

# **The Experiences of Parents of Children with Reading Difficulties**

by  
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## ABSTRACT

According to the results of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) of 2011 in South African schools, approximately 53% of learners in grade 3 and 70% of learners in grade 6 did not reach a partially achieved level of reading. As a result of the reading difficulties, these learners have varying degrees of learning and behavioural difficulties and also experience psychological and emotional challenges. This figure indicates that a high number of people are parenting a child identified as having reading difficulties. Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development indicated the importance of interconnections between school, home, and community settings in order to foster children's learning. Parents may be better supported and empowered to assist their child by collaboration among teachers and families. This collaboration may be strengthened by utilising knowledge gained from parents' lived experiences of parenting a child identified as having reading difficulties. The primary research question guiding this phenomenological study involved understanding the experiences of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties. The study's research methodology can be described as basic qualitative research which is embedded within an interpretive paradigm. Purposive sampling was used to select three parents as research participants. Three methods of data collection were employed, namely written reflective notes, structured individual interviews and observations. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data. The analysis revealed that four interconnected contexts emerged concerning parents' lived experiences, namely their relationship with their identified child, their relationships with other family members, their interactions with teachers and the child's school, and their perception of social support in raising their child. The study found that parents experienced a variety of dismaying emotions regarding their child's reading difficulties and that parents adopted roles such as caretaker, motivator and advocate in order to obtain the intervention and educational services needed for their child. The findings of this study inform and encourage educators and other support personnel to support parents and promote collaboration with parents of children identified as having reading difficulties, potentially enabling those parents to better support their identified child.

Keywords: Parents, experiences, child, reading difficulties, secondary school, ecology of human development.

## OPSOMMING

Na aanleiding van die uitslae van die Jaarlikse Nasionale Assessering (ANA) van 2011 in Suid-Afrikaanse skole, het ongeveer 53% van leerders in graad 3 en 70% van leerders in graad 6 nie 'n gedeeltelik bereikte vlak van lees behaal nie. As gevolg van die struikelblokke met lees, ervaar hierdie leerders verskeie grade van leer- en gedragsuitdagings, asook sielkundige en emosionele uitdagings. Hierdie syfers dui aan dat 'n beduidende hoeveelheid mense in die rol staan van die ouer van 'n kind met leesstruikelblokke. Bronfenbrenner se teorie van die ekologie van menslike ontwikkeling dui op die belangrikheid van interkonneksies tussen die leerder se skool, tuiste en die konteks van sy gemeenskap vir die bevordering van leer. Ouers kan moontlik meer effekief ondersteun en bemagtig word om hul kind meer effekief te ondersteun, indien 'n medewerking tussen ouers en onderwysers bewerkstellig kan word. Hierdie medewerking kan versterk word deur kennis aan te wend aangaande ouers se ervaringe in hul rol as die ouer van 'n kind met leesstruikelblokke. Die navorsingsvraag wat hierdie fenomenologiese studie lei, handel oor 'n begrip van die ervaringe van ouers van kinders wat met leesstruikelblokke geïdentifiseer is. Die navorsingsmetodologie wat in hierdie studie gebruik is, kan beskryf word as basiese kwalitatiewe navorsing binne 'n interpretivistiese paradigma. 'n Doelgerigte steekproef is gebruik om drie ouers as deelnemers te identifiseer. Drie metodes van data insameling is gebruik, naamlik geskrewe, reflektiewe notas; gestruktureerde, individuele onderhoude en waarnemings. Verder is kwalitatiewe inhoudsanalise gebruik om die data te analyseer. Die data analyse het aan die lig gebring dat vier kontekste wat telkens met mekaar verband hou, na vore gekom het rakende ouers se ervaringe as die ouer van 'n kind met leesstruikelblokke, naamlik die ouers se verhouding met hul kind, die ouers se verhoudinge met ander lede van die gesin, die ouers se interaksies met die kind se onderwysers en skool asook die ouers se persepsie van die sosiale ondersteuning wat hulle ontvang in hul rol as ouers. Die bevindinge van hierdie studie het aangetoon dat ouers verskeie ontmoedigende emosies ervaar rakende hul kind se leesstruikelblokke en dat ouers in die rol van versorger, motiveerder en advokaat optree om sodoende die nodige intervensie en opvoedkundige dienste wat hul kind benodig, te bekom. Die bevindinge het ten doel om opvoeders en ander ondersteuningspersoneel in te lig en aan te moedig om ouers te ondersteun en medewerking tussen opvoeders en ouers van kinders met

leesstriukelblokke te bevorder. Sodanige medewerking kan ouers in staat stel om hul kinders meer effektief te ondersteun.

Sleutelwoorde: Ouers, ervaringe, kind, leestriukelblokke, hoërskool, ekologie van menslike ontwikkeling.

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“I will not boast in anything - no gifts, no power, no wisdom  
But I will boast in Jesus Christ - His death and resurrection  
Why should I gain from His reward? I cannot give an answer  
But this I know with all with my heart -  
His wounds have paid my ransom...”

-Stuart Townend

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# CHAPTER 1

## CONTEXT AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Since the 1990s, reading difficulties, which are characterised by difficulties in reading and spelling (British Dyslexia Association, 2012), have gained increasing attention worldwide. This increase in awareness may be related to the high prevalence rate as well as the pervasive impact brought about by reading difficulties among school-age children. Regardless of their socio-economic status, language background, or intellectual ability, children may be identified as having reading difficulties (British Dyslexia Association, 2012). In the South African context, according to the results of the Annual National Assessment (ANA) of 2011, approximately 53% of learners in grade 3 and 70% of learners in grade 6 did not even reach a partially achieved level of reading. As a result of the reading difficulties, these learners not only have varying degrees of learning and behavioural difficulties but also experience psychological and emotional challenges (Scott, 2004).

Given that learners with reading difficulties may encounter academic, social and psychological barriers, parenting them can be multifaceted and challenging, because parents need to address the learning needs of their children due to their reading difficulties. According to Scott (2004), parents may aggravate the emotional, social and academic challenges of learners with reading difficulties when they have inadequate parenting skills or do not know how to manage these challenges. In contrast, some learners with reading difficulties can cope well with the help of supportive and caring parents. In other words, parental experiences and reactions may have a significant impact on their children as their responses may affect how their children adapt to their reading difficulties.

In my teaching career, I have had several conversations with the parents of learners who experience reading difficulties. It was very clear to me that the parents have experienced similar feelings of frustration, guilt, helplessness and confusion. These parents seem to consult several professionals in their quest to find a solution for their child's struggle, just to find themselves frustrated when not receiving straight answers or clear solutions. Sometimes these parents

diagnose their children themselves in an attempt to clarify the struggle and to decide which path to take concerning assistance for their child. There seems to be a great need for research conducted on this topic. Very little literature concerning the experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties could be found to support this study. The limited available research on parents' experiences on a broad spectrum of learning difficulties also focuses mainly on quantitative research methods (Dewey, Crawford & Kaplan, 2003; McIntyre & Hennessy, 2012; Miron, 2012; Rashid, Morris & Sevcik, 2005; Smith-Bonahue, Larmore, Harman & Castillo, 2009).

Parents play a critical role in the literacy development of their children. Therefore, according to Baker (2003), what parents believe, say and do, makes a big difference. Previous research examined support groups for parents of children with learning difficulties (Bull, 2003). Participants reported individual differences in their experience of parenting a child with learning difficulties. Levels of self-reported parental stress varied and were not directly related to the degree of learning difficulty experienced by the individual children. However, the parents of children who were challenged by learning difficulties reported experiencing a high degree of parental stress (Bull, 2003). Parents who had mentioned high levels of personal stress also reported that they felt isolated in dealing with learning difficulties and did not receive sufficient social support from friends and family (Bull, 2003).

Very little research was recently done on parental experiences regarding children who experience reading difficulties. However, Burns and Kondrick (1998) suggested that children's long histories of reading problems, the lack of successful interventions in improving reading and the parents' significant frustration with their children's reading difficulties should be investigated.

Many years before Burns and Kondrick made this suggestion, Preston (1939) stated that while a broad study was being made on the subject of maladjustments arising in children from the inability to learn to read by modern educational methods, the striking part played by the reactions of the parents toward the reading failures of their children prompted her decision to treat this topic as a separate paper in 1939. Even today, this still remains an area which has not been

adequately researched and significant research on this topic for review regarding the current study could not be found.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

I am currently holding a teaching position in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. Since I have started teaching, I have taught many learners who seem to have difficulties in reading and realised the impact of that on an academic, social or emotional level. I have also realised the importance of discovering what the specific needs of the parents are and how they can be supported in order to contribute to their ability to support their children as well as lessen their frustration levels. Baker (2003) stresses the fact that parents play a critical role in nurturing children's reading. Counselling and support are beneficial for parents of struggling readers in that it can help them better understand their children's difficulties and how to assist their children, as well as how to deal with their own feelings of guilt, anger, frustration, embarrassment and disappointment (Baker, 2003).

The purpose of this study is to increase knowledge about the challenges parents face when their children have reading difficulties. It aimed at guiding parents in how to support their children. The research question that guided this study therefore was: What are the experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties?

The specific aims of this study were to determine:

- 1      What are the specific experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties?
- 2      What are these parents' experiences and difficulties about the assessment, schooling and intervention of the child?
- 3      How do these parents perceive their support network and what coping strategies do these parents make use of?
- 4      How can these parents be supported by educational psychologists and other support personnel?
- 5      How can these parents be empowered to assist their children and contribute to intervention strategies?

### 1.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Merriam (2002), theory has a deep and broad influence on the research process. The word theory refers to a particular kind of explanation (Tavallaei & Abu Talib, 2010). Leedy and Ormrod (2005, p. 4) furthermore point out that “a theory is an organized body of concepts and principles intended to explain a particular phenomenon”. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2000), a theory can develop scientific knowledge through the following criteria: first, providing simple explanations about the observations regarding their relation to a phenomenon; second, being consistent with an already founded body of knowledge and the observed relations; third, providing a device for verification and revision; and fourth, stimulating further research in areas needing investigation.

Maxwell (2005) stated that a theoretical framework can also be defined as specific theories, findings, and conceptual frameworks relating to the phenomena being studied, that will guide or inform a research study. This framework can also be defined as the system of concepts, assumptions, beliefs and theories that supports and informs the research. It explains the main aspects to be studied and the presumed relationships among them. The theoretical framework helps the researcher develop and select realistic and relevant research questions and methods, and identify potential validity threats to the conclusions derived from the study (Maxwell, 2005).

This qualitative phenomenological study examining the experiences of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties is based upon Bronfenbrenner’s ecology of human development as theoretical framework. Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 3) developed a theory about childhood development that posited that interconnections are as:

decisive for [human] development as events taking place within a given setting.

A child’s ability to learn to read in the primary grades may depend no less on how he is taught than on the existence and nature of ties between school and the home.

In essence, Bronfenbrenner’s model of the ecology of human development recognised that children do not develop in isolation but do so inside and outside of the confines of their family, their school, their community, and their society at large. Recognising that these environments are

complex, ever fluid, and constantly changing, Bronfenbrenner (1979) maintained that the interaction that takes place within and among these diverse settings is essential to the development of the child. The word nesting appeared in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) description of his ecological theory of human development. He asked the reader to think of nesting as a series of layers building outward, from the individual child in the centre. He compared it to a set of Russian dolls, whereby one removes the outward top and bottom of the first doll and there nested within is another doll and still another, and another, and so on until the final doll appears: the child nested within the others.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) divided his theory into four environmental systems: the first is the microsystem, the setting where the child lives. It includes the child's family home, siblings, relatives, playmates, or the school or church the child may attend. It is the setting where the most direct interactions with the child take place (Seals, 2010). Surrounding the microsystem's layer is the mesosystem. Within the mesosystem's shell, the relationships between all those within the microsystem begin to emerge. Also, within the mesosystem, relationships experienced in the home begin to co-mingle with the relationships experienced at school, at church, or within the community. A good example might be that should a child have a negative experience at home, the child may now carry that experience into his or her other environments such as school or next door to his playmate, creating perhaps academic or behavioural problems in these environments. In turn, when a child experiences an uncomfortable event in academia or a particularly painful experience with teachers or other classmates, this may influence the family and may cause turmoil at home (Seals, 2010). The two remaining outer systems include the exosystem, those experiences which the child cannot control, such as where their parents work, where they live, and what level of education their parents obtained. This exosystem is enveloped with another outwardly spiralled system called the macrosystem in which attitudes and ideological customs of one's government, religion, or ethnic background have been proven to influence the child (Seals, 2010).

Sontag (1996) wrote in line with Bronfenbrenner's theory that "few studies in special education have investigated multiple setting influences, such as the joint influence of home and school factors, on children's developmental and academic competence" (p. 320), adding that "family

functioning and community context become critical issues for educators when there is compelling evidence that sociocultural factors outside the classroom influence the developmental outcomes and academic achievement of children with disabilities” (p. 319).

Bronfenbrenner’s theory also informed Epstein’s theory of overlapping spheres of influence that emphasise the importance of the family-school relationship and the mutual responsibility for children’s learning and development (Epstein, 2002; Swart & Phasha, 2011). This theory stipulates that children are best supported when schools and families work together in a partnership to reach shared educational goals. The focus and purpose of these interactions are always on how these contexts can best support the achievement and development of the child (Swart & Phasha, 2011).

#### **1.4 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

Phenomenology refers to the meaning of the ‘lived experience’ of several individuals on a particular concept; or in other words a phenomenon, in context (Creswell, 2007). Through phenomenology, the researcher can deeply understand the experience that several individuals have had on a certain phenomenon. This study will follow a phenomenological approach and I will be working in an interpretive paradigm.

Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (2006) describe paradigms as systems of interrelated ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that act as perspectives that provide a rationale for the research and commit the researcher to particular methods of data collection, observation and interpretation. Ontology specifies the nature of reality that is to be studied, and what can be known about it. Epistemology specifies the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what can be known. Methodology specifies how the researcher practically studies whatever he or she believes can be known (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

The interpretive paradigm suits the type of qualitative research that was conducted. The interpretive model centres on the way in which human beings make sense of their subjective reality and attach meaning to it (Flick, 2009). The methods of this model try to describe and

interpret people's feelings and experiences in human terms rather than through quantification and measurement (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Researchers working in this paradigm assume that people's subjective experiences are real (ontology), and that we can understand others' experiences by interacting with them and listening to what they tell us (epistemology), and that qualitative research techniques are best suited to this task (methodology) (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

The study therefore focused on the subjective experiences of research participants and I adopted an interactional stance towards the participants by means of interviewing and observation as data collection methods. I also requested the participants to write reflective notes on their experiences to achieve data collection triangulation. This research focused on the subjective world of the participants and aimed at understanding it through empathetic interpretation of the meaning experienced by the participants (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

## **1.5 RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research design of a study can be described as "a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between research questions and the execution or implementation of the research" (Durrheim, 2006, p. 34). Durrheim (2006) suggests four principles which can be applied in order to achieve this design coherence, namely the purpose of the research, the context in which it takes place, the research paradigm, and the techniques used.

This research study took the form of a case study (Yin, 2008). The research focused on the experiences of the participants from their perspectives and on understanding the meaning that is constructed through their own perceptions. It was therefore a basic or generic qualitative case study (Yin, 2008). The researcher was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis and an inductive research strategy was followed aiming at describing the phenomenon that is researched and identifying recurring patterns in the data. The case study will be described in more detail in Chapter 3.

## 1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methodologies refer to processes whereby the researcher attempts to understand how research participants make meaning of their environment through observation and interaction (Maree, 2007). The research methods used were selected due to their coherence with the research design and questions. These methods included purposeful sampling techniques, three data collection methods and qualitative data analysis. These methods will now be briefly discussed.

### *1.6.1 Selection of Participants*

Sampling refers to the action undertaken by the researcher to identify a population of interest, or unit of analysis, that becomes the focus of the study (Durrheim, 2006). The participants for this study were identified through purposeful sampling. The research for this study was conducted in the form of a case study with three parents who live in the northern suburbs in the Western Cape. For the purpose of this study, the participants have provided enough in-depth information for analysis.

In an attempt to identify such cases to participate in the study, criteria can be set to assist in selecting the sample. This is referred to as criterion-based selection, and as the term suggests, is a list of criteria according to which the sample is decided upon (Merriam, 2002). The participants in this study each have a child with reading difficulties who is in grade 8 - 12 in secondary school. The child lives with both parents. I have selected these families because secondary school life may be more challenging, and they may have a deeper experience of the impact brought about by reading difficulties. In addition, parents may have richer experiences given that they have accompanied their children transitioning from primary to secondary schools. The parents have already walked a long road with their child regarding the reading difficulty and I would like to gather information from their experiences during this time. Interviews with the parents and observations during homework times will take place in the family's homes and will be arranged at a time that is convenient to the family. The participants wrote their reflective notes in their own time over a six-month period.

### *1.6.2 Methods of Data Collection*

Interpretive researchers attempt to become a natural part of the context in which the phenomenon being studied occurs. This can be achieved by entering the research setting with the necessary care and engaging with research participants in an open and empathetic manner (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). In the current study this was done by conducting interviews and engaging in participant observation - the two most popular ways of collecting data in interpretive research (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). In order to achieve data collection triangulation, participants' reflective notes was used as the third method of data collection (Maxwell, 2005).

The primary data collection method for this study was in-depth, open-ended, structured interviews, for which I used an interview guide (Addendum D). One of the main aims of the interview in qualitative research is to gain insight into the interviewee's world (Patton, 2002.). In fact, the interview itself can be considered a narrative in which both interviewer and interviewee construct a story that is situated within a particular context (Fontana & Frey, 2005).

Non-participant observations were the second method for data collection (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Observations take place while the phenomenon being studied occurs, which brings the researcher closer to the phenomenon itself (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Observations took place at the family's home when the parents assist the child with homework. Field notes, described by Terre Blanche et al. (2006) as copious notes made by the researcher during observations, were compiled from these observations.

The parents were also requested to write reflective notes on their experiences and emotions on raising a child with reading difficulties throughout the research period. Reflective notes can be used to elicit a written account of someone's perceptions and meaning-making processes regarding a specific event, as well as to stimulate thought about it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This allows the participants to reflect on certain issues and to provide a voice to their thoughts, opinions and beliefs; providing them the opportunity to explore their thoughts at their own time and pace without the interference of an outsider (Patton, 2002).

### 1.6.3 Methods of Data Analysis

The analysis of the data aimed at reaching an explanation, understanding or interpretation of the investigation (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). A key principle of interpretive analysis is to stay close to the data and to interpret it from a position of empathetic understanding. This immersion in the data involves becoming thoroughly familiar with a phenomenon, carefully reflecting on it and then writing an interpretation (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

Analysis of interview transcripts, field notes and participants' reflective notes was based on an inductive approach geared to identifying patterns in the data by means of thematic codes (Patton, 2002). Inductive analysis means that the patterns, themes, and sub-themes of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed prior to data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). This process was conducted through data reduction as well as arrangement and display of data in order to discern patterns and themes in the data (Maxwell, 2005). Conclusions were drawn from the meaning derived from the data, assessing their implications and verifying the data by revisiting it and cross-checking it for themes and patterns. This study thus focused on qualitative content analysis (Patton, 2002). Coding was used to combine themes, ideas and sub-themes in order to interpret the data, which in turn was analysed using the constant comparative method which will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3 (Bowen, 2005).

## 1.7 DELIMITATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND KEY ASSUMPTIONS

This study focused only on the experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties. It did thus not include the experience of the children with reading difficulties. It did also not include the experiences of parents or children with other learning difficulties, e.g. mathematical difficulties or other language difficulties. The study was conducted in the form of a case study on three parents and can therefore not be generalised to the wider population.

According to Creswell (2007), assumptions are self-evident truths. In this qualitative study, it may be assumed that participants had answered truthfully and accurately to the interview questions

based on their personal experience, and that participants responded honestly and to the best of their individual abilities. Creswell (2007) defines the limitations of a study as those things over which the research has no control. Evident limitations are potential weaknesses of a study. Researcher biases and perceptual misrepresentations are potential limitations in this study.

## **1.8 CREDIBILITY AND DEPENDABILITY**

Merriam (2009) emphasises the importance of producing valid and reliable knowledge when conducting qualitative research. In qualitative research the terms credibility and dependability are often used in reference to increasing a study's trustworthiness and rigour (Merriam, 2009).

Credibility in qualitative research acknowledges that reality is subjective and that there are many perspectives which influence it. Credibility is therefore the correspondence between the way in which the researcher interprets and presents the research findings and the meanings and perspectives of the research participant (Merriam, 2009). Dependability refers to the consistency of research (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Dependability in qualitative research aims to see whether a study's research design can be used in other studies and what procedures have been followed. This allows one to determine whether a study has made use of best practices and whether its findings can be considered to be 'reliable' within this context (Merriam, 2009). Strategies which were implemented to foster both credibility and dependability are triangulation, adequate engagement in data collection, reflexivity and the use of an audit trail (Merriam, 2009).

## **1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical issues throughout the study were considered along the categories of autonomy, non-maleficence and beneficence: the freedom of participants, doing no harm to participants or society as a whole and to benefit participants and society (Durrheim, 2006). This means that the research participants were thoroughly informed of the nature of the research and the steps in the research process. They voluntarily participated in the research and were aware of their

freedom to withdraw from the research at any time. The participants also have the right to anonymity in any presentation or publication that might arise out of the research (Allan, 2008).

The research had done no harm to the participants or any other persons and aimed at benefitting the participants by providing a guideline for support for these participants as well as other researchers and society at large (Allan 2008). All information was treated with the strictest confidentiality. The identity of the participants was concealed, unless otherwise preferred and only information that was central to the study was gained. Raw data containing participants' personal details was securely stored. The researcher only carried out procedures that she was competent to perform (Allan, 2008).

## **1.10 CONCEPTS CLARIFICATIONS**

### **1.10.1 Experiences**

According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010, p. 513), 'experience' refers to "the knowledge and skills that you have gained through doing something for a period of time and the process of gaining this". The implication is therefore that through the process of parenting a child with learning difficulties the parent has gained knowledge and skills that the researcher is interested in. In the context of this study, parents' experiences refer to cognitive, emotional and physical results of their parenting roles.

### **1.10.2 Parents**

Parents can be described as the main caregivers of children, in other words the child's mother or father. In this study the word parent refers to the biological mother of each respective child.

### **1.10.3 Children**

For the purpose of this study children has reference to secondary school learners parented by their biological parents. This concept thus refers to somebody's son or daughter and does not

refer to age.

#### **1.10.4 Reading difficulties**

A reading difficulty is a challenge in which a learner displays reading hindrances resulting primarily from neurological factors (McCandliss & Noble, 2003). It can be described as a brain-based type of learning difficulty that specifically impairs a learner's ability to read. These individuals typically read at levels significantly lower than expected despite having normal intelligence (Birsh, 2005). Although these hindrances vary from person to person, common characteristics among learners with reading difficulties are difficulty with spelling, phonological processing (the manipulation of sounds), and/or rapid visual-verbal responding (McCandliss & Noble, 2003). It can be inherited in some families, and recent studies have identified a number of genes that may predispose an individual to developing reading difficulties (Plomin & Kovas, 2005). In this study, reading difficulties are separate and distinct from reading difficulties resulting from other causes, such as a non-neurological deficiency with vision or hearing, or from poor or inadequate reading instruction.

### **1.11 CHAPTER DIVISIONS**

Chapter 1 describes the process of exploring the experiences of parents with children who had been identified as having reading difficulties. This chapter introduced the challenges parents faced in this regard. Limitations of the study, the aim of the study, the scope of the study, research questions and ethical considerations were also offered in this chapter.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature concerning this topic. It explains issues concerning parents' experiences of special education, conceptualising reading difficulties, the emotional experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties, parenting styles and coping with the challenges of raising such a child and parents' perception of social support.

Chapter 3 presents the sample size and population of the study, the research method, data collection methods and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 4 presents the results of this study as obtained using the data analysis.

In the final chapter, Chapter 5, a discussion of the findings regarding the experiences of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties is presented. Implications of the findings of this study are also discussed, their relevance to future studies, and recommendations are put forth.

