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THE EFFECT OF A POSTMODERN CAREER LIFE STORY INTERVENTION ON DISADVANTAGED GRADE 12 LEARNERS

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A research project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master in Educational Psychology in the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 2011

DECLARATION

I declare that this research report entitled "The effect of a postmodern career life story intervention on disadvantaged grade 12 learners" is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Education (Educational Psychology) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other university.

……

Sarah Tinsley-Myerscough

July 2012

ABSTRACT

This research sought to explore the effects of a postmodern career life story intervention on a sample of eight disadvantaged grade 12 learners. A qualitative research design using pre and post intervention interviews was used to explore whether the participants reevaluated or reinterpreted their responses to the interview questions in light of the intervention. The results of the study indicated that the participants experienced increased self-understanding, self-esteem, initiative and hope, optimism and empowerment through the intervention. The participants appreciated the time and space to be able to reflect on their lives. It appears as if all the various components of the life story intervention had a powerful impact on the participants. Writing life stories and using art materials appeared to be a method that was effective with disadvantaged grade 12 learners.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

During the research and writing of this thesis I have received immense support from a number of people.

I thank my husband, *Jimmy Myerscough* for his incredible, unwavering support and encouragement; for tirelessly assisting in any way he possibly could to make this year not only possible, but also amazing for us. I truly could not have done it without him.

I owe immense gratitude to my parents, *Roger and Sue Tinsley*, who, from the beginning, have believed in and loved me, unconditionally. For all they have done, and the support they have given, to make this next step in my journey possible, I am so grateful.

I have been fortunate to have in my life m*y family and friends*, whom I thank for all their love, support and prayers over so many years, but especially this year.

My research supervisor*, Joseph Seabi,* has guided me through this research journey. His wisdom, gentle encouragement and belief in this topic, (and my ability to do it), have been greatly appreciated.

The research could never have been carried out without the willing participation of the eight volunteers from AEC and Ikageng. Their enthusiastic involvement has been an inspiration to me.

To the Creator of Life, thank you for being with me in and through it all.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

There is a crisis in youth unemployment in South Africa. One of the factors contributing to this crisis is inadequate, insufficient or, in some cases, no career counselling in youth finishing school. Parsons (1909), who has been called the "founding father" of career counselling, suggested that there seemed to be three main foci for career counselling: 1) knowledge of oneself, one's life story, where one has gone and where one is going; 2) knowledge of the world of work, including opportunities available and resources within one's context; and 3) putting one and two together to make a decision for action into the world of work.

Using a qualitative research design this research aims to explore the effects of a postmodern narrative career life story intervention on disadvantaged grade 12 learners. This intervention, if successful, could be used as part of the first main focus for career counselling – knowledge of oneself. A further aspect in career counselling is increasing self-efficacy so that the person has the self-belief to be able to start their career journey. The intervention also aims to increase self-esteem in participants so that they feel empowered to make career decisions and start their life journeys in the world of work.

1.2. Aim

This research aims to explore the effects of a postmodern career life story intervention on disadvantaged grade 12 learners. Using pre and post intervention interviews, the research aims to see whether the participants reevaluated or reinterpreted their answers in light of the intervention. It was hoped that the responses to the questions post intervention would reflect a more positive and hopeful attitude and an increase in self-belief and esteem, and that the learners would demonstrate more pro-activity and responsibility for their lives, specifically their lives after school. Using a qualitative interpretative case study approach, the research aims to determine whether this intervention could be a useful tool as a postmodern career intervention in helping adolescents discover more about who they are, what has shaped them and who they hope to become (Santrock, 2003). A corollary of the output of the research could be a better understanding of how disadvantaged grade 12 learners perceive their place in the world, which may indicate further areas for study. If the intervention proves to be useful to the adolescents, it could form a component of a high impact, low cost career and self-efficacy intervention to help address unemployment in out of school youth.

1.3. Rationale

In South Africa there is a high percentage of unemployed youth that are also not receiving further education. This group is referred to as NEETs - Not in Education, Employment or Training (Department for Business, Education and Skills, 2000). In South Africa, 32.7% of individuals between the ages of 15 and 24 fall into this category (Statistics South Africa, 2010).

This is an alarmingly high percentage, particularly as 7% of households are headed by youth in the 15 – 24 age category (Statistics South Africa, 2010), who require high levels of responsibility and the need to become financially independent and find their place in society.

There are a number of reasons for the high percentage of NEETs. These include poor schooling and academic results (Bhorat & Oosthuizen, 2006). The 2010 Grade 12 failure rate was 33% (Motshekga, 2011). Addressing these practical issues will be a long-term project, and many current learners will enter the NEETs group before significant changes are affected in the education system. By aiming this intervention at matriculants, it could be immediately effective.

Poor education, along with lack of resources for further study and a shortage of entry-level jobs increases the percentage of NEETs and also has a number of psychological impacts including hopelessness, learned helplessness, low self-efficacy, and a lack of motivation or responsibility to enter this next life stage. Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, (2001 p.188) report that "the higher the individuals' perceived efficacy to fulfill educational requirements and occupational roles, the better they prepare themselves educationally for their career, and the greater their staying power in challenging career pursuits." This intervention specifically aims at addressing some of these psychological areas through a process of self-discovery as part of a career counselling intervention.

By exploring the effects of the proposed intervention, this study will add to the body of research on the effectiveness of postmodern qualitative narrative counselling in the

South Africa context, especially amongst disadvantaged youth. There is a growing consensus that the quantitative, test and tell approaches of the West are not sufficient in the South African context with its multicultural nature and socio-economic challenges (McMahon & Watson, 2008) and that a more effective approach could be a holistic qualitative-quantitative one with clients becoming the authors of their life stories (Maree, 2010).

Because the NEETs group are predominantly from a disadvantaged background, interventions will need to be effective, but low cost, as this intervention is intended to be.

1.4. Research Questions

This research is a qualitative case study design, which explores the effects of a postmodern career life story intervention on disadvantaged youth. Therefore the following research questions will be used:

- Do the participants re-evaluate or reinterpret their lives in light of the intervention?
- Are the participants actively applying what they learnt in the intervention to their lives?
- What are the other differences in the participants' answers in light of the intervention?

Sub-questions could possibly include:

- Do the participants reframe the negative or difficult events in their lives in a new and empowering way after the intervention?

- Is there a difference in the participants' answers regarding responsibility, attitude, motivation, hope and optimism for their lives after the intervention?
- Does the intervention make a positive difference to the lives of the participants?

1.5. Methodology

Eight grade 12 English-speaking participants who are 18 years or older from disadvantaged communities were included in the study.

Qualitative data was collected through a case study approach using pre and post interviews to describe any changes in the participants' answers to the questions around their life stories. The pre-interviews were conducted one on one and were recorded. A set of guideline questions was used in the interviews. A life story intervention, which took four hours, was conducted with all the learners between the two sets of interviews. The post intervention interviews took place up to one month after the intervention and were conducted one on one. The same guideline questions were used to see if the learners' responses had changed.

The data was transcribed and then analysed using thematic content analysis. Themes pertaining to whether the learners reinterpreted or re-evaluated their answers, their perceptions of the intervention and insight into their lives as a whole were examined. An interpretation and integration of these was conducted and conclusions were drawn.

1.6. Chapter Outline of the Research Report

Chapter One describes the aims, rationale and research questions of the study. It also provides a brief description of the methodology used in the research and a brief description of the outcome of the study.

Chapter Two contains a review of the literature relating to the research. The literature review begins with a definition of disadvantaged youth. Some of the socio-economic and psychological factors pertaining to disadvantaged youth and unemployed and uneducated youth in South Africa are explored. There follows a review of traditional career counselling methods and how they, on their own, are inappropriate to the South African context. The rise of postmodern career methods and their usefulness in the South African context are discussed. Finally postmodern methods including narrative counselling and life story interventions as the focus of this study are analysed in detail.

Chapter Three describes the research design and methodology including information on the sampling and biographical background of the participants. The procedure used in the interviews and intervention is discussed and the data capturing is explained. The data analysis methodology, which was thematic content analysis, is explained. Finally ethical issues concerning the research are discussed.

Chapter Four consists of the results and discussions of the research, which are presented together and related to the relevant literature. The transcribed interviews were analysed using the various research questions as a theme guideline.

Chapter Five examines the strengths and limitations of the research and provides a conclusion to the study; it also includes recommendations for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the rationale behind this research it is necessary to explore the literature pertaining to disadvantaged youth as well as some of the socio-economic and psychological reasons for the high numbers of unemployed and uneducated youth in South Africa. This will be followed by a review of career assessment particularly pertaining to South Africa. This includes historical, quantitative career methods. Postmodern career approaches will then be focused on, together with theories of both methods. The effectiveness of narrative counselling and life story interventions as a means of addressing some of these psychological factors in disadvantaged South African youth will be explored.

2.2. Adolescents and Disadvantaged Youth

Adolescence is broadly understood as the developmental period between puberty and maturity when the adolescent is confronted with the question of identity and vital decision-making. Consequently, the adolescent grapples with the following questions: who am I, what am I about, and what do I want to be (Santrock, 2003).

The first year after school is crucial for starting a career path, either by studying, working or gaining adult life skills and experience, such as becoming financially independent and finding a place in society. In order for the first year out of school to

be successful, learners in their adolescence need to start thinking about who they are and where they are going and start making the appropriate plans. Meyer and Braxton (2002) report that youth in more affluent communities have better success within the sphere of career development than youth from disadvantaged communities.

Disadvantaged communities can be defined as rural or township communities that have families with low income, parents who are unemployed, insufficient educational resources and inadequate career counselling in most schools (Bernhardt, 1998). Disadvantaged youth for the purposes of this study will be defined as black learners from a low socio-economic status who come from disadvantaged communities.

Thirty three percent of youth fall into the 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET) category (Statistics South Africa, 2010). Reasons for this high number of NEETs include three main areas. The first is socio–economic factors, the second is psychological factors and the third is ineffective career counselling.

2.3. Socio-Economic Factors

International studies have found that adolescents from lower income families tend to have lower career aspirations than adolescents from middle or higher income families (Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003). Hill and his co-authors state that this could be due to less information on careers available to lower income youth, a lower quality of education, and fewer role models. The stress on lower income parents could result in them being less supportive. Research has found that unsupportive parent–child relationships impact negatively on career aspirations (Hill et al, 2003).

In South Africa, the lingering legacy of apartheid and the skewed wealth distribution means that eighty percent of the economy is controlled by thirty percent of the population (Human Sciences Research Council, 2004). This results in drastic resource shortages, especially amongst disadvantaged youth and also prevents them from being able to study further and in some cases even complete school. An education system that provides inadequate schooling and teaching has produced poor academic results (Bhorat & Oosthuizen, 2006). The 2010 Grade 12 failure rate was 33% (Motshekga, 2011) and according to results published by the Annual National Assessment, only 35% of Grade 3s are literate, only 28% of them have grade appropriate numerical literacy, only 28% of Grade 6s are at the grade appropriate language level and only 30% are at the grade appropriate mathematical level (Department of Basic Education, 2011). The poor academic results exacerbate an already challenging problem for youth entering the work force, which arises from inadequate work preparedness training and a shortage of entry-level jobs, with currently 25.7 percent unemployment (Business Day, 2011). This tough socio-economic situation also has a psychological impact on areas such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and even hope of a future.

2.4. Psychological Reasons

Self-esteem can be broadly defined as an individual's sense of confidence in his or her abilities to perform an action or master various environmental challenges (Bandura, 1986). If people do not believe they can produce outcomes by their actions, they have little incentive to start an action or continue when facing resistance (Bandura et al, 2001). According to the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), self efficacy beliefs have a strong, direct influence on all career areas including career interests, career

values, career goals and activities, and career performance (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994). SCCT suggests that three intrinsic beliefs impact on all areas of careers. These include: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and personal goals. Lent, Brown and Hackett (2000) suggest that self efficacy beliefs are acquired through personal achievements, learning from watching others learn, communal persuasion and physical and emotional states. Outcome expectations refers to individuals' expectations about their ability to perform a task and personal goals means setting achievable personal objectives. Self-esteem is a key component in starting and pursuing a career. The higher people's academic and occupational self-esteem, the more career options they can consider. They will also have more interest in pursuing those options and staying with a career once they achieve it (Bandura et al, 2001). Those with higher self-efficacy have higher career aspirations, possibly because they believe in their ability to succeed (O'Brien, Friedman, Tipton, & Linn, 2000). However, research has shown that poverty can erode self-esteem and limit career development (Dass-Brailsford, 2005). Therefore building self-esteem, especially in disadvantaged communities, is an important component in helping a person on his/her career path.

