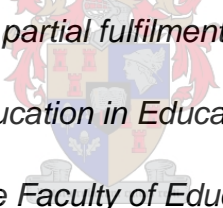


**Learning Facilitators' Perspectives of Supporting Learners with
Disabilities in Mainstream Classrooms**

by

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*Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Education in Educational Psychology (MEdPsych)
in the Faculty of Education*

at

Stellenbosch University

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March 2015

DECLARATION

By submitting this thesis, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the sole author thereof (save to the extent explicitly otherwise stated), that reproduction and publication thereof by Stellenbosch University will not infringe any third party rights and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

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ABSTRACT

Learning facilitation is a growing phenomenon in mainstream schools in South Africa, as learning facilitators are increasingly being employed by parents as a conduit in providing individual support for learners with disabilities. An in-depth examination of available knowledge and theory about the phenomenon of learning facilitation revealed that associated research is lacking in the South African education context. Consequently, learning facilitators' roles lack definition, status and regulation in both policy documents and the practical setting of mainstream education. This study aimed to gain insight from the perspectives of learning facilitators to form a clearer description of what learning facilitation entails. As support structures are still evolving in inclusive education contexts, it is considered important to acknowledge, explore and identify the role learning facilitators play in the implementation of integrated education for learners with disabilities.

In order to optimally support the effective development of the learner, consideration must be shown to the individual needs of the learner and the processes within the environment that foster or hinder learning potential. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development linked this understanding of the influences on learning and development. The learning support provided by a learning facilitator in the mainstream classroom is prefaced as an aspect of the learner's environment that 'fosters' in contrast with those that 'interfere' with the development of proximal processes.

This study adopts a basic interpretive design. Qualitative data collection and data analysis research strategies were employed to derive in-depth insights. Verbal accounts and descriptions from learning facilitators were gleaned, both through individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview.

Research into the daily experiences of learning facilitators revealed that they fulfil important and varied support roles. These roles incorporate academic needs as well as providing care and support for the learner with disabilities. Findings showed that the relational aspect of the learning facilitator's role is crucial in the collaborative effort of various role players (professionals, therapists, teachers, parents, etc.) to help learners with disabilities achieve engagement and integration into mainstream education as far as possible. It relieves the negative focus on the learner being perceived as "different" and eases the pressure on them to overcome challenges on their own.

Thus, recognition and definition of their role – what they are and what they are not, their interaction with teachers and other role players, their responsibilities, training and required skills - in regulations and policy statements will add much significance and clarity to a fairly new resource (in the South African context) of supporting learners with disabilities along with their parents and teachers and the learning facilitators themselves.

ABSTRAK

Leerderfasilitering is 'n groeiende verskynsel in hoofstroomskole in Suid-Afrika, aangesien al hoe meer leerderfasiliteerders deur ouers aangestel word om ekstra individuele ondersteuning aan veral leerders met gestremdhede te bied. 'n In-diepte studie van beskikbare kennis en teorie oor die verskynsel van leerderfasilitering het 'n tekort aan relevante navorsing in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks aangedui. Duidelike omskrywings van die leerderfasiliteerders se rol en status ontbreek in beleidsdokumente en hul werksomgewings. Die doel van hierdie studie was om insig te verkry uit die perspektiewe van leerderfasiliteerders om sodoende 'n duideliker beskrywing te vorm van wat leerderfasilitering behels. Aangesien ondersteunende strukture nog in die ontwikkelingsfase is in inklusiewe onderwyskontekste, word die erkenning, verkenning en identifisering van die rol wat leerderfasiliteers in die insluiting en ondersteuning van leerders met gestremdhede kan speel, as belangrik geag.

Die individuele behoeftes van leerders en die prosesse in hul omgewing wat leerpotensiaal bevorder of verhinder moet in ag geneem word om die effektiewe ontwikkeling van die leerder so ver as moontlik te kan ondersteun. Bronfenbrenner se bio-ekologiese teorie van menslike ontwikkeling het hierdie begrip van die verbande tussen leer en ontwikkeling getrek. Die ondersteuning wat 'n leerderfasiliteerder bied in die hoofstroomklaskamer word voorgestel as 'n beskermende faktor in teenstelling met hindernisse wat "inmeng" met die ontwikkeling van proksimale prosesse.

Hierdie interpretatiewe studie het kwalitatiewe datagenerering en -verwerkingstrategieë gebruik om betekenisvolle insigte te verkry. Verbale data en beskrywings van leerderfasiliteerders is gegeneer deur individuele, semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude asook 'n fokusgroeponderhoud.

Navorsing oor die daaglikse ervarings van leerderfasiliteerders het onthul dat hul belangrike, maar 'n verskeidenheid ondersteuningsrolle vervul. Hierdie rolle spreek die akademiese behoeftes sowel as die voorsiening van sorg en ondersteuning vir leerders met gestremdhede aan. Bevindinge het getoon dat die leerfasiliteerder se verhoudinge met verskeie rolspelers (medici, terapeute, onderwysers, ouers, ens.) deurslaggewend is in die gesamentlike poging om leerders met gestremdhede se insluiting en betrokkenheid in hoofstroomskole sover as moontlik te verwerklik. Dit kan die persepsie dat die leerder moet

verander om aan te pas by die sisteem ondervang en ook ondersteuningsgeleenthede skep om uitdagings te oorkom.

Erkenning en definiëring van leerderfasiliteerders se rol, hul interaksie met onderwysers en ander rolspelers, hul verantwoordelikhede, opleidingsvereistes en vaardighede in regulasies en beleidsdokumente sal meer betekenis en duidelikheid verleen aan 'n taamlik nuwe werkswyse (in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks) om leerders met gestremdhede, in samewerking met hul ouers en onderwysers, te ondersteun.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing this thesis has been the most challenging academic endeavour and I am indebted to many people.

Foremost, I would like to thank my husband, Heinrich, and daughters Emma-Jane and Sarah-Kate for their love, patience and support throughout the duration of this course.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Estelle Swart for her helpful insight and recommendations.

I am greatly indebted to Heideli Loubser for her careful, thoughtful and efficient manner during the editing process.

My thanks is extended to Monica Bosman for her willingness to assist with the technical editing.

I am grateful to the learning facilitators who so willingly participated in this study.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

PREFACE

*“Inclusion is a battle cry,
a parent’s cry,
a child’s cry to be
welcomed,
embraced,
cherished,
prized,
loved as a gift,
as a wonder
as a treasure.”*

Marsha Forest
1942 – 2000

1.1 INTRODUCTION

It is a matter of grave concern that children with disabilities in the South African context contend with barriers in the education system for a multitude of reasons, as this has resulted in a massive exclusion of children with disabilities from education (African Child Policy Forum, 2011). According to statistics quoted in a 2010 Department of Basic Education report to the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshega (Department of Education, 2010), the total population of children between the ages of 5 and 18 was approximately 14.6 million – of which close to one million were disabled. The report further estimates that the number of children with disabilities who are of school-going age, yet are out of school, could be as high as half a million. The reasons why disabled children are not attending school are manifold, but paramount among them is that their needs are not catered for (Pasensie, 2012).

In recent years, the practice of inclusive education has been widely embraced as an ideal model for education, both in South Africa and internationally (Maher, 2009). Inclusion is broadly understood as the process by which learners¹ who previously might have been taught in a separate special education system, because of the disabilities they experience, would now be taught in regular, mainstream schools that have taken the responsibility of

¹ In this study I will use the term ‘learners’ when referring to school-going children (Grades 1- 12).

changing and improving to provide the support necessary to facilitate access and participation (Walton, Nel, Hugo & Müller, 2009).

Equity for learners with disabilities implies that these learners will have access to the widest possible educational and social opportunities; receive education and training in as equitable an environment as possible and be provided with the resources needed to realise their highest potential (Integrated National Disability Strategy, 1997). Education White Paper 6: Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System (Department of Education, 2001), hereafter referred to as White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001), states that as far as practically possible, support will be provided at local mainstream schools. Believing in and supporting a policy of inclusive education is not enough to ensure that such a system will work in practice (Department of Education, 2001), nor does it ensure that it will necessarily translate into what actually occurs within the classroom (Donohue & Bornman, 2014).

As the South African education system is beset with a host of challenges, from a lack of infrastructure to the provision of quality education, parents² express a host of concerns about the commitment and capacity of the mainstream education system to meet the educational needs of learners with disabilities (Dalton, McKenzie & Kahonde, 2012). To mitigate these challenges, employing one-on-one learning facilitators is seen by some parents and schools as a mechanism to support and facilitate the learning process of an individual learner with disabilities in mainstream schools. The Guidelines for Full Service/ Inclusive schools (Department of Education, 2010) refers to the appointment of teacher assistants at full-service schools and states that they should have clearly identified roles. Recommendations emanating from research conducted in the Gauteng public primary school education system in South Africa included a proposal that class assistants could serve as a support corps, thus relieving teachers' workload and allowing them to concentrate on their main task of teaching (Nel, Müller & Rheeders, 2011). The Guidelines for Full Service/ Inclusive schools (2010) distinctly state that teacher assistants are school-based staff who do not necessarily work with individual learners but are there to support the teacher. The Guidelines (2010) furthermore emphasise that schools may not require individual parents to pay for teacher assistants as a condition for the inclusion of their child.

Some parents with financial resources employ individual/ private learning facilitators (the title used in the South African context), as a means to advocate and campaign for inclusive

² In this study the term 'parents' is used interchangeably to refer to biological parents and other parents standing in place of natural parents, such as caregivers, guardians, adoptive parents, etc.

placement for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools, knowing that support systems still need to be developed in mainstream schools. The role of the learning facilitator needs to be explored and clarified. In South Africa, there are currently many examples of learners with disabilities such as Down's syndrome, autism, physically and sensory disablement, cerebral palsy and dyspraxia, who have been included in mainstream schools. While some of these learners have learning facilitators who assist and support them in the mainstream classroom, Brummer (1996) and Lazarus (in Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001) highlight that there is a level of uncertainty as to the exact role of the learning facilitator.

1.2 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

For many years, disability was a key reason for the exclusion of learners from mainstream schooling. Learners who were disabled were separated from other learners and were sent to special schools, often far away from their homes. Since 1994, there is a more inclusive dispensation of understanding disability.

Inclusive education policy acknowledges that all learners are different and have different learning needs. The underlying principle of inclusive education is to provide an education that is as equitable as possible for all learners, while adapting it to the needs of each learner (Thomazet, 2009). In conjunction with specific or differentiated instruction, some learners may require more intense and specialized forms of learning support to be able to develop to their full potential (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2009, 2010; Department of Education, 2001). According to Donohue and Bornman (2014), support provisions in international contexts depend on the particular learner's disability but may include special equipment, educational provisions and accommodations, for example, more time during tests and assessments, a teacher's aide to help provide the learner with higher levels of support needs and one-on-one instruction.

Similarly, the South African Department of Education's policy on inclusive education (Department of Education, 2001) emphasises the importance of providing education support services to schools, staff, parents and learners. However, considerable inconsistencies exist between policy and practice. The support needed is often not provided in mainstream schools in South Africa, due to, amongst others, limited financial and human resources, as well as accessibility.

Despite the scarcity of support services in mainstream schools, parents of children with disabilities often advocate for placement of the learner in mainstream inclusive school settings. The use of learning facilitators to support individual learners with disabilities in

mainstream schools in South Africa is a recourse that is not currently funded by the state. In principle, this is particularly problematic in developing countries like South Africa as only a small percentage of parents are able to afford the cost of employing a private learning facilitator. A study conducted by Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, and Swart (2007) showed that in South Africa, advocating for inclusion in the mainstream school setting often involves emotional and financial sacrifices, for example, the cost of extra tutoring to enable a learner to remain in a mainstream school (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, Kitching & Eloff, 2005). Parents could also be responsible for the cost of related services, such as physical therapy, speech therapy, and occupational therapy (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). An example is cited in the study where a parent hired a classroom assistant for her child at her own cost (Engelbrecht, et al., 2005).

Research conducted by Giangreco and Doyle (2007) revealed that when parents resolve to employ a private learning facilitator, they are seen to play an important role in providing individual and ongoing support to learners with disabilities where the school may not have the capacity and funding for this provision. Hence, they also invest in their child's mainstream placement.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Seven years after the above-mentioned research by Yssel et al. (2007), the position remains largely unchanged. In an attempt to compensate for the lack of supportive structures for the learner with disabilities, current practice in some mainstream schools shows that where affordable, parents may employ a private learning facilitator to assist with the learner's support needs. However, learning facilitators lack identity within the field of education as there is no official recognition of their role. Very little is known about what learning facilitation encompasses, and the roles learning facilitators assume in mainstream inclusive contexts in South Africa.

The Guidelines for Full-service/ Inclusive schools (2010, p. 30) state that the hallmark of inclusive schools is an ongoing effort to find effective ways to ensure that learners access and make progress in the mainstream curriculum, while receiving the individualised instruction and support needed to be successful. As such support is critical to ensure the successful inclusion of learners with disabilities in mainstream schools, the researcher asserts that this phenomenon warrants closer investigation. A recent South African study conducted by Mtsweni (2013) confirmed this research's supposition that while there is a growing phenomenon of employing learning facilitators to support learners with disabilities in mainstream schools, there is no clear definition of their role, or specific criteria for their

employment. This study argues consequently, that while learning facilitators may be perceived as valuable members of the inclusive education community (Mtsweni, 2013), their role is unclear in the South African inclusive education context.

The Guidelines for Full-service/ Inclusive schools (2010) inadvertently validate the support provided by learning facilitators:

While professionals are primarily responsible for providing services, non-educators like peer tutors, volunteers, paraprofessionals, and others may participate in supporting learners (p. 21).

In considering this statement, the support provided by learning facilitators falls within the ambit of policy guidelines. However, policy guidelines are vague and there is no official recognition of their role. Consequently, there is a lack of clarity about what their support role necessitates, and the goals, purposes and challenges of learning facilitation. Learning facilitators lack an identifiable position in inclusive education. This lack of definition is problematic as it may inadvertently lead to reservation, uncertainty and mixed feelings amongst education authorities, teachers, parents and learners. This research asserts that as learning facilitators are role-players in inclusive education, their identity and role needs to become more discernible in the mainstream inclusive education context, and advances that the personal perspectives of learning facilitators could inform this undertaking.

The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994, p. 24) and many writers in the field of inclusive education have emphasised the need for research into inclusive practice (Walton et al., 2009). Inclusive education is a dynamic process which is constantly evolving. As teachers, learners, parents and policy makers grapple with inclusive education policy and practices, learning more about current practices is instructive, as it provides examples of what may work (and insight into what is currently happening) in the South African context.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

The research was guided by the following question:

What are learning facilitators' perspectives of supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream education classrooms?

The following sub-sections further guided the research:

- What roles do learning facilitators assume in the mainstream classroom?

- What is the nature of the relationships they engage in within the mainstream classroom?
- What meanings do they attribute to what they do and how they do it?
- What are the expectations and challenges they encounter?

1.5 AIM AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The aim of this study was to interpret and describe the perspectives and experiences of learning facilitators in order to gain a deep understanding of their roles and the meanings they attributed to supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. This entailed exploring and understanding what supporting learners with disabilities meant from their point of view. The aim of gaining this insight was to gain clarity into what their role encompasses as this insight could assist with the development and perception of the role of learning facilitators. In conjunction, the research sought an understanding of the phenomenon of support in inclusive education for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

Before engaging any further in a discussion on this study, it is necessary to describe my world view and my rationale for adopting this research topic. There is also recognition for how my decisions shaped the research study.

As a primary school teacher, I had the experience six years ago of working with a learning facilitator in my mainstream classroom. At the time, my knowledge and insight of South African education policies and the phenomenon of learning facilitation was limited. Parents of a learner had advocated for one-on-one learning facilitation when the school advised that the learner needed individualised attention in order to cope in the mainstream classroom. Educating a learner with disabilities was a new experience, which proved to be both challenging and enlightening, as my own assumptions about including learners with disabilities in mainstream contexts were confronted.

I had no insight or introduction to the role of the learning facilitator in the mainstream classroom, and initially questioned whether the mainstream setting could accommodate the needs of the learner. As a mainstream teacher, I had misgivings about whether the individual support being offered was sanctioned by the Education Department. I questioned the necessity and fairness of the one-on-one support provided by learning facilitators within the mainstream classroom. Was the learner gaining an unfair advantage by being in the position to receive one-on-one facilitation? In addition, I was uncertain about the expectations of the learning facilitator and the parent. I contemplated my role as a teacher in relation to the role

of the learning facilitator. It raised doubt about whether my teaching was effective enough to meet the needs of the learner with disabilities.

Walsham (2006) notes that we are biased by our own background, knowledge and prejudices to see things in certain ways and not others. My postgraduate journey has broadened my exposure to current educational policies and universal rights, and has also honed insight into policy statements, learner and parents' rights. As this was uncharted territory in the mainstream context where I was teaching, it was interesting to observe staff interactions and overhear teacher discussions around the phenomenon of learning facilitation as the learner progressed through the various grades. It was evident that there was a lack of professional insight into the meaning and rationale for learning facilitation. This was, in part, due to the lack of official recognition of the learning facilitator's role in inclusive education policy.

This research study provided learning facilitators with an opportunity to express their perspectives about their roles within mainstream schools. The rationale was that their perspectives were a potential source of data about the phenomenon of support for learners with disabilities, which could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of these learners in daily experiences in mainstream classrooms (Bourke & Carrington, 2007). It was furthermore felt that the research data may help to clarify the role of learning facilitator and that this insight might lead to a deeper appreciation of their role.

This study also highlights the serious problem of the limitations regarding individual support for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools in South Africa. Becoming more informed about the role of one-on-one learning facilitators may contribute to the realisation of inclusive possibilities when educating learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. This research asserts that it is important to engage with evidence and with direct experiences of inclusion which can help to inform and shape practice and research and provide evidence of alternative means of support, in order to analyse possibilities and barriers to participation and learning (Ainscow, 2005; Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

1.6 CONTRIBUTION TO NEW KNOWLEDGE

A research base into inclusive education in South Africa is emerging (Walton et al., 2009). An extensive review of the literature on inclusive education revealed that empirical research about the perspectives of learning facilitators in inclusive education in South Africa was negligible. Furthermore, the support roles of learning facilitators are absent in official policy documents including the Guidelines for Full-Service/ Inclusive Schools (2010). The need for

this research is not to determine best inclusive practice, but to increase the repertoire of support strategies that schools, teachers, communities and parents can use to ensure that diverse learning needs are met (Walton et al., 2009).

It is recognised that the outcomes of the present research study are limited; research confirms that the use of learning facilitators providing individual support is primarily confined to the more affluent groups in South Africa, as it is not funded by the state (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007). Due to the limited scope of a mini-dissertation, and the research design (introduced in 1.7.3, and discussed in detail in Chapter Three), the intention was not to offer a generalised conclusion, but to provide some insight into the support provided to accommodate the needs of individual learners with disabilities within mainstream contexts at a particular moment in time. To achieve this objective, an in-depth interpretive study highlighting the perspectives of learning facilitators, using a restricted number of learning facilitators, was deemed preferable.

1.7 RESEARCH PROCESS

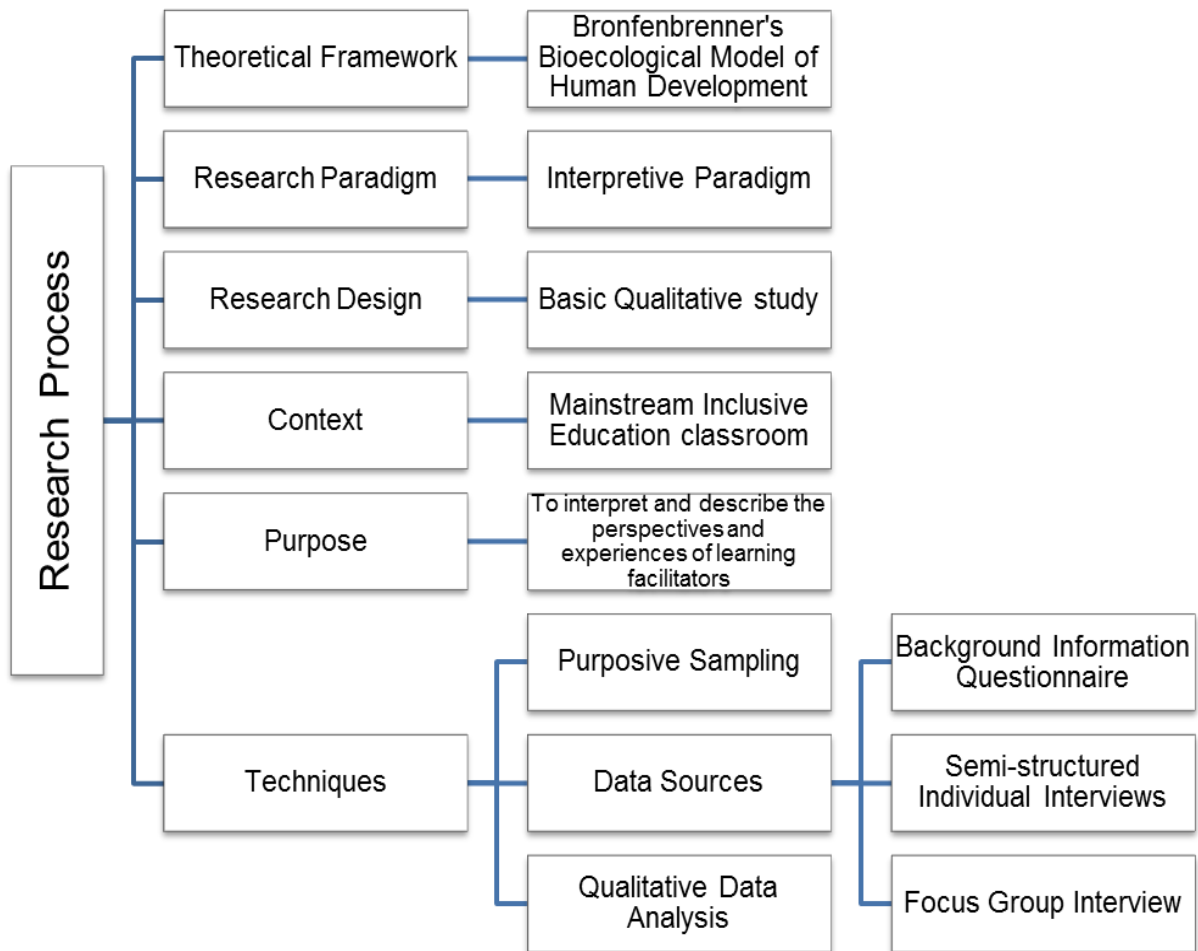


Figure 1.1: Schematic presentation of the research process

A comprehensive discussion of the research process is included in Chapter Three. This section will succinctly provide a summarized introduction to frame the study. I briefly describe the research process, focusing on the theoretical framework which served as a lens through which various aspects were explored, the research paradigm, research design and the methodology that addressed the research question (Figure 1.1).

This research study focused on the phenomenon of learning facilitation in order to acquire a deeper understanding of the unique interactions that derived from it from the perspective of the learning facilitator (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Snape & Spencer, 2003). A personal interest in interpreting and understanding the subjective meanings which learning facilitators

attach to their experiences in mainstream education contexts had a direct bearing on the research paradigm and theoretical framework adopted in the study.

1.7.1 Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model is valuable for application to educational support provisioning, as it allows for an assessment of the influences, interactions and interrelations between learners with disabilities, learning facilitators, parents and teachers in the mainstream school setting (Pieterse, 2010). The core of the bioecological systems model of human development is the idea of proximal processes. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010) describe proximal interaction as the close, face-to-face, and usually sustained social interactions which become progressively complex and result in learning and development. As this research focuses on the proximal interactions pertinent to the processes involved in facilitating and supporting learners with disabilities, Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems model of human development was deemed appropriate. A more extensive discussion of the theoretical framework follows in Chapter Two (2.5).

1.7.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

This study is embedded in the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretive research assumes that reality is socially constructed and that subjective meanings are socially negotiated by researchers and research participants. The interpretivist paradigm was deemed to be appropriate as it emphasises experience and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). Interpretive research assumes that reality is socially constructed and that subjective meanings are socially negotiated by researchers and research participants (see Chapter Three).

