viewed either themselves or others as unworthy and therefore felt uncomfortable about being connected on a personal level. The strong academic focus maintained in this school community might therefore suit learners and educators who resisted connectedness, since the maintenance of the status quo could enable them to avoid situations that challenged them to acknowledge their need for personal connectedness in the school community.
**ABUSE OF POWER** refers to the ways in which power is used to coerce people to conform to particular opinions or to act according to the expectations of those who abuse their power positions through intimidation, the suppression of assertive behaviour and by sending anonymous messages.

**Intimidation through power plays**

The participants reported that intimidation was used to coerce people into doing what others wanted them to do. Intimidation was particularly evident, in two examples where parents jeopardised the relationships between themselves and educators through such power plays. In one instance the educator was forced to change the mark she had allocated for a learner’s assignment: *The father phoned the principal and I was forced to take in the child’s assignment and change his mark.* The educator was upset that the principal did not intervene: *I feel that the principal should have said something but instead he just listened to the parents.*

In another instance, a parent, upset about her child’s underperformance, intimidated the educator in the following way: *I told her, your class average for these learners is 26% and they are in Grade 11 and my child has to go to Grade 12 with these marks. What are you going to do about it? Then her eyes were full of tears and she started crying. I told her that I she has to rectify the situation and that her relationships with the learners have to change and if I do not see results I will follow it up.*

Power plays were also evident among learners. According to the learners, fellow-learners, who perceived themselves as superior, intimidated other learners by forcing their will on them and insisting that their opinions and their ways of doing things should be accepted and followed: *It is only that one person forces his will onto the other. When that person said that something should be done in a certain way then it should be done just like that.* The intimidation occurred non-verbally and verbally: *It is the way in which they stare at you and the way that they talk to you.* Another form of power play was evident in the way in which
educators threatened learners. Both the parents and the learners reported that the educators abused their power by threatening the learners. Threats were most often directed at learners who did not follow the rules or did not complete their homework. They were threatened with a visit to someone the educator supposed they would fear: The educators threaten us with Mr S they say when you haven’t done your work I will send you to Mr S. Some of the learners agreed that discipline could be maintained only by strict educators: But remember because he is so strict that is why the discipline in the school is under control. When he leaves, everything in the school will fall apart. The responses of other learners indicated, however, that threats did not always bring about the obedience and submission the educators evidently wanted. Instead, the threats evoked fear: The children fear him. I fear him to death.

On the one hand the threats were not carried out: Some (educators) only say that they are going to take you to the principal, and never do it, or even retracted after a few days. In one instance, a learner was expelled and in two days time he was back again. On the other hand though, parents reported instances where threats were apparently carried out without proper investigation of the particular incident: And the child was chased away, and the child did not have a fair chance, since there was no hearing, they only chased him away, because he was involved in fights before, but in this case he did not hit first.

**Suppressing assertiveness**

According to the learners, some educators tended to suppress assertive behaviour on the part of learners. It seemed that the educators perceived such behaviour as a challenge to their authority: It is true and they think that it does not matter how they treat us because they are the bosses. The suppression of assertive behaviour restrained the relationships between the learners and the educators. For example, a learner who was denied the opportunity to explain why he did not complete an assignment was very upset by the educator’s refusal to listen to his explanation: When she confronted me about the way in which I did my assignment, she blamed me of being cheeky when I wanted to reply to her
question. After the incident, the learner said that he consciously decided to refrain from any further interaction with the educator.

**Using anonymous messages**

The findings indicated that anonymous messages were used to communicate about difficult issues. The parents in the study, for example, reported that they were aware that learners sometimes communicated through anonymous letters out of fear of being victimised if others knew their identity: *they wrote a letter and someone else delivered it at the office, because they did not want anyone to know who wrote it ... they did not want to talk face to face with the principal, because they feared that they would be victimised.* In another instance, parents who laid complaints at the principal’s office did not want him to reveal their identities: *When the parents phoned the principal they did not want to see the educator. They wanted to stay anonymous, so you did not know who they were.* According to the educators, the principal also discussed complaints in a generalised manner in the staffroom to avoid victimisation of learners.

The educators reported that the use of anonymous messages created uncertainty about the nature of the relationships: *There are 40 children in front of you and you do not know who has complained. And you keep thinking who can it be?* They also felt frustrated as they could not communicate openly with the parents and the learners about what was expected of them as educators: *You do not know what their needs are so that you can address them. Yes, you want to know who it is so that you can solve the problem and say why it happened.* They were also aggrieved that they could not defend their reputations: *Yes what you do not know who is, it that harms your reputation and criticise you. And you cannot defend yourself.* The educators expressed concern that the anonymity of the complainants meant they could not resolve the problem: *The child might think that the teacher has something against him while it is not the case.* They did not seem willing to accept that parents and learners might respond anonymously due to fear of intimidation and victimisation.
The findings above indicate that the abuse of power as a restraining aspect of relationships is patterned by intimidating behaviour that involved power plays between parents and educators and amongst learners, the suppression of assertive behaviour and the avoidance of victimisation through the use of anonymous messages.

The intimidating attitude of parents who abused their power to address problems seemingly related to their expectations of schooling which in this case is that their children should excel academically and might indicate a no confidence motion in the educators as found by Rambiyana and Kok (2002). The way in which the one parent reported her intimidating behaviour indicated that she did not even consider how her attitude might restrain the relationships between her child and the educators. A serious concern is the restraining effect that such intimidations might have on the collaboration between educators, learners and parents in their efforts to address the problems. The intimidating behaviour of parents apparently also restrained the relationships between the educators and the management team as the educators experienced that management did not protect them sufficiently against parental intimidations. The intimidations amongst learners were more subtle in nature. However, in view of the violence in schools, intimidation in whatever form should be taken seriously.

The use of threats to control the behaviour of learners, reported in this study correlates with a study by Naong (2007), which indicated that different forms of ill-treatment of learners such as threats were employed in school communities, since the abolition of corporal punishment. However, the fear evoked by these threats, were counter-productive in terms of the development of pro-social behaviour in human beings as suggested by Fiske (2004). The threats therefore seriously restrained relationships between the educators who use threats to control behaviour and the learners who experienced the threats as fearful. In view of the fact that some learners seem to agree with the use of threats as a way to control behaviour, the relationships between learners might also be restrained as they will be polarised by their different perspectives. The execution of the threats based on a lack of evidence furthermore undermined
relationships on all levels as indicated by the responses of the participants who observed situations where people had been expelled without sufficient evidence.

The threats that more often receive attention in the literature seemed to be threats that are bully or violence related. A deeper understanding of the impact of the kinds of threats reported in this study on the relationships between members of the school community is therefore needed, since educators who made the threats did not seem to understand that in doing so they restrained their relationships with learners.

The way in which assertiveness was suppressed suggested that some educators still experience that their power positions were challenged when learners expressed their opinions. This finding supports the findings of a study by Devine (2002) which indicated that teachers often perceive learners who are empowered as threatening. In view of the fact that learners are currently more empowered than in the past the suppression of assertiveness might evoke conflict between learners and educators that could seriously restrain the relationships between them.

The sending of anonymous messages suggests that the participants wanted either to avoid retribution by those in positions of power or the discomfort associated with confrontation as suggested by Rains (2007). On the one hand, the use of anonymous messages could be perceived as socially acceptable and therefore an appropriate tool to protect members of the school community. On the other hand, such messages could indicate that the participants did not have the candour to communicate openly as a result of power differences. However, irrespective of the purpose of anonymous messages the findings indicated distrust between the members of the school community, as confirmed by uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Berger, 1986). The sending of anonymous messages hence suggested that restrained relationships are associated with uncertainty about whether the members of the school community could trust one another. The latest literature indicates that
anonymous messages as a way to exert power over others are currently present in the form of cyber bullying (Juvonen, 2008).

**SHIFTING RESPONSIBILITY** refers to the process of transferring the responsibility for problems to other members of the school community instead of accepting co-responsibility for dealing with the problems.

