

# Lessons from the Kalahari



# Lessons from the Kalahari:

## *Tracking Teachers' Professional Development*

Edited by

Monica Hendricks and Giulietta Harrison

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The efforts and positive attitudes of the in-service teachers, who embraced the challenge of shifting their thinking and studying part-time while teaching full-time, are evident in the chapters of this book. Principals of schools supported their teachers as well as researchers coming into classrooms. Many parents took an interest in their children's schooling and worked with teachers and researchers to improve learning. Lastly, the children in classrooms in Northern Cape worked with teachers and researchers to make schooling a positive experience.





## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION TO A PROGRAMME OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN CAPE

MONICA HENDRICKS  
AND GIULIETTA D. HARRISON

This book is the culmination of work done by a consortium at Rhodes University, and the funder, Sishen Iron Ore Company Community Development Trust (SIOC-CDT), who saw a need to invest in teacher education in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. The collaborative offering of Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programmes by three institutions at Rhodes University, namely the Centre for Social Development (CSD), the Institute for the Study of the Englishes of Africa (ISEA) and Rhodes University Mathematics Education Project (RUMEP), began in 2012.

Significant amounts of donor funding from corporations, foundations and non-governmental organisations, have been spent to improve the quality of classroom teaching in South Africa. However, many professional teacher-development programmes may result in short-lived or limited impact in changing classroom practice because they fail to take into account what teachers already believe (Young and Muller 2015). The suite of B.Ed. courses described in these chapters attests to the efforts of the authors to understand and respond to what these teachers know, from the mixed-mode delivery of the programme, to course content and classroom-based support and mentoring.

Over the time that these programmes have been implemented, aspects were changed to ensure emergence of quality professional educators. Three key aspects of change have been highlighted to help the reader to understand both the evolution of this programme and the dedication of the three training institutions to improvement of teacher education to meet the

challenges of Northern Cape teaching and learning spaces. The highlighted changes are, firstly, the amount and nature of contact course time in a given year; second, the extent to which the programmes are rooted in the Northern Cape; and third, the whole-school and district reach of the programmes.

There are differences in the specifics for each institution's mode of delivery. For example, both the B.Ed. in English Language Teaching (B.Ed. ELT) and the B.Ed. in Mathematics (B.Ed. Maths) have regular cluster or school-based workshops and peer-support groups, while the B.Ed. in Foundation Phase (B.Ed. FP) does not, preferring to have monthly workshops with all students present. However, for all three programmes, a day of contact teaching time at Rhodes University entails a minimum of nine hours, and often there are extra evening movie screenings related to course content, computer laboratory sessions, or self-study time in the library. Both the computer laboratories and the library are open 24 hours.

The amount and nature of contact time in a given year for each B.Ed. programme are, on average, 18 days, plus eight days of workshop time and five days for examinations. Added to the model of delivery is a strong mentorship-and-support component, with field workers visiting teachers on-site to ascertain how teachers may need practical support. This information is fed back to the course coordinators and lecturers to allow for tweaking of lectures and district workshops. This degree of classroom support and lesson observation contrasts with most in-service teacher education courses.

Contact time is 77% devoted to building and deepening teachers' disciplinary and pedagogical content knowledge, while almost a quarter is structured, supervised time in teachers' schools and classrooms. This Work Integrated Learning is an important, necessary element of teacher qualifications as per the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (DHET 2015).

The current model of implementation is in-service, meaning that teachers have to already be working in schools and they have to attend contact teaching sessions during school holidays and over long weekends. There are four contact sessions per annum, and teachers are given assignments to complete between one contact session and the next. More than half of the total structured contact teaching and learning time of 38.3 days per year take place in Northern Cape, evidence of the extent to which these programmes are embedded in Northern Cape, and in John Taole Gaetsewe District, in particular.

The whole-school and district benefits of the programmes, together with impacts across the B.Ed. FP, B.Ed. ELT, and B.Ed. Maths courses, flows from teachers' applying what they have learnt, both in a practical and theoretical sense. On-site visits found teachers who had transformed their classrooms into print-rich environments, set up book corners and improved their pedagogy around teaching of reading and writing. Overall, there was evidence of improved content knowledge and pedagogic practice. Teachers were responsive to environmental challenges such as absence of a functioning school library, and limited classroom resources and support from the community. An interesting aspect of this collaborative teacher-training endeavour was the manner in which teachers shared their knowledge with colleagues who were not on the course; they even went so far as to run district workshops for other teachers at surrounding schools. This was particularly evident in the B.Ed. Maths programme.