## **1.12 CONCLUSION**

The aim of this chapter was to provide a background to the study so as to orient the reader to the research conducted. It furthermore contextualised the research and motivated its relevance and importance. The chapter also provided a brief description of the theoretical framework underlying the research as well as the research process implemented. In the next chapter a detailed review of the literature relevant to gaining insight into the experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties will be presented. This will include a review of the main features of reading and reading difficulties and its impact on children's lives. In addition, the literature review will also focus on aspects including parental experiences, parenting styles, coping behaviours, and social support.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore, describe, and document the experiences of parents who have children identified as having reading difficulties. Whilst parents are the main caregivers of their children, they are faced with a variety of demands arising from this role. Parental emotional experiences intensify when there are increased child care demands resulting from learning difficulties (Woolfson & Grant, 2006). To gain insight into the experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties, this chapter will present a review of the main features of reading and its impact on children's lives. In addition, the literature review will also focus on aspects including parents' experience of special education, parental emotional experiences, parenting styles, coping behaviours, and social support.

Learning difficulties have received a considerable amount of attention in the literature. However, research interests (Bailey, 2006; Hudson, High & Al Otaiba, 2007; Cheak & Wessel, 2004; DeThorne, et al., 2006; Gortmaker, Daly, McCurdy, Persampieri & Hergenrader, 2007) tend to be primarily focused on the biological influences that causes reading difficulties and the educational outcomes of reading difficulties. In comparison, a much smaller amount of attention has been given to the lived experiences of the families of children with learning and especially reading difficulties. In fact, interest in the lived experiences of families of children with developmental challenges such as reading difficulties peaked in the latter half of the twentieth century (Johnston & Mash, 2001). Research such as this endorses the need to consider the interaction between child characteristics and family circumstances in order to fully understand the experience of reading difficulties. Therefore, data generated during this research project can prove to be valuable to the understanding of families' experiences. This approach is in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) ecological model. This model promotes the bi-directional nature of the parent-child relationship and asserts that the family is an important context for development, including children's literacy development. Epstein's (2002) theory of overlapping spheres of influence of family, school and community on children's learning also supports this model. Therefore, the parents' experiences of the educational

needs of their children with reading difficulties and how these needs are met, play an important role in this study.

## **2.2 PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH LEARNING BARRIERS**

The Education White Paper 6 (2001) on Inclusive Education supports the idea that parents be collaborative decision-makers in the development of an educational plan for their child. This means that a parent participates, become informed, and obtains knowledge about the academic progress of their child (Seals, 2010). This idea also encourages parents to engage in the education process with the professionals who deliver the educational services to their child with learning barriers (Reid & Valle, 2004). However, Dabokowski (2004) found that “opportunities for parent participation in making decisions can vary considerably. Such participation may vary not only from one school district to another, but also from school to school, depending in part on the people who serve on the team” (p. 36).

Dabokowski's (2004) study revealed that the institutional level support team, referring to the team of professionals at a certain institution providing educational and emotional support to learners with learning barriers, when brought together for the purpose of developing an education plan for a child identified with a learning barrier, develops its own team culture. Dabokowski (2004, p. 34) defined team culture as the “attitudes and beliefs that are valued by a particular team”. The study suggested that the team's culture was demonstrated by characteristics and activities displayed in the institution level support team meetings. The team's culture is a major factor affecting how much and how often a parent participates in the decision-making on behalf of their child (Seals, 2010). The team's culture is a major factor in building and implementing a strong individual support plan, however this is counterbalanced by the individual's own cultural beliefs. The cultural beliefs of each member may be suppressed or expressed depending upon the exhibited team's culture during a meeting (Seals, 2010). An example would be a parent “indicating agreement with a team decision out of respect for professional educators rather than conviction” (Reid & Valle, 2004, p. 37). Dale (1996) observed reactions of parents attending their children's institutional level support meetings and documented a variety of reactions. The emotional responses ranged from being

fiercely protective of their child, to embarrassment about the child's academic performance. Some of the observed parents demonstrated a sense of uneasiness with their child, and many expressed inadequacy in their own ability to parent successfully. Others invoked no response except to sign the necessary documents upon request. Dale (1996) interpreted this last action as either wanting to be agreeable with the school staff or attempting to quickly leave the meeting, thus avoiding the situation at hand. Parents who exhibit such emotions may not always have the ability, at that moment, to be an equal participant in the supporting plan process (Seals, 2010).

The inability to participate as an equal participant may be as a result of misperception or an inability to comprehend the specialised jargon used when negotiating in the world of education for learners with learning barriers and its processes (Seals, 2010). Reid and Valle (2004) also found that parents may struggle to understand the scientific language circulating among professionals. Their own child, described by professionals as an amalgamation of test scores, discrepancies, deficits, and limitations, sometimes becomes virtually unrecognisable to them. The parents' knowledge of the child, in contrast, appears informal (i.e. less important) in its lack of scientific verification. Thus education discourses that drive and sustain practice may effectively alienate parents from the collaborative process (Seals, 2010).

On this issue Reid and Valle (2002) previously reported that as a profession, education for learners with learning barriers relies largely on discursive practices and teachers' assumptions to label children as having a disability. These assumptions and practices measure, label, categorise and are so deeply connected with the world of psychometrics, that perhaps parents are forced to enter the complex world of special education with a big disadvantage. "It is paradoxical, indeed, that the discourse of education for learners with learning barriers; a system of practices in which parent-professional collaboration is encouraged; operates simultaneously out of the scientific framework that by its very nature gives authority to professionals" (Reid & Valle, 2002, p. 475).

Dale (1996, p. 4) notes: "The professional, as implied, holds a specialized body of knowledge and skills and has undertaken a period of training (often prolonged) to acquire them. This expertise distinguishes and distances the professional from the lay person and also from members of other professions". Kalyanpur and Harry (2004) responding to Reid and Valle

(2004), added the following to the argument that labelling children with learning difficulties stems from discursive practices: the discussions about learning difficulties constructs are largely argued in colleges and universities and not among the educators, service providers, and parents who provide daily care for these children - both inside and outside their home environments. Nonetheless, Russell (2003, p. 145) observed that "all parents develop expectations about their child's education based on their own experience and information provided by the school concerned, the media, and informal networks of parents". Therefore, Valle and Aponte (2004, p. 470) wrote "a review of the learning disability literature points to the routine disqualification of parents' voices by professionals as a major obstacle to authentic collaboration".

Another impediment to parental involvement concerns information and support given to parents. A study conducted by Howie-Davies and McKenzie (2007) found that parents of children identified as having learning difficulties received less information and support than parents of children identified with a more specific diagnosis of Down's syndrome or Autism. These researchers debated that perhaps professionals just do not see the diagnosis of learning difficulties as an equally important difficulty compared to other challenges. Yet, Reid (2007) found that parents must play a crucial role in the assessment and intervention of their child's academic needs in order to foster the child's academic growth. In order to play this role parents need relevant information regarding their child's reading difficulties.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) thought that understanding human connections was a way to gain knowledge that may bring schools, the community, and families together to foster productive humans throughout entire lifespans. His theory of the ecology of human development may be particularly relevant when applied to those parents with children identified as having reading difficulties.

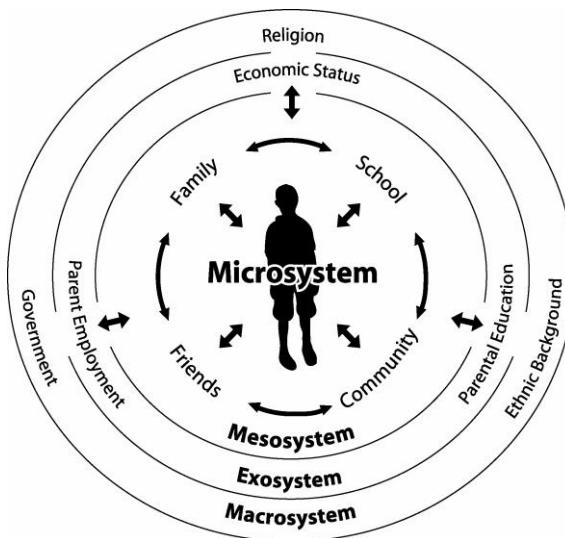
## **2.3 THE ECOLOGY OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION FOR LEARNERS WITH LEARNING BARRIERS**

To best understand the impact of reading difficulties it is important to understand the bi-directional relationship between the children who are affected and their parents. The ecology of

human development is considered a theoretical framework from which to approach this understanding. The family, specifically parents, are the primary source of influence for the child's development (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1986). However, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory also postulates that relationships within the family are reciprocal; therefore, not only is the child influenced by his parents but the parents are also influenced by the child. As such it would be ineffectual to consider parents and children in isolation from one another (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2009). Bearing this in mind it is important to give due consideration to the perspectives of parents who are in a unique position to offer insights into family life. The perspectives of parents may be particularly pertinent when deciding how to support the child (Seals, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner's theory about child development posited that interconnections between settings such as school and home are just as crucial for a child's development as events taking place within a single specified setting (Seals, 2010). A child's ability to learn in an academic setting may be just as dependent upon the connections between the child's school and parents as much as the curricular methods or parental strategies used to teach the child in either the academic or home setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). Bronfenbrenner (1979) used the word *nesting* when explaining his theory of the ecology of human development. He utilised the analogy of Russian dolls, where he described the smaller dolls as encapsulated within the larger dolls until the final doll, the child, emerges. He thought of nesting as layers building outward with the developing human at the centre. Bronfenbrenner (1979) divided his theory into four distinct environmental systems, each working alone, yet together, to cultivate the developing person at the centre (*Figure 2.1*). He labelled the innermost layer the *microsystem*.

The microsystem was described by Bronfenbrenner as the setting where the child lives, plays and learns. It is the setting where the most direct interactions take place between the child and the child's direct single environment. Here, the child interacts with neighbourhood friends, parents, and relatives; all the while examining the cultural norms of that inner society, taking note of behaviour that is acceptable in this culture as well as behaviour that are not. The child has the unique opportunity to observe and analyse how the important people in his or her life, such as his or her parents and siblings, relate to one another and to the child as a developing person (Seals, 2010).



*Figure 2.1: Nesting of the individual child as discussed in Bronfenbrenner's theory of Ecology of Human Development (Seals, 2010).*

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 22) defined the microsystem as “a pattern of activities, roles and inter-personal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics”.

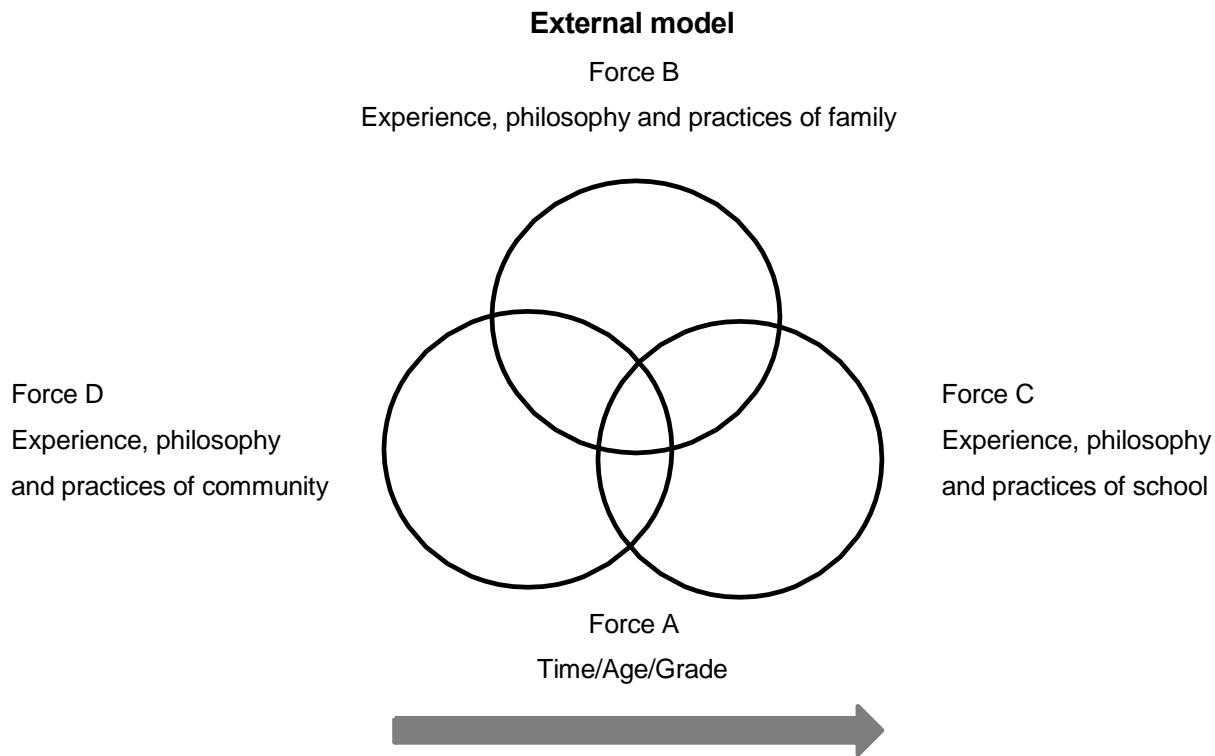
The next layer, moving outward from the microsystem, is what Bronfenbrenner referred to as the *mesosystem*. It “requires looking beyond single settings to the relations between them” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). Within the mesosystem, the multiple relationships between those within the microsystem begin to interact and co-mingle amid one another (Seals, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 25) explained that “a mesosystem comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates; such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighbourhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work and social life”. Moving outward from the mesosystem to the next layer is what Bronfenbrenner (1979) called the *exosystem*, those experiences which the child does not control; for example, where their parents work, where they live, and what level of education their parents obtained prior to the child’s birth. The developing person is not a direct participant in the exosystem, yet is very much affected by what takes place there (Seals, 2010). In her study, utilising Brofenbrenner’s ecology of human development theory, Sontag (1996, p. 319) noted that “problems outside of school - for example, poverty, malnutrition, drugs, and gangs - cannot be isolated from the learning environment of the classroom”.

Finally, leaving the exosystem and moving to the outermost layer, Bronfenbrenner described the system that surrounds all the other systems. He referred to this as the *macrosystem*. In the macrosystem, the attitudes and ideological customs of one's government, religion, or ethnic background are shown to influence the child (Seals, 2010). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. 26) described the macrosystem as referring to "consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro, meso, and exo) that exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies". This means that the child nested in the centre while not directly or actively participating in the macrosystem remains influenced by the laws of the developing person's government, the cultural values and beliefs of the child's ethnicity, or the ideologies of the religious faith predominately practiced, and is also influenced by the politics and social norms of the society in which the child resides (Seals, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner's theory also informed Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence that emphasise the importance of the family-school relationship and the mutual responsibility for children's learning and development (Epstein, 2002; Swart & Phasha, 2011). This theory stipulates that children are best supported when schools and families work together in a partnership to reach shared educational goals. Epstein devised a model to illustrate that there are overlapping spheres of activity or influence between the families, schools and communities that can represent an area of partnership (*Figure 2.2*) (Swart & Phasha, 2011).

Epstein distinguishes between an external and internal model of influence. The external model demonstrates that the extent of overlap is an interaction with the forces of time and the forces associated with the experience, philosophy, and practices of every sphere. The internal model of interaction demonstrates how and where complex interpersonal interactions take place between school, family and community (Swart & Phasha, 2011). The focus and purpose of these interactions are always on how these contexts can best support the achievement and development of the child (Swart & Phasha, 2011).



*Figure 2.2: Epstein's model of overlapping spheres of influence of family, school and community on children's learning (Swart & Phasha, 2011).*

Russell (2003) was another researcher who found Bronfenbrenner's theory of ecology of human development an appropriate and useful theoretical framework from which to study the issues within education for learners with learning barriers. It may therefore be useful when studying the personal experiences of parents with children identified as having a reading difficulty when engaging with their schools, teachers, and other service providers such as remedial teachers and educational psychologists. Russell suggested that cultural values will influence the beliefs on which expectations are based, and through the development and review of expectations, a person gains a greater understanding of their personal experiences. Consequently, it is reasonable to explore what parents experience when engaging with the school system and other service providers.

Learning about these experiences may lead to better planning and implementation of individual support plans for children with learning barriers (Seals, 2010). “Incorporation of Bronfenbrenner’s

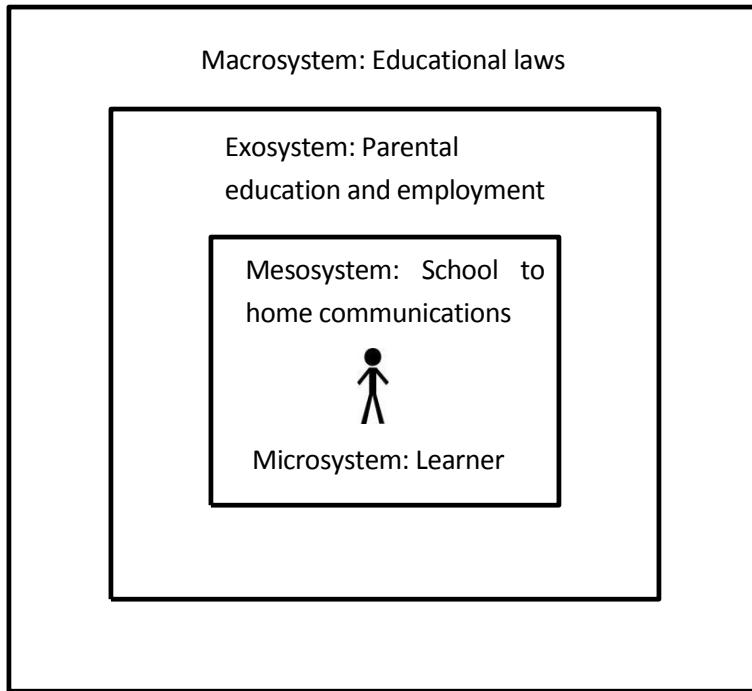
ecological framework into research efforts on education for learners with learning barriers has the ability to generate new knowledge and influence practice in a number of important ways" (Sontag, 1996, p. 338).

Bronfenbrenner's model of the ecology of human development recognised that children do not develop in isolation but do so inside and outside of the borders of their family, their school, their community, and their society at large. This is especially true of children identified as having reading difficulties, many of whom can find themselves regulated to subsequent mini-settings within their schools; nested within the environments that their non-challenged peers navigate as a routine matter.

According to Seals (2010) children identified with having reading difficulties may find themselves assigned to a variety of settings within a school, such as: (a) segregated classes comprised of children with multiple types of disabilities; (b) pull-out classes, where the child is removed from their peers to learn individually designated academic skills; (c) inclusion classes, where a specialised educator works with a general educator to assist children with reading difficulties in full view of their peers; or (d) within the initial identification process, the child may become part of a variety of intervention environments. In the South African context however, those identified with a reading difficulty may be singled out for additional academic support during their elective courses and during after-school programmes which may prompt some to feel more isolated from their peers (Kass & Maddux, 2005). Placement of students into a variety of intervention strategies does not happen without interaction between the four distinctive systems described by Bronfenbrenner. It is not merely a teacher or learner decision but one that requires the participation of all parties within the child's ecology of human development, including his family and school (Seals, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner's theory can be viewed as a snapshot of any institution level support team meeting (*Figure 2.3*). The macrosystem is seen in the form of educational laws that guide educators and support personnel. The exosystem is evident in the need for parental participation in the educational planning of children identified as having reading difficulties. Parental education and employment opportunities influence the parents' ability to participate in their child's academic planning. The mesosystem is demonstrated through school to home

communication, as seen through the collective creation of goals and objectives for the child and also through subsequent progress reports, telephone conferences, and individual support updates (Seals, 2010).



*Figure 2.3: The institution level support team meeting as seen based on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model.*

## 2.4 CONCEPTUALISING READING DIFFICULTIES

Earlier studies have estimated the percentage of children who fail to adequately read by the end of primary school to be 20 - 25% of the school population (Collins & Matthey, 2005.) In the South African context the results of the Annual National Assessment of 2011 (ANA) shows that approximately 53% of learners in grade 3 and 70% of learners in grade 6 did not reach a partially achieved level of reading. Previous research also indicated that four times as many boys as girls experience reading difficulties (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005), and theories abound as to the probable causes of such reading difficulties. These include sensory-motor difficulties, language-related problems, neuropsychological impairments, and socio-emotional deficits, poor teaching and poor learner support to name but a few (Fletcher-Campbell, Soler & Reid, 2009). There are

consequently a host of different interventions for reading difficulties (Aaron, Joshi, Gooden & Bentum, 2008). These range from social skills training, to neurological impress methods and multi-sensory integration approaches, to psycho-educational and learning-theory based approaches. The empirical evidence for these interventions varies greatly.

Individuals with reading difficulties may consequently have lower self-esteem and exhibit more emotional and behavioural difficulties than those without reading challenges (Terras, Thompson & Minnis, 2009). This can be a further concern and challenge for the parents of these learners. Parental worry regarding their children's development of reading skills appears to be universal (Granet, Castro & Gomi, 2006). According to Granet and his colleagues, children attend school for the first few years to learn to read — then they read to learn. Apprehension regarding a child's failure to develop these skills runs to the core of parenting. The fear of consequences resulting from poor school performance owing to poor reading overwhelms a parent. The child's perceived failure becomes the school's failure. This leads to a search for any intervention that might help. An understanding of reading development is crucial to assisting the family through this stressful period (Granet et al., 2006).

#### **2.4.1 Understanding the reading process**

Understanding the process of reading is an important issue concerning the specific cause of a learner's reading difficulties and how to address this challenge. Reading is in fact a difficult task. Initially the eye must be properly refracted if needed. The near triad must next be initiated: miosis, convergence, and accurate accommodation (Granet et al., 2006). Each letter must be resolved and then identified. Then groups of letters may form phonemes or sound groups. These sound groups may vary dependent upon the word and sentence order. Next the word must be identified properly (Levy, Gong, Hessels, Evans & Jared, 2006). Its meaning must be discerned, generally in context. After this task, the reader must be able to find the next word, and must then piece together a series of words to create a sentence with meaning. These sentences then form a paragraph that must be understood in context (Granet et al., 2006). Examining the aspects of reading that concern parents is helpful to this study in providing a better understanding of the specific concerns that these parents experience.

Identifying letters is one of the concerns for parents. The biggest challenges include the reversals of letters or the inability to identify mirror letters like *b* and *d* (Geary, Hoard, Byrd-Craven, Nugent & Numtee, 2007). The reason for this is generally developmental. The child's view of the world has been shaped by his experiences. Everyday objects do not change their meaning based upon their direction. This is a learned task and not even the same in every language (Granet et al., 2006). Asking a child to approach this task too soon is a set-up for frustration. The developmental "bell curve" means children can be ready for this task at slightly different times. For most, the challenge with reversals fades by the end of the third grade (Granet et al., 2006).

Although most children are taught to read using phonics as a base, no fluent reader uses phonics routinely. According to Hatcher, Hulme and Snowling (2004), when an unfamiliar word is encountered, one would revert back to phonics, but not as a rule. These researchers argue that reading fluency would be essentially impossible if each word had to be identified by its phonemes and put together. Initially, learning by phonics helps initiate the linguistic connection from the spoken to the written word. With practice the words become symbols that are recognised and processed. Even "reversing" some letters won't confuse the sophisticated reader and changes in words can be easily read in context. This whole-language approach is thus the eventual goal, with phonics as the tool used to build to reach that goal (Granet et al., 2006).

With regard to reading comprehension, contextual meaning affects what we read. Our experiences affect our understanding, as does our general intelligence, vocabulary and reasoning skills (Levorato et al., 2004). All this occurs after the decoding phase of reading. So one must thus resolve, decode, and then understand to have full reading comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002).