**Blaming the home environment for problems**

Some of the educators indicated that behavioural problems experienced by learners could be related to problems in the home environment: *I am convinced that the child, who pesters you all the time, is the child who is rejected at home. That is the child who needs love and attention.* A concern was that the educators seemingly based their assumptions on popular generalisations by lay people and the media: *Last year I read an article which stated that because parents are obliged to work full time, the child is alone at home most of the day. He is not used to being reprimanded or to get respect and discipline. So when the parents get home in the evenings, they feel guilty because they only see the child for a short period of time. So everything goes according to their will. And tomorrow the child comes to school and also expects that everything that he is doing should be accepted.*

The way in which the educators generalised the belief that parents were responsible for the problems their children experienced at school clearly upset the parents as revealed by their responses to the allegations that problems at school were related to problems at home. The parents challenged the blaming of home environments for the lack of discipline in schools. They said that most parents disciplined their children at home and that the educators should not shift the blame for children’s behaviour in class to the home environment. The parents challenged the educators to accept responsibility for what happened between them and the learners in the classroom: *I sometimes feel that they (educators) allow it. You give learners permission to disrupt your class and then blame the parents.* They also encouraged the educators to respond actively to the discipline
problems in their classes: If you cannot handle the situation you need to call in the principal. If there is no discipline in the school, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to rectify the situation? I cannot do it! I am a mother at home. Was it a problem in my household, then I would have helped. But the problem is at school. Sort it out!

The learners also insisted that their behaviour at school did not necessarily relate to their problems at home: I do not agree, I think everyone who is naughty wants to get some attention. One does not always have to look that far as problems at home. It does not help to go to the parent with every problem.

**Blaming the educators for problems**

The educators were reportedly blamed by the parents if their children experienced problems at school. Instead of considering that their children might also contribute to the problems at school and supporting the efforts of the educators to deal with the children’s unacceptable behaviour, the parents supported their children: The educator is the worker. Here you have to do the work whether it is good or whatever and you have to take the punch. You have to absorb everything like a sponge, and the children can say what they want and do what they want, but you have to take the punch and you are not supported. The parents were perceived by the educators as neglecting their duties regarding their children’s education. The educators were apparently frustrated by the parents’ behaviour since it seemed they were expected to bear the dual responsibility of being educators as well as parents for the learners: In the end I have to carry the whole academic responsibility, I have to carry the education through, everything, everything becomes my responsibility. Although this might be applicable to certain parents, some educators generalised the allegation that some parents did not want to get involved in their children’s lives to all parents, which parents who participated in the study found very upsetting.

The findings indicated that the shifting of responsibility as a restraining aspect of relationships was patterned by the blame-shifting between educators
and parents in the school community. Saunders (1995) also found that while educators blame the parents for the problems at school, parents, in turn, have a tendency to make educators the scapegoats. According to Peters (2004), the shifting of responsibility for problems between parents and educators constitutes what she calls the ‘blame game’. She argues that the reciprocal blaming between members of a school community may serve as a momentary catharsis for people’s frustrations but might seriously restrain relationships between them in the longer term.

In accordance with this study Rishel (2004) found that educators tend to blame student misbehaviour and academic underachievement on broken homes and dysfunctional. Ndamani (2008) found that parents have a tendency to shift the role of disciplining their children to educators since they believe that they should not involve themselves with the discipline in the school environment, is confirmed by the findings of this study. It seemed evident from the findings that both, the educators and the parents in the study underplayed their own involvement in the problems in the school community by assuming a linear, causal effect between learners’ problems, their dispositions and familial factors or schools factors as confirmed by Bibou-Nakou, Kiosseoglou and Stogiannidou (2000).

**DISRESPECT FOR ONE ANOTHER** in this study refers to disregard that people display through incongruence regarding respect, a lack of consideration for others, the devaluing of others and discriminating against one another.

**Incongruence regarding respect**

Incongruence regarding respect was reported by the learners who recounted incidents where educators who were cross with a learner who had misbehaved would treat the learner disrespectfully yet expected respectful behaviour from them: *When he has done something wrong and the educator
scolds him, he might backchat or something. So he will not have respect for the educator, who do not show respect for him.

Some educators were also considered incongruent regarding respect when they shouted at the whole class when only some learners had misbehaved: *When one child, and it is mostly one or two children in the class, do not have respect, the educator shouts at the whole class and gives lots of homework. That generates a negative vibe between the whole class and the educator.* The learners also indicated that they did not appreciate the way in which some educators humiliated learners in front of the whole class and still expected them to show respect for the educator: *And I also think the educator should not attack the child in front of the class. When there is a situation the child should be kept behind. It is humiliating when the educator shouts at him in front of the whole class. They should wait until after the class to discuss the matter.*

The educators reported that the relationships with management team members became restrained when management acted incongruently by disregarding educators’ opinions while they were expected to respect management’s views: *I do not think that there is mutual respect between the educators and top management, we are not considered as important. All the other people’s opinions are considered, before ours. Then when you respond they ask you why you behave like that and tell you how to respond and disregard what is important for us as educators.*

**Lack of consideration for others**

The administrative staff and the parents referred to the tendency amongst educators to show a lack of consideration for others. The administrative staff members, for example, experienced that some educators treated them disrespectfully by insinuating that they did not do much work without even taking the trouble to understand the nature of their work: *I sometimes feel that there are people who think that nothing is happening in the office. I sometimes work till late in the afternoons ... it seems sometimes as if we don’t do anything, but*
actually we do a lot of work. And yet they (educators) do not understand if I say no sometimes. They furthermore indicated that some educators apparently set expectations without considering the learners’ circumstances at home: You have to show understanding for the child’s situation at home. Not just trample the child. The child comes from a certain background where he has learnt to do things a certain way and now you trample the child at school, while it is not the child’s doing.

Parents indicated that educators also displayed a lack of consideration by assuming that parents who did not attend parent meetings were not interested in their children, while as the parents in the study explained the situations of some parents were of such a nature that, despite their interest in their children, they could not attend meetings.

**Devaluing one another**

The educators reported that they had been devalued by some parents who demeaned their training: When the parent comes here he does not respect you as the educated person who at least studied in your field. In line with the alleged demeaning attitude towards educators, some parents reportedly also spoke negatively about educators in front of their children: The parents badmouth staff in front of their children and then the children come to school with this negative image about staff members and it is impossible to do anything right in the learners’ eyes, because we are not supported by the parents, we are there to do the work. The educators ascribed this tendency to the over-emphasis of human rights and the incongruent ways in which these rights were applied in the school communities: So much emphasis is placed on human rights from the government side. So, parents and children feel that their rights are all that is important in the school. And precisely what she said, the relationship that certain parents have with the school is negative and they transfer that negativity to their children.

The educators’ professional dignity was sometimes devalued by their own colleagues who used pet names to address them in professional contexts. One
An educator expressed her frustration about this kind of behaviour as follows: *I do not appreciate it when someone calls me ‘doll’ (pop). I am young but I am not stupid and I know that experience is important but I have also studied and are still open to learn and will listen when someone gives me advice but please take me seriously and respect my position.*

The educators furthermore experienced devaluation of their position of status in that the parents and learners were often mollified irrespective of the ways in which they behaved towards the educators. The educators seemed concerned about the effect that this might have on their position as educators: *It feels as if the parents are pampered, it feels terrible to say but the parents are kept as happy as possible and then the child walks out of there and thinks yes how nice, the teacher is going to get in trouble with the principal and then the principal will probably come and say that all is under control, but the child wins.* The educators added that their needs and opinions were often ignored unlike those of the learners and the parents: *I actually feel that much trouble is taken to listen to learners’ opinions, and much trouble is taken to hear children, but do we really have a place where we can talk about something, because you never know if it will remain confident?*

Another example of devaluing people concerned learners who performed averagely on the performance continuum. Learners at the extreme ends of this continuum, that is, learners who achieved well or failed to achieve, apparently received all the educators’ attention. The learners in the middle often had to cope without the support of the educators: *it sometimes feels as if the average child is falling through the cracks. On the one hand, we boost the top group, while this average group of learners we forget. And they fall through the cracks. On the other hand, we are so busy pampering these learners that we forget about the 75%, the rest of the school. We forget the average child.* The learners in the study confirmed this when they said that when they performed well - in sport, cultural activities, academic work or leadership - they were advantaged by their success. However, they did not experience the same advantages when they no longer performed well: *It is like this, he does not worry about us now, but when we were
in the first team then he would very much care about us, but that is not how it should be. It thus appears that some of the participants were not considered as valuable as other participants to the school community, which has serious implications for the relationships between people if one bears in mind that the average group is often the largest group in the school community.