Initiative, which can be defined as becoming self-motivated and exerting effort to reach challenging goals, can enhance self-esteem (Larson, 2000). In South Africa Dass-Brailsford (2005) conducted a study on how a group of disadvantaged black youth achieved academic success and demonstrated resilience despite poverty. Individual characteristics such as motivation, initiative, goal focus and an understanding that individuals possess their own agency, were found to be important factors in attaining academic achievement to pass grade 12 or study further. Ebrahim

(2009) supports the converse, namely that learners who did not pursue further studies seem to lack confidence in their abilities, have poor self-esteem and feel that they do not belong in a group or tertiary setting.

Maite (2008) found that career development in disadvantaged youth in South Africa could also be affected by a limited or destructive involvement by parents. Adolescents perceive destructive involvement by parents as top-down, authoritarian advice with no room for negotiation and, in some cases, as parents imposing their own failed career goals on them. Maite (2008) also found that career development could be affected by a lack of adequate role models. This lack of role model means that some disadvantaged youth do not have the opportunity to ascribe positive values to work and work ethic, as this is not demonstrated to them. The problem of poor or missing role models for the working world is made worse by inadequate and ineffective career counselling, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

2.5. Career Counselling

2.5.1. Traditional Approaches

The legacy of apartheid, which did not provide equal education, career counselling or career opportunities to all, has had a damaging and lingering effect on the school guidance system and career counselling in South Africa (Chuenyane, 1983; Mathabe & Temane, 1993; Stead & Watson, 1999). Because of the inequalities of the past, Maree and Molepo (2007) find career counselling facilitation to be almost absent in most schools but especially in previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa. Sultana and Watts (2008) suggest that the lack of career counselling in schools

continues to contribute to the massive unemployment rates and skills shortages, not only in South Africa, but in Africa as a whole.

South African career counselling has its roots in the traditional or modern approach (Watson & Stead, 2002). The modern approach shifted in the second half of the twentieth century from a traditional trait factor approach to a fluid lifelong developmental approach but neither took into account a person's context (Watson & Kuit, 2007). South Africa has a unique, multicultural society where traditional approaches to career counselling have been unsuccessful in addressing the needs of non-white, non-western, "non–standard" populations (Maree, 2010). This is due to many reasons. The individuals and their personality characteristics are key in the traditional approach to career counselling, based on the paradigm that everyone comes from the same humanity despite contextual differences; therefore the primary focus is on the commonality. However, this excludes cultural, economic, social and political contexts, which shape and give meaning to individuals and their lives (Blustein, Hawley-McWhirter, & Perry, 2005). Traditional career counselling is a costly exercise, which only a privileged few can afford. Traditional assessments in the South African context are not reliable nor valid as they are not culturally relevant to the multicultural population of South Africa. Most of the tests are in English, which is not the first language of many of the test takers. The career counsellor is regarded as the "expert" and the client often accepts unconditionally what the counsellor recommends which results in the clients not taking responsibility for their choices and not being part of the decision-making process (Maree & Molepo, 2007).

Foxcroft and Roodt (2009) suggest that testing is never perfect but that the critical element is how it compares to alternative methods and whether it leads to a more cost effective, accurate result when used in conjunction with other methods. They go on to say that there is value in psychological testing but it needs to be alongside other important information and the clinician needs to use his judgment to look at the bigger picture and the client as a whole.

Watson and Stead (2002) suggested that qualitative methods with action-focused approaches could also be pertinent. These approaches would not just be dependent on an individual's personality characteristics or a test and tell method, but would allow the marginalized to give voice to their concerns because of the inclusion of psycho-social contexts.

In summary, according to Maree (2010, p. 361) "The consensus now is that a combined qualitative–quantitative approach, based on a deep sense of respect for clients, a strong emphasis on the meaning clients need to find in their lives and their personal stories equips practitioners with a possible means to address the shortcomings that characterised the profession in the past and is useful to clients as they design their lives."

2.5.2. Postmodern Approaches

As discussed above, in the South African context with its multicultural nature and socio-economic challenges, a traditional, quantitative, approach is insufficient. Further emphasis needs to be placed on postmodern qualitative aspects and in particular narrative counselling (McMahon & Watson, 2008).

Maree and Molepo (2007) suggest that in South Africa there is an urgent need for approaches that: 1) help with self awareness and especially with individuals' awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in career development, and help clients to use their strengths and overcome their weakness in career development; 2) enhance career assistance and job opportunities for learners; 3) help learners to manage their major life and career transitions; 4) assist learners with their first steps in career development; 5) administer relevant and affordable career counselling to all learners; and 6) link learners' life experiences and stories with their career choices.

The postmodern approach offers a range of different perspectives to career counselling and not just one theory. It offers an umbrella under which various practices can reside, all of which have an emphasis on contextual and relationship factors (Chope, 2005).

Savickas (1995) identified six differences between modernism and postmodernism:

1. The individual as the primary agent of knowledge vs. knowledge from the community and relationships between people.
2. A scientific objective approach vs. multi-perspective approach acknowledging subjectivity.
3. Generalised, universal principles vs. local practices. This represents a change from focusing on finding solutions to looking at various strategies or options.
4. Knowledge for knowledge's sake vs. knowledge only to the extent that it is useful.

5. Abstract, centralised understanding vs. contextual, decentralised understanding.
6. The use of concepts vs. the use of constructs created within the context of the individual.

Postmodern counselling approaches move from counselling to co-constructing, from tests and assessments to autobiographical exploration and dialogue. As Savickas (1993 p. 205) states, career counselling practice needs to move from "seeking truth to participation in conversations; from objectivity to perceptivity". Qualitative postmodern methods put the clients as the authors of their own life stories; the clients take responsibility for their lives (Cochran, 2007). Practitioners enable clients to look to the future, look at their context, look to develop themselves and, being aware of all these factors, choose appropriate paths to become the people they dream of being (Savickas, 2007a).

For the purposes of this research the theoretical framework will be narrative counselling.

2.5.3. Narrative Counselling

Narrative counselling has been defined by Barresi and Juckes (1997 p. 695) as "the most natural way for human beings to express the inherent structure of their personal experiences". A counsellor will guide a client in the use of narrative to make sense of life experiences. Narrative counselling has its philosophical roots in Kelly's theory of personal constructs and in Super's life span – life space theory. At a time when the focus was on a positivist worldview, which searched for common, universal truths, Kelly stated that each person has his own unique world and therefore each person

constructs his own theories about the world and his own experiences of it (Meyer, Moore, & Viljoen, 1997). A few tenets from Kelly's personal construct theory that are important for the narrative approach include: firstly, narrative counselling focuses on an individual's personal constructs and uses these constructs as the core for positive change; secondly, constructs provide the reason but also the content for the formation of an individual's life story; thirdly, exploration of constructs enables meaning making in an individual's life story; fourthly, as the creator of his or her own constructs a person has the ability to construct his or her own life story; and fifthly, a person can view, review and develop new versions of his or her life story. Therefore a person's life story is always open to change (Chen, 2007). This principle underpins the mechanism for the potential usefulness of this intervention.

Super (1990) emphasised that career choices (as opposed to the trait and factor approach) should be seen as a lifelong developmental process and that career choices would most probably change during various stages in life. People's career choices will also be dependent on their life roles and life values and these can only be encountered during a person's life story (Moller, 1995). Super's contribution to narrative counselling provides philosophical support but also practical suggestions. Many of Super's concepts (career choices, life roles, life values, life theatre) function as essential parts that form helping strategies in narrative career counselling (Chen, 2007). A direct connection between Super's theory and the narrative approach was made in the most revised version of Super's Life Span – Life Space theory (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996) where it was suggested that narrative construction should be included in career counselling, as this intervention does.

Colin and Young (1986) have also contributed to narrative counselling with their biographical, hermeneutical and ecological approaches. The biographical approach is the life story enquiry of the person. Hermeneutics is the meaning making that comes from interpreting and framing or reframing the life story narrative. The ecological approach is the important understanding of the context and the various relationships of the life story. Chen (2007) emphasises hermeneutics as the core for helping interventions and suggests that the main function of narrative counselling is helping clients with their levels of motivation and purpose in life.

Larry Cochran's work has been regarded as the greatest influence on narrative career counselling in current literature (Chen, 2007). Watkins and Savickas (1990) emphasised finding a life plot through clinical assessment techniques, using interpretative methods to enhance understanding of that life plot and finally linking the life plot to future possibilities. Cochran (2007) added to Watson and Savickas' work by emphasising practical wisdom (an ability to make future decisions) and agency (the ability to take action) as important in career counselling, since it is not just one decision that needs to be made but a lifetime of career directions. Therefore Cochran suggests that narrative career counselling has three areas of promise: firstly, it works with personal meanings; secondly, it emphasises the person as author or agent of his or her life story; and thirdly, narrative career counselling can extend to all aspects of careers and career decision making. Two foci of narrative career counselling are: encouraging the clients to construct their life stories in a positive way that bodes well for their future and strengthening the clients to own their life stories (Cochran, 2007).

Narrative Therapy helps clients to see patterns in their life histories. The counsellor helps to initiate change by focusing on strengths rather than weakness and reframing lessons drawn from significant negative experiences and providing encouragement (Cochran, 2007).

According to Chope and Consoli (2007), a primary building block of narrative therapy is re-authoring of clients' stories. They describe this process as follows: (1) construction, where the client shares the information, (2) deconstruction, where the counsellor exposes hindering paradigms that affect the client's life (3) reconstruction, where the client and counsellor together change the narrative to have a more satisfying interpretation. A beautiful description of deconstruction found in Sampson (1989 p. 7) is "deconstruction is to undo, not to destroy".

Pomerantz (2008) suggests that the following questions need to be answered during career counselling sessions. How do we empower people to tell their life stories in a way that is helpful to counselling? How do we put a life story into context and why is this important to the process? How do we reframe a concept that is hindering? How can we empower clients to better reframe and live their life stories?

Even though narrative career counselling is emerging as a promising suitable career development alternative its recent development means that it does not have a history to substantiate it (Reid, 2006). Some of the limitations to narrative career counselling as identified by Reid (2006) could be that it is: 1) too focused on making meaning instead of taking action; 2) too intangible, obscure and out of touch with everyday

life; 3) too reliant on a counselling interaction of a therapeutic nature; and 4) irrelevant, as a narrative approach, to the ordinary person on the street.

However the measures of success of narrative career Counselling, especially in the South African context, seem promising. Maree and Molepo (2007) conducted a research study from 2003 to 2006 with 1200 learners in Grade 9 and 11 in 13 schools in four South African provinces to trace the impact of postmodern narrative career counselling using meaning-making, writing life stories, and applying lifestyle and biographical analysis to learners, and linking these acts with the world of work. For the first time a vast majority of the learners experienced a space to talk about their feelings. Some of the themes that arose from the research included anxiety, learned helplessness, blaming other people or circumstances, low self-esteem and impeded sense of reality testing – 'this is my lot in life' (Maree & Molepo, 2007). A narrative approach was used because it promotes personal responsibility and the research team was then able to facilitate learners' growth by encouraging them to find meaning and helping them to construct and dream their futures. The results of the project suggest that a postmodern narrative career construction approach may yield more satisfactory results than the traditional approach and that this approach to career counselling could, with further exploration, be successful in helping even the most disadvantaged of learners. Maree (2007) goes on to suggest that the narrative approach has great potential in culturally diverse settings. Stead and Watson (1999) state that it is important that South African career facilitators develop more theories, models and techniques that come from Africa. Therefore far more research on postmodern narrative career counselling and techniques that teachers could use in classrooms needs to be done (Maree & Molepo, 2007).

Nkoane and Alexander (2010) agree with Maree and Molepo (2007) in an article on integrating narrative approaches in South African schools and particularly in the subject of Life Orientation, stating that the overall development of learners needs to be conducted in a more inclusive way that allows learners to express and give meaning to their life stories in career counselling situations. They suggest "Narratives in career counselling could assist the South African learner to share his or her story, current circumstances and future goals" (p. 432). Therefore, learners can integrate their past, present and future life stories into their roles and contexts. Nkoane and Alexander concluded their article by saying that they fully endorse exploring the narrative approach as a tool to assist learners with career counselling and therefore contributing to overall societal development.