1.7.3 Research Design

A basic qualitative research design was considered suitable for this study as it does not concern itself with the search for broadly applicable laws; rather, Merriam expresses that basic qualitative research "simply seeks to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives of worldviews of the people involved" (1998, p. 11). Learning facilitators' perspectives are subjective, and I was interested in understanding how they made sense of their role and the experiences they had while performing this role in mainstream classrooms.

1.7.4 Research Methodology

Methodology is concerned with the specific ways to obtain data or the procedures of inquiry that will reflect the research question and suit the research purpose (Henning, Van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004).

1.7.4.1 Participants in the study

This study focused on learning facilitators in mainstream primary schools who are privately employed by parents to support the learning processes of learners with disabilities. Five learning participants were invited to participate in semi-structured individual interviews and a further five were invited to participate in a focus group interview. I purposefully selected information-rich cases for an in-depth study. I also employed a snowball sampling strategy after the study had begun, where I asked research participants to recommend others to participate in the study. Care was taken to ensure that the sample size was large enough for the purpose of the research.

1.7.4.2 Data Sources

Interpretive researchers attempt to derive their data from direct interaction with the phenomenon being studied. My primary data sources in this research study were the background information questionnaire and transcripts of the in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interview (3.5.2 provides a detailed description of the data sources).

1.8 CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

In the following section, terms and concepts which are important to the conceptualisation of the study will be clarified.

1.8.1 Learners with Disabilities

In this study the term learners with disabilities, as opposed to learners with barriers to learning and special needs, was preferred. The rationale was that just like other children, learners with disabilities have individual needs and experience barriers. Some of these are linked to their disabilities, while other barriers are not (UNESCO, 2009).

The Disability Strategy of the Western Cape Education Department (WCED, 2001) acknowledges that disability is both a social and medical construct. It recognises persons with disabilities who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments

which, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (WCED, 2011). Within this argument, both the role of the individual (the individual's health condition and impairment, their age, sex, race, personality, etc.) as well as the individual's context was acknowledged.

Smith (2011) suggests that Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development explains the drivers of human development as the interactions that occur between an individual (the biological being) and the interconnected systems surrounding them (the ecology). This theory emphasizes how a person's biological characteristics interact with environmental forces to shape their development. Bronfenbrenner's idea is that genetic material does not solely determine human traits but interacts with environmental experiences to determine developmental outcomes (Skelton & Rosenbaum, 2010). This way of thinking allows one to recognize that many characteristics that are attributed largely to heritability (such as disability) can be impacted by environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

1.8.2 Learning Facilitator

A plethora of terms is used in international contexts to define support staff in schools (Cologon, 2013); depending on which country you inhabit, the personnel hired by schools to assist classroom teachers and special education teachers in their efforts to educate learners with disabilities are known by a variety of names. Inter alia, these include teaching assistant, learning support assistant, teacher aide, paraprofessional, paraeducator, and special needs assistant (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007).

For consistency and uniformity, the term learning facilitator is used throughout this study to refer to an adult who facilitates the learning process of a learner with disabilities in a one-on-one basis in mainstream schools in South Africa. The role assigned to a learning facilitator in South Africa is similar to that of a Learning Support Assistant in the United Kingdom and the United States of America: To assist in the support and inclusion of learners with disabilities within the mainstream school (Giangreco Doyle, 2007).

According to Brummer (1996), in most international contexts, learners with disabilities are accommodated in inclusive classrooms where the schools and state governments provide special assistants and support staff. The Department of Education (DoE) does not, however, pay for learning facilitators in South Africa. Moreover, policy dictates that schools may not require individual parents to pay for teacher assistants as a condition for the inclusion of a learner (DoE, 2010). Notwithstanding the policy directives, learning facilitators are privately

employed by the parents of a learner with disabilities. Oftentimes the employment of a private learning facilitator is deemed as a prerequisite to the learner being included in a mainstream school (Engelbrecht, Oswald, Swart, & Eloff, 2003), despite contrary policy regulations. When parents advocate for the presence of a learning facilitator, it is often learner characteristics, the severity of the disability, concern for a learner's success and pressure from the school that may contribute to the decision to employ a learning facilitator.

It is perhaps helpful to make the distinction between "learning support" and "learner support". "Learning support" is essentially about enabling the learner to engage with the learning programme and providing personalised, identified support that will allow learners to maximise their independence, to achieve and to progress. This research focused on learning support and the role of the learning facilitator as defined above. The term 'learning facilitator', as opposed to 'learner facilitator', was preferred in this study. This distinction was deemed necessary as references to facilitation of the 'learner' are reminiscent of working within the parameters of the medical model where the emphasis is on deficits within the learner, without consideration of broader systemic issues. Where the decision is based solely on individual learner characteristics, a disproportionate emphasis is placed on categorising what is wrong with the individual learner, which is reminiscent of the medical model of deficit (see 2.3 for a more detailed discussion).

According to Donald et al., (2010), facilitation is the process through which something is made possible or easier. Gouws and Mfazwe (1998) state that the learning facilitator in the inclusive classroom fulfils an important role in the lives of the learner with disabilities and should work alongside the teacher, parents and interdisciplinary team, to support the learner with disabilities. The focus of this study was to gain insight into the meanings that learning facilitators attribute to their support roles; to examine the proximal relationships they engage in; determine emerging themes related to how they assumed their roles and responsibilities; and explore the expectations and the difficulties they encountered while working in mainstream classrooms alongside learners with disabilities.

1.8.3 Mainstream Classrooms

Mainstream classrooms are regular heterogeneous classrooms, where learners are educated with same-aged peers in general education settings. The Guidelines for Full-service/ Inclusive Schools (2010) describes mainstream institutions as schools with an inclusive orientation that provide quality education to all. Within an inclusive education system, the aim is to transform the mainstream in ways that will increase its capacity for responding to all learners. The Salamanca Statement, an international policy initiative,

envisions that “Ordinary schools with an inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all” (1994, p. ix).

Despite enabling policy statements, mainstream schools are currently not very accommodating and user-friendly microsystems for learners that experience barriers to learning (Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013). Many learners with disabilities, who experience barriers to learning, continue to be excluded from aspects of school life because the required resources and support are lacking. This results in learners being unable to participate fully in classroom activities, and they are thereby denied the opportunity to develop optimally. With the implementation of inclusive education in South Africa, and due to the lack of state funding, the door to learning facilitation has been opened, as parents advocate and provide necessary support for the education of learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms (see 1.6.2).

1.9 PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY

Chapter One served as introduction to the background and context of learning facilitation in the mainstream classroom setting in South African schools. The background, aim, research questions and a brief clarification of important terms was presented, followed by an explanation of the research process.

Chapter Two: A literature review contextualizes the research, showing how it fitted into the specific field of study. Much research has been documented regarding inclusive education. However, research regarding the role of the learning facilitators and the support needs of learners with disabilities in mainstream education in the South African context was lacking.

Chapter Three outlines qualitative research as the selected approach of inquiry and basis for assumptions in the present study. Within this chapter, a description of the research design, the methodology of the study, including sampling of participants, data collection and means of analysis, are also explained.

Chapter Four presents a description of the perceptions of learning facilitation, through the lenses of learning facilitators.

Chapter Five integrates these results and interprets them within the context of relevant literature and theoretical framework. This chapter also provides an evaluation of the study and indications for future research on the subject.

1.10 CONCLUSION

Chapter One oriented the reader to the research by outlining the relevant study. In addition, the merit of the research study was proposed. In conclusion, this chapter introduced the actual research process supported by a defined theoretical framework.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND TO THE PHENOMENON OF LEARNING FACILITATION

2.1 INTRODUCTION

A commanding knowledge of previous studies and writing in the area of research offers a point of reference for discussing the contribution the current study will make to advance the knowledge base in this area (Merriam, 2009). This chapter serves as an introduction to the background and context of the emergence of learning facilitation in mainstream classroom settings in South African schools.

The background research for this study is derived from various policy documents, research papers and literature that look at the key issues related to inclusive education and support for learners with disabilities in education contexts. This review considers both international and South African literature, but delves more deeply into South African documents and policies. A personal interest in the role of learning facilitators as they engage in proximal processes with learners with disabilities to offer individual support, the lack of relevant literature about learning facilitation in the South African context, and the growing realisation that there is a dire need for support for learners with disabilities in inclusive education, motivated me to conduct this research.

According to Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari (2003), the role of the learning facilitator in international contexts is to help keep the learner focused on tasks, to provide any modifications to the environment necessary, to help increase their understanding, minimize social and/or academic frustration, reduce behavioural problems and help the learner work in small groups with other learners. In order to understand the relatively new phenomenon of learning facilitation in South Africa, an overview of developments, changes and goals of education leading to the implementation of inclusive education in global contexts is necessary, as international guidelines provided the overall framework for policy developments in inclusive education. It is also important to understand the way in which attitudes towards individuals with disabilities have changed (Eloff, Swart & Engelbrecht, 2002). This discussion is followed by a focus on the education systems in the South African context which reveals additional challenges.

2.2 CHILDHOOD DISABILITY

All children, both with and without disabilities, face barriers. Children with disabilities, however, face both environmental and individual barriers. Research has shown that how disability is conceptualised and defined differs over time and varies in different societal and cultural contexts (Proyer, Schiemer & Luciak, 2011). Disability has been variously defined as

‘a deficit, a deviation from the norm, social oppression, exclusion, disadvantage, a collection of barriers, a challenge, an experience, an identity, a process, a predicament, difference, and an aspect of diversity’ (Croft, 2010).

In 2007 South Africa ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD). The definition of disability currently applicable in South Africa is directly compliant with that of the UNCRPD (2007):

Disability is the loss or elimination of opportunities to take part in the life of the community equitably with others that is encountered by persons having physical, sensory, psychological, developmental, learning, neurological or other impairments, which may be permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, thereby causing activity limitations and participation restriction with the mainstream society. These barriers may be due to economic, physical, social, attitudinal and/or cultural factors.

The South African Government, since 1994, has given high priority to issues of disability (Lansdown, 2002). In 1994, the President pledged a commitment to put children first and is committed to respecting the rights of disabled children to education in an inclusive environment. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was ratified by the South African Government in 1995. In so doing, the Government made commitments under international law to recognise disability as a ground for protection against discrimination (Article 2) and to promote the fullest possible social integration of disabled children (Article 23). Article 28 of the UNCRC (1995) asserts the equal right of every child to education. Chapter 2 of the 1996 Constitution guarantees fundamental rights to all citizens (Republic of South Africa, 1996). It includes, in Section 9, the equality clause, and the right to freedom from discrimination based on a number of social criteria. Discrimination based on disability is specifically mentioned and disabled people are thus guaranteed the right to be treated equally and to enjoy the same rights as all other citizens. The South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) introduces an equal right for all learners to access education without discrimination, bringing together the education of all learners under one statute for the first time. The Integrated National Disability Strategy (INDS), (Office of the

Deputy President, 1997), a key policy dealing with disability, states that learners should receive education and training in as normal an environment as possible, and learners must be provided with the resources needed to reach their highest potential.

According to the joint Report of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training (NCSNET) and the National Committee on Education Support Services (NCESS), learners whose education requires additional planning and modifications in order to assist them to learn, are described as learners who are experiencing barriers to learning (Department of Education, 1997). An amendment to National Education Policy Act, 1996 (Act no. 27 of 1996), issued by the Department of Basic Education (2014), recognises that learners with disabilities requiring differentiated strategies and accommodations in education include learners with:

- Sensory Disabilities,
- Physical Disabilities
- Learning Disabilities
- Behaviour, Anxiety, ADD/ ADHD/ Autism/ Psychosocial Disorders
- Disabilities of limited functional speech
- Other medical conditions, for example severe diabetes, epilepsy, chronic pain, back injury and HIV and AIDS.

2.3 MODELS OF DISABILITY

Models of disability exert a powerful influence on the public perception of disability and the response to people with disabilities (Smart, 2009). For years the traditional education system worldwide provided special education and related services to learners with disabilities (du Plessis, 2013). Historically, the term 'special education' has been widely interpreted to refer solely or mainly to special schools and special classes, with an emphasis on learners with disabilities (Mitchell, 2010). Paraprofessionals provided essential support for learners with disabilities in special education contexts for more than 50 years. Traditionally, such support was primarily in the form of clerical and one-on-one learner assistance (<http://www.spense.org/>).

During its history, the broad field of special education has been the site of different paradigms, or models, which posit certain relationships between individuals with disabilities

and their environments (Mitchell, 2010). A discussion of the medical, social, and social-ecological models of disability follows.

2.3.1 The Medical Model of Disability

The medical model frames the participation of people with disability as a problem at the level of the individual and sees the disabled person as the problem (as illustrated in Figure 1.1). Until the latter 1900s, disability was understood as an intrinsic, medical problem, with the focus of intervention being solely on the cure of the specific individual.

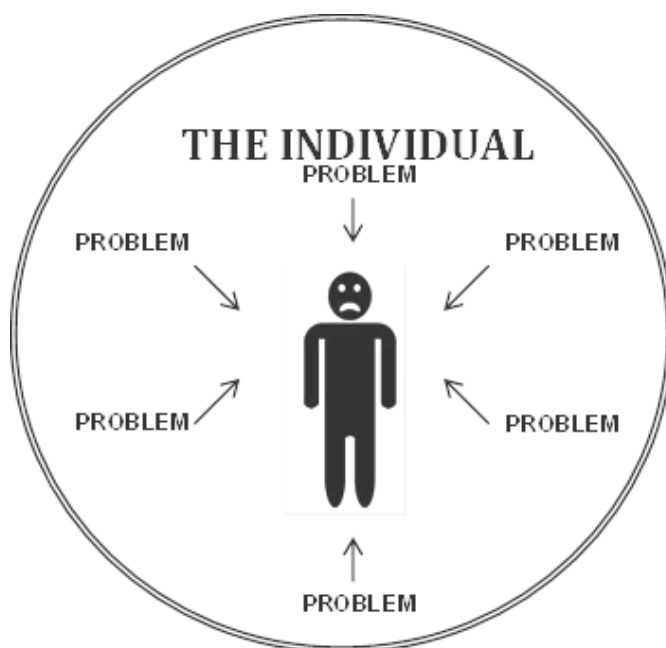


Figure 2.1: The Medical Model of Disability

According to Rieser and Mason (1992), the medical definition of disability

- has given rise to the idea that people are individual objects to be “treated”, “changed” or “improved” and made more “normal”
- views the disabled person as needing to “fit in” rather than thinking about how society itself should change
- does not adequately explain the interaction between societal conditions or expectations and unique circumstances of an individual.

The medical model holds that disability results from an individual person's physical or mental limitations, and is largely unconnected to the social or geographical environments. Criticism of the medical deficit model led to a gradual move away from “within-child” explanations of

disability toward explanations that acknowledge an interaction with the environment (Florian, Hollenweger, Simeonsson, Wedell, Riddell, Terzi & Holland, 2006).

2.3.2 The social model of disability

The social model of disability contrasts with the medical model of disability and is seen as a consequence of barriers which are externally imposed by the physical, attitudinal, communication and social environment. Within the social model, disability is perceived as being a societal problem and political issue (Kearney, 2004). The social definition of disability emphasizes the shortcomings in the environment and in society which prevent persons with disabilities from participating on equal terms (e.g., in education).

According to Oliver (1986), it is not individual limitations of whatever kind which are the cause of the problem but society's failure to provide appropriate services and adequately ensure that the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organization. This model of disability concentrates on the social and physical environment: the barriers to participation, unequal rights, discrimination, oppression, and asserts that society disables by creating barriers to independence.

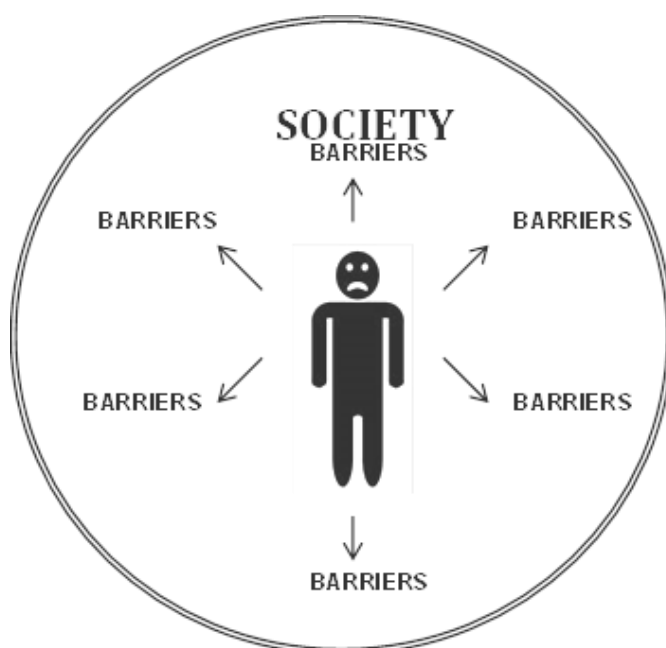


Figure 2.2: The Social Model of Disability

As illustrated in Figure 2.2, the social model frames the problems faced by people with disabilities as a consequence of external barriers. As a social and environmental problem, participation is enabled through strategies that modify the social and physical environment. The social model of disability has been influential in shaping public policy on disability

matters and the education of learners with disabilities on an international level during the last two decades (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2013).

The social model can be criticised for not sufficiently acknowledging the importance of disabilities and the role of other personal factors (Schneider & Saloojee, 2007 in Dawes, Bray, & Van der Merwe (2007). There is currently an emerging understanding of disability that is represented by the social-ecological model.

2.3.3 The social-ecological model of disability

Within the social-ecological model, neither biological/individual differences nor social context alone can provide an adequate account of disabilities. Rather, the construct of disability is defined through the interconnection of person and environment, providing a contextual experience of disability (Ebersold & Evans, 2003). The World Health Organisation International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health (WHO, 2001) may be seen as a specific model within the ecological framework, which conceptualises disability thus:

Disability is a complex phenomenon that is both a problem at the level of a person's body, and a complex and primarily social phenomena. Disability is always an interaction between features of the person and features of the overall context in which the person lives, but some aspects of disability are almost entirely internal to the person, while another aspect is almost entirely external. In other words, both medical and social responses are appropriate to the problems associated with disability; we cannot wholly reject either kind of intervention (WHO, 2001).

In agreement with Smart (2009) (see 2.3), Anastasiou and Kauffman (2011) state that public policy has a great impact on the lives of people with disabilities, and the formulation of disability strategies in education and public arena is of huge importance. The impact of policy on disability in the South African education context will be discussed in the section which follows.

2.4 INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

The most prominent paradigms related to disability and educational support in the South African context will be discussed in the sections which follow. The central feature which distinguishes South Africa from other countries in terms of educational provision, is the extent to which racially entrenched attitudes and the institutionalization of discriminatory practices led to extreme disparities in the delivery of education, a reflection of the fragmentation and inequality that characterised society as a whole (Engelbrecht, 2006).

2.4.1 The Impact of Apartheid

During the apartheid era in South Africa, 20 percent of learners with disabilities were accommodated in special schools (DoE, 2001). Historically, problems impeding access to education have been seen as being located within an individual disabled person, who was often medically defined by their impairment. This gave rise to the so-called “medical model”.

A medical model of intervention was followed, where the source of any type of so-called ‘special educational needs’ was looked for within the learner (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Figure 2.3 provides a visual representation of the separate special education system which existed for learners with disabilities.

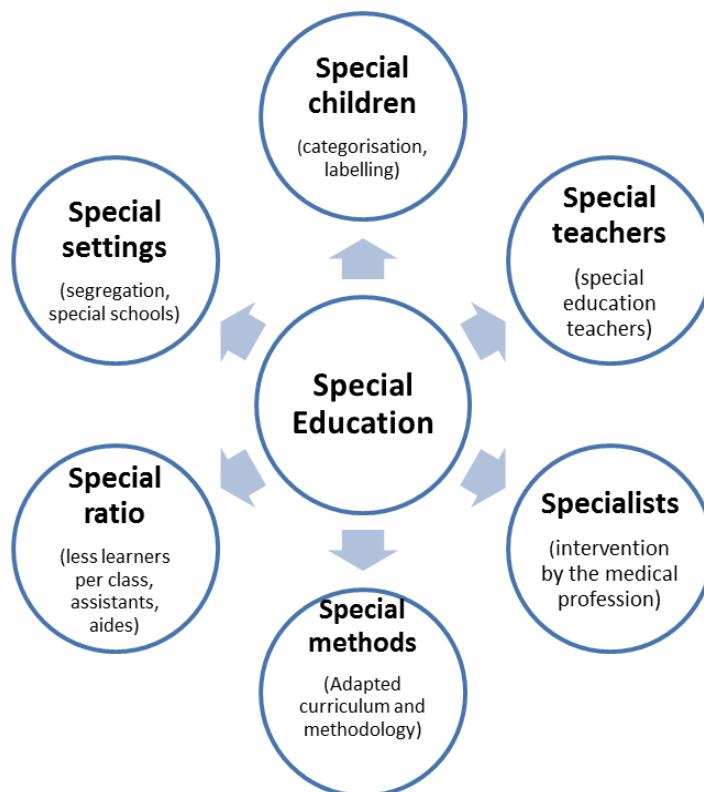


Figure 2.3: Special Education characteristics

Learners were not only educated separately according to race, but a separate special education system existed for learners with disabilities (Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013). In these special environments a special curriculum was followed, including intervention by specialised personnel and professional experts to “heal them” or to “get them right” (Swart & Pettipher in Nel, Nel & Hugo, 2012).

The medical model of disability placed the deficiency within the individual, and justified social inequalities based on biological inequalities (Engelbrecht, 2006). The Special Schools Act

passed in 1948, institutionalised exclusionary practices and created a belief amongst teachers that teaching children who experienced barriers to learning was beyond their area of expertise (Engelbrecht, 2006). This acted to further discriminate against learners with disabilities, and create a system of embedded inequality. In recent years, the appropriateness of separate systems of education has been challenged, both from a human rights perspective and from the point of view of effectiveness (UNESCO, 2005).

After the democratic elections of 1994, the new South African government committed itself to the transformation of education and the promotion of the principle of education as a basic human right.

2.4.2 Inclusive Education

Education in South Africa is faced with several challenges in an era of political and social transformation following the first democratic election in 1994. Inclusive education originated from a rights perspective that was informed by liberal, social-critical and progressive democratic thinking (Nel, Müller, Hugo, Helldin, Backman, Dwyer, & Skarlind, 2011).

It is framed within a human rights approach and based on the ideal of freedom and equality as depicted by the Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). South Africa was a signatory to the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action (1994) which endorses the rights discourse. The Salamanca Statement argues for a strong focus on the development of inclusive schools and states that “schools should accommodate all children, regardless of their physical, intellectual, social, linguistic, or other conditions” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6).

The Guidelines for Inclusion: Ensuring Access to Education for All (UNESCO, 2005) defines inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. Four key elements feature strongly in this conceptualisation of inclusion. The four elements are as follows:

- Inclusion is a process. This involves responding to, addressing and welcoming diversity amongst all learners (UNESCO, 2001).
- Inclusion is concerned with the identification and removal of barriers.
- Inclusion is about the presence, participation and achievement of all learners.

- Inclusion involves a particular emphasis on those groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement.

Inclusive education is thus concerned with challenging the ways in which educational systems reproduce and perpetuate social inequalities and is inexorably linked with the principles of equality and social justice in both educational and social domains (Sapon-Shevin, 2003).

Inclusion, according to Walton, Nel, Hugo and Müller (2009), is broadly understood as the process by which learners who previously might have been taught in a separate special education system because of disabilities they experience could now be taught in mainstream schools, depending on the level of their support needs in education and the choices of parents. Within the South African context, disability is now regarded in policy circles as not simply a medical issue but also a human rights concern. By applying the principle of social justice, which is focused on providing equitable outcomes to marginalised individuals and groups due to barriers embedded in social, economic and political systems (Dreyer, 2011), inclusive education can improve the lives of all people (Geldenhuys & Wevers, 2013).

White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) calls for a significant conceptual shift, with a focus on the needs of individual learners, distinguishing them not by their disability, but by the level of educational support they need. White Paper 6 (2001) asserts that:

- all children, youth and adults have the potential to learn, given the necessary support
- learners at schools should be allowed to learn at their own pace and be provided with support where necessary
- some learners may require more intensive and specialised forms of support to be able to develop to their full potential.