**Discriminating against one another**

The participants in the study revealed a strong tendency to discriminate against one another on the basis of race, years of experience and position in the hierarchy. In the work sessions, some of the white learners refused to join a group of black learners. The way in which the black learners responded suggested that they expected such an attitude because they were a minority group in the school. Neither the educators nor the parents openly referred to discriminatory practices, yet it was evident from the focus group discussions that some educators still considered segregation of groups as acceptable. Conversely, the learners openly discussed the issue of racial discrimination by recounting how learners who preferred to make friends across racial boundaries were discriminated against: *One of the children who is white is with the black children and I think it causes friction because they insinuate that as a white kid you must be in our group, and they reject him because they assume that it is only the blacks that accept him.*

Apart from discrimination based on race, the findings also indicated that the experienced educators in the study tended to discriminate against younger educators by referring to them in derogatory ways: *You get a group of youngsters who are Generation X/s, they wonder who they are, they like to be surrounded by noise, they mXit and the rest of the staff said please be calm. You talk too much and you are too loud.* They also seemed to be irritated by them: *So much so, that they roll their eyes at one another in the staff meetings, when the youngsters are loud.* The alleged judgemental attitude of the more experienced staff members apparently seriously restrained the relationships between the two groups: *Their worlds differ so much and that is where relationships go astray.*
In view of the aforesaid, disrespect as a restraining aspect of relationships in the school community was evidently patterned by incongruence regarding respect, a lack of consideration for others, the devaluing of others and discriminating against one another.

The incongruence regarding respect, apparently confirm that respect might probably be perceived by some educators as a way to assert their authority to control behaviour, instead of gaining the respect of others by showing them respect. As indicated in this study the incongruence certainly restrained the relationships between the educators and the learners, even the learners who were not directly involved were upset about the incongruent behaviour. By emphasising the incongruence regarding respect this study confirms the importance of mutuality as a primary component of respect as indicated by Hendrick and Hendrick (2006).

Ignorance of people’s situations and circumstances implied a demeaning, judgemental attitude towards other people that particularly restrained the relationships between the administrative staff and the educators. It seemed however that such a lack of consideration might also restrain relationships between the educators and the learners, as suggested by the examples that the administrative staff reported. Research by Kenrick, Neuberg and Cialdini (2007) revealed that the participants who did not take the time to consider other participants’ situations were regarded as egoistic and self-centered. Although not stated explicitly it was apparent that the administrative staff perceived the educators who do not consider other people, as egoistic and self-centered.

The disrespect experienced due to the devaluing of people confirm that respect is strongly associated with the worth or value of a person, as indicated by Hendrick & Hendrick (2006). It is therefore inevitable that the relationships between educators and those members (parents and management team) who disregarded their value as professionals would be seriously restrained. Such devaluing behaviour inevitably led to disparity between educators and parents as also found by Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, Kitching and Eloff (2005). The way in
which management accommodated the parents and the learners irrespective of the circumstances clearly led to a deeper sense of devaluation, as educators apparently interpreted the mollifying of parents and learners as confirmation that they were merely in service of parents and the educators and therefore less important members of the school community.

With regard to discriminatory practices it was evident that relationships between members of the school community were seriously restrained due to the racial discrimination, aggravated by the perception of educators that segregation between people is acceptable. A concern that arose was that the members of the school community did not even seem to reflect on discriminatory practices, despite the fact that these practice restrained relationships between people in the school community on different levels.

The findings regarding discrimination against one another seemingly confirm an argument by Soudien (2004) that despite changes in the social nature of the education system, discrimination still prevails in school communities. Fiscke and Ladd (2004) believe this may be linked to the way in which racial discrimination was and still seemed to be legitimised in the previous dispensation. The findings therefore emphasised the importance of attending to discriminatory practices in schools as restraining relationships that will jeopardise the co-construction of enabling school communities.

**Understanding restrained relationships**

The study revealed four aspects of restrained relationships that emerge in the complex, dynamic interactions between people as suggested by complexity theory (Cilliers, 1998; Radford, 2006). When we consider the four aspects and the patterns associated with each aspect as discussed previously our understanding of restrained relationships in this particular school community encompassed the following:

The school community seemed dehumanised (Morrison, 2002) due to a strong academic focus that, limited the possibilities for personal interactions
between the members of the school community. Within this dehumanised context the members of the school community were mainly defined in terms of their individual roles and tasks and were therefore expected to perform only in accordance with these roles (Stacey, 2007b). Because of the strong individualist focus participants seemingly perceived one another as a threat and responded by protecting themselves on all levels of the relational matrix. According to Gergen (2009) this might be an outcome of the primacy of the individual that bound the members and suggests a shift towards the primacy of relationships that could unbind members to be able to collaborate in the process of co-constructing an enabling school community.

The abuse of power, the blame games and the disrespecting ways in which the participants interacted to maintain the boundaries between the self and other people further foster the autonomy of individuals at the cost of the connectedness between people as indicated in the literature (Gergen, 2009; Stacey, 1992; Swart & Bowman 2007; Wood, 1995). The forming of relationships therefore seemed foreign to the participants who did not seem to regard the relational component of their school community as informing their interactions. Although power relationships are inevitably part of all relationship as indicated in the work of Foucault (Marshall, 1990), the concern that emerges from this study is that the members of the school community seemed ignorant about how they abuse power to maintain the status quo and the consequences thereof for the relationships between them on all the levels of inter-connectedness. Burbules (1986) argued that educational institutions apparently perpetuate the problem of power due to the hierarchical nature of the school that might cause conflict between people.

From a relational psychology perspective (Stacey, 2007a), the manner in which the educators and the parents in the study blamed one another clearly demonstrated that the educators and the parents seemed to disregard their own roles in the complex dynamic interactions between people (Stacey, 2007b; Radford, 2006; Morrison, 2002). Both groups seemed caught up in what is described in the literature as traditional modernist ways of thinking about human
interaction (Radford, 2006). They consequently made linear, reductionist connections between the problems in the school and the learners’ home environments based on their own assumptions rather than acknowledging the dynamic interplay between the various role-players.

The members of the school community were polarised in and between the different levels of relatedness. Such polarisation jeopardises the possibility of creating support networks to enhance relational wellbeing in the school as suggested by Evans and Prilleltensky (2007). The polarisation of the educators on the one extreme and the parents and the learners on the other extreme is cause for concern as the educators apparently believed that they could not truly be part of the school community. According to Levine and Perkins (1997), this could increase the psychological distress of educators and diminish their wellbeing.

The findings also indicated that an authoritarian approach as described in the literature (Mokhele, 2006; Maree & Cherian, 2004; Naong, 2007) might still be prevalent in this school community. Such an approach tended to maintain control by minimising attention to the social context as suggested by Wilkonson (2001). From a critical psychology perspective, it could therefore be argued that despite the shift towards social justice and inclusion in existing policies (DoE, 2001) and expectations regarding the enhancement of relationships in schools set by the National Department of Education (ELRC, 2003), the members of school communities have not yet embraced the practice associated with these changes. The apparent prevalence of the authoritarian approach confirmed that the formalised implementation of change in contextual conditions that has taken place since 1994 has not necessarily changed the people involved (Levine & Perkins, 1997) due to the complex self-organising nature of human behaviour in a school community.

**Recommendations**

The findings of the study indicated that the relationships between the members of the school community were restrained in various ways. An
understanding of restrained relationships should therefore be considered an important part of the facilitation of social change and the enhancement of wellbeing in all school communities. The study revealed that the restrained relationships in the particular school community should be understood as intersubjective recursive processes that patterned the relationships between the members of the community. The identified patterns should consequently be considered an essential part of the conversation about the co-construction of enabling school communities. However, there seemed to be a tendency among the participants to avoid restraining patterns or to focus mainly on the symptoms associated with these patterns. The ways in which relationships are restrained in school communities should accordingly be dealt with pro-actively in the process of co-constructing enabling school communities.

In terms of the levels of wellbeing identified by Prilleltensky (2001), it seems the development of positive behaviour support (Sugai & Horner, 2002; Carr, 2007; Franzen & Kamps, 2008), the ways of dealing with discipline problems (Badenhorst, Steyn & Beukes, 2007; Van Louw & Waghid, 2008) and the promotion of health in schools focus either on the individual or the collective wellbeing in schools. Yet, as indicated by Prilleltensky (2001), relationships between people facilitate personal and collective wellbeing. A relationship-focused approach should consequently also be developed to enable educators, learners and parents to become unbounded beings capable of changing the discourse in schools in such a way that the human connection replaces separation as the fundamental reality in school communities (Gergen, 2009) and, in the process, facilitates an inclusive environment in which social justice prevails for all school community members.

**Limitations of the study**

Because this was a single case study, the generalisability of the findings to other contexts is limited. However, the intention of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between all the members of a particular school community. Since the study entailed in-depth longitudinal
involvement in particular contexts, where time was restrained due to academic obligations, a single case study was considered the best option.

The use of focus groups may have limited the candour of the participants to disclose more serious restraints to relationships. To address this concern, the open-ended focus group discussion was conducted in a way that seemingly facilitated a relaxed atmosphere in which the participants could openly express their opinions about restraining relationships. Although only two parents participated in the research, they contributed significantly to the understanding of restrained relationships perhaps because of the dyadic nature of the interview that allowed them to talk freely.

**Conclusion**

The living present is as much about restrained relationships as it is about nurturing relationships. The facilitation of social change in schools therefore requires us to see restraining patterns as part of the process of co-constructing enabling school communities.
ARTICLE 4: CONCEPTUALISING A RELATIONSHIP-FOCUSED APPROACH TO THE CO-CONSTRUCTION OF ENABLING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

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Abstract

The attempts to facilitate social change in schools are still informed mainly by individual-level interventions that seem to lack sustainability. A relationship-focused approach is proposed as an alternative way to co-construct enabling school communities. In this article such an approach is conceptualised based on complex responsiveness process theory, and empirically grounded in baseline data as well as in-depth exploration of relationships in school communities. The relationship-focused approach encompasses open, spontaneous conversations about being together in school communities that involve reflexive engagements and feedback. Facets of interrelatedness that emerged from the in-depth study are applied as focal points to identify and punctuate nurturing and restraining patterns of relating and interacting in a school community. The intention of the approach is to enhance a meta-level understanding of being together in school communities by bringing the private into the public sphere through the facilitation of dialogue on the co-construction of enabling school communities.
Introduction

The future wellbeing of schools will increasingly depend on the extent to which generative processes of relating between the members of school communities are nourished and protected (Gergen, 2009). However, very little attention has been given to the relational dimension of being together in school communities despite the fact that schools are often swamped with relational problems between learners, educators, parents and other staff members. Attempts to promote social change in schools are still heavily reliant on individual-level interventions. Support services in South African schools are, for example, focused primarily on individualist, intra-psychic interventions, and referrals of individuals who experience behavioural problems are escalating. Also, because of high learner-professional ratios and long distances between support offices and schools in rural areas (Pillay & Lockhat, 2001; Pillay & Wasileski, 2007; Lazarus, 2006), tertiary level interventions are mainly focussed on individuals with serious problems. Primary and secondary interventions generally take the form of random, once-off presentations in a prescriptive format of how people should relate and interact (Dreyer, 2005; Pienaar, 2003) without acknowledging the complex, dynamic nature of human interaction. This could explain the non-sustainability of current interventions to enhance wellbeing in schools (Hawe, Shiell & Riley, 2009).

In response to the challenges that schools are currently facing, more attention needs to be paid to the relationships between members of school communities rather than persisting with traditional ways of dealing with challenges regarding human behaviour in such communities. This article proposes a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities as an alternative way to deal with the challenges of human behaviour in schools. The proposed approach is informed by theories on the interactions between people and by the findings of the research, which was conducted in school contexts and reported on in Articles 1, 2 and 3 of this doctoral study.
Assumptions underpinning a relationship-focused approach

A relationship-focused approach challenges the individualist view that members of school communities are separate entities that are solely responsible for their actions (Gergen, 2009; Gergen & Gergen, 2008; Stacey, 1997). A relationship-focused approach assumes that the transactional nature of the relationships between learners, educators, parents and administrative staff members, and the contexts, in which they function, is acknowledged (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001; Duffy & Wong, 2000). The transactional nature of the various relationships in the different contexts is derived from the social ecological theory of Kelly (1990; 2000) and the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979). However, although the theories of Kelly and Bronfenbrenner contributed to the identification of hard systems (Flood, 2006), the research in the present study indicated that the complexity of human behaviour within and between the different systems should also be recognised. A theory that explains the dynamic interactions between individuals, groups and the different systems in which the interactions occur, and the patterns that emerge between them should therefore be applied in the conceptualising of a relationship-focused approach.

The theory of complex responsive processes of relating (Shaw, 2002; Stacey, 2007a; 2007b; Griffin, 2002), is consequently proposed. According to the theory people continuously act in ways that evoke and provoke responses from each other, and, in the process, patterns of being together develop in emergent self-organising ways (Morrison, 2002; Radford, 2006). The complex networks of relational patterns that evolve in the dynamic interactive processes of being in interaction inform the private and silent conversations in people’s minds as well as the public conversations between them. The patterns of being together in a school community - whether in the private minds of individuals or displayed publicly in social interactions - are thus mutually created and co-created in each moment of being together in the school community as indicated by Vorster (2003). All the members in the school community are thus continuously involved in the interactive processes that take place between them on a daily basis (Burr, 1995). Human behaviour and behavioural challenges should hence be understood
in terms of the web of relational interrelatedness (Gergen, 2009; Gergen & Gergen 2008; Josselson, 1996) and not as individual acts of the unconscious mind (Stacey, 2001). In this web of relational interrelatedness, the individual, the group, the school community and society are ontologically viewed as the same phenomenon in terms of their contribution to the complex dynamic interactions in school communities (Stacey, 2007a).

A relationship-focused approach is furthermore based on the assumption that the dynamics of schools, as non-linear feedback systems, are so complex that the links between cause and effect are not easily determinable (Cilliers, 1998; Morrison, 2002; Radford; 2008; Stacey 1992). Since a variety of behaviours emerge in self-organising ways in the interaction between members, stricter control in addressing the challenges school face in terms of learners’ behaviour will therefore not necessarily bring about stability and equilibrium (Manson, 2001; Morrison, 2001). Neither will it be possible to design a blueprint for dealing with human behaviour and relational dynamics in schools (Bloch, 2005; Cilliers, 2001; Stacey, 1997), since it is also not possible to prescribe how people would relate and interact in a school community. From a relationship-focused perspective, dealing with human behaviour and relational dynamics therefore rather becomes the ongoing concerted effort of individuals and the group as they form each other and are formed by each other (Stacey, 2007a). This concerted effort takes place in the zone of complexity where there is a constant shift between stability and chaos. In this zone of complexity the ambiguity and paradox of the concurrent presence of nurturing and restraining relationships might give rise to creative ways to co-construct enabling school communities that did not necessarily exist before.

In addition a relationship-focused approach mainly emphasises prevention, as suggested in the research literature (De Jong, 2000; Farmer & Farmer, 1999; Sharatt, 1995; Strein, Hoagwood & Cohn, 2003; Patton et al., 2000; Prilleltensky, 2005). The approach thus encompasses proactive involvement of the members of school communities that is aimed at strengthening relationships between all the members of such communities rather than merely addressing the
interpersonal problems between individual members. Consequently a relationship-focused approach is an inclusive endeavour. Not only those members who, experience problems, regarding human behaviour or who are in management positions or perceived as experts in a particular field should be involved in the continuous conversations. The inclusion of all the members of the school community should be encouraged to provide the diversity of input needed to facilitate conversations that enhance a meta-level understanding of being together in the school community.

A relationship-focused approach

Schools are complex responsive processes of relating that simultaneously display order and disorder, stability and instability, regularity and irregularity (Stacey, 2007a) as confirmed in a baseline exploration of learners’, parents’ and educators’ experiences in South African schools discussed in Article 1. The challenge is to conceptualise an approach that contributes constructively to practice while simultaneously showing sensitivity for the complexity of social phenomena and human behaviour in schools. In terms of such sensitivity, a relationship-focused approach has to refrain from presenting strategies or clusters of strategies as optimum solutions to the problems in schools (Mittleton-Kelly, 2003).

According to Stacey (2003), human beings co-construct their futures in conversational processes. We therefore propose that school communities should be understood as conversational processes that involve self-organising participation in the spontaneous emergence of continuity and change (Shaw, 2002; Fonesco, 2002). Conversational processes encompass open, spontaneous dialogue between the members of a school community that takes place through everyday ways of relating and interacting. A relationship-focused approach is accordingly conceptualised as the facilitation of continuous conversations between all the members about how they co-construct an enabling school community while they are together. All the learners, the educators, the parents and the other staff members have to be involved in the dialogue with one another
to ensure that the opposing voices of the members of a school community are heard as suggested by Bakhtinian dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Mkize, 2004; Stacey, 2003). Through the active engagement of all the members, the continuous conversations between them, and not the individual members, then become the agents of change in the school community as argued by relationship psychology (Stacey, 2007a; Shaw, 2002).

The first phase of the study indicated that when the facilitation of the continuous conversations focus on descriptions of the explicit ways of relating and interacting in school communities stereotypical descriptions of being together emerge. Enabling ways of relating and interacting was for example reported as people participating together in events and activities; collaborating with one another in classroom activities and projects; sharing ideas, opinions and stories about their lives with one another; recognising one another’s achievements; and supporting and encouraging one another. In the same temporal spaces, disenabling ways of relating and interacting were identified as pretending to be in control; stereotyping people; favouring people; harming people’s integrity and reputation; humiliating people through teasing and ridicule; excluding people from involvement; and fighting with one another.

Although it can be useful to obtain information on these explicit ways in which members of school communities relate and interact, the focus merely shifts the attention from individuals (intra-psychic) to the interactions between individuals (inter-psychic). Patterns of being together were vaguely visible from the descriptions of ways of relating and interacting yet, it was not sufficient to provide an understanding of the process of being together in school communities that can facilitate change in a way that is sensitive to the complexity of human behaviour.

Informed by an understanding of the complexity of human behaviour, we therefore argue that the facilitation of the continuous conversations about co-constructing an enabling school community has to involve a meta-level understanding of being together in school communities. In attempting to
understand what meta-level conversations entail, we were guided by the theoretical assumptions that underpin the conceptualisation of a relationship-focused approach as well as by the findings of in-depth case study research conducted in a school community in South Africa as described in Article 2 and 3.

In the analysis of data obtained from the case study, nurturing and restraining aspects of relationships between the members of the particular school community were identified by focusing on the patterns of relating and interacting that emerged from the ways in which the members of a school community related and interacted. The nurturing aspects of the relationships identified in the present study included connectedness, respect, care and transparent communication. The aspects evidently created conditions for positive and reassuring relational interaction between the school community members and stimulated the expansion and flow of meaning that brings new and enriching potential to relationships (Gergen, 2009). The restraining aspects of being together included limited connectedness, abuse of power, shifting of responsibility and disrespect. These aspects were degenerative in terms of the flow of relational communication and consequently jeopardised the expansion and flow of meaning that could enrich the participants’ relationships.

At first glance, the nurturing and restraining aspects of relating and interacting in the school community seemed dichotomous. However, reflection on the findings from a complexity perspective in discussions with peer researchers* revealed the following: The nurturing and restraining aspects are not dichotomous but represent what Radford (2008) refers to as recursive symmetrical patterns of being together in school communities that at the level of the system as a whole might inform the co-construction of enabling school communities. Based on theory and the reflexive engagements we therefore posit that the nurturing and restraining aspects are understood as facets of interrelatedness that provide a basis for the facilitation of the continuous conversations about the co-construction of an enabling school community. The nurturing and restraining aspect of relationships understood as facets of interrelatedness include connectedness, respect, care, responsibility, power and
communication. Each facet of interrelatedness will be briefly discussed with reference to relevant literature and an indication of how the specific facet is perceived within a relationship-focused approach.

**Connectedness**

The literature refers to school connectedness as encompassing a sense of belonging and attachment and consequently considers it significant for the co-construction of enabling school communities (Libbey, 2004; Loukas, Roalson & Herrera, 2010; McNeeley & Falci, 2004; McNeeley, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002; Roffey, 2010; Schaps & Cook, 2010). In a relationship-focused approach connectedness as a facet of interrelatedness encompass that people are acquainted on a more personal level across the boundaries created by the systems, as a way to enhance a sense of belonging and interdependence.

**Care**

Various authors state that in a school as a caring community, concern, solidarity and support should be shown for people (Battistich, Solomon & Watson, 1998; Blum, 2005; Noddings, 2002; Strike, 2004). McLennan (2008) argues that care entails that the emotional needs of learners should be attended to amidst the rigorous academic standards that prevail in school communities. Care is evident in the support networks that are created to accommodate people (Rosenfeld, Richman & Bowen, 2000) and contribute to quality of life (Burlenson, Albrecht, Goldsmith & Sarason, 2000). As a facet of interrelatedness in a relationship-focused approach care encompass emphatic engagement between people based on their love for their fellow-men and willingness to serve others and address legitimate needs within formal and informal support networks (Josselson, 1996; Barnes & Duck, 2000).

**Respect**

According to Dillon (2007), respect refers to the deference people show one another. Deference implies a communicative act of acceptance towards
another person without forfeiting one's own individual worth. Hajii (2006) maintains that respect involves being mindful of one another, being responsive to people’s needs, instilling optimism and accepting boundaries without being judgemental. In addition Hajii’s study indicated that students consider respect as mutual kindness towards one another while staff members conceptualised respect as the way a person responds to another person's beliefs and feelings and shows respect for his or her own self. Goodman (2009) distinguishes between respect-due, which is premised on human dignity and granted unconditionally, and respect-earned, which is contingent upon qualities that one possesses or acquires over time. A study by Jones (2002) confirms that respect as a value is not necessarily based on intrinsic worth or dignity. Marginalised youths, for example, value relationships of mutual respect. Yet for them respect is conditional, and they show respect if it is shown to them but withdraw respect if they perceive another person as dismissive, inattentive or unaware. In addition, Van der Merwe (2004) emphasises that a person who wants to be respected needs to show respect, but argues that in relationships with learners, the responsibility to initiate and maintain respect rests with the adults.

As a facet of interrelatedness, respect is perceived as, mindfully engaging with one another, based on unconditional acceptance and appreciation for one another as equal human beings. Respect furthermore entails congruence associated with an understanding that respect is a mutual process that involves complex interactive dynamics of respect due and respect-earned.

Responsibility

Hayden and Thompson (1978) indicate that responsibility is described either as an outcome of education or, from a moral perspective, as a primary ethical requirement that people should observe. As an ethical requirement responsibility refers to shared responsibility that members of a school community have towards the co-construction of enabling school communities. Wentzel (1991) indicated that the acceptance of social responsibility has value for the school community as a whole. As a facet of interrelatedness responsibility is thus
perceived as, the shared effort of accepting liability for the co-construction process as a collaborative effort, without shifting the blame for problems to other members of the community.

Communication

Communication encompasses the process of making sense out of the world and sharing that sense with others (Beebe, Beebe & Redmond, 2005) and not merely the exchange of information (Suchman, 2006). Communicative interaction between members of a school community (Stacey, 2007a) enables them to co-construct inter-subjective spaces in which they encounter one another as persons (Hesplep, 2001). In these inter-subjective spaces they can thematise and explore challenges through discussions as argued by Habermas (2001). In a relationship-focused approach, communication as a facet of interrelatedness then entails the processes of shared sense-making through open honest communicative interaction across all the levels of interrelatedness.

Power

According to Foucault (1982) power is part of all relationships. He describes power relations as a set of actions that induce others to act in a manner that makes it either easier or more difficult for them to act in a particular context (Ahmed & Suffla, 2007). An understanding of power and power relations is therefore an essential part of the co-construction of enabling school communities. On the one hand power might constrain people to act within a system (Richardson, 2000) and create power dynamics associated with most societal problems as argued by Nelson and Prilleltensky (2004). On the other hand members of a school community might be empowered to take control over their wellbeing through active participation in the co-construction of an enabling school community (Prilleltensky, 2001). In a relationship-focused approach, power as a facet of interrelatedness is then perceived as encompassing both oppressive interactive dynamics that involve control and liberating interactive dynamics that facilitate emancipation.
In view of the above it is evident that the facets of interrelatedness represent relational level indicators of the complex, dynamic, interactive process of being together in a school community that can enhance a meta-level understanding of being together in a school community. Applying the facets of interrelatedness to understand how people are together in the school community used as a case study, clearly revealed the following nurturing and restraining patterns associated with each facet of interrelatedness that emerged from the everyday ways in which people relate and interact, as illustrated in Diagram 5 below.