Bischof (2007) conducted a study on the perceptions of learners from disadvantaged South African communities regarding postmodern group narrative and traditional psychometric career assessment. Quantitative group psychometric career assessment techniques were administered to eleven grade eleven learners. A month later postmodern narrative career assessment techniques were conducted with seven of the learners. Bischof found that the learners preferred the structure and standardized conditions of the psychometric testing to the unfamiliar postmodern narrative assessment techniques. This could possibly be due to the familiar exam-like conditions under which the assessment was done, as well as the assessor being placed in a position of expert, which removed accountability and responsibility from the students. However, Bischof found that the learners also enjoyed the narrative exercises, particularly talking about themselves, their lives and their current issues.

Learners felt empowered by the opportunity given to them in the narrative assessment to describe themselves through their life stories. A limitation to narrative career counselling is that the boundary can be blurred between narrative career counselling and therapy. Bischof therefore suggested that the person conducting the assessments should be able to contain any personal situations that arise and be able to refer the learners for further counselling. Bischof also noted that there was a need for career counselling interventions that raise the self-efficacy of learners, as learners are likely to give up on occupational options because of low self-efficacy beliefs (Niles, & Harris-Bowlesby, 2002). Therefore in the present study, one of the aims was to improve the self-efficacy of the learners by using a postmodern narrative career counselling approach.

Coetzee, Ebersön, and Ferreira, (2009) developed and implemented an exploratory study using an asset based career facilitation intervention that included psychometric and postmodern career activities with five adolescent participants. They suggested that an asset based approach could be used as a tool in narrative counselling in that it uses various techniques to focus on what one has at one's disposal both internally and externally to facilitate one's success in terms of career development. The findings indicated that the asset based principles could be effectively used in career facilitation provided that the client did not expect the career facilitator to function as an expert, bringing in traditional career counselling paradigms, but rather entered fully into the shared responsibility required of the intervention. This study emphasises the importance of the role the career faciliator plays, in needing to be flexible in order to meet clients where they are (Coetzee, Ebersön, & Ferreira, 2009).

Maree, Ebersöhn, and Biagione-Cerone, (2010) conducted a case study to investigate the effect of narrative career facilitation on the personal growth of a disadvantaged first year tertiary student. Pre and post facilitation data was gathered to examine the effects of the intervention on career awareness and personal growth. It was found that the year long narrative career faciliation process had an overall positive effect on personal growth and the student demonstrated an increased academic self image and an improved future outlook. As the study was conducted with only one participant, the way in which the particpant responded to the narrative career facilitation may not be representative of the way in which others may respond to the same facilitative process. The process was also time consuming as it took place over a period of a year and included nine one on one sessions.

A limitation of postmodern career counselling is that it is still fairly expensive and possibly even more expensive than traditional career counselling as the number of career counselling sessions tends to increase. This places an even heavier financial burden on already poor communities (Maree & Beck, 2004). The use of group career counselling is therefore supported by Maree, Ebersöhn, and Molepo (2006) who state that due to inadequate resources most learners are used to being taught in groups. Therefore Maree and Beck (2004) have suggested that further research on narrative counselling methods in groups is needed.

Regarding the success of career counselling, Cosser (2002) conducted a study with 12,204 grade 12 learners in 288 schools across the province to investigate the factors that influence learners with regards to higher education. It was found that in whatever form it takes, career guidance positively affects the intention to enter higher education

with 79% of learners who had received career guidance intending to enter higher education as compared to 60% of those who had not received career guidance. Although there is no commonly agreed measure of the perception of success, letting people grow through the experience of life story narration is meaningful as it helps them to develop their potential for future growth, which in turn can only lead to more success in their lives and careers (Chen, 2007; Maree & Beck, 2004). Any sign of positive change or growth, no matter how insignificant it may seem, shows a level of success that is important to the client (Chen, 2007).

2.6. Life Story Intervention

For the purpose of this study a life story intervention will be described as a series of exercises that enable the participants to frame their life stories in a positive, enabling and affirming way and look to the future with hope. The intervention will be similar to what Chen (2007) describes as important in career counselling, namely helping participants to look at their past stories and helping them to reframe their stories so that the positive events and characteristics of their life stories are included in their future narrations. Chen emphasises that all narrative career counselling must focus on empowering the client to face the future and whether or not this is achieved is a measure of success. Therefore an important component of career counselling and especially of this intervention is empowerment. Empowerment is defined as increasing the possibility that people can more actively control their own lives (Duffy & Wong, 2003). Empowerment therefore means action, not someone taking action on behalf of another person, but an individual taking action for themselves. Maree et al, (2006, p. 50) have emphasised that career counselling with marginalised communities needs to give them "power and agency". Maree and Beck (2004) have found that

counselling that focuses on empowerment will allow the participants the liberty and room to create and activate their own life plans. Savickas (2007b) emphasises that empowerment will take place when clients understand that they are authors of their own personal development and this is done through emphasising the clients' emotions and passions.

Cochran (2007) also emphasises that career counselling has to focus on a person's future but that you cannot ignore the past because the past is filled with implications for the future. Therefore you need to help the person design a future that is not held back by the past or present. This will mean looking at the attitudes they have collected through their lives and how they describe them in their stories, as those attitudes will define how they predict their future stories will turn out (Cochran, 2007).

In conducting a life story intervention, aspects such as emotional readiness, personality and learning style, willingness to participate and commitment to the process need to be considered (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) as they will affect the overall outcome experienced by the participant.

Drawing a lifeline is a process that helps clients to make sense of their life stories and put them in an order that will help to explore them in further detail (Fritz & Beekman, 2007). Pennebaker (1990 p.27) has found that "writing or journaling as self-exploration is a helpful tool as it includes both the experience and the emotions around that experience. This in turn can lead to catharsis and deeper understanding of

oneself. It has also been found to improve mood, increase coping ability, enhance the immune system and in general appears to promote better physical and mental health."

Creating a collage (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) can be a process that opens up personal development and self-growth by choosing pictures that tie into the collage theme. However, using magazines in constructing collages can be a hindering process if the magazines are not culturally similar to the clients' background (Bischof, 2007). Also, in disadvantaged communities, magazines can be a luxury and therefore unfamiliar to the clients. Instead, drawing or writing could be better methods for narrative career counselling (Maree & Molepo, 2007).

According to Fritz and Beekman, (2007) techniques for helping clients tell their life stories are extensive. This is why participants are given a variety of creative options including collages, writing, drawing, poetry, painting or singing to express their life stories in this intervention.

The quotation by Maree and Molepo (2007 p. 69) seems appropriate as a concluding thought "Helping learners to write and rewrite their career stories, helping them to create stories that are psychologically healthier is a caveat for the continued success of generations of adolescents in our country".

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

In this study, a qualitative interpretative approach using case studies was used to describe and explore any changes in the participants in the answering of the questions around the life story intervention. The qualitative approach, using the case study method, was considered to be relevant, as in this approach, researchers attempt to appreciate the world from the participants' point of view using meaning that is gathered from words, symbols or other metaphors, to gain deeper insight and understanding into their lives (Koekemoer & Mostert, 2010). The characteristics of the interpretative paradigm show a belief that reality is subjective and socially constructed and is influenced by culture and history. Despite this subjectivity, the researcher remains objective, acting as an uninvolved collector and skilled interpreter of data (O'Brien, 1998). The aim of the interpretative paradigm is to "explore in detail individual, personal and lived experiences and to examine how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Lyons & Coyle, 2007 p.35). This approach was considered to be useful to this study as participants are allowed to describe their own experiences and what is meaningful or important to them in their own words.

3.2. Participants

3.2.1. Sampling Method and Size

A non-probability purposive sampling method was employed to select the participants. This method was used so that easily accessible participants could be included. While it may limit the reproducibility of the findings, it is a practical and expedient way of locating participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2004).

A relatively small sample size of eight participants was chosen. As the study was going to be an in-depth analysis of each interview, it was decided to focus on a relatively small number of participants to ensure that justice was done to each case and the detailed analysis of each transcript thereby ensuring rich data. Lyons and Coyle (2007) suggest that six to eight participants is enough for an IPA study as it provides enough cases to examine similarities and differences between participants but not so many that the researcher does not do justice to each case and is overwhelmed.

3.2.2. Criteria for Participants

The inclusion criteria were that participants had to be: 1) over the age of 18; 2) currently in grade 12; 3) able to communicate in English; and 4) beneficiaries of AEC or Ikageng Organisations. These criteria were included to ensure that the participants did come from a disadvantaged community, as both Ikageng and AEC support disadvantaged students. As the researcher was only able to conduct the interviews and intervention in English it was important that the participants were able to understand and hence fully participate in both the interviews and interventions.

Furthermore as the researcher desired to look at the effects of a life story intervention on grade 12 learners, the learners obviously had to be in grade 12. To ensure that they were easily able to get to and from the venue, it was required that they were over the age of 18. Therefore these purposive sampling criteria were employed in order to meet the needs of the research criteria.

3.2.3. Participants

The participants were chosen from youth supported by two non-profit organisations: Alex Education Committee (AEC) and Ikageng. The AEC is a non-profit organisation that manages a bursary scheme directed towards educating boys and girls from financially deprived families in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. The AEC offers these learners bursaries to attend government schools that are based outside Alexandra Township, and additional support in terms of extra lessons on Saturdays and through holiday school programmes, as well as mentors who meet with the learners throughout the year. Ikageng is a non-profit organisation that is based in Soweto and aims to improve the quality of life for orphaned and other vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS on a sustainable basis and to ensure that they receive a quality life, like any other children. Their aim is to help develop orphans into educated, employable adults who can positively contribute to society.

Contact was made with the AEC and Ikageng and permission obtained from both organisations. A letter outlining the research and inviting the participants to be part of the research was given to the organisations who gave the researcher the names of interested participants. The first four male and four female participants who indicated willingness to be involved in the study and who met the inclusion criteria were invited

to participate in the intervention. Three of the four male learners were 18 years old and one was 19 years old. Two of the four female learners were 18, one was 19 and one was 20 years old. There were five learners from AEC and three learners from Ikageng.

3.3. Interviews

A semi-structured face-to-face interview was used in the pre- and post- intervention interviews. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they are well suited to give insight into a participant's views, opinions and life experiences of material that can be complex and sensitive. Therefore the participant is an active shaper in determining how the interview will progress and is the subject matter expert, so is given time and space to tell their story. In this regard the researcher has little control over the interview (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). However according to Lyons and Coyle (2007) the researcher is also able to, in real time, follow up on interesting and important statements that come up in the interview. Semi-structured interviews allow for further probing or clarification should it be required, as well as adapting or clarifying the questions and the order of the questions to suit each individual (Barriball & White, 1994). McBurney (2001) states that face to face interviews have many advantages: interviewers can establish rapport with the interviewees; they can point the participants' attention to the material and encourage them to answer the questions carefully; interviewers can also notice when participants do not understand a question and are able to explain it to them; they can also encourage the participants towards more complete answers or for further explanations if a brief answer is given. However, the presence of the interviewer can: create a social situation that can result

in “favourable” responses from the participant in terms of participants telling the interviewers what they think they want to hear.

3.4. Procedure

The participants were each interviewed using a set of questions compiled by the researcher. After the pre-interviews had all been conducted, a date and time was agreed upon with the participants for the intervention, which was conducted with all the students together. Following the intervention the participants were all contacted for follow up interviews, again using a set of questions compiled by the researcher. The pre and post interviews were all conducted on different days from the intervention.

3.4.1. Pre Interviews

The interviews were conducted at an office, which was within suitable proximity for the students, and the intervention was conducted at the AEC offices, which are located within a school. Special attention was given to ensuring that the venue promoted a relaxed environment and a “do not disturb” sign was placed on the door to ensure privacy and that no interruptions occurred during the interviews and intervention. The researcher audio taped the interviews to ensure accuracy. These tape recordings were subsequently transcribed word for word. The use of the digital audio recorder enabled the researcher to freely engage with the participants rather than be pre-occupied with note taking (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1991). At the beginning of the interviews the researcher tried to put the participants at ease by using a relaxed and friendly manner to introduce herself and the research.

The pre interviews took between forty-five and sixty minutes. The interview was focused on hearing the participants' narratives about: who they felt they were; where they have been; and where they are going. Open-ended questions were aimed at encouraging stories or answers from the participants that enabled the researcher to gain insight into the participants' self-esteem, self belief, attitudes, responsibility, hopes, dreams and motivation (Appendix C).