UNESCO (2001) defines learning supports as the resources, strategies and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual supports intended to enable learners to have an equal opportunity for success at school by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning and teaching. Lewthwaite (2011) posits that Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development encourages much consideration of what constitutes supportive interactions in fostering development.

2.5 BIOECOLOGICAL THEORY

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework for human development applies socio-ecological models to human development (as described in 2.3.3). Bronfenbrenner postulates that in order to understand human development, consideration of both the ecological system in which growth occurs, as well as the biological and genetic aspects of the person in human development is paramount.

Inclusive education is grounded on the bioecological system of Bronfenbrenner which emphasises that there is a complexity of influences, interactions, and interrelationships between the individual (learner) and multiple other systems (Swart & Pettipher 2011). The bioecological theory allows for the exploration of the development of inclusive education as constructed and restricted by aspects operating in different systems. It also allows for an examination of how practices are shaped by the interactive influence of individuals and their social environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005). The interrelated nature of the ecological systems implies that teachers, learning facilitators, learners with disabilities, families, schools and the learning context, are integrally involved in a learning environment (Hines, 2008). In order to provide holistic support within a socio-ecological approach to inclusive education, as opposed to providing individualistic intervention, all the influences, interactions, and interrelationships are explored by role players in the relevant systems working together in collaborative partnerships (Engelbrecht 2007; Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

2.5.1 Propositions of the bioecological theory of development

In fostering learning and development successfully one must take into account the four inter-related components in the bioecological theory of human development: the process of development (process), the individual characteristics of the developing learner (person), the systems within which the developing learner exists (context), and factors associated with change over time that influence development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Figure 2.4 illustrates the four components of Bronfenbrenner's Person-Process-Context-Time (PPCT) model (adapted from Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000):

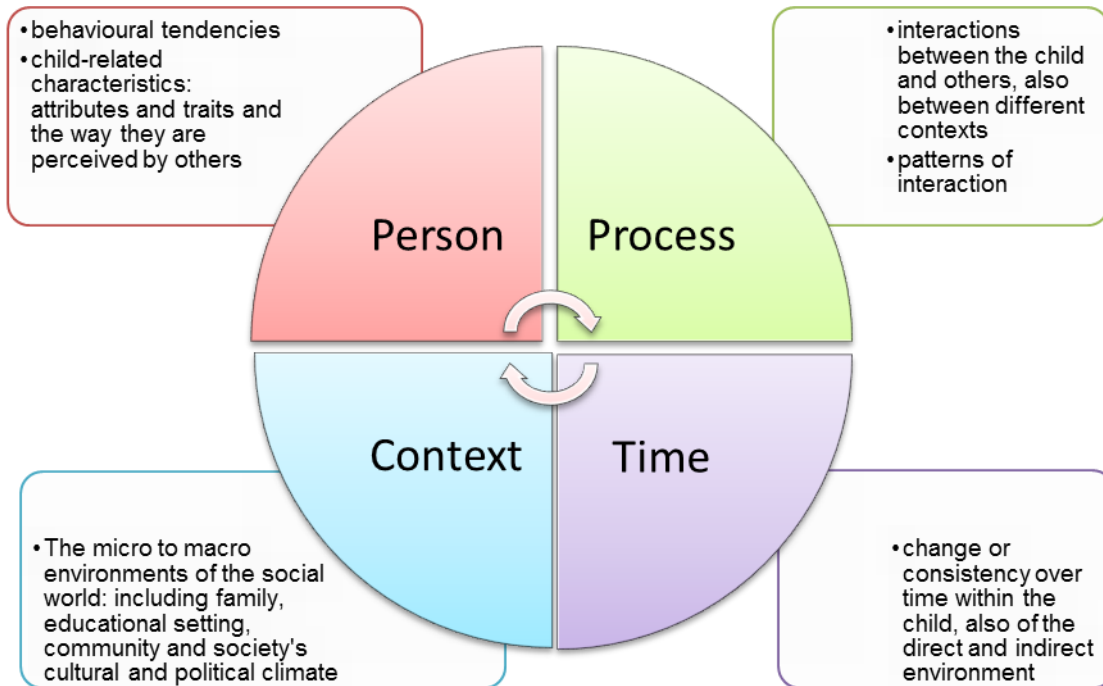


Figure 2.4: Person-Process-Context-Time Model

2.5.1.1 Proximal processes

Krishan (2010) states that the proximal-or near-processes involve all the transactions between the child and the immediate surroundings that are responsible for the child's competencies and general well-being. These transactions drive development.

Bioecological theory advocates that by strengthening human relationships (proximal processes) within supportive environments, it is possible to increase the extent of development realised into positive outcomes (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Hence, through strengthening human connectedness in supportive mainstream learning environments, it is possible to increase the extent of learning outcomes.

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) advance that this way of thinking allows one to recognize that many characteristics that are attributed largely to heritability, such as disability, can be impacted by environmental systems to produce developmental changes. In this vein, learning facilitators engaging in proximal processes in inclusive education contexts have the potential to play a key role in making inclusive education effective for learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

Bronfenbrenner (2001) asserts that proximal processes are the primary mechanism through which development, effective functioning (Swart & Pettipher, 2011.) and learning outcomes are actualised. He asserts that these interactions are the most powerful forces determining human development and learning outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2001). The importance of relationships (person–person and individual–context) and how these relations influence the individual's quest for learning is highlighted within this theoretical framework (Smith, 2011). This makes this model relevant for a close examination of the relational aspects of support pertinent to learning facilitation in mainstream classrooms.

As previously discussed (2.5.1), during the Apartheid era in South Africa, learners with disabilities were educated in a separate special education system and withdrawn from the mainstream education system as it was perceived that this was the best way to cater for their needs. In contrast, learning facilitators provide direct, individual support for the learner within the mainstream classroom setting. This research focuses on the proximal relationships that develop during the course of these supportive interactions and asserts that the role of the learning facilitator is invaluable to ensure that the learner is provided with the necessary support to achieve their potential within the mainstream classroom. The definition of proximal processes according to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) suggests that

- For development to occur, an individual must engage in an activity (the engagement of the learner in learning activities and responsiveness to the support of the learning facilitator);
- To be effective the activity must take place on a fairly regular basis, over extended periods of time;
- To be developmentally effective, activities must take place long enough to become increasingly more complex;
- Developmentally effective proximal processes must be initiated both from an individual and from the environment;
- Proximal processes involve interpersonal interactions between an individual and others who form part of the individual's microsystem (interactions between parents, learning facilitators, teachers and peers); and
- Proximal processes also involve interactions with objects and symbols in the individual's environment.

Proximal processes range from very direct influences such as learning experiences, individual beliefs and attitudes, to more indirect (or distal) influences such as socio-economic factors and public policy. Each level of influence, from direct to distal, has the potential to increase risk or offer protection for the learner with disabilities.

A direct (proximal) influence is the role of the learning facilitator and the attitude and beliefs of parents and teachers. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory represents the family and the school as systems, influenced by larger social, political and economic realities (Seligman & Csikszmentihalyi, 2000). The socio-economic resources of parents who can afford to employ private learning facilitators are more distal influences which directly impact on the proximal processes and serve as a protective resource. It is also acknowledged that there may be elements of risk involved in one-on-one facilitation for the learner with disabilities. Research cited in Giangreco and Doyle (2007) cautions that the utilization of paraprofessionals in international contexts has been associated with inadvertent, detrimental effects, for example, over-dependence, isolation, stigma, interference with peer interactions, and interference with teacher involvement. Learning facilitators make reference to some of these concerns as evidenced in the data presented in Chapter Four.

Teachers and, by association, learning facilitators should be actively involved in patterns of activity that mobilize and sustain attention, develop knowledge, and encourage the individual learner to attain slightly higher levels of functioning (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). In terms of the structure of schooling today, which stresses the breadth and depth of curriculum coverage and typically sees in excess of thirty learners per class, teachers are permitted little time to establish and develop healthy working relationships with every learner. The development of an effective working relationship between learner and learning facilitator can have significant ramifications for educational attainment.

2.5.1.2 Person characteristics

Bronfenbrenner acknowledged that the learner is endowed with genetic, physical, psychological and behavioural characteristics necessary for development and learning (Smith, 2011). These developmentally instigative or personal attribute characteristics invite, inhibit, or prevent engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction in the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). To foster learner development, mechanisms to minimize the risk factors and accentuate the supportive factors influencing learner change positively are necessary (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). According to Nel et al., (2012) there are three types of person characteristics: Dispositions, ecological resources and demand characteristics.

- *Dispositions* are described as powers that can mobilise, support and sustain proximal processes, interfere with, limit or even prevent proximal processes (e.g., impulsiveness, distractibility, aggression and violence).
- *Ecological resources* are bio-psychological assets and liabilities that influence the capacity of the individual to effectively participate in proximal processes (e.g., genetic defects and disabilities).
- *Demand characteristics* are described as “personal stimulus” characteristics which have the capacity to stimulate or discourage reactions from the social environment (e.g., hyperactivity versus passivity).

The learner is central and relates to the learning environment in light of his or her own unique circumstances and life experiences. Recent research in human development indicates that genetic makeup does not solely determine human traits; rather, genetic messages interacting with environmental experiences determine developmental outcomes (Smith, 2011). This is an important concept for the science of human development and can be applied to maximise learning, as it implies that maximising learning opportunities and creating enabling learning environments learners is an important determining factor in achievement of potential.

Genetic endowment (the “bio” component) and ecological experiences interact to determine human functioning and developmental outcomes such as learning. Bronfenbrenner advocates that the processes of actualising genetic potential are found externally within relationships (proximal processes). Learning facilitators work in one-on-one relationships with learners with disabilities and strive to create opportunities to ensure that the individual needs of the learner are met, in order to enhance learning and developmental opportunities. They also strive to develop learner agency by offering variation, differentiating and adapting learning and instructional material thereby making it more accessible to the individual learner. This is important to ensure that the learner develops a sense of control and mastery over their own learning.

Thus, although genetic factors and disability may have an influence on developmental outcomes, including learning, most outcomes are not determined solely by genes. Instead, individual achievements are due to genetic effect, the interactions between people in the ecology of learning (e.g. the proximal interactions between the learning facilitator and learner with disabilities), and independent influences on the ecology such as teacher characteristics, peer characteristics and parents’ socio-economic status.

2.5.1.3 Context

The inter-connectedness between the proximal processes and the interacting systems is fundamental to the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). One without the other is ineffectual. Excellent environments without functional proximal processes fail to achieve positive outcomes. Together, connected relationships and functional environments are influential in achieving positive developmental and learning outcomes.

The process of interactions or proximal processes between the learning facilitator and learner with disabilities is affected by relations between settings and by the larger context in which the settings are embedded (illustrated in Figure 2.5 below).

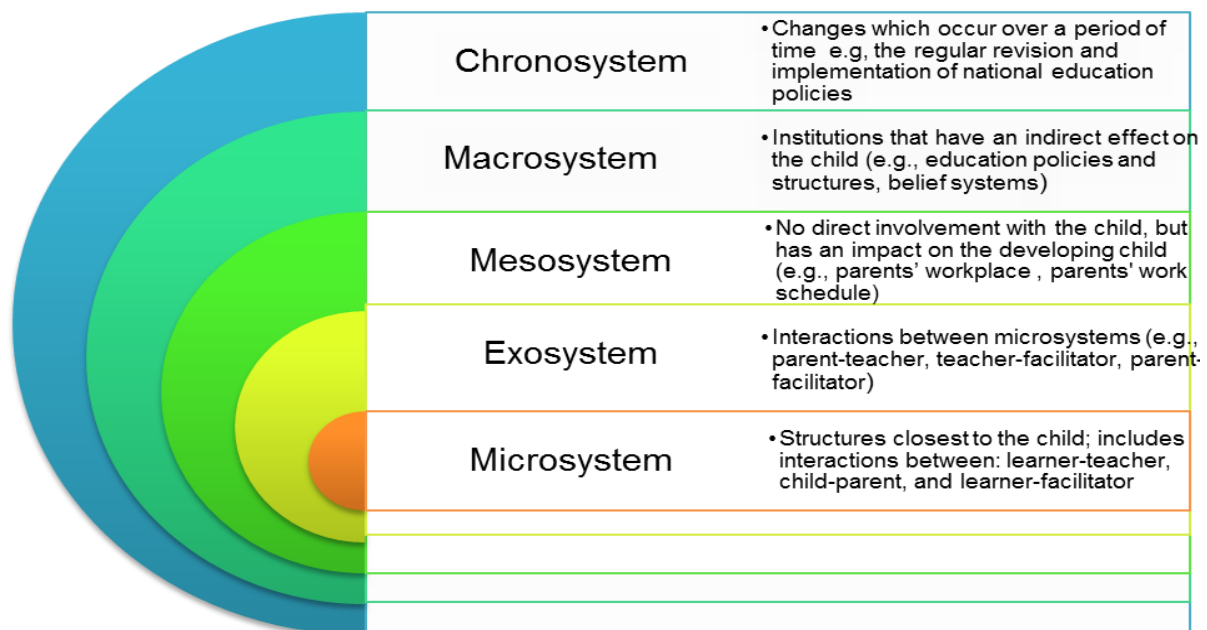


Figure 2.5: Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner, 2001)

In this research study, the relationships between the home, school, learning facilitator, classroom and mainstream education context are significant. Together these components are the ecology of a learner, which consists of all the processes, relationships and external influences that impact on learning (this includes the institutional, political and societal systems governing learning).

The learner is an active participant in these interacting systems and the learner's personality, responses and life circumstances will influence other people in these systems. Strong, mutual connection within the learning environment motivates the engagement with the learning concepts and enhances learning outcomes. This study explores the proximal processes that occur at the microsystem level; of significance are the learning facilitator's perspectives of the activities, roles and their relation to the learner with disabilities in the mainstream classroom.

- Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2009) define the microsystem as one in which learners are closely involved in proximal interactions with other familiar people, such as the family, peers and school. The microsystem is a very important layer of the educational ecosystem because learners are directly involved in this layer. Lewthwaite (2011) implies that effective learning facilitators may become a significant member of learners' microsystems by becoming connected to learners' lives.
- The mesosystem refers to the relationships that develop and exist between two or more microsystems at a given point in an individual's life (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Within inclusive education, intervention strategies on the mesosystemic level need to focus on the creation and maintenance of good relationships and purposeful partnerships among the school, parents and learners. Harty and Alant (2011) assert that by cooperating, teachers and parents bring together two important parts of the learner's world and strengthen the proximal processes. Since the learning facilitator is privately employed by parents to work with and support a learner in the mainstream classroom, the relationship between the family and school is extended to incorporate this role. These relationships will be examined at a mesosystemic level during the research.
- The exosystem includes other systems in which a child is not directly involved, but which may influence the people who have proximal relationships in the microsystems (Donald et al., 2009, p. 42). For example, the employment opportunities and financial status of the family may create options for the family, such as the employment of a learning facilitator when making decisions about a learner's education.
- The macrosystem consists of the larger cultural world surrounding learners together with any underlying belief systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Duerden & Witt, 2010). The macrosystem refers to policies and structures which provide the blueprint on which education provisioning in South Africa is based. The implications of policies

and the actions of structures have an influence on the management of inclusive education in schools, e.g., flexible curricula and assessment policies.

2.5.1.4 Time

- The chronosystem represents the changes that occur over a period of time in any one of the systems (Donald et al., 2010). Interventions on the chronosystem level include the regular revision and adjustment of national education policies to schools. The dimensions of time which are of direct relevance to this study are microtime and mesotime.
- Microtime refers to continuity versus discontinuity in ongoing episodes of proximal process. In the relationship between the learning facilitator and learner, it refers to the activities they are engaged in on a daily basis in the mainstream classroom context.
- Mesotime is the periodicity of these episodes across broader time intervals, such as days and weeks. Learning facilitation takes place on a regular basis, over extended periods of time.
- Macrotime refers to the developmental processes which are likely to vary according to specific historical events that are occurring. Due to the limited nature and scope of this study, change which occurs across time, relevant to learning facilitation, in different historical and cultural contexts has not been observed.

2.6 APPLYING THE BIOECOLOGICAL MODEL TO LEARNING AND TEACHING

The bioecological model can be used as a tool to emphasise the complexity of influences, interactions, and interrelationships between the individual (learner) and multiple other systems (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). It also establishes that in learning, the influential environment is not merely the immediate context in which the person seeks learning; it is also argued that a complex and dynamic relationship exists between the learner, the mainstream school, the broader education system and the social, political and economic context of which they are all part. By identifying the interconnectedness within and between these systems, it facilitates a better understanding of inclusive education.

Applying the bioecological model to learning and teaching thus requires a focus on the mechanisms alongside the context of learning and teaching as equal determinants of the learning outcome (Smith, 2011). This establishes the basis for understanding learners within

their ecology as active participants in their learning, where optimal learning occurs through interactions that are bidirectional and reciprocal. This allows for the exploration and examination of how the learning processes are constructed and shaped by the interactive influence of learning facilitator and learner with disabilities in the mainstream education context. The learner is active in their own development through selective patterns of attention, action and responses with people, objects and symbols from within the classroom and school environment. However, the capacity of schools to accommodate the support needs of learners with disabilities is most often inadequate in the South African context.

A premise posited by Lewin and Bronfenbrenner is that human development is a joint function of both individual instigative (person) characteristics (see 2.5.1.2) and the environment (context) in which the individual is situated (Lewthwaite, 2011). It emphasizes that individual attributes and characteristics of the environment, in particular the microsystem, have the ability to enable or constrain the learning experiences of learners with disabilities in mainstream settings (Lewthwaite, 2011).

The foremost feature of a teaching strategy stemming from this model is the incorporation of interpersonal relationships within supportive learning environments to create effective learning opportunities. A learning facilitator training network that provides training in Cape Town suggests that the learning facilitator facilitates the learning process, in order for the learner to optimise their learning and educational experience. The learning facilitator thus facilitates the learning process and ensures that the academic and scholastic content is accessible by using the learner's strengths and abilities and using alternative and adjusted techniques.

This research hypothesises that learning facilitators, who are privately employed by parents of learners with disabilities to address and respond to the learner's individual support needs in the mainstream classroom, could be regarded as an asset and a protective resource to the learner in the inclusive learning context.

2.7 ASSETS AND RESOURCES

Harty and Alant (2011) posit that the identification of assets and resources in the learner's environment that can provide for enhanced learning and development is pivotal for learners with disabilities in mainstream contexts. Bouwer (2011) states that assets comprise all the external resources in an individual's life world of a personal, institutional and inanimate nature that could be utilised within the particular context in addressing any need as it develops.

Bouwer (2011) furthermore asserts that people and relationships could serve as assets, as could particular knowledge and expertise, facilities, resources, services and financial means. The asset-based approach complements Bronfenbrenner's concept of proximal processes which hinges on relationships. Bouwer (2011) contends that assets only have use once they are functioning dynamically within relationships and serve as protective resources. This research suggests that the proximal relationship that develops between a learning facilitator and learner is an external resource which could serve as an asset to the learner with disabilities.

Research in inclusive schools in international contexts indicates that paraprofessionals and teacher assistants are increasingly being assigned to support learners with disabilities in a one-on-one format (Giangreco, 2013). Individual support is advocated for by parents and professionals (Giangreco, 2010). A strong parent-school partnership is an essential element in the success of inclusionary placements (Garrick- Duhaney & Salend, 2000).

2.8 THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

The role of parents in the education of children with disabilities changed dramatically with the emergence of a democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994. Engelbrecht et al. (2005) asserts that the inclusion of a learner with disabilities into mainstream education is a challenging and dynamic process that starts with the parents' decision to place the learner in a mainstream setting.

The South African Schools' Act (1996) acknowledges parents' rights to place learners in neighbourhood schools and states that a school must take into account the rights and wishes of parents and of such learners and uphold the principle of what is in the best interest of the child when making decisions. Parents are considered to be integral partners in developing a more inclusive system, where decision making and the responsibility for outcomes are shared (Swart, Engelbrecht, Eloff, Pettipher, & Oswald, 2004).

The reality remains, however, that parents often find themselves having to advocate on behalf of their children with disabilities in order for them to be admitted to mainstream schools (Swart et al., 2004). International literature indicates that there is a chasm between the expectations of parents of inclusive education and the actual practice of having a learner included (Fisher, Pumpian & Sax, 1998). Despite policy measures to ensure equal, accessible and quality learning opportunities for all learners, many learners may not receive the attention they deserve in mainstream classrooms in South Africa (Ladbrook, 2009). Parental concerns regarding inclusion in South Africa include the lack of state funding,

availability of qualified personnel and a lack of expertise in implementing inclusion (Yssel et al., 2007). Swart et al. (2004) assert that South African parents are cognisant of the fact that teachers are not necessarily trained to work with learners with disabilities.

As a result of pressure from both parents and teachers to ensure the inclusion for learners with high education support needs in mainstream South African schools, learning facilitators have become a resource for implementing inclusive practices in many South African schools. This support provisioning is considered to be sanctioned in education policies which state that learning support is any form of help, assistance and guidance given to learners to enable them to overcome barriers to learning (Department of Education, 2001).

2.9 COLLABORATION AND SUPPORT IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS

As schools become inclusive, there is an increasing diversity in learner needs. Unlike their typically developing peers, learners with disabilities may need extended instruction or assistance on specific tasks. White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) states that schools, teachers and families must collaborate to ensure that schools provide the resources and support to include children with diverse educational needs. Enlisting collaboration for learning support that meets the support needs of a specific learner depends on identifying and understanding the assets in the learner's environment that may be accessible (as discussed in 2.7) (Harty & Alant, 2011).

According to Engelbrecht (2007) collaboration was traditionally seen as a problem-solving consultation process; discussions of important learning outcomes were conducted in private by school administrators, curriculum specialists and other 'experts'; and a professional with a certain expertise would assist another person (e.g., teacher, parent, learner) (p. 176). In contrast, collaboration within an inclusive education system is essentially about collective decision making and problem solving; shared responsibility for decisions taken; a supportive environment; co-operation towards a shared goal; accountability for outcomes; shared resources; and where every member of the group is valued as an equal partner (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

The Conceptual and Operational Guidelines for the implementation of inclusive education stipulates that support in an inclusive setting should be defined as all activities that increase the capacity of schools to respond to differences (DoE, 2005, p. 22). The SASA (1996) states that where reasonably practicable, the State must provide education for learners with disabilities at ordinary public schools and provide relevant educational support services for such learners.

As shown in Table 2.1, this support can be of a low intensity, moderate or high-intensive level, depending on the needs of the individual learner. A continuum of provision is envisaged, providing support in mainstream schools for low-intensity support needs of learners, moderate level support in full-service schools and more specialized and intensive support in special schools for those with high support needs.

Table 2.1: Levels of support in inclusive education

Levels of Support	Institution where support will be provided
Low levels of support	Ordinary and full-service schools
Moderate levels of support	Ordinary and full-service schools
High intensive and very high intensive support	Full service and special schools

Adapted from DoE (2009:26)

Moving from category of disability to determining the level and nature of support is in line with the UNCRC (1995) and the UNCRPD (2007) which advocate for putting “the child first” instead of the disability. Inclusive education looks at a learner individually and aims at unlocking the potential of each learner through various means of support (Nel et al., 2011).

The underlying principle of inclusive education is to provide an education that is as standard as possible for all learners, adapting it to the needs of each learner (Thomazet, 2009). White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) provides clear directions regarding the importance of curriculum flexibility in meeting the full range of learning needs. Curriculum Differentiation refers to modifications that relate specifically to instruction or content of a curriculum. Curriculum differentiation specifically deals with adaptation, modification and any adjustment to:

learning, teaching and assessment environment and techniques; the learning, teaching and assessment support material that enhances a learner’s performance or allows at least partial participation in a learning activity; the structure and number of learning programmes; and assessment (DoE, 2005).

In line with policy, professional teachers are primarily responsible for providing services and modifying their teaching strategies to accommodate the diverse needs of learners (DoE, 2009). Teachers also need support, because most of them feel that they had inadequate training, skills, or resources to accommodate the diversity of the learner population (Hines 2008; Kourkoutas et al., 2010). Research conducted into teacher preparedness for inclusive education in South Africa (Hay, 2003; Kitching, Magare, & Roos, 2010; Pieterse, 2010; Pillay

& Di Terlizzi, 2009) and teachers' perspectives concerning inclusive education (Mayaba, 2008; Magare et al., 2010) indicate that the shift towards inclusive education has placed a strain on teachers. Their roles have become increasingly demanding and frustrating (Lehohla & Hlalele, 2012) and the question teachers are concerned about is how to accommodate learners with disabilities in inclusive classrooms without the support from learning facilitators, teacher assistants and learning support teachers.