A recent national study aimed at understanding what quality early childhood education, and current training of Foundation Phase teachers, might look like, brought forward a model of professional educators who are reflective, context adaptive and skilled in subject knowledge (Harrison 2017). The chapters in this book are testament to how a quality teacher-education programme can have a profound impact on teachers' pedagogy and, most importantly, on the child in the classroom. It is important to note the backdrop of this book which is the context of teaching and learning in Northern Cape, as this frames much of the work described in each chapter and demonstrates how the teacher educators and teachers explored ways of adapting to promote quality education for the South African learner.

The sparsely populated Northern Cape province contains 2.2 % of the total population of South Africa, in the largest provincial land area (GCIS 2013). The province is situated in the dry north-western part of South Africa and contributes only 2.3% to South Africa's GDP despite its size, with economic activities focused mainly on agriculture and mining (diamonds, iron-ore, zinc, lead and manganese; GCIS 2015).

The National Development Agency identified several challenges faced by the people living in this province, directly as a result of poverty (Magongo 2016). In early 2016, the official Northern Cape unemployment rate stood at 30.7%, while the expanded unemployment rate was 43.9%, well above the already high national expanded unemployment rate of 36.4%. These levels of unemployment have been exacerbated by diminishing mining of alluvial diamonds and the vagaries of the price of iron on the international market. The result is an increasing number of people dependent on state grants. Communities have high levels of illiteracy, alcohol abuse and associated problems such as malnutrition and

foetal alcohol syndrome, TB and chronic diseases including hypertension and HIV/AIDS.



**Figure 1-1:** District and municipal government boundaries in Northern Cape (Wikimedia Commons 2011).

Education represents further challenges for people living in the Northern Cape due to the long distances between settlements. Schools are often far apart and far from resources such as libraries. The generally poor roads and communication infrastructure in most rural areas result in schools being isolated, which makes it difficult for learners to access information or books to read for pleasure, and for teachers to form collegial relationships.

A recent research report was produced by CSD to determine the efficacy of the B.Ed. F.P. in-service programme and whilst the report revealed that the programme is fundamentally effective, it is sobering to consider the national results regarding literacy levels in South Africa as

they demonstrate how important it is for teacher training institutions to produce quality professional educators. The results of the PIRLS literacy study of 2016 revealed that South Africa was once again the lowest performing country out of 50 (Howie et al. 2017). This study found that 78% of South African Grade-4 learners could not read for meaning as they did not understand what they were reading, as opposed to only 4% of learners internationally (Howie et al. 2017, 11). Furthermore the report outlined that learners writing in African languages attained the lowest scores, with 90% or more of Setswana-speaking Grade-4 learners (the main language of learning and teaching in Northern Cape) not being able to read for meaning (Howie et al. 2017, 11). Afrikaans and English speaking learners fared better with higher scores but were still below the international benchmark (Howie et al. 2017, 2, 4). Rural schools and schools without libraries (Northern Cape was third last of all provinces) contributed to the poor performance in literacy attainment overall (Howie et al. 2017).

Problems of illiteracy in higher grades, such as Grades 4, 5 and 6, pointed to the roots of literacy in Grades 1–3. In South Africa, learners are taught to read in Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3). From Grade 4, learners are expected to “read to learn”, in other words, the foundations of literacy are intended to be established in the first three years of formal schooling. The results for home language in Northern Cape, in all grades, lagged behind the national average, which itself represents a low level of achievement (Table 1).

We need to consider the Annual National Assessment (ANA) results (Tables 1-1 and 1-2). The ANAs are nationally benchmarked assessments in Grades 1 and 3 (Foundation Phase), Grade 6 (Intermediate Phase) and Grade 9 (Senior Phase), conducted by the Department of Basic Education (DBE 2014). These grades were targeted because they are at the start of formal schooling and the end-point of each phase of the curriculum for compulsory education. We consider the results in Mathematics and Language, in Grades 1 and 3 in learners’ Home Language (HL), and in Grades 6 and 9 in their First Additional Language (FAL, generally English), as these are key to academic success, and also the curriculum areas dealt with in this volume.

**Table 1-1:** Summary of the ANA results in Mathematics for Northern Cape, 2012, 2013 and 2014, compared to the national average.