The researcher conducted an informal pilot of the intervention during a career workshop in 2010 with ten participants. There was no formal evaluation of the pilot but the students gave informal feedback saying that they enjoyed the intervention and felt the intervention was of value to them.

The intervention aims to give the participants time and space to look at the journey of their lives thus far and any major positive or negative events that have made them into the person they are today. This is done using a life graph, which serves as a guideline to write a written story of their lives.

The participants then look at the positive and negative aspects of their life stories. They are taught how to reframe especially the bad aspects of their lives, in order to not let those bad aspects continue to hold them back in the future and to realize the strengths they have within and around them that they have used in their lives so far. They are then taught how to create goals for themselves in the next three years.

Using their goals, the strengths and insights they have gained in the writing and reframing exercise, they are then encouraged to create a visual reminder of who they are and what they are hoping to achieve in the years to come.

The overall aim of the intervention is overall self awareness or self-development.

Specific aims of the intervention are to help participants:

- Look back and see how far they have come in their life journeys.
- Realise what impact their life story has on them going forward.
- Be aware of the strengths they have within and around them to cope with life events.
- To reframe negative events in their lives, showing them that they are not responsible for what happens but they are responsible for how they choose to respond.
- With time and space to work through their own goals for their futures
- To feel affirmed, empowered, motivated and optimistic for their future lives but also realising that the responsibility for their lives lies with them.

3.4.2. The Intervention in Detail

The intervention took four hours and was conducted concurrently with all the participants but the participants completed each section individually. The intervention took place in a classroom with participants sitting in two groups of four desks each. The researcher made sure that the classroom was light and airy and conducive to working. The researcher welcomed everyone and asked the participants to make themselves comfortable for the afternoon. The researcher said that this was their own personal journey and so to avoid sharing experiences or distracting each

other from entering fully into the tasks. It was also mentioned that there would be plenty of time to finish the tasks and so participants would need to work efficiently but could take the time they needed to think carefully through things. The researcher stated that this was very much a workshop for their own personal growth and development and what they put into the exercise and the seriousness with which they took it would determine what they got out of the workshop.

The individuals were asked to draw a quick life graph and then use their graphs as a basis to write their life story. They were asked to place emphasis in their story on events that were life affirming and positive, and events that were tough and difficult as well as to look at the highs and lows in their lives. This first part of the intervention took an hour and participants were provided with pens and paper.

The participants were then asked to circle in a red pen all the tough times in their lives and then with a green pen all the good events in their lives. They then received a piece of paper with three columns. In the first column they were asked to write down all the red and green-circled events giving one or two words for each event. In the middle column they were asked to finish one of the following sentences: I am…; I have… ; I always…; next to each event. Then in the final column they were encouraged to write strengths or positive attitudes or good things in their lives that they have found resulted from that event. It was explained that they might need to reframe the final column if something negative was written, so a brief explanation on reframing was given to the participants. The explanation included holding up two pictures - one in a terrible frame and the other in a beautiful frame. The researcher explained that with all the events in our lives, there will always be something that can

make it “look better”. It could be the inner strength we found to get through, the friend who helped us through, the support of family, the joy of exercise in a tough time – any number of things. This section of the intervention took the participants 30 minutes.

The participants then spent 30 minutes working on their hopes and dreams for the future. They were asked to look at body, mind or work, spirit and social (family and friends) and write a hope and dream for each one in a years time and in three years time.

The final part of the intervention was to use the positive things in their lives from the third column and their hopes and dreams to either: rewrite their life story; or draw; or paint; or make a collage; or write a poem; or compose a song about “who they are and where they are going”. The participants each had an hour to do this and various art materials including big A3 sheets of paper, khokis, coloured pens, glue, glitter, paint and magazines were provided.

Once everyone had completed their creative work each participant was given a chance to demonstrate their work to the others. Participants each explained, as far as they felt comfortable to do, the work they had created. As each participant was sharing the other participants were encouraged to listen respectfully and also to share any encouraging thoughts or insights with their peers. This took thirty minutes.

The participants were encouraged to complete their work in silence, focusing on their own lives, stories, hopes and dreams and they easily entered into this silence and did

not find it uncomfortable. After each section the participants could take a short break and wait for the other members of the group to finish.

The participants were provided with art and stationery materials that were of a standard that inspired creativity and that contributed to their willingness and enthusiasm to complete the project.

3.4.3. Post Intervention Interviews

The post intervention interviews, each lasting for between 30 and 45 minutes, took place four weeks after the intervention. The researcher started the interview using the following questions to explore the life story intervention and the participant's experiences of the intervention:

1. How did you find the life story exercise?
2. What did you find easy?
3. What did you find difficult?
4. What change (if any) do you think the exercise has had on how you see yourself and your life?

The researcher then proceeded to ask the questions that were used in the first interview. The researcher explained that same questions were asked to see if any of the answers to the questions had changed in light of the intervention. The researcher also explained that if the participant's answers have not changed, that was not a problem.

Therefore the pre interview interpreted various aspects of the participants' lives and the post interview reinterpreted those aspects to see if the participants reevaluated or reinterpreted their answers in light of the intervention.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data was analysed through thematic content analysis. Thematic analysis is a method that recognises, examines and presents patterns or themes within the data. The rich detail and description of data is made apparent through the minimalistic organisation of this approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically inductive, somatic, thematic content analysis is used. Inductive is the way in which the themes that are identified are strongly linked to the data itself and are not driven by any agendas on the part of the researcher. Somatic is the way in which the themes are gathered and interpreted from the data itself as opposed to latent analysis in which underlying assumptions, conceptualisations and/or ideologies are assumed to have shaped or formed the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According to Terre Blanche, Durheim and Painter (2006), thematic content analysis falls with the interpretative method of analysis.

Analysis of the data entailed the researcher transcribing the interviews verbatim from the recorded pre- and post- interviews. This ensured that confidentiality was maintained and the researcher was able to immerse herself in the material. The researcher took the following steps for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Read the data several times to obtain a rounded perspective and familiarity with the data.

2. Organised the data into initial codes.
3. Refined and collated codes into possible themes and started to explore relationships between themes.
4. Reviewed the themes. This involved looking for coherence of the data within themes and clear distinctions between the themes.
5. Formalised the themes. This involved finding the heart of what each theme is about or what aspect of the data each theme captures. This took place within the overall aims of the research.
6. Performed final analysis and completed the narrative of the findings.

In order to ensure valid and quality data, multiple data collection strategies were used. These included the semi-structured interviews as described above; observation by the researcher in the interviews; and observations by both the researcher and the counselling psychologist in the intervention, especially in the presentation of participants' creative work on "who they are and where they are going". Neutrality, which is describing exactly what was done, why and what happened in the research process; and applicability, which is asking other researchers to read through the transcripts and to confirm theme agreements (Appleton, 1995), together with monitoring of the researcher's own bias through continuous reflection was included. The aim of using these methods was to ensure and produce information rich data, as well as in depth analysis and insight into the participants and their life stories before, and after, the intervention to see if any changes had taken place in light of the intervention.

Comparing the participants' answers and narratives prior to and after the intervention using thematic content analysis seemed appropriate for exploring any changes in the telling of the answers and narratives. Analysing people's perceptions of the intervention and its impact on their life stories and perceptions of those stories, assisted in determining whether the life story intervention could be an effective tool.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Written permission was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand ethics committee as well as signed consent forms from the AEC and Ikageng organisations. An information form outlining the purpose of the research and the details of participating in the research was given to eligible participants (Appendix A). A consent form (Appendix B) was given for signature to those participants who agreed to partake in the study.

In order to ensure ethical practice the participants were informed: that they were not obliged to participate in the study; that at any time they could withdraw their consent; that they had the right to anonymity; and that their names would not appear in the final report. The consent form, which the participants signed, informed them that the interviews would be recorded for data collection but that the data would be kept safe and confidentiality would be ensured; that they could refuse to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable with; and no physical or psychological harm would come to them. The participants were informed that a summary of the research findings would be given to the two organisations and that they could obtain a copy of the research report from the WITS library.

As the intervention was looking at life stories, the researcher was aware that sensitive issues could come to the surface. The researcher was available to handle any issues that arrived in an empathetic and containing way. As the researcher is currently pursuing a master's degree in educational psychology and had completed her micro skills component by the time of the intervention, she was able to use this knowledge in facilitating the interviews and the intervention. The researcher has also designed and implemented many programmes with adolescents and has had experience with informal individual and group counselling with adolescents. She was therefore equipped to handle any sensitive issues. A practising counselling psychologist was also at all sessions to assist the researcher and was ready to step in, if a difficult counselling situation arose. Those participants that possibly could have benefited from counselling were given the contact details of counselling institutions within close proximity to them.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the findings of the research that was obtained using semi-structured pre and post intervention interviews conducted with disadvantaged Grade 12 learners from two non-profit organisations. In this chapter the findings from the study are presented together with the discussion and related to the relevant existing literature.

As explained in the previous chapter, thematic content analysis was used as the data analysis method. The data was analysed using the initial research questions and the aims of the research. The initial research questions have been compressed to avoid repetition in the answers. The focus of analysis was on five main themes:

1) Do the participants re-evaluate or reinterpret their lives in light of the intervention and what are any other differences in the participants' answers after the intervention.
2) Are the participants actively applying what they learnt in the intervention to their lives?
3) How did the participants experience the various aspects of the intervention?
4) How did participants perceive the intervention to be of benefit to them?
5) What themes and perceptions does this sample of disadvantaged grade 12 learners present?

These broad themes are discussed below, with quotes included to support and illustrate the conclusions reached. Some of the responses could overlap into several categories. Where this is the case they have been included in the most prominent category.

4.1. Do the participants re-evaluate or reinterpret their lives and what are any other differences in the participants' answers in light of the intervention?

The primary aim of this research was to explore the effects of a postmodern career life story intervention on disadvantaged grade 12 learners, specifically to see whether the participants reevaluated or reinterpreted their answers in light of the intervention. What became clear from the analysis was that all the participants reevaluated or reinterpreted different aspects of their lives. The various areas of reevaluation or reinterpretation that demonstrated growth for each participant were different, but included the following: 1) improved understanding of the self; 2) increased self-esteem; 3) increased hope and optimism and 4) increased self responsibility and empowerment. Each of these areas are explored in more detail below:

4.1.1. Improved Self Understanding

In the initial interview the researcher asked participant 1 for five words to describe himself. Even with prompting, the participant was only able to give one word, which was *"honest"*. In the second interview when the researcher asked him the same question he was able to give the following six descriptions of himself which were:

> *"sharing person, kind, honest, confident, communicator, does things with other people."*

Therefore participant 1 was able to give voice to words that describe himself, a task that seemed almost impossible in the first interview. This could have been due to shyness or that he was not aware of these aspects of himself but either way being able to voice them is an element of self-understanding and growth.

Participant 3 gave the following responses for five words to describe himself in the first interview:

> "*narcissist, good looking, nice person, inquisitive, hard to satisfy, power, paranoid and introvert".*

In the second interview he gave the following words as response to the same question:

> *"Daring, ambitious, very understanding, listen to people and make them feel better about certain things, lovable, paranoid".*

He seemed to have gained a more outward looking and slightly more positive aspect to his self-understanding rather than the inner focus of the first interview. Participant 3 in the first interview described himself as:

> *"Paranoid, I suppose because I am an introvert I am always just thinking about everything that happens and hence I don't know I get depressed, sort of, sometimes."*

In the second interview he had come to realise that it is normal and acceptable to be reflective.

> *"Okay having done this course that we did the other day has made me realise that I am human, yeah cause I'd never considered such… I'm really, I just don't know paranoid and over think stuff, so just realising that was really important."*

Participant 4 was asked in the first interview what made her feel good about herself. Her answer included *"I always do things in time and manage them*." In the second interview her response when asked the same question changed to *"Overcoming everything in my life*." She mentioned that through the various exercises she had come to realise how much she had managed to get through in her life. Therefore in that moment she had a self-understanding that included doing things in time and managing them but also having the self capability to get through all the difficulties in her life. This self understanding may help her get through any future obstacles that come her way as she has now realised that she has been able to do that in the past.

Participant 5, in her first interview, stated that she never tells people how she feels. In the first interview when asking her when she feels most alive her response included *"When I have had a good laugh and being around others."* In the second interview her response to the same question had changed to:

> *"I feel most alive when I have expressed my feelings, that is when I feel most alive. At least I spoke to someone and told them how I really feel."*

Therefore she had come to a new self-understanding as to what it means to feel alive. She had also gained the self-confidence to share her feelings with others.