Research shows that learners with disabilities often need specific instruction in addition to being included in programmes with the learners without disabilities (Terpstra & Tamura 2007). The Salamanca Statement (1994) recommends that learners with disabilities should receive extra support from classroom aides or support facilitators to ensure effective education. South African education policy states (DoE, 2009) that teacher assistants may be appointed by the school or by the parents. A stipulation is made, however, that teacher assistants should not be responsible for a specific learner on their own. The role of a learning facilitator is thus distinctly different from that of a class assistant in South Africa, as the learning facilitator supports a particular learner with a disability in a one-on-one relationship, rather than the class as a whole (Giangreco & Doyle, 2007).

While it is recognised that teacher assistants can be a great support to teachers, especially where a diversity of learners are accommodated (Landsberg, 2011), the employment of these assistants is not funded by the state. As a result of systemic and contextual concerns, some parents advocate and employ a learning facilitator to support a learner with disabilities in mainstream education classes (Werts, Harris, Tillery & Roark, 2004).

2.10 SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH ON LEARNING FACILITATORS

Findings from research conducted by Geldenhuys and Wevers (2013) show that many learners with disabilities continue to be excluded from aspects of school life, because the required resources and support are lacking in South Africa. Pieterse (2010) recognises that because of the challenge of large numbers of learners needing support, the majority of learners who experience barriers to learning simply go unsupported in schools and consequently nullify the envisaged benefits of their inclusion in diverse mainstream classrooms.

Implementation of inclusive education is still in its early stages in South Africa, but already alternative options need to be explored for many learners who are not receiving the support they need (Mahlo & Hugo, 2013). Using learning facilitators to support and facilitate the learning experiences of learners with disabilities is a solution in some mainstream classroom

settings in South Africa. Research in inclusive schools in international contexts indicates that paraprofessionals and teacher assistants are increasingly being assigned to support learners with disabilities in a one-on-one format (Giangreco, 2013) and is advocated for by parents and professionals.

According to Weeks and Erradu (2013), individual support generally aims to increase the inclusiveness of the curriculum. In most cases, the aim of extra support is to give a child access to the mainstream curriculum (through adaptation and differentiation). Learning facilitators can play an important role in providing intervention and support in the mainstream classroom setting.

As stated in 2.9, inclusive education looks at a learner individually and aims at unlocking the potential of each learner through various means of support (Nel et al., 2011). This study asserts that learners with disabilities benefit greatly from an effective learning facilitator who can support and assist them in order to reach their potential, and often independence. However, this resource is undermined by the fact that it is not officially recognised in education policy. As a consequence, there is a lack of clarity about what this role encompasses.

In order for this resource to be properly appreciated, evaluated and critiqued, insight into the role of the learning facilitator must be sought. This research explored insights gleaned from the perspectives of learning facilitators themselves.

2.11 SUMMARY

In order to provide a background to the phenomenon of learning facilitation, models of disability and the subsequent impact of policy on education provision were discussed. The bioecological theory served as a frame of reference for exploring the interactive influence between learners with disabilities and their social environment. Furthermore, it served as a framework to identify assets and resources in mainstream education contexts.

The importance of collaboration and support within inclusive education was underscored in this study. The chapter ended with a focus on the significance of conducting research on learning facilitators. Chapter Three will focus on the research process and discuss its various components in detail.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

"The methods and procedures is really the heart of the research ... activities should be described with as much detail as possible and the continuity between them should be apparent." (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005:416)

3.1 INTRODUCTION

All research is based on some underlying philosophical assumptions about what constitutes 'valid' research and which research methods are appropriate for the development of knowledge in a given study. This chapter discusses the philosophical assumptions and also the design strategies underpinning this research study as presented in Chapter One.

Before engaging in further discussion on the research process and design implemented, it is necessary to revisit the aim and rationale of the research as discussed in Chapter One (1.5). The aim of this study is to interpret and describe the perspectives and experiences of learning facilitators in order to gain a deep understanding of their roles and the meanings they attribute to supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. The rationale for this study is that the perspectives and experiences of learning facilitators can provide the inclusive education research community with valuable data which can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of learners with disabilities in daily lived experience within mainstream classrooms.

As discussed in Chapter One (1.8.2), Gouws and Mfazwe (1998) assert that the learning facilitator fulfils an important role in the lives of learners with disabilities in an inclusive classroom and should work alongside the teacher, parents and interdisciplinary team to support the learner. However, as mentioned in the introduction to the study (1.1), there is a level of uncertainty as to the exact role of the learning facilitator in mainstream classrooms (Brummer, 1996; Lazarus, in Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001). In order to gain insight into the phenomena of learning facilitation, my research was guided by the following question (formulated in Chapter One):

What are learning facilitators' perspectives of supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream education classrooms?

The following sub-sections further guided the research:

- What roles do learning facilitators assume in the mainstream classroom?
- What is the nature of the relationships they engage in within the mainstream classroom?
- What meanings do they attribute to what they do and how they do it?
- What are the expectations and challenges they encounter?

In reflecting on the research questions presented above, philosophical assumptions were reviewed and presented and the interpretive paradigm was identified as the framework of the study. In this chapter, I intend to discuss the research methodologies, and design used in the study including strategies, present the instruments, data collection and analysis methods, and explain the stages and processes involved in the study (see Figure 1.1).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), all research is interpretive as it is guided by the beliefs and feelings that the researcher holds about how the world should be understood and studied. This statement reflects my intent, which is to uncover the perspectives of learning facilitators in order to gain a better understanding of learning facilitation. The paradigm from which the research was conceived and conducted will be discussed comprehensively in the section which follows.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

Guba (1990) defines a paradigm as a “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (p. 17). Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006, p. 6) emphasise that the social science researcher should have an understanding of the wider social and political forces that shape the formation of new knowledge, as well as of the major paradigms that influence the practice of research in the social sciences. Chapter Two includes a discussion of the paradigm shifts in education and its impact on learners with disabilities.

This research was undertaken within an interpretive framework (as discussed in 1.7.1) with its emphasis on experience and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). As my intention was to become more familiar with and understand the phenomena of learning facilitation in mainstream contexts, and to describe in great detail the perspectives of the learning facilitators, an interpretivist research paradigm was considered most appropriate for this study. The interpretivist research paradigm offered me the scope to investigate and develop an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of learning facilitators; furthermore it facilitated the capture of contextual depth and detailed, nuanced descriptions (Carcary, 2009).

According to Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2006), a research paradigm is an all-encompassing system of interrelated practice and thinking that defines the nature of enquiry along these three dimensions (see Table 3.1):

- *Ontology* refers to the nature of reality that is to be studied, and what is to be known about it. Qualitative research is based on the ontological assumption that the nature of reality is diverse and that reality has multiple facets (Creswell, 2007). The multiple realities of the learning facilitators formed the focus of this study. These perspectives were explored by paying attention to their experiences of supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.
- *Epistemology* specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher (knower) and what can be known. The researcher and learning facilitators were involved in *an interactive process* of interpreting socially constructed knowledge gleaned from the natural setting of the mainstream classroom and school. "Substantial, multifaceted, situational information" was gathered during the research process (Henning et al., 2004).
- *Methodology* specifies how researchers go about practically studying whatever they believe can be known. According to Henning et al. (2004), the key words pertaining to qualitative *methodology* are participation, collaboration and engagement.

Interpretive researchers believe that reality consists of people's subjective experiences of the external world; thus, they may adopt an inter-subjective epistemology and the ontological belief that reality is socially constructed (Thomas, 2010). Table 4.1 displays the characteristics of interpretivism.

Table 3.1: Characteristics of interpretivism

Feature	Description
Purpose of the research study	Interpret and describe learning facilitators' perspectives on facilitating learners with disabilities in mainstream contexts.
Ontology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are multiple realities. • Reality can be explored and constructed through human interactions and meaningful actions. • Discover how people make sense of their social worlds in the natural setting by means of conversations

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many social realities exist due to varying human experience, including people's knowledge, views, interpretations and experiences.
Epistemology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events are understood through the mental processes of interpretation that is influenced by interaction with social contexts. • Those active in the research process socially construct knowledge by experiencing the real life or natural settings. • Researcher and the research participants are interlocked in an interactive process of talking and listening. • More personal, interactive mode of data collection.
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Processes of data collected by questionnaire and interviews. • Research is a product of the values of the researcher. • See 3.3 for a more in-depth discussion of the methodology employed in this study.

Adapted from Cantrell (2001)

Henning et al. (2004) emphasises that the interpretive paradigm does not concern itself with the search for broadly applicable laws and rules, but rather seeks to produce descriptive analysis that emphasises deep, interpretive understanding of social phenomena. In the interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is a part of the research process and is not perceived as being entirely objective (Rowland, 2005). Being part of the research process allowed me to:

- understand and emphasise events from the perspective of the insiders;
- provide a description and understanding of the phenomena under investigation;
- come to grips with the specificity or idiographic nature of the phenomena rather than its generalisability;
- follow an inductive approach based upon an interpretation of the empirical evidence; and
- be the main research instrument (Babbie & Mouton, 2002).

Myers (2009) argues that the premise of interpretive researchers is that access to reality (whether given or socially constructed) is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. When brought into interpretive research,

constructivism implies that any discovery of meaning of human action involves a conceptual framework in the minds of the researchers and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In selecting a research methodology, Guba (1981) suggests that “it is proper to select that paradigm whose assumptions are best met by the phenomena being investigated” (p. 76).

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Babbie and Mouton (2010, p. 104) describe a research design as being a plan or structured framework of how you intend conducting the research process in such a way that it answers the research question. Thomas (2010) suggests that research design can be thought of as the logic or master plan of a research that throws light on how the study is to be conducted.

Given the interpretive stance adopted in this research and the nature of the research question, I decided that a basic interpretive qualitative study was the most appropriate research design for this study as the focus was on revealing in detail the unique perceptions and concerns (Merriam, 2009) of individual participants (learning facilitators) in a real-world situation (mainstream classrooms) (see 1.7.3). Merriam (1998) asserts that the purpose of qualitative educational research is to improve our practice, and considers the basic qualitative research design to be particularly well suited to obtain an in-depth understanding of effective educational processes (personal communication, September 5, 2013).

This basic qualitative research study sought to discover and understand the phenomena of learning facilitation by exploring the meaning learning facilitators have attached to their experiences of learning facilitation in mainstream classrooms. Merriam (1998) points out that the basic qualitative study in education typically draws from concepts, models, and theories in educational psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and sociology. Basic qualitative research is grounded in constructivism with reality being constructed by individuals as they interact within a certain environment. Merriam (2009) contends that a basic qualitative research study is used by researchers who are interested in

- how people interpret their experiences,
- how they construct their worlds, and
- what meaning they attribute to their experiences.

In a qualitative research design, “the focus is on process, understanding and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). A list of characteristics common

to several qualitative methods (Creswell, 2009) which played a decisive role in adopting this research design will now be reviewed.

- I conducted research and generated data in direct interaction with the participants.
- As the main research instrument, I generated data using multiple sources of data which include a background information questionnaire, individual interviews and a focus group interview.
- I then reviewed all the data with the purpose of making sense of it and organising it into categories or themes that cut across all data sources.
- I used inductive analysis which involves observing, discovering patterns, themes, and categories in the data (see 3.5.3). Figure 3.1 below is an illustration of the inductive approach in qualitative data analysis.

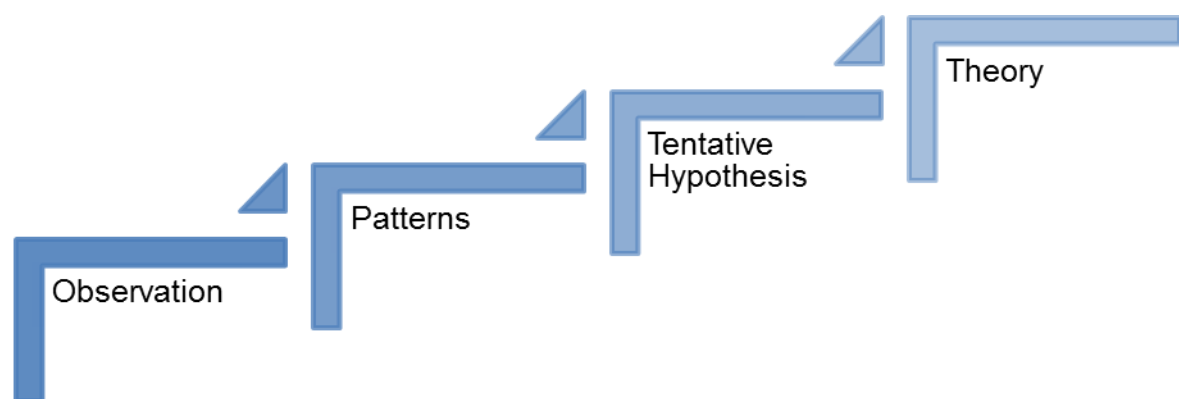


Figure 3.1: The Inductive Approach in Qualitative Research

- I considered that the focus of the research was on exploring the meaning research participants (the learning facilitators) held rather than the meaning brought in me, as the researcher.
- I recognised that the research was an emergent, shifting process in response to the field.
- I tried to develop a complex picture of the problem by reporting multiple perspectives and identifying multiple factors involved.

3.4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Babbie and Mouton (2011) refer to research methodology as the methods, techniques and procedures that are employed in the process of implementing the research design. According to Henning et al. (2004), research methodology refers to a process in which a coherent group of methods are fitted together in a complementary manner to deliver findings which answer the research questions.

The essential processes in this study included researching and documenting in detail, the unique experiences of learning facilitators in the complexity of the mainstream classroom. As noted by Babbie and Mouton (2010), the primary goal of using qualitative methodology is to describe and understand human experiences in a social context. The secondary aim of using qualitative methodology in this study is that it lends itself to "uncovering and interpreting" the meanings that learning facilitators construct and the sense they make of their experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). Domegan and Fleming (2007) contend that qualitative research aims to explore and to discover issues, because very little is known about the problem. It uses 'soft' data and gets 'rich' data". (p. 24). As highlighted in 1.3, very little is known about the role of the learning facilitator in mainstream education contexts.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) assert that qualitative research is particularly useful to study educational settings and processes as it involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter and attempts to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. In this respect, it allows for the research participants to have a more open-ended way of giving their views and demonstrating their actions; the qualities and characteristics of a phenomena are examined for better understanding and explanation (Henning et al., 2004, p.6). Berg (2007) explains that qualitative research refers to the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and description of things.

When considering research methodology, an interest in subjectivity and authenticity in order to explore and understand the perspectives of learning facilitators governed my decision to employ qualitative rather than quantitative methodology. Table 3.2 lists the strengths and weaknesses inherent in qualitative research.

Table 3.2: Strengths and Weaknesses of Qualitative Research

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data based on the participants' own categories of meaning • Useful for describing complex phenomena • Provides understanding and description of personal experiences of phenomena (i.e., the emic or insider's viewpoint) • Can describe phenomena in rich detail as they are situated and embedded in local contexts • The researcher almost always identifies contextual and setting factors as they relate to the phenomena of interest • Can determine how participants interpret constructs (e.g., learning facilitation) • Data are usually collected in naturalistic settings in qualitative research • Qualitative data in the words and categories of participants lend themselves to exploring how and why phenomena occur
<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge produced might not generalize to other people or other settings (i.e., findings might be unique to the relatively few people included in the research study) • It is difficult to make quantitative predictions • It generally takes more time to collect the data when compared to quantitative research • Data analysis is often time consuming • The results are more easily influenced by the researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies

I will address some of the issues listed in Table 3.2 as they related to this study in 3.4, 3.6 and 3.7.

3.5 RESEARCH METHODS

The research method is a strategy of enquiry, which moves from the underlying assumptions to research design, and data collection (Myers, 2009). Researchers conducting basic qualitative research typically collect data through analysis of documents, observations, and interviews. As this research is a basic qualitative study, its strategy is inductive and starts with initial assumptions and speculations about the phenomena of learning facilitation. Data analysis then occurs with data being organized according to themes, or reoccurring patterns (Merriam, 2009).

3.5.1 Selection of Participants

Miller and Crabtree (2004) note that research participants should be selected to maximize richness of information pertinent to the research question. The sampling of research participants in qualitative research is thus described as purposive. Patton (2002) interprets this as meaning that there is far less emphasis on generalizing from sample to population and greater attention to a sample purposely selected for its potential to yield insight.

Purposive sampling is often used when looking for particular types of participants (Durrheim, 1999) and is used to obtain a representative sample by including typical groups in the sample (Kerzlinger, 1986). Merriam (2009) suggested that the crucial factor is “potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomena” (p. 105). Merriam furthermore suggests that good informants “understand the culture or phenomena being studied, but are also able to reflect on it and articulate for the researcher what is going on” (2009, p. 107). The purpose of a small random sample is credibility, not representativeness (Patton, 1990). The targeted sample size was five to six learning facilitators who could engage in individual interviews, and a minimum of five learning facilitators who would engage in a focus group discussion. Although the sample size was small, data was collected until saturation point.

This study focused on learning facilitators in mainstream primary schools who are privately employed by parents to support the learning processes of learners with disabilities. I established contact with a network that provides training for tutors and learning facilitators. The organisation was willing to recommend learning facilitators who had relevant experience working with learners with disabilities in mainstream schools. My letter of invitation was forwarded to learning facilitators registered with the network. Furthermore, I made contact with learning facilitators introduced to me by word-of-mouth to ascertain their willingness to participate in the study.

When my invitation met with no response from learning facilitators registered with the above-mentioned network, I selected a convenience sample which included facilitators who were accessible, willing to participate in the study and who had been recommended by word-of-mouth. I furthermore employed a snowball sampling strategy after the study had begun, where I asked research participants to recommend others to participate in the study. Five learning participants were invited to participate in semi-structured individual interviews and a further five were invited to participate in a focus group interview.

The aims and process of the study were explained through discussion of the information letter (Appendix C). Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted at an arranged site that was convenient to each individual participant (e.g., at the homes of the participants and at my office). The focus group discussion was at a school in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town as this was most convenient for the focus group participants. Research was conducted after school hours and over the weekends.

3.5.2 Data Collection Methods

Qualitative researchers seek to build rapport and credibility with research participants in order to ensure the involvement of the participants in data collection (Creswell, 2003). They become familiar with their participants' interpretations of reality. Utilizing the emic approach, where one becomes immersed in the data, the qualitative researcher observes, records, and interprets the phenomena from the participants' perspectives.

The qualitative methods employed in this study were influenced by the researcher's theoretical orientation: given the interpretive stance and the nature of the research question, the data collection strategy consisted of a background information questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and all data was transcribed verbatim from the recordings by me. An audio recording was considered advantageous for capturing verbal material for data analysis and reporting. Recordings were made with the informed consent of the research participants.

3.5.2.1 Background Information Questionnaire

A background information questionnaire was constructed and emailed to prospective research participants. The questionnaire contained information of a general kind (name, age, gender, etc.) and a specific kind (qualifications, number of years involved in learning facilitation, training received etc.) (Appendix D). I settled for a questionnaire as a tool for collecting this data as it was a factor in considering the potential of each person to contribute to the development of insight and understanding of the phenomena. I present the data in 4.2.

3.5.2.2 Semi-structured individual interviews

The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the "others" who make up the organization or carry out the process. According to Shneiderman and Plaisant (2005), interviews can be very productive since the interviewer can pursue specific issues of

concern that may lead to focussed and constructive information. The main advantages of semi-structured interview method of data collection are that:

- Direct contact with the research participants often leads to specific, constructive information;
- Interviews are good for obtaining detailed data;
- Relatively few participants are needed to gather rich and detailed data (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2005).
- The semi-structured design gives the participants ample time and scope to express their diverse views and allows the researcher to react to and follow up on emerging ideas and unfolding events (Nohl, 2009).
- Results obtained through semi-structured interviews can be compared with each other since all participants are required to express their views about the same general themes (Nohl, 2009).
- Semi-structured interviews allow not only for assessing the participants' opinions, statements and convictions, but also for eliciting narratives about their personal experiences (Nohl, 2009).
- Open-ended questions allow the participants to freely voice their experiences and minimize the influence of the researcher's attitudes and previous findings (Creswell, 2005).

In order to facilitate an inter-subjective relationship with the learning facilitators, I employed the methodology of interviewing (Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). Within this study, five learning facilitators were interviewed individually, using a semi-structured interview approach. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method for eliciting perspectives from the research participants (learning facilitators) because this strategy was consistent with the study's emphasis on participants' subjective meaning-making in the contexts within which individuals interpret their experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The researcher considered the interview as a valuable data collection tool as a considerable amount of data was generated from the interview which lasted for approximately one hour.

To ensure consistency with all research participants, I designed an interview schedule containing a set of pre-planned core questions to ensure that the same areas were covered with each participant (Appendix E). The interview schedule was used as a guide, thereby

allowing questions that are not included in the interview schedule to be asked as I probed and explored perspectives of the participants. Merriam (2009) suggests that working from an interview schedule allows the novice researcher to gain experience and confidence needed to conduct open-ended questioning.

The semi-structured individual interviews elicited themes and patterns which enabled me to conceptualise and refine an understanding of the perspectives of learning facilitators. This approach gave me the opportunity to take into account their views, and allowed for 'thick narrative descriptions' of their perspectives. As each interview progressed, the research participant (learning facilitator) was given the opportunity to elaborate or provide more relevant information. Seidman (2006) posits that an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience is at the root of in-depth interviewing. Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behaviour and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behaviour.

In order to triangulate data, this study included a focus-group interview. The focus group interview was conducted after the individual interviews, to further explore the nature of the comments gleaned during individual interviews (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2005).

3.5.2.3 Focus group interview

Cilliers (2005) suggests that the purpose of a focus group interview is to gain information and perspectives about a specific research topic, and its rationale is to provide a socially-oriented interaction, similar to a real life situation, where participants freely influence one another, build on one another's responses and thus stimulate a collective and synergistically generated thought, feeling and experience.

A similar conceptualisation is made by Babbie and Mouton (2001) who state that the focus group allows space for people to get together and create meaning among themselves and has the effect of shaping and reshaping opinions to develop a completely new set of data. Furthermore, the focus group interview can provide a setting where the participants can discuss problems and provide possible solutions (Duggleby, 2005).

A focus group discussion is considered to be less structured than individual interviews, and is geared to further explore the general nature of the comments from different individuals (Shneiderman & Plaisant, 2005). Patton explains that unlike a series of one-on-one interviews, in a focus group participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comments beyond their original responses as they consider what other participants have to say (2002, in Merriam, 2009). Babbie and Mouton (2001), assert that the

focus group instrument is also useful as it enables the collection of a large amount of information in a limited period. Through facilitated discussion, the researcher can gain insights into participants' shared understandings and can learn or confirm the meaning implicit in their responses.

A focus group discussion was planned, arranged and presented for ninety minutes. As stated in 3.5.1, the participants in the focus group discussion were a convenience sample. Five learning facilitators were chosen to form a focus group for ease of access, as they worked in the same school setting. This allowed for an exploration of their perspectives and experiences within a similar setting. I designed an interview schedule which guided the discussion (Appendix F).

Data was collected until saturation.

3.5.3 Data Analysis

“Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others. Analysis means organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories. It often involves synthesis, evaluation, interpretation, categorization, hypothesizing, comparison, and pattern finding. It always involves what H. F. Wolcott calls “mindwork”. . . Researchers always engage their own intellectual capacities to make sense of qualitative data.” (Hatch 2002, 148)

According to Merriam (2009) qualitative data collection and analysis collection occur simultaneously. Qualitative data analysis often follows a general inductive approach (as opposed to a hypothetical-deductive one) in the sense that explicit theories are not imposed on the data in a test of a specific hypothesis. Bogdan and Biklen (2003), in agreement with Hatch (2002), defines qualitative data analysis as working with the data, organising them, breaking them into manageable units, coding them, synthesising them, and searching for patterns. Emergent methodology (induction) is used by qualitative data analysts as they gradually build a structure for understanding their findings. Emergent methodology relies on inductive reasoning and a continual interplay between data and developing interpretation.