Subject: Mathematics	Average mark (%) in Northern Cape			Average mark (%) nationally		
	2012	2013	2014	2012	2013	2014
Grade 1	63.5	55.1	65.9	68.1	59.6	68.4
Grade 3	37.9	50.5	49.2	41.2	53.1	51.3
Grade 6	23.8	35.6	41.6	26.7	39	41.8
Grade 9	13.2	12.6	9.7	12.7	13.9	10.8

Results for Mathematics showed that Northern Cape was almost always below the national average throughout the nine years of compulsory schooling, and followed the same general precipitous decline by Grade 9.

**Table 1-2:** Summary of the ANA results in Language for Northern Cape, 2012, 2013 and 2014, compared to the national average.

Subject: Language	Average mark (%) in Northern Cape			Average mark (%) nationally		
	2012	2013	2014	2012	2013	2014
Grade 1 (HL)	52.4	56.4	60.6	58	61	63
Grade 3 (HL)	49.4	46.2	46.2	52	50.8	52
Grade 6 (EFAL)	36.4	40.3	36.7	35.6	45.7	42.6
Grade 9 (EFAL)	37.9	34.9	34.5	34.6	33.2	33

Similarly to Mathematics, results for language showed that Northern Cape was largely below the national average throughout the nine years of compulsory schooling. It is worrying that language results declined from Grade 1 to 3, indicating that learners did not achieve basic literacy (decoding) in their home language in Foundation Phase. The drop-off in results between Grades 3 and 6 reflects the challenge most learners face when the medium of instruction in school switches to an additional language, namely English. It is noteworthy that the drop was smaller in Northern Cape than nationally, possibly due to the fact that for many Northern Cape learners, EFAL does not become the medium of instruction, but they continue to learn through Afrikaans, their home language.

This book provides a varied set of chapters on how a suite of teacher professional development course offerings for Foundation Phase, English FAL, and Mathematics teachers in Northern Cape, contributed towards

expanding teachers' knowledge, skill, and confidence in improving teaching and learning in their classrooms. The teacher professional development models discussed include action research, productive pedagogies, outside leaders and partners, networked learning communities and working for systemic change. Most chapters draw on some aspect of sociocultural theory, which provides a unifying analytical approach across diverse subject matter. Use of a message-book system coupled with emotional intelligence to improve teacher-parent communication, and active mentoring of group guided reading through setting up reading corners, are some of the practical topics presented.

The chapters are grouped into three sections with distinct foci, namely literacies in English, mathematics education, and life skills through the relationships of parents, teachers and children. As literacy, numeracy and life skills are key areas of learning in Foundation Phase classrooms, but are equally relevant in other phases of education, it is fitting that these three areas should have emerged strongly.

Another point of interest is the way in which the active mentorship of in-service teachers has an impact on their pedagogy and the quality of learning taking place in Northern Cape classrooms. This resonates with findings of the PIECCE report which suggested that mentorship for teachers should go beyond their initial teacher training and be contextualised for it to be relevant (Harrison 2017). Additionally, the B.Ed. FP degree provides a way for Early Childhood Development practitioners who have an accredited NQF Level-5 qualification, and are in service, the opportunity to obtain an NQF Level-7 degree at a tertiary institution. Interestingly, Rhodes University is the only university in South Africa that offers this unique career path for adult learners who would otherwise not have the opportunity to study further.

The recommended readership for this book includes academics, postgraduate students, education officials, researchers in the field of teacher education, and practitioners in professional development of teachers, in particular. However, since the quality of classroom teaching is a matter of general public concern, this book may also be of interest to NGOs involved in schools in general, as well as to wider South African society.

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## SECTION A: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

Giulietta Harrison addresses the importance of teachers' professional development when communicating with parents, and the effects of using an Emotional Intelligence approach to establish support for teacher, parent and child. Making use of Vygotskian theory, she describes how the seemingly simple step of using a message book with emoticons can have a positive impact, not only on how teachers relate to parents, but even on their teaching. Joanna Muroa and Giulietta Harrison examine the scope and style of parental involvement in children's schooling. The extent of challenges parents face, and the attitude of teachers towards parents, are described. They demonstrate that, despite trying circumstances, parents show a willingness to participate, but need the support of teachers and School Governing Bodies. Monica Hendricks and Elizabeth Botha explore the communities within which teachers acquired literacy, concluding that the influence of parents and caregivers is pervasive, not only at home, but also in school and within institutions such as church. They provide a rich description of how a group of children, raised in apartheid-era South Africa, acquired foundational literacies in a variety of languages and through a range of influences and resources. This chapter also shows how similar influences play a role in shaping the pedagogy of teachers, as adults.