When asking participant 6 when she felt most alive she said:

> "*I do not know, I have never felt that before. I once tried committing suicide, to seek feeling alive. I don't think that is important, because everybody is alive – see?"*

In the second interview her response to this question had changed to the following:

"*When I am with my uncle, when I feel like there are people behind my back or watching over me."*

Therefore she was able to identify with some experience of being alive, which involved having people around and caring for her and not being so alone in the world.

In the first interview when asking participant 8 what his three dreams were he mentioned omnipotent and egocentric dreams, which included:

"To be president and run the country, to stage a revolution, and to build this country without destroying it."

In the second interview his dreams had changed to:

"*Attending university, making a change in the country and fulfilling all my life goals and dreams."*

These dreams show slightly more insight, self-awareness and understanding, and as they are slightly more realistic, may help him to be able to pursue them.

The researcher ended the second interview with participant 3 by saying "it has been really nice getting to know you". Participant 3 responded by saying:

"It has been really nice getting to know myself, actually."

Parsons, in his matching theory (1909 p.5), emphasised three key areas in career counselling: self understanding, knowledge of the world of work and "true reasoning on the relations of these two groups of facts". Both of these aspects, self understanding and a knowledge and awareness of a world of work, are of vital importance to narrative career counselling. A goal of narrative career counselling is

to place importance on self reflection and meaning making. This self reflection and meaning making of various aspects of self, moves the person towards an enhanced subjective understanding of self that is truthful for that person at that moment in that place and time (McIlveen & Patton, 2007). It became clear that the learners through the intervention experienced a definite movement towards an enhanced self understanding. This is congruent with what Nkoane and Alexander, (2010) found, that "the client's narration during the career counselling processes of past experiences, current meanings and future actions is the story that reveals self knowledge" (p. 431). Therefore encouraging the participants to look back over their lives through the writing of their life stories and to look forward through the reframing and formulating of their hopes and dreams, and tying it all together in art work, was key to this self understanding.

As was emphasised by Parsons (1909) it is also understood that this self understanding is a continuous journey rather than a final destination and that it needs active participation by individuals in ongoing explorations. The glimpses of self understanding that took place in the participants are acknowledged as only a small, but important, part in the journey of self understanding.

In the scope of this research project it is not possible to measure whether this self-understanding will last. However one is reminded of the following quotation referred to in the literature review "a sign of positive change or a sense of growing, no matter how minute and trivial it might seem, depicts a kind of success that is meaningful to that person" (Chen, 2007 p. 29).

4.1.2. Increased Self-esteem

In the initial interview when asked how his friends would describe him, participant 1 was only able to give one word, *"shy",* in the second interview he said that he was:

> "*A talkative guy – I like talking okay, let me say when I saw something in the newspaper and my friends they say did you see that? I say yeah and argue with them about things like that."*

The researcher understands that the participant could have been feeling shy himself in the first interview. However this increase in confidence and self-esteem seemed to be a theme that continued throughout the second interview. For example when he was asked in the first interview what made him feel good he answered:

> "*Doing things right by my family, playing outside, soccer and music".*

In the second interview he answered:

> *"Not telling yourself that you are a loser; telling yourself that you will do it, being confident and thinking good things for yourself."*

In the first interview when participant 1 was asked if he had any great achievements he was not able to list any. In the second interview he was able to state:

> *"Being best player of the soccer tournament in grade 8."*

Participant 4 initially described herself as extremely shy:

> *" I am a shy, crazy person who does not like associating herself with other people."*

In the second interview she described herself as:

> *"Shy, but I have overcome that shyness. I am not outspoken, but I am getting there to understand and be fluent in talking to people and yeah, I am a playful person, that is me."*

She later said that:

> *"After all these activities, it gave me that I have to talk to people in order to know what to do and to be able to stick with what I do and understand what I do. Friends would say – "X – you have changed" and when I say how? They say "you talk now!"*

Participant 3 stated in his first interview that he really struggles with being short:

> *"I don't know I get paranoid about how short I am, because I am 18 and I don't know I just hate being looked down at."*

In the second interview he stated that:

> *"I am going to show people I can do it. Prove that even though I am short, I can make it. All you really need to survive in this world is a brain."*

Participant 8 in some concluding comments at the end of the interview stated:

> *" I guess in the beginning I had confidence but after doing the exercise I really gained a lot of perspective on my life so I am really far more confident, to say: Yes! I am going to UCT! Yes! I am going to do this! So the exercises have helped me to see myself as more of a better person, a unique individual. To see myself as a successful person."*

Reid (2006) suggested that narrative career counselling may help improve a client's self-esteem. Seven out of the eight participants clearly reflected an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence in the interviews post the intervention. The researcher noticed that in the second interview they seemed far more confident and comfortable. This could have been because they knew what to expect and also knew the researcher

from the first interview and the intervention, but their answers clearly reflected an increase in self-confidence and self esteem. The eighth participant already seemed to have a high self-esteem from the first interview that continued through the intervention and into the second interview.

The Social Cognitive Career Theory suggests that the personal attributes of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations and personal goals will impact on career related interests. Self-efficacy beliefs can be shaped by personal performance accomplishments, learning through watching others, community influence and physical and emotive states (Lent, et al, 2000). This intervention seemed to influence the participants' self-esteem positively, particularly through realising personal accomplishments (looking back over their life stories and reframing) as well as positively influencing perception of physical (as in the case of participant 3 who was struggling with being short) and emotional states. It was therefore found in this intervention, as was suggested by Nkoane and Alexander (2010), that exploring narratives helped learners rebuild their identity and sense of meaning, which in turn enhanced their self esteem and self efficacy.

As mentioned in the literature review, if people do not believe their actions can produce outcomes they have little initiative to start actions or to continue when facing difficulty. Self-efficacy beliefs regarding one's ability play a central role, in the career decision making process (Alexander, Seabi, & Bischof, 2010; Lent, et al 1994). Therefore it is important that career counselling improves self-esteem, which hopefully will encourage self belief and action. It was clear from the participants' answers in the second interview that the improvement in self-esteem did seem to be

accompanied by a desire for action. Again whether this action will take place is beyond the scope of this study, but an increase in self- esteem can only be helpful in encouraging that action.

4.1.3. Increase in Hope and Optimism

When asking Participant 2 what would stop her from achieving her dreams, her first response was:

> *"Nothing I have friends but I wont let them influence me."*

In the second interview she elaborated saying:

> *"Nothing, I am determined to do everything I want, I can! I have problems but I put them aside, because I should not let them disadvantage me to not be an intelligent person and super at school. I am going to put those aside and make them better."*

Participant 5 initially said she found life after matric to be:

> "*scary, terrifying, because now I am going into a whole new world that I don't know anything about. I have never been there, I only hear from people that it is kind of scary, but I will get through it."*

In the second interview she said:

> "*I am going into a new era, to meet new people in a new environment to meet everything that comes after all this studying and everything. With good marks for a good life."*

Other comments demonstrating increased hope and optimism include:

> *"Greatly realise that I can be somebody in the future."* (Participant 6)

"The benefit that I have had from the workshop is that you don't always have to look at things in a negative way. You know, you can always turn them to get the positive." (Participant 7)

"That it was really nice to look back where you have come from and from that you now know where you are going." (Participant 5)

"I think it was a good innovation to say like in life, there is no such thing as you can't actually do it. You can actually take your bad qualities and turn them into good ones." (Participant 8)

Hope is defined by Miller and Powers, (1998 p. 2) as "an anticipation of a future which is good, based on mutuality, a sense of personal competence, coping ability, psychologicial well-being, purpose and meaning in life, and a sense of the possible." The previous examples of self understanding and self-esteem have also demonstrated hope and optimism. It seems that overall the participants left the intervention and the interviews feeling that they could cope, they could do it, they could succeed and take the first steps in becoming all that they dreamt of. Therefore they were more optimistic and hopeful about their lives. There was a clear shift in their answers from pre interview to post interview and in the post interviews there was far more hope and optimism. This could also be linked to the improvement in self-esteem, which could create more hope and optimism.

4.1.4. Increase in Responsibility and Empowerment

When the researcher asked participant 1 how he felt about his matric exams he answered that it would be a difficult challenge but he would try his best to make himself and his family proud. In the second interview he answered:

> *"I have two ways of looking at it: 1. Failing matric will be bad, you are finished and there is nothing you can do or 2. I have opportunities and careers that I am able to do and I am excited by the challenges that are coming. Just feel okay when you do it and do it well and I will say, 'I am proud of myself'."*

When asking participant 1 about his plans for life after school in the initial interview he stated that:

> "*Thinking about life after school, there are lots of things on my mind, thinking of working, studying, I don't want to end up sitting on the street."*

He seems to have shifted and taken on more responsibility as in the second interview he answered:

> *"I am feeling confused about next year and worried that if I don't get a bursary or good marks to get a bursary then there will be no opportunities for me. But I am encouraging myself to try and then also to try and get any job next year if I don't get a bursary so that the year after I can go to school. So I am excited, but worried about finances so it is a good and bad year for me. It is not stable."*

When asked if he had any specific plans for next year, in the first interview he said he would like to study human resources or business administration, but did not know where or how to look for a bursary. In the second interview he said:

"If they accept me into UJ, I will go study. If not, I will find any kind of job to raise money. I don't want to stay at home and say "Okay I am waiting for next year it will come, the money will start" because it will go downhill from there. You will see!"

When participant 2 was asked about how she felt about life after school, she answered:

"Scared, because I don't know if I am going to get a bursary or what is going to happen, I will get a job if I don't get a bursary, that will be my second option."

When asked if she had started applying for university or for bursaries, she responded that she had not. In the second interview she said that:

"I want to go to University so I am trying to complete the application forms."

This suggests determination and concrete action.

When asking participant 2 what would stop her from achieving her dreams her first response was *"Nothing I have friends but I won't let them influence me."* In the second interview she elaborated on that saying:

"Nothing, I am determined to do everything I want, I can! I have problems but I put them aside, because I should not let them disadvantage me to not be an intelligent person and super at school. I am going to put those aside and make them better."

When asking participant 3 how he felt about life after school he responded:

"It is a void and I just don't see anything. I want to get through the matric exams and see what happens."

When asked what he thought he would do next year he said civil engineering at UP, but he had not applied. When asked about financing his studies, he said his parents would be able to pay for him. In the second interview he said that it was:

"*feeling much clearer, it is not as bleak as I said last time. Thinking about the future through the exercises we did and stuff really helped!"*

When I asked him what he thought he would do next year, he said:

"*Civil engineering student at UCT, right now it is solidifying. I need a bursary because my parents have told me that they don't have money for me."*

Therefore between the interviews he had obviously managed to speak to his parents regarding financing his studies and made a decision that he would rather study at UCT than at UP.

When asking participant 3 where he gets his source of strength he responded in the first interview with:

"With a vision of me being super rich, being on top. Rich and powerful."

In the second interview he responded with:

"Not wanting to be part of the poverty cycle. So I am always working hard to have a better future than my parents and those just not making it in life. It is like a picture of Tomb Raider she has the wall closing in on her and of course the wall following me would be adversity which I just, I wouldn't want that."

Participant 4's first interview response to what were three things that would stop her achieving her dreams included:

"*Not reading, my family or someone else could stop me, any situation could stop me."*

In her second interview her response had changed to:

"Money, family and myself, but if I say I am going to do this, it is in me that I am going to do this. And if I say I can't do this, then it is in me so I will be holding myself back. So if I can say this, I will be allowing myself to persevere in my life."

When asking participant 7 what would hold him back from achieving his dreams, initially he said:

"Getting involved with the wrong people, getting into illegal things, losing my mom, getting someone pregnant and if I don't get a bursary."

His response in the second interview then changed to:

"Peer pressure, bad influence and not being able to make up my mind and stick to it. If I am not determined, to pursue my dream then that is going to hold me back actually because I want to be able to give my all into achieving what I want to achieve. So if I am not encouraged that is just going to hold me back."

The intervention and interviews seemed to remind or reiterate to the participants that they need to be in charge of their lives. Before the intervention they seemed to take a passive and pessimistic role. However, post the intervention they were not only constructively hopeful in terms of their future, but they were also doing something to get them where they want to be. They seemed to be much more aware that if they did not study hard and try to make plans for their life after Grade 12, their futures would

not be very promising. It appears that these results are consistent with the current literature (Chen, 2007; Duffy & Wong, 2003; Maree et al, 2006; Maree & Beck, 2004), which reveal that making participants feel empowered is an important component in narrative counselling, especially in marginalised communities (Adams, 2003). Giving the participants time and space, through the intervention, to realise their emotions and passions, created a sense of empowerment in the participants. They are more optimistic and hopeful but are also taking action as is illustrated in the examples above but also in the examples that follow.