The analysis of the interview data in this research study followed the general steps of qualitative data analysis described by Creswell (2009). This generic procedure is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

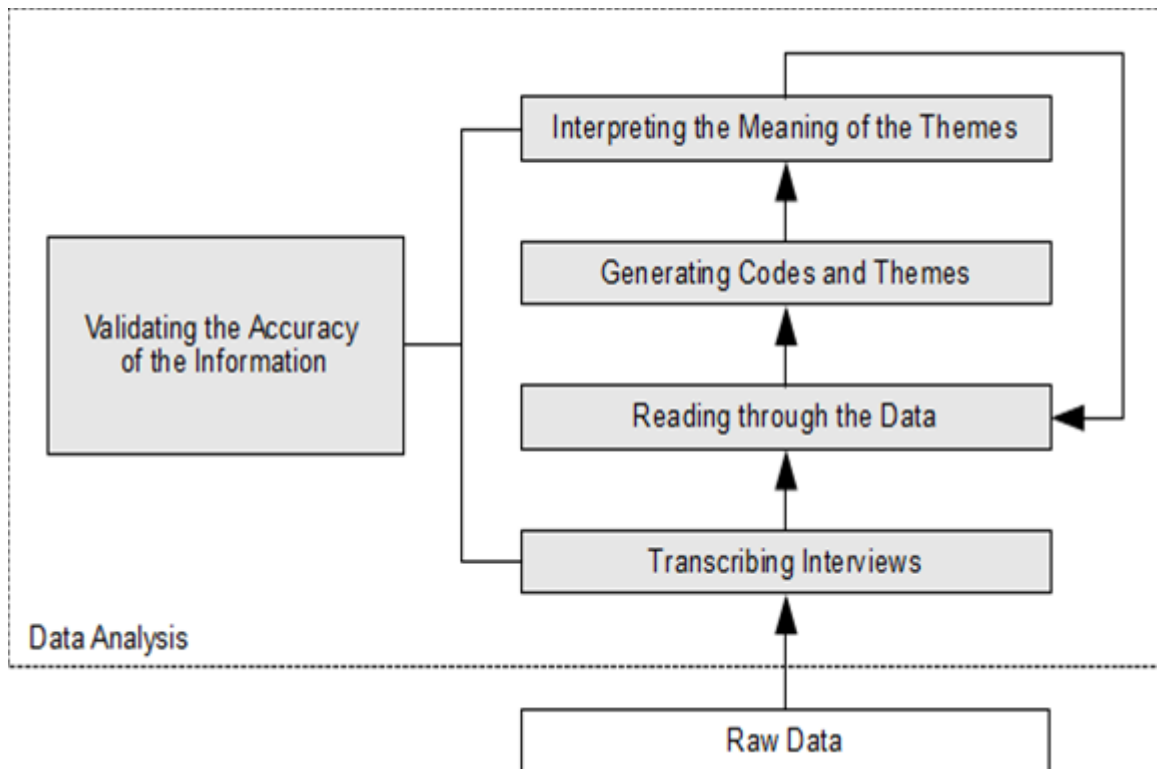


Figure 3.2: Steps of Qualitative Data Analysis (adapted from Creswell, 2009)

This was an inductive process, as I started with multiple sources of raw data. The individual steps of this procedure are listed and described below:

1. *Transcribing Interviews*: Transcription is the process whereby recordings of research conversations (interviews, focus groups) are turned into textual material (transcripts), which then become the primary data for subsequent analysis. The individual interviews as well as the focus group discussion in this research were transcribed verbatim by me, from an audio to a text format. Care was taken to remove names and potential identifying information to protect the anonymity of the research participants.

2. *Reading through the Data*: In order to get a general sense of the overall meaning of the data, all transcribed interviews were read through.

3. *Generating Codes and Themes*: Coding can be defined as “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (Rossman & Rallis in Creswell 2009, p.186). These segments are then labelled with terms that describe the data on different levels of abstraction (Table 3.3 is an excerpt of the transcript from a semi-structured individual interview to illustrate coding).

Table 3.3: Excerpt of transcript

Coding	Portion of transcript	Comments
<p>Challenges:</p> <p>Disability</p> <p>Emotional immaturity</p> <p>Socialisation</p> <p>Work pace</p> <p>Accountability to parents</p> <p>Expectations of the school</p> <p>Curriculum</p>	<p>What are the challenges that you experience in the mainstream classroom?</p> <p>His disability is the main thing, but I think his emotional maturity in a mainstream classroom, because on paper it's impairment, but like I said, there's definitely lots of other stuff going on. He doesn't have any friends and he doesn't mind, he's very happy in his own little world, he doesn't even realise, I don't think, that he doesn't have any friends. So that's definitely a challenge, the socialisation. Work pace: that school particularly, they work very fast and you have to maintain a standard and if you don't they almost imply, and I don't know if it happens or not as I don't know enough about the school, that you will be asked to leave. So whether or not that happens, we're not sure, but you have to maintain a certain standard.</p> <p>And also therefore, you have to impress your parents too. And that's also huge on him- his dad. I think it's good for him, I'm not saying it's bad or good, but if he was in a school with smaller classes that maybe allowed him to work at his own pace, he would feel a lot more successful, I think</p> <p>Please comment on the curriculum and it's suitability for a learner with disabilities</p> <p>I don't think it is suited. They follow CAPS and I don't think it is. I make it suited for him and without my adjustment I don't think. I think it's very teacher specific too, they are expected to differentiate slightly, but they're not expected to make a whole/</p>	<p>barriers located within the learner</p> <p>broader than a diagnosis</p> <p>difficulty with socialisation</p> <p>acceptance is conditional- depends on ability to conform and meet standards and requirements of the school... and the curriculum</p> <p>impress parents (employers)- pressure on learning facilitator to ensure the learner achieves to school's standards</p> <p>questions the suitability of the mainstream school?</p> <p>accommodations of curriculum content made by learning facilitator</p> <p>learner needs the individualised intervention, not necessarily provided by the teacher; barriers to learning and development in the</p>

	another lesson for a child who is functioning on a sort of Grade 3 level, but I don't think it is, no.	education system?
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Two levels of abstraction have been defined in the course of my data analysis, namely codes and themes (see 4.3.1).

4. *Interpreting the meaning of the themes:* After having structured and presented the interview data, I interpreted the meanings of the coded data against the backdrop of my own history and experiences and compared these findings with information gleaned from the literature and theories (Creswell, 2009). (see Chapter Four)

As each new finding and possible explanation emerged, I checked it against other sources of data until a point of saturation was reached, thus completing the analysis.

3.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Morse, Barratt, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers (2002) aptly states that without rigor, research is worthless, becomes fiction, and loses its utility. Guba and Lincoln (1981) stated that while all research must have truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality in order to be considered worthwhile, the nature of knowledge within the quantitative paradigm is different from the knowledge in qualitative paradigm. They noted that within the quantitative paradigm, the criteria to reach the goal of rigor are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. On the other hand, they proposed that the criteria in the qualitative paradigm to ensure trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- *Transferability* is the degree to which the findings of this inquiry can apply or transfer beyond the project;
- *Dependability* is an assessment of the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation; and
- *Confirmability* is a measure of how well the inquiry's findings are supported by the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)

3.6.1 Credibility

The main focus in qualitative research is on ensuring appropriate representation of the study's events and on understanding the key issues under investigation. According to Merriam (1998), the validity of qualitative research is often referred to as trustworthiness or

credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that credibility is an evaluation of whether or not the research findings represent a credible conceptual interpretation of the data drawn from the research participants' original data. Credibility thus refers to the congruence between the way the research participants actually perceive social constructs and the way the researcher portrays their viewpoints (Mertens, 2005). In this study, credibility was enhanced by using triangulation and peer review, as discussed in 3.7.

3.6.2 Transferability

Transferability, according to Newton Suter (2012) refers to evidence supporting the generalization of findings to other contexts and can be achieved by evidence of theoretical transference; that is, the same ideas applied more widely are shown to be applicable in other fields. Merriam (2009) adds that in order to make the data transferable, there must be sufficient descriptive data provided by the researcher. This means that the researcher needs to provide detailed descriptions of context and phenomena so as to enable others to assess the findings' transferability (Carcary, 2009).

My research study incorporated a small sample of learning facilitators, chosen by means of convenience and snowball sampling. In order to retain the consistency of the original data, I have included the direct phrases and sentences of the research participants with the purpose of generating authentic, detailed data. As explicitly stated in 1.5, the intention of this study is not to offer transferable and generalised conclusions, but to provide some insight into the perspectives of learning facilitators.

3.6.3 Dependability

Merriam (2009) offers the explanation that as "human behaviour is dynamic, the question then is not whether findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (p. 221). From an interpretivist's perspective, dependability is concerned with demonstrating that the researcher has not invented or misrepresented data or been careless in data recording or analysis (Mason, 2002). The dependability of this study was enhanced by using qualitative strategies such as audit trails, thick descriptions and triangulation (discussed in more detail in 3.7).

3.6.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the research participants and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Newton Suter, 2012). In order to achieve this, Carcary (2009) suggests that strategies for

establishing research confirmability need to be built into the qualitative research process. Data verification strategies are crucial to ensure confirmability of research data. The strategies used to verify the data collected in this study are discussed below.

3.7 DATA VERIFICATION STRATEGIES

Qualitative researchers agree on strategies that promote trustworthiness in a study. The strategies used in this study are described well by Merriam (2009) and include:

- Triangulation, or multiple sources of data as evidence
- Peer review, or consultation with experts
- Audit trail, or the detailed record of data collection and rationale for important decisions
- Thick description or providing rich detail of the context of the study.

3.7.1 Triangulation

Triangulation is used to ensure that the understanding of phenomena is as complete as possible or to confirm interpretation through the comparison of different data sources. The aim is to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question, and maximize confidence in the findings of qualitative studies.

Methods of triangulation can include two or more methods, sample groups or investigators. Babbie and Mouton (2010) add that researchers can triangulate according to paradigms, methodologies, methods, researchers, etc. in order to partially overcome the deficiencies that flow from one investigation or one method. The benefits of triangulation include “increasing confidence in research data, creating innovative ways of understanding a phenomenon, revealing unique findings, challenging or integrating theories, and providing a clearer understanding of the problem” (Thurmond, 2001, p. 254).

These benefits largely result from the diversity and quantity of data that can be used for analysis. I employed three different means of gathering data from the research participants in the study, thus triangulating data collection methods to provide thick descriptions of the perspectives of learning facilitators. The data gathered from each individual interview was compared with data elicited from other interviews, in order to search for similarities and emerging themes, as well as for contrasting responses.

3.7.2 Peer examination or review

Peer examination involves the researcher discussing the research process and findings with impartial colleagues who have experience with qualitative methods. According to Creswell, “peer review or debriefing provides an external check of the research process” (1998, p. 202). The purpose of peer review is to improve and advance research, and to facilitate the observance of ethics. It is advised that researchers subject their own work to such a process.

As I am completing this research study as part a master’s degree, regular supervision sessions form part of the research process. Insights were discussed and problems presented with both my thesis supervisor and peers engaging in master’s studies.

3.7.3 Audit trail

In developing an audit trail, the researcher provides an account of all research decisions and activities throughout the study and makes explicit all decisions taken about theoretical, methodological and analytic choices (Koch, 2006). Merriam (2009), describes the audit trail as a “running record of your interactions with the data as you engage in analysis and interpretation” (p. 223). As the goal of much qualitative research is a deeper understanding of a phenomena or process, documentation of the rigor leading to a meaningful conclusion and understanding is especially important. Chapters Three and Four of this research report act as an audit trail for this research study, as a detailed account of the research process and data analysis are included.

Dependability and confirmability are primarily achieved through the use of audit trails. Critical to developing an audit trail is the consistent organisation of data during the process of collection. Koch (2006) suggests that a study’s trustworthiness may be established if a reader is able to audit the events, influences and actions of the researcher. Akkerman, Admiral, Brekelmans and Oost (2006) suggest that audit trails represent a means of assuring quality in qualitative studies. According to Rice and Ezzy (2000), “maintaining and reporting an audit trail of methodological and analytic decisions allows others to assess the significance of the research” (p. 36).

3.7.4 Thick description

The researcher makes meaning of the data by seeing the bigger picture and converting the raw empirical information (thin description of the phenomena) into a thick description

(Henning et al., 2004). Different researchers provide different perspectives on the essence of thick descriptions.

According to Henning et al. (2004), thick descriptions provide rich detail of the context of the study and gives an account of the phenomena (a) that is coherent and that (b) gives more than facts and empirical content, but that also (c) interprets the information in the light of other empirical information in the same study, as well as from the basis of a theoretical framework that locates the study.

Denzin, 1989 adds that the description of people's lived experiences, events, or situations is often described as "thick", meaning attention is given to rich detail, meaningful social and historical contexts and experiences, and the significance of emotional content in an attempt to open up the word of whoever or whatever is being studied.

Babbie and Mouton (2010) succinctly refer to a "thick description" as being a lengthy description that captures the essence of actions as they occur (p. 272).

Conducting in-depth, semi-structured individual and focus group interviews allowed for thick descriptions to emerge from the data. The descriptions and perspectives of the learning facilitators in this study are presented in Chapter Four.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ensuring credibility and dependability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Being registered as a health practitioner under the Health Professions Act, 1974 (Act No. 56 of 1974), confers certain rights and privileges (Health Professions Council of South Africa, 2008). Corresponding to these rights and privileges are the ethical duties a health practitioner owes to individuals and society.

The moral integrity of the researcher is a critically important aspect of ensuring that the research process and a researcher's findings are trustworthy and valid (Biber, 2005). It is imperative that the researcher adheres to strict ethical guidelines, which serve as a standard for the honesty and trustworthiness of the data collected and the accompanying data analysis. Researchers should respect and protect the rights and interests of participants at every stage and level of research.

3.8.1 Informed written consent

Drew, Hardman and Hosp (2008) state that consent involves the procedure by which an individual may choose whether or not to participate in a study. This right to exercise choice must be present throughout the entire research process (Drew et al., 2008). The researcher must ensure that participants have a complete understanding of the purpose and methods to be used in the study, the risks involved, and the demands placed upon them as a participant. Participants must also understand that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Legally, informed consent involves three elements: capacity, information, and voluntariness (Drew et al., 2008). Capacity is a person's ability to acquire and retain knowledge. Information must be presented so it can be completely and fully understood by each participant. Voluntariness ensures each participant's ability to exercise the power of free choice without the intervention of force, fraud, deceit, duress, or other forms of coercion.

Participation in this research project is for academic purposes and participation is voluntary. In this study I obtained informed written consent from the research participants (learning facilitators) in the format given in Appendix C after informing participants about:

- the limits of confidentiality;
- the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures;
- their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun;
- the foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing;
- reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects;
- any prospective research benefits;
- incentives for participation; and
- whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights (Drew et al., 2008)

The management of confidentiality and anonymity is closely linked with the management of consent.

3.8.2 Confidentiality and right to privacy

Participants need to be informed about how confidentiality and anonymity will be managed and what the implications of taking part will be in relation to these issues before consenting to participate (Wiles & Crow, 2005). The primary method researchers use to preserve anonymity and confidentiality is the use of pseudonyms for participants and, in some cases, to change other biographical details so that individuals cannot be recognised (Corden & Sainsbury, 2004). Maintaining the anonymity or confidentiality of research data offers advantages to both the researcher and research participant. These include the ability:

- to improve the quality and honesty of responses.
- to encourage participation in the study and improve representativeness of the sample.
- to protect the participants' privacy.
- to protect participants from discrimination or other adverse consequences of disclosure.

In striving to preserve anonymity and confidentiality, all identifying information was removed from the interview transcriptions before presenting the data in this research study. Each research participant (P) was given a number to facilitate anonymity (see Table 4.1) when reflecting on the data.

3.8.3 Non-maleficence

The principle of non-maleficence reflects the duty to avoid, prevent or minimise harm to others (Wassenaar, 2006, in Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter). In practice it means that research participants must not be subjected to any unnecessary risks of harm (Bamako, 2008); their participation in research must be essential to achieving scientifically and socially important aims that cannot be achieved without the participation of human participants. I, as the researcher, did not foresee that participation or non-participation would disadvantage the research participants in this study in any way.

3.8.4 Beneficence

Beneficence requires a commitment to minimizing the risks associated with research (Wassenaar, 2006, in Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter), including psychological and social risks, and maximizing the benefits that accrue to research participants. An important

principle is thus to ensure that the intention of research is to generate new knowledge that will produce benefits for participants themselves, for other individuals, for society as a whole, or for the advancement of knowledge (Bamako, 2008). It is presumed that individuals may experience personal benefits as a result of taking part in research, such as feeling listened to, having an opportunity to express their views or feeling that their views will influence policy or practice. Wiles (2005), however, cautions that it cannot be assumed that such benefits will occur, as it is not the purpose of research to bring about such benefits.

It was expected that this current research would benefit the learning facilitators who participated in the study by giving them the opportunity to reflect on their work with the learners they facilitated in mainstream classrooms. This study furthermore aimed to allow the research participants the opportunity to voice their experiences and perspectives, which may result in insights beneficial to policy makers, the community, school, educators, parents as well as the participants.

3.8.5 Independent ethical review

Ethics are an important part of the research process, particularly when the research involves human beings. Ethical clearance for research with human participants is needed to protect the rights and welfare of research participants and minimise the risk of discomfort, harm or danger from research procedures. It furthermore protects the rights of the researcher to carry out a legitimate investigation as well as the reputation of the University for research conducted by it.

One of the first guidelines offered to psychologists when conducting research is that of institutional approval. The Departmental Ethics Screening Committee (DESC) at Stellenbosch University subjected all protocols to independent ethical review prior to the commencement of data collection. The institution's Research Ethics Committee (REC) reviewed the purpose of the research and the proposed methodology as it related to potential risk or benefits to the participants involved. Once the application was audited, a clearance certificate was issued prior to the commencement of data collection (see Appendix A for letter).

The main ethical considerations which were made in this study included obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Committee, gaining informed consent from the research participants, and ensuring the confidentiality of these participants' privacy.

3.9 CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter was to discuss the research paradigm, research design and methodological underpinnings of the study. A qualitative interpretivist study was deemed to be the most suitable way of addressing the research question. Data collection, analysis and verification strategies were discussed and consideration was given to the importance of ethical standards in research. The findings of the research will be presented and discussed in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This study investigated learning facilitators' perspectives on supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Within this study, learning facilitators were considered to be individuals who are privately employed by parents to provide one-on-one learning facilitation to learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

The purpose of this study was to determine the emerging themes relevant to how learning facilitators perceived their roles, responsibilities, and expectations and the challenges they encountered while working in mainstream classrooms alongside learners with disabilities. My research was guided by the following question (formulated in Chapter One):

What are learning facilitators' perspectives of supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream education classrooms?

The following sub-sections further guided the research:

- What roles do learning facilitators assume in the mainstream classroom?
- What is the nature of the relationships they engage in within the mainstream classroom?
- What meanings do they attribute to what they do and how they do it?
- What are the expectations and challenges they encounter?

This chapter firstly provides background information about the research participants. A description of the process used in analysing the data that was collected follows, based on the methodological chapter, Chapter Three. Finally the findings are presented.

4.2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Each research participant (P) was given a number to facilitate anonymity (see Table 4.1). All the facilitators in this study were female. The length of their experience as a learning facilitator ranged from one year to six years. Five of the participants (the focus group participants) worked in the same school with different learners (3.5.2.3). The other five learning facilitators were from different schools.

The learning facilitators provided learning facilitation for learners with a wide range of disabilities. Two of the learning facilitators worked for a portion of the school day, providing learning facilitation for only the core learning subjects, while the remaining eight were employed to provide learning facilitation throughout the school day. Some learning facilitators provide learning facilitation for an individual child, while others provide facilitation for more than one learner at different periods during the day and week.

Table 4.1: Background information of research participants

Participant	Age Category	Relevant Qualification/s	Years of experience	Number of learners facilitated	Nature of the disabilities
P-1	40-50	Qualified teacher	3 years	2	Asperger's Syndrome
P-2	20-30	Qualified teacher	1 year	1	Emotional Difficulties
P-3	50-60	Qualified teacher, Training Course at XXXX, a Facilitator and Tutor Network	6 years	4	Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyscalculia
P-4	50-60	Training Course at XXXX, a Facilitator and Tutor Network	4 and a half years	2	Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Asperger's Syndrome, Learning Disorder
P-5	20-30	Qualified Teacher, experience in Special Education	1 and a half years	1	Hearing Impairment

P-6	Over 60	Course: neuro-developmental differences	3 years	1	Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
P-7	20-30	Montessori training	1 year	1	Rubinstein-Taybi Syndrome
P-8	40-50	XXXX, a Facilitator and Tutor Network	2 years	5	Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Foetal Alcohol Syndrome
P-9	20-30	None	2 years	1	Down's Syndrome
P-10	20-30	3 rd year Psychology student	1 year	1	Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

4.3 INTERVIEWS

After establishing email or telephone contact to make meeting arrangements, the researcher met the participants at a mutually convenient venue. The nature and purpose of the study was described by referencing the information letter (Appendix C). Each learning facilitator gave informed written consent.

Five individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group interview were conducted. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by me (as discussed in 3.5.2). I agree with Riessman (1993), that while the process of transcription was time-consuming, and occasionally frustrating, it was an excellent way to start familiarising myself with the data. Verbatim transcription of the interview data facilitated ideas which emerged during analysis.

4.3.1 Themes and Categories

In interpreting the interview data, my aim was to make “sense” out of the perspectives and insights of the learning facilitators. I felt that it was important to retain the consistency of the original data, and therefore report direct phrases and sentences, not only because they were more illuminative, but also because the direct conversations were immensely rich in data and detail.

The process of analysing the data started after my first interview with a learning facilitator. As mentioned in Chapter Three (3.5.3), each interview was transcribed verbatim by me, which allowed me to become familiar with the data. While transcribing and reading through the data, I tried to establish meaning by organising the data into chunks of information and categorising it based on the perspectives held by the learning facilitators. Themes or patterns emerged from the learning facilitators' responses. The themes and categories cited in Table 4.2 are constructed from the data gathered in the semi-structured interviews and focus group interview.

Table 4.2: Themes and Categories

Themes	Rules for Inclusion in Themes	Categories
Investment in the social-emotional well-being of the learner	This theme incorporates the perspectives of learning facilitators on facilitating relationships and providing care and support for the learner.	-Addressing the affective domain - Addressing the social domain
Responsiveness to learners' academic needs	This is a focus on learning facilitators' insights into curriculum, assessment and instructional support.	-Characteristics and needs of learner -Diversity of academic support needs
Communication and collaborative partnership	This theme examines collaborative strategies in the school environment including networks between role players e.g., parents, institution level support team.	-Parents -Teaching and learning environment
Support involves self-reflection	The perceptions of learning facilitators with respect to their motivation, training and responsibilities are recognised in this theme.	-Skills -Challenges: Mainstream school Personal challenges Rewards

Before the findings of the study are discussed, it is necessary to clarify the position of the learning facilitator in mainstream classrooms in South Africa.

Most disabilities and learning difficulties involve quite specific and sometimes complex developmental and learning needs, which may require considerable individual attention, extra help and support (Donald et al., 2010). South African parents express concern about

the ability of the mainstream education system to cope with the needs of the learner with disabilities, as effective support systems must still be developed in many mainstream schools. In their efforts to advocate for inclusive placement for their children, some parents with financial resources make the decision to privately employ individual learning facilitators (the title used in the South African context), to provide personalised support for learners with disabilities (see 1.1). A study conducted in South Africa asserts that many autistic learners have learning facilitators that provide support (Roberts, 2007).

Learning facilitators support learners in a variety of ways, yet their support roles are unacknowledged in official documents. There is currently no governing body monitoring or overseeing learning facilitators and their functioning and effectiveness. Subsequently, there are at present no specific requirements for a learning facilitator. This implies that learning facilitators are defining their role while they are providing facilitation.

Brummer (1996) and Lazarus (in Lomofsky & Lazarus, 2001) highlight that there is a level of uncertainty as to the exact role of the learning facilitator. By engaging in research with learning facilitators, I aim to get an insider (emic) perspective and first-hand account of the phenomena of learning facilitation.