# CHAPTER TWO

## AN EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION BETWEEN TEACHERS AND PARENTS

GIULIETTA D. HARRISON

### **Introduction**

The relationship between teacher and parent can often be problematic owing to poor communication from both parties. This was the case when In-service Foundation Phase educators in Northern Cape province evidenced a fear of communicating with parents and a general lack of trust on both sides. Many teachers revealed that they did not have the support of parents and that this made it difficult for them to do their jobs. Parents did not supervise homework, respond to notices or participate in school events. Children were frequently absent from school and the teacher was not notified why or when the child would be returning. Teachers said they did not know how to communicate with parents and that the only communication that took place was when there was a problem with a child, or a fundraising event was taking place. Furthermore, discipline in classrooms was problematic and some teachers were afraid to tell parents that their child was misbehaving, for fear of the child being subjected to corporal punishment. Teachers did not feel that they had the type of relationship with parents that they could suggest alternative forms of discipline as there was no trust between teacher and parent.

It was decided, as part of the Life Skills programme, to assist the teachers with a practical approach to building relations and continued communication with the parents of their learners. This chapter describes how a research project that piloted a communication tool, grounded in the principles of emotional intelligence (EI), had a positive outcome.

## Literature Review

One of the goals of teacher education is to equip teachers with skills to teach effectively in their classrooms. This is particularly challenging in South African classrooms which are multilingual, overcrowded and often under-resourced (Fleisch 2008). Many teachers confess to feeling overwhelmed and unsure of how to manage their learners, often resorting to ‘crowd-control’ as the primary activity of the day and resulting in limited learning taking place. Teachers are told that they should be educating the whole child (DBE 2011), but they are not shown how to develop the emotional capabilities of the child or how to relate to the child’s home environment, which is traditionally represented by the teachers’ communication with parents.

Durlak et al. (2011) stated that teaching and learning in schools has a strong social, emotional and academic component, and that students do not learn alone but rather collaboratively with the assistance of their teachers, peers, and with the added support of their families. How and what is learned is affected by the relationships that learners have with their teachers and families, suggesting that the relationship between parents and teachers is potentially significant.

Studies have shown that Emotional Intelligence (EI) is key to improved performance of learners and that if a teacher models EI, she will assist learners to develop the same skills (Greenberg et al. 2003). Furthermore, by promoting EI in the classroom the teacher manages her learners in a positive way, builds self-respect and self-regulation, and provides a positive learning environment (Harrison 2011). EI was described by Daniel Goleman (1995) as the capacity to recognise one’s own feelings, together with those of others, motivating ourselves and regulating our emotions, particularly with regard to our social relationships. Consequently, making use of the principles of EI has the potential to build effective relationships between teacher, child and parent.

Yuri Karpov (2005) urged educators to consider all aspects of the child’s make-up, namely cognitive, emotional and physical aspects, and examine the interrelationships of the different facets of child development. Zeidner et al. (2003), when they reviewed the literature on EI, came to the conclusion that it comprises three aspects, namely the temperament of the child, the child’s rule-based learning, and competencies around insightful understanding. It is particularly the latter two that are important for the teacher to promote in order to facilitate self-regulation. As the child’s temperament is inherited, the teacher can at best only “modulate” this aspect of the child’s development, but she can provide tools to deal with

difficulties around temperament and the ability to self-regulate (Zeidner et al. 2003).

Elfenbein and Maccann (2017) proposed that EI is a higher order construct consisting of emotional perception, emotional expression, emotional attention regulation, emotional understanding, emotional regulation of self, and emotional regulation of others. While all of these emotional abilities are interrelated, it is the last one, namely emotional regulation of others, that affects how the teacher mediates. This chapter focuses particularly on the teacher as a mediator who is not only developing self-regulation in her learners, but also in the parents of her learners, through use of a tool for communication.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***EI principles and Vygotsky***

For Lev Vygotsky, an eminent Soviet psychologist, humans are very different from their animal relations because they bring to the learning environment an evolutionary capacity to adapt and manipulate their environment and have consequently built up cultural and historical tools (Van der Veer and Valsiner 1991). This collective social history is brought to the classroom and transferred from learner to learner, from educator to learner and from educator to parent, through the process of mediation. Vygotsky described the mediational process as a goal-directed and conscious activity in which the educator creates an environment that is conducive to learning (Van der Veer and Valsiner 1991).