4.2. Are the participants actively applying what they learnt in the intervention to their lives?

All the participants except one were able to give the researcher verbal examples of something they had reframed because of the exercise. The one participant who was unable to give a verbal example of a reframe was able to demonstrate a reframe of her life and circumstances in her collage that she made. She had written "today" with pictures of all the challenges and adversity that she is struggling with, including: not having a mother or father; and not knowing what she is going to eat each night. She then wrote "tomorrow" with pictures of her hopes and dreams and, significantly, how she is going to address her challenges. Some other examples included:

> *"I wrote an assignment and got a really bad mark. Instead of sitting down and doing nothing, I am going to carry on trying and also try to understand the questions and ask someone who did well."* (Participant 1)

"The rain has been dripping through the roof and it stops me from studying. I decided next time it rains to make a plan and not let it stop me. When it rained I went to study next door." (Participant 2)

"In my household I always waste time cooking and cleaning. I come home and clean and cook and I have to study and my time does not balance. Because when I am cleaning I also feel tired and have to sleep. So the next day I maybe fail a test because I am cooking and cleaning. So it really helped me when I talked about this. I even reviewed it with my mother, and she was like "okay this is nice telling me different things". Maybe she did not even know that I can stand up for myself and say "I don't have to do this because my level of my job at school is too high, so there has to be some limitations to the things I do at home." So she understands better and told my father and they agreed that on Saturdays I have to clean and on Sundays I have to cook to give my mother a break, because I am the only girl. But my mother now cooks and cleans before she goes to work during the week." (Participant 4)

"I reframed about not knowing my dad, he was probably bad and did not want to know me. I'm better also because I have my grandmother and she is my knight in shining armour." (Participant 5)

Participant 6 had explained in the first interview that he really struggles to get on with his dad. In the second interview he said:

"Maybe I should also take the initiative to talk to him, just let him know what is happening in my life and all that. If he can't do that, then I am going to

have to do something about it. Maybe I am the one who is going to have to change and turn around."

He explained after the workshop that he felt encouraged to try and do it but it was difficult because his dad was always watching TV or distracted with something else, but the participant said that:

"I did it and I am finding it easier to interact with my dad than before, I am letting myself into him actually." (Participant 6)

As mentioned previously participant 4 mentioned in the first interview that he really struggles with being so short. In the second interview he said:

"I am not beating myself up with being short because it is genetic and really it is not anybody's fault because I mean most of the time I would just be looked down on as the short guy and as depressing as that might be and as agitating as it may make me, I am just getting over it and saying "whatever" and that kind of makes me feel good."

There are definite indications that the learners applied what they learnt about reframing in their daily life, as the examples indicate. They seem able to understand in their verbal responses that they are active agents or authors in determining their life story and that they can choose to be better about situations or they can choose to be bitter and reactive. It was clear from these responses that the participants understood the reframing concept and could give verbal examples. There is, however, a limitation in the research. Because the participants have been taught how to reframe, they are possibly verbally talking about reframing and verbally explaining the changes they have had in their life. However, this study is unable to measure whether

these changes have happened in reality, or whether these changes will continue to be implemented in time to come. However, if we reflect on the previous quotation by Chen, an element of change no matter how small is important and positive and it is hoped that these participants will be able to remember and implement the reframing exercise in future life events that are difficult.

4.3. Participants Feedback on Various Aspects of the Intervention

As described in Chapter 3, the intervention has three components. 1. The writing of their life story, 2. Being taught how to reframe. 3. Goal setting and the creation of a visual art work. Each of these will be elaborated on below ending with a discussion on how the participants experienced the group nature of the intervention.

4.3.1. Writing of Their Life Stories

Participants are encouraged to look back over the high and low events in their lives using a life graph and then write their life story. Various studies have shown that writing of life stories can be a powerful intervention that is a key component in narrative career counselling. McIlveen and Patton (2007) state that it can add depth to the counselling dialogue, and Grant and Johnston (2006) explain that seeing one's story in black and white can reveal a whole new way of looking at one's life. It can almost be compared to looking at life with a fresh set of lenses, which brings clarity and insight into a person's life story.

The participants had different responses to writing their life stories. Most of the participants said that they found it easy to write their life stories:

"I just wrote, I did not find it difficult." (Participant 1)

"I found it interesting because I ended up realising how important it is to just write things from the way you feel, from your own perspective. It was beneficial and I learnt a lot." (Participant 7)

"It was pleasant, it was something different, writing that story about me, it was like feeling something I did not know. I was privileged by you giving that time to write everything we can about ourselves because no one else can do this for us, so I felt special on that day because this is a different thing that I never did with anyone else… I did not find it hard because you learn from what you did in the past, so you have to carry on with everything that happens and learn from your mistakes." (Participant 4)

"I enjoyed the questions of life, the questions which dig deeper and which get into your heart and even after answering the questions you are left to say wow. This is it, this is life and you are affected – intellectually, emotionally and psychologically." (Participant 8)

One of the participants said she found it really difficult to start writing, but when she did, she found it interesting to realise all the things that have happened in her life:

"It was quite difficult, like where to start in the beginning, but eventually I started it. It was interesting because you know you forget the things that have happened but when you write it down, I guess that is when you realise, many things have happened!" (Participant 2)

Two of the participants had mixed feelings towards the writing exercise indicating that it was difficult to write because it meant they had to look at some difficult areas in their lives:

> *"It was easy because you know yourself and are writing about yourself, but emotional thinking about my mother passing away."* (Participant 5)

> *"It was easy when it came to the part where I had to write the good things, but coming to the things that are a bit low, it was hard to actually write everything down. So I couldn't actually write much about bad things that I have experienced, which I found okay because I don't tend to be down on myself."* (Participant 7)

Even though all of the participants implied that the writing exercise had benefitted them, some of the participants struggled with some emotion around recalling and writing more difficult or painful areas in their lives. It would appear that out of all the exercises the writing exercise was the one that stirred up the most emotion for the participants. The researcher and psychologist were on hand to step in and help contain difficult emotions should the participants have needed that help, but all of the participants managed to contain and work through the emotions themselves. For most of them writing their life stories, even though they had to think back over painful moments, was a significant event in the intervention and the following quote seems appropriate in summing up the experience of writing their life stories:

> "Story telling is healing. As we reveal ourselves in story we become aware of the continuing core of our lives under the fragmented surface of our experience.

> We become aware of the multifaceted, multichaptered "I" who is the storyteller. We can trace out the paradoxical and even contradictory versions of ourselves that we create for different occasions, different audiences…. Most important, we become aware of ourselves as storytellers, we realise that what we understand and imagine about ourselves is a story. And when we know all this, we can use our stories to heal and make ourselves whole." (Albert, nd)

4.3.2. Reframing Exercise

The reframing exercise aims to help participants realise what impact their life story has on them going forward, it tries to show them the strengths they have within and around them to cope with life and to teach participants how to reframe negative events in their lives, showing them they are not responsible for what happens but they are responsible for how they choose to respond.

Participant 5 stated:

> *"The part I love most was the reframing part, I never really thought about making something bad, you know reframing it, would make it a bit good in a way, so that part really stuck with me."*

Participant 3 said:

> "*It was good because I don't know I am always thinking about the bad things as opposed to the good things. So yeah it was good because I mean I am sort of paranoid about these things, so I tend to just cling onto the bad stuff and never really notice all the good I have done throughout the years."*

Researcher: “So you found that when you circled all the good and bad you realised that you had a lot more good in your life?”

> *“And a little bad, which is actually what I thought about the most and actually it didn’t make sense just having thought so much about the bad stuff.”*

When describing how it felt to reframe participant 3 said:

> “*It was taking the load off my shoulders, it just made me realise what a great person I am.”*

The Brott (Brott, 2001 p.305) storied approach involves construction, deconstruction and construction; that is to “reveal, unpack, and re-author”. Deconstruction involves looking at stories from a new view point and seeing them in a new light and is actively supported by Chen (1997) who states that deconstruction, or gaining different perspectives, puts the client’s story into a life context, encourages flexibility and meaning making in the client, which in turn will increase optimism and hope. It would appear that the reframing component of the intervention succeeded in helping participants view their stories in a new light. There was only one participant who struggled with this exercise. She explained afterwards it was because she did not understand the instructions as to how to complete this part of the exercise and she did not feel comfortable asking for additional explanation. The other seven participants really seemed to enjoy, understand and find benefit in this part of the exercise. Six of the participants were able to relate a story or event that they had managed to reframe. These stories have been elaborated on in the previous section. On the basis of these results it seems that the reframing component of the exercise is a vital component in the exercise, as it empowers the participants to realise that they can choose how they respond and their attitude to a situation.

4.3.3. Goal Setting and Art Work

The participants had time and space to work on their goals and hopes and dreams for the future. Using all that they had learnt from the writing and reframing exercise and their hopes and dreams and goals they were asked to either write; draw; paint; make a collage; write a poem; or compose a song about "who they are and where they are going".

> *"The only difficult thing was trying to find the pictures that would relate to what I was thinking. There was nothing bad about it, I was just bringing all my thoughts together, I mean just giving myself a goal that is realistic, because I am going to take it home and look at it everyday."* (Participant 7)

Participant 5 said that this aspect of the intervention was *"Fun, fun, fun!"*. She included a picture of a lady screaming in her collage (Figure 1) and said that:

> *"I am very talkative, I talk and talk and talk, I can talk all day but I never really talk about the stuff that bothers me. Okay so this picture is like you know how this person is feeling. That is how I feel, I feel like I could just get angry and talk about how I feel for once."*

She also put fear of failure because:

> *"I don't want, I don't want to be a failure. I don't want that. I want to have a better life. You know, I want to move on and break the poverty cycle and everything. I want to, you know, be successful. Yeah, I want to make something good of myself. I want my grandmother to be proud of me."*



Figure 1. Collage by Participant 5

Participant 6 divided her poster into two sections. "Today" and "Tomorrow" (Figure 2): *"I started like where I came from to see where I am going."*

In the "today" section she included her father's death; the fact that her house is no longer safe as it does not have a lock on the door; and how currently they do not have enough food. In the tomorrow section she explains that:

> *"One day I'll be there at my siblings telling them what to eat for supper, for lunch you know and all this stuff and taking them back to school to realize their goals and achievements and then I am standing here individual and independent and this is for them!"*

The researcher asked her how she felt about looking at her "tomorrow" side of the picture and she said:

> *"Like smiled, I felt that I will, Actually I am going to achieve it. Nothing can stop me!"*

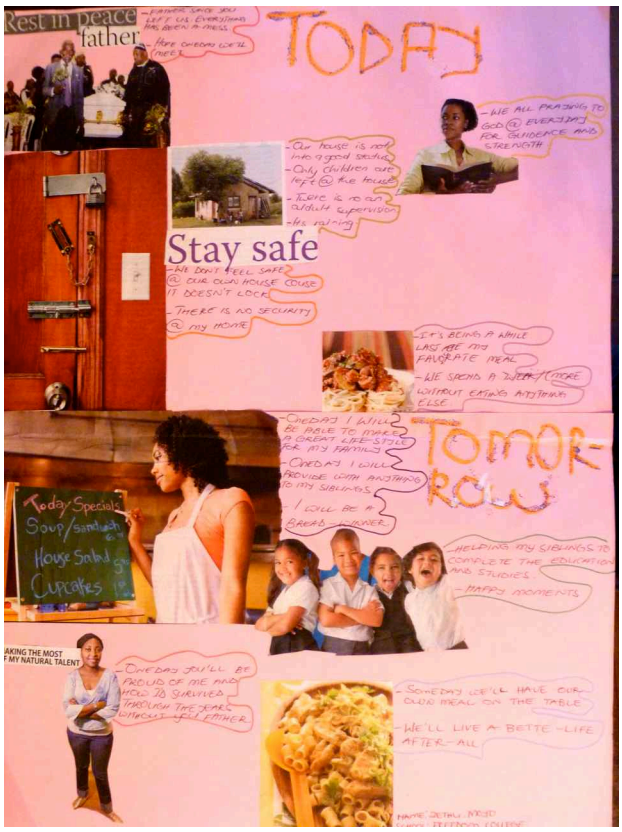


Figure 2. Collage by Participant 6.