Reading is therefore an interactive, holistic process, involving the reader, the text, and instruction (Roe, Burns & Smith, 2011). The skilful reader is able to orchestrate a complex system of skills and knowledge. An effective reader has a well-developed system of decoding and comprehension skills. Readers who decode quickly and accurately coordinate this process with the processes involved in the comprehension of the text (Roe et al., 2011). Unfortunately, children with reading difficulties often experience difficulty with one or more of the skills

involved in the reading process (McEneaney, Lose & Schwartz, 2006; Sample, 2005). These children often do not use comprehension strategies adequately and have difficulty monitoring their own comprehension (Mastropieri, Scruggs & Graetz, 2003). Mastropieri and her colleagues found that children with reading difficulties rarely use comprehension strategies, even as passage difficulty increase. This suggests that these children have problems monitoring their critical reading skills. Even when they employed comprehension strategies, their strategies were considered inappropriate and of little assistance to the reader (Calhoon, 2005). Roberts, Torgeson, Boardman and Scammacca (2008) found that children with reading difficulties experienced difficulty with more difficult text types. Even after repeated exposure to varying text types, children with reading difficulties were unable to use text structure effectively to comprehend the text. This finding suggested that children with reading difficulties need to be specifically taught the use of critical reading strategies, particularly if they are reading texts with more complex structures.

One critical text comprehension skill is the identification of character motive. Roe, Burns and Smith (2011) stated that to comprehend a story, readers must hold together a series of actions and understand characters' motives for those actions. The identification of character motive is a discrete comprehension skill that is considered critical to the comprehension of narrative texts (Roe et al., 2011). However, elementary-age children find the identification of character motives to be difficult (Crowe, 2005). Considering the difficulty that children with reading difficulties have with reading comprehension, the identification of character motives should prove to be challenging for these children.

Research conducted by Gough and Tummer (1986) indicates that the reading process is the product of at least two mentioned components: decoding and comprehension. These researchers expressed the two-component nature of reading in the form of the mathematical formula  $R = D \times L$ , where  $R$  represents reading,  $D$  represents decoding, and  $L$  represents linguistic comprehension, with the value of each variable ranging from 0 to 1. It follows then, that if  $D = 0$ ,  $R = 0$  and if  $L = 0$ , then  $R$  also = 0. Thus, there can be individuals who cannot read well, but for different reasons (Roe et al., 2011).

Neuropsychological reports (Rucklidge & Tannock, 2002; Semrud-Clikeman, 2006; Swanson, Harris & Graham, 2005) indicate that some children can comprehend individually presented words much better than they can pronounce them, whereas other children decode written words fairly well but have a diminished ability to comprehend them. These children, labelled "deep dyslexics" and "surface dyslexics," respectively, indicate that decoding and comprehension skills can be affected independent of each other (Joshi, 2003).

A study done by White, et al. (2006) showed that a group of children identified with dyslexia comprehended sentences much better than they could read them aloud, and that some children with autism could read much better aloud than they could comprehend. Children identified with dyslexia and those identified with hyperlexia also show that comprehension and decoding are dissociate skills (Hagvet, 2003; Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005; Vellutino, Fletcher, Snowling & Scanlon, 2004).

Savage (2006) indicated that a vast majority of poor readers have challenges in both decoding and comprehension. Decoding refers to the ability to pronounce the written word, either covertly or overtly, by relating graphemes to phonemes. Decoding represents one of the two strategies of word recognition, the other being sight-word reading. Sight-word reading skill, which is a marker for skilled reading, emerges as children learn to read, and this strategy is faster than decoding (Ehri, 2008). It appears, however, that these two, word recognition strategies (decoding and sight-word reading) are not independent of each other, in that the development of sight-word reading skill is dependent on the acquisition of sufficient decoding skills (Ehri, 2008; Ouelette, 2006). Comprehension is a generic term that is used to refer to both reading and listening comprehension. Studies (Wise, Sevcik, Morris, Lovett & Wolf, 2007; Hagvet, 2003; Perfetti, Landi & Oakhill, 2008) show a high degree of correlation between the two and support the idea that listening comprehension sets the upper bound for reading comprehension.

Although decoding and comprehension are two independent components of reading, they do not explain all of the variance seen in reading performance (Cain, Oakhill & Bryant, 2004). For instance, a study done by Plaza and Cohen (2004) found that phonological recoding, listening comprehension, and the interaction between the two accounted for only some of the variance in

reading achievement. This leaves open the possibility that other factors contribute to the reading process. Chief among these are orthographic skill and reading speed (Kirby, Parrila & Pfeiffer, 2003).

The modular nature of components implies that any component of reading can fail to develop normally while other components remain intact. This will result in more than one form of reading difficulty (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). For example, if reading consists of two components, we can expect the following three patterns of reading difficulty profiles: (a) poor decoding but adequate comprehension, (b) adequate decoding but poor comprehension, and (c) poor decoding and poor comprehension. It is also possible that other forms of reading difficulties resulting from challenges in orthographic processing, the ability of a learner to visualise letter symbols, or reading speed, the number of words a learner can read in a specific time, or a combination of the two will be encountered (Kirby et al., 2003). Although phonological challenges account for a majority of the cases of reading difficulties, the reading struggles of some children can originate from challenges in comprehension, and, furthermore, the reading difficulties of some older children can be due to their inability to process information at a rapid rate (Margolis & Brannigan, 2009).

In the present study, reading difficulties are defined broadly as below-average achievement in decoding or reading comprehension. This definition applies to poor reading performance only when such underachievement cannot be attributed to factors such as lack of reading experience or sensory deficits. Reading difficulties, in the present context, is not used as a synonym for dyslexia or specific reading disability but does include dyslexia as one of its several possible manifestations. Also implied in this definition is the belief that certain varieties of reading difficulties are caused by etiological factors that are cognitively distinct from each other. It has to be noted that this way of describing reading difficulties is not universally accepted (Pennington & Bishop, 2009).

Parents often self-label their children as dyslexic. Dyslexia is ironically a word that is often misunderstood. The standard definition of dyslexia is: "Unexpected difficulty in reading in children and adults who otherwise possess the intelligence, motivation and schooling considered necessary for accurate and fluent reading" (Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2005). This definition does not

include reversing letters or mirror writing. Dyslexia is a language deficit and varies from language to language. The phonemic complexity of a language corresponds to the prevalence of dyslexia, confirming the linguistic, and not ocular, origin of this challenge. This understanding is crucial to explain the paradox of intelligent people who experience difficulties in reading. Their higher order cognitive functions are intact. An in-depth discussion of dyslexia is beyond the scope of this study, but essentially, learners with dyslexia will process more like novice readers than fluent ones (Granet et al., 2006).

Having conceptualised reading and reading difficulties, it is also important for this study to pay attention to a conceptualisation of the emotional experiences of parents who raise children identified as having reading difficulties.

## **2.5 CONCEPTUALISATION OF PARENTAL EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES**

Individuals' perceptions and reactions towards the demands they face define whether their emotional reactions from situations are positive or damaging (Fong, 2006). According to Hassal, Rose and McDonald (2005), emotional reaction can be conceptualised as a dynamic, bi-directional relationship between individuals and the environment in which individuals appraise whether their well-being is endangered. These researchers identify two types of cognitive appraisals. In the primary appraisal, individuals evaluate the situations, and in the secondary appraisal, their coping capacities are assessed. Trute, Hiebert-Murphy and Levine (2007) noted that appraisal is important for the individuals to mediate the influence of a stimulus on a stressful situation. However, individuals react to stimuli by evaluating whether they have resources to cope with these stimuli, which causes their emotional reactions (Fong, 2006).

Anthony et al. (2005) explain that parenting behaviours and child adjustment are influenced by a number of factors relating to sociological, environmental and developmental aspects, and the level of parental emotional reactions is dependent upon the appraisals parents make when their parental roles are challenged. Whilst the availability of resources determine the ultimate parenting behaviours, parenting emotions may motivate parents to utilise their resources to support their parenting roles (Anthony et al., 2005).

Zeifman (2003) also emphasised that a negative emotional reaction is a condition of perceived tension between demands that require effort and resources. In other words, these emotions may be generated when childcare demands exceed the capacity of parents to fulfil their roles (Olsson & Hwang, 2002). Keller and Honig (2004) support this idea by indicating that increased care demands of children may lead to heightened parenting stress levels. Furthermore, parental emotional experiences can be a result of the interaction between children's and parents' characteristics (Anthony et al., 2005). Olsson and Hwang (2002) suggested that the levels of these emotions are dependent on the characteristics of parents rather than those of children. Hassall and Rose (2005) also believe that parents' perceptions of children's behaviour and their feelings of competence in parenting contribute to negative emotions. According to their model, negative emotions are conceptualised as a complex construct involving behavioural, cognitive and affective components. While children and environmental characteristics have a direct impact on parent-child interactive emotions, parent characteristics mediate the impact, resulting in a reciprocal link from parental emotions to parent, child, and environmental characteristics (Hassall & Rose, 2005).

Parental emotional reactions can therefore be conceptualised as parents' reactions towards their functioning given the characteristics of themselves, children, and the environment. Parents may experience different emotions when they perceive their inadequacy in providing care and support to their children (Fong, 2006). Given that it is not uncommon for parents to experience strains as a result of parenting, it is critically important to explore the emotions of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties.

### **2.5.1 Emotional experiences in parents of children with reading difficulties**

As mentioned, parenting brings about different emotional experiences to parents, which may lead to a broad variety of psychological and physiological reactions (Fong, 2006). Considering parenting children with reading difficulties, the experiences are far more frustrating. Scott (2004) has argued that parents' most challenging emotions about reading difficulties may include shame, embarrassment, anger and hatred. Despite strenuous efforts made by both children and parents, it may not be easy for children to overcome these difficulties. Their academic

performance may always be challenging to them, which creates intense distress and disappointment. The accumulation of these emotions affects parental perception about the learning challenges of their child and may contribute to the increasing emotional experiences of the parents (Fong, 2006).

In addition, parents of children with reading difficulties can become very anxious (Scott, 2004). This anxiety may be linked to uncertainty and negative apprehension about their children's future (Kenny & McGilloway, 2007). One may argue that these parental worries and anxiety may in turn induce and maintain anxiety in children, given the close interaction between parents and children. Parental emotions may therefore escalate when parents have to deal with both their own and their children's anxiety challenges (Fong, 2006). Furthermore, children with reading difficulties may easily get caught up in unsatisfying parental relationships (Scott, 2004). In addition, children's reading difficulties may have ramifications on the siblings (Dyson, 2010). Sibling rivalry and bullying is not uncommon, especially when those children with reading difficulties take up an unfairly large amount of parental attention or where siblings model parental ambivalence toward their challenged brothers and sisters (Scott, 2004). Thus, the family system may be disturbed, and the tension among family members may increase the emotional experiences of parents (Fong, 2006).

The school context can also be one of the major sources that bring on negative experiences to parents (Fong, 2006). As previously explained, parents may feel that they are not an equal participant in the educational plan of their children. According to Higgins, Raskind, Goldberg and Herman (2002), there are also certain myths about reading difficulties and about the parents of children with reading difficulties from the teachers' perspectives. Whilst some challenged children are perceived as lazy and brainless, their parents are considered by teachers as pushy, unrealistic, over-ambitious and overprotecting of their children. Some parents, on the other hand, were afraid of being regarded as difficult parents, since this might jeopardise their children's interest in school. The negative stereotypes and prejudice formed by some teachers towards children with reading difficulties and their parents may be unfair and unreasonable (Higgins et al., 2002). Heiman and Berger (2008) remarked that the impact of reading difficulties is more powerful than any other form of impairment, as the parents of these children need to face the

continual strain arising from the feelings of their helplessness in watching their children suffer in schools.

When it comes to the South African context, reading difficulties affect the lives of both children and their parents significantly. Although South Africa has adopted the policy of inclusive education, the education system in South Africa is still achievement oriented (Department of Education Strategic Plan, 2011-2014), and children with reading difficulties are disadvantaged because they struggle with reading. Despite the fact that they use extra time and effort to study, their academic performance may still be disappointing. They may reverse letters, find it difficult to spell and write words or be unable to map the word form to its meaning and sound. Thus, the weekly dictation during the primary school years not only makes both children and parents feel frustrated, but may also increase tension and conflict. It may not be easy for parents to understand and accept their children's reading difficulties given that they may not have any intellectual impairment (Fong, 2006).

In a study done by Bull (2003), participants reported individual differences in their experience of parenting a child with learning difficulties. Levels of self-reported parental stress varied, but all the parents reported experiencing a high degree of parental stress. The parents also reported differences in the level of informal social support that was available to them in connection with parenting a child with learning difficulties. Those parents who had mentioned high levels of personal stress also reported lower levels of informal social support. Parents reported that they felt isolated in dealing with learning difficulties and did not receive sufficient social support from friends and family. The majority of parents interviewed as part of Bull's study reported that their primary reason for attending a support group was due to a feeling of not coping or a feeling of distress.

While a broad study had been done by Mary I. Preston in 1939 on the subject, "Maladjustments Arising in Normal Children from an Inability to Learn to Read by Modern Educational Methods," the prominent role played by the reactions of the parents toward the reading failures prompted her decision to treat this topic as a separate paper. Although this study was conducted in 1939, it still makes a significant contribution towards the current study.

In general, failure in arithmetic has then long been accepted with the excuse that the child has "no head for figures", often adding that the child "takes after" the mother (Preston, 1939). No such attitude was found toward reading failure in the parents interviewed in Preston's study. The child that could not read was "one set apart, abnormal, queer or not quite right". To get mixed on fractions and decimals was understandable but to be unable to read - that was beyond the pale. It was past their comprehension that a child of normal intelligence could not learn to read - there must have been something wrong with him. He was seen as backward or perhaps subnormal. Even in cases where the school was blamed, there was always doubt in the minds of parents and relatives regarding the normality of the child, since all about were siblings, classmates, neighbours, cousins or other relatives that had learned to read.

In Preston's study the attitude of the mothers and fathers was expressed by the person providing the history as worried, anxious, distressed, upset, greatly concerned, troubled, bothered or disturbed over the reading situation. Such attitudes are surely not conducive to a feeling of security on the part of the children. Baffled, shocked, desperate, despairing, hurt, discouraged and disheartened expressed the state of mind of other participants. Even emotions such as furiousness, annoyance, sarcasm, impatience, provoked and anger were identified with parents in the study. Preston also documented feelings of severe disgrace, resentfulness, disgust and mortification as expressed by other parents.

According to Preston (1939), these emotional reactions seemingly overrode intelligence, social standing or economic security. It would be strenuous enough to live with any of these attitudes just once in a while but the subject of school and homework occurs five days a week, every year. More than half of the participants in this study had one or more siblings, up to seven years of age, that read well, along with cousins, other relatives and playmates in the neighbourhood that read well and with whom belittling comparisons were made.

In their efforts to assist their children academically, evidently the parents of the children with reading difficulties were not good teachers and apparently did more damage than good through their efforts. Help was given to the children in most cases, and of those parents attempting to give help almost all became impatient and angry when, after teaching a word for about the

fortieth to the hundredth time, it was still unrecognised when next encountered. Parental reactions thus expressed intolerance toward reading failure. The parents described their emotions in terms of anxiety, despair, annoyance, anger, disgust, mortification and desperation. It was found that in the majority of cases parents placed the blame on the child (Preston, 1939).

Meaningful parent-child interaction during the completion of homework has emerged as a significant variable for improving learning for low-performing students (Bailey, 2006). Bailey states that when parents complete specific training modules focused on how to assist their children during the completion of interactive homework assignments, the child's ability to learn can improve. Interactive homework assignments are homework designed to increase parent involvement during the completion of home learning activities and student outcomes. Specific components of the homework have been found to support the notion that as parents interact positively with their children during the completion of this work, children become more engaged and are more likely to learn subject matter (Bailey, 2006). This can also be applied to learning to read as well as improving reading skills. These interactions can also be used to effectively promote meaningful conversations between parents and their children about school work as well as conversations regarding everyday life. These conversations seem to also relieve the emotional burden on the parents (Bailey, 2006).

Increased parental interaction during the completion of home learning activities positively impacts outcomes for students who experience reading difficulties and are at risk of failing academically (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). These researchers reported that not only does parental involvement improve learners' academic performance; it also improves their perceptions of personal competence and self-management. Consequently, when these personal attributes were improved, academic achievements were also positively impacted. And at the same time, learning lags for those learners experiencing reading difficulties were proven to decrease, which in turn positively impacted the parents' emotional experiences regarding their children's progress in school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001).

Emotional experiences encountered by parents of children with reading difficulties come from multiple sources (Fong, 2006). Reading difficulties affect not only the life of an individual child, but also the parents' psychological well-being. This emphasises the importance of exploring the

factors contributing to negative parental experiences, and to understand how parents perceive and cope with these.

### **2.5.2 Parental emotional experiences and parenting styles**

Parenting practices or styles may have a significant impact on the growth and development of children (Berk, 2004). Even so, children's performance may in turn affect parents' perception and appraisal of their own functioning (Fong, 2006). According to Zeifman (2003), negative parenting emotions result when parents' competency in parenting is challenged.

Parenting style has been conceptualised along a number of dimensions such as acceptance, involvement, warmth and control (Fong, 2006). Baumrind (1971) identified three types of parenting styles, namely authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting and permissive parenting. He suggested that authoritative parenting, which is characterised by high parental warmth and moderate control, is an optimal parenting practice for children (as cited in Berk, 2004). Parental involvement and autonomy granting are also some important aspects that differentiate authoritative parenting from other child-rearing practices (Woolfson & Grant, 2006). In contrast, authoritarian parenting style is cold, rejecting, commanding and criticising (Berk, 2004). Permissive parents are warm but overindulgent and exert little control over their children's behaviour, and uninvolved parents are characterised by low acceptance and involvement as well as little control (Fong, 2006).

Scott (2004) has suggested that warmth is the most beneficial and helpful parenting quality for children with reading difficulties. Responsive parenting is also associated with children's positive beliefs about their own competence which may also foster better peer relationships (Fong, 2006). Furthermore, emotional warmth from parents promotes good problem solving skills and impulse control in children (Willinger, Diendorfer-Radner, Willnauer, Jörgl & Hager, 2005). Conversely, overprotective parenting behaviours, which may frequently occur in families of children with reading difficulties, are prone to dependence, social impairments, and low social competence (Safford, Alloy & Pieracci, 2007). In explaining the issue of overprotection, Scott

(2004) argues that this may be due to unresolved parental guilt feelings related to the challenges of their children.

It seems as if parenting styles have a pervasive impact on children's behaviours and performance, which may perpetuate parental emotional experiences (Fong, 2006). However, given the individual characteristics of parents and children, there may not be an optimal parenting style for parents of children with reading difficulties (Fong, 2006). However, it would be invaluable to consider the relationship between parenting styles and parental emotional experiences, and to explore the extent of parenting practices in counteracting the negative outcomes brought about by reading difficulties. It would also be valuable to explore the nature of social support that parents would identify as effective in coping with their parenting roles.

### **2.5.3 Parental emotional experiences and social support**

According to Hassal, Rose and McDonald (2005), social support is defined as the availability of meaningful and enduring relationships that can provide nurturance and security. This may also include resources provided by those outside the family such as informational, instrumental, psychological, and material resources (Keller & Honig, 2004). Whilst social support is more of an interpersonal commitment, it serves a preventative role in decreasing negative responses to life crises and challenges (Keller & Honig, 2004). According to Marmot and Wilkinson (2006), social support can be helpful at all times, and will be particularly effective as a buffer during challenging times such as raising a child with learning barriers.

Social support embraces the concept of both the actual social support system and the perception of support adequacy (Fong, 2006). Green, Furrer and McAllister (2007) have argued that both types are equally important and operate at every stage of the coping and adaptation process. Support for parents can be a collection of intimate to more distant relationships within an immediate or extended family (Deater-Deckard, 2005), but the parental perception of the availability of social support does not necessarily correspond with the actual support. Overall, those who have close relationships with families and who believe that support is accessible, show better adaptation to challenges (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006).

One of the main functions of social support is that it may reduce negative emotions associated with parenting challenges (Fong, 2006). By communicating and sharing with someone who can understand their situations, parents may realise that they are coping with difficulties common to many others (Kerr & McIntosh, 2000). Parents may come to recognise that they share similar experiences with other parents, and thus the number and intensity of stressors faced by them may be reduced (Deater-Deckard, 2005). In addition, Raikes and Thompson (2005) have indicated that social support buffers the challenges of parenting on parental behaviour. When mothers perceive their social support as desirable, parental emotional experiences may have a less pronounced negative effect on their parenting behaviours (Fong, 2006).

Several studies have pointed out that social support can empower parents to cope with the demands of parenting (Fong, 2006). As noted by Cairney, Boyle, Offord and Racine (2003), challenges may produce debilitating effects particularly for mothers that lack adequate social support. Furthermore, mothers whose social support networks enhance their self-esteem may promote their ability to parent more effectively (Hassal, Rose & McDonald, 2005). Likewise, Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch and Ungar (2005) have concluded from their study that smaller networks and less satisfying social support are predicted to be associated with greater negative parental emotions. Green et al. (2007) have suggested that social support can strengthen a parent's defence against unpleasant experiences such as dealing with the challenges of parenting a child with learning barriers.

Despite the fact that most of the studies assert the value of social support in reducing the negative emotional experiences related to parenting demands, it can also be a potential source of negative emotional experiences (Hogan, Linden & Najarian, 2002). As argued by Pakenham, Chiu, Bursnall and Cannon (2007), social support may not only be associated with positive outcomes but can increase parental stress. Taylor (2007) has suggested that social support that is not wanted or appropriate for a particular situation is not helpful, and may even lead to further distress. Similarly, Keller and Honig (2004) have noted that some parents perceive social support as only occasionally helpful. Deater-Deckard (2005) has emphasised that empathy is a critical element in considering social support. When empathy is inaccurately provided by partners or friends, support delivered may become ineffective or damaging even with the best intention (Taylor, 2007).

Regarding the social support for parents of children with reading difficulties, Scott (2004) suggested that perceived support is more important than the actual existence of support when considering spousal support from the father to the mother. Boyd (2002) also indicated that fathers' support was the most significant and had critical impact on the child care outcome. Jones and Passey (2004) reflected on this issue that the mothers consider the support obtained from their own parents as well as other parents with similar situations particularly helpful.

As for the South African context, support for parents of children with reading difficulties appears to be centred on assessing and providing educational support. A collaborative support strategy is followed, involving teachers, institutional-based support teams and the district-based support team. Underlying this strategy is the SIAS (Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support) policy (Department of Education, 2011). This policy guides the identification, assessment and intervention strategies employed for learners with learning barriers. Children and parents may furthermore be referred for assessments or evaluation by professionals from the medical, psychological and educational disciplines (Lam, 2005). Moreover, educational support for children with reading difficulties will be provided by the district educational office, school-based educational programmes such as remedial classes in certain schools, and a few private practitioners (Lam, 2005).

According to Fong (2006), the services and support for children with reading difficulties are inadequate, but the support for their parents is even more insufficient. Parents may seek advice from the professionals that provide services to their children, but support for them appears minimal. Given that the availability of support is limited, one may argue that the support from family and friends is critically important in helping parents to cope with the challenge of raising children with reading difficulties (Fong, 2006). Overall, social support may cover a wide network ranging from the family to the external environment. It may also potentially reduce negative parenting emotions and improve parents' psychological well-being regardless of whether the support is perceived or actual (Fong, 2006). A good understanding of parents' situations, emotions, and experiences by educational psychologists and teachers is beneficial for providing support that can match parents' needs appropriately. This would in turn assist parents in coping with their parenting roles more efficiently.

## 2.6 COPING WITH RAISING A CHILD WITH READING DIFFICULTIES

Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) refer to coping as the thoughts and behaviours used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful. While coping strategies are actions taken with the intention to reduce negative emotions, they can be categorised as problem-focused coping strategies and emotion-focused coping strategies (Baker & Berenbaum, 2007).

As implied by the use of terminology, problem-focused coping strategies aim at solving problems while emotion-focused coping strategies facilitate emotion regulation. Deater-Deckard (2005) has suggested that problem-focused coping strategies are more likely to be carried out when stressors are considered to be under personal control, or the intention is to remove the stressor. Conversely, emotion-focused coping operates to regulate emotions through conscious thought processes rather than altering the source of stress. Thus, problem-focused coping is adaptive, while emotion-focused coping can be adaptive or maladaptive (Austenfeld & Stanton, 2004).

Whilst coping is an ongoing process of adapting to demands of everyday life, there is no clear definition for effective coping (Fong, 2006). Folkman and Moskowitz (2004) argued that there is not a universally effective coping strategy because there are lots of variations among people, situations and emotional processes. Furthermore, parents usually adopt more than one coping strategy in managing stressful events and circumstances (Glidden, Billings & Jobe, 2006). In addition, the availability of resources during the caregiving process is important for parents (Fong, 2006). As suggested by Amatea, Smith-Adcock and Villares (2006), families' resilience towards challenging situations may be related to various kinds of available resources, which mediate the experience of emotions associated with parenting.

