MANUSCRIPT: Primary school educators’ perceptions of emotional problems in children during middle childhood

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Journal of Psychology in Africa

"Teach a child in the way that he should go, and it will never depart from him"

Proverbs 22:6
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Manuscript

Primary School Educators’ Perceptions of Emotional Problems in Children During Middle Childhood

Authors:

Tamlynn Jefferis
tamlynn@thermolectric.co.za

Dr Karen Van Der Merwe *

School of Behavioural Sciences: North-West University, Vaal Triangle Campus.

Karen.vandermerwe@nwu.az.za

The author to who all correspondence is sent, is indicated by the *
ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of primary school educators regarding emotional problems in children, as well as their perceived role therein. In order to reach these aims, a qualitative exploratory research design was used, and focus group interviews were conducted with primary school educators from three urban schools in Gauteng, South Africa. The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were analysed through thematic content analysis. Themes regarding educators’ perceptions include externalised and internalised behaviours, changes in children’s usual behaviour, the impact on school work, and physical or behavioural signs. In addition, the following themes emerged regarding the perceived role of educators in relation to emotional problems in children: educators identify emotional problems in children and love and support those children, they play an active role in the lives of children, and educators utilise resources to assist them with interventions. Participants in this study show insight into emotional problems in children, and are in need of extra support and resources from helping professionals such as counsellors, psychologists and social workers in order to intervene more effectively with children suffering from emotional difficulties.

Key words: Primary school educators, children, perceptions, emotional problems.
OPSOMMING

Die doel van hierdie studie was om laerskoolopvoeders se persepsie oor kinders se emosionele probleme en hul beskouing van hul eie rol ten opsigte van hierdie probleme te verken. Om hierdie doelwitte te bereik is 'n kwalitatiewe verkennende navorsingsontwerp gebruik en fokusgroeponderhoude is gehou met laerskoolopvoeders in drie stedelike skole in Gauteng, Suid-Afrika. Die fokusgroeponderhoude is woord vir woord vertaal en transkripsies is aan die hand van tematiese inhoudsanalise geanaliseer. Temas wat die opvoeders se persepsies verteenwoordig sluit in geëksternaliseerde en geïnternaliseerde gedrag, verskille in kinders se normale gedrag, die invloed op skoolwerk en fisieke tekens of tekens wat uit gedrag sigbaar word. Die volgende temas het na vore gekom wat betref die opvoeders se beskouing van hul rol ten opsigte van die kinders met emosionele probleme: opvoeders identifiseer emosionele probleme by kinders en gee aan hulle liefde en ondersteuning, hulle speel 'n aktiewe rol in die kinders se lewens en opvoeders gebruik hulpbronne om hulle met intervensies te help. Deelnemers in hierdie studie toon insig in emosionele probleme by kinders en het 'n behoefte aan ekstra ondersteuning en hulpbronne van die hulpprofessies soos beraders, sielkundiges en maatskaplike werkers om kinders met emosionele probleme effektiewer te kan help.

Sleutelwoorde: Primêre skoolopvoeders, kinders, persepsies, emosionele probleem.
INTRODUCTION

Middle childhood begins roughly from the age of seven to around 11 or 12 years (Louw & Louw, 2007). This developmental phase is described as a relatively calm phase as far as emotional development is concerned, but is seen as important regarding children’s cognitive, social, emotional and self-concept development (Louw & Louw, 2007). During this pre-adolescent phase, pre-identity formation may be crucial in defining the child’s self-concept (Colwell & Lindsay, 2002). Piaget outlined the particular factors that influence cognitive and emotional development during this phase as being social interaction and transmission. This involves knowledge passed on to children from family members, parents as well as educators (Keenan & Evans, 2009; Louw & Louw, 2007; Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009).

Educators as ‘substitute parents’ may also play a big role in the emotional development of children (Keenan & Evans, 2009) due to the large amount of time children spend at school. With this in mind, the researcher held the assumption that educators may have a significant impact on the lives of children in their classes. According to Louw, Van Ede and Louw (2004), research conducted among educators in South African showed that the attitudes of educators had an impact on the current, as well as future, success of children in their classes. Such attitudes included love and care, encouragement, and extra attention to and patience with slower children. Research has also shown that the expectations of the educators influenced the children’s academic achievement, as well as their motivation and self-image (Louw et al., 2004).
The attitude of the educator has an impact on children in three significant ways. Firstly, the sense of belonging emphasised by educators influences children's academic achievement, as well as whether they will accept the educators' education values (Ma, 2003). This, in turn, affects the motivation of children. Secondly, the attitude of the educator towards the children influences the atmosphere in the classroom. Approaches such as the responsive classroom approach, which emphasises empathy as well as structure with the goal of aiding students to develop self-control, produces more positive attitudes in educators, which in turn ignites more positive attitudes in children (Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004). Thirdly, the attitudes of educators influence how peers view each other. How educators behave towards children in the classroom not only influences the target children's self-image, but also influences how peers perceive their fellow children (Montague & Rinaldi, 2001).

In addition to this, the attitude or perception an educator holds may also influence how that educator manages various behaviours in children. In a study of educators' perceptions of bullying, it was found that educators often would not intervene because they did not witness incidents, and although they also regarded physical aggression as bullying, they overlooked verbal aggression such as name-calling and exclusion. Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler and Wiener (2005) found that educators did not intervene because they misjudged the extent of bullying and were not aware of ratios of bullying and victimhood. The educators doubted the children's views, and the educators' understanding of bullying behaviours was limited (Mishna et al., 2005). If educators have misperceptions regarding important aspects of the emotional well-being of children, the children may feel ignored, overlooked and even neglected.
In another study, it was found that educators paid more attention to externalising and disruptive behaviours (Mollins, 1999), often overlooking less physical and quieter behaviours that may be just as maladaptive. According to Mash and Wolfe (2005), around 5% of children and between 10% and 20% of adolescents in America suffer from severe depression. According to the South African Depression and Anxiety Group, it was estimated in 2007 that more than 5000 youth in South Africa, some even as young as 10, might commit suicide, which is an alarming number and is significantly indicative of depression. It was also estimated that 9% of all teenage deaths were related to suicide. One can assume that this number has possibly increased since 2007. Yet depressive symptoms that are internalised may be overlooked by educators, as they are less visible. These symptoms include persistent feelings of sadness; withdrawn behaviour; low self-esteem; and a dismissive attitude; negative thinking and poor concentration; disruptions in sleep and eating patterns; and physical complaints such as stomach aches, headaches, fatigue, etc. (Mash & Wolfe, 2005). These symptoms might easily be overlooked if educators do not have sufficient knowledge regarding the complexity of emotions and manifestations of emotional problems in children.