The participants all seemed to really enjoy this component of the exercise. It was interesting that all of the participants decided to make collages, which could be due to looking at what others were doing or it could be that they could use all the various art materials (painting, drawing, cutting from magazines as well as written expression) which they seemed to really enjoy in making the collage. As Bischoff (2007) reported, magazines that were culturally appropriate need to be used in qualitative narrative work. The researcher sourced culturally appropriate magazines and combined them with other magazines. The learners did seem to prefer the more culturally appropriate magazines. The learners all seemed to enjoy the time, space and quietness in order to create something that reflected their lives. This is congruent with what Willis (2003) emphasises; that using creative means, especially art in a therapeutic way, can help the client to relax, realise their emotions and enter into a

level that they are unaware of but will help with making decisions. Adams (2003) agrees, suggesting that collages, in particularly, help clients realise unidentified, forgotten, and overlooked possible aspirations, and to realize and discern rare traits in their lives.

4.3.4. The Intervention in a Group Setting

Asking the participants how they felt in the group setting of the intervention was not one of the questions in the pre and post interviews. However as most of the participants referred to the group in their answers, the researcher felt it was important to include a discussion on the group setting:

> *"I don't like associating myself with people because I am really shy, but on that day when we presented our posters, I saw X and she was like I am not going to present my poster but at the end she said I am going to do it because she was feeling so open and free with everyone. So that was what I said to myself that I am free now to everyone. I can even talk. I even talked about everything and people laughed so yeah, I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it a lot."* (Participant 4)

> *"On our way back home to Soweto we were busy talking about it with X and Y. Yeah we were sharing our posters and what we really want and what we wrote about on our way back to Soweto."* (Participant 1, and Participant 4 said a similar thing)

"I really enjoyed meeting new people and interacting with other girls that I have never met before but now we shared space on the taxi and we spoke about everything we did that day." (Participant 6)

"I found the workshop consuming, because whenever you feel appreciated, you know, and people they show interest in what you are saying. With me I am often not able to just talk to somebody to tell them how I feel and all that but with the workshop I just felt like, you know, able to express whatever I have always kept inside. So I was like okay here I am around people who want to share their stories with me, why not share my own story. This is the opportunity for me to, I just freed myself and just say what I want to say, because now is the time." (Participant 7)

Maree and Beck (2004) have supported further research into the use of groups as a low cost, high impact way of doing career counselling. The participants in this intervention did not know each other well. The participants from AEC knew each other from Saturday school and those who came from Ikageng did not know each other or the AEC participants. Therefore there were five participants who meet on Saturday mornings for Saturday school and three participants who were strangers to each other and to the other five. The delegates all met each other at the beginning of the intervention but all the exercises were conducted in silence, individually. The only time the group interacted was at the end when participants shared their collages. All of the participants experienced this time as affirming, empowering and supportive. One of the participants said that she felt nervous at presenting her poster and initially said that she was not going too, but after everyone had presented, she asked if she

could present hers. At the end of the session one of the participants asked if she could read to the group a poem she had written. Therefore there was a great sense of caring and respect for one another in this group setting. This is consistent with what was found by Alexander, Seabi, Bischof, (2010) who conducted a qualitative study using a postmodern group assessment procedure with eleven Grade 11 learners to explore their perceptions of careers in a group setting. They found that the group setting facilitated participation since it relieved pressure to respond but also gave learners time to reflect. Vicarious learning through other group members' performance, and social persuasion could help learners acquire self efficacy beliefs. Therefore they concluded that assessment could commence in a group setting and then proceed to face to face interaction if necessary. As the participants did not know each other, it would be interesting to see how the group dynamics would change if they did know each other. This could be a possible area of further research.

4.4. Participants Responses to the Intervention

Having already looked at some of the impacts that the study has had on the participants, what follows are some quotations where the participants recognise these changes for themselves:

> *"It helped me realise what is important to me."* (Participant 1)

> *"It was very interesting, I got to learn a lot of things, more things about myself that I did not know."* (Participant 2)

> *"I found it was taking the load off my shoulders, which is kind of like how I happened to be feeling with all the bad things I had, so yeah, it was good. It*

made me realise what a great person I am… I learnt to think, I have a clearer vision of what I want to do." (Participant 3)

"It got me thinking about way back, way back and you know, I never really think about this stuff that happened back then, you know. So it got me thinking and it is nice to, you know, think about where you come from and from that you know where you are going." (Participant 5)

"It was good and cool, like I realise that I can be somebody in the future. I am going to achieve and no one can stop me… It is the first time telling my story to someone. Like when people will say tell us about your story, I will sometimes lie and say I come from a good family!" (Participant 6)

"The benefit I got from the workshop is that you don't always have to look at things in a negative way. You know, you can always turn them to positive… what you are doing changes peoples lives. It can actually change people to become better people, you know. People can be able to see the other side of life, not only focusing on what is happening to them, because what I think is people see life as being unfair, but now I am able to look outside the box and just realise what life is saying to you. And once I can do that, I am able to do something about it, you know, work around it, solve it, you know make it better for good! " (Participant 7)

"After doing the exercise, really gained a lot of perspective on my life. The exercises have helped me see myself as a better person, a successful person." (Participant 8)

"I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it a lot. I need direction, everyone needs direction." (Participant 4)

These comments reiterate themes that have already been described – an increase in self knowledge, self esteem, hope and optimism and empowerment, but they also reflect the deep and powerful impact that the intervention had on the lives of the participants.

4.5. Disadvantaged Grade 12 Learners – Themes and Perceptions

As suggested in the aims of the research - a corollary of the output of the research could be a better understanding of how disadvantaged grade 12 learners perceive their place in the world. Upon analysis of the data the following themes or areas, not already discussed, seemed pertinent to the participants: 1) space to be heard; 2) making caregivers proud; and 3) inadequate career guidance and counselling

4.5.1. Space to be Heard

All of the participants indicated that they had enjoyed the intervention and the time spent with the group, and they also all indicated either formally in the interview or informally as they were leaving that they really enjoyed the time with the researcher. For example:

"I would really like to thank you for all of this, yeah it has just been great. Because I am a conflicted person sort of. So to be given this, I don't know, burst of sanity, it will make me the person I want to be so much!" (Participant 4)

"I would like to thank you for what you have been doing. What I can say is that what you are doing can actually change people's lives. I can actually change people to become better you know? People can be able to see the other side of life and not only focus on what is happening to them. Because what I think not only being able to see life as being unfair like in most cases, but now I can be able to think out the box and just realize why I feel that life is as I am saying to you. And once I do that I can be able to realize and just do something about it, you know? Work around it, solve it. You know, make it better for good. So thank you for giving us the opportunity to express ourselves." (Participant 7)

It thus appears that the participants enjoyed being able to have someone as witness to their lives as they told their stories. McIlveen and Patton (2007) suggest that in narrative the counsellor acts as co–creator, assisting the client in making sense and meaning of his or her life story. Grant and Johnston (2006) suggest "listening to stories is more than establishing good rapport; our role as audience member helps clients retell their stories; which leads to significant and meaningful change" (p. 114). A limitation of this study is that the change could have also been influenced from having the researcher listening to their stories and taking an interest in their lives.

This does not necessarily reduce the effectiveness of the intervention but might indicate an important factor for it to be successful.

4.5.2. Making Caregivers Proud

A theme that greatly motivated all of the participants was the theme of making caregivers proud, whether they are parents, grandparents, siblings or aunts and uncles. In almost all of the hopes and dreams every participant said something about either: buying a house for a parent or grandparent or sibling; helping parents or grandparents or siblings to upgrade their house; or giving their first job cheque to their parents, grandparents or siblings. Most of the participants show deep gratitude for the support and care their parents/grandparents have given them and are so desperate to break out of the poverty cycle to make them proud:

> *"I want to make sure that my first job payment goes to my granny to do something that will make me proud of myself and make sure that my family is doing well, even though my sister is not working at all. I want to try build my family to be together as we are all together now."* (Participant 1)

> *"I want to make my father proud wherever he is and buy my mom whatever she needs."* (Participant 3)

> *"I find my mother is my source of strength because she is supportive. When I'm saying to go where and where she is the one who says good luck, be strong and pray that God will be there for you… I just want to make her happy."* (Participant 5)

This theme of making caregivers and family members proud correlates with what Dass-Brailsford, (2005) found in her study on resilience among disadvantaged black youth in South Africa, that various other family members could compensate for a lack of one or both parents and that the sacrifices made by caregivers do not go unnoticed by the participants.

4.5.3. Inadequate Career Counselling

Almost all of the participants had an idea of what they wanted to study or do when they finished school. However, at the time of the first interview, April 2011, and the second interview, the end of May 2011, most of the participants had not yet applied for further study. All of them indicated that they would need financial assistance and none of them had applied for bursaries. They seemed totally unaware as to the procedure for applying for university and bursaries. Regarding the various careers that they would like to pursue, most of them can name various courses that they would like to apply for but it is clear that they are not really sure what the courses entail:

> *"I really like human resources and okay a chartered accountant is a good thing and IT, is a good thing as it is not a matter of doing science it is based on accounting business and I say wow, that is a good option for me." (*Participant 1)

> *"I want to do chemistry engineering, which deals with coming up with chemicals and maybe I can come up with the cure for HIV and AIDS. I also think maybe if I could do be best in English I can also do TV presenting."* (Participant 4)

When asking participant 4 about her marks she says that she is failing maths and gets around 40% for everything else:

> *"After school next year I would like to study project management or human resources or sports management, because I don't want to be locked up in an office, I want to be around people".... I haven't found a bursary that is for me yet, but I will have to try harder as my grandmother cannot pay for tuition fees."* (Participant 6)

The aim of this study was not to introduce participants to the world of work or to assist them in finding the correct career direction; the aims were to assist them with self knowledge, growth, increased self-esteem and an ability to use their life stories to show them where they have come from and to start hoping and dreaming for the future. However, it has become very clear in this study that there is inadequate career guidance and counselling in schools and from universities to the participants. This is consistent with what Maree and Molepo (2007) found, that career counselling facilitation in most schools but especially previously disadvantaged schools in South Africa is almost absent. Participants are setting themselves up for failure, because they are dreaming of careers that are just words - not knowing what is really entailed in the career; what they need to be achieving in school to even begin thinking about the career; and how to even start applying to higher education institutions or for financial aid.

4.6. Conclusion

As already mentioned, the aims of this research were to explore the effects of the intervention on disadvantaged grade 12 learners and to see whether the intervention using a qualitative, narrative, life story approach had any impact in terms of helping the participants to re-evaluate or reinterpret their lives. Re-evaluation was explored in participants possibly reflecting an increase in self awareness, self-esteem, optimism and responsibility for their lives after school. The research also aimed to determine whether this intervention could be a useful tool as a postmodern career intervention in helping adolescents discover more about who they are, what has shaped them and who they hope to become (Santrock, 2003). In addition, the research explored any additional themes or perceptions of disadvantaged grade 12 learners.

The intervention significantly impacted the participants in terms of self understanding; an increase in self esteem or self efficacy; an increase in empowerment or responsibility; as well as an increase in hope and optimism for their lives.

The participants seemed to enjoy the intervention, particularly the various components including writing their life stories, the reframing exercise, goal setting and the artistic activity that incorporated learning from the previous exercises. However, caution and care need to be taken to ensure that everyone fully understands the instructions. The facilitator should be aware of the possible need to create more space for additional explanation or individual explanation if required.

The participants enjoyed the fact that the intervention took place in a group setting and it would appear that the group setting actually enhanced the impact of the intervention amongst the learners. Group settings are useful for providing low cost, but high impact career counselling interventions that if run effectively and carefully would be able to have an impact on far more lives than individual career counselling which is time consuming and expensive and therefore beyond the reach of most South African learners.

The additional themes and perceptions that appeared in this research include:

a. The participants really enjoyed and felt empowered by having a space to be heard and someone to listen to their life stories. It is beyond the scope of this research to study how much the results were impacted by having someone listening in a careful, respectful and reflecting way to their life stories, hopes and dreams.
b. The participants all have a strong desire to make their caregivers and family members proud and to "give back" to those who have given so much to them. The researcher experienced this wanting to make family members proud as a strongly motivating factor in the participants' lives.
c. As the literature review pointed out, there is a drastic shortage of career counselling in South African schools and the career counselling that is received is at best inadequate and at worst setting learners up for disappointment and failure. Most of the participants in this intervention are able to verbally articulate career aspirations. However, with further exploration, they do not know anything about their chosen careers and

most of the chosen careers would be inappropriate considering their school marks. All of the learners stated that they wanted to go to university. None of the participants were considering trade or technical jobs, despite the skill shortages in these areas, and the overall high levels of unemployment in the country. Trade and technical jobs seem to be highly underrated and even discouraged, despite their suitability for some of the participants.