Vygotsky saw mediation as happening with the assistance of signs and tools which gives it a generative quality. This encompasses the social and cultural qualities of the relationship between the teacher or mediator and the child or, in this case, the parent (Moll 2014). Language is the key cultural tool for mediation and can be used as a resource to address problems that language sometimes poses in a multilingual classroom (Ruiz 1984). Language occurs at the same time as the child begins to use symbols and it is this language that opens the door to understanding things that are not necessarily present (Piaget 2001). For example, an emoticon<sup>1</sup> can be used to describe the behaviour of a child. The symbol is placed in a message book and “read” by the parent and child.

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<sup>1</sup> An emoticon is the name given to a small iconic drawing that depicts an emotion such as happy, sad, cross or surprised. Emoticons are used extensively in social media as shorthand for expression of an emotion.

In Foundation Phase, the child is beginning to make connections between alphabetic and numeric symbols and their associated significance. Furthermore, the younger the learner, the more likely he is to be simply 'reading pictures' in order to understand information. Consequently, emoticons as a key aspect of this research, provided a basic introduction to using a visual symbol to interpret meaning. In this instance, emoticons referred to the performance of children and their ability to self-regulate. To develop self-regulation, the teacher and the parent must address the development of the child's emotional intelligence. By noting the daily emoticons, the parents and the teacher were able to assist the children in development of self-regulation.

The concept of Emotional Intelligence was popularized by Daniel Goldman in the early 1990s and he identified a number of elements of EI in an individual. These include self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy for others and development of social skills grounded in positive relations (Goleman, 1998, 2001 & 2007). Perhaps the most important of these is self-regulation as this tends to affect academic performance. It is conscious mediation on the part of the educator that facilitates self-regulation in the learner.

Self-regulation or self-management is the first principle of EI and is a key component of individual management of emotions (Harrison 2011). For the purposes of this study, self-regulation, as in Jahronmi and Stifter (2008, 125), is defined as:

"The ability to control one's actions and responses which is essential for healthy development across varied contexts. This ability comes in several forms, including emotional, behavioural and cognitive."

Self-regulation is essential to the development of executive functioning and should be modelled by the teacher in the classroom and in her relations with the parents of her learners. To develop self-regulation within the triad that is teacher, child and parent, the teacher must consciously mediate and build a relationship of trust.

All too frequently, teachers complain that parents do not communicate with them or their children and that current economic constraints require that both parents work, hence meeting with them regularly is not always possible. Within the context of this study, many of the parents were dependent on social grants and simply did not have the means to make frequent trips to the school to meet with the teachers. Consequently, establishment of an effective approach to communication between teacher and parent was imperative. For this reason, a message-book system as a

tool for conscious mediation was put in place and had the potential to effectively facilitate development of self-management or self-regulation.

Empathy, the second principle of EI, is described as the capacity to care about others and responding to their needs (Goldman 1998), which suggests that teachers should not only develop empathy in their learners, but have empathy for learners and their parents. Furthermore, lack of communication with parents tends to promote a sense of 'otherness', meaning that the teacher does not understand the needs of the parent and is often unmotivated to do so, and the parent does not appreciate the needs of the teacher. Without a sense of empathy for parents, it is easy for teachers to dismiss their needs, particularly the need of working parents to understand what their child is engaging with at school. Without this understanding, parents cannot support the teacher, the school or their child. Consequently, developing empathy is essential to the raising of the 'whole child', as stipulated in our curriculum, and a general understanding of how children should develop in Foundation Phase (DBE 2011). In the context of this study, empathy is understood to be the ability to appreciate the emotions of the learner, teacher and parent with a view to using that appreciation in a constructive manner.

Developing empathy and self-regulation hinges on a third principle of EI, namely self-awareness. It is only by noticing one's own emotions and using these to determine a reaction, that the teacher, parent and learner can regulate their behaviour. This is taken to a more abstract level when the individual moves beyond her own awareness to noticing the emotions of others and using this information to react in a positive manner. Through the message-book system, the teacher uses a mediational tool in a self-regulated manner to convey her feelings about a child's performance to the parent. The parent's response is drawn from her own awareness of both the message in the message book, the child's behaviour and her own reaction to the message. In this way, an awareness is established at multiple levels and a conscious reaction can take place.

### ***Collaboratively constructing knowledge***

Vygotsky (1978) put forward the notion that we learn collaboratively, drawing from existing knowledge to construct new knowledge. Accepting that language is the key tool for mediation when co-constructing knowledge, must take into account the context of teaching and learning.