4.4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

Providing support which meets the individual needs of a specific learner with disabilities is an important role for learning facilitators. It is an emotional investment, shown to facilitate the establishment of an effective working relationship and ultimately, engagement in the curriculum. Addressing the support needs of learner from a bioecological perspective implies not only focusing on the learner and the learning support needs of the learner, but also facilitating interaction within the classroom environment and facilitating relationships among peers in order to develop sensitivity to the needs of the learner with disabilities.

This model recognises the significant influential factors and relationships in the environment and considers how these can impact on a child's development. It also acknowledges that a person's disposition and individual characteristics can shape outcomes.

4.4.1 Investment in the social-emotional well-being of the learner

Reciprocal interactions, based on an emotional investment in the wellbeing of the learner with disabilities, were a strong theme in the data. The learner, according to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), is not a passive recipient of

experiences in these settings, but someone who helps to construct the settings. The learner both influences and is influenced by the mainstream classroom and school context.

4.4.1.1 Addressing the affective domain

Relationships are a critical component of a learner's social/emotional development. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory identifies interpersonal relations (1979) as a key element in the context of human development. Learning facilitators perceive that a significant part of their role involves being responsive to the personal welfare of the learner by providing care and support in the learning environment. For the learning facilitators in this study, support entails establishing one-on-one rapport, relating to the learner, and being on the learner's level in order to understand their feelings. In exploring the relational aspects of their role, Participant 1 explores the composition of the role of a learning facilitator, "You can't be in an authoritative position, you're not like a teacher and you're not like a mother and you're not like a friend, you keep your boundaries, but you are much more accessible for them" (P-1).

Perceptions vary among the research participants, as participants see themselves fulfilling different roles at different times: fulfilling a maternal role, being a friend, being somebody in the classroom who understands and provides reassurance, being able to relate at their level and building confidence.

It is evident that learning facilitators are responsive to the personal welfare of the individual learner and strive to develop empathetic relationships with them. The relationship develops as they spend a significant amount of time in close proximity and experience situations together. Research participants often refer to the learner they are facilitating as "my child":

"My role is to make *my children* understand that the things they struggle with are okay, and that all of us struggle." (P-8)

"*My child* has different emotions every day, happy one day and completely silent the next and you have to know how to work with it. You have to understand that he's not angry with you. He may be frustrated that he can't do something that others can and you have to reassure him that it's okay, not everybody can do everything." (P-10)

"I keep *my child* out of trouble and I noticed a lot of the time when he did get into trouble, it would be when I wasn't with him." (P-4)

Learning facilitators develop an intimate understanding of the learner's personality traits and behavioural patterns as they spend a significant amount of time relating in a one-on-one

relationship. The unique personal characteristics of the learner affect interactions and the development of relationships with both the learning facilitators and peers. The learner's temperament may foster or hinder engagement with others. Learning facilitators contend that they become intuitively aware of the behavioural and emotional challenges which the learner is experiencing on a daily basis and are responsive to the learner's needs. Participant 3 expresses, "I know him really, really well and I can walk into the classroom and instantly know where he's at." Participant 7 voices familiarity with the learner's needs: "I am the person who understands him in class."

Learning facilitators acknowledge that this depth of intuitive awareness is not always easy, as learners with disabilities and learning difficulties do not always display predictable behaviours (Bourke, 2008).

"It is quite hard sometimes to read the learner's emotions." (P-1)

"He's a difficult child to understand emotionally." (P-5)

"It's not plain-sailing all the time; we take a couple of steps back before we go forwards." (P-2)

"He threw a curve ball and did something I never ever thought he would do, which made me question my skills." (P-3)

When responding to the learner's emotional needs, learning facilitators empathise with the learner's feelings of frustration and often assume personal responsibility and accountability for the learner. Participant 1 perceives that "there is a lot of emotional stuff" when fulfilling the role of learning facilitator as they are invested in the learner's personal welfare:

"You spend a lot of time locking into their emotions." (P-1)

"I know my child's struggling so I'm going to be the voice for the child." (P-7, P-8)

"Making sure his needs are met when he doesn't have the words to be able to say he doesn't understand." (P-2)

"You get involved in their lives." (P-5)

"It's very emotional because we struggle to detach, because how can you not get attached? We can't, we're human, we feel what they feel, we feel their progress and their rewards." (P-8)

Some learners with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to emotions that interfere with learning and learning facilitators recognise that at times, environmental factors may precipitate negative behaviours:

“Sometimes the learner needs containment in the classroom, as she lacks self-regulation skills.” (P-1)

“He runs, he leaves the classroom, leaves the premises, leaves the school, takes off. That was how he learned to deal with what was happening - he’d leave the situation.” (P-1)

“He’s inclined to have meltdowns, complete breakdowns, tears streaming, on the floor, complete meltdowns.” (P-5)

Participant 1 ruminates that the feeling that “I’m not like the others” is exacerbated for learners with disabilities in a mainstream setting as they never quite fit in. She contends that “if learners with disabilities were given a bit more freedom to be who they were, they’d probably be more successful” (P-1). Instead, as schools are faced with the diverse needs of learners and have inadequate support systems, they try “to fit square pegs into round holes” (P-3). This is illustrated in Figure 4.1.



Figure 4.1: Square pegs and round holes

It is clear from the above statements that learning facilitators develop an intimate understanding of the learner’s behaviour patterns. They recognise that busy teachers may not understand or have the resources to deal with the learner’s behaviour:

“It was becoming difficult for teachers because they couldn’t read the behaviour- they didn’t have time to find out why.” (P-1)

“He was so difficult that she couldn’t possibly spend any more time on him.” (P-3)

“He couldn’t sit still for long and he had to be micro-managed” (P-4)

“He doesn’t know how to tell you that this is overwhelming so he starts to bang to calm himself down” (P-7)

The role of the learning facilitator encompasses being empathetic and supplying comfort and reassurance to the learner with disabilities. The social and emotional security of a learner with disabilities are important aspects of learning and wellbeing in the mainstream school setting, and the learning facilitator serves as a buffer for the learner with disabilities, providing protection against potential risks and difficult situations. This protection plays a significant role in supporting the inclusion of the learner in the mainstream school setting.

Data collected during this research suggests that learners with disabilities, unlike their non-disabled peers, often display more developmentally instigative or personal attribute characteristics that inhibit, or prevent engagement in the immediate environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

The role of the learning facilitator is similar to that of a paraprofessional in international contexts in the sense that both the learning facilitator and paraprofessional perform a variety of roles in the classroom, including keeping the learner focused on tasks, increasing understanding and reducing behavioural problems (Chamberlain & Kasari, 2003).

4.4.1.2 Addressing the social domain

Research studies suggest that children with disabilities often demonstrate lower levels of social interaction, including social initiation, social response and the use of appropriate social skills (Terpstra & Tamura 2009). As a result, they may lag behind their peers in social relations. Within the context of the school, there is a need for them to become a part of and a valued member of their classroom community. An important component of mainstream education is co-operative group work.

Learning facilitators express their empathy for learners with disabilities, as:

“They’re never chosen to be in a group, and they’re never chosen for partner-work. The nature of education is group-work and partner-work. And they’re not chosen. I actually have to play a pro-active role. If I’m there, I suggest to the teacher that they make sure she’s in a group.” (P-1)

“Children would never invite him to sit with them.” (P-3)

“There are 25 in a class and they sit in two’s in most of the classes. So I’m his two, I’m his partner.” (P-5)

Slavin (1990) argued that the co-operative learning context, through which learners work in small groups and receive rewards or recognition based on whole-group performance, can lead to increases in learner achievement, self-esteem and social acceptance among learners of different abilities. Donohue and Bornman (2014) assert that the inclusion of a diverse body of children in the mainstream education system – including those who are diverse in terms of disability, race, gender, religion, language and socioeconomic status – allows children who are different to become acquainted with one another and helps them to discover common ground.

Booth and Ainscow (2011) assert that the idea that diversity can be a resource for learning permeates the indicators involving collaboration between and amongst children and adults. Participant 9 confirms this and asserts that “Inclusion helps the child with the disability with social skills, they learn quicker with their peers”. Eccles (1999) extends Slavin’s (1990) point by noting that when learners are supported to develop the social skills necessary for group work, co-operative groups can provide an array of opportunities for learners of diverse abilities to participate in the learning process. This can lead to an increase in the amount of social or peer learning support, and increased contact among learners of different abilities, leading to the potential fostering of new friendships, thus reducing social isolation.

Learning facilitators perceive that an important aspect of their role encompasses advocating for the learner’s sense of belonging and inclusion and encouraging learner agency. This is important, as learners with disabilities are not adept at relating and communicating with others. This notion is illustrated by different learning facilitators:

“She doesn’t really engage with others.” (P-1)

“She doesn’t relate. I’ve got to play a pro-active role.” (P-1)

“My job includes teaching social skills, teaching coping skills, organisational skills and behavioural skills.” (P-3)

“I’ll often encourage the learner I’m facilitating to explain something to the others in the group just to help him build his confidence.” (P-2)

“Nobody would sit with him; he was literally a little island.” (P-3)

“He doesn’t have any friends, so that’s definitely a challenge, the socialisation.” (P-5)

“At break I would go out even though I wasn’t required to.” (P4, P-2, P-5)

“I find every now-and-again a child will come and talk to her, because I will start off the conversation and then they will talk to each other.” (P-1)

Relationships with other children, both in the playground and in the classroom, are regarded as an important aspect of being in mainstream education. Learning facilitators recognise that it is important not to compensate by developing an insular relationship with the learner, thereby exacerbating their social isolation; rather, their role encompasses teaching social skills and being attuned to social dynamics in the classroom and in the playground. Participant 3 recognises that “there is a different way of being in class with each different learner.” An advantage of providing one-on-one learning facilitation is that the proximity of the relationship facilitates managing emotional, behavioural and social needs as they arise.

The relationship that is forged between a learning facilitator and an individual learner is based on insight into the uniqueness of the learner; these effective proximal processes therefore have the potential to enhance the growth and development of the learner.

In summary, emotional investment forms the basis of a nurturing relationship between the learning facilitator and learner with disabilities. The learning facilitator plays a role in ensuring that the learner is included and receives affirmation from peers in the classroom. The one-on-one relationship is responsive to the learner’s socio-emotional needs. An important factor in these interactions is that both the learner and the facilitator are active partners in continuous, dynamic and reciprocal interactions.

4.4.2 Support of learning facilitator involves responsiveness to the learner’s academic needs

As mentioned in 4.3.1, learners with disabilities present with diverse learning needs. In order to determine the individual needs of the learner and enhance learning potential, it is primarily important for the learning facilitator to establish a successful working relationship with the learner. In order to achieve this, the learning facilitator must firstly develop personal rapport with the learner; this rapport facilitates the learning process, and ultimately facilitates engagement with the curriculum. This process is illustrated in 4.2.

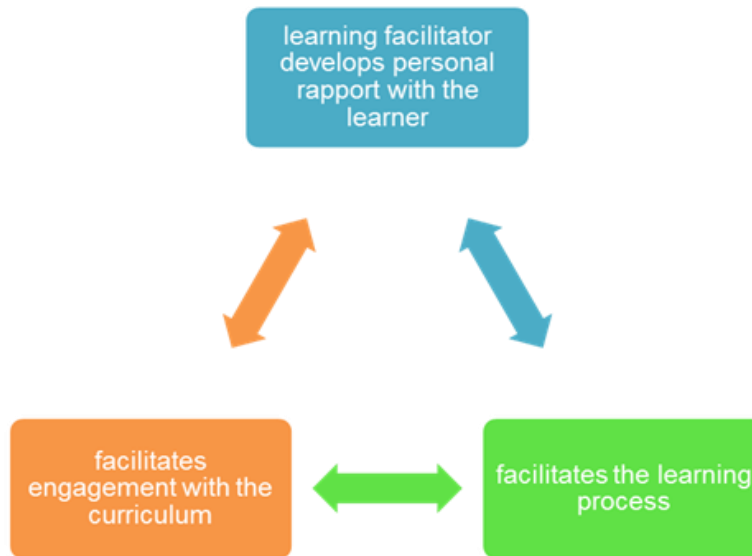


Figure 4.2: Responsiveness to the learner's needs

Bouwer (2011) asserts that effective one-on-one support is important to cater for the unique characteristics and learning needs of learners with disabilities to enable them to grow at their own pace towards their maximum level of independence in their learning.

4.4.2.1 Characteristics and needs of the learner

White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001) acknowledges that some learners may require more intensive and specialised forms of support to be able to develop to their full potential. Learning facilitators suggest that a large part of their support role is to encourage and “help learners to get through a mainstream curriculum” (P-5). They adapt the structures within the classroom, keep the learner on track, make sure the learner is working, focused and keeping up with the class.

“My role is checking that he understands, making sure that he’s on track with his work and just directing him, directing his focus back onto his work, confidence-giving.” (P-2)

“I had to encourage and motivate her. She needed facilitating to actually engage in the task.” (P-1)

“I see my role as a bridge between the classroom and him, no, rather, between the work and him.” (P-5)

“I had to push him all the time, get a move on, finish up, because otherwise he would just be left behind.” (P-4)

“I have to keep him on track, make sure he’s focused, make sure he keeps up with the class.” (P-4)

Differentiation is considered an important way of facilitating access to the curriculum for learners with disabilities. Learning facilitators often take it upon themselves to find accommodations that make allowance for individual difference in learning tasks. They see the importance of using strategies, making use of adaptations that personalize teaching and learning, and catering for difference in learning styles in order for the learner to reach a level of achievement in accordance with their unique abilities. Participant 2 considers that it is important:

“to try and hone in on his strengths so that you can build his confidence because with him a lot of it is his confidence that’s lacking, so to be able to pick out those strengths is really important.” She continues that it is important “to work with individual skills and strengths to be able to combat the weaknesses.”

“My role is to make sure that he is succeeding on his standards in that specific classroom.” (P-5)

Learning facilitators report that it is often difficult for them to accurately conceptualise the difficulties experienced by a learner with disabilities, as there are a range of problems associated with a given disability. As a result, no single description or profile can represent all individuals with disabilities. Participants 2 and 5 concur and offer their experiences by way of illustration:

“He’s been assessed on all levels and no one’s really quite sure what’s happening with him. He’s got a wide range of problems.” (P-2)

“My work with him has made me think that there are lots of other things going on.” (P-5)

Participant 9 considers that it is therefore important for learning facilitators to display a “willingness to do some research on what is needed for your specific child” to understand and gain insight into the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social characteristics that are generally associated with the diagnosed disability. This assertion is shared by Participants 6 and 10.

I agree with Uys (2011) who argues that while it is important to recognise a specific disability a learner might have, it is more important to understand the effect a disability has on the

ability to learn and adapt. Learning facilitators recognise, however, that learners with disabilities are often defined by their disability and endeavour to focus their attention and energy on the child, not the label. They stress that, in contrast: “We don’t work on diagnosis, we work beyond a diagnosis; we take our kids further than what the diagnosis has said.” (P-8)

Learning facilitators state that often labels and limitations have already been imposed on learners with disabilities by the time they get to school. Booth and Ainscow (2011) assert that the division of children according to their attainment is generally bolstered by the ascription of ability labels from a very young age. This constrains thinking about future achievements and affects self-expectations.

“They were told that he would never be in a school, and that he would never be able to read, and never be able to write.” (P-5)

“The expectation was that the child was only going to live till he was 5 years old.” (P-8)

Learning facilitators spend a significant amount of time engaged in one-on-one interaction with the learner. They endeavour to use strategies that encourage independence and positive self-esteem. Participant 2 draws attention to the fact they aim to provide support with the least intrusion; they therefore consider “how much to intrude, and how much to hang back” in their supportive interactions with the learner.

In order to achieve the goal of maintaining an inclusive and supportive learning environment, an important aspect of the role of the learning facilitator is to ensure that the learner is not set apart from the rest of the learners in the mainstream classroom. They are conscious of the perceptions of the other learners and try to ensure that the learner is not stigmatized for having learning differences:

“I try really hard so they don’t feel they’re different to the other kids.” (P-4)

“I don’t want the rest of the class to see him as having issues that he needs a special person to be there with him to help him learn- that’s one of my roles, to make that he’s not seen as being any different to them.” (P-2)

In striving to displace the ‘stigma’ from the learner who needs the constant learning support of the facilitator, Research Participant 7 explains that they often make a conscious effort to help others in the vicinity of the learner so as not to single out the learner with disabilities. Participant 7 contends that helping others “will help him to understand that it’s not just him

that needs the help. Then he won't feel like he's in a bubble ... he knows that not everybody can do everything". (P-7)

They report that a function of their role is to keep the learner mainstreamed, and they show determination to make it work for the learner.

"It's a constant battle to keep him in a mainstream school, but I have been able to do what I have to do, which was to keep him mainstreamed". (P-3)

They speak of the learner's resilience to overcome challenges,

"He's got to consciously keep at it - it must be tiring." (P-3)

"It's exhausting for the child, but look where we've got." (P-5)

and recognise that it is important to provide consistent routines and clear and understandable rules.

"He doesn't like change. He likes the same thing to be done every day; he likes routine, likes boundaries, likes feeling safe." (P-3)

"He really struggled with change and transitions, but I was determined to make it work." (P-4)

"He's gotten into a routine; he definitely works with a routine. I think a lot of his day he gets through on routine, by not thinking about why he needs to do something." (P-2)

They consider it part of their role to motivate, inspire and support the learner when they are experiencing difficulties with learning tasks. Multiple means of engagement are used to tap into the learner's interests, in order to offer appropriate challenges and/or increase motivation:

"I've got to engage with where she is at certain times to enable the whole work process to move forward." (P-1)

"Without having that little run-around in the quad, the rest of the day would have been a total waste, he wouldn't have absorbed anything." (P-4)

"There are times we have to take the child out of the class because there's too much information and its brain overload, so they have to step out of the environment in order to catch their breath and then carry on again." (P-8)

“I have to encourage and motivate her... I have to race her with work.” (P-1)

Learning facilitators reflect on the intensity of the one-on-one relationship with the learner and are wary that a relationship of over-reliance on their learning support may develop:

“He depends on me to give him that impetus to work.” (P-2)

“Our relationship’s based on dependence from his side, which is inevitable.” (P-5)

“It’s really intense for the two hours I’m with her. I have to help her continuously.” (P-4)

“He knows he’s dependent on me.” (P-5)

They, however, see it as their role to constantly encourage and promote the independence of the learner. This is important as research in international contexts documented that the utilization teacher assistants and paraprofessionals has been associated with inadvertent, detrimental effects (for example, dependence, isolation, stigma, interference with peer interactions, and interference with teacher involvement):

The aim is to “make him be as independent as possible.” (P-5),

“My role is to help him become more independent in his work.” (P-2)

“The expectations of me are to help him become more confident with his work and because he’s an older child, he’s in Grade 5, and going to Grade 6 next year, we are trying to let me not come in or not be there as much because he has to learn to be on his own a little bit. I will be there, but less, so he can learn to be a bit more independent.” (P-10)

“I have to make sure that I’m not helping her too much, I had to try and hold myself back from actually doing it for her because the temptation is to just help.” (P-1)

“You want to try and help as much as you can, but I also need to sometimes step back to see that he understands it on his own.” (P-2)

As supporting the learner in a one-on-one relationship on a regular basis over time may lead to over-reliance on the facilitator, the learning facilitator actively encourages the learner to be as self-reliant as possible.

4.4.2.2 Diversity of academic support needs

Learners with disabilities have diverse learning needs which may require intensive and individualised attention in order for the learner to develop their unique potential. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2010) assert that if inclusive education is to work, extra help and support may be required.

Learning facilitators work in a one-on-one relationship with learners with disabilities which, according to them, enable them to develop an intuitive sense of the learner's unique abilities and strengths. They strive to develop positive relationships with the learner. They expressed the opinion that support roles and strategies are different with each individual learner, as no two learners with disabilities are alike.

According to Bronfenbrenner, two children may have equal resource characteristics (as discussed in 2.6.1.2), but their developmental trajectories will be quite different if one is motivated to succeed and persists in tasks and the other is not motivated and does not persist. The learning facilitator therefore cannot work on the same basis with any two learners with disabilities as support for the learner is wholly dependent on the needs and abilities of the learner. Participants 1, 2 and 8 express it thus:

"I worked with two different learners, they both had the same diagnosis, but my role was very different." (P-1)

"Two children, with the same diagnosis, but completely different needs. You have to be adaptable as a facilitator. You can't go with a preconceived set of relating otherwise it just wouldn't work with a child." (P-1)

This statement illustrates the importance of responding to the individual needs of the learner with disabilities.

"You can't work on the same basis with any two children with disabilities. You have to be creative and realise you're working with their emotions. No two learners or days are alike." (P-8)

"The focus is working with him, working with his abilities and his particular strengths." (P-2)

Stofile and Green (2007) argue that the lack of a supportive learning environment at mainstream schools is seen as a contributing factor in preventing the inclusion of learners

with disabilities into local mainstream schools, exacerbated by a complex new South African National Curriculum which teachers and learners find difficult to engage with.

A perspective held by Participant 1 is that the mainstream education system and curriculum is not always suited to the diverse learning needs of learners with disabilities as school has become “very much assessment-based with the new CAPS syllabus.” She continues and asserts that “for a child who perhaps doesn’t function as quickly, or a child who’s overwhelmed, a child without facilitating would really struggle with the new CAPS syllabus.”

Participant 5 claims: “I make it suited for him, and without my adjustment I don’t think it would work.”

Differentiated teaching is a key strategy for responding to diversity, and is premised on the notion that needs of different learners cannot be met in only one way (Schoeman, 2012). Teachers in the mainstream are required to modify their teaching strategies to accommodate the diverse needs of learners. Learning facilitators state, however, that they are often left to make their own decisions and use their initiative to decide on the best way to support the learner’s individual needs.

“Adapting - that was a hard thing for me in the beginning because I didn’t know if it was my responsibility to adapt the work or if it’s the teacher’s responsibility. It’s a thing that I still battle with sometimes, but I’ve taken it on my own to adapt the worksheet to the needs of the specific child.” (P-9)

Inclusive education policy stresses the need for teachers to individualise learning and teaching strategies to accommodate the diverse needs of learners in mainstream classrooms. Participant 5 empathises with teachers: “The fact that they’re expected to differentiate increases their workload.” She adds that when using worksheets, for example, teachers have “to find them or create them” and relates that she “completely understands teachers’ frustration with regards to it.”

Policy articulates that although professional teachers are primarily responsible for providing services, peer tutors, volunteers, and others (learning facilitators) may participate in supporting learners (Guidelines for Full-service/ Inclusive Schools, 2010). Learning facilitators reflect that they sometimes assume responsibility for improvising and adapting class work and learning material in an attempt to meet the unique individual needs of the learner. They achieve this by using different approaches and methodologies in the teaching and learning tasks.

“I had to make my own decisions, adapt the exams, reduce the homework; I was responsible for her learning.” (P-1)

“What’s expected of us is to adjust what’s given to us to fit the child’s needs and requirements.” (P-9)

“We introduced an iPad and it’s helping a lot, but we have to make sure that we are matching what he does on the iPad with what the other children are doing in class.” (P-7)

“Visual aids are a big thing. I often have to draw pictures or I’ll use counters, but I find pictures work better, presenting things that they can see and interpret.” (P-9)

“I sign with my student because the sounds he hears is different to when the teacher says it.” (P-8)

“I scribe for him.” (P-4, P-5)

The issue of curriculum differentiation is fundamental to the implementation of inclusion (Dalton et al., 2012). Differentiation is responsive to the diverse needs of all learners, and it is important to take cognisance of the fact that learners with identified disabilities have more intensive needs associated with those disabilities. However, Participant 5 expresses the concern that while she makes adjustments and assumes some responsibility for differentiating and personalising class work, she is cautious in her approach. It raises questions: “How much of it is his own work and how much of it is my work?”