Maree and Molepo (2007) remind us that we need career counselling in South Africa that: 1) Makes an individual aware of his or her strengths and limitations within and around them in relation to career growth. 2) . Helps clients to use their strengths and work around their limitations in order to facilitate their well being using the resources they have at their disposal. 3) Enhance career counselling tools and opportunities enabling employment for learners. 4) Help learners to navigate their way through life changes. 5) Help learners with taking their first steps on a future career path 6) Implement realistic, appropriate and affordable career counselling to all learners 7) Help them to link their life narrative with their future career hopes and dreams.

It would appear from this research, that this postmodern narrative life story intervention could be a useful tool in: helping individuals to realise their strengths within and around them; helping learners to dream and create goals for their future through looking back over their past; increasing learners' self efficacy, motivation, optimism and empowering learners as they enter the world of life after school.

CHAPTER 5

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter describes the strengths, limitations, and recommendations for the study as well as concluding comments.

5.1. Strengths of the Study

Several strengths of the study were identified, namely:

1. The overall aim of the study was to explore the effects of a postmodern life story intervention on disadvantaged grade 12 learners. The results suggest that the life story intervention could be a useful postmodern career counselling method that is high impact and, due to its group suitability, low cost.
2. The study demonstrated that a life story intervention in a group setting can be conducted successfully and participants highlighted that they enjoyed taking part in the intervention in a group setting.
3. The study demonstrated that a postmodern life story intervention could be used as a narrative career counselling intervention to enhance self-esteem, self-knowledge, hope and optimism as well as responsibility.
4. The study demonstrated that the intervention left the participants feeling empowered.

5.2. Limitations of the Study

The following limitations have been identified in the study and should be taken into consideration when reading the results and discussion as well as in conducting related research in the future:

1. The study was conducted with a small sample size of eight learners from a disadvantaged context; therefore caution would be needed in generalising these findings to other groups.
2. The changes that the participants demonstrated could also have come from having the researcher listen to the participants' stories and take an interest in their lives in the pre and post interviews and not solely from the intervention itself.
3. Whether the results achieved in this study will continue to be implemented by the participants in time to come is beyond the scope of this research report.
4. Because the participants have been taught how to reframe, they are possibly verbally talking about reframing and verbally explaining the changes they have had in their life. However, this study is unable to measure whether this reframing has happened in reality.
5. Face to face interviews can create a social situation that can result in favourable responses from the participant in terms of participants telling the interviewers what they think they want to hear (McBurney, 2001).

5.3. Conclusions

Career counselling in the South African environment urgently needs to be redefined. Too many young people are finishing school with no idea of the next steps and no means of moving forward. This is causing a crisis in the youth in South Africa but

also a crisis for the South African economy. Maree and Molepo (2006) suggest that ongoing research is needed in order to find postmodern career counselling methods that are suitable and affordable for the diverse contexts in South Africa but also suitable for group work.

By exploring the effects of an affordable postmodern life story intervention on disadvantaged grade 12 learners in a group setting, this research contributes to this growing body of knowledge on creating counselling methods that are appropriate and cost effective in the South African environment.

The research set out to ultimately answer the effects of a postmodern career life story intervention on disadvantaged youth, with the following sub questions: Do the participants re-evaluate or reinterpret their lives in light of the intervention? Are the participants actively applying what they learnt in the intervention to their lives? What are the other differences in the participants' answers in light of the intervention?
Further possible sub questions are: Do the participants reframe the negative or difficult events in their lives in a new and empowering way after the intervention? Is there a difference in the participants' answers regarding possibly responsibility, attitude, motivation, hope and optimism for their lives after the intervention? And finally does the intervention have a positive difference on the lives of the participants?

Using pre and post intervention interviews, the pre interview interpreted various aspects of the participants' lives and the post interview reinterpreted those aspects to see if the participants revaluated or reinterpreted their answers in light of the intervention.

It was found that this intervention is useful in helping participants from disadvantaged backgrounds grow in: self knowledge of their strengths and limitations; self efficacy; optimism; and hope. It also helped empower the participants to plan goals and dreams for their lives ahead by using their life stories. It was also found that the reframing component of the exercise was useful to the participants and assisted them in reframing negative events in their lives in new and empowering ways, which fostered resilience and hope amongst the participants.

McIlveen and Patton (2007) describe qualitative assessment as not just matching facts from clients with vocational interests; rather it is a journey for the client of self-discovery as they actively reflect on their life. In exploration of the effects of this intervention, the participants did seem to discover new areas of self-knowledge. However, McMahon and Patton (2006 p. 167) suggest, "Qualitative career assessment can be time consuming, labour intensive, demonstrate questionable reliability and validity, be too informal and lack scientific rigour." Due to the group nature of this intervention, it was not time consuming or labour intensive. The responses from this intervention do suggest that there was a demonstrable increase in self-knowledge, self-esteem, hope, optimism and a sense of empowerment. Whether these effects will be long term are beyond the scope of this study, however as Chen (2007) suggests, a sign of positive change or growth, no matter how small it may seem, shows a level of success that is significant to the client.

One must also remember that creating new self knowledge from reflection on our life experiences and then using that knowledge to support us in going forward is a basic

principle of constructivism and narrative career counselling (Patton & McMahon, 2006). However, the focus is always on the process and not on the end result as, in constructivism, one never reaches an end. Mahoney and Lyddon (1988 p.209) explain it beautifully when they suggest that "embedded with self change is self stability – we are all changing all the time and simultaneously remaining the same". Therefore even a small movement in the lives of the participants in this interveniton is a success, as it is part of their ongoing journey of self discovery.

5.4. Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the strengths and limitations of this study, the researcher believes that a postmodern, narrative life story intervention, such as this one used in the study, could be a high impact, low cost tool to be used as a component of career counselling in the diverse South African context. However, the following points would need to be taken into consideration:

1. As the participants did not all know each other, it would be interesting to explore how the group dynamics would change if they did know each other.
2. In conducting a life story intervention, aspects such as emotional readiness, personality and learning style, willingness to participate and commitment to the process need to be considered (Fritz & Beekman, 2007) as they will affect the overall outcome experienced by the participant. If this intervention was to be conducted as part of a compulsory life orientation career counselling component in a school setting, the participants may not be as engaged in the intervention as the participants from this study who volunteered of their own initiative to be involved.
3. Exploring the longitudinal effects of the intervention on participants.

4. The facilitator should be trained in group facilitation as well as possibly the counselling process. If they are not trained in the counselling process, they should have a network to refer participants to who may benefit from counselling.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participants Information Letter

1 March 2011

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Sarah Tinsley–Myerscough and I am conducting research for the purposes of obtaining a Master's Degree in educational psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. My area of focus is the effect of a life story intervention on Grade 12 learners. Many people find it difficult to enter work or further study after matric. There are many reasons for this but in this research we will be looking at whether this life story workshop could be a useful tool in the school to work transition and career guidance in general.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. Taking part in this research will entail:

1. Taking part in the first interview conducted by me.
2. Participating in a life story workshop that will be done individually, with a group discussion after the workshop.
3. Taking part in a second interview conducted by me.

The interview will be held at a time and venue that is convenient for you for a period of an hour. It will take place prior to the life story workshop. **The life story workshop will most probably be conducted on Friday 8 April 2011: 12pm to 5pm at the AEC offices.**

We will then meet for another hour-long interview two weeks after the life story workshop at a time and place convenient for you.

The interviews will be recorded in order to ensure accuracy but no one will have access to the recordings except me. Participation is voluntary, and no person will be advantaged or disadvantaged in any way for choosing to participate or not participate in the study. If you choose to participate you will need to be over the age of 18 and currently in grade 12.

During the interviews and workshop you may refuse to answer any questions you would prefer not to answer, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point. There will be total confidentiality regarding what is said during the interviews. Confidentiality will be encouraged during the group discussion at the end of the workshop but it cannot be ensured that group members will keep

the confidentiality outside of the group. No information that could identify you would be included in the final research report. Some of your sayings may be used word for word in the final document but no names would be given.

Results of the study will be written up in the form of a research report and the Alex Education Committee will be provided with a summary of the findings, which will be made available to you. A copy of the report will also be available at the WITS Education Library.

Your participation in this study would be greatly appreciated. If you choose to participate in the study please fill in your details on the consent form below and return it to the Alex Education committee. If you have any queries or questions I can be contacted telephonically at 082 374 5535 or my supervisor Mr Joseph Seabi can be contacted on Tel +27 11 717 8331.

With kind regards,

Sarah

Sarah Tinsley – Myerscough
WITS Masters in Education (Educational Psychology) Student
082 374 5535
s.tinsley.myerscough@gmail.com

Appendix B: Participant's Consent Form.

Consent Form:

I _____ consent to participating in the life story intervention and interviews lead by Sarah Tinsley – Myerscough for her masters' research in education (educational psychology) on the effects of a life story intervention on Grade 12 learners.

I understand that:

- Participation in this interview is voluntary.
- I may refuse to answer any questions I would prefer not to.
- I may withdraw from the study at any time without any penalty.
- No information that may identify me will be included in the research report.
- What is said in the interviews will remain confidential.
- Confidentiality of the group discussion in the intervention group cannot be ensured outside of the group, however the group would be encouraged to keep what is said inside the group confidential.
- There are no individual risks or benefits.
- My direct quotes may be used in the written report however anonymity will be guaranteed.
- I am over the age of 18.

I also consent to the interviews being tape-recorded. I understand that:

- The tapes and transcripts will only be heard and processed by the researcher for data analysis.
- The tapes will be securely stored and locked away in a safe place agreed by my supervisor and myself for a period of five years.
- My identity will be protected and no identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Telephone contact details: _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions and Intervention Procedure:

Pre intervention Interview Questions

Focus 1: Who are you?

1. Describe yourself using five words
2. How would your parents describe you?
3. How would your friends describe you?
4. What makes you feel good about yourself?
5. When do you feel most alive?
6. When do you feel most anxious, worried, scared?

Focus 2: Where have you been?

1. Have you had any great achievements in your life? If yes – describe it for me
2. What has been one of the biggest difficulties you have overcome?
3. Where do you find your source of strength?

Focus 3: Where are you going?

1. How are you feeling about your matric exams?
2. How are you feeling about life after school?
3. Do you have any plans for life after school?
4. If yes – what? If no – why?
5. What are three dreams that you have?
6. What three things that would hold you back from being all you dream?

Life Story Intervention:

1. The participants will draw a quick life graph (15 minutes)
2. Using the graph as a guide the participants will then write their life story emphasising events that were life affirming and positive and events that were tough and difficult. (60 minutes)
3. The participants will circle in a red pen all the tough times and with a green pen all the good events. (10 minutes)
4. They will receive a piece of paper with three columns. In the first column they will write down all the red and green-circled events giving one or two words for each event. In the middle column they will finish one of the following sentences: I am…; I have… ; I always … next to each event. Then in the final column they will write strengths or positive attitudes or good things in their lives that they have found from that event. They will need to reframe the final column if something negative was written there and a brief explanation on reframing will be given to the participants. (20 minutes)
5. They will write a hope or dream for each of the following: body, mind or work, spirit and social (family and friends). (15 minutes)
6. They will use the positive things from the third column and their hopes and dreams to draw, paint, make a collage, work with clay, write a poem, compose a song or write their life story about "who they are and where they are going". (90 minutes)
7. Participants will be given a chance to explain, as they feel comfortable, the work they have created to the other participants and the other participants will be allowed to share strengthening or encouraging comments or insights with their peers.

The participants will be encouraged to complete their work in silence – focusing on their own lives and stories and hopes and dreams. They will get adequate breaks throughout the intervention. The materials provided will be of a standard that inspires creativity and a willingness and enthusiasm to complete the project.

Post intervention research questions:

The post intervention interviews will take place two weeks after the intervention.

1. How did you find the life story exercise?
2. What did you find easy?
3. What did you find difficult?
4. What change (if any) do you think the exercise has had on how you see yourself and your life?

The researcher will then proceed to re ask the questions that were used in the first interview. Explaining that she will now ask the same questions used in the first interview to see if any of the answers have changed in light of the intervention. She will explain that if the participant's answers have not changed, that that is not a problem.