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**Diagram 5: Facets of interrelatedness and associated nurturing and restraining patterns in the case study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FACETS OF INTERRELATEDNESS</th>
<th>NURTURING PATTERNS</th>
<th>RESTRAINING PATTERNS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONNECTEDNESS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to connect with one another</td>
<td>Resistance to connectedness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledge interdependence</td>
<td>Maintain individuality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to cross boundaries</td>
<td>Maintain strict boundaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathic understanding</td>
<td>Apathy towards people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing needs and problems pro-actively</td>
<td>Ignorance of one another’s needs and circumstances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Showing love for one another</td>
<td>Exclude people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPECT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show respect</td>
<td>Lack of mutual respect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance one another as equal beings</td>
<td>Judge one another</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valuing of each other’s input</td>
<td>Disregard one another</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to listen to one another’s needs</td>
<td>Lack of understanding for others dispositions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESPONSIBILITY</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration between members based on trust</td>
<td>Distrust between members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared responsibility</td>
<td>Blame-shifting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMMUNICATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open discussions</td>
<td>Limited communicative interaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation for assertiveness</td>
<td>Fear assertiveness (send anonymous messages)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing openly with conflict</td>
<td>Avoidance of conflict</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POWER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiate power</td>
<td>Control behaviour</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowering less powerful members</td>
<td>Intimidation: force consent through fear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Based on the findings of the case study and the theory of complex responsiveness processes of relating, we therefore propose that a relationship-focused approach should encompass the facilitation of continuous conversations that enhance a meta-level understanding of a school community. To facilitate such transformative continuous conversations we propose that the facets of interrelatedness that were identified are, introduced into the conversational processes in school community as focal points that could guide the members of the school community to reflect on the ways in which they relate and interact with one another. The collective reflexive process, according to Roos and Kitching (2010), will raise the members’ awareness of themselves in relation to others and the social context in which they are engaged. We recommend that the reflexive engagements are based on the principles of a person-centred approach to enable members to honestly mirror their own behaviour in a congruent way.

We furthermore propose that while members are reflexively engaged, in the open, spontaneous dialogue about the ways in which they relate and interact they identify recursive nurturing and restraining patterns that prevail in their particular context at that particular point in time. The patterns identified in association with each of the facets are then punctuated on the nurturing-restraining continuum to provide a map of how people are together in the school community at that particular point in time as indicated in Diagram 5 above. Punctuation, a principle applied in general systems theory allows for the observations of recursive patterns (Vorster, 2003) and intends to facilitate new shared meanings about being together in a school community (Hawe, Shiell & Riley, 2009).

While the patterns are punctuated the reflexive engagements should continue to ensure that feedback loops (Byrne, 1998; Cilliers, 1998) are created about the impact of the ways in which they relate and interact on their efforts to co-construct and enabling school community. The recognised patterns of being together will not be stable but irregular and fractal in nature (Stacey, 1997) and will change continuously. However, the continuous conversations about these irregular, fractal patterns will facilitate insight into being together, in the school
community on a meta-level. In the process the members of the school community will be enabled to embrace the nurturing and challenge the restraining patterns in more constructive ways in the public domain as their private experiences become more visible as suggested by Venkataramani & Dalal (2007). In other words, as the conversations continue, the patterns of being together in school communities may, or may not, gradually change in spontaneous, self-organising ways (Stacey, 2007a).

Based on the arguments above, a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities encompasses the following:

- Continuous conversations that are spontaneous, open and fluid in nature about the ways in which people relate and interact with one another on a daily basis. The conversations involve all the members of a school community through reflexive engagements as a process of examining the ways in which they relate and interact and giving feedback about these interactions.
- The identification of patterns of being together in a school community on the nurturing-restraining continuum by introducing facets of interrelatedness to the conversations to detect recursive patterns of being together (Radford, 2008). The facets of interrelatedness are hence used as focal points to guide the continuous conversations between the members of the community.
- The punctuation of patterns of being together in a school community, on the continuum between nurturing-restraining with a two-fold intention: Firstly to facilitate an awareness of the complexity of human behaviour as displayed by the consecutive presence of nurturing and restraining patterns across all the levels of relatedness. Secondly to facilitate further reflexive engagements, by introducing the punctuated patterns as themes for further conversations.
The Figure 4.1 below provides a graphic overview of a relationship-focused approach as conceptualised in this study:

Figure 4.1: Graphic overview of a relationship-focused approach as conceptualised in this study
Evidently a relationship-focused approach does not offer a blueprint for the co-construction of enabling school communities. The approach rather holds that enabling school communities are co-constructed as the conditions of fluidity and ambiguity required for change are realised (Stacey, 2007a). Amidst the fluidity and ambiguity, members will continuously and mindfully embrace ways of relating and interacting that nurture relationships, and challenge ways of relating and interacting that restrain relationships.

However, it is important to accept that a meta-level understanding of being together in school communities will not necessarily ensure that people relate and interact only in nurturing ways. Such an understanding will merely facilitate the mature ability to function in the zone of complexity where there is constant movement between stability and chaos (Stacey, 1997). Metaphorically, this implies a shift from navigating a boat from the banks to getting into the boat and navigating it through hazardous as well as helpful currents (Shaw, 2002).

**Problems anticipated in the implementation of a relationship-focused approach**

Due to the tendency to control, evaluate and prescribe behaviour perpetuated by current policies, a relationship-focused approach may be perceived as vague and impractical and resistance to the implementation of the approach can therefore be expected. A relationship-focused approach may also threaten current power relations and official ideologies that expect schools as organisations to focus primarily on teaching and learning and that consider the co-construction of enabling school communities as distracting attention from the main aim of schooling.

The implementation of a relationship-focused approach in school communities may accordingly necessitate a pre-implementation phase that challenges the current view that human behaviour should be dealt with only from the perspective of individual mainstream psychology. Government officials and school leaders should be consulted in this pre-implementation phase about the value of complexity theory for understanding human behaviour in schools on a
meta-level. As leaders, they need to be alerted to the possibility that school communities as complex adaptive systems cannot experience equilibrium because human behaviour is not easily controllable (Cilliers, 2001; Radford, 2006). School leaders therefore have to accept that they cannot design and control the process - they can influence the process only by the nature of their own participation in it and by their ability to help raise the skill and awareness of others.

In the initial stages of implementing this approach it might be valuable to identify members who identify with this approach and are motivated and mentored to implement it in informal and formal ways in the school community. Due to an anticipated lack of reflexive skills amongst members of school communities we also foresee that more creative ways of facilitating the continuous conversations such as action and drama work (Blatner, 1995; Verhofstadt-Denève, 2000) and ethno-drama (Tedlock, 2005) might have to be applied to enhance the involvement of all the members of a school community.

We anticipate that the members will then eventually be capable of facilitating their own conversations as it relates to being together in the school community. They will also become better equipped to negotiate shifts towards nurturing ways of being together in schools. The primacy of the relationship will then hopefully replace separation, an outcome of the primacy of individuals, as the boundaries between the inside and outside are removed and people become multiple beings who can embrace their interrelatedness, as anticipated by Gergen (2009).

**Recommendations**

A relationship-focused approach conceptualised as continuous conversations will enhance the potential of all the members of a school community to participate more actively in relational processes in the school as well as in the broader societal context (Gergen, 2009). The active participation of members will, in turn, enhance social responsiveness and mutuality, strengthen social networks and eradicate oppressive practices in the school community as indicated by Fox and Prilleltensky (2001) and confirmed by Roos and Temane
(2007). It is therefore recommended that a relationship-focused approach should be considered as a way to promote primary level interventions that can contribute to the co-construction of enabling school communities, facilitate the re-humanisation of schools and prevent the escalation of behavioural problems in school communities. Due to practical constraints and financial limitations, the research did not include the piloting of the approach in school communities. It is therefore recommended that the approach should be further developed in practice by implementing it in different contexts with the aim of refining it.

Finally, more research on being together in school communities should be conducted from the point of view that schools involve complex responsive processes of relating and interacting.

**Conclusion**

A relationship-focused approach is a pro-active preventative approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities. The approach implies the involvement of all the members of a school community as equally important partners. The commonly accepted focus on individuals as bounded beings and the sole agents of social change is challenged, and the attention is shifted to the conjunction between unbounded beings metaphorically described by Gergen (2009) as shifting the focus from the dancer to the dance in the conviction that “when relational wellbeing is at the centre of our concern we approach a life-giving future” (p. 403) in school communities.
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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to conceptualise a relationship-focused approach to the co-construction of enabling school communities. Enabling school communities here mean school communities where the individual, relational and collective wellbeing of all the members of the school community are enhanced in a way that promotes quality of life. The co-construction of enabling school communities has received considerable attention across the globe. Yet, efforts to co-construct such communities in South Africa, in practice and in research, are on the one hand focused on the control of the behaviour of individuals and groups and, on the other, on the identification of symptoms, factors and causes that may contribute to behavioural problems.

As an educational psychologist, a researcher in school-based projects and a lecturer in a Faculty of Education, I have often questioned these punitive and curative approaches to the co-construction of enabling school communities, based on my experience and informed by my engagements with research literature. Evidently both approaches contribute to the dehumanising of schools. The punitive approach in my opinion focuses more on how the order in school communities is disrupted and how the order could be restored through measures of control and less on how enabling contexts can be co-constructed while dealing with the different problems that prevail in school communities. The curative approach involves the implementation of interventions to address the identified symptoms, factors and causes without taking note of the social dynamics that exist in school contexts and evidently relates to the medical models aimed at diagnoses and treatment of problems of individuals and groups of individuals who disrupt the order in school communities. Linked to this strong focus on control and cure, individual members are perceived as the main agents of change in school communities. I have also been concerned that the major thrust in the education system seemingly shifted to the management of schools, while the role of psychology in facilitating enabling school communities has been marginalised.
Identifying with academia and researchers (Dewey, 1957; Sergiovanni, 1994; Sarason, 1974; Strike, 2004; Saleebey, 2004) who stress the importance of the social aspects of schooling and suggest that schools should be perceived as communities, I decided to adopt a community psychology perspective in the study. This meant that the focus of my research transferred to the interdependence between individuals and their social contexts as suggested by socio-ecological and ecological systems theory (Kelly, 1990; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Informed by complex adaptive system theory (Byrne, 1998; Cilliers, 1998; Morrison 2002) and a relationship psychology perspective, (Stacey, 2007a) the important role that relationships play in the co-construction of enabling school communities was also recognised. That motivated me to conceptualise a relationship-focused approach as an alternative to the punitive and curative approaches associated with traditional modernist thinking, which is linear and reductionist in nature and in stark contrast with the values and beliefs promoted by community psychology.

In the first phase, I explored everyday ways of relating and interacting in school communities. My intention was to obtain a sense of how people relate and interact with one another in various school contexts. The findings revealed ways of everyday relating and interacting that could be seen as enabling and disenabling in terms of their influence on the individual and the relational and collective wellbeing of the members of school communities. A sense of enablement emerged when members were actively engaged and acknowledged through participation, collaboration, encouragement and support. The sense of enablement evidently facilitated commitment and connectedness that promoted hope and a sense of personal value in relation to individual wellbeing and sense of belonging in relation to collective wellbeing. A sense of disenablement emerged when people were disengaged and disregarded through stereotyping, favouritism, humiliation, exclusion and fighting. Disenablement was strongly associated with inclusion-exclusion dynamics that evoked anger and pain in terms of individual wellbeing and a sense of insecurity, distrust and fear in terms of collective wellbeing.
From the study, I concluded that everyday relating and interacting plays a significant role in the mental health and psychological wellbeing of learners, educators and parents who are involved in school communities. Even ways of relating and interacting that might seem insignificant contributed to the dynamics of being together in the school community as argued by complexity theory. A possible link between current human behaviour challenges and everyday relating and interacting was also established. The tension between in-groups and out-groups that arose from the exclusion and rejection of learners could possibly be linked to the violent behaviour displayed in schools. The impression was also created that the educators had distanced themselves from the school and might perceive themselves as less valuable members than the parents and the learners.

The concurrent presence of enabling and disenabling ways of relating and interacting in all the school communities was furthermore highlighted in the study thus indicating the need to find new ways to achieve equilibrium. Such reframing calls for a greater awareness of the complexity of being together in school communities as well as the realisation that enabling and disenabling ways of relating and interacting are part of human interactions in the zone of complexity, as the zone between stability and predictability and instability and unpredictability in a school community (Morrison, 2002; Stacey, 1997; Verwey & Du Plooy, 2003). The implication of recognising the zone of complexity is that the choice, in terms of maintaining equilibrium in school communities is no longer only between stability and instability. Bounded instability, described by Stacey (1997) as the constant movement between order and chaos should be accepted as a third possibility for dealing with human behaviour in school communities.

The descriptive exploration of relating and interacting in school communities thus provided valuable baseline information on the complexity of human behaviour and its influence on being together in such communities. However, the first phase of the study also suggested that the ways in which school community members relate and interact may show recursive patterns that impact on the relationships between them. To avoid the trap of linear reductionist thinking in conceptualising a relationship-focused approach, a more in-depth
understanding of how people relate and interact was required. The second phase of the study therefore comprised an instrumental case study of one school community to acquire such in-depth understanding of the how relationships are patterned by the dynamic interactions between school community members.

The study confirmed the concurrent presence of enabling and disenabling ways of relating and interacting as part of being together in a school community. It was also evident that the ways in which the participants related and interacted with one another nurtured and restrained the relationships between them. Nurturing and restraining patterns of being together could be seen in the everyday interactions between the members thus indicating the nurturing and restraining aspects of being together in a school community.

The nurturing aspects of relationships identified in the study included connectedness, respect, care and transparent communication. Nurturing patterns associated with connectedness at the time of the research were that the members of the particular school community became familiar with one another and actively crossed the boundaries between them. Respect for one another entailed their accepting one another as equals, appreciating one another as holistic beings, valuing one another’s contributions and listening to one another. Care for one another was evident in the love the members showed one another, the empathic understanding, the accommodating attitude and the willingness to seek information about other people’s needs and problems. Transparent communication was associated with open discussions and dealing with conflict proactively. The aspects of nurturing identified in the study showed similarities with the signs of wellbeing recorded by Evans and Prilleltensky (2007), as well as with indicators of classroom climate. The similarities with the characteristics of therapeutic relationships as described in person-centred therapy were also significant. The need for a school community in which people can feel contained on an emotional level and experience that they are recognised as human beings therefore seemed evident from the study.
The restraining aspects of being together included limited connectedness, abuse of power, shifting of responsibility and disrespect. Limited connectedness was associated with limited time to become familiar with one another, a lack of skills to interact on a more personal level and resistance to interact on a more personal level. Abuse of power was associated with patterns of intimidation and the suppression of assertiveness. Shifting of responsibility was associated with blaming one another across the levels of relatedness. Disrespect for one another was associated with a lack of mutual respect, a judgemental attitude, disregard for others and discriminatory practices. The restraining aspects of being together polarised the members of the school community with serious consequences for all involved. The restraining patterns confirmed that the primacy of the individual would jeopardise efforts to co-construct enabling school communities as it was evident that due to the primacy of the individual members of the school community seemed less connected due to a strong focus on achievement that polarised them. They also felt threatened by one another and therefore abused power and disrespected one another as well as shift their responsibilities to other members.

The study that identified nurturing and restraining aspects of being together indicated that the co-construction of enabling school communities required the intended shift from the focus on individuals to the relationships between them. The meta-level understanding acquired from the study furthermore revealed what Radford (2008) describes as regularities, recursive symmetries and attractors, detected at the level of the system as a whole. The emergence of these patterns of being together confirmed that the problems occurring in schools should be perceived as socially constructed within the context of being together in school communities. The notion is accordingly challenged that the problems are caused by individuals who experience intra-psychic difficulties. The intention of the study was not to disregard the responsibility of individuals and the presence of intra-psychic problems but rather to focus on the need for the social, emotional and behavioural problems experienced by individuals to be addressed from a relational perspective.
Due to the socially constructed nature of being together in school communities, the potential for social change is implicitly present in such communities. Social change should therefore be facilitated from within rather than imposed by experts who often tend to prescribe how people should behave. The focus should rather be on the co-construction of new ways of being together in each moment. Interventions should consequently involve all the members of a school community in the process of co-construction. The interventions should encompass more than the formulation of codes of conduct, once-off presentations and the implementation of longer term programmes aimed at teaching people the correct behaviour while at the same time controlling unacceptable behaviour. Interventions relating to human behaviour should endeavour rather to create an awareness of the complexity of being together and facilitate a meta-level understanding of such togetherness.

Based on the conclusions drawn from the second phase of the study, a relationship-focused approach was conceptualised in the third phase of the study. The conceptualisation emphasises the socially constructed nature of school communities and acknowledges the complexity of human behaviour. A relationship-focused approach accordingly involves the facilitation of continuous conversations between the members of a school community about how they are together in that community and how they co-construct enabling school communities. On the strength of theoretical insights gained throughout the study and feedback from peer researchers, I concluded that the nurturing and restraining aspects of relationships are not dichotomous but represent facets of interrelatedness that can facilitate a meta-level understanding of being together in school communities. These facets include connectedness, respect, care and responsibility, communication and power. All these facets of interrelatedness are mentioned in the literature often as values, actions or attitudes that need to be present in school communities. According to the present study, nurturing and restraining patterns of being together associated with each of the facets of interrelatedness emerge from the ways in which people relate to and interact with one another in the school community. It was therefore suggested that facets
of interrelatedness are introduced as focal points in the facilitation of continuous conversations about the co-construction of enabling school communities. Through reflexive engagements and feedback on the ways in which members are together in school communities, nurturing patterns can then be identified and enhanced, and restraining patterns can be challenged in every moment.

A relationship-focused approach will therefore shift the paradigm regarding the way in which human behaviour is currently dealt with in school communities. The paradigm shift will entail the acknowledgement that all the members of school communities are sense-makers who take part in the patterning of enabling social spaces in which they can be well in the midst of the complexity of being together. Of significance here is that the facilitations of continuous conversations show similarities with the person-centred approach to organisational development. The similarities include the encouragement of participation by all the members of the school community and support for the own developmental and problem-solving processes as part of a positive, societal movement towards understanding complexity and concern for people (Tudor et al., 2004). A relationship-focused approach also links up with the work of Paulo Freire (Freire & Freire, 2004) which led to critical consciousness that goes beyond the everyday understanding of problems. I therefore believe that the implementation of a relationship-focused approach may contribute to the re-humanising of school communities.

However, I am aware that most national reports and policy developments focus on the need to attend to the structure and organisation in schools in order to enhance the academic achievement of individual learners and the performance of educators. I therefore anticipate that the approach will be received with scepticism for two reasons: the lack of linear, reductionist guidelines that are so often applied to manage human behaviour in educational contexts, and the strong focus on the social aspect of schooling that may threaten the current emphasis on academic achievement at the cost of the development of enabling social spaces.
Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore made for dealing with human behaviour in school communities:

Firstly, schools need to be re-humanised by attending more closely to the everyday relating and interacting between all school members across all the levels of relatedness and in all the various activity settings that include classroom, playground, sports and cultural activities. In line with the work of Hirst and Vadeboncouer (2006), the recommendation entails that schools should be transformed from economic spaces where all actions and attitudes relate to academic achievement into social spaces that recognise the contributions of human beings in the educational endeavour.

Secondly, in line with the work of Morrison (2002), the recommendation is that metaphors from engineering should no longer be used to describe schools. Schools should rather be viewed as communities in which the individual and collective wellbeing of all involved are enhanced through their relationships with one another. The recommendation implies that parents as well as administrative staff members should also be considered as full members of the school community.

Thirdly, the strategies for dealing with the problems in school communities should move away from dealing only with the individuals or groups of individuals who experience problems. Attending to social, emotional and relational problems in schools should include a meta-level understanding of how the relationships between the members of a particular school community may contribute to the prevailing problems. In this regard the study findings show that the problems experienced in school communities may be associated with the restraining patterns of being together in schools and that the nurturing patterns may provide ways to address the problems as they emerge.

Fourthly, the implementation of a relationship-focused approach is recommended as an alternative way of meeting human behaviour challenges in
school communities, as it is the aim of the approach to facilitate a meta-level understanding of being together in such communities and to empower all the members to participate in the co-construction of enabling school communities.

The following recommendations are made with reference to the practice of psychology:

Mainstream psychology has been criticised as being blind to the systems, groups and collective nature of society that shape individuals (Olssen, 1993). It has thus been perceived as maintaining the interest of institutions by holding individuals responsible for problems that prevail in society and accordingly focusing on curing individuals to heal society. I therefore agree with Sheridan and Gutkin (2000), who suggested that as part of a new 21st century paradigm for psychology, the basis of psychology in schools has to be broadened beyond micro-systemic interventions to also involve ecological macro-systemic intervention. It is therefore recommended that psychology when practiced in school contexts pay more attention to the exploration of collective processes aimed at the enhancement of relational wellbeing as suggested by Harré and Moghaddam (2003).

I furthermore recommend that the assumptions and values of community psychology should be applied to all contexts and not merely to contexts that have been identified as oppressive contexts. From a relationship-focused perspective, all contexts are replete with oppressive ways of relating and interacting. If we attend to the ways in which people relate and interact in all school contexts, our society may eventually become more humanised and more capable of embracing democratic ideals as we accept that dynamic interactions and not individuals are the real agents of social change.

The following recommendations apply to research practice:

Ongoing research (possibly in a post-doctorate study) is recommended to reify the theoretical understandings of the complexity of human behaviour and to introduce interventions that acknowledge this complexity (Morrison, 2001). It
implies the development of a practice theory described by Østerlund and Carlile (2005) as theory that focusing attention on every-day practices of relating and interacting.

The possibility of training counsellors and psychologists who work in school contexts to implement a relationship-focused approach in these contexts should be further investigated through research as a way to strengthen support services and facilitate a preventative approach as suggested by Prilleltensky (2006).

In view of the challenges faced in the implementation of inclusive education with regards to the acceptance of people who experience barriers to learning as valued members of school communities, it is recommended that the application of a relationship-focused approach should be investigated as a way to support the implementation of inclusive education in school environments.

With reference to qualitative research methods that involve larger groups of people in school communities in face-to-face qualitative research designs, it is recommended that the application of work sessions that include visual methods is further explored as a method of data collection.

**Limitations**

The baseline exploration of experiences of relating and interacting in school communities provided a comprehensive overview of such experiences. The research was, however, limited owing to the lack of follow-up on the written assignments by conducting individual interviews or focus group interviews. The limitations can be ascribed largely to a lack of resources to visit all the sites as well as the restrictions imposed by the Department of Education in terms of access to schools. To overcome the limitations, a single instrumental case study design was selected to ensure that rich data on relationships in school could be obtained.

The case study did indeed provide deep, rich data, but it involved a prolonged engagement with the schools due to the limited time that could be
made available for the research. As the research process unfolded, it became
evident that the inclusion of multiple case studies would mean that the study
would have to be extended. It was therefore decided to suffice with the in-depth
case study for the purpose of completing a PhD thesis and to do follow-up
research on a post-doctoral level. The choice of site may also be perceived as a
limitation since the school contexts was not representative of the majority of
school contexts in South Africa. As indicated earlier the intentions of this study,
was not to generalise the findings to other context, but to generalise to theory as
suggested by De Jong (2000). This limitation will however be addressed in the
post-doctoral study by applying the approach in a variety of contexts to enhance
the transferability of the findings.

Another limitation was that only two parents, both mothers were involved
in the case study research. The reluctance of parents to participate might reflect
the lack of parent involvement that is currently experienced by most schools.
However, the interviews with the parents did provide deep, rich information. The
information was to a certain extent triangulated in the informal discussion with
parents during two parent evenings that I attended. The statements that learners
and educators made about parents also enhanced my understanding of the
parents’ perspective.

Although the research shifted from low participant involvement to high
participant involvement (Schein, 2008) between the first and the second phases
of the study, the research was still mainly driven by the researcher and therefore
did not contribute sufficiently to the empowerment of the members of the school
community, as suggested by Gaventa & Cornwall (2008). If the study is to be
repeated I recommend that participants are involved in the initial planning of the
research to facilitate a more authentic transformative approach as suggested by
Mertens (2009).


**Contributions of the study**

On a theoretical level, the study confirmed the key role that the social context plays in a school community as indicated by community psychology theory. New knowledge was created on how relationships between the members of a school community contribute to the co-construction of the social context. The study in particular enhanced relational knowledge about being together in school communities. Relational knowledge according to Park (2006) does not consist of facts but encompasses knowledge about developing relationships through words, actions and expressions that makes it possible to create and sustain a community. By emphasising the value of relational knowledge in a school community, the study challenged community psychology to attend more seriously to the relational dimension of social contexts.

In terms of complex responsiveness processes of relating theory, the study created new knowledge regarding possible recursive symmetry, patterns and attractors (Radford, 2008) that emerge in school contexts and consequently contributes to the application of complexity theory to school contexts. The study particularly emphasises the value of complexity theory and in particular complex responsiveness processes of relating theory for understanding being together in school communities on a meta-level.

In terms of praxis, the study provided an alternative approach to facilitating the co-construction of enabling school communities. The study thus contributed to new knowledge on how human behaviour challenges can be met in order to co-construct enabling school communities as a dynamic ongoing endeavour that involves all the members of a school community.

**Final word**

I envision that the implementation of the relationship-focused approach conceptualised in this study will promote a new understanding of being together in school communities that will contribute to the co-construction of enabling school communities as an ongoing process of embracing nurturing patterns and
challenging restraining patterns of being together in such communities. In the process, the potential of all school community members to participate in meaningful ways in their relationships will be enhanced and eventually education will no longer be only a process of producing effective individuals, but also of an indefinite extension of the potential of relationships (Gergen, 2009).
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