Vygotsky's principles of learning placed strong emphasis on the social dynamics of learning. This relates particularly to the use of language. In EI it is recommended that learners be given the language of emotion in order to understand and regulate their emotions. This is more important the younger the child is, particularly when working with second-language learners. The language of emotion is comprised of labelled emotions, discussion and care circles. In South African classroom contexts we are challenged by multilingual learners who often learn in a language other than their mother-tongue. In addition, learners' parents may not understand notices that are sent home, how to support their child's learning, or the requirements of the school. For this reason, it was essential to establish a system of communication that would transcend the multilingual issues and ensure levels of trust. The collaborative efforts on the part of the teacher and parent, through the message book system, allowed the participants to understand the needs of the child and to respond appropriately. Each participant acquired knowledge about the other party and used this knowledge to implement EI principles that built relations of trust within the triangle of parent, teacher and learner.

The use of icons/emoticons on the grid meant that, even if a parent did not speak the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), they could understand at a glance how their child was performing and acknowledge by signing the book, commenting and praising their child. In some instances this was simply a cross on the page when a parent was illiterate and, in others, it was the sharing of deeply personal information. Arising from this acknowledgement was the opportunity for the parent to communicate with their child, in their mother tongue, while responding to the teacher's message. Consequently, a specific language of communication was established that allowed for collaborative social learning between all parties concerned.

### ***The Zone of Proximal Development***

Vygotsky (1978) suggested that when we learn collaboratively, through the use of language, we set up what he referred to as a "Zone of proximal development" (ZPD). The ZPD is essentially the space between present capabilities and potential development, with the help of a more capable other. At the heart of the ZPD is the idea that the less capable other should achieve independence in the set task or concept, through scaffolded steps of learning. This type of conscious mediation allows the less capable other to internalise new learning and therefore set a new ZPD.

In this research, the lecturer set a task requiring in-service teachers to pilot the use of a message book that communicated the daily behaviour of their learners to the parents. Through the work of the message book, a tool for mediation, the teachers were able to assist the parents in understanding their child's development as well as the work of the teacher, and thereby strengthen communication between the teacher and parent. Thus, one of the ZPD relationships was between the teacher, the more capable other who scaffolded information through use of a message book, and the parents. A second ZPD was established between parent and child and was mediated by the tool of the message book and the work of the teacher. As use of the message book unfolded, the teacher was able to step back and allow the parents to own the process and make valuable contributions to this tool of mediation. The third ZPD was between child and teacher who, through noting daily behaviour of the child, setting behavioural goals and putting in place systems to improve or support behaviour, facilitated development of the child's self-awareness and self-regulation. As the child's behaviour improved, a new ZPD with corresponding goals, was established. The use of the message book system was consciously mediated by the teachers for both child and parent.

### *Conscious mediation*

Mediation or, in this case, conscious mediation (Karpov 2005), is the means by which an individual guides the learning of another, often through the use of a chosen language and mediational tool. Conscious mediation is a specific decision and action on the part of the mediator with a goal attached. The goal, in this instance, was for the conscious mediator, namely the teacher, to inform the parents of their child's learning and to establish a line of communication through bonds of trust that would develop by using a message book system that made use of specific EI-based principles and language. The second goal was to improve the teaching and learning environment through promotion of self-regulation in teachers and learners.

In this research project, in-service teachers were challenged to promote EI in their learners and to document progress in the form of emoticons used in a message book that parents would read daily. The teacher was required to assist parents in using the message book system as a means to validate their child, thereby helping them to use positive approaches to discipline. This collaborative effort was designed to shift the thinking of both parents and teachers toward identifying the positive actions of each learner and, where problems were present, to create an environment of



trust in which these could be resolved. In this way, the teacher was not only guiding the EI of learners, but also that of parents by requiring them to engage with the behaviour of their children and to acknowledge it in an appropriate manner. This type of conscious mediation allowed the teachers to open up a channel of communication with the parents and for the parents to begin to appreciate the work that the teachers were doing with their children.

## **Research Methods**

The 29 teachers engaged in this research project taught Grades R to 2 in the rural areas of Northern Cape Province. Teaching often took place in challenging circumstances, with high class numbers, no water, limited resources and parents who themselves were poorly educated.

Each in-service teacher was charged with the task of piloting the use of a message book system of communication in their school as part of a research assignment in their first-year course in Life Skills, one of the curriculum courses in a part-time B.Ed. programme. The purpose of this assignment was to promote conscious mediation and improved communication between teacher, parent and child. The lecturer wanted the teachers to experience the benefits of an EI approach to communication with parents and, in so doing, build positive relations between the teachers and their learner's parents.