This caution approach is related to the actuality that learning facilitators do not see themselves as teachers, rather, they regard the teacher as the learner’s “first port of call” and “foster” and encourage the relationship with the teacher” (P-3). They recognise the importance of teacher engagement to the success of inclusive education for learners with disabilities, and take care not to inadvertently compromise that engagement or create role confusion:

“He relies a lot on her. I don’t want to interfere with that relationship at all; I don’t want to usurp myself into that at all.” (P-2)

“He has to see the teacher as the first port-of-call.” (P-3)

“I was there to help him with his organisation skills and behaviour, but that was still his teacher, I take my direction from the teacher.” (P-4)

“You have to respect the relationship that the students have with the teacher, I’m secondary to the teacher.” (P-2)

This perspective mirrors the findings of a study conducted by Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari (2003) which contends that the presence of a paraprofessional does not appear to affect the quality of the teacher-learner relationship. Participant 1’s perception is that “Children cope very well with having a facilitator they really connect to and a teacher who they can still connect to.” By cooperating, teachers and learning facilitators strengthen the proximal processes in the learning environment.

An overview of the second theme, which involves being responsive to the individual learner’s academic needs, reveals the interrelatedness of the academic and affective dimensions of support. Learning facilitators strive to create an inclusive, enabling, supportive learning environment in order to facilitate learning opportunities. Inclusive education policy states that all schools are required to offer the same curriculum to learners while simultaneously ensuring variations in the mode of delivery and assessment processes to accommodate all learners. Learning facilitators consider the unique needs of learners when providing academic support.

4.4.3 Communication and collaborative partnership

Learning support in principle assumes collaboration of all role players (including family and community members), adaptation of the curriculum, peer support and where required, specialist intervention as clearly reflected in the National Strategy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS, DoE 2008).

Participant 4 asserts that effective responsibility for the learner relies on teamwork. All the research participants reported that the schools where they were currently engaged in learning facilitation had learning support teams consisting of learning support teachers; some included social workers and psychologists. The learning facilitators saw a need for cooperative working relationships with all involved in the education and care of learners with disabilities.

Research findings emanating from this study yields similar findings to research conducted by Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron and Fialka (2005): Some parents request individual learning facilitation because of their concerns or fears about how the learner will be accepted, treated, supported, and instructed in mainstream education classes. In other situations, as indicated by the research participants in this study, parents are told that the

assignment of an individual learning facilitator is required for admission into the mainstream school setting.

A study conducted by Giangreco and Doyle (2007) confirmed that the employment and assigning of a classroom assistants by South African parents is often seen as a way to get the school to accept the learner. Figure 4.3 is an illustration of some reasons why learning facilitation is initiated:

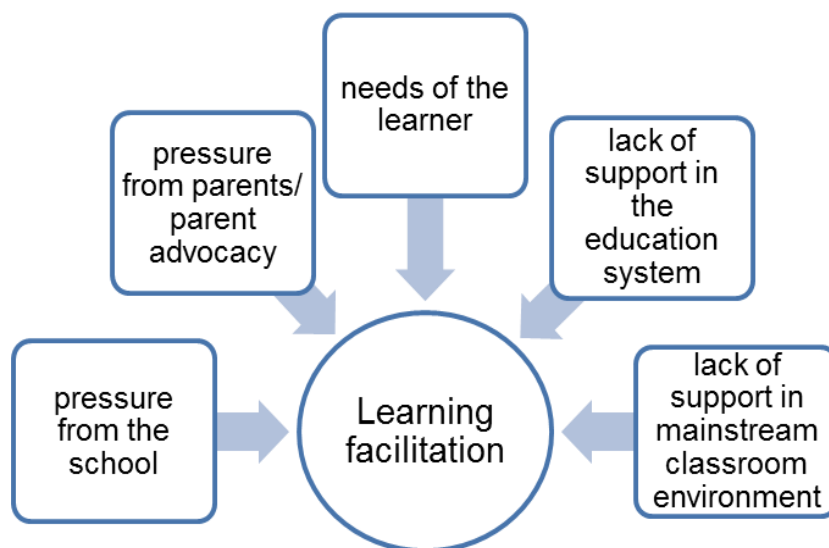


Figure 4.3: Rationale for learning facilitation

Participant 1 asserts that:

“They had two different approaches in the two different schools. The one was toleration, whereas in the other one, the school requested it. In the first school the mom asked and pushed for facilitating, and in the other school, teachers insisted on facilitation in order for the child to stay. So the attitude of the first school is that they have called on facilitators and the second is that the facilitator has been imposed on them.” (P-1)

Participant 2’s perception is that: “The mother” initiated facilitation. “The mother just wants to be able to support him” (P-2).

Involving parents implies valuing them as collaborators in the facilitation of their children’s social and emotional wellbeing as well as their learning (Engelbrecht et al., 2005; Hodge &

Runswick Cole, 2008). Collaboration is an important strategy of support in Inclusive Education and represents a proximal process (Swart & Pettipher, 2011).

4.4.3.1 Parents

According to Bouwer (2011), enlisting collaboration for learning support also depends on identifying and understanding those assets in the learner's environment that may be accessible. She contends that assets are all the external resources that could be utilized to address learner's needs. In this vein, people and relationships can serve as assets, as well as knowledge and expertise, resources, services and financial means.

Researchers Dalton et al. (2012) contend that South African parents recognise that learners with differing needs have the right to equal opportunities to learn, and equal access to the mainstream curriculum. By employing the learning facilitator, parents are providing an essential support service in education to ensure that the individual learner's needs are met.

Consultation and involvement of parents assumes shared responsibility for achieving outcomes and involves communication and collaboration with parents. Learning facilitators often fulfil the role of being a liaison between the home and school.

The learning facilitators in this study reflect a willingness to be responsive to the parents need for regular communication, thus fulfilling an important role in home-school collaboration: Participants 2 and 5 consult with the parents and the support team on a regular basis. Collaboration with the support networks in schools is important in the education of learners with disabilities. Participant 2 expressed that she "thought it was really great that there were so many people invested in his (the learner's) progress."

Participants 3, 8 and 9 have regular contact with the learner's mother and the learning support team. They spend time observing and recording the learner's behaviour every day and use a message book as the main form of communication with the parents (making anecdotal records of the learner's day, behaviour, learning needs, etc.).

Participant 4 reports that she meets with the parents on a weekly basis. Participant 7 speaks to the mother every day. Participant 1 reports having regular email contact with the parents of the learner.

"I see his parent every day. This was his first year, the mother didn't feel secure initially, but she knows I know him quite well now, and I pick up on things." (P-7)

“The mother didn’t feel secure initially, and needed to trust people so she wanted one-on-one in the morning and afternoon and I use a message book.” (P-6)

“I make notes in the class if there’s been an emotional episode.” (P-1)

“I give them constant feedback on what’s happening, whether it be a good day or a bad day - we communicate so parents can understand the child’s behaviour.” (P-9)

It is apparent that these learning facilitators make use of effective communication strategies which serve as a basis for successful collaboration. They see the significance of establishing relationships based on trust, care and support for the learner (P-10). They relate that they keep in close contact with parents in an attempt to understand underlying causes of the learner’s behaviour. Learning facilitators note that behavioural changes in the learner are immediately apparent as the relationship between the learning facilitator and learner is based on rapport and proximity. They note that teachers are not able to develop this bond as readily as they have to cope with the demands of all the learners.

“I think my biggest responsibility is to let the parent know when there is growth and improvement. We have message books, correspondence books where we write messages to the parents every day, just something that happened in the class or if something went wrong and then they give feedback because you may not see them every day.” (P-9)

“She relies on me to give feedback about how he’s doing - it’s a very important link.” (P-4)

Learning facilitators use ethical practices and regard trust, confidentiality and being discreet as critical and important aspects of respecting the privacy of parents, teachers and the learner:

“You have a relationship with the family. The relationship is delicate.” (P-1)

“I don’t want bad vibes between me and the teacher, I can’t afford to not have the teacher on my side and have negative vibes (P-4).

A very important thing with facilitating is to not have judgement, you can’t suspend all of it, but a facilitator’s got to be neutral.” (P-1)

The mother trusts me and knows I want the best for the kids (P-6)

“The parents entrust me to make decisions.” (P-1)

Learning facilitators unanimously agree that they are primarily accountable to the parents who employ them. Inclusive education policy in South Africa recognises and enhances the role of parents in the inclusion of their children in all aspects of schooling (DoE, 2009). By cooperating, learning facilitators and parents bring together two important parts of the learner's world and strengthen proximal processes.

Research shows that involving parents implies valuing them as collaborators in the facilitation of their children's social and emotional well-being as well as their learning (Engelbrecht et al., 2005). The commitment that is required from South African parents comprises involvement and extra sacrifices. Learning facilitation is extremely expensive for South African parents and this is acknowledged by the research participants:

"It's extremely expensive for parents in South Africa. Very! Both families have money, and I still feel guilty asking for money because I think - all that extra just for their child to receive a 'normal' education." (P-1)

"The financial burden on parents is enormous, however parents say they are prepared to give up bread and milk, and sacrifice holidays to be able to afford the facilitation" (P-3).

Learning facilitators state that they are aware of the advocacy role that many parents assume in order to get the learner with disabilities accepted into a mainstream school. Reflections on parents advocacy include statements such as: "The mom had to fight for every right" (P-1), "She fought tooth and nail" (P-3), because "Some schools are not open to it." (P-1) "They were only prepared to take him if he had a facilitator with him." (P-4)

Some learning facilitators report that they feel pressured to produce "the goods" in order to satisfy both the school and the parents" (P-1). Similarly, Participant 5 perceives that it adds extra pressure because you must impress the parents.

"I need to perform and to show that I'm performing, he needs to perform" (P-5).

Participant 9 reflects: "My biggest responsibility is to let the parent know that there is growth and improvement so they can feel that their money's well-spent."

Learning facilitators feel that an added pressure is that the school sometimes sees facilitation as temporary or interim solution:

"Their solution was to try for a year with a facilitator and then take them off to a special needs school." (P-1)

These situations result in learning facilitators assuming personal responsibility for keeping the learner mainstreamed. “I have been able to do what I have to do, which was to keep him mainstreamed.” (P-3)

Learning facilitators acknowledge their accountability to the parents, and also feel a huge sense of responsibility and accountability to the teachers.

4.4.3.2 Teaching and Learning Environment

Learning facilitators also recognise the significance of fostering collaborative relationships with teachers (P-1). This is furthermore reflected in Participant 4’s statement:

“I can’t afford to not have the teacher on my side and have negative vibes. I respect the teacher, I take my direction from the teacher, I’m not there to undermine the teacher” (P-4)

“We work closely “every day, all day.” (P-5)

“I have been working with them, they are very accommodating and nice, they include me in everything, they tell me what’s happening the previous day or what’s going to happen” (P-10)

“After each day we chat about how we both found the session and how he reacted to it.” (P-2)

Participant 1 shares a dissimilar experience which suggests that teachers may not always be as welcoming and amenable to having a learning facilitator in the classroom:

“My role in both schools has been clearly just for the child. The teachers are very loathe to.... they won’t ask you for help in any other place, they don’t include you in the class activity; so they don’t call on you, it’s very much that you’re there for the child.”

Learning facilitators agree unanimously that their role is to relieve the teacher from some of the pressure of trying to provide constant support for the learner and are wary of “creating extra work or tension in the classroom.

“Often they will explain lessons to me beforehand, but that does create extra work. I’m very aware of being in a class. It’s quite a self-conscious thing, because you don’t want to create extra work for them, you don’t want to be a pain or a bug.” (P-5)

“I felt as though I was encroaching on the teacher’s space, on her discipline and her way of doing things. I felt that I had disrupted it, even though I crept around and I was as quiet as I could be.” (P-6)

“The reason I was there was twofold: it was to help him and help him become more independent in his work, but it was also then to alleviate the teacher of having to go and help him at every stage. I definitely got that duality aspect.” (P-2)

“I’m constantly in awe of teachers, of how much they’re trying to cope with, and I think to have me in the class has been a kind of ‘letting-go relief’ that the times when he was not in a good space, I can take him out the class and deal with the situation and come back in again; whereas they would have to have done that.” (P-3)

“I think it’s challenging for them to have a facilitator in the class, but I think it is much more challenging with thirty two children to have a child who needs that extra facilitating just to engage in a task.” (P-1)

The perspective held by the learning facilitators in this study is that their role incorporates supporting individual learners in performing activities initiated by the teachers. They express that the expectations of teachers differ

“Different teachers expect different things.” (P-10)

“Each teacher’s handled it very differently.” (P-3, P-4)

“Teachers’ attitudes are different. The dynamics are quite wide that you have to watch for and you have to watch for what the teacher’s needs are too.” (P-1)

“It varies a lot from class to class and from teacher to teacher. The expectations are very individual, depending on the teacher. If teachers are accommodating, it just makes your life so much easier (P-S) ... And easier for the child.” (P- V)

Learning facilitation is a relatively new phenomenon in the South African education context. Teachers have mixed reactions to using learning facilitators; some recognize them as valuable contributors, while others are concerned about having another adult in the classroom (Giancreco & Doyle, 2007). Learning facilitators work in close proximity with teachers and they contend that it is important not to overlook how teachers feel:

“You have to watch for what the teacher’s needs are too.” (P-3)

“The teachers also found it useful that there was a little back-up for them.” (P-4)

“Teachers have just been so grateful because I got her through the hurdle, where it would have blocked teaching, would’ve disrupted the whole class.” (P-1)

“It came out that the teacher was apprehensive about having someone else in her classroom. I tried to allay those fears just by saying I’m there for him, just to help him process what you’ve said... I’m secondary to you completely. I want to check that he’s understood the instructions that he’s been given and how he’s processing it, so it’s nothing about how you are.”

“Teachers have this preconceived idea that you’re analysing them and you’re there to tell them their job, which is so untrue.” (P-4)

“A lot of teachers are very against having a facilitator in their class and ultimately the children suffer.” (P-4)

“Generally they are accepting, but I think in the times they aren’t accepting they don’t mean to be like that, but it’s just that they may never have experienced having a facilitator, and they themselves don’t know what to do with having a facilitator in the classroom.” (P-9)

Research participants are cognisant of the fact that it is challenging to have a learning facilitator in the classroom, and therefore aim to be discreet in delivering support to the individual learner. They recognise that the dynamic changes when there is another adult in the classroom (P-2, P-9) and are conscious of encroaching on the teacher’s space (P-6) or stepping on the teacher’s toes (P-2).

“At first I felt very nervous, very scared to go onto someone else’s territory.” (P-7, P-10)

“I aim to hide.” (P-3)

“I’m invisible (P1, P-E), I tread carefully.” (P-1)

“I purposefully didn’t want to go in there and stick out as this little boy’s facilitator, I wanted to blend in and just become a part of the classroom atmosphere.” (P-2)

“You’re a very neutral entity in the classroom; you can’t be buoyant, you can’t put your personality in the classroom” (P-1).

The teacher is perceived as being the instructional leader, and the person who establishes the climate of the classroom community (Giancreco & Doyle, 2007).

I initially thought I'd have to be there and be very hands-on, and be showing them different methods of how to do things- it's been an interesting process to see how much I need to dial back." (P-2)

Learning facilitators' perspective is that busy teachers could use them more effectively.

Participant 3 relates a reflection made by a teacher on the role between the learning facilitator and teacher: "She said it was really nice to have someone across the room, just to have an eye contact with another adult in class when you are having a bad time."

They reflect that as they facilitate, they have the opportunity to observe the classroom dynamics and can offer teachers much insight into other learners. Participant 1 expresses the opinion that "teachers can use a facilitator to also check in with other children", to "just keep an eye" (P-5), or offer reassurance. Learning facilitators contend that they are able to watch for things that promote or interfere with learning.

In summary, the learning facilitators in this study assume responsibility for the support needs of the learner. Most facilitators in the study report that they collaborate with both teachers and parents, thereby establishing a collaborative link between the home and school. However, their reflections highlight that their perspectives and insight into the support needs of the learner are not often sought by many of the schools. As they work in close proximity with the learner, it is asserted that their insight is relevant when considering approaches, methodologies and strategies which are best suited to the needs of the learner. Furthermore, their first-hand knowledge could inform collaborative teams such as the Institution Level Support Teams at schools about the support needs of learners with disabilities.

4.4.4 Support of learning facilitator involves self-reflection

4.4.4.1 Skills and Experience

A wide variation of experience, training and qualifications was found among learning facilitators in the study. There is currently no formally recognised qualification or formal training requirements to fulfil the role of learning facilitator in a mainstream classroom. This may be due to the fact that there is no legal framework governing the employment and utilisation of learning facilitators. Three of the research participants are qualified teachers; two of them report having prior experience of working with learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms in an international context (P-1, P-5).

According to the Participant 4, learning about support also comes from life experiences which include helping your own children with school work: “My life has been about children for the last few years, it made sense to follow on with something like this.” (P-4)

As learning facilitation is a relatively new phenomenon in South Africa, and as inclusive education is still in its infancy, the learning facilitators are forging their identity and learning about their role while on the job. They also learn about their role while in consultation and collaboration with other members of the learners support network:

“We are learning from each other, (from parents, teachers, learning support teachers and other learning facilitators) and it’s a learning curve for everyone. We’re learning from them, they’re learning from us, we’re engaging with everyone’s knowledge.” (P-7)

“I learn as I go along.” (P-4)

They express different reasons for their interest in learning facilitation and supporting learners with disabilities, “I wanted to see how learning support worked in the classroom” (P-5). Two of the learning facilitators have children of their own with disabilities. Participant 3 expresses her interest in doing learning facilitation thus:

“I took the course a long time ago because my son has special needs and the education system couldn’t support him. But I realised he could manage if he had understanding and support, I then realised that there was a gap and that I could help a whole lot of children.” (P-3)

Participant 1 shares similar motivation and insight: “I have a child with a disability, so I am aware.” Furthermore, she expresses: “I chose it because I really like children and I love the relationship side of teaching. And this way you actually do get the relationship side.” (P-1)

Three of the learning facilitators are currently involved in further studies on a part-time basis and consider that the working hours allow for sufficient time to pursue their studies.

Participant 4 contends that the needs of the learner with disabilities are always prioritised:

“I would try and help the other kids if I could, but I made it clear to the teacher that he was my first priority.” (P-4)

Learning facilitators perceive that “there are children who really need a facilitator and the parents can’t afford private schools and can’t afford a facilitator so the child struggles year

after year”. Both Participants 3 and 4 perceive the need for what they term a ‘general school facilitator.’ They propose that:

“Every school should make provision in their budget where you are (the learning facilitator) employed by the school and the parents don’t have to carry the financial burden. They suggest that the school facilitator could be a ‘float’ and work out a timetable, and identify which kids struggle in which grade, and move from child to child.” (P-4)

The hours of employment of learning facilitators vary and are determined in an individual agreement made between the learning facilitator and the parents. The decision is often based on the nature and severity of the disability and the level of support needed. Parents’ financial status also plays a significant determining role. The decision is sometimes made in consultation with the school. At times, the school may dictate the level of support provisioning. Two facilitators in the study mentioned that their time was divided between providing individual learning facilitation to more than one learner at the same school (P-8, P-9). Three other facilitators were providing one-on-one support only during the teaching of ‘core subjects’ (P-1, P-3, and P-4).

4.4.4.2 Challenges

The concept of learning support acknowledges the potential of learners to grow at their own pace towards their maximum level of independence in learning, using strategies and practising learning styles of their choice, in order to reach a level of achievement in accordance with their unique abilities (Bouwer, 2011). However, learning facilitators’ experiences reflect that this is often not easily achieved.

4.4.4.2.1 Mainstream school

The attitude of the mainstream school towards inclusion emerged quite strongly from the data. Participants commented on the difference the ethos of the school made in accommodating the diverse support needs of learners with disabilities and adds that “it makes a big difference, if a school is on board.” (P-1)

“The headmaster was fantastic, she thought of everything. She was just so aware that there were kids in the school that are different.” (P-4)

“The school is inclusive - it is something new and it’s great, to show our other kids and parents that learners with disabilities are no different from us.” (P-8)

“It’s not an inclusive school. The person in charge of the school is not inclusive. So, it’s all about what marks the school gets, how good the school looks.” (P-3)

“They’re not an inclusive school. I think they’re doing the parents a favour.” (P-5)

“It’s not an education plan, there are no education plans. It’s more... get a facilitator in, as long as we’re not hassled.” (P-1)

Learning facilitators feel a sense of frustration when the mainstream education system does not meet the needs of the learner. Bronfenbrenner states that at the exosystem level, teachers and learners are influenced by policy decisions that impinge upon learner achievement, particularly testing associated with the reform in education (Heubert, 2002), and increased pressure to improve test scores.

“Schools are so high-pressure and you’ve got all these assessments all the time, and the child’s just working, working, working, and there’s no time to be just themselves.” (P-1)

“The whole focus of school is to get through it and pass. The Department’s ethos is on marks, not on happiness, not on fulfilment, not on capabilities.” (P-3)

“School’s become challenging for all children, so for children with special needs, to have a child without facilitation you feel for them.” (P-1)

“The system isn’t there for them, they just want to label them and shut them out.” (P-3)

“It is a constant battle to keep him in the mainstream school.” (P-3)

They express their observations and reservations about the mainstream curriculum:

“The new CAPS syllabus is an incredible amount of work.” (P-1)

“They follow CAPS and I don’t think it is suited to the learner with disabilities.” (P-5)

“The curriculum is physically demanding. They need your attention all the time.” (P-2)

“It’s very challenging to try and keep them up to date at the same pace of the other kids.” (P-4)

4.4.4.2 Personal challenges

Learning facilitators assume significant responsibility for engaging the learner in learning tasks and being responsive to the learner's personal welfare. Their perspective is that it is an ongoing challenge:

"Every day is a challenge because you have to constantly come up with new plans. Today you may come up with a new plan and it really works, but tomorrow that plan's not good enough. You constantly have to readjust everything that you do because there's always a new challenge that comes up." (P-9)

"You have to be very creative to deal with his different and changing emotions" (P-10)

"No two days are alike..." (P-8)

"To not get overly involved..." (P-5)

"Definitely the behaviour..." (P-4)

"The socialisation..." (P-5)

"Facilitating is stressful because you can't switch off at all, you have to actually gauge the whole time, you have to be ready when the child hits a glitch, so you have to be on the alert all the time, and it is actually exhausting". (P-1)

4.4.4.3 Rewards

On considering the rewarding aspects of their role, learning facilitators' responses centre on the learner:

"The rewarding aspects are very small, but they are differences that only you can notice, that the teacher wouldn't be aware of. They don't actually know what the hurdles are for the child, so they don't know when a hurdle's been crossed... what it takes out of the child to do certain things. So victories may go unnoticed, hurdles of learner may go unnoticed, and nobody would even know what a big thing it was for her". (P-1)

"When he clicks with a concept..." (P-2)

"Well it's my just love of children, my wanting to help and to see the success that these children can achieve and the fact that they've been told that they can't and to

get them to believe they can, and they will be able to do much, much more. It's an everyday reward, it's a look, it's a hug, it's a thumbs-up from across the room, or a wink. It's just building relationships." (P-3)

"His success, I think, is the main reward. Seeing when he does well, how happy he is with himself, because he is very, very hard on himself". (P-5)

"That's my reward, to see that he got through and to see how little things eventually sink in." (P-4)

Learning facilitators speak passionately about their roles in relation to the learner with disabilities; it is evident that a significant part of their role is spent on care for the learner; it is evident that they develop empathy, rather than tolerance for diversity. A striking feature of the interviews with learning facilitators in mainstream schools was their enthusiasm for the work they do. Without exception, they stated that they felt they were making a meaningful contribution towards helping learners with disabilities.

In brief, the fourth theme provides insight into the self-reflections of the learning facilitators in this study. As there is currently no legislation informing the employment of learning facilitators, they have varying levels of experience and the scope of their practice is undetermined. While this raises concerns, the teacher remains primarily responsible for the education of the learner; the learning facilitator's support role is interdependent and is based on curriculum content initiated by the teacher. Learners follow the same curriculum and are exposed to the same learning opportunities within the mainstream classroom. Learning facilitators reflected on the challenges and rewards associated with their role, focusing largely on the relational aspects thereof.

4.5 DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

This research study was grounded within an interpretivist framework. This section of Chapter Four focuses on placing the research findings into the context of literature and the theoretical framework.

Before commencing on the discussion, it is first necessary to revisit the aim of the study within the context of its theoretical framework. The aim of this study is to interpret and describe the perspectives and experiences of learning facilitators in order to gaining a deep understanding of the meanings they attribute to supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The aim of gaining insight is to gain clarity into what their role encompasses as this insight could assist with creating a role definition. In conjunction, the

research seeks an understanding of the phenomenon of support in inclusive education for individual learners with disabilities in mainstream schools.

What is clearly evident from this research is that while learning facilitators work with individual learners they cannot lose sight of the whole system in which the learner functions (Swart & Pettipher, 2011). Addressing the support needs of learner from a bioecological perspective implies not only focusing on the learner and being responsive to the support needs of the learner, but also facilitating the classroom environment and facilitating relationships among peers in order to develop sensitivity to the needs of the learners with disabilities. This is evident as the research study shows that learning facilitators assume a proactive stance in social interactions.

A common thread emanating from the four identified themes is an emphasis on proximal interactions and collaboration, which facilitates a link with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework of human development. The proximal processes in this study refer to the close, face-to-face sustained, reciprocal interactions which occur regularly between the learning facilitator, learner with disabilities, teachers, peers and parents. In accordance with bioecological theory, effective learners are active participants in the bidirectional interactions which occur within the learning environment (Smith, 2011). Learning facilitators also actively encourage engagement with peers and teachers and see the need to support and encourage effective socialisation and relational skills.

Bronfenbrenner and Ceci suggest that by enhancing proximal processes and environments, it is possible to increase the extent of actualised genetic potential for developmental competence (1994, p. 568). By being attuned and responsive to the learner's needs in the microsystem of the classroom context and strengthening relationships within these environments, Bronfenbrenner (2001a) advocates that it is possible to increase the extent of development, and hence learning, into positive outcomes.

Learning facilitators fulfil an important function as they work in a one-on-one relationship with the learner and can attend to the learner's individual needs. They play an active role in engaging with the learner at their individual level of competence in an attempt to enhance learning potential. This is important as research shows that most learning difficulties and disabilities require considerable individual attention and learners with disabilities may thus require extensive support to cope with the demands of the mainstream curriculum (Donald et al., 2010).

The concept of learning support acknowledges the potential of learners to grow at their own pace towards their maximum level of independence in learning, using strategies and practicing learning styles of choice and each reaching a level of achievement in accordance with their unique abilities (Bouwer, 2011). Inclusive education policy acknowledges that learners with disabilities may need extra support, yet support provisioning is lacking in mainstream schools. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model is valuable for application to educational support provisioning, as it allows for an assessment of all the possible influences, interactions and interrelations between learners (intrapersonal) and the different role-players that may impact on the effective support. Landsberg et al. (2011) assert that the identification of resources and assets in the learner's environment that can provide a basis for learning opportunities and participation is pivotal for inclusive education in South Africa.

Collaboration is perceived as being an important strategy of support in inclusive education and represents a proximal process. In South Africa, the school-family community partnerships have been given official recognition through legislation and education policies such as the SASA (1996), and Education White Paper 6 (Department of Education, 2001). The establishment of mutually respectful collaborative relationships between learning facilitators, parents and teachers was valued by the learning facilitators in this study. Bronfenbrenner's theory acknowledges the multi-directionality of the relationships (proximal processes) between families and schools and the impact of this relationship on the learning and development of the child (Swart & Phasha, 2011).

The insights of learning facilitators in South Africa can thus provide useful insights into the essential structures of support needed for learners with disabilities, as they develop a reciprocal relationship with the learner over long periods of time.

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the perspectives of the learning facilitators were presented within the conceptual framework and relevant literature. In the following chapter, the implications of the findings and suggestions emanating from the findings are discussed. Lastly, the researcher will provide a concluding reflection on the research process.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a summary of the findings that are relevant to the aim of the study and research questions. A discussion of the limitations and recommendations of the study follows and the chapter ends with a conclusion.

The employment of learning facilitators who provide support to individual learners with disabilities in mainstream inclusive education is a growing phenomenon in South Africa. As there is no official recognition of their role, learning facilitators lack identity within the field of education. In addition, very little empirical evidence exists on the exact nature of their role. This study aimed to gain insight into learning facilitators' perspectives of the roles they assume in mainstream education.

The research was guided by the following question:

What are learning facilitators' perspectives of supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream education classrooms?

The following sub-sections further guided the research:

- What roles do learning facilitators assume in the mainstream classroom?
- What is the nature of the relationships they engage in within the mainstream classroom?
- What meanings do they attribute to what they do and how they do it?
- What are the expectations and challenges they encounter?

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory of human development provided the theoretical framework for the study. The four interacting dimensions of person-process-context-time and were relevant when considering the development of the learner and the support provided for the learner within the mainstream education context. The proximal processes and the dynamics that might influence the learner's development were underscored. A focus on the proximal processes involved examining the face-to-face sustained, reciprocal, interactions which occur regularly between the learning facilitator, learner with disabilities, teachers, peers and parents. The role of the learning facilitator is premised as being a resource for the learner.

5.2 PERSPECTIVES OF LEARNING FACILITATORS

In seeking to gain insight into the perspectives of learning facilitators, the nature of their relationship with the learner is highlighted. As discussed in Chapter Four, learning facilitators display a vested interest in the personal welfare of the individual learner. They assume high levels of responsibility for managing and being responsive to the learning, social and emotional needs of the individual learner.

A distinguishing feature within the findings was their commitment and intention to meet the unique learning needs of the learner with disabilities. These findings confirm the assertion made by Downing and Brookes (2008) that the role of the learning facilitator is to meet the unique needs of learners with disabilities in order to maximise learning and development opportunities in mainstream classrooms.

Learning facilitators' perspectives and reflections are deemed valid since they engage in one-on-one relationships with the learner and have first-hand knowledge and experience of the learners' unique learning and support needs. This information is important when schools and support teams consider the levels of a learner's support provisioning. Learners with disabilities often have specific learning needs which require more individualised support. Table 5.1 provides a summary of the perspectives of the learning facilitators emanating from the study.

Table 5.1: Summary of the perspectives of learning facilitators

Roles they assume	Nature of relationships	Meanings attributed	Expectations and challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • remove barriers to enable learning • provide care and support • foster anticipation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one-on-one relationship with the learner • supportive, collaborative, reciprocal relationships with parents and school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • request for facilitation may be reactive or proactive • provide support to compensate for lack in the education system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parents • learners • schools • lack of role definition and policy guidelines

Insight into the effect of the lack of clarity and role definition on the learning facilitator's daily experiences emerged from the data. Learning facilitators perceived that they were learning about their role while experiencing it, were not always sure of the role expectations, and suggested that their experiences were determined by the joint expectations of the parent, learner and school. This research argues that rather than these decisions being negotiated

by learning facilitators in consultation with parents and teachers, it is a matter that should be established and regulated at school and policy level to ensure role clarity and a measure of consistency of the expectations of learning facilitators.

5.2.1 The roles learning facilitators assume in relation to learners with disabilities

This research highlights that learning facilitators play a significant role in reducing, circumventing, breaking through and removing barriers to enable the learner to achieve maximum independence possible in learning. This enables the individual learner to function optimally in the mainstream classroom, in accordance with their own learning style, abilities and potential (Bouwer, 2011). In helping learners with disabilities to negotiate the learning and social environment of the mainstream education context, learning facilitators assume many roles which involve care and support for the learner. These include:

- one-on-one learning support
- behaviour management
- being somebody who understands and provides reassurance and motivation
- advocating for inclusion in social activities and building confidence
- being a bridge between home and school
- being a bridge between the learner and the curriculum
- adapting learning content to suit the learner's needs and
- being a voice for the learner.

The findings in this research suggest that effective practice involves support from learning facilitators that foster the participation of the learner in the social, emotional and academic processes of school. This corresponds with the definition of learning support provided by UNESCO (2001, presented in 2.4.2) as being the resources, strategies and practices that provide physical, social, emotional, and intellectual support intended to enable learners to have an equal opportunity for success at school by addressing barriers to and promoting engagement in learning and teaching.

5.2.2 Nature of the relationships that learning facilitators engage in

The research findings underscore the need for support and effective collaboration in the mainstream education context. Nel, Engelbrecht, Nel and Tlale (2013) assert that equal partnerships between all role players, within the school as well as outside, are needed in supporting learners who experience barriers to learning.

Effective support necessitates the establishment of reciprocal, collaborative relationships with all those who have a vested interest in the learner's development. In this respect, learning facilitators endeavour to form respectful relationships with parents, teachers and the learning support team. Establishing collaborative relationships is an important strategy of support in inclusive education, and represents a proximal process.

Collaborating with and including the perspectives of learning facilitators in inclusive education reform can provide relevant insights into the support needs of learners with disabilities, as learning facilitators are centrally involved with the learner's needs. Although there is no official recognition of their role in education, this research suggests that collaborative teamwork at schools should include the insights of the learning facilitator. Marginalisation of the perspectives of learning facilitators will result in essential knowledge and insight being overlooked when the needs of the learner are considered.

5.2.3 Meanings attributed to what learning facilitators do

Learners with disabilities present with diverse learning and support needs which are currently not being met in mainstream school contexts in South Africa. The financial commitment made when parents/caregivers employ a learning facilitator is an attempt to compensate for the lack of supportive structures for the learner with disabilities. This research posits that the commitment of the parents conveys to educators and policy makers their hope and quest for educational inclusion.

The research findings in this research are confirmed by research conducted by Giangreco, et al. (2005). Both studies suggest that a school's request for an individual learning facilitator/ paraprofessional as a condition of placement is often rooted in the concerns of classroom teachers who argue that the demands of the new curriculum and overcrowded classes prohibit them from spending the necessary one-on-one time that teaching a learner with disabilities requires. This request from mainstream schools is fair when considering the size of many classes and the pressures teachers face when trying to work through a curriculum that currently requires a large amount of assessment and administration. The support of learning facilitators for learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms is not a negative reflection on the adequacy of classroom teachers.

Giangreco, et al. (2005) stress that even highly competent and willing teachers may experience some anxiety when they are unclear of expectations in relation to a learner with a disability placed in their class. This highlights that clarifying the needs and expectations of

the learner, facilitator, teacher and parent must be addressed when placing a learner with disabilities in a mainstream class.

Swart and Pettipher (2011), caution that no teacher, parent, education support professional, learner or volunteer should have to handle the significant challenges of catering for the diverse needs of learners in mainstream classrooms on their own. The perspectives of this study confirm this assertion as well.

5.2.4. Expectations and challenges

Learning facilitators are responsive to the expectations of parents, learners and the school. They perceive that they are primarily accountable to them as role-players in the education of the learner and strive to develop collaborative relations with them. While the expectation is that learning facilitators are employed to work with an individual learner, their insight into classroom dynamics and learning is invaluable as inclusive education policies and practices are being implemented and these insights warrant discussion with teachers and school development teams.

The expectation of parents and teachers is that learning facilitators cater for the individual learner's needs as they arise. This individual support has associated benefits and challenges. Learning facilitators' perspectives of the benefits and challenges associated with providing one-on-one support for learners with disabilities is presented in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2: Benefits and challenges of learning facilitation

The benefits of learning facilitation identified in the research include:
The development of affective relationships which affects the engagement of learners in the learning processes
Catering for the individual's unique learning needs and styles
Individualised within-classroom support rather than withdrawing the learner from the classroom to provide extra support
Minimising social and/or academic frustration
Promoting the inclusion of learners with disabilities into the mainstream school community

It is important, however, not to overlook the challenging aspects of one-on-one support for individual learners:

The danger of the increase in the use of learning facilitators in mainstream settings in South Africa is that the employment of learning facilitators becomes seen as *the way* rather than one way to operationalize inclusive education for learners with disabilities.

The employment of a facilitator providing individual support relieves some of the pressure from the teacher and school which may result in shifting the responsibilities associated with including the learner with disabilities entirely onto learning facilitators, rather than enacting fundamental changes in mainstream education.

The escalating use of learning facilitators in mainstream classrooms raises concerns as it is not financially sustainable as a primary mechanism to support the numbers of learners with disabilities in mainstream education classes.

The increased use of learning facilitators may well also necessitate the formation of regulatory policies/organisations and regulated curriculum for their training. This is a time consuming process.

International literature reveals concerns with one-on-one paraprofessional support for learners with disabilities (Giangreco & Broer, 2005). It cites that the utilization of learning facilitators has been associated with inadvertent, detrimental effects (for example, dependence, isolation, stigma, interference with peer interactions, and interference with teacher involvement).

While the employment of learning facilitators can be viewed as a reactive stance to compensate for the lack of support in mainstream schools and the inability of teachers to cope with diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms, the learning facilitators in this study assumed a proactive stance, guarding against the inadvertent detrimental effects associated with one-on-one support mentioned above.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

While considering the recommendations, it became evident that many questions must be addressed at school, policy and research levels.

The overall goal of inclusive education is to ensure that school is a place where all children participate and are treated equally. As learning facilitators play a visible and crucial role in including learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms and advocating for inclusive

possibilities, their role in mainstream classroom deserves credit and recognition in the education context and should be formalised in policy guidelines.

Learning facilitators have varying degrees of training and support relative to the care and support of the learner. There is currently no formal qualification needed to assume the role. If consideration is given to formalise their role in policy, the training and orientation of learning facilitators must be considered to ensure a level of consistency of expectations and standards.

A recommendation emerging during the interviews with the Participants 3 and 4 was that mainstream schools employ general or school-based learning facilitators who work on a roster-basis, supporting learners at different periods during a school day. This may prove to be a more cost effective way of managing this resource within the ambit of the school context. Learning facilitators furthermore propose that this will alleviate some of the pressure on parents to fund the employment of a learning facilitator for individual support and pressure on the teachers to cope with the workload of adapting the curriculum meet the unique needs of the learner.

A lack of a clear definition of the role of the learning facilitator has created confusion and uncertainty of the learning facilitator's role in inclusive education. A clear delineation of the roles and responsibilities of the teacher and the learning facilitator is necessary for establishing a collaborative working relationship. Mainstream schools must ensure collaborative teamwork procedures which includes the insights of all those with a vested interest in the needs of the learner. Learning facilitators form part of a network of support for the learner and play a significant role in promoting inclusive education principles and values.

There is insufficient data regarding one-on-one support both in policy and in practice. Data is needed on how the support of learning facilitators benefits the learning and academic achievement of learners with disabilities in the mainstream classroom context. Future research studies could use the necessary role of learning facilitators as a basis from which to develop more support for learners with disabilities. Due to the nature and time constraints of this study, this was not examined.

5.4 LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

It is acknowledged that the findings from this study cannot be generalised as this study drew from a small sample of ten learning facilitators providing one-on-one learning facilitation in six different schools. As a result, the findings from this study cannot be generalised since it is only a small sample.

As the purpose of the study was not to generate generalised conclusions, the extent to which these findings can be generalised is therefore unknown as it depends on the context in which challenges are addressed and the available resources and assets. This is supported by Bronfenbrenner's theory which states that factors that influence an individual's development cannot be generalised but, instead, are multi-system in nature and unique to each setting (Lewthwaite, 2011).

A further limitation is that the study focused on learning facilitators supporting learners in Grade One to Seven mainstream classrooms. It is anticipated that the situation in high school, where there are multiple teachers and classrooms, might be very different. Similarly, learning facilitators also work in other educational contexts, including special schools where the educational context may vary significantly. Research in these areas would add another dimension to knowledge and understanding of how learning facilitators support learners.

In addition, I did not do an observational analysis in the mainstream context in the data and therefore did not confirm the opinions with observational data. Due to the limited scope of the study, I only heard the voice of learning facilitators. To enrich the data on the role of learning facilitators, teachers, parents and learners should also be included.

5.5 CONCLUSION

As inclusive education is implemented in South Africa, new ways of supporting learners with disabilities are emerging. It is highlighted in this study that the experiences of learning facilitators must be acknowledged, investigated and considered in the research data base that informs inclusive education initiatives. As learning facilitators are a resource employed by some parents to provide support for learners with disabilities, it is important to include their views, as their perspectives can provide the inclusive education research community with valid and valuable data which can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of what support for learners with disabilities really means in daily living experiences.

As inclusive education policy is still in its infancy in South Africa, it is equally important to explore all opportunities and possibilities for inclusion for learners with disabilities in inclusive education contexts. Consideration should be given to the important role that the learning facilitator can play in developing more inclusive school cultures and practices.

While it is recognised that the phenomena of learning facilitation is limited to those who have financial resources and presents a small window of opportunity for the effective inclusion of learners with disabilities, it is nonetheless a resource which provides us with insight into the support needs of learners with disabilities. Walton (2010) expresses that the suggestion of

wider applicability of all strategies is not helpful, given the diverse contexts in which inclusion has to be implemented in this country.

Although the South African Government is committed to intensifying its support to develop inclusive education, effective support structures are not in place in all mainstream schools. It is the researcher's contention that all available avenues of support provisioning and possibilities for inclusion must be explored to increase effective support within the South African context.

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APPENDIX A

ETHICAL CLEARANCE



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Approval Notice New Application

14-May-2014
BERGSTEDT, Jo-ann

Proposal #: DESC/Bergstedt/May2014/21

Title: Learning Support Facilitators' perspectives on supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

Dear Mrs Jo-ann BERGSTEDT,

Your **New Application** received on **08-May-2014**, was reviewed
Please note the following information about your approved research proposal:

Proposal Approval Period: **13-May-2014 -12-May-2015**

General comments:

The researcher is reminded to submit copies of official institutional permission letters to the DESC as soon as it is obtained.

Please take note of the general Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

Please remember to use your **proposal number (DESC/Bergstedt/May2014/21)** on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research proposal.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Also note that a progress report should be submitted to the Committee before the approval period has expired if a continuation is required. The Committee will then consider the continuation of the project for a further year (if necessary).

This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki and the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.

National Health Research Ethics Committee (NHREC) registration number REC-050411-032.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research.

If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the REC office at 0218089183.

Included Documents:

REC application form
Questionnaire
Research proposal
Permission_application letters
DESC application
DESC recommendation letter
Informed consent form

Sincerely,
Clarissa GRAHAM
REC Coordinator
Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)

Sincerely,
Clarissa GRAHAM
REC Coordinator
Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)

APPENDIX B
LETTER REQUESTING ASSISTANCE WITH IDENTIFYING
PROSPECTIVE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS



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XXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXX

17 May 2014

Dear XXXX

My name is Jo-Ann Bergstedt. I am studying towards a Master's Degree in Educational Psychology at Stellenbosch University. As a partial requirement of my degree, I need to complete a mini-thesis. The aim of my study is to investigate learning facilitators' perspectives on supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The rationale for this study is that the perspectives of learning facilitators in South Africa can provide useful insights into the essential structures of support needed for learners with disabilities in the mainstream classroom and school.

As your organisation provides training for learning facilitators and tutors, I am writing to request your assistance in identifying learning facilitators who would be willing to participate in a study of this nature. All information you provide will be treated in the strictest confidence, and you will remain anonymous. Participation by the identified participants is completely voluntary and they will have the right to withdraw from the study at any time by contacting me directly, and will not be penalized for it. There is no potential risk or hazard in participating in this study.

International literature confirms that the perspectives of learning facilitators can provide useful insights into the essential structures of support needed for learners with disabilities in the daily life of the mainstream classroom and school, and this research will explore this phenomenon of support within mainstream classrooms in South Africa.

I enclose information which could be forwarded to prospective research participants. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Jo-Ann Bergstedt, the principal investigator, or Professor Estelle Swart, the supervisor assigned to my study.

Yours Faithfully
Jo-Ann Bergstedt

APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER AND CONSENT FORM



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STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Learning facilitators' perspectives on supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jo-Ann Bergstedt, from the Department of Educational Psychology at Stellenbosch University. As a partial requirement of my degree, I need to complete a research project for my thesis. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you have experience as a Learning Facilitator supporting learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms.

1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to investigate learning facilitators' experiences of supporting learners with disabilities and learning difficulties to establish what they do and what their general experiences are when working with learners with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. The experience of supporting an individual learner might provide parents, education authorities and policy makers with deep insights into ways of advancing practice and policy throughout an educational institution. One-to-one support can be invaluable to a learner with disabilities in a mainstream classroom setting.

The voices of learning facilitators are included in this study because support is a crucial aspect of inclusive education. Research focusing on learning facilitators is needed because inclusive education reform requires a change of mindset in relation to notions of disability and of supporting learners in ways that value diversity and celebrate difference.

2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Your participation will be voluntary.
- You will be asked to sign this consent form.
- If you are interested in taking part as a participant, you will complete a short background information questionnaire. This will take approximately 10-15 minutes.
- You will meet individually with me for an initial interview of approximately 45 minutes.
- To complete the process, you will meet with the other participants as a small focus group and participate in a focus group interview of approximately 60 minutes.
- Interviews will be conducted at times and places convenient for you during May and June 2014. If necessary, I will follow up telephonically.

3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Your participation is completely voluntary. There are no personal or professional risks anticipated for you. However, you may be inconvenienced by the time schedules of the interviews, although all attempts at accommodating your schedule will be made. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time by contacting me directly, and you will not be penalized for it. In the possible occurrence that any participant or the researcher may fall ill or be unavailable to attend an interview or activity, the appointment will be re-scheduled at a time convenient to both parties.

4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

It is expected that this project will benefit you by giving you the opportunity to reflect on your work with the learner/s you facilitate. This study aims to allow you, the participants, the opportunity to voice your experiences that may result in insights to the benefit of policy makers, the community, school, educators, the parents as well as the participants.

5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

This study is a non-profitable study and therefore the participants will not receive any payment or remuneration.

6. CONFIDENTIALITY

Your personal information and your data will be kept in strict confidence throughout and after the study. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. All information you provide will be treated in the strictest confidence, and you will remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be used in place of real names. Any data that can identify you will not be given to any other researcher or agency. Only my supervisors and I will have access to these data. The results of the study may be submitted for publication to national or international journals or presented at educational conferences. You can ask for additional information or results from this study any time. I will provide you with the summary of results. You will be required to protect the integrity and confidentiality of what is said by others in the group interview. However, due to the nature of the focus group interview, confidentiality cannot be entirely guaranteed. All audio-recorded or transcribed data will be kept locked at the university for a period of five years, after which time all data will be destroyed. You also have the right to withdraw at any time during this study, with all data acquired being destroyed at this time.

7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Jo-Ann Bergstedt, the principal investigator, or Professor Estelle Swart, the Supervisor assigned to the study.

9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact Ms Maléne Fouché at the Division for Research Development at Stellenbosch University.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT

The information above was described to me, _____ by Jo-Ann Bergstedt in English and I am in command of this language. I was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to my satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to _____. She was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in English.

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX D

BACKGROUND INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:	
Age :	
<input type="checkbox"/> 20-30	<input type="checkbox"/> 30-40
<input type="checkbox"/> 40-50	<input type="checkbox"/> 50-60
<input type="checkbox"/> Over 60	
How long have you been working as a learning facilitator?	
How many learners with disabilities have you facilitated?	
Please state their age/s and grade/s	
What is the nature of the disability/ disabilities?	
What training have you received for this role?	
Relevant qualifications	
Contact details	
Email:	
Telephone:	

Researcher: Jo-Ann Bergstedt

Questionnaire completed by: Research Participant

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW

General focus question:

Tell me more about your roles and experiences as a learning facilitator

Follow up questions:

- Why have you chosen this career?
- Describe what you believe to be the skills and personal characteristics required for your job.
- Describe the nature of disability/disabilities related to the learners you are currently supporting/ have supported in the past
- What are the needs and difficulties of the learner?
- During a typical school day, what are your responsibilities? What roles do you assume in relation to the learner?
- What challenges do you experience in your role in relation to
 - The mainstream classroom setting / the learning environment
 - The curriculum requirements
 - Your support role
 - Inclusion/ Inclusive Education
 - Accountability (to the parents, learner with disabilities, school).
- Tell me about the rewarding aspects of your role.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

Discussion Points:

Tell me about the most important roles you assume as a learning support facilitator

- Why is learning facilitation needed for the learners with disabilities?
- What significance is attributed to your role in the mainstream school setting?
by the learner
the parents and
the school
- What are the expectations of
your employer (the learner's parents),
the learner/s whom you facilitate
the school
- What the challenges in relation to
facilitating the learner/s with disabilities
the mainstream classroom setting
the curriculum being taught
the expectations of the school
the expectations of parents
- What support is provided for diverse learning needs in the mainstream classroom?
- In your opinion, what important information needs to be conveyed to the school community and policy makers about learners with disabilities, their support needs, learning support facilitators and the process of learning facilitation?
- Describe the rewards and benefits of learning facilitation for learners with disabilities within the mainstream school setting.