DeLongis and Holzman (2005) have suggested that both cognitive and behavioural approaches to useful coping strategies are commonly adopted by parents. Grant and Whittell (2000) have also concluded from their study that families consider the ability to build on personal experience and expertise as an essential element for problem solving. When problem-solving strategies are

perceived to be irrelevant, parents will employ cognitive coping by changing the meaning of the challenging incidents (Grant & Whittell, 2000).

Deater-Deckard (2005) has suggested that it may depend on factors such as parents' personal attributes as well as their ability to utilise and alter their coping strategies in considering whether successful adaptive coping takes place. Parents who consider their children as individuals with their unique characteristics may have warmer relationships, which in turn may minimise the negative emotional experiences they may have to face (Woolfson & Grant, 2006). Also, parents that have sufficient knowledge about parenthood and child characteristics may be able to form more realistic expectations (Grusec, Goodnow & Kuczynski, 2000). Apparently, when parents are physically and psychologically prepared for their parenting roles, they would be more competent to cope with the demands thereof (Fong, 2006).

Coping plays a crucial role in parents of children with reading difficulties regarding helping themselves and their children to face daily challenges (Fong, 2006). As suggested by Scott (2004), if the parents can cope well, it is likely that their children will cope better. In Heiman and Berger's (2008) study, the mothers were keen to seek advice and guidance from school, specialist literature or professionals. This may indicate that mothers can cope with their children's reading difficulties by actively finding resources to help them (Fong, 2006).

Coping with children's reading difficulties involves many struggles and challenges. Some parents may have difficulties in dealing with their emotions while others may persistently try their best to cope with their children's reading difficulties. Since the coping process is no easy task, it would be imperative to explore coping behaviours as well as to know how parents manage it.

## 2.7 THE PRESENT STUDY

Parenting a child with reading difficulties was framed in the bio-ecological model of Bronfenbrenner as well as Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres. A core feature of parental

experiences and coping in this parenting role is the idea of parents' perception of the demands of their roles and access to available resources for meeting these demands (Fong, 2006). For parents of children with reading difficulties, the issue becomes more complicated because they have to deal with the impact brought about by the reading difficulties of their children in the South African educational context. The challenge can be very intense and demanding. Although research studies have been conducted on reading difficulties, the focus is mainly on the children (Fong, 2006). Equally, in spite of the existing literature on parenting, the emphasis on the emotional experiences related to parenting children with reading difficulties is very limited. Given the high prevalence rate of reading difficulties within the local context, a great need exists for a study on understanding the experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences generated from parenting children with reading difficulties. In particular, the parents of secondary school learners with reading difficulties will be invited to participate in this study. In the next chapter the research design for the study will be explained, including the research method, sampling strategy, data collection methods and methods of data analysis.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate and describe the experiences of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties. To be able to understand, describe, and interpret parents' experiences, this study adopts qualitative research methods. Brantlinger, Jimenz, Kingner, Pugach, and Richardson (2005, p. 195) found that qualitative designs "do produce science-based evidence that can inform policy and practice in special education". Few studies have given voice to the parents of children with reading difficulties regarding their experiences in raising their children. Therefore, the findings of this study may make a significant contribution to the topic of reading difficulties by adding to the lack of literature focusing on the experienced viewpoint of the parents. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) the exploratory nature of qualitative studies enables the researcher to investigate little-understood phenomena, as well as identify important themes or categories in the participants' world.

The previous chapter presented a comprehensive review of the literature. This chapter presents the methodology that guided the study and describes the chosen research design. Included in this chapter is the discussion of the data collection methods as well as the analysis procedures that were used. Also described within this chapter are the study's limitations, delimitations, and assumptions as well as ethical considerations.

#### **3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In Chapter 1 the research questions that guide this study were formulated. These questions will lead to the purpose of the study, namely to gain insight into the experiences of parents who have children identified with reading difficulties. These questions were:

- 1      What are the specific experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties?

- 2 What are the parents' experiences and difficulties regarding the assessment, schooling and intervention of the child?
- 3 How do these parents perceive their support network and what coping strategies do these parents make use of?
- 4 How can these parents be supported by educational psychologists and other support personnel?
- 5 How can these parents be empowered to assist their children and contribute to intervention strategies?

The main research question that guides this study therefore is: What are the experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties? A detailed discussion on the research process and design implemented to answer these questions will now follow.

### **3.3 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

As was discussed in Chapter 1, a paradigm is a system of interrelated ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions that act as a perspective that provides a rationale for the research and commit the researcher to particular methods of data collection, observation and interpretation (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state that the researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology), which are then examined (methodology, analysis) in specific ways. That is, empirical materials bearing on the research questions are collected and then analysed and written about. The researcher is “bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which - regardless of ultimate truth or falsity - become partially self-validating” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13). The net that contains the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises may be termed a paradigm or interpretive framework, a “basic set of beliefs that guides action” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13).

Creswell (2007) classified research paradigms into three philosophically distinct categories as positivism, interpretivism and postmodernism. This study is guided by the interpretive paradigm.

It can be also called the “anti-positivist” paradigm because it was developed as a reaction to positivism (Mack, 2010). It is also sometimes referred to as constructivism because it emphasises the ability of the individual to construct meaning. The interpretive paradigm was heavily influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology, as described in Chapter 1. Hermeneutics is the study of meaning and interpretation in historical texts (Mack, 2010). This meaning-making cyclical process is the basis on which the interpretive paradigm was established (Mack, 2010). Another strong influence is the philosophical movement of phenomenology. A phenomenologist advocates the need to consider human beings’ subjective interpretations, their perceptions of their world as our starting point in understanding social phenomena (Creswell, 2007). Therefore the ontological assumptions of interpretivism are that social reality is seen by multiple people and these people interpret events differently, leaving multiple perspectives of an incident (Mack, 2010).

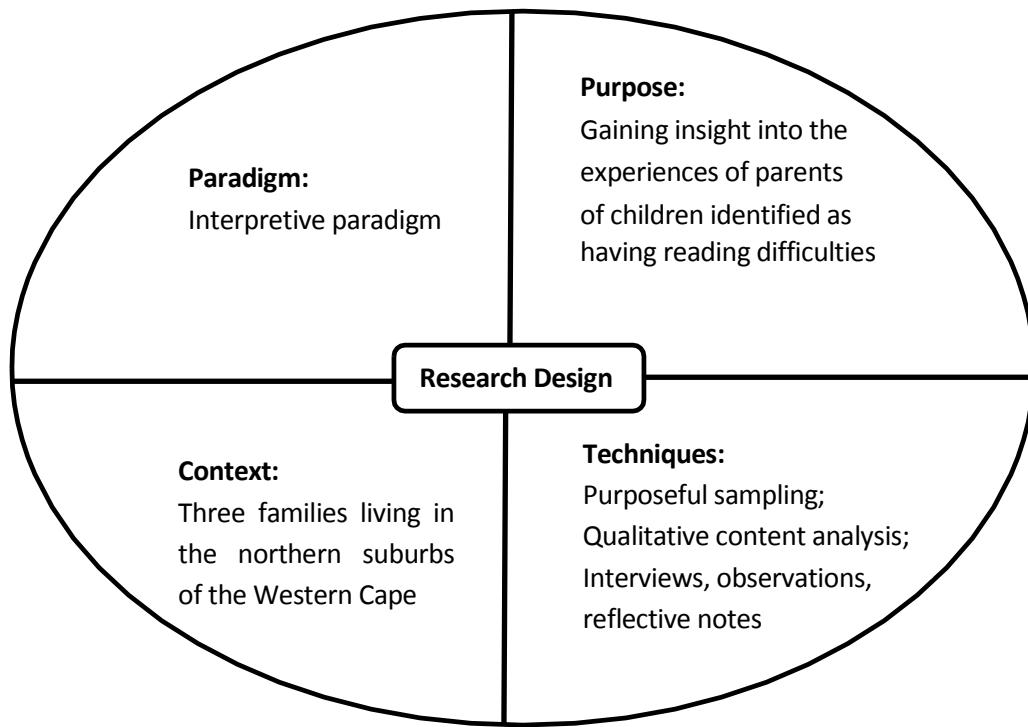
Interpretive research therefore emphasises that phenomena can never be objectively observed from the outside, but should rather be observed from the inside through the direct experience of people. The role of the researcher in the interpretive paradigm is to “understand, explain, and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 19). Researchers in this paradigm seek to understand rather than explain.

### **3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN**

A research design is a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between the research question and the implementation of the research (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). A research design is developed along the dimensions of the purpose of the research, the theoretical paradigm informing the research, the context within which the research is carried out and the research techniques employed to collect and analyse data (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

The purpose of this study, namely capturing the experiences of parents raising children with reading difficulties, as well as the context of the study, informed the interpretive paradigm within which the study is conducted. Within this paradigm fit the techniques of purposeful sampling for

identifying research participants, interviewing, observation and collating reflective notes as data collection methods and qualitative content analysis methods (Figure 3.1).



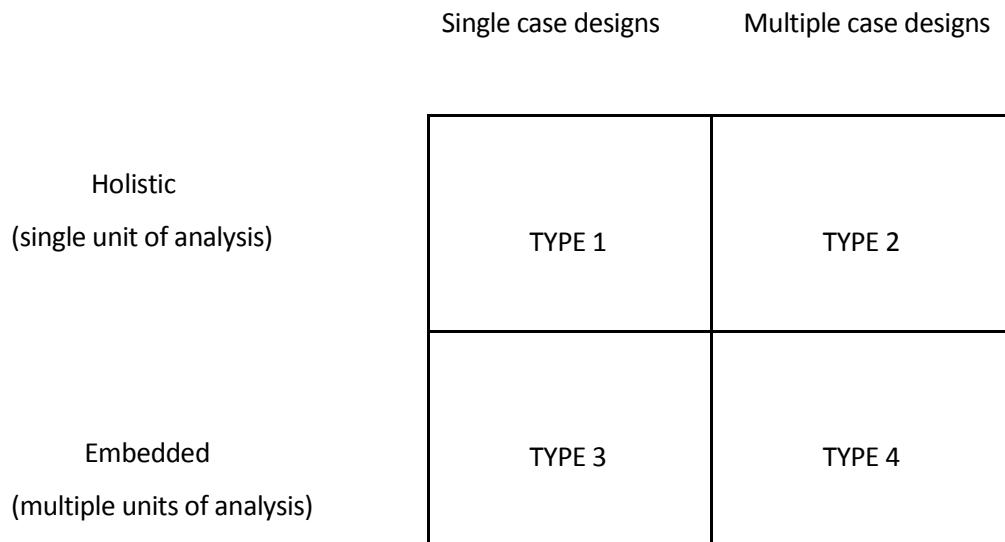
### *3.1 The research design of the current study*

## 3.5 RESEARCH METHODS

The case study has become an accepted vehicle for conducting research in a variety of disciplines. However, the meaning behind the term is not always made clear by researchers and this has given rise to a number of assumptions which are open to challenge, and to questions about the robustness of the method (Bergen & While, 2000). For this study, the term 'case study' refers to the collection of detailed, relatively unstructured information from a range of sources about a particular individual, group, phenomenon or institution (Gerring, 2006). The case study is therefore a descriptive method within the qualitative framework. It relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data converging in a triangulating fashion and benefiting from the prior

development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis (Bergen & While, 2000).

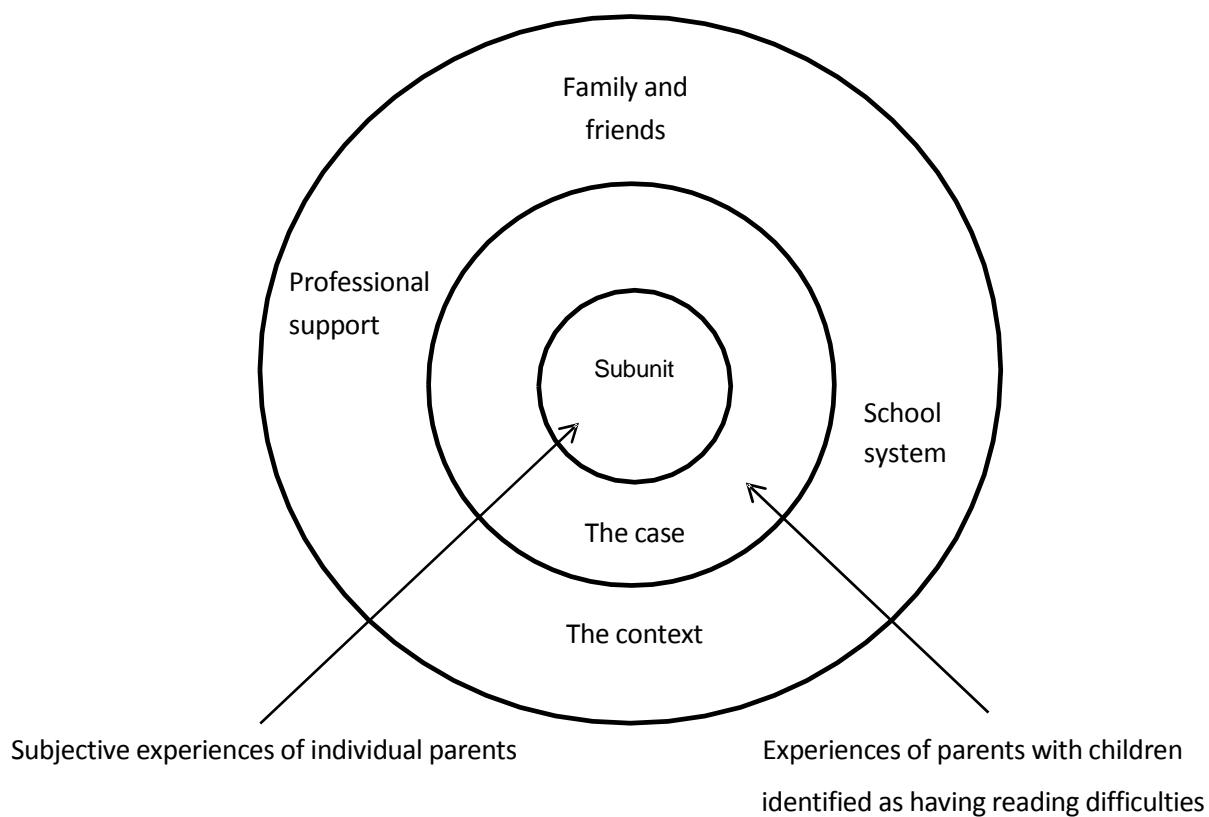
Yin (2008) described a 2 x 2 matrix, where the horizontal axis represents single and multiple case designs, while the vertical axis differentiates between 'holistic' and 'embedded' designs; since, within these two types, that is, single and multiple case designs, there can also be unitary or multiple units of analysis (Figure 3.2).



*Figure 3.2: Basic types of design for case studies (Yin, 2008).*

For the purpose of this study a type 3 case study design will be followed. I decided to adopt Yin's notion of designating a unit smaller than the case for purposes of analysis, in order to build up the case picture. Thus the case (the experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties) is subdivided into its component parts (the experiences of the individual parents). In order to be clear about terminology, the former (the case) is termed the main unit and the latter (individual experiences) a subunit (Figure 3.3) (Bergen & While, 2000). The unit and subunit are qualitatively the same; that is, comprised of individual experiences, rather than, for example, individuals.

The term 'unit of analysis', like the term 'case', has two distinct meanings, and here the terminology of Moser and Kalton (1971) (as cited in Yin, 2008) is helpful. They differentiated between sampling units (the sources of data collection) and units of enquiry (the subjects or variables to be investigated). Thus, units of enquiry comprised the case as the main unit with individual experiences as the subunits. Yin (2008) also states that the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clearly demarcated and it seemed clear that the case study would necessarily include data relating to that context. Contextual issues were shown in the literature to be important to the phenomenon of case studies, in the form of family systems, professional support and local organisational structures, so Yin's specific counsel of inclusion would certainly seem appropriate here. Since data about the relevant contexts were also to be included, these were termed contextual units of enquiry.



*Figure 3.3: The case and the context*

### 3.5.1 Participants and sampling

Sampling is the decision-making process that the researcher uses to choose and select the research participants for the study from the population at large (Durrheim, 2006). Determination of the sampling units depended on the research questions and the data needed to answer these questions, and in this study it seemed that interviews with parents had the best potential to elicit the type of data required to fulfil the research aims. An understanding of the nature of the sampling unit is crucial to an understanding of the nature of external validity within case study design (Bergen & While, 2000).

Critics have argued that case study research is a poor basis for generalisation (Gerring, 2006) but this criticism is based on traditional sampling theory, itself based on the representativeness of sample selection and the consequent ability to make inferences about a population. Gerring (2006) suggested that the purpose of a lot of research, not just case study approaches, is seldom an entirely new understanding of phenomena, but rather a 'refinement of understanding'. This is particularly the case with what is termed the collective case study design, where several cases are selected in order that, by counter-example, each case study invites modification of the generalisation, though a positive example is neither likely to establish a generalisation nor to modify one, but may increase the confidence that readers have in their (or the researcher's) generalisation (Gerring, 2006). Analysis is based on a search for patterns across a number of cases and for a refinement of understanding through what Stake (2006) termed 'categorical aggregation of instances'. However, to Bergen and While (2000) the single case could also be seen as representative in its own right, provided that there was a sufficiently detailed description, since this would lead to a clearer understanding.

This study focused upon the lived experiences of parents, representing three children identified with having reading difficulties. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary. The sample was purposeful, and the three parent participants were chosen using criterion-based selection. Purposive sampling is one of the most common forms used when conducting qualitative research and is "based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (Merriam, 2009,

p. 77). The goal of utilising a purposeful sample is to truly represent the typical experience of parents whose children have a reading difficulty. Due to the need to conduct in-depth interviews with each participant, this study utilised a small sample size of three participants as suggested by Creswell (2003). The research participants are selected with a clear purpose in mind: a small sample can lead to data and findings which provide insight more efficiently than a large, randomised sample (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of this study, the number of participants selected provided enough in-depth information for analysis. Criterion-based selection was implemented. According to Merriam (2009), formulating these selection criteria is the first step in purposive sampling. This involves stating the qualities or characteristics the researcher wants to investigate and then finding units of analysis which match those qualities and the purpose of the study. Participants in this study met the following criteria:

- They were parents to a child (aged 14-18) attending a secondary school in the northern suburbs of the Western Cape district of South Africa.
- The child must have been formally identified as having reading difficulties.
- They were willing and able to accurately recount their experiences relating to their child's reading difficulties.
- They were willing to give details about their personal interaction with their child and those responsible for their child's academic progression.

The parents participating in the study each have a child with reading difficulties who is in secondary school and who lives with both parents. Due to the fact that learners' secondary school careers can be perceived as more challenging than their previous school years, the increasing demands on learners and therefore the parents, with the added demands of reading difficulties, may prove to be valuable to this study. It may also be possible that these parents have a deeper and richer experience of the impact brought about by reading difficulties, given that they have accompanied their children's transitioning from primary to secondary schools. The parents have gained this experience over some time since the initial identification of their child's reading difficulties. The parents were therefore selected for this study to provide a deeper perspective on the emotional experiences of parenting.

The participants were identified by one parent of a learner with a reading difficulty living in the same community. This stage of the sampling process is referred to as snowball sampling. The identified parents were telephonically requested to meet the researcher for a short appointment at their home where the nature and purpose of the study was explained. The parents were then invited to participate in this study and the researcher explained that such participation would entail being available for interviewing and observations as well as compiling reflective notes on their experiences.

### **3.5.2 Methods of Data Collection and Analysis**

For this interpretive study, interviews, observations and the analysis of documents fit well into the design of qualitative research, as suggested by Merriam (2009). The use of triangulation was said by Yin (2008) to strengthen the construct validity of the research - the establishment of the correct operational measures for the concepts being studied. Bergen and While (2000) made the point that there is no clear agreement on the meaning of triangulation in research and it is used in very different ways, therefore, its meaning was specified within this study. The purpose, as well as the type, of triangulation in any research needs to be made clear, since it affects the logic of the overall design.

For this study it was helpful to triangulate both data collection methods and data sources, with the object of convergence around the framework constructed from the literature. Structured interviews were selected as the major feature, conducted with different key informants (parents) from each case. Additionally, reflective notes were written by parents pertaining to their subjective experiences, thoughts and emotions since first identifying reading difficulties experienced by their child. Observation, another data collection method common to the case study, was made during parent-child interactions, especially homework times.

#### *3.5.2.2 Data Collection*

The data collection methods for this study equated with each of the multiple sources of evidence

used, while the individual sources of data within these methods equated to what Yin (2008) termed 'data points'.

### *3.5.2.2.1 Literature Review*

According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006), a research study does not exist in isolation, but must be built upon what has been done previously. This implies that researchers need to review previous work done in the field to put their study in context before continuing with the study. A literature review involves the identification of literature relevant to a specific study, an initial assessment of these sources, thorough analysis of selected sources and the construction of an account integrating and explaining relevant sources (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The literature on reading difficulties, the role of the parent in children's academic development and the experiences of parents with children who struggle academically were reviewed in order to supply contextual data on professional theory and research evidence. Interviews, the second method of data collection, were conducted to provide further information on how these aspects were operationalised.

### *3.5.2.2.2 Structured Interviews*

Data for the study was collected through structured interviewing and the use of an interview guide (Addendum D). This was identified as a principal data collection method in case study research by Gerring (2006). According to Patton (2002), the main purpose of interviewing is to enter into the participants' perspective to find out how they interpret the issues under discussion. As the focus of this study was on the experiences of parents, the interviews allowed them to recall and reflect upon their emotions and thoughts. Thus, interviewing was an appropriate and relevant technique for this study.

Amongst the various forms of interviews suggested by Fontana and Frey (2005), individual face-to-face, structured, in-depth interviewing was chosen as the most suitable method to collect data. The main questions as well as the issues to be explored were planned, but the wording and the order of questions were not predetermined. An interview guide (Addendum D) that contained

questions and important issues was developed to guide the interviews. I conducted all the interviews in this study. To promote a sense of privacy, I interviewed the participants at a mutually agreed time and location. Before commencing with the interviews, participants had to sign a letter of consent (Addendum B). Throughout the interviews, I used verbal and non-verbal probes that focused on the participants' experiences. I also clarified with participants any ambiguity in their description so that they were understood correctly. Interviews ended when the participants believed that they had exhausted their descriptions. The duration of the interviews ranged from 150 minutes to 180 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and were transcribed in Afrikaans for data analysis. Only segments of the interviews and reflective notes that were quoted in Chapter 4 were translated into English.

#### *3.5.2.2.3 Observations*

Observations were the second method for data collection. Non-participant observations were used in this study (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Observations took place at the family's home when the parents assist the child with homework. Field notes, described by Terre Blanche et al. (2006) as copious notes made by the researcher during observations, were compiled from these observations - which will be used for data analysis.

#### *3.5.2.2.4 Participant Reflections*

The analysis of reflective notes written by the parents who participated in the study provided additional data. The parents who participated in the study were requested to write reflective notes on their experiences and feelings throughout the research period (Addendum C). Reflective notes can be used to elicit a written account of someone's perceptions and meaning-making processes regarding a specific event, as well as to stimulate thought about it (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This allows the participant to reflect on certain issues and to voice their thoughts, opinions and beliefs. It also provides them with the opportunity to explore their thoughts at their own time and pace without interference from an outsider (Patton, 2002). These reflective notes were then be coded for data analysis.

### 3.5.2.3 Data Analysis

As stated in Chapter 1, this study made use of qualitative content analysis in order to make sense of the data collected. Qualitative data analysis is the process of structuring the data and finding meanings from the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Congruent with the assumptions that regularities and sequences exist in social phenomena, data analysis involves description and explanation (Huberman & Miles, 2005).

The interview data were transcribed verbatim. I transcribed all the interview data myself. Data analysis began with data coding. Coding is the process of labelling data so as to give meaning to it (Huberman & Miles, 2005). For this study, this was achieved by means of finding regularities and patterns from the data and writing down codes to represent the topics and patterns covered. The codes were reduced and categorised according to their nature to help establish coding categories. Themes or topical focuses related to the research emerged from the categories. Data analysis was also conducted in the same way with the reflective notes written by the participants as well as the field notes compiled from the observations.

The analysis of the data aimed to reach an explanation, understanding or interpretation of the investigation. Analysis was conducted through the processes of data reduction as well as arrangement and display of data in order to discern patterns and themes in the data. Conclusions were drawn from the meaning derived from the data, assessing their implications and verifying the data by revisiting it and cross-checking it for themes and patterns (Huberman & Miles, 2005; Merriam, 2009). This study thus focuses on content analysis. Coding was used to combine themes, ideas and categories in order to interpret the data. While analysing the collected information, discrepant data emerged. Discrepant data is data that does not support or may challenge the emerging patterns within the study. When such data appeared that did not fit the pattern of other data collected, it was recorded, analysed and coded as discrepant data in order to increase the credibility of the results reported. Seeking alternative explanations and considering what discrepant data tells the researcher about emerging conclusions can add greater validity to a qualitative study (Huberman & Miles, 2005).

## **3.6 CREDIBILITY AND RELIABILITY**

### **3.6.1 Data Verification Strategies**

Merriam (2009) emphasises the importance of gaining valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner while conducting qualitative research. The terms reliability and validity are relevant to quantitative research, but less so to qualitative research due to its subjective nature. Instead, terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are often used in qualitative research regarding the trustworthiness of the research (Merriam, 2009).

Credibility acknowledges that reality is subjective and that there are many perspectives which influence it. Credibility is therefore the correspondence between the way in which the researcher interprets and presents the research findings and the meanings and perspectives of the research participant (Merriam, 2009). Strategies implemented in this study to promote credibility include triangulation, adequate engagement in data collection, an audit trail and reflexivity (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability refers to the consistency, or reliability, of research (Shenton, 2004). Dependability allows the researcher to assess if a study has made use of best practices and if its findings can be considered to be ‘reliable’ within the specific context (Shenton, 2004). Strategies implemented to ensure the dependability of this study are triangulation, reflexivity and the use of an audit trail (Merriam, 2009).

Transferability refers to the instance that findings of research can be transferred to certain other contexts if the contextual influences are documented in the research in question and are applicable to other situations (Shenton, 2004). Merriam (2009) identifies strategies to promote the transferability of research findings, including using thick, or rich, descriptions of data and the use of maximum variation in the sample population.

Confirmability refers to the issue of objectivity (Shenton, 2004). The researcher needs to be aware of his or her own predispositions and how these might influence the research process (Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). This can be promoted by triangulation and reflexivity.

Merriam (2009, p. 215) describes triangulation as a manner of increasing a study's credibility by using "multiple methods, measures, researchers, and perspectives". Triangulation can therefore be used to promote the credibility, dependability and confirmability of the research. Triangulation was applied in this research study through methods triangulation and triangulation of sources (Patton, 2002). Three different methods were used during the data collection process, including structured interviews, observations and reflective notes. The researcher was also able to triangulate data from different sources, namely three parents of children identified as having reading difficulties.

Merriam (2009) describes the audit trail as an account of decisions and descriptions of the research process, with a particular focus on data collection and analysis. Chapters 3 and 4 of this study, which describe the research process and data analysis methods, act as an audit trail for the research. Data is presented in the form of quotations and addenda are attached to demonstrate the processes that were followed. The audit trail therefore explains how the research findings were arrived at and promotes confidence in the findings (Merriam, 2009).

The reliability of the study was furthermore ensured by using more than one method for data collection and continuously checking for the validity of the data throughout the research process. A continuous process of testing for fit between themes, sub-themes and data was followed.

### **3.7 DELIMITATIONS AND KEY ASSUMPTIONS**

This study focuses only on the experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties. It thus does not include the experience of the children with reading difficulties. It also does not include the experiences of parents or children with other learning difficulties, e.g. mathematical difficulties or other language difficulties. The study was conducted in the form of a case study on three parents and can thus not be generalised to the wider population. The goal of

this study was not to make generalisations about the participants' experiences but to understand how the participants make sense of their everyday lives as parents of children who have been identified as having reading difficulties. Brantlinger et al. (2005, p. 203) cautioned that qualitative research is not done for the purposes of generalisation but rather to produce evidence based on the exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals: "It is expected that readers will see similarities to their situations and judge the relevance of the information produced to their own circumstances". Hatch (2002, p. 7) supported the idea that qualitative research should not attempt to generalise the participants' experiences, but rather it should "explore human behaviors within the contexts of their natural occurrence".

It was assumed that the use of the phenomenological research method was an appropriate means of managing and analysing data as reported by the research participants. This assumption was reasonable based upon the unique nature of the phenomenological research, as this process assists the researcher in isolating themes discovered with the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the parents of children with reading difficulties. The phenomenological method of research has been frequently utilised in qualitative reporting and has proven to render successful data with validity. It was also assumed that despite the controversy about how one is initially identified as having a reading difficulty and how interventions are dispersed, the phenomenon of having a child identified with reading difficulties was worthy of exploring in the hope that it may assist service providers in offering optimal support for these parents and their families and therefore adding value to their quality of life.

### **3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Permission was granted to perform this study by the Research Ethics Committee of Human Research (Humanities) of Stellenbosch University (Addendum A). The research participants were thoroughly informed of the nature of the research and the steps in the research process (Allan, 2008). They voluntarily participated in the research and were aware of their freedom to withdraw from the research at any time. The participants also have the right to anonymity in any presentation or publication that might arise out of the research (Allan, 2008).

After acceptance into the study, participants were asked to review and sign a consent form (Addendum B) prior to participating in the interviews. The study accepted only participants who signed the consent form. Anonymity was guaranteed in that no individual responses were linked to a specific participant. The participants were given pseudonyms that were known only to the researcher and were not revealed to any third parties. The identities of the participants were thus concealed, unless otherwise preferred and only information that is central to the study was gained. Raw data containing participants' personal details was securely stored. The researcher only carried out procedures which she was competent to conduct.

All participants in the study were treated ethically by using the principle of beneficence. In other words, participants were treated with a standard of respect and consideration. The study aims to benefit the participants by providing a guideline for support for these participants as well as other researchers and society. All information was treated with the strictest confidentiality.

### **3.9 CONCLUSION**

This chapter aimed to substantiate the use of the qualitative phenomenological methodology to study the question: What are the experiences of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties? The setting, the northern suburbs of the Western Cape Province of South Africa, provided three parents whose children attend secondary schools within this region. Included in this chapter was a discussion of the data collection methods, the analysis procedures, the study's limitations, delimitations and assumptions as well as ethical considerations regarding the research participants. Chapter 4 presents the results of this study as obtained using qualitative methods of data analysis.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

This phenomenological study employed qualitative research strategies. Three participants were invited to attend structured interviews to share with the researcher their experiences in raising a child with reading difficulties. These parents were also requested to write reflective notes on their parenting experiences for a six-month period. The researcher furthermore conducted observations of the parent-child interactions during homework times. This chapter presents the outcomes of the study's data analysis as well as the results of this study in a manner that addresses the research question: What are the experiences of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties? This data will be presented according to the themes and sub-themes identified during the process of qualitative content analysis and followed by a discussion of the findings. These findings will then be interpreted in terms of existing literature in answer to the research question.

#### **4.2 RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This qualitative content analysis identified four themes with subsequent sub-themes. The four themes identified were:

1. The experiences of the initial acknowledgment that the child has been identified as having reading difficulties and the process of seeking professional assistance for the child.
2. The experiences of the parents' relationship with the identified child. This encompassed the areas of homework, explaining reading difficulties to the child and the description of the parents' emotions and perceptions about the identification and knowledge of their child having reading difficulties.

3. The experiences of maintaining relationships and interactions with significant others. This includes the relationships with siblings, the relationship with the spouse or partner, the relationships with extended family and friends, and gaining social support.
  
4. The experiences of parents with interactions with teachers and the child's school.

The four identified themes reflect the subjective realities of the parents involved in the study and their perception of their experiences in raising a child with reading difficulties. The data presented in the following sections is taken from the three sources of data generated during the data collection process, namely the structured interviews, the parents' written reflective notes, and the field notes compiled from observations during homework times at the respective family homes. These data sources are presented in Table 4.1. When data is presented in this section, the source will be indicated by the abbreviation used in Table 4.1. A summary of the themes and sub-themes identified during analysis of the data gathered in this study is presented in Table 4.2.

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Data source</b>		
Participant 1 Mercia* (daughter Nadia*): (P1)	Interview 1: (I1)	Reflective notes 1: (R1)	Field notes 1: (F1)
Participant 2 Vera* (son Marius*): (P2)	Interview 2: (I2)	Reflective notes 2: (R2)	Field notes 2: (F2)
Participant 3 Kate* (son Riaan*): (P3)	Interview 3: (I3)	Reflective notes 3: (R3)	Field notes 3: (F3)
* Names changed for confidentiality purposes			

*Table 4.1 Data Sources*

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Sub-Themes</b>
1. Parents' experiences with their child's initial identification with reading difficulties.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Parents' emotional experiences with the initial identification.</li> <li>▪ Experiencing different opinions from different professionals.</li> </ul>
2. Parents' experiences on their relationship with the identified child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Emotions and perceptions on parents' knowledge of their child having reading difficulties.</li> <li>▪ Experiences on assisting their child with homework.</li> <li>▪ Experiences on explaining the reading difficulties to their child.</li> <li>▪ Parents' concerns about their child's self-esteem.</li> <li>▪ Parents' experience on coping with raising their child.</li> </ul>
3. Parents' experiences on their relationship with significant others and social support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relationships with the identified child's siblings.</li> <li>▪ Relationship with the parent's spouse.</li> <li>▪ Relationships with family and friends.</li> </ul>
4. Parents' experiences on interactions with teachers and the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Interaction with the identified child's teachers.</li> <li>▪ Interactions with the child's school.</li> </ul>

Table 4.2 Themes and Sub-themes

#### **4.2.1 Parents' experiences with their child's initial identification with reading difficulties**

Within this category, two types of experiences emerged from parents who participated in this research. First, the emotional experiences of the parents when the initial observation and identification of possible reading difficulties were discovered and, second, the experiences of the parent seeking assistance to address it. These will now be discussed under the appropriate sub-themes.

##### *4.2.1.1 Parents' emotional experiences with the initial identification of their child's reading difficulties*

All three parents who participated in this study reported feeling anxious when first discovering their child's challenge with reading. They reported searching anxiously for "quick fixes" and feeling very worried. Feelings of frustration, shock, uncertainty, resistance, confusion, sadness, anger, feeling out of control and fear were also reported. Parents furthermore articulated powerlessness and dismay because of wanting to help their child, but not knowing how.

"I was very anxious. I was looking for quick fixes. I had his eyes tested, everything. It felt like a big black hole within me. Of course I worried all the time - what will become of him?"  
(P3-I3)

"I was so worried and anxious. I felt dismayed and powerless. Frustrated. I didn't know how I could help him. I was worried that he wouldn't pass" (P2-I2).

"It was a hard pill to swallow and difficult to accept. To me it was the most painful moment of my life. My child burst into tears frequently - my heart wanted to break" (P2-R2).

"It felt as if I was losing my child and as if I could hit my head against a wall" (P1-I1).

"I didn't know what was going on. I couldn't lay my finger on the problem. I was so frustrated. It was terrible. I was very shocked. It was as if I was just wandering about purposelessly. I started getting anxious. I cried in my bed at night. My heart broke for my

child. I didn't know which way to turn. I feared her not passing her next grade. It felt as if I was going mad. I had this anger and this sadness inside of me. I can't tell you what emotions a person experiences. I just wanted to know what I could do to help" (P1-I1).

Participant 1 articulated how she felt when first approached by a teacher with the possibility that her child might have reading difficulties:

"What a shock. My brain worked overtime. At first I thought that the teacher was imagining it. I was so confused" (P1-R1).

"My heart broke when I had to send my child off to be assessed. She doesn't understand what these tests are all about. My heart was very heavy when I left her there" (P1-R1).

#### *4.2.1.2 Parents' experiences on receiving different opinions from different professionals in seeking assistance for their child*

All the participants in this study articulated high levels of frustration and confusion in seeking assistance for their child, and then being sent from one professional to the other, without receiving effective assistance and intervention for their child. Parents' frustration was also elevated by different opinions given by different professionals regarding their child's challenge. All three participants were initially informed that their child was suffering from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and advised to treat this challenge with prescribed medication. These parents subsequently diagnosed their children themselves in order to cope with the ordeal and move forward in terms of intervention.

Participant 2 described this experience:

"I had so many opinions. I had more an opinion about it than anybody else. I went to see so many people. The first psychologist said he has ADHD. The last psychologist I took him to said he has symptoms of dyslexia. They said so many things: his eyes, ADHD. I made the conclusion in the end" (P2-I2).

“His teacher said that he needs to see the remedial teacher on a frequent basis. I organised it immediately. I was so glad they had identified him with something and that I wasn’t wrong. But he made no progress. I decided to take things in my own hands and demanded a report from the remedial teacher. Again I hoped that there will be progress. Three months later there was no progress and his class teacher recommended that I take him to a biokineticist. He recommended that I take him to a psychologist. The result: ADHD. That was difficult to accept. The psychologist recommended that he go for reading lessons. One day he looked at me with tears in his eyes and said: you don’t understand, I am trying very hard, but it is not working. On our way home he asked me what was wrong with him and why everybody can’t just leave him alone. In that moment I realised that I was losing his trust in me. I promised him we would look for the solution together. I took him to an optometrist who gave him glasses with coloured lenses. When the glasses didn’t work the man got irritated and said that my child is lying and doesn’t want to admit that it is better, because it’s just easier to say: I can’t read. I was furious. I took him to another woman who gave him reading lessons. I then took him to another optometrist who does eye exercises. Things just started getting too much for the both of us. I was once again referred to an optometrist. The optometrist told me to go to a pediatrician who specialises in ADHD. She recommended he go on Ritalin. I was so confused and frustrated, I didn’t know what to do anymore. Again I started looking for answers. I took him to a psychologist again who told me that he will not be able to cope in a mainstream high school” (P2-R2).

The other participants had similar experiences:

“The teacher told me she thinks that he has ADHD. I realised something was not quite right. Then he went on Ritalin and then Stratera. Nothing helped. Then I had his eyes tested, everything” (P3-R3).

“In grade 1 the teacher was worried because she reversed her letters. When she was in grade 3 or 4, the teacher said she thinks that she has ADHD, I must have her tested. She was pretty straightforward about it. I felt very negative because there is so much negative information about medication for ADHD out there. I took her from one psychologist to the other. I felt even more confused. One psychiatrist told me that my child was severely

depressed. Another psychologist suspected she had ADD which is linked to ADHD. She advised me to take her to a doctor for evaluation. The doctor recommended that we put her on Ritalin and see what happens. The teacher got even more worried and recommended that my child goes to the remedial teacher. The teacher did preliminary test and determined that she is dyslexic. Then I took her to another psychologist who agreed that something is wrong, but also couldn't tell me what it is. That psychologist referred me to another psychologist because she couldn't help us. It was very frustrating. I then took her to a male psychologist because she has always 'bonded' better with her father than with me. He referred me to another psychiatrist" (P1-R1).

"The teacher thought that he had ADHD. I took him to so many people, nothing helped. I lived in fear that he would fail his grade at some point or another. I thought he had a form of dyslexia. Out of ignorance I wanted to label my child myself" (P3-R3).

Being referred to so many professionals also has its financial implications, which puts further strain on the parents:

"It was a big deal to me. She got remedial teaching for free for a year because we just couldn't afford to pay the woman. And she was in dire need of it. And the money for the psychologist, doctors, everybody. If we didn't have a medical fund, I don't know what we would have done" (P1-I1).

"And then all the bills of all the people I took him to had come. It was a lot of money. What a nightmare" (P3-I3).

"All the psychologists, remedial teachers, optometrists, special school... it's just money, money, money" (P2-I2).

Even though seeing so many professionals and getting so many opinions are confusing and frustrating to parents, the parents in this study did however report that consulting a professional person who was able to correctly identify their child's challenge and give them appropriate and much needed support and guidance was very helpful to them.

"One of the best decisions of my life was taking him to an educational psychologist. He told me that he is definitely not dyslexic but has a genetic problem with reading and

spelling. It is the most wonderful thing I have ever done in my life - taking him to the right person. It is the best advice I can give to other parents: take your child to the right professionals” (P3-I3).

“Since he had been given a spelling concession, my life has changed” (P3-R3).

“The psychologist was amazing. He always made me feel better, that the road ahead will get better. He listened to me and suggested things I can try. He gave me advice about how to act towards her in certain situations. How to handle her anger. How to encourage her in her schoolwork and how to help her strengthen her relationships with her friends” (P1-R1).

“I felt relieved because someone other than me was willing to fight for him. I was getting help. I felt as if a mountain was lifted from my shoulders. The feeling that I was not going to fail him was the best feeling I had ever felt” (P2-R2).

“I gave my family the report I got from the psychologist. I think they realised for the first time that he can’t cope on his own” (P2-R2).

“It is incredibly important to get your child to the right people who can help him and who can give you guidance” (P2-R2).

The above examples indicated that initially parents have a high degree of trust in professionals and the process of obtaining intervention for their child. They appeared to consistently agree to the offered interventions presented by the professional until discovering these interventions to be ineffective. The trust appeared to be diminished only after this discovery, which caused the parents to reverse that trust and assert themselves as the primary advocate for their child. Parents do however embrace and appreciate the help from professionals when the intervention they receive is perceived as effective in improving their child’s struggle and relieving their own anxiety.

## **4.2.2 Parents' experiences on their relationship with the child identified with reading difficulties**

Parents spoke about their emotions and perceptions of the knowledge that their child has reading difficulties, their experiences with homework, their experience of explaining the reading difficulties to the identified child, what concerns them most regarding their child and how they cope with the parenting challenges of raising a child with reading difficulties.

### *4.2.2.1 Parents' emotions and perceptions about the identification and knowledge that their child has reading difficulties*

A perception expressed by the participants in this study on their role in their child's life is one of being there for them when they need help, supporting them and helping them manage their schoolwork. The parent as advocate is another role which occurred consistently between the three parents. They perceived their role as advocates for their child in terms of not giving up on finding solutions for their child's challenge and encouraging their child in their journey through school. This role can evidently place pressure on the parent.

“To be there when she needs help. To make the vast amount of work more manageable to her. I want to be a pathfinder for her” (P1-I1).

“At the beginning it was absolutely to be a teacher for him, not a mother. Now I think my role is to encourage him to do his best. To be there for him and to support him” (P2-I2).

“I put everything in to help him. I took things into my own hands” (P2-R2).

“The way in which I can give my child guidance and advice. And that I never give up on him. I try to build his self-esteem. I try to understand him, to know his soul” (P2-I2).

“Do something about it. Search for the answers until you find them. Never give up on your child” (P1-I1).

“It puts a lot of pressure on me. If my daughter has difficulty with something, my son would tell her: ‘Just ask mom. She can solve everything’. I must always be the mother who can solve everything” (P2-I2).

“As a parent I think it is your duty to ensure that they achieve their utmost best. I think it is my duty to develop his strengths” (P3-I3).

“His survival depends on me. He must be an adult one day” (P3-I3).

Parents also reported feeling that they may be the only person advocating for their child’s academic progress. Participant 2 explained:

“I saw what it did to him. I could read in his eyes: help me. He had no one else to turn to” (P2-I2).

“If he loses me, he has no one left who will understand him” (P2-R2).

“It was very difficult to me. He could not yet make his own decisions and I was the only one responsible for making decisions for him. The decisions that I made, could change his life drastically” (P2-R2).

“I felt that if something went wrong in his life, the responsibility would be mine alone” (P2-R2).

“I knew that without my help he would not pass his grade and that he was depending on me” (P2-R2).

Not only do parents feel isolated in advocating on their children’s behalf, parents also articulated feeling worried and uncertain about their children’s future. Parents furthermore reported feelings of uncertainty and worry concerning their child’s education up to completion of their high school careers.

“I won’t always be there to help her. Somewhere I’ll have to let go. I’ll have to stand back and pick up the pieces when they fall. I can’t do that anymore” (P1-I1).

“I try not to worry too much about what will become of her. I just need to get her through school” (P1-I1).

“I am anxious about his future. If I can describe it in one word, I would say it’s like a ‘mother-sore’” (P2-I2).

“I am just trying to get him through school. Of course I am worried about what will become of him, but I try not to think about it too much” (P2-I2).

“Of course a person worries. Where will he find a job? Will he be able to study? What will become of him? I must just get him through matric” (P3-I3).

The research participants also reported feelings of self-blame upon knowing that their child has reading difficulties.

“I was so tired and so overwhelmed. I thought that maybe I didn’t put in enough effort. Maybe I didn’t do enough for him” (P2-I2).

“I was wondering whether I spent too little time with him. Whether I didn’t stimulate him enough when he was little” (P3-I3).

“Where did I fail as a parent? How could my cheerful child change so much when I just wanted the best for her and put so much time and attention into her” (P1-I1).

Despite these feelings of despair, the parent participants in this study explained that raising a child with a reading difficulty has however changed their views on life and relationships.

“It changed my relationship with my sister. I understand her better. It forced me to climb into her shoes. I definitely grew a lot closer to her. It is very humbling to me. I look at people from a completely different perspective” (P1-I1).

“He equipped me to work better with other children. I understand the children I work with so much better” (P3-I3).

#### *4.2.2.2 Parents’ experience on assisting their child with homework*

All three parents participating in this study accepted responsibility for their child’s learning at home. Homework and studying were centrally placed in all the interviews and reflective notes

containing data for the study. The parent participants, who in this case were all mothers, were the only members of the family assisting the child with homework and helping the child prepare for test and examinations. These activities consumed the parents' time and were reported by the parents to be very stressful and made them feel isolated. Parents also reported requiring lots of patience and perseverance to assist their child in this way.

"My child is writing a test tomorrow. Today was one of those days that I got so stressed that I just wanted to cry, fight, give up. Sometimes I think that he will never, ever make it" (P3-R3).

"We work afternoon until evening, because it takes so much longer than with 'normal' children. I spend hours helping him with homework and learning" (P3-R3).

"I am the one who has to help her with homework and learning in the afternoon. I spend hours with her but it is as if she is cut off from everything" (P1-I1).

"We work at this table. He knows we have to work hard every day. We can't just work the day before the test. It takes much longer than other children's homework. Before tests we work even longer. It takes incredibly much patience. He gets tired easily and I have to motivate him and keep him going the whole time. He can't work alone. He needs help every day. I must sit with him" (P3-I3).

"It's terrible. It takes up so much time. And it asks lots and lots of patience. She gets irritated. We start fighting because I get so stressed and frustrated" (P1-I1).

The parents participating in this study furthermore explained that assisting their child with homework is a stressful experience because they do not feel equipped to handle the increasing levels of difficulty and increasing amounts of their child's homework. This experience make the parents feel as if they are losing control of the situation and that they are disappointing their child by not being able to assist their child effectively. Participant 2 explained this experience:

"In the beginning it was terrible. At first I could do the work and I enjoyed it. He was always glad that I could do it with him. I made it easier for him. He moved on to higher grades, and later on the homework got too much and too difficult. It felt as if I was spending all my time on homework and I wasn't a mother anymore. Things got too much

for us both. I couldn't keep up. I felt alone and desperate and sad. And I felt so abandoned. I began looking frantically for answers. It felt as if I was starting to lose control. Sometimes I asked his sister for help. Other times I just left it. It made me feel so powerless. I felt as if I was disappointing him. I was tired and everything just overwhelmed me. I wanted to give up so many times. But every time I try, I felt guilty and I felt as if I was disappointing him. I was losing my grip on everything. I was desperate" (P2-I2).

"My biggest challenge was when I started losing control over his homework and I realized that I was going to fail my child. I thought that his life depended on me and I was not going to be able to help him anymore. It is then when you start experiencing every emotion you can possibly think of" (P2-I2).

"Some days I got so anxious and started crying. I usually got mad at everyone in the house. I thought: you are all going on blissfully and you don't understand that I can't anymore" (P2-I2).

Participant 1 articulated this similar experience:

"If she asks me to help, I have no clue. I try to help but it takes incredibly long and I don't always have the time. With some subjects I can't help her at all. It makes you feel so powerless as a parent" (P1-I1).

Completing homework assignments and assisting the child in studying can become a daily stressor for parents. While all parents appeared to be committed to assist their child in homework completion and studying, the help was not always effective and the challenge to assist the child with reading difficulties, while simultaneously attending to other home responsibilities, may sometimes be overwhelming. Each parent disclosed their occasional desire to just give up, give in, and stop the struggle.

#### *4.2.2.3 Parents' experiences on explaining the reading difficulties to their child*

Even though parents in this study reported being open towards their child about their reading difficulties and talking to their child about it forthrightly, the parent participants did report not knowing whether their child completely realises the impact of having reading difficulties on their lives. This puts the burden of this knowledge even heavier on the shoulders of the parents.

“I don’t think he realises the implication of all of this for his life” (P3-I3).

“He is still too immature to really realise it. I talk to him straight. Say it like it is. What his challenge is. But I don’t think he really understands the impact of it. I try to focus on his strengths” (P2-I2).

To the parents in this study who have children with reading difficulties, it seemed very important to communicate to their children the importance of their happiness and not being high academic achievers. Parents communicated to their children that they should always just try their best and that they are accepted unconditionally, regardless of their reading difficulty.

“I tell him that he must just do his best. I tell him: you must make every day your goldenmedal-day. If you know that you have given your very best that day, then it is a goldenmedal-day” (P3-I3).

“After one long day of doing homework together he was lying on his bed crying and he didn’t want to tell me why. I sat next to him on his bed and eventually, all sobbing, he told me that I probably wish that I had a boy who could get these things right. It broke my heart. He must know that I accept him and love him just the way he is. He doesn’t have to be perfect. I don’t want any other child. He should just be happy within himself and with what he is doing” (P3-I3).

“I just want her to be happy. I have had a dreadfully unhappy child for too long. It doesn’t matter how well she does, she should just be happy. I want her to be passionate about what she does. I want her to be a happy adult” (P1-I1).

“He must be happy, no matter where he is or what he does. That he is happy within himself and with who he is” (P2-I2).

“I try to encourage her to do well in what she can and not to bother about what other people think of her. It is not important to get 100% for everything at school, but to grow up happy and balanced” (P1-I1).

It also seemed important for parents to focus on and develop their child’s strengths and positive attributes and to communicate to their children that they are not different from other children and that there are many children with the same struggles.

“I wanted him to realise that there are many other children just like him. He is okay. He will have to work a little harder, but that is also a skill that he needs to develop” (P3-I3).

“Everyone has some or other strength. He must realise that he can’t function as well as others in one specific facet of the school system, but in totality, he is still okay” (P3-R3).

This study indicates that the parents experienced the need to buffer their children against the negative emotions of the child and they each attempted to assist the child in accepting the fact that needing additional academic assistance does not define who he or she is as a person. Since mothers and their children reinforce each other’s feelings, it is important to establish trusting relationships and promote effective communication. When there is good understanding between the mother and the child, the tension will be reduced for both of them. One of the ways was for the mothers to express and show explicitly that they unconditionally loved, supported and cared about their children.

#### *4.2.2.4 Parents’ concerns about their child’s self-esteem*

One of the greatest concerns for parents when raising a child with reading difficulties is the impact that the reading difficulties has on their child’s self-esteem. All three parent participants of this study articulated this concern and reported it to be one of their biggest challenges in raising their child.

“His self-esteem got a big knock. One day, I asked him why he doesn’t hang out with certain people at school, then he said: because they are cool and we are the losers” (P3-I3).

“Her self-esteem reached a low point; actually she had no self-esteem left. She was too scared to get out of the car and sat there for half an hour crying because she was too scared to meet the other children. My heart was broken and I sat there crying with her. It’s very difficult for a mother to see her child, who always talked to everybody, like that” (P1-R1).

“It is also important to me to ensure that his low self-esteem does not degenerate into problem behaviour. That he doesn’t channel it in the wrong direction” (P3-I3).

“My one child has so much more self-confidence. The other one has so much less. His self-esteem has totally deteriorated” (P2-I2).

“His self-confidence. That’s the biggest thing I would want to give him” (P2-I2).

“He gets all the more quiet. He is more and more timid because he thinks there is something wrong with him. I’m worried that when he gets older he might react wrongly towards this whole thing and that he might start having a ‘no-care-attitude’” (P2-I2).

“Her self-esteem. She has no confidence. Somewhere someone has got to work on that confidence. I had her take drama in the hope that it would help. But she struggles” (P1-I1).

“Her self-esteem. She is always the odd one out (sigh). The other children always push her out in every way. It’s difficult. She can’t stand up for herself. She’s unpopular. She is so quiet. She feels rejected very easily. She has no confidence” (P1-I1).

“His self-confidence started disappearing quickly. It hurt me so much to see that he started to become more introverted as time passed. He got quiet and self-contained. He was so sensitive and he lost his will to try his best at school” (P2-I2).

“I listened to her with tears in my eyes because I knew his dream was to go to the same school as his sister. How do I tell my child that he can’t go to that school, without breaking down his self-esteem even more?” (P2-R2)

“She became quiet and self-contained and therefore lost many of her friends and often became the target of bullies” (P1-R1).

“My child changed so much I hardly knew her” (P1-R1).

“It has such an impact on her self-esteem. And an impact on her social relationships” (P1-R1).

“It humiliates them and breaks down their self-esteem if people continually refer to their ‘learning problem’” (P1-R1).

The impact that the reading difficulty has on the child’s self-esteem is reported by these parents as adding to their despair in their roles as parents of these children. It leads to emotions such as sadness, worry and hurt experienced by the parents.

#### *4.2.2.5 Parents’ experiences on coping with raising a child with reading difficulties*

In order to cope with the demands of raising a child with reading difficulties, parents employ different coping strategies. Mental coping strategies were most commonly reported by the parents participating in this study. One of these is accepting their child’s challenge and focusing on their child’s strengths and developing these. Participant 2 articulates this:

“I realised that I have a highly intelligent child. The same child who can immediately (actually on his own) understand why a longer lever can lift a heavier object” (P2-R2).

“You accept your child. You don’t expect 100% from him, just his effort. Focus on what they are good at and give them opportunities and encouragement to express themselves in other areas” (P2-R2).

“As a parent, you must be able to accept that your child has challenges” (P2-I2).

Another participant expressed the same sentiment:

“I am satisfied with who I am and who they are. You can easily doubt yourself when you are in a situation like this. It makes it much more difficult to help your child” (P1-I1).

Although these children have difficulties in reading, they may have strengths in other areas. If parents can explore their children’s potential, they may look at them from a more balanced perspective, and this can lead to better appreciation. Parents furthermore viewed coping as compulsory, explaining that they didn’t perceive themselves as having any choice but to cope in the interest of their child.

“I think it is mental strength. You must. You don’t have a choice. I think about his future. If I don’t help him, no one else will” (P2-I2).

These parents also identified certain characteristics that helped them cope with the challenge of raising a child with reading difficulties. These include characteristics like perseverance, empathy and being a more relaxed parent.

“I think I have a lot of perseverance. That helps. You need a lot of perseverance” (P3-I3).

“Empathy helped me a lot. And the fact that I never give up on him” (P2-I2).

“My husband and I decided early on in our lives how we want to raise our children. We are very relaxed. I would not have done it any other way” (P1-I1).

Actively seeking professional help was another strategy used as reported by the parents who participated in this study.

“I think parents should realise where they can help and where they can’t. Where you should get professional help. You can’t be everywhere and do everything. You should realise you must get professional help” (P1-I1).

“I was past the point of talking. To talk to someone didn’t help anymore. I needed help. Talking won’t bring help to you. The best thing I could do, was to get him professional help” (P2-I2).

### **4.2.3 Parents' experiences on their relationships and interactions with significant others and on gaining social support**

#### *4.2.3.1 Parents' experiences on their relationships with the siblings of their child identified as having reading difficulties*

When it comes to the family context, the equilibrium may be disturbed when a child is identified as having reading difficulties. The participants in this study reflected that their parenting stress and pressure increased significantly when family members could not understand and accept that the identified child had reading difficulties. Explaining their child's reading difficulties to the siblings of their child is another challenge voiced by parents. Parents reported the siblings of their child not realising the implications of his or her difficulties. The siblings also responded negatively to the excessive attention given to the child with reading difficulties by the parents. This can lead to rivalry between siblings. This experience adds to the stress of the parenting role in these cases.

“It took a long time to make them realise it. Sometimes they still forget. They were initially very irritated with the attention that I gave him. His sister was too young to be able to give him any empathy. It always hurt me very much when he asked for help and my daughter and husband snapped at him” (P2-I2).

“My daughter starting blaming me for not having time for her anymore and the fact that all my attention goes to him. I tried to explain, but she was too young to really understand it. Because of my attention, fights broke out between them regularly. I was torn in two and started getting more and more disheartened” (P2-R2).

“Her sister knows how to attack her with her mouth. She fights with her mouth, especially concerning her sister's problems. They fight very often” (P1-I1).

“She almost wanted to murder her sister when they differ on something. I don't mention this lightly. She got furious and wanted to harm her sister with all her might. I regularly had to come in-between, and believe me, it wasn't easy. What a battle. And the fighting between the two sisters just got worse” (P1-I1).

Overall, the family will not be the same once children are identified as having reading difficulties. Misunderstanding and conflict are created when providing support and assistance to the identified child becomes the priority in the family. The mothers who want to give the best to all family members may experience severe stress. Despite the fact that mothers are the main caregivers, the involvement of other family members will enhance better understanding of the reading difficulties and thus the children's challenges. When siblings are encouraged to help each other, the family relationships may be strengthened and sibling rivalry may decrease.

#### *4.2.3.2 Parents' experiences on their relationship with their spouse*

The data gathered in this study indicates that the mothers are the primary source of support to their children identified as having reading difficulties. All three parent participants are mothers and described negative experiences with their husbands when making decisions for their child identified as having reading difficulties. These parents perceived their husbands to be uninvolved in the process of seeking assistance for their child as well as with the child's academic progress. The parents reported the need for their husbands to be more supportive to them and more involved in activities aimed at supporting and assisting the child.

"I mentioned it to him, but no response. It really frustrated me. I started thinking that maybe I'm too hasty" (P2-R2).

"My husband (sigh), he leaves raising the kids to me. He doesn't understand what it's all about. His head is in another place most of the time. He is never really involved with them in terms of school." (P1-I1).

"It would help a lot if my husband was more supportive and more involved. I think it would have taken a lot of pressure off my shoulders" (P1-I1).

"It's more my husband that sometimes forgets. It hurt so much when he asked for help and my husband and daughter snapped at him" (P2-R2).

"He doesn't want to know it. He doesn't say much and does nothing. It's my responsibility and my problem" (P2-I2).

“My husband who didn’t understand was one of the worst things of everything to me” (P2-I2).

“I would have really liked to have more support from his father. My husband talks along with me, but he does nothing. I must literally do everything. Even if he could just take our son for a walk or do some sport with him or something. I will handle the school work, gladly, but he does nothing to help” (P3-I3).

“I begged my husband to help me, but he didn’t understand that our son could not do his homework on his own. My daughter and my husband reprimanded me regularly because they felt that I was doing too much for him. I felt alone, powerless, angry and sad” (P2-I2).

“I took my worries home and discussed it with my husband. He left it in my hands, which made me feel alone once again” (P2-R2).

#### *4.2.3.3 Parents’ experiences on their relationships with family and friends*

With regards to the parents’ family, the parents participating in this study reported their mothers to be the members of their family most helpful and easiest to talk to concerning the challenges they have to face in raising a child with reading difficulties. Again it is the mothers of these mothers who participated in the study who were the primary sources of support to their children.

“I got home and phoned my mother. I was in tears. My mother calmed me down and told me to quiet down and go do some reading on it before I make any decisions” (P1-R1).

“At least my mother was on the phone. I could speak to her. It helped a lot to phone my mother and to just talk and cry. I spoke to her most of the time” (P1-I1).

“I phoned my mother and spoke to her and she made suggestions. It’s about only her I could speak to at that stage” (P3-I3).

The extended family and friends of these parents were reported not to be as supportive. Parents articulated perceiving their friends as unable to comprehend the nature of the ordeal that the parent and the child had to face.

“I have a huge circle of friends and spoke to everybody. I hoped to get answers from everyone I spoke to. My mother was very supportive. My friends - it was as if they didn’t understand it. They will be nice upfront, but you could see they don’t understand” (P1-I1).

“In some circles I got quite frustrated. You feel as if other parents don’t understand what you are going through” (P1-I1).

“I felt totally alone. I knew they wouldn’t understand it. Everybody had so many opinions about him, but no one really understood what we are dealing with” (P2-I2).

“He got more and more self-contained and didn’t really make friends, and I also felt as if I didn’t really fit in with the other parents. I felt isolated” (P2-I2).

Parents did however report finding it easier to talk to other parents who had the same experiences as they are having, because they were also raising a child with reading difficulties or another specific learning difficulty. The parents reported perceiving these parents as more understanding.

“I have a good friend who has a son with a reading problem. And someone else in our circle of friends who used to be our neighbour. It’s easier to talk to them” (P1-I1).

“My neighbours - on both sides - have sons with reading difficulties. They know exactly what I’m going through” (P3-I3).

All the participants in this study agreed about the importance of social support in raising a child with reading difficulties. The parents articulated the need to talk about their emotions, to be listened to, to be cared for and to feel understood.

“Someone who doesn’t tell you what you should do. You must be able to decide for yourself. Someone who will listen to you” (P1-I1).

“It means that there is someone who just listens. It just gives you a different perspective. You get the chance to just unpack a bit. You have a sound-board” (P1-I1).

“I don’t keep it behind closed doors. It really feels as if people support you. It feels good if you get the idea that people start understanding what you’re going through. If you say no when someone invites you somewhere and they understand that your child is writing a test the next day, or it is exam times and we have to study. It becomes your support network” (P3-I3).

“To talk about things helps you to just get a bit of a different perspective. And you don’t feel so alone. There are people out there who understand and care about you” (P3-3).

“You are looking for that relief to talk to someone, to get some sympathy. To know you’re not alone. You want to know that you are not the only one who sees and understands these things” (P2-I2).

“You would so much like to just talk to someone and release your emotions. You also don’t feel so alone. Someone understands. Someone listens” (P2-I2).

Having a child with reading difficulties can bring about feelings of isolation or frustration. Parents who receive emotional support from a family member or friends described feeling less alone, understood, listened to and cared for. Those who indicated a lack of emotional support from their spouse, family, or friends described incidences of feeling isolated and frustrated. They also reported feelings of powerlessness, anger and sadness.

#### **4.2.4 Parents’ experiences on their interactions with their child’s teachers and school**

##### *4.2.4.1 Parents’ experiences on their interactions with the teachers of their child identified as having reading difficulties*

Parent participants explained that even though they perceive to have a fairly good relationship with their child’s teachers, they rarely interact with these teachers. The parents reported only

having interaction with their children's teachers once or twice a year during parent-teacher meetings. Even when they have a really important or urgent matter to discuss, the parents reported finding it difficult to obtain an appointment with the children's teachers. The teachers also don't give feedback to the parents about relevant information. These parents therefore hardly play a role as collaborative participants in the education plan for their children. This can lead to feelings of frustration on the part of the parents.

"I basically only see them with parent meetings. About twice a year. Unless I there is a problem. Then I will try to make an appointment to see them" (P2-I2).

"I see them only once or twice a year. With parent meetings. It's quite difficult to get an appointment. I have a fairly good relationship with her teachers, but you can't always easily get to see them. Sometimes I feel like just walking in. It's supposed to be a remedial school. Sometimes I want to pull my hair out of my head" (P1-I1).

"The school didn't give me any feedback and I had to go back to school again to get some information" (P2-R2).

Participants voiced their experiences with their children's teachers. Each mentioned both positive and negative experiences within the realm of their teacher-parent interactions. Participant 1 described the teacher she thought helped her daughter the most:

"She was able to recognise the good side in my daughter. She tried to support her where she was not strong enough emotionally" (P1-I1).

The other participants also described these experiences:

"She is wonderful. She makes him feel he is fine just the way he is" (P3-I3).

"His teacher also had two sons with learning problems. She completely understood where I came from" (P2-I2).

"Her teacher understands and tries to encourage her" (P1-I1).

Teachers, who are perceived as being understanding and supportive towards the child and unconditionally accept the child, are therefore reported by parents to be most helpful.

On the other hand, parents articulated negative experiences with teachers they thought to be least helpful to their children. Participant 3 describes her perception of such a teacher:

“That is where he got his big knock in life. She was a clever-good-little-girl-teacher. She liked it when children did things right and did well in school. In grade 3 he created a new pain somewhere every day. He hated going to school” (P3-I3).

Participant 2 articulates her experience:

“She didn’t want to recognise that he had a reading problem. She blamed me for the problem. She said that I didn’t exercise reading with him enough at home. I was furious” (P2-I2).

Participant 1 describes her perception on unhelpful teachers:

“She completely misunderstood her. My child isolated herself because of this teacher. She made negative remarks about her reading problem. She would for instance say: ‘you must all please study very hard for tomorrow’s test, because some of you apparently have dyslexia’. I had to regularly bite my lip not to attack the teacher. Another teacher also said in a joke that she can’t remember very well, but at least she’s not dyslexic. This impressed upon my child the idea that dyslexia is a disease. It made her very sad. Because teachers acted so negatively towards children with this problem, it made it more and more difficult for me to tell them about it. She also doesn’t like it if I tell the teachers, because then they exempt her. That’s why I don’t really go and see the teacher and will only do it if it is really necessary” (P1-I1).

Raising children with reading difficulties requires not only the parent’s devotion, but also the ability to endure with the unfavourable comments from the surrounding environment.

#### *4.2.4.2 Parents’ experiences on their interactions with the school of their child identified as having reading difficulties*

Intervention for learners with reading difficulties at the schools attended by the children of the parent participants of this study, appeared to be minimal. Children furthermore did not want their

mothers to discuss the difficulties related to their learning with their teachers due to the negative attitude perceived by the parents and children from the teachers. The school also seemed to make decisions regarding the children without the input or agreement from the parents.

“The school didn’t do anything. I felt as if I could turn the desk on top of the headmaster’s head. I sat there and cried my eyes out and he did nothing” (P1-I1).

“His classes are smaller and his workload is less. He also gets some help with reading in the examinations. That’s basically it” (P2-I2).

“Someone read his exam papers for him. He writes it separately. That’s about it. They don’t do much more than that. He just doesn’t fit into the mould of the school system” (P3-I3).

“The school wasn’t of much help” (P1-R1).

“Within our school system children get broken down and labelled so easily” (P1-R1).

“The teacher and the headmaster decided that he must progress to grade two even though I didn’t agree with them” (P2-R2).

One parents also reported having certain expectations from the school which her child attends:

“If your child was tested by a professional, they will send a report to the school. Any good school will act accordingly” (P3-R3).

Despite the fact that children with reading difficulties have to put more effort into overcoming their challenges, their disadvantaged situations might not be addressed adequately at schools. This created pressure for the mothers who did not know what to do but remained feeling helpless. In addition to providing basic care for children, parents encountered a wide spectrum of stresses ranging from the family to the school. Whilst mothers are the main caregivers of their children, it seems as if they have to shoulder all the responsibilities and burdens.

## 4.3 DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 4.3.1. Introduction

This study has been grounded within Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological framework and therefore the interpretation and discussion of the research findings will be structured within this perspective. This section of Chapter 4 therefore focuses on placing the research findings into the context of literature and the theoretical framework. The recommendations of this study have, in reflection, consequently been presented in Chapter 5. Data will therefore be referred to in both Chapters 4 and 5.

Before presenting a discussion of the research findings, it is necessary to revisit the problem statement that guided the study within the context of its theoretical framework. The research aimed to investigate the experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties. The purpose was to increase knowledge about the challenges parents face when their children have reading difficulties in order to optimise support to these parents as well as guide parents in how to be of support to their children.

Analysis of the data yielded important themes pertaining to parents' experiences in raising children with reading difficulties. The following will be a discussion on the research findings highlighting parental emotional experiences in raising children with reading difficulties and its relation to the parent's role in their child's education, coping behaviours, parents' relationships with significant others, and perceived social support.

### 4.3.2 Parents' emotional experiences in raising a child with reading difficulties

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986), the family, specifically parents, are the primary source of influence for the child's development. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory also postulates that relationships within the family are reciprocal; therefore, not only is the child influenced by his parents but the parents are also influenced by the child. Therefore the family as microsystem will be mutually influenced by the reading difficulties of a child as member of that family.

When recruiting parent participants for this study, mothers were the only parents willing to share their experiences on raising a child with reading difficulties. Data collection and analysis also revealed that mothers are the primary source of support and advocacy regarding their child's reading difficulties. These mothers seem to experience isolation due to not having their spouse's collaboration in supporting and advocating for their child.

All three mothers who participated in this study reported feeling anxious and very worried when first discovering their child's challenge with reading. Scott (2004) stated that parents of children with reading difficulties can become very anxious. Feelings of frustration, shock, uncertainty, resistance, confusion, sadness, anger, feeling out of control and fear were also reported. This correlates with Preston's (1939) study, stating the attitude of the mothers and fathers being expressed by the person providing the history as worried, anxious, distressed, upset, greatly concerned, troubled, bothered or disturbed over the reading situation. Parents furthermore articulated powerlessness and dismay because of wanting to assist their child, but lacking the knowledge on how to achieve that goal. According to Granet et al. (2006), children attend school for the first few years to learn to read — then they read to learn. Apprehension regarding a child's failure to develop these skills runs to the core of parenting. The fear of consequences resulting from poor school performance owing to poor reading overwhelms a parent.

The participants in this study furthermore articulated high levels of frustration and confusion when seeking assistance and intervention for their child. These participants subsequently diagnosed their children themselves in order to cope with the ordeal and in order to hasten the application of interventions to assist the child. This correlates with Shaywitz and Shaywitz's (2005) argument that parents often self-label their children as dyslexic.

Participants in this study feel isolated in advocating for their children, but also articulated feeling worried and uncertain about their children's future. This correlates with Kenny and McGilloway's (2007) argument that parents' anxiety may be linked to uncertainty and negative apprehension about their children's future.

Terras et al. (2009) emphasised that individuals with reading difficulties may have lower self-esteem and exhibit more emotional and behavioural difficulties than those without reading problems. Granet et al. (2006) argues that this can be a further concern and challenge for the

parents of these learners and that parental worry regarding their children's development of reading skills appears to be universal. One of the participants in this study indicated that her greatest concern is the impact that the reading difficulties have on her child's self-esteem. All three participants of this study articulated this concern and reported it to be one of their biggest challenges in raising their children.

According to Bailey (2006), meaningful parent-child interaction during the completion of homework has emerged as a significant variable for improving learning for low-performing students. All three participants in this study, who were all mothers, accepted responsibility for their child's learning at home. However assisting the child with homework activities was reported by the parents to be very stressful to them and made them feel isolated. The participants explained that assisting their children with homework is a stressful experience because they do not feel equipped to handle the increasing levels of difficulty and increasing amounts of their child's homework. Bailey however states that when parents complete specific training modules focused on how to assist their children during the completion of interactive homework assignments, the learner's ability to learn can improve. Bailey also argues that this can be used to effectively promote meaningful conversations between parents and their children about school work and everyday life, which can in turn aid in lifting the emotional burden from the parents.

#### **4.3.3 Parents' experiences in relation to their child's education**

Even though the Education White Paper 6 (2001) on Inclusive Education supports the idea that parents be collaborative decision-makers in the development of an educational plan for their children, parent participants in this study explained that they rarely interact with their child's teachers. Seals (2010) interpreted this policy in terms of parents participating, being informed, and obtaining knowledge about the academic progress of their child. Reid and Valle (2004) further explain this idea as encouragement for parents to engage in the special education process with the professionals who deliver the specialised educational services to their child.

The participants in this study reported minimal interactions with their children's teachers during parent-teacher meetings. Even when they have a really important or urgent matter to discuss with the teachers, the parents reported finding it difficult to obtain an appointment with their child's

teachers. Regarding Seals' notion of parents being informed and obtaining information, the teachers of the children this study applies to, also didn't give any feedback to the parents about the child's academic progress or any other relevant information, except for general school reports each term. A study conducted by Howie-Davies and McKenzie (2007) found that parents of children identified as having learning difficulties received less information and support than parents of children identified with a more specific diagnosis of Down's syndrome or Autism. These researchers debated that perhaps professionals just do not see the diagnosis of learning difficulties as an equally important difficulty compared to other challenges. Reid (2007) found that parents should play a crucial role in the assessment and intervention of their child's academic needs in order to foster the child's academic growth. In order to play this role, parents need relevant information regarding their child's reading difficulty.

Bronfenbrenner's theory about child development posited that interconnections between settings such as school and home are just as crucial for a child's development as events taking place within a single specified setting. Bronfenbrenner's theory also informed Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence that emphasise the importance of the family-school relationship and the mutual responsibility for children's learning and development (Epstein, 2002; Swart & Phasha, 2011). This theory stipulates that children are best supported when schools and families work together in a partnership to reach shared educational goals. These mothers played a role as participants in the education plan for their children, only in isolation from the school system and teachers. As mentioned previously, this can lead to feelings of frustration and dismay on the part of the parents.

Reid and Valle (2002) also reported that as a profession, special education relies largely on discursive practices and teachers' assumptions to label children as having a disability. As mentioned previously, raising children with reading difficulties requires not only the parents' devotion, but also their ability to endure the unfavourable comments from the surrounding environment, including teachers. This was clearly evident in the data collected during this study. One participant in this study was particularly distraught by the negative comments made by teachers towards her child's challenge and labelling the child mostly in front of her peers.

Even though the Annual National Assessment (ANA) of 2011 states that more than half of learners in grade 3 and even more learners in grade 6 did not reach a partially achieved level of

reading, intervention for learners with reading difficulties at the schools attended by the children of the parent participants of this study, appeared to be minimal. However, children did not want their mothers to discuss the difficulties related to their learning with their teachers due to the negative attitude perceived by the parents and children from the teachers. According to one of the participants in this study, the school made decisions regarding her child without input or agreement from the parent. Accordingly, Reid and Valle (2004) pointed to an example of a meeting between parents and the school where parents would indicate agreement with a team decision out of respect for professional educators rather than out of their own conviction. One of the participants in this study agreed to a decision made by the school principal and her child's teacher, even though she did not agree with this decision.

#### **4.3.4 Parents' experiences in relation to coping with raising a child with reading difficulties**

Scott (2004) has suggested that warmth is the most beneficial and helpful parenting quality for children with reading difficulties. In agreement, Fong (2006) argues that responsive parenting is also associated with children's positive beliefs about their own competence which may also foster better peer relationships. To the participants in this study who have children with reading difficulties, it seemed very important to communicate to their children the importance of their unconditional acceptance, regardless of their reading difficulties. It furthermore seemed important for these mothers to focus on and develop their child's strengths and positive attributes.

According to Grant and Whittell (2000), parents will employ cognitive coping by changing the meaning of the challenging incidents, when problem-solving strategies are perceived to be irrelevant. Mental coping strategies were most commonly reported by the parents participating in this study. One of these is accepting their child's challenges and focusing and developing their strengths. These mothers also identified certain characteristics that helped them cope with the challenge of raising a child with reading difficulties. These include characteristics like perseverance, empathy and being a more relaxed parent. Deater-Deckard (2005) has suggested that it may depend on factors such as parents' personal attributes as well as their ability to utilise and alter their coping strategies in considering whether successful adaptive coping takes place.

Woolfson and Grant (2006) also argue that parents who consider their children as individuals with unique characteristics may have warmer relationships, which in turn may minimise the negative emotional experiences they may have to face.

Actively seeking professional help was another strategy used as reported by the parents who participated in this study. This correlates with Heiman and Berger's (2008) study, wherein the mothers were keen to seek advice and guidance from school, specialist literature or professionals. According to Fong (2006), this may reflect that mothers can cope with their children's reading difficulties by actively finding resources to help them.

#### **4.3.5 Parents' experiences in relation to their relationships with significant others and social support**

The family context may be severely impacted when a child is identified as having reading difficulties. According to Dyson (2010), children's reading difficulties may have ramifications on the siblings. Scott (2004) also argues that sibling rivalry and bullying is not uncommon, especially when the children with reading difficulties take up a large amount of parental attention or when siblings model parental ambivalence toward their challenged brothers and sisters. The participants in this study reported that the siblings of their identified child responded negatively to the excessive attention given to the child with reading difficulties. This regularly leads to sibling rivalry. This experience adds to the stress of the parenting role in these cases.

Regarding the social support for parents of children with reading difficulties, Scott (2004) has suggested that perceived support is more important than the actual existence of support in considering the spousal support from the father to the mother. Boyd (2002) also indicated that the support of fathers was the most significant and had critical impact on the care outcome. All three participants described negative experiences with their husbands when making decisions for their child identified with having reading difficulties. These mothers perceived their husbands to be uninvolved in the process of seeking assistance for their child as well as with the child's academic progress. However, the participants in this study reported their mothers to be the members of their family most helpful and easiest to talk to concerning the challenges they have to face in raising a child with reading difficulties. Accordingly, Jones and Passey (2004)

reflected on this issue that the mothers consider the support obtained from their own parents as well as other parents with similar situations particularly helpful. However, this study reveals that these mothers rely on maternal support rather than paternal support in coping with their challenges. It can also be inferred that parents who share similar experiences are a source of support to each other.

According to Marmot and Wilkinson (2006), those who have close relationships with families and who believe that support is accessible, show better adaptation to challenges. The extended family and friends of the participants in this study were reported not to be as supportive because they do not share similar experiences with these mothers. Participants articulated perceiving their friends as unable to comprehend the nature of the ordeal the parent and the child had to face. Pakenham, Chiu, Bursnall and Cannon (2007) argued that social support may not only be associated with positive outcomes but can increase parental stress. Deater-Deckard (2005) has emphasised that empathy is a critical element in considering social support. The participants in this study did not perceive their extended family and friends to be empathetic to their situation.

Bull (2002) commented on a study that he performed, that participants who reported high levels of personal stress also reported lower levels of informal social support. Participants in this study reported that they felt isolated in dealing with learning difficulties and did not receive sufficient social support from friends and family. The majority of parents interviewed as part of Bull's study reported their motivation for attending a support group to be due to a feeling of not coping or feeling a great deal of parental stress. The mothers who participated in the current study articulated these feelings of not being able to cope. Fong (2006) argues that one of the main functions of social support is that it may reduce negative emotions associated with parenting challenges. In addition, Raikes and Thompson (2005) have indicated that social support buffers the challenges of parenting.

The parent participants in this study unanimously agreed to the importance of social support in raising a child with reading difficulties. Several studies have pointed out that social support can empower parents to cope with the demands of parenting. Cairney, Boyle, Offord and Racine (2003) reported that challenges may produce debilitating effects particularly for mothers lacking adequate social support. According to Hassal, Rose and McDonald (2005), mothers whose social support networks enhance their self-esteem may promote their ability to parenting more

effectively. Likewise, Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch and Ungar (2005) have noted that smaller networks and less satisfying social support are predicted to be associated with greater negative parental emotions. Green et al. (2007) have also suggested that social support can strengthen a parent's defence against unpleasant experiences.

Kerr and McIntosh (2000) furthermore argues that by communicating and sharing with someone who can understand their situations, parents may realise that they are coping with difficulties common to many others. Deater-Deckard (2005) also emphasises that parents may come to recognise that they share similar experiences with other parents, and thus the number and intensity of stressors faced by them may be reduced. Participants in this study reported finding it easier to talk to other parents who had the same experiences they are having, due to also raising a child with reading difficulties or another specific learning difficulty. The participants reported perceiving these parents as more understanding.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

Parenting is a complex process that involves more than love, dedication and commitment. Coupled with the heavy burden of raising children with reading difficulties, one may argue that parenting stress levels rise exponentially. Whilst mothers are culturally believed to be primarily responsible for the well-being of their children, they are confronted by a wide range of difficulties arising from their children's reading challenges. Despite making persistent efforts, mothers are left with anxiety and distress.

In addition, since all participants in this study were mothers and the primary caretakers of the children, fathers' roles, though lacking, appear to be essential for supporting the mothers rather than providing care for the children. It is concluded that the participants valued the support from professionals such as teachers and psychologists differently. The extent to which parents of children with reading difficulties utilise these support systems demands further exploration.

It is furthermore concluded that parents experience a variety of negative emotions concerning their child's reading difficulties, including feelings of isolation, frustration, uncertainty, despair and powerlessness. When seeking intervention for their child, parents are often left even more

confused, frustrated and helpless. These parents do not participate in collaboration with their child's school and teachers, which aggravates these emotions. Furthermore, the parents perceive their social support as inadequate, especially the support needed from their spouses. However, these parents have evidently developed their own coping mechanisms. A majority of the coping strategies these parents make use of, are focused on the strengths of the child. Overall, it seems as if mothers' perseverance enables them to overcome their difficulties. It may be argued that mothers' devotion towards their children in turn builds up their resilience.

This chapter presented the findings of the study's data analysis. Descriptions and examples were offered from the participants' verbatim interviews and reflective notes which demonstrated what participants experienced while parenting children identified as having reading difficulties. These findings were then discussed and placed in the context of literature and the theoretical framework.

Chapter 5 will offer concluding remarks and recommendations with regards to the experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties. The strengths and limitations of the research study will also be discussed.

## CHAPTER 5

### INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the experiences of parents with children who have been identified as having reading difficulties. To be able to understand, describe, and interpret parents' experiences, a basic qualitative study founded in the interpretive research paradigm was used to approach the research questions: What are the experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties? The specific aims of this study were to determine:

- 1     What are the specific experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties?
- 2     What are these parents' experiences and difficulties about the assessment, schooling and intervention of the child?
- 3     How do these parents perceive their support network and what coping strategies do these parents make use of?
- 4     How can these parents be supported by educational psychologists and other support personnel?
- 5     How can these parents be empowered to assist their children and contribute to intervention strategies?

This qualitative phenomenological study was based upon Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development as theoretical framework. Interview data from three participants was collected and analysed. These participants each parented a child with reading difficulties. Each parent voluntarily agreed to accurately recount their life experiences with their child identified as having reading difficulties. The participants gave details about their personal interactions with their child, with other family members, and with teachers. Data gathered from these interviews were analysed using constant comparative data analysis.

In this chapter, implications of the findings of this phenomenological study will be discussed and recommendations will be put forth. The limitations and strengths of the study will furthermore be discussed and possible future research will be suggested.

## 5.2 INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

Through this research, it was discovered that the recognition or the confrontation of a child's developmental challenges, such as the challenges in developing reading skills, begins the parent-child journey into the reality of reading difficulties. For all the parent participants in this study, these challenges brought upon parental emotions that took on various forms and severities. At this initial identification of reading difficulties, parents described feelings of shock, worry, anxiety, uncertainty, frustration and confusion. However, participants viewed the acceptance of the reading difficulties designation as a beacon that enabled them to support their child and clarify the way forward in terms of their child's academic future. Areas of success or strengths in the child's life were identified and focused on as they became important pointers to future possibilities for the child. The journey of the child and parent is a challenging one and can present families with unique challenges that may create feelings of uncertainty, helplessness, and frustration — emotions that surface and resurface throughout this journey.

In this study, the data indicated that parents' experiences with their child's reading difficulties can be divided into four contexts which interact with one another constantly and continually.

- The first context is the parental experience of the initial discovery and identification of the reading difficulties. After this acceptance, the challenge influences three other contexts, namely
  - the parental experiences within the relationship with the identified child,
  - the reading difficulties and its effect on family relationships, and
  - interactions with teachers and the child's school.

Parents seem to rarely interact with their child's teachers and receive minimal feedback about their child's academic progress or any other relevant information. These parents support their

children in isolation from the school system and teachers. Intervention for learners with reading difficulties at the schools attended by the children of these parents furthermore appeared to be minimal. Mothers also seem to perceive the support from their husbands as lacking. These mothers rely on maternal support in coping with their challenges. Parents who share similar experiences are a further source of support to each other.

### **5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the study's findings, it is evident that parents experience varying degrees of dismay due to the identification of their child's reading difficulties. In addressing the parental emotions, it is essential to increase the awareness of both parents and every family member about the significance of reading difficulties. This highlights the important roles of educational psychologists and other support personnel in providing parents with updated knowledge about reading difficulties and its psychological impact on children, and to empower them to accept the complex parenting roles.

Despite the fact that parents may feel relatively relieved after the identification of their child's reading difficulties, ongoing support and validation of their experiences and emotions is necessary. This may point to the essential role of educational psychologists and other support personnel in acknowledging and addressing the ambivalence of parents towards the demands imposed by their identified children and the surrounding environment. In addition, the positive aspects of their parenting roles may need to be emphasised to instill hope and to balance the negative impact experienced.

In addition to providing individualised psycho-education to parents of children with reading difficulties, organised parent support groups are highly recommended. Support groups provide a platform for parents to share their parenting experiences and to ventilate their emotions. Educational psychologists are therefore critically important for providing psycho-education as well as facilitating the group process. The collective experience is valuable and may empower parents to face the challenges with more confidence.

## 5.4 POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY

Information gathered from this study may assist in better collaboration between teachers and families and may assist to form stronger educational planning teams that will in turn further a child's educational opportunities. The findings of this study may lead to developing processes that provide greater understanding of parent participation in the decision-making processes of their child's education. The study may also assist educators and other support personnel to exert positive efforts toward embracing, supporting, and promoting the greatest possible collaboration with parents of children identified with having reading difficulties. This may empower parents to support their children more effectively and make it possible for parents to contribute in intervention strategies which the teachers utilise.

## 5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The scope of this research study was quite narrow due to the sample size. Although phenomenological research studies are mostly characterised by a smaller sample size, an increase in the sample size would possibly promote the transferability of the research findings. Since only three mothers participated in the study, this might affect the quality of the data and thus the generalisability of the results and findings. Similarly, the participants were all mothers, and they might only provide views from their perspective rather than that of the fathers.

Another limitation is related to the interview questionnaire. Some parents might refer to their previous experiences in answering questions, while others emphasised the emotions in the moment. This may create discrepancies as the questionnaire did not specify the time frame.

A further limitation of this study involves the difficulties encountered in the structured interviews. As some participants might have little experience in expressing their thoughts and feelings, it would be difficult to find the words to express what has happened around them. In other words, the findings might have been affected by the degree of expressiveness of the mothers.

The quality of the data generated in qualitative research is largely dependent on the skills of the interviewer and this may have been influenced by the limited expertise of a novice researcher. Since the interviews were conducted in Afrikaans, data quoted in Chapter 4 was translated into English. Some of the meaning of this data might have gone lost in translation.

The research study focused on understanding the experiences of parents with children identified as having reading difficulties, and therefore used data collection methods which aimed to gain insight into these experiences. The use of additional methods may have enhanced the research findings. The use of focus group interviews may have been useful in order to provide additional data regarding how parents experience raising a child with reading difficulties.

In addition, this study focused on the experiences of parents with children who have reading difficulties. Parents of children with other learning difficulties would also benefit from such research into their experiences. This was, however, outside the scope and extent of the current study.

## **5.6 STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY**

Due to the nature and structure of the research design, this study gained in-depth insight into the experiences of parents of children identified as having reading difficulties. The advantage of using a qualitative method is that it gathers rich descriptions from participants. The richness of the data enhances one's understanding about the experiences of parents in parenting their children with reading difficulties. This insight is important as it can provide valuable information which can be used to provide support to parents by educational psychologists, teachers and other relevant practitioners. Participating in the research study can also be beneficial for these parents as it provides them an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Such reflections can foster the parents' meaning-making processes throughout their journey with their child.

## 5.7 FURTHER RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

Given that this study has obtained data from only a small homogeneous sample of mothers, a research study that involves a demographically more heterogeneous sample may generate richer data. In addition, this study was constrained by time and resources; future studies which involve fathers and children may yield a deeper understanding of parental experiences and parenting in relation to raising children with reading difficulties.

The study is also limited by its small geographical setting of one suburb in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. Therefore, the study does not investigate parents' experiences from other areas within the province or other provinces throughout the country. As is characteristic of a phenomenological study, the results should not be generalised, but may in future be transferable to investigating the experiences of parents from other areas or other provinces.

The data of this study highlighted the significance of the parent-child relationship in coping with reading difficulties. Thus, further studies on exploring the parent-child relationship and its impact on raising children with reading difficulties will be meaningful. While participants in this study showed positive attitude towards their parenting roles, it may be meaningful to explore the role of positive psychology in parents' coping behaviours. Furthermore, to have a deeper understanding of parents' acquisition and practice of coping strategies in being faced with their children's reading difficulties, longitudinal studies to describe and reflect upon parents' experiences are recommended.

Lastly, while schools are parents' partners in children's education, the interplay between schools and children may have a significant impact on parents' well-being. Future studies exploring parents' experiences and emotions towards schools may shed more light on the school's effects on parents while raising children with reading difficulties.

## 5.8 CONCLUSION

Life for both parents and children may become complex with the identification of reading difficulties. Reading difficulties not only affect learning, but may also induce psychological and emotional distress on children as well as their parents. While the majority of the focus in research and intervention may be on the care and empowerment of the identified children, parents' experiences, particularly their emotional distress, are mostly left unattended.

By conducting a study on parents' experiences in raising a child with reading difficulties, I was able to explore the parents' subjective experiences and uncover the meanings attached to these experiences. It appears that parenting distress is influenced by multidimensional factors. Apart from the significant predictors such as coping behaviours and perceived social support, other factors play a significant role, for instance, parent-child relationships and schooling experiences. While the extent to which schools need to offer their support and how they collaborate with parents may require further exploration, educational psychologists may need to provide ongoing professional support for these parents.

The knowledge generated from this research study complements existing literature on issues related to raising children with reading difficulties, and will enhance a better understanding towards parental emotions and difficulties encountered by parents.

Future research studies in this direction will be invaluable in advancing the practice of educational psychology and enriching the knowledge base in the local context.

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## **ADDENDUM A**



UNIVERSITEIT•STELLENBOSCH•UNIVERSITY  
jou kennisvennoot • your knowledge partner

**Approval Notice**  
**New Application**

31-May-2012

DU PLESSIS, Annette

**Protocol #: DESC1/2012**

**Title: The experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties**

Dear Miss Annette DU PLESSIS,

The **New Application** received on **13-Feb-2012**, was reviewed by staff members of the REC office on **23-Feb-2012** and was approved.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval Period: **26-Apr-2012 -25-Apr-2013**

**Standard provisions**

1. The researcher will remain within the procedures and protocols indicated in the proposal, particularly in terms of any undertakings made in terms of the confidentiality of the information gathered.
2. The research will again be submitted for ethical clearance if there is any substantial departure from the existing proposal.
3. The researcher will remain within the parameters of any applicable national legislation, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of research.

4. The researcher will consider and implement the foregoing suggestions to lower the ethical risk associated with the research.

You may commence with your research with strict adherence to the abovementioned provisions and stipulations.

Please remember to use your **protocol number (DESC1/2012)** on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research protocol.

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.

#### **After Ethical Review:**

Please 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). Annually a number of projects may be selected randomly for an external audit.

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

This committee abides by the ethical norms and principles for research, established by the Declaration of Helsinki, the South African Medical Research Council Guidelines as well as the Guidelines for Ethical Research: Principles, Structures and Processes 2004 (Department of Health).

#### **Provincial and City of Cape Town Approval**

Please note that for research at a primary or secondary healthcare facility permission must be obtained from the relevant authorities (Western Cape Department of Health and/or City Health) to conduct the research as stated in the protocol. Contact persons are Ms Claudette Abrahams at

Western Cape Department of Health ([healthres@pgwc.gov.za](mailto:healthres@pgwc.gov.za) Tel: +27 21 483 9907) and Dr Helene Visser at City Health ([Helene.Visser@capetown.gov.za](mailto:Helene.Visser@capetown.gov.za) Tel: +27 21 400 3981). Research that will be conducted at any tertiary academic institution requires approval from the relevant parties. For approvals from the Western Cape Education Department, contact Dr AT Wyngaard ([awyngaar@pgwc.gov.za](mailto:awyngaar@pgwc.gov.za), Tel: 0214769272, Fax: 0865902282, <http://wced.wcape.gov.za>).

Institutional permission from academic institutions for students, staff & alumni. This institutional permission should be obtained before submitting an application for ethics clearance to the REC. Please note that informed consent from participants can only be obtained after ethics approval has been granted. It is your responsibility as researcher to keep signed informed consent forms for inspection for the duration of the research.

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:**

DESC checklist / application form

Sincerely,

Sidney Engelbrecht

REC Coordinator

Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)

## **ADDENDUM B**



UNIVERSITEIT•STELLENBOSCH•UNIVERSITY  
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**STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY  
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

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**THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH READING DIFFICULTIES**

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Annette du Plessis (B.Diac; BAHons; PGCE) from the Department of Educational Psychology at Stellenbosch University. The results of this study will be contributed to a Master's thesis.

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you have a child with reading difficulties who is in high school. You have also been selected because you have already walked a long road with your child regarding the reading difficulties and the researcher would like to gather information from your experiences over this time.

The purpose of this study is to increase knowledge about the challenges parents face when their children have reading difficulties. It will aim to guide parents in how to be of support to their children. The specific aim of the study is to determine:

- 1     What are the specific experiences of parents who have children with reading difficulties?
- 2     What are these parents' experiences and difficulties about the assessment, schooling and intervention of the child?
- 3     How do these parents perceive their support network and what coping strategies do these parents make use of?
- 4     How can these parents be supported by educational psychologists?
- 5     How can these parents be empowered to assist their child and contribute to intervention strategies?

**1. PROCEDURES**

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

1. Be available for interviewing

Data for the study will be collected through structured interviewing. Interviews will take place in the family's home at a time that is convenient to the parents. Interviews will last up to one hour. The researcher will conduct one interview with the parents. This interview will be transcribed for data analysis.

2. Allow the researcher to make observations in your home

Observations will be the second method for data collection. Observations will take place at the family's home when the parents assist the child with homework. The researcher will observe the family during homework times on three different occasions at a time and date that is most convenient to the family. These observations will last more or less an hour each. Field notes will be compiled from these observations which will be used for data analysis.

**3. Write reflective notes**

The parents will also be requested to reflect on their experiences and feelings throughout the research period and write these reflections down. Reflective notes can be made daily or weekly, and could be as long or as short as is convenient to the parents. The parents will be asked to write down as many thoughts and feelings as possible about their child's learning difficulty. These reflections will then be coded for data analysis.

**2. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

If any discomfort or inconveniences should occur during your involvement in this study, you may at any time discuss this with the researcher who will appropriately address and manage your concerns.

**3. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

The aim of this study is to describe and understand the experiences and challenges of parents who have children who experience reading difficulties. It therefore aims to provide a guideline to teachers and therapists on how to address the needs of these parents and to provide the support to these parents. By participating in this study, you can play a role in assuring better support for all parents who have children who experience reading difficulties. The study will also provide a safe space for you to share your own thoughts and feelings on the topic.

**4. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

No payment will be received for participation in this study.

**5. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be associated with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of keeping all interview transcripts, field notes and journals locked in a safe cabinet and all electronic documents safeguarded by a password. Only the researcher will have access to these documents and information.

**6. 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 remove from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

**7. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Dr. L. Dreyer at (021) 808 3502 or [lornadreyer@sun.ac.za](mailto:lornadreyer@sun.ac.za).

## 8. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

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 subject, contact Ms Maléne Fouché [mfouche@sun.ac.za; 021 808 4622] at the Division for Research Development.

### SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE

The information above was described to me, \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_ in English and I am in command of this language or it was satisfactorily translated to me. 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 Subject/Participant**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Name of Legal Representative (if applicable)**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Subject/Participant or Legal Representative**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

### SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to \_\_\_\_\_ and/or his/her representative \_\_\_\_\_. He/she was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any questions. This conversation was conducted in Afrikaans and no translator was used.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Signature of Investigator**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Date**

## **ADDENDUM C**

## Reflective Notes

In order to gain insight into the experiences of parents of children with reading difficulties, it will be helpful if you can write about your own experiences with your child.

I would appreciate your answering the following question in writing:

What are your experiences on raising a child with a reading difficulty?

Also consider the following in your response:

- Becoming aware of your child's challenge
- Your relationship with your child
- Your child's education
- Your relationship with the rest of your family and friends

## **ADDENDUM D**

## The Experiences of Parents of Children with Reading Difficulties

### Interview with Parents

#### Structured interview questions

##### Academic and Procedural Issues:

1. What have the professionals and teachers told you about your child's reading difficulties?
2. Do you know what the school is doing for your child?
3. Describe the relationship you have with your child's current teachers.
4. Without using names, tell me about your child's best teacher? What made him or her "the best?" Explain.
5. Without using names, tell me about your child's worst teacher? What made him or her "the worst?" Explain.
6. What is your role in the education plan of your child?
7. What is your child's greatest challenge?
8. How many times a year, on average, do you meet with teachers concerning your child's reading difficulties?
9. Do you feel that you are equipped to help your child academically?
10. Describe what your child needs help with and what assistance you provide. What assistance does he or she get at school?

##### Home and Family Issues:

11. Tell me a bit about your own experience as a student? What sort of student were you, in terms of grades and behaviour?
12. Is there anyone in your family that has been identified with having a Learning Difficulty? Explain who and how do you know?
13. Did you have any particular difficulties in any subjects in school? If so, which ones? In which subjects were you particularly successful?

14. How about your child?
15. Tell me about your child. What is he or she like? Just talk a bit about personality, likes and dislikes; anything you would like a teacher to know about your child?
16. How did you first become aware that your child had reading difficulties?
17. How did you feel when you learned about your child's reading difficulties? Talk a bit about what that was like? Did you change anything at home or have any discussions with other family members? If so, can you tell me about that?
18. Tell me about your child's difficulty? When someone tells you that your child has reading difficulties, what does that mean to you?
19. Does he or she (the child) know he or she has been identified as having reading difficulties?
20. Let's talk about you and your child. What do you tell him or her about the reading difficulties?
21. Do his or her siblings know about the reading difficulties?
22. How does that impact, if any, their relationship with one another?
23. Do you see any behavioural differences between your child with reading difficulties and your child or children without one?
24. Have you spoken with others (friends or neighbours) about your child's reading difficulties? Why or why not? Tell me about those conversations.
25. Do you know anyone who has (family, friends, or neighbours) a child with reading difficulties?
26. Do people outside your family know about the reading difficulties? What about grandparents, neighbours, friends? Do you ever talk to them about your child having reading difficulties? What kind of feedback do you get?
27. Tell me about homework time. When does it occur, where does it occur? How long does it last? Describe the typical experience.
28. Where do you go if you need help with your child's homework? Who do you contact? Is it useful?
29. Are there any financial issues related to having a child with reading difficulties? If so, what are they and how are these issues managed?
30. Are there special things you must do at home to help your child socially or academically? Can you talk about some of those things?
31. How if at all does having a child with reading difficulties change your everyday life?

32. How do you see your child after high school? Has your family discussed the future independence of your child?

### **Parenting challenges**

33. As a parent of a child with reading difficulties, can you explain how that makes you feel?

34. What are your greatest concerns?

35. Do you as a parent feel that you are competent to care for a child with reading difficulties?

36. Have you ever blamed yourself for giving birth to a child with reading difficulties?

37. What influence, if any, do you think having a child with reading difficulties had on you? Will the experiences raising your son/daughter affect/change your view about life?

38. Have you ever felt isolated from other parents?

### **Parenting style**

39. As a parent, what is the most important for you and your child?

40. What are your expectations for your child?

41. As a parent, which part do you think you perform the best?

42. As a parent, which part do you think you perform the worst?

43. If you can start over, will you adopt the same parenting style? Why?

### **Social support**

44. Do you think that support is important for you to care for your child? Why?

45. Do you think you have enough support? Are you satisfied with the support offered?

46. Which type of support is the most effective and appropriate?

47. Do you consider yourself taking an active role in seeking support?

48. To what extent do you think that support can empower you to face the parenting roles?

### Coping

49. What do you usually do to cope with the demands of raising a child with reading difficulties?
  50. Can you describe some of the challenges and difficulties you frequently encounter in raising your child? What are your reactions toward them?
  51. What is your advice for parents of children with reading difficulties regarding how they may better cope with the parenting challenges?
  52. Do you think your personality characteristics facilitate you to adapt to the challenges? What are these?
  53. What are the things that empower or support you in providing continued care for your child?
  54. What are the things that parents need to pay special attention to in raising children with reading difficulties?
-

## **ADDENDUM E**

PORTION OF THE TRANSCRIPTION FROM THE STRUCTURED INTERVIEW WITH PARTICIPANT 2		Code**	Comment
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Vertel my 'n bietjie wat die onderwysers by die skool en die professionele persone gesê het van Marius* se struikelblok met lees.</i>		
<i>Vera*</i> :	<i>Ek het soveel opinies gekry (sit hande oor oë). Ek het meer 'n opinie gehad daaroor as enige iemand anders. <u>Die eerste sielkundige het gesê hy het ADHD</u>. Die heel laaste sielkundige by wie ek hom gehad het, sy was 'n vrou, het gesê hy het simptome van disleksie. Hulle het so baie goed gesê, sy oë, ADHD. <u>Ek het op die ou end die konklusie gemaak.</u></i>	A1 A1 A1	Nb quote Nb quote Nb quote
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Wat doen sy skool vir hom?</i>		
<i>Vera:</i>	<i>Hy is in 'n privaatskool. Sy werkslas is minder. Hy word geassisteer in die eksamen. Iemand lees die vraestel vir hom en skryf dit ook vir hom. In sy skool is die klasse kleiner wat baie help. <u>Dis basies al.</u></i>	4B 4B	4B 4B
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Watter tipe verhouding het jy met sy onderwysers by sy skool?</i>		
<i>Vera:</i>	<i>Hmm. Meeste van die tyd goed. Sy onderwysers is stapelgek oor hom.</i>	4A	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Sonder om 'n naam te noem, wie dink jy was sy beste onderwyser sover en hoekom dink jy was dit sy beste onderwyser.</i>		
<i>Vera:</i>	<i>Die een juffrou by die hoërskool wat al vir hom LO en Afrikaans gegee het. <u>Sy het self twee kinders met leerprobleme gehad. Sy het uit en uit verstaan waar ek vandaan kom.</u></i>	4A 4A	Nb quote
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>En wie dink jy was Marius se swakste onderwyser?</i>		
<i>Vera:</i>	<i>Definitief sy graad 1 juffrou. <u>Sy wou nie erken dat Marius 'n leesprobleem gehad nie. Sy het die skuld vir sy probleem op my gepak. Sy het gesê ek het nie genoeg by die huis met hom geoefen nie. Ek was woedend.</u></i>	4A 4A 4A 1B	Nb quote
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Wat dink jy is jou rol in die onderrig van jou kind?</i>		
<i>Vera:</i>	<i>Dit is 'n moeilik een. (Dink). My rol het verander. Aan die begin was dit absoluut om sy juffrou te wees. Nou dink ek is my rol om hom aan te spoor om sy beste te lewer. <u>Om daar te wees vir hom en hom te ondersteun.</u></i>	2A 2A 2A	Nb quote

<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Wat sou jy sê is Marius se grootste uitdaging?</i>		
Vera:	(Dink). Op hierdie stadium... om selfstandig te word. Om op sy eie voete te kan staan. En sy selfbeeld ook. Ek probeer maar om dit positief op te bou.	2D 2D	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Hoe gereeld besoek jy Marius se onderwysers?</i>		
Vera:	Net basies met ouerbesoek. So twee keer 'n jaar. Tensy daar 'n probleem is, dan sal ek 'n afspraak maak en hulle gaan sien.	2A 2A	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Voel jy dat jy toegerus is om Marius op akademiese vlak te help?</i>		
Vera:	Nee. (Stilte.) (Skud kop).	2B	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>In watter area het hy die meeste hulp nodig?</i>		
Vera:	Sy selfvertroue. Dis die grootste ding wat ek vir hom wil gee. En sy geheue, om sy huiswerk te onthou. Ook natuurlik leeswerk.	2D	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Vertel my bietjie van jou skoolloopbaan. Hoe het jy gevaaar op skool? Hoe was jou gedrag?</i>		
Vera:	Ek? (Lag). My skoolervaring was nie baie goed nie. Ek het saam met my ouers van Holland af Suid-Afrika toe gekom toe ek standerd 8 was. Dit was nog in die apartheidjare en in daai jare was Suid-Afrika nog baie konserwatief. Holland is baie meer liberaal. Ek het toe ook nog opgeëindig in 'n baie konserwatiewe skool. Ons was op gepik omdat ons anders was. Ek en my suster. Ons het pak gekry in die skool. My ma was woedend. My ervaring met die onderwysers was baie sleg. Ek was nie iemand wat regtig geleer het nie. Ek het meer "gesocialise".		
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Is daar enige iemand anders in jou familie wat 'n struikelblok met lees het?</i>		
Vera:	Nee, niemand.		
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>In watter vakke op skool het jy die beste en die slegste gevaaar?</i>		
Vera:	Ek was goed in Tik en Duits. Eintlik al my tale. En opstelle. Ek het dit "gelove" om opstelle te skryf. Ek was nie so goed in Wiskunde nie.		
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>En Marius? Waarin is hy die beste en die slegste?</i>		

Vera:	Hy doen baie goed in Computer Applications Technology (CAT). Hy's ook goed in Biologie en Engels. Hy sukkel met Wiskunde die meeste.	2B	
Navorser:	<i>Vertel my 'n bietjie van Marius. Watter tipe persoonlikheid het hy? Waarvan hou hy en warvan hou hy nie? Wat sou jy wou hê 'n onderwyser moet van hom weet?</i>		
Vera:	Hy's 'n introvert. Hy't 'n sagte hartjie. Hy hou baie van sport en fietsry veral. Uhm... (dink)... Hy is 'n baie gehoorsame kind.	2D	
Navorser:	<i>Hoe kom Marius se leesstruikelblok na vore? Hoe manifester dit?</i>		
Vera:	Hy konsentreer so op wat hy moet lees, dat die begrip heeltemal verlore gaan. Dan weet hy glad nie wat hy gelees het nie.	2B 2B	
Navorser:	<i>Hoe het jy aanvanklik agterkom dat Marius 'n leesstruikelblok het?</i>		
Vera:	Hy was in graad 1. Dit was so 4, 5 maande in die jaar in. As ek saam met hom huiswerk doen en hy moet lees by die huis, het hy vasgehaak op 'n sekere punt. En dan kan hy nie verby daardie punt kom nie. Ek het geweet waar sy sussie op daardie ouderdom was.	1B 1B 1B 1B	
Navorser:	<i>Hoe het jy gevoel toe jy besef Marius het 'n leesstruikelblok?</i>		
Vera:	<u>Ek was bekommerd. Ek het magteloos gevoel. Gefrustreerd.</u> <u>Ek het nie geweet hoe om hom te help nie.</u>	1B 1B	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Het jy hierdie uitdaging met enige iemand in jou familie bespreek?</i>		
Vera:	Ek het dit genoem, maar "no response". <u>Dit het my gefrustreer.</u> Maar ek het toe begin dink miskien is ek oorhaastig.	3B 3B	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Wat beteken dit vir jou dat Marius 'n leesstruikelblok het?</i>		
Vera:	Ek is gespanne oor die toekoms. As ek dit in een woord kan beskryf sal ek sê <u>dis amper soos 'n moederseer</u> .	2A 2A	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Weet Marius dat hy 'n leesstruikelblok het?</i>		

Vera:	Ja...ek dink hy is nog te onvolwasse om dit heeltemal te besef.	2C	
Navorser:	<i>Wat sê jy vir hom oor sy leesstruikelblok?</i>		
Vera:	Ek praat reguit met hom. Sê dit soos dit is. Wat sy uitdaging is. Maar ek dink nie hy't regtig begrip vir wat die impak daarvan is nie. <u>Ek fokus op sy sterkpunte.</u>	2C 2C	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Weet sy suster en broer dat hy 'n leesstruikelblok het?</i>		
Vera:	Ja. Dit het lank gevat om hulle tot die besef te laat kom. Partykeer vergeet hulle nog. Dis meer my man wat partykeer vergeet.	3A 3C	
Navorser:	<i>Wat sou jy sê is die impak daarvan op hulle verhouding met mekaar?</i>		
Vera:	Aanvanklik was hulle baie geïrriteerd met die aandag wat ek aan hom gegee het. Sy sussie was nog te jonk om regtig vir hom simpatie te kon gee. Sy is nou baie meer geduldig met hom. <u>Dit het my altyd baie seer gemaak as hy vrae vra en my man en dogter kap hom.</u>	3A 3A 3A 3C	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Dink jy daar is verskille in die gedrag tussen jou kind sonder 'n leesstruikelblok en jou kind met 'n leesstruikelblok?</i>		
Vera:	Die een het baie meer selfvertroue en die ander een het baie minder selfvertroue. Marius se <u>selfvetroue het heeltemal verswak.</u>	2D 2D	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Het jy al ooit met jou vriende of bure oor Marius se leesstruikelblok gepraat?</i>		
Vera:	Nee. <u>Ek het totaal alleen gevoel.</u> Ek het geweet hulle sal dit nie verstaan nie. Almal van hulle het soveel opinies oor hom gehad, <u>maar niemand het regtig verstaan</u> waarmee ons "deal" nie.	3B 3B 3B	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Ken jy enige bure of vriende wat ook kinders met leesstruikelblokke het?</i>		
Vera:	Nie regtig leesprobleme nie. In ons hele straat is wel mense met kinders met verskeie ander leerprobleme. Ook die kinders wat in Marius se skool is.	3B 3B	
Navorser:	<i>Kom ons gesels bietjie oor huiswerk. Kan jy jou ervaring van huiswerk-doen-tye beskryf?</i>		

Vera:	(Sug)... <u>Dit was in die begin verskriklik erg vir my. Aan die begin was dit doenbaar en vir my lekker. Hy was altyd bly as ek dit saam met hom kon doen. Ek het dit vir hom makliker gemaak.</u> <u>Hy het aangegaan in sy grade en later het die huiswerk te veel geraak en te moeilik geraak vir my. Dit het vir my gevoel of ek al my tyd spandeer aan huiswerk en ek was glad nie meer 'n man nie. Ek was alleen en desperaat en hartseer. Ek het baie "abandoned" gevoel. Ek het verskriklik begin na antwoorde soek. Dit het gevoel of ek begin beheer verloor het.</u>	2B 2B 2B 2B 2B 2B	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>En as jy voel jy kan hom nie help nie, vir wie vra jy gewoonlik hulp?</i>		
Vera:	Ek het somtyds vir sy sussie gevra om te help. Ander kere het ek dit maar net gelos. <u>Dit het my so magteloos laat voel. Ek het gevoel ek laat hom in die steek.</u>	2B 2B 2B	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Is daar finansiële implikasies om 'n kind met 'n leesstruikelblok te hê?</i>		
Vera:	Ja, absoluut. Al die sielkundiges, remediërende onderwysers, die spesiale skool. Dis net geld, geld, geld.	1A	
Navorser:	<i>Watter spesiale dinge doen jy by die huis om Marius op sosiale of akademiese vlak te help?</i>		
Vera:	Niks eintlik nie. Ek het nooit tyd nie. Al die tyd gaan net in sy huiswerk en leerwerk in.	2B	
Navorser:	<i>Hoe dink jy het 'n kind met 'n leesstruikelblok jou alledaagse lewe verander?</i>		
Vera:	Ek weet nie regtig nie...dit het definitief al my tyd in beslag geneem. Dit plaas ook baie druk op my. As Daleen* met iets sukkel of 'n probleem het, sal Marius vir haar sê: vra net vir mamma. Sy kan alles oplos. Ek moet altyd die mamma wees wat alles kan oplos.	2B 2A 2A 2A	
Navorser:	<i>Hoe sien jy vir Marius na skool?</i>		
Vera:	(Dink lank)... Dit gaan 'n baie ingewikkeld antwoord wees. Hy het my al so baie keer verras as ek gedink het hy gaan dit nie maak nie. Ek probeer om nie te veel daaraan te dink nie. Ek probeer om hom net deur skool te kry. <u>Natuurlik is daar bekommernis in my oor wat van hom gaan word, maar ek probeer om nie te veel daaraan te dink nie.</u>	2A 2A 2A 2E	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Wat is jou grootste bekommernis oor Marius?</i>		

Vera:	Marius raak al hoe stiller. Hy is al hoe meer ingetrokke omdat hy dink daar is iets verkeerd met hom. My bekommernis is dat hy dalk op 'n ouer stadium verkeerd gaan reageer op die hele ding en dat sy gedrag traak-my-nieagtig sal word.	2D 2D 2D	
Navorser:	<i>Het jy jouself ooit blameer vir Marius se leesstruikelblok?</i>		
Vera:	<u>Ja. Ek was so moeg en so "overwhelmed". Ek het gedink miskien het ek nie genoeg ingesit nie. Miskien het ek nie genoeg vir hom gedoen nie.</u>	2A 2A	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Watter invloed het jou ervaring met Marius op jou lewe gehad? Het dit jou perspektief op die lewe beïnvloed?</i>		
Vera:	Dit het my definitief anders laat begin dink. Ek dink nie iemand is ooit dom nie - veral nie kinders nie. Mense moenie kinders oordeel nie. Sommige kinders het net 'n ander manier van dinge doen. Die hele ding het my simpatie "levels" teenoor kinders baie groter gemaak.	2A 2A 2A 2A	
Navorser:	<i>Het jy al ooit geïsoleerd gevoel van ander ouers.</i>		
Vera:	<u>Ja. Marius het al hoe meer teruggetrokke geraak en nie regtig maats gemaak nie, en ek het ook gevoel ek pas nie regtig in by die ander ouers nie.</u>	2D 2B	Nb quote
Navorser:	<i>Wat is die belangrikste ding vir jou en Marius?</i>		
Vera:	Dat hy eendag heeltemal finansieel onafhanklik sal kan wees. En dat hy sal gelukkig wees, maak nie saak waar hy is of wat hy doen nie. Dat hy gelukkig in homself sal wees met wie hy is.	2C 2C	
Navorser:	<i>Wat is jou verwagtinge vir hom?</i>		
Vera:	Dat hy alles in sy vermoë sal doen om sy doelwitte te bereik.	2C	
Navorser:	<i>In watter area dink jy vaar jy as ouer die beste?</i>		
Vera:	Uhm. (Lag). Die manier waarop ek vir my kinders kan "guidance" en advies gee. En dat ek nie opgee op hulle nie.	2A	
Navorser:	<i>En die slegste?</i>		
Vera:	Oeee... Aandag. Ek sou graag meer aandag aan al my kinders wou gee.	2A	
Navorser:	<i>As jy weer van voor af kon begin, sou jy dieselfde ouerskapstyl</i>		

	<i>volg?</i>		
Vera:	Ja, ek sal. Ek het vandat my kinders klein was probeer om hulle selfvertroue op te bou, ek het probeer om hulle te verstaan, om hulle siel te ken. Ek sal dit nie anders doen nie.	2A 2A 2A	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Dink jy ondersteuning is belangrik in jou ouerskapsrol met Marius?</i>		
Vera:	Ja, <u>'n mens soek daai verligting om met iemand te praat, om simpatie van iemand te kry. Om te weet jy's nie alleen nie. 'n Mens wil weet jy's nie die enigste een wat die dinge raaksien en verstaan nie.</u>	3B 3B 3B	Nb quote
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Voel jy dat jy voldoende ondersteuning het?</i>		
Vera:	"I had nothing!"	3B	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Watter tipe ondersteuning sal die effektiefste vir jou wees?</i>		
Vera:	Definitief van my man af. <u>Hy wil dit nie weet nie. Hy sê nie veel nie en doen ook niks. Dis maar my verantwoordelikheid en my probleem.</u>	3C 3C	Nb quote
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Neem jy 'n aktiewe rol in om ondersteuning te verkry?</i>		
Vera:	Ja. Ek het alles in my vermoë gedoen om vir hom hulp te kry. Ek het so baie mense gaan sien.	1A 1A	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Hoe dink jy kan ondersteuning jou bemoedig in jou rol as ouer?</i>		
Vera:	<u>'n Mens wil graag net met iemand praat en uitlating gee aan jou gevoelens. Jy voel dan ook nie so alleen nie. Iemand verstaan. Iemand luister.</u>	3B 3B 3B	Nb quote
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Wat doen jy gewoonlik om julle uitdagings te hanteer? Om daar mee te "cope"?</i>		
Vera:	Ek raak gespanne en huil. In die verlede het ek gewoonlik kwaad geraak vir almal in die huis. Ek het gedink: <u>julle gaan "blissfully" aan en julle verstaan nie dat ek nie meer kan nie.</u>	2E 2E 2E	Nb quote
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Hoe kom jy deur die moeilike tye?</i>		
Vera:	Ek was verby die stadium van praat. Om met iemand te praat het nie meer gehelp nie. Ek het hulp nodig gehad. Praat gaan nie vir jou hulp bring nie. <u>Die beste ding wat ek gedoen het, was om vir hom professionele hulp te gaan kry.</u>	2E 2E 2E 2E	Nb quote

<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Wat is vir jou die grootste uitdagings in jou rol as Marius se ouer?</i>			
<i>Vera:</i>	<u>Ek dink eerstens my man wat nie verstaan het nie was vir my baie erg. Toe ek begin beheer verloor het oor Marius se huiswerk en ek besef het ek gaan my kind faal. Ek het gedink sy lewe hang van my af en ek gaan nie vir hom verder hulp kan gee nie.</u> Dis dan wanneer 'n mens ervaar: "every emotion you can possibly think of".	3C 2B 2B 2B 2B	Nb quote	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Watter advies kan jy aan ander ouers gee wat kinders met leesstruikelblokke het?</i>			
<i>Vera:</i>	Kry hulp. Dis ontsettend belangrik om jou kind by die regte mense uit te kry wat hom kan help en vir jou leiding kan gee.	1A 1A		
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Watter karaktereienskappe dink jy het jy wat dit vir jou moontlik maak om hierdie uitdaging deur te sien?</i>			
<i>Vera:</i>	Empatie met mense. En dat ek nie moed opgegee het nie.	2E		
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Wat is dit wat jou bemagtig en aanspoor om aan te hou veg vir Marius se leerproses?</i>			
<i>Vera:</i>	<u>Ek het gesien wat dit aan hom doen. Ek kan in sy oë lees hy sê: help my. Hy het niemand anders gehad na wie toe hy kon draai nie.</u>	2A 2A	Nb quote	
<i>Navorser:</i>	<i>Waaraan dink jy moet 'n ouer spesiaal aandag gee as hulle 'n kind het met 'n leesstruikelblok?</i>			
<i>Vera:</i>	Hoor wat jou kind vir jou sê. Jy moet jou kind se siel ken. Luister na wat hy vir jou sê. En vertrou jou "gut feel". Jy ken jou kind beter as enige onderwyser of sielkundige.	2A 2A 2A		

\* Names changed for confidentiality purposes

\*\* Key to codes:

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Parents' experiences with their child's initial identification with a reading difficulty.	1A: Parents' emotional experiences with initial identification. 1B: Experiencing different opinions from different professionals.
2. Parents' experiences on their relationship with the identified child.	2A: Emotions and perceptions on parents' knowledge of their child having a reading difficulty. 2B: Experiences on assisting their child with homework. 2C: Experiences on explaining the reading difficulty to their child. 2D: Parents' concerns about their child's self-esteem. 2E: Parents' experience on coping with raising their child.
3. Parents' experiences on their relationship with significant others and social support	3A: Relationships with the identified child's siblings. 3B: Relationship with the parent's spouse. 3C: Relationships with family and friends.
4. Parents' experiences on interactions with teachers and the school.	4A: Interaction with the identified child's teachers. 4B: Interactions with the child's school.



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22 August 2012

To whom it may concern,

**Re: Copy editing**

This letter confirms that Annette du Plessis's thesis titled "The Experiences of Parents of Children with Reading Difficulties" was copy edited. The reference list was edited in accordance with the APA format.

Best regards,

Craig Kolb

*Editing manager*