The task required the teachers to run a workshop with parents to introduce the message book system, draft a letter explaining the system, and ensure that it was sent to all relevant parties. As part of the assignment, the teachers were given a basic message book grid and a sample of potential emoticons they could use to illustrate how the child had performed. The teachers had the option to design their own basic emoticons that could be filled-in daily on a grid in the message book. A space on the grid had to be allocated for both the teacher and the parent to comment in writing about the learner's performance, when necessary.

The piloting had to take place over a term and the teachers had to provide five example pages from five different learners' message books, along with a reflective piece on how they felt the system had worked as a whole. The reason for implementation over a full term was to allow for practising of a new concept to consolidate new learning (Vygotsky in Smidt 2009). It additionally enabled the teacher to scaffold the use of the system with both the parent and the child providing both the time and the steps involved to ensure the system could "take hold". Running alongside the application of the message book system was EI work in the classroom

designed to encourage the learners to “do their best” on a daily basis. Teachers were given a lecture on how to use EI principles in the classroom together with a basic resource pack designed by the lecturer concerned. Positive discipline strategies such as acknowledging learner efforts in “care circles”, discussing emotions with the learners in order to develop a language of emotion and using resources such as ‘traffic lights’ to control noise levels, all raised the awareness of the learner and assisted in developing a constructive learning environment.













The purpose of the reflective essay was for the lecturer to obtain feedback on how the pilot was implemented and to understand if the use of message books had resulted in the desired outcome of positive relations being established between parent and teacher. The use of emoticons was a calculated decision based on difficulties attached to teachers communicating with parents of different languages. This had been identified as a problem that many teachers faced and was considered to be one of the major stumbling blocks in communicating with parents, resulting in teachers often simply avoiding communication. Emoticons were chosen not only because they are frequently used in the field of Emotional Intelligence, but because they can be read by parents who may be illiterate and by children who are only starting to read. Also, emoticons are quick for teachers to fill in and they are culturally current because they are used in advertising, emails and social media. It was felt that emoticons were relatively universal and therefore something that all participants could easily relate to.

On page 21 and 22, is an example of a basic grid completed by a teacher simply using a pen to draw the emoticons (Fig. 2-1), followed by an example of a grid that was further adapted and the teacher made use of stickers (Fig. 2-2).

## **Data Analysis and Findings**

It is only relatively recently that mixed methods research has been recognised as a third form of research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzi 2004). This project made use of a mixed-methods approach, in preference to one that was either purely quantitative or purely qualitative, as it allowed for a deeper triangulation of data (Cresswell 2003). In other words, having two types of data provides an opportunity to crosscheck findings and conclusions. Mixed-methods research makes use of both quantitative and qualitative data within the same project and emphasises the role that each plays in informing analysis (Denscombe 2008). It answers questions from different perspectives and minimizes gaps in data collection. In this

research, the reflective piece provided qualitative evidence that supported quantification of the responses on the grids and allowed for cross analysis.

Days of the week	Inside play	Outside play	Other	Comment
Monday Date: 31/08/2015			Storytime 	Was fighting on the mat,
Tuesday Date: 1/9/2015				Snatched a puzzle and had a tantrum.
Wednesday Date: 2/9/2015				Had a great day and was best monitor.
Thursday Date: 3/9/2015				Did not have a good day. Was fighting a lot. think he might be unwell
Friday Date: 4/9/2015	<u>Absent because he is sick.</u>			



Happy



Sad

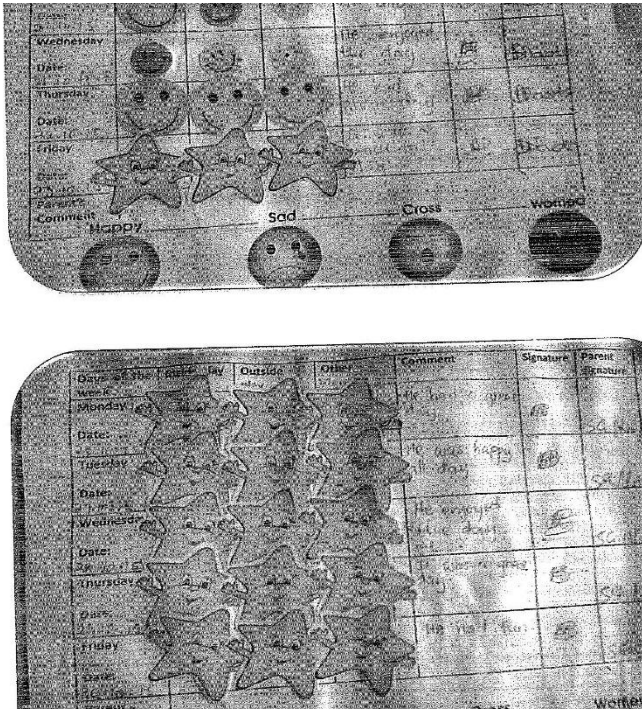


Cross



Worried

Figure 2-1: Example of a completed grid using the sample given.