Because the majority of research focuses more on the parental relationship with children, there seems to be a gap regarding just how important the role of the educator is, as well as what educators believe emotional problems to be. Educators are one of the key informants to psychologists regarding the behaviour and functioning of children in the classroom context (Barret, 2006). Collaboration between educators and psychologists regarding the functioning of children is important because the two parties inform one another; educators inform psychologists of how behaviour is manifested, and psychologists inform educators of how to implement
therapeutic interventions (Barret, 2006). Collaboration between the two could be powerful and valuable for the Education Department, the field of psychology and, most importantly, would be in the best interests of children who suffer from emotional and behavioural problems.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Educators play a vital role in the development and observation of children, and the impact that educators have on children in their classes is significant. It consequently is extremely important to explore the perceptions of educators regarding the emotional problems of children in order to assist and educate educators in how to recognise emotional problems in children, and refer children for further assessment when necessary.

The above statement leads to the following research questions:

• How do primary school educators perceive emotional problems in children?

• What do primary school educators perceive their role to be regarding the emotional problems of children?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Based on the abovementioned research questions, the following objectives for the study were identified:

• To explore the perceptions of primary school educators regarding the identification and recognition of emotional problems in children.
• To explore the perceptions of educators regarding their perceived role in the identification and recognition of, as well as the intervention in, children they perceive to have emotional problems.

CENTRAL THEORETICAL STATEMENT

The exploration of the perceptions of primary school educators will provide insight into the ability of educators to recognise and intervene in emotional problems in children during the developmental stage of middle childhood. An in-depth description of the perceptions of primary school educators will contribute to information regarding how educators understand emotional problems, as well as what is necessary for effective intervention therein.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to achieve the aim of this study, a qualitative exploratory research design was used (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). A qualitative exploratory research design allowed the researcher to become immersed within the field of the participants and to gain in-depth insight into and information regarding the phenomenon this research study sought to explore. This research was conducted through focus group interviews, which allowed the researcher to explore the perceptions of the participants through creating a forum for discussion and collaboration between the researcher and the participants.
RESEARCH METHOD

SAMPLING

Participant Criteria

- All participants had to be primary school educators.

- All participants currently had to be educating children from grades one to seven.

- The participants had to give informed consent to participate in this study, as well as to be quoted anonymously.

Population and Setting

The sample consisted of educators from three primary schools in an urban area in Gauteng, South Africa. The schools included in this study were in a middle-class area, and the children came from working-class families. A substantial number of the children attending these schools lived in lower socio-economic areas and travel to school by bus on a daily basis, and the majority of these school children were African. The focus groups were conducted at the school where the participating educators worked. The only criterion that the participants had to meet was that of being an educator of children currently in the developmental stage of middle childhood (grades one to seven). The researcher’s assumption was that this sample would have the experience and knowledge to give an excellent indication of the perceptions that this particular group of educators had regarding emotional problems in children during middle childhood.
Sampling method

The sample was selected purposefully within various restrictions. The Department of Education gave permission for the research to be conducted within a specific district. The schools that were easily accessible were approached for participation. A purposive sample was used due to the specific interest of the study in the perceptions of primary school educators (Strydom & Delport, 2005). This sampling method allowed the researcher to achieve the aims of the study effectively. Primary school educators employed in urban schools in Gauteng were approached and included in this study.

Sample size

Participation was voluntary and the sample consisted of 18 primary school educators between the ages of 22 and 67 years. The sample included two male educators and 16 female educators. Sixteen of the participants were white, one participant was African, and one participant was coloured. The years of experience of the participants in education ranged from two to forty years. The sample size was determined by the willingness of educators to participate voluntarily, as the majority of the educators were unwilling to participate in this study. However, after the fourth focus groups, no new information arose, information was being repeated, and data saturation was reached (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

DATA COLLECTION

Data collection involved four focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were chosen as the most appropriate method of data collection due to the ability of focus groups to produce rich data
regarding the topic of interest, and due to the rich information they allow the researcher to gain (Creswell, 2009; Maree, 2007). The focus group interviews consisted of three to eight participants each. Focus group one consisted of four participants, focus group two and three consisted of three participants each, and focus group four consisted of eight participants. Focus groups one to three were very small, as some of the participants did not arrive and others withdrew their participation. Only four focus groups were conducted due to a lack of willing participants. The researcher assumed the role of moderator during the focus groups in order to influence the discussions within each of the focus groups (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). By conducting focus group interviews, the researcher was able to explore the perceptions of the participants in their natural educational setting, and this allowed the researcher some control over the line of questioning during the focus group interviews (Creswell, 2009).

Due to the pitfalls of focus groups interviews, such as participants losing the train of thought, some participants talking more than others, possible bias etc., the researcher regarded each participant positively and encouraged all participants to discuss their views and opinions (Greef, 2001). During the focus group interviews, the researcher probed for information through the use of open-ended questions, as well as by clarifying and summarising in order to explore and gain as much in-depth information as possible from the participants involved.

The questions used during the focus group interviews were discussed with and approved by the study supervisor in order to ensure the clarity and effectiveness of the questions. The following are the main questions asked during the focus group interviews:

(1) How do you recognise emotional problems in children?

(2) What are the signs that may indicate that a child may be suffering from emotional problems?
(3) How do you think children with emotional problems are most likely to behave?

(4) How do you deal with children when they appear to be suffering from emotional problems?

(5) What would need to be different for you to play an effective role in dealing with children suffering from emotional problems?

FIELD NOTES

Immediately after each focus group session, the researcher wrote field notes based on the researcher’s experience of each focus group interview in order to note all relevant information while it was still fresh in her mind. The field notes included a description of the atmosphere during the focus group session and the experience of the researcher during each focus group in order to record additional information that contributed towards reaching a deeper understanding of the data.

PHYSICAL SETTING

Focus group one took place in the staff room of the school, which was chosen by the participants as a venue where they felt comfortable. The second and third focus groups took place in the principal’s office, as the participants felt there would be a minimal amount of distraction. The fourth focus group took place in the staff room, where all eight participants were accommodated. In order to show appreciation to the participants, juice and snacks were provided. This also assisted in creating a foundation for a positive forum for the group discussion by creating a relaxed atmosphere. During the focus group interviews the participants and researcher sat in a circle so that every participant could see the other participants, as this is conducive for group
discussions. The participants were asked to speak loudly, and all digital recording equipment was prepared in advance, with extra equipment as back-up.

DATA ANALYSIS

The focus group interviews were recorded via digital recording devices. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher in order for the researcher to become fully immersed in the data. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data from the focus groups (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Open coding was completed by hand on printed copies of the transcripts. The open codes were then grouped together under similar topics, and finally the grouped codes were written into final themes. The themes were presented to the researcher’s study leader, who co-coded the data, and consensus was reached in order to ensure the trustworthiness of the data (De Vos, 2001). The final themes were then presented to the participants involved in the study in a process known as member checking (Creswell, 2009), in order to ensure that the identified themes were accurate according to the participants.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

According to Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), trustworthiness refers to the “truth” of the data. These authors believe that, in qualitative research, “validity takes on the form of subjecting one’s findings to competing claims and interpretations and provoking the reader with strong arguments for your knowledge claims” (2011, p. 48). Trustworthiness also includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability (De Vos, 2001).

The credibility of this study was ensured through a dense description of the setting in which the research took place, as well as of the process and the interaction of the participants who were involved in the study (Strydom, 2001). Transferability refers to the applicability of the finding to
another context; whether the reader is able to reflect on whether the findings apply to the reader’s context (De Vos, 2001). The researcher ensured the transferability of the study through a clear description of the contexts in which the educators function, and also stating of the limitations of the study. Dependability refers to the consistency of the data, through the researcher’s attempts to describe and understand the changing context within which the research takes place, and conformability refers to the extent of the researcher’s bias regarding the results and findings of the study (De Vos, 2001). Field notes and consultation with the study supervisor ensured that researcher bias was examined and did not contaminate the findings of this study.

The trustworthiness of the research results was ensured through the use of a co-coder to verify and validate themes that arose from the data that was collected and analysed through thematic content analysis. Once themes had been identified, the researcher took the themes back to the participants in a process known as member checking (Creswell, 2009). This process of member checking ensured that the themes produced from the results were trustworthy and a true reflection of the participants’ perceptions. The discussion of the results is based on the particular group and context within which the research took place and is a true reflection of the particular group and context (De Vos, 2001). The researcher also provides a dense description of the data and particular context in the discussion of the results of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results section contains two sets of themes from the focus group interviews; the first section regarding the participants’ perceptions of emotional problems and the second section discussing
the themes regarding the perceived role of the participants regarding children suffering from emotional problems.

Question 1: How do primary school educators perceive emotional problems in children?

Theme 1: Externalised behaviour

The externalised behaviour is divided into sub-themes, such as attention-seeking behaviour, acting-out behaviours, as well as aggressive behaviours. In total, externalised behaviours, including all sub-themes, were mentioned 34 times by the participants, making externalised behaviours the most frequent theme.

Sub-theme 1.1: Acting-out behaviour

The most frequently mentioned form of externalised behaviour was acting-out behaviour (reported 19 times), which participants referred to as the ‘naughty’ behaviour, or behaviour that is regarded by the participants as inappropriate or ‘out of line’, such as deliberately breaking rules: “today he will deliberately walk out of the gate, while he knows he may not do it” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 45-49). The participants reported that “... most of the, the time it becomes naughty behaviour” (focus group 1, participant 2, lines 31-32) and even when “you can find nothing wrong there... but in the meantime you will see her pinching this one...” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 233-234).

Other participants mentioned ‘bad behaviour’ in the form of screaming at the teacher and fighting with peers as an indicator of emotional problems “...I can see it in their bad behaviour... they are not behaving, they are behaving badly, they... fight and they scream at their peers and their educators” (focus group 3, participant 2, lines 6-7). Participants also reported
that “Yea it’s a known thing that the children that we really know well are those children that are excellent at their work, and those that are not doing very well and are misbehaving” (focus group 3, participant 3, lines 145-148).

Another participant reported inappropriate behaviour as an indicator of emotional problems: “I think emotional behaviour as well comes from emotional baggage that they actually come to school with, then they react in different ways...that’s not actually appropriate”. When asked to clarify what inappropriate behaviour was, the participant responded “I mean they will...just stand up and hit somebody...or stealing” (focus group 4, participant 1, lines 17-18, 20).

An example of acting-out behaviour was given by P6: I’ve got a boy that has problems at home and his mother basically... she tries to wipe it away, and now he’s acting out in class by accusing everybody of lying, picking fights, and always telling this person they must do that and absolutely challenges your authority at every single turn that he has” (focus group 4).

This theme of acting out behaviour is seen throughout the data and presents as the most frequently mentioned theme. Acting out behaviour is often linked to emotional problems (Kit-Yee Lam, 2003). According to Mash and Wolfe (2005), children who display disruptive behaviours are at a higher risk for developing psychological or psychiatric problems and impairment in their normal functioning. Burke (2009) states that, for children who display aggressive or disruptive behaviours, their behaviour often leads to major impacts on their academic, social as well as emotional well-being. Behaviour that includes acting out, hostility and anger are most often linked to mental disorders (Özabaci, 2011), and in mental disorders there is always an element of personal distress (Barlow & Durand, 2005), which links to this theme of acting out behaviours to indicate possible emotional problems.
Sub-Theme 1.2: Attention-seeking behaviour

The second most frequently mentioned form of externalised behaviour was attention-seeking behaviour. This was mentioned six times by the participants as indicating that a child may be suffering from an emotional problem. The participants reported that it often happens that when a child might be suffering from an emotional problem, “they do seek for attention” (focus group 1, participant 2, line 31). Another participant reported that “The ones that seek attention the most are the ones with emotional problems” (focus group 2, participant 2, line 195). Other participants reported that “You can see they need the attention... even if they get negative attention” (focus group 3, participant 2, line 139), and the reason for attention-seeking behaviour, as explained by the participants, is “...because then they get noticed” (focus group 3, participant 3, line 142). An example of this attention-seeking behaviour is given by a participant in focus group 4 (lines 113-129):

P4: “Yes we had this boy in grade seven, I can remember that day, he was cross with one of the teachers, and he was in my class and he came to my class...and he was so upset so I said to him just go and stand outside and chill...so he moved to the...the boys' toilet and he was kicking the door, and I could hear it, and I ran around and then he started on the... dustbin outside, he was kicking it and he was screaming and...so (name) talked to him...and he's got a stepfather who doesn't really accept him.”

Researcher: “Ok.”

P4: “And...he's got a little sister and she was always getting all the attention...but he was always trying to get the attention ....”
Researcher: “So he acted out in that way in order to get some attention?”

P4: (Agrees) “…so we gave him attention, it went a bit better.”

Although the child in this example displayed aggressive behaviour, the participant believed the intention of the child’s behaviour was to receive attention, and when the child received attention the aggressive behaviour subsided to a degree. Another example of attention-seeking behaviour is given in focus group 2 (participant 3, lines 164-171):

P3: “...just before I came here there was somebody who was playing with a pen on the table, it was a disturbing noise...I said ‘who is that?’...so because they are naughty most of them they said it’s this one, it’s this one, it’s this one...and then ultimately when they pointed at somebody I (told him to) stand up... (and then) he cried...so somebody said mam...he just lost a father last night... but I didn’t know...”

P2: “You know with the older ones, especially from grade 4-7 it’s not easy...you will only be able to see if there is an emotional problem by seeking attention and behaving not in their normal way like...asking for a tissue and mam I don’t have a pen.”

The above examples refer to behaviours that draw attention to children, such as making a disturbing noise in the classroom or asking for a tissue or a pen. According to the participants, children behave in these ways in order to receive attention.
The literature supports this notion of attention-seeking behaviours as indicators of emotional problems. Mellor (2009) reported that the topic of attention-seeking behaviour is under-researched and states that, regardless of the lack of research available, there is strong evidence that this behaviour is seen as potentially serious behaviour. According to Mellor (2009), attention-seeking behaviour may lead to very serious consequences for children's social, emotional and academic functioning. Schaefer and Millman (1983) describe attention-seeking behaviour as that which is intended to gain love and sympathy from others, especially when there is no other way in which to obtain attention. Schaefer and Millman (1983) also say that the attention-seeking behaviour may lead to anger and hostility in children if their needs for attention are not met, which is a clear indication of underlying emotional problems within a child. Older (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998; Schaefer & Millman, 1983) as well as current literature are consistent with this theme of attention-seeking behaviour, which is indicative of emotional problems in children.

Sub-theme 1.3: Aggressive behaviour

Aggressive behaviour was only mentioned four times by the participants, yet is still significant. The participants reported aggressive behaviours as another possible indicator that a child may be suffering from emotional problems: “with the grade 6s and maybe more with the grade 7s, there's a little bit of aggression as well ... it's like an underlying anger” (focus group 1, participant 3, lines 114-115, 117), and another participant mentioned that “All the pent-up anger and unhappiness in them, and they will start picking a fight with somebody especially the bully type of children” (focus group 1, participant 4, line 122). It was also mentioned that “...some of them they try to be aggressive towards others...so that's where you start asking yourself why is this child like this, and then you will find that there's something there” (focus group 2,
participant 2, lines 292-297). From these quotes it is clear that the participants also view aggressive behaviour as an indicator of emotional problems in children.

Aggressive behaviours are often linked to emotional problems in children that may have dramatic effects on children, such as social and emotional impairments (Burke, 2009; Özabacı, 2011). This theme of aggression is consistent with the literature, which indicates that aggression is often more openly expressed during middle childhood (Louw et al., 2004). However, persistent expressions of disruptive behaviour are indicative of emotional problems (Burke, 2009). Souter (2001) also reports that aggressive behaviours often are recognised as manifestations of emotional problems by educators. Current literature also reports that early aggressive behaviour is often a predictor for maladjustment (Ladd, 2006). Early occurrence of aggressive behaviours may therefore be a predictor of maladaptive behaviour in later developmental stages, which ties in well with the theme of aggression as a sign of emotional problems in children.

Theme 2: Internalised behaviour

Internalised behaviours are divided into three sub-themes: withdrawn behaviour, distant behaviour, as well as no concentration. Internalised behaviours were mentioned 22 times by the participants. The sub-themes are discussed below.

Sub-theme 2.1: Withdrawn behaviour

Withdrawn behaviour as an indicator of emotional problems was mentioned 14 times by participants. A participant mentioned that, after being laughed at by peers, a child may appear “kind of under the weather or he withdraws...” (focus group 1, participant 3, lines 24-26), and another participant mentioned that children may withdraw from socialising with peers.
“Usually a child that is... standing alone, doesn’t want to mingle, doesn’t want to talk to other children, I know there’s certain children that like to be loners...they’re not groupies...whereas they deprive themselves socially” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 36-40).

Another participant reported that emotional problems are first shown through ‘bad behaviour’ as well as withdrawn behaviour:

“...I can honestly say emotional problems first comes out in bad behaviour...that’s where you pick it up the easiest, and then of course your child that withdraws which is easier yes because I get to know that child well” (focus group 3, participant 3, lines 517-519).

An example of withdrawn behaviour is explained by participant 3 of focus group 4:

“...there was also this incident...where this boy had bullied one of the girls outside, and since then she’s not the same, she’s so quiet in class you won’t even know she’s there, when before she was very bubbly so the peer-on-peer bullying can also affect them and then you see it afterwards. It’s more than a month afterwards and it’s still affecting her” (lines 37-41).

Withdrawn, asocial behaviour is viewed as not socialising with peers, as well as a child being very quiet, and these types of behaviour are seen as indicators of emotional problems. Withdrawn behaviours have been reported by educators as having a negative impact on children’s development (Shen et al., 2009). Souter (2001) also reported withdrawn behaviours as behaviours that are cause for concern, and that they are also indicative of emotional problems in children, as reported by educators. Extreme withdrawal is also seen as a criterion for emotional
behavioural disorders, indicating the severity of the impact of noticeable, consistent social withdrawal in children (Younger, Schneider & Guirguis-Younger, 2006; Zimmerman, 2006), which ties in well with this theme of withdrawn behaviours as pointer towards emotional problems in children.

**Sub-theme 2.2: Distant behaviour**

Distant behaviour is mentioned six times by the participants as a means to recognise emotional problems in the children in their classes. Distant behaviour is referred to as not being totally present in mind: "This child is distant today, he's not with you...you have to call him twice to get his attention" (focus group 1, participant 4, line 112). Another participant reported, "I've got a child that I can think of now, that when he walks in and there's, something is...totally lost you can see...the curtain is drawn, there's nothing, nothing going on..." (focus group 3, participant 1, lines 66-68).

One participant reported this distant behaviour regarding a child who would “blank out in the class as well” (focus group 1, participant 3, line 653), and another participant added, “She goes into...a stupor type of thing” (focus group 1, participant 1, line 654). One participant also mentioned “...in their group, sometimes...(the) child feels the children just don’t like him or her and then they withdraw and then they sort of suck and they...are very unhappy with life” (focus group 4, participant 4, lines 14-16). Participants reported distant, ‘not with it’ behaviour as a definite pointer towards emotional problems in children. Schneider (2009) reports that children who suffer from social phobia usually evaluate themselves negatively, and that children who have been diagnosed with social phobia or anxiety are often unresponsive, passive and communicate very little. Mash and Wolfe (2005) state that children suffering from anxiety often
find it difficult to focus their attention on everyday tasks due to their thoughts constantly being occupied by threats or dangers. Mash and Wolfe (2005) also discuss features of depression in childhood, such as a preoccupation with worries, which may lead to difficulties in concentration due to a focus on negative thoughts. Children who are preoccupied in their thoughts may appear as distant and ‘not with it’, yet it may be a clear indication of emotional turbulence, which is consistent with the theme of distant behaviour. Distant behaviour is closely linked to withdrawn behaviour and is often viewed as leading to potentially serious emotional problems (Zimmerman, 2006).

Theme 2.3: Lack of concentration

Poor concentration is mentioned by participants as a possible pointer towards emotional problems in their children, and this was reported five times by the participants. The participants reported that children are unable to concentrate. “The concentration...they don’t concentrate” (focus group 1, participant 3, line 102), as well as the following example:

“at the beginning of the year, he’s in grade 4, he’s now a white little boy, and...I couldn’t understand...this little boy cannot take out his books open his books and start working...he is just...not concentrating...and I’ve written it in the board (the) activity. You do number 1, 2 and 3...and then he will say what must (I do)...and he must still take his book (out)...” (focus group 1, participant 3, lines 432-437).

Another participant explained that sometimes it is noticeable that the children do not have sufficient sleep at night and this may also cause them to suffer difficulties in concentration, which has an impact on their emotional status: “other things that I have noticed with the little
ones is they go to bed quite late at night, most of them...are allowed to go to bed very late then they can't concentrate and that does have...an influence on their emotional status” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 30-33).

A participant also reported that sometimes the children become easily distracted:

“they easily get distracted if...mom and dad had a fight the evening before...like they get easily distracted in class and are very emotional” (focus group 4, participant 1, lines 86-88).

The participants report poor concentration as a warning that children may be suffering from emotional problems. In a Chinese study, inattention was reported to be one of the most troublesome behaviours in the classroom (Shen et al., 2009). The same was reported in a study by Poulou and Norwich (2000). Poor concentration is consistently seen by educators as behaviour indicative of emotional problems in children, tying in well with this theme of a lack of concentration. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is often linked to low self-esteem in children that suffer predominantly from inattention (Mash & Wolfe, 2005), which indicates that children suffering from ADHD often have emotional difficulties. Furthermore, inattention or a lack of concentration may be a signal to other underlying emotional problems in children, which is supportive of this theme of a lack of attention as an indicator.

**Theme 3: Change in usual behaviour**

Participants reported that they get to know each child in the classes they teach so well that they can easily see when the behaviour of children changes and these changes in the children’s usual behaviour offer a warning of possible emotional problems in children. Change in the children’s usual behaviour was mentioned 17 times by the participants. One participant referred to “A
change in normal behaviour" (focus group 1, participant 1, line 69), and went on to say, “Normally naughty suddenly not, normally not naughty suddenly naughty and attention seeking”. Any change in behaviour, whether it is withdrawn or externalised, is seen as an indicator of emotional problems, “especially...(you know) your children, (those who) always (stick their) hands up...no they just sit...then you know something’s not right” (focus group 1, participant 2, lines 67-68).

Participants also mentioned that they know there is an emotional problem when children suddenly start “behaving not in their normal way” (focus group 2, participant 2, lines 281-282), as well as a change in the usual behaviour pattern of children:

“children that are normally outgoing suddenly become very...like an introvert...and to find out that emotionally...they might be very upset because they lost a parent or...family member...a change in their behaviour pattern” (focus group 3, participant 3, lines 19-22).

Participants also recognised that there are two norms; a norm for the individual (usual behaviour), as well as a group norm. The participants explained that they see atypical behaviour on a group norm level as behaviour that “doesn’t really fit in with their...peer group” (focus group 3, participant 3, lines 8-9). The participants also explained individual norms as “you get used to kids in certain situations” and “emotionally you can see something’s not right, either they’re different from what they usually are or they’re totally acting out, or they’re totally not acting out” (focus group 4, participant 3, lines 29-34). The participants reported that “there’s not a set normal, in a class you get used to every kid having their own version of normal” (focus group 4, participant 3, lines 53-54) and that “it depends from child to child, you won’t get a
situation that’s exactly the same” (focus group 4, participant 7, lines 80-81). Therefore, educators seem to get to know each child and are very aware when there are changes in the behaviour of children, and they pay attention to those changes in usual behaviour, as they believe they are indicators of emotional problems.

The majority of the literature focuses more on either externalised behaviours or internalised behaviours in children (Burgess, Wojslawowicz, Rubin, Rose-Krasnor & Booth-LaForce, 2006; Zimmerman, 2006). Acting out or aggressive behaviours are discussed (Özabaci, 2011), often along with withdrawn behaviours (Younger et al., 2006), yet not the interaction between the two with regard to shifts from externalised to internalised and vice versa. It was frequently mentioned by the participants in this study that there are sudden changes in children’s usual behaviour. Perhaps this is an area that is in need of more investigation – the sudden or shifting patterns of children’s usual behaviour within the school context.

Theme 4: Impact on learning

An impact on learning was mentioned frequently by the participants as a way of indicating emotional problems in children. This theme is divided into three sub-themes: homework is not done, lowered performance at school, and emotional problems being confused with learning problems. All of these were reported 20 times by the participants.

Theme 4.1: Homework not done

The participants reported that the children’s homework often would not be done, and this is regarded as a warning sign that something is amiss with a child: “the homework is not done” (focus group 1, participant 2, line 103) and that “the homework is never done” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 84-85). This is regarded as a significant indicator by the participants, in that
"when they don’t do their homework then you start asking questions" (focus group 2, participant 3, lines 189-190).

Voorhees (2011) reports that there is often a link between incomplete home work and academic achievement in children, and goes on to say that not completing home work may be related to frustration in children, as well as cognitive and affective conditions. Hong, Wan and Peng (2011) state that incomplete home work is seen more often in older children, and that this does not necessarily indicate problems with children. However, the educators in this study perceived consistently incomplete home work as an indicator that something is emotionally amiss with a child. This perception is consistent with the literature, which states that this behaviour is seen as normal in adolescents but not necessarily in pre-adolescents, and is at times linked, by educators, to a lack of motivation (Hong et al., 2011). The majority of the literature focuses on the advantages or lack thereof of home work, and not on the repeated incompletion of home work as an indicator of emotional problems in children. However, this can be linked to a general impact on school work and learning. Where there is academic impairment due to psychological or emotional problems, there will most likely also be instances of home work not being done (Burke, 2009).

Theme 4.2: Lowered performance

The participants referred to emotional problems as something that "...stands in the way of learning" (focus group 1, participant 1, line 10) and "it’s something...that forms a barrier to learning" (focus group 1, participant 4, line 11). The participants explain that there is an impact on learning, which is often an indicator of an emotional problem in children. The participants reported that "... work also drops, the quality of work" (focus group 1, participant 2, line 100).
Concerning school work, "They drop" (focus group 2, participant 3, line 204) and "They barely cope" (focus group 2, participant 3, line 205). The participants believed that, when the quality of the school work drops, it is a definite sign of emotional problems; "you must know especially if it's interfering in the school work" (focus group 3, participant 1, lines 63-64). The participants linked underperformance to children they believe to suffer from emotional problems. "There are very, very intelligent children and then ... they underperform...it's something that is always linked, your underperformer" (focus group 3, participant 1, lines 180-181).

One participant gave an example of this lowered performance in the school work. "I had a little girl in my class, in the first two terms she did very, very good, and then their father just left...he packed his bag and left and now the marks [are] down, she's struggling to do the work" (focus group 4, participant 7, lines 76-78). The participants regard this dip in performance at school as a clear indicator of a possible emotional problem in the child. Kaplan and Sadock (1998) state that impairment in school work is often a symptom of emotional problems in children. The majority of psychological or emotional difficulties experienced by children result in impairment in academic or school functioning (Mash & Wolfe, 2005), which confirms the theme of lowered performance in children who suffer from emotional problems. McConaughy, Volpe, Antshel, Gordon and Eiraldi (2011) report significant academic impairments for children who suffer from ADHD. Gau et al. (2010) also report that children suffering from emotional or behavioural problems are more likely to receive special education or counselling. Furthermore, the impairment in school work is clearly emphasised by the participants in this study, and is consistent with the current literature, that children who suffer from emotional difficulties often experience academic impairment.
Theme 4.3: Emotional problems confused with learning problems

Often the impact on the school work of children is to such an extent that it is confused with a learning problem. The participants would often think that a child had a learning difficulty, only to find out that there was an emotional problem. This demonstrates the extent of the impact that emotional problems may have on learning.

“One of the boys in grade seven that doesn’t, just doesn’t perform in any way or thing, and we thought now what are we going to do, and eventually we also had these meetings...and we found out quite a nasty history to him...I think his house had been broken into, he had been raped and his mother had been raped and he witnessed all of this and it was very traumatic, and now we don’t know these things from the get go, we just think the child’s got a learning problem, then you see that emotionally behind...the problem on the surface goes much, much deeper” (focus group 4, participant 3, lines 106-111)

“...there’s also sometimes children that you think they’ve got a learning barrier, but that has more emotional problems than a learning barrier” (focus group 4, participant 1, lines 190-192)

“P3: I thought he had a learning problem, straightforward just ... and he’s doing actually quite well in his tests, his work is perfect, so you see...as a teacher with many years of experience...I face children that I can’t place...you don’t know what is it – an emotional problem or is it just academic...” (focus group 1, participant 3, lines 447-452).
“Or they’re on that line all the time...and you know what you can give them remedial programmes, you can give them...something to do at home...it won’t help” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 206-207).

The participants reported assuming that a child has a learning problem, and after some time realising that it is an emotional problem that is interfering in school work. Mowat (2009) states that emotional and behavioural difficulties in children are linked to poorer performance at school, which often leaves educators confused as to whether it is a learning problem or an emotional problem. Mowat (2009) goes on to say that even children in special schools who have emotional and behavioural difficulties have struggles with schoolwork. Undheim, Wichstrøm and Sund (2011) report considerable links between reading disabilities and ADHD, including both subtypes of inattention and hyperactivity. In the light of this, one can assume that, because of the impact of emotional problems on school work, educators may easily first identify learning problems when there actually is an emotional problem.

Theme 5: Physical/behavioural signs

The participants also reported physical or behavioural signs that they believed to indicate emotional problems, such as thumb sucking, rocking or a child who is unable to sit flat on his/her bottom. A participant also reported a child with a blue eye. All reports of physical/behavioural signs occurred a total of 16 times. A few examples of this follow:

“I actually came across a grade 4 girl, and I really thought she was trying me...and one day I had her sitting on the floor here next to me...and she put her finger in her mouth and she was rocking like this (rocks to demonstrate) for the
whole period...and it clicked...there's big problems...that child has...there's big problems there” (focus group 1, participant 3, lines 637-641).

“And in grade 5 non-stop sucking thumb, 10 years old child” (focus group 1, participant 2, line 642).

“there's a lot of thumb sucking at our school ... it hasn't been like that in the previous years...that I've noticed now, somebody said no don't suck your thumb, now they take the forefinger ... and they suck that...this morning when we had assembly I saw one of my bright, bright students...and...she was sucking her thumb...she was in a total different world...and when I...brought her attention to it...you could see the tongue was sticking out...a comforter the whole time...that worries us because we've been taught that if there's a lot of thumb sucking...there might be a problem with sexual...something in that area” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 5-15).

The participants believed that thumb sucking was an indication of sexual abuse in the child who continuously sucks his/her thumb. Other forms of physical/behavioural signs that were mentioned by the participants were children not being able to sit flat on their bottoms. “And then they would also sit like this with the one foot under the bottom (participant demonstrates) so that this area (bottom area) will hang in the air... the bottom part...will hang in the air...and that also has a lot to do with abuse I know” (focus group, participant 1, lines 20-22).

It was also mentioned that at times there were changes in the children’s eating patterns, such as either gaining weight or losing weight: “it's either they become...the one sister was very thin and
... then the other sister became obese” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 110-113) – this was after two young children had been poisoned by their mother.

The above themes are not divided into sub-themes as not all were mentioned frequently by the participants. However, the researcher felt that they were significant. The theme mentioned frequently was thumb sucking, which was mentioned eight times, and the participants believed this related to sexual abuse.

The literature on thumb sucking focuses more on the developmental stages of infancy and early childhood, rather than on middle childhood. Kaplan and Sadock (1998) discuss stereotypic movement disorder as motor behaviour that is non-functional, repetitive and compulsive. Some of the symptoms of this disorder are thumb sucking and rocking, and are seen as maladaptive in older children. Thumb sucking in children during middle childhood is atypical behaviour (Kaplan & Sadock, 1998), which supports the participants’ perceptions that it could indicate possible emotional or even movement problems. Freeman, Soltanifar and Baer (2010) report that when stereotypic movements begin to interfere in daily activities, are unusually intense and atypical, there is reason to be concerned. Freeman et al. (2010) also report that daydreaming and anxiety, among others, are triggers for these behaviours. This supports the theme that physical behaviours such as thumb sucking or rocking at times may be indicative of deeper emotional problems.
Question 2: What is the perceived role that educators play regarding emotional problems in children?

This section of the results is divided into two parts; first the theme of identification and support, and second a discussion of a process that takes place when educators deal with emotional problems in children. Each step in the process will be discussed, followed by a visual representation of this process. Themes in this section are not discussed in order of frequency, but rather in order of steps which follow one another.

Theme 1: Identification and support

Theme 1.1: Role to identify emotional problems

It was mentioned by a participant that it was not the role of an educator to deal with emotional problems, but to identify emotional problems “*We don’t go into the problem ... that is not for us*” (focus group 1, participant 3, lines 157-159). This was mentioned frequently by the participants (six reports). In spite of this belief that educators are there to identify yet not intervene, the participants in this study do try to intervene where they can, even though they feel they are not able to ‘do much about it’. “*I don’t think we have a problem finding the emotionally stressed or emotional problem child...we can check we have the way to see that...but to do much about it*” (focus group 1, participant 1, lines 485-487). The participants reported not feeling equipped to intervene: “*very few of us really have that level of ability...to really counsel with success*” (focus group 1, participant 1, lines 261-262); and that they are only trained to recognise when there may be an emotional problem: “*...I’m not trained to...see what the problem is, but to see the result of the problem*” (focus group 3, participant 3, lines 16-17).
The participants reported that “we can recognise the symptoms” (focus group 1, participant 3, line 492), but when it comes to intervening with the child, “That’s where the big problem is” (focus group 1, participant 4, line 490). The participants felt that it was part of their role to recognise and identify children with emotional problems and to refer them on to professionals, as the participants were not trained to intervene. This theme is supported in the current literature, where it is stated that educators do not have sufficient or specific training in responding to the mental health needs of children (Morrison & Bratton, 2010). However, Stormont, Reinke and Herman (2011) report that schools are the primary site for referrals regarding children’s mental health services. This confirms that, in spite of insufficient training, educators will still intervene and refer children for necessary services. Skeen et al. (2010) report the importance of early identification of children who are at risk for mental health problems. In a study done by Culp, Howell, Culp and Blankenmeyer (2001), the role of the educator is described as one of an educator and a therapist, and that educators not only improve developmental problems but also intervene in the case of social or emotional problems. A study done by Dobbs and Arnold (2010) suggests that how educators view children influences their behaviour towards those children. However, in this study, even when there were instances where a child’s behaviour evoked negative perceptions and feelings in the educators, the educators still intervened and supported the child regardless.

Theme 1.2: Support through love and encouragement

Even though the participants felt that they were unable to intervene, they tried to generate positive emotions within the children through love and encouragement (11 reports); “if it’s emotional it’s...just a little showing of love” (focus group 1, participant 4, line 169) and “you just
deal with the child in your class you know, basically just...I understand and ok calm down” (focus group 1, participant 3, lines 161-162), because “we are in this profession for the children’s sake” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 433-434). The participants reported that it was part of their duty as a teacher to care for the children they educate:

“try to help the child, that’s what we’re here for...not just for education, emotional as well...and especially if the...the child is unhappy at school, we must really go into the whole matter and see what we can do about it...we are working with children and they need us” (focus group 4, participant 4, lines 219-222).

“We’re the ones that have to tell them that they’re doing well and encourage them, sometimes it is difficult, sometimes you have to fill the void, if you know that the child needs emotional support you have to do it emotionally, if the child needs educational support you have to do it there, so you have to fill the void wherever it is” (focus group 4, participant 3, lines 230-233).

Love and encouragement, as well as the belief that educators are needed by children, is evident. “Especially at our school the learning part is maybe 30%, 70% is the bringing up part...helping the child” (focus group 3, participant 3, lines 426-427).

The participants in this study clearly indicated that they are not just educators, they were also caregivers. Louw et al. (2004) discuss research that was conducted concerning children who had achieved at school and whose achievement was attributed to a particular educator and her values. Some of these values were love for the children, caring for the children, and faith in her children, which provided a solid foundation for learning (Louw et al., 2004). Resilient educators often report their career as ‘a calling’, and not just as a job (Patterson, Collins & Abbott, 2004). The
participants in this sample made similar statements, such as “we are in this profession for the children’s sake”. These educators are guided by their values, they are active and engage in problem solving, they are focused on assisting children with their learning, and will stop at nothing to help children (Patterson et al., 2004). The participants in this study portray very similar characteristics, and it can be concluded that they are more than educators.

Process

Theme 2: Active role

Step one in the process is that participants take an active role (10 reports) in the identification and support of the children they educate, whether they are trained to do so or not. The participants felt that they could not overlook a child that was suffering from emotional problems, and this drove them to take action when they believed it was necessary: “then we will take the necessary steps that we can intervene” (focus group 1, participant 4, lines 168-169). When the participants assumed that a child was suffering or that something may be amiss, they did not ignore the situation but rather approached the children and tried to find out what the situation was: “we try to find an answer, where’s the problem” (focus group 1, participant 3, line 456) because “... you can’t leave it unattended, you’ve got to attend to the problem...” (focus group 3, participant 1, lines 80-81). An example follows:

“I have one in grade 7, she was raped when she was about 10 years old...she only opened up this year to me, and I asked her of it’s ok that I can refer her...and she said it’s ok...and she said to us the mother is aware but nothing has been done and it’s been years...and it’s coming back...every night...so we took it further and
The child is seeing a psychologist now...and she is becoming better” (focus group 2, participant 2, lines 195-200).

The participants therefore take on an active role; when they identify behaviour of some type that they feel indicates an emotional problem, they actively try to find out if there is a problem by talking to the child privately. The participants also make themselves available as support, even if children are unwilling to discuss problems at first: “but in the long run you know they will come to you eventually if it becomes unbearable...because now you’ve opened the door and he’s got a foot in” (focus group 2, participant 1, lines 514-516). Remarkably, even if it is dangerous for the educator, he/she will still intervene on behalf of the child:

“...it’s also dangerous for you as a teacher...but we feel as teachers it’s our responsibility to do something...that’s why sometimes not even follow the channels that are expected for us” (focus group 2, participant 3, lines 424-426).

Patterson et al. (2004) report that resilient, effective educators will stop at nothing to help their children, and at the same time are actively engaged in problem solving. The participants in this study reflect these types of values, even though they are not educating in adverse circumstances. Educators who take an active role in teaching and in intervening in emotional problems where necessary, not only assist the vulnerable child, but also improve the academic achievement as well as the self-image of children (Louw et al., 2004). This is consistent with this theme that educators take an active role in intervention in children suffering from emotional problems. Educators do not overlook signs of emotional difficulties, but take an active role in the identification of and intervention with children in need of services.
Theme 3: Utilisation of resources

Participants reported that once they had recognised a child suffering from an emotional problem, and actively explored their assumption with the child, they would then contact the parents. After contacting the parents, the educators would locate and utilise resources in order to assist children suffering from emotional problems. These resources include counsellors, psychologists as well as psychometric tests. Educators find and utilise resources: “we identify, try resolve it...(if it is) not working ... (then we call for a) psychologist or counselling come, and we pay for children who can’t pay for their own counselling, we pay the psychologist, even for the test” (focus group 1, participant 1, lines 503-505). Another participant reported, “the first step in identifying if there’s a problem...and then the teacher will try and handle it the best they can...but...sometimes a more experienced hand is needed” (focus group 4, participant 2, lines 259-260). The participants first explored the problem with the child, then alerted the parents, and then drew on resources to assist the child. The participants in this study reported finding counsellors or psychologists, and at times even paying them to come and assess their children. Due to the fact that schools most often refer children to appropriate professionals (Stormont et al., 2011), and educators are reported to find solutions to problems as well as help children despite difficult circumstances (Patterson et al., 2004), it is reasonable to state that educators find and utilise resources to assist children with difficulties. This supports the theme that educators find and use relevant resources around them in order to assist children who are in need of mental health services.
Theme 3: Difficulties that arise for educators

The participants involved in this study reported many difficulties and challenges they face, particularly with regard to the identification of and intervention with children suffering from emotional problems. These challenges tie in with the research questions, because they are related to successful interventions. Participants reported that large class sizes made it more difficult to recognise children who may be suffering emotional problems (12 reports): “It’s difficult if the classes are big...you only know the clever children and you know the children that’s very naughty” (focus group 3, participant 2, line 149).

The participants in this study reported that large class sizes may be the reason why some children who display internalised behaviours are overlooked, or not noticed. Blatchford, Basset and Brown (2011) report that more research is needed regarding the impact that class size has in the school environment. It is also reported that the larger the size of the class, the more the educator needs to educate the class (Blatchford et al., 2011). In this regard, the class size influences the delivery of lessons, but not necessarily the quality. Gorard and Huat See (2010) report that factors such as individual attention, as well as the approachability of the teacher regarding learning challenges, increase the enjoyment of school by school children. With this in mind, the participants in this study reported that due to large class sizes they were unable to give individual attention and were most likely not able to assist every child that needed assistance with learning, which may reduce school enjoyment.

Another challenge that was reported by the participants was a lack of support from the parents, as well as from the district. The participants felt that if they had more support from the parents and from the district, they would be able to intervene with the children more effectively.
"I also think what we need to keep in mind is there's a culture that once you've dropped the child off at the school gate it's not our responsibility anymore...we've got no parental involvement at this school...maybe 2% parental involvement" (focus group 3, participant 3, lines 158-160).

P7: “In the olden times you could pick up a phone and phone the welfare.”

P3: “Yea.”

P7: “Pick up a phone and phone the dietician, you could pick up a phone and phone the psychologist and they, within 24 hours they are at school and your problem's solved, now there's nothing like that, you must struggle yourself from day to day.”

P3: “...it's just bureaucracy and red tape before you can get anyone to even look at a child” (focus group 4, lines 270-278).

When the participants were asked what would help them most, the majority replied that having a professional counsellor or social worker on hand at the school would have a huge impact. If this was the case, the participants would be able to refer children to someone for immediate intervention, and be able to continue educating their other children, which would result in children receiving the necessary services and less pressure being put on educators.

P3: “... if they can give each and every school a full-time social worker...that person must be here when we come to work in the morning.”

P1: “mmm” (in agreement)

P3: “She comes with us, she's there for such problems.”
P3: "...it will be much better because you know exactly if you experience something in class you just send the child, you call her and say I'm sending the child to you I think there's a problem here... Even for us... as teachers we are able to do our work, to concentrate on our work... yes we will identify such problems, but we know exactly there's somebody there's an office where you are sending the child to" (focus group 2, lines 564-577).

"Not so much pressure as just knowing that there's someone who can do more about it, 'cause you feel very limited and sometimes it's frustrating as well, you know that you could do more for this kid if there was a counsellor at school, if there was someone you knew could definitely help them within a certain period of time..." (focus group 4, participant 3, lines 263-266)

The participants felt that a professional who was on hand at the school would be ideal in the immediate intervention with children suffering from emotional problems. Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri and Goel (2011) report that the majority of mental health services are received in school, and due to this there is an increased need for services in the school setting. Stormont et al. (2011) report many referrals of children to mental health services through schools, and because of this it undeniably is important to acknowledge the importance of these services to children, as well as to educators. Culp et al. (2001) state that educators often intervene in emotional problems, yet the participants in this study reported that they were not sufficiently trained in this regard. The presence of a professional who is on hand could lead to faster and more effective intervention in children suffering from emotional problems. Figure 2 illustrates the process of intervention by educators.
Active role: Identify and then explore suspected problem with learner

Call in the parents

Find and utilise resources available

Figure 2: Process of intervention by educators
Narrative: This specific group of educators who participated in this study

Emotional problems in children are very complex and manifest in a number of ways. At times children act out, seek attention or even act in aggressive ways, which indicates to educators that a child may be struggling with emotional problems. Other ways in which these emotional difficulties surface are through internalised behaviours, such as withdrawing, being distant, and an inability to concentrate in the class room. Not all children are the same, and in some children it is the shifts or changes in behaviour that indicate that something is amiss. Educators become attached to the children they educate, and they get to know the personalities of their children on a daily basis. Because of this, educators often notice when a child is not behaving in his or her usual manner. Emotional difficulties may cause distress in children, and this has an impact on their school work. Most often this is a good indicator that a child is struggling emotionally, as home work is often not done and the child performs more poorly than usual or than the other children in the class. At times the poor performance in school work is the first indicator that something may be amiss with a child, and sometimes it surfaces later that the child has an emotional difficulty instead. In addition to this, physical or behavioural signs lead educators to ask question if an emotional difficulty is present. These physical or behavioural signs include thumb sucking, rocking, changes in children’s eating patterns and, sadly, even children who come to school with a black eye. All of the abovementioned aspects tell educators when a child may be suffering emotionally.

This is not where it ends, as educators believe it is their role to not only identify when a child has emotional difficulties, but to intervene in spite of insufficient training in this regard. Educators become attached to the children they educate and love and support these children, even through simple words of encouragement in the classroom such as ‘well done’, or ‘I know you can do it’.
If an educator sees that a child is in need of attention, the educator gives that child attention. Educators not only educate but love. When a child is suffering and needs professional assistance, educators do not overlook the difficulty, but find resources in order to help their children, even when it costs them. Educators face many challenges, such as large class sizes, time limitations with children due to large numbers of children travelling from afar, as well as a lack of support from the relevant government bodies. Educators are in need of professionals who are on hand to provide assistance with emotional problems in children. In spite of the difficult circumstances these educators face, they can be called more than educators; they can be called the mentors of children, because they stop at nothing to educate, love and support their children, as well as to intervene and find resources for their children.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of a group of South African primary school educators regarding emotional problems in children. Focus group interviews were successful in promoting meaningful discussions with the participants in this study, and led to data saturation, which gave rise to the following main themes: externalised behaviours, internalised behaviours, changes in behaviour, impact on school work, physical or behavioural signs, role to identify emotional problems, love and support, active role of primary school educators, utilisation of resources, as well as a brief description of some difficulties primary school educators face.

Data analysis involving thematic content analysis was meticulous and the results were confirmed as a true reflection by the participants involved in this study.
The limitations of this study included a small sample size due to many primary school educators being unwilling to participate in the research, and only one method of data collection was used in order to reach the aims of this study. In order to compensate for only one method of data collection, member checking was conducted. Despite the limitations, data saturation was reached, and the research questions were answered.

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, the results reflect only the perceptions of the participants involved in the study, and are in no way generalisable. However, valuable data was generated that enabled the researcher to provide a rich, textured account of the perceptions of a group of primary school educators.
References