**Figure 2-2:** Example showing modification of grid using stickers and adding a column for the signatures of parent and teacher.

### *Grids*

A total of 145 grids were quantitatively analysed to answer the following questions:

- Had the teachers adapted their grids to suit their specific contexts of teaching and learning?
- What types of icons had been used?
- What types of comments were written by teachers and parents?
- What evidence was there that parents were illiterate?
- Had the parents responded to the system and its implementation?

Some of the comments made by parents clearly showed a deeper engagement in their child's schooling: "I will encourage him to learn and help him with all his school work"; "I was not aware of what you

experienced at school but will observe her at home and will visit to share with you my experience”; “I am impressed to see that he enjoys being at school almost every day,” and “I am happy to see that the teacher cares,” or “I am so impressed to hear about the progress of my child at school”. Perhaps most significant was the improvement in trust between parents and teachers. This was evidenced by a parent who stated that she had not felt that the teacher had “cared” until the message book system was introduced, but now that she was convinced, she felt that she could reveal that her child had been abused. Another aspect of trust was shown by parents who were illiterate feeling comfortable to simply put an “x” as a signature, and then taking time to speak to the teacher about their child’s progress.

The use of icons had the additional knock-on effect of teachers realising that, “My children can also interpret what I am saying to their parents about them through using the faces,” which meant that they were eager to be on their “best behaviour” in the classroom. Another teacher noted that, “Most of the learners are determined to do their best to keep their record clean and get smiley faces. This has helped me with my discipline.”

Teachers commented that, “What amazes me was that a week after I introduced the rubric, parents’ attitude[s] changed because every day the message book is signed and some parents even come to the school uninvited, which means they are showing an interest in their children.” Another teacher noted, “The use of the message book helps us to show the parents that we value and respect the role they play in the child’s life.” The latter comment showed a marked shift in attitude from a teacher who had previously felt threatened by parents and did not have a positive relationship with them.

Most of the teachers (78%) adapted the grid to meet their individual needs. Adaptations included things like using stickers instead of drawing icons, adding comment lines, columns for signatures, or cutting out icons which were then pasted in the grid.

The teachers generally kept their comments short and, in most instances, they did not comment on the grids. This was indicative of time constraints in completing each learner’s message book before home time. Some of the teacher comments were affirming, for example, “He was excited to be at school,” and “She had a good week and achieved in all learning areas”. Others alerted parents that there was a problem which needed their attention, for example, “He was angry all day because he was feeling sick,” and “He made a lot of noise in class, but he enjoyed the maths activity”. However, the simple act of presenting an icon to show

how the learner had performed, together with an occasional comment, convinced parents that the teacher cared enough to note their child's individual performance.

**Table 2-1:** Quantitative analysis of message book grids

Number of grids analysed	Number of grids with successful application	Number of parents (n=145) who did not respond	Number of parents (n=145) who were illiterate	Number of schools (n=29) which continued to use the system
145 (100)	113 (78%)	32 (22%)	5 (3%)	18 (62%)
Number of grids adapted to context	Number of teachers (n=29) making use of stickers	Number of teachers (n=29) who stated the system was useful	Number of teachers (n=29) who said parents were actively involved and communication had improved	Number of teachers (n=29) who thanked lecturer for exposing them to the system
113 (78%)	8 (28%)	26 (90%)	27 (97%)	10 (34%)

It is interesting to note that 78% of the teachers who adapted their grids to their context had successfully applied the system (Table 2-1) in that the parents were responsive and the triad between parent, teacher and child was strengthened through positive communication. It is useful to note that only 28% of the teachers made use of stickers with the rest preferring to draw the emoticons or cut them out and stick them onto the grid. This is not surprising given that most of the teachers were in rural settings far from shops where they might purchase stickers. In addition, it was clear that the grids that were successful were also those that had been adapted to context. The data illustrate that, contrary to the teachers' assumptions, only 3% of sampled parents were illiterate, suggesting that this reason, was, in fact, not a primary cause of poor channels of communication.

### *Reflective report*

The 29 reflective reports were qualitatively analysed to determine how the teachers felt about: