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TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ON EMOTIONAL WELLNESS OF LEARNERS WITH HEARING IMPAIRMENT IN GAUTENG, SOUTH AFRICA.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated teachers' perceptions on emotional wellness of learners with hearing impairment in Gauteng Province of South Africa. The wellness theory was used as a lens underpinning this study. Thirty educators were purposively selected from Gauteng province to take part in this study. The province was purposively selected because of its high concentration of special schools for learners with hearing impairment. Thirty respondents in the quantitative design and 10 participants in the qualitative design were teaching Grades R to Grade Seven. The schools were purposely chosen because of their well known record in education of learners with hearing impairment. Researchers used interviews to collect data. The necessary ethical considerations were observed in accordance with standard research standards. Findings revealed that there were mixed views in attitude among the teachers of the emotional wellness of learners with hearing impairment.

Keywords: emotional wellness, abuse, self concept, self awareness, incidental learning, secure attachment

1. INTRODUCTION

Children spend most of their day at school. For learners at residential centers they spend most days of their years at the residential schools. Children need a secure attachment at home and at school. That is, an environment that creates positive mental health for positive emotional wellness. Deaf children who grow up in secure well attached environments are more likely to develop positive self concepts and ultimately emotional wellness (Gascon-Ramos, 2008). Mellroy and Storbeck (2011) observed that inclusive environments were responsible for exclusion of learners with hearing impairments. This sometimes led to individuals feeling lonely and ambivalent, insecure in both the hearing and the deaf community (Bat-Chava, 2000). Residential education for learners with hearing impairment has been credited for creating positive self concept for hearing impaired people (Gascon-Ramos, 2008; Hauser, O'Hearn, McKee, Streider, 2010; Storbeck, 2009). Early intervention is more rewarding than later intervention because it allows the school to induct and train the individual on acceptable behaviors as a hearing impaired person. Several studies recommend that role model deaf adults must be available to create positive emotional wellness of learners with hearing impairment (Department of Education, 1998, 2014; Gascon-Ramos, 2008; Skrebneva, 2010).



2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Hettler's (1979) wellness theory maintains that a person's state of optimal health or total wellness is achieved when there is a balance in the six wellness areas namely: physical, emotional, social, intellectual, spiritual and occupational wellness. The current study focused on teacher perceptions on emotional wellness of learners with hearing impairment in Gauteng Province.

Emotional wellness is defined by Hettler (1979) as awareness and acceptance of one's feelings and of others. Similarly, Dunn (1959) concurs with Hettler (1979) who views total wellness as an integral component in an individual in promoting a homeostasis in an individual. Dunn (1959) further maintains that it is necessary for every individual to know themselves. Marshark and Spencer (2003) are convinced that emotional wellness is facilitated by cognition in which individuals show self-awareness and personal judgment. Cummins (2013) believes self-concept is developed through experience in the real world.

Strydom (2011: 100) sees the need for individuals to be able to react to different situations in their school and outside school lives. In order to develop positive emotional wellness, home environment plays a critical role by providing secure attachment (Gascon-Ramos 2008: 57). Gascon Ramos (2008) states the importance of developing a sense of purpose and direction in life for effective coping strategies on a daily basis. Similarly, Strydom (2011) credits the existence of supportive social relationships to facilitating rewarding emotional wellness. Syzmanski, Lutz, Shan and Gala (2013) suggest self-concept and self-esteem as positive results of secure attachment. Self-concept is three pronged. Storbeck (2009) between the way children want to see themselves (ideal self) and their construction of themselves (self-esteem). Thomas (2015) argues that the development of a positive self-concept depends on the individual's home background and early schooling. Storbeck (2009) concurs and further maintains that experiences and early placement to school contribute to positive self-concept for hearing impaired learners. Marshark and Hauser (2012), and Solvang and Haualand (2014) concur that deaf learners at special schools have the advantage of positive role models of adults who are deaf as well as other peers who are deaf to develop positive emotional wellness. Archbold and O'Donoghue (2009) argue that it is important to use appropriate teaching and learning strategies to enhance emotional wellness.

Storbeck (2009) further outlines the need for teachers who are conversant in sign language that they contribute immensely in the development of positive emotional wellness of hearing impaired learners. Some studies suggest that hearing impaired learners act impulsively and that they have reduced emotional wellness caused by struggle with self-concept (Gascon-Ramos, 2008; Hauser et. al, 2010; Haualand & Allen, 2009). Hauser, O'Hean, Mckee, Steider and Thew (2010) put the blame squarely on the lack of role models. Kirk, Gallagher and Anastasiow (1997) uphold that early intervention, quality physical and emotional care result in positive emotional wellness.

3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The statement of the problem is:

What are the teachers' perceptions on emotional wellness of learners with hearing impairment in Gauteng?'

4. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research approach in a natural setting (Creswell, Ebersohn, Ivankova, Jansen, Nieuwenhuis, Clark & Van der Westhuizen, 2011). Qualitative methods consider several realities based on the person perceiving it and the context on which it is perceived (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Joubish, Kurran, Ahmed, Fatima & Houder, 2011). The qualitative method enabled variables to be observed in natural settings (Creswell, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Individuals in the study displayed their experiences as they perceived them. The study followed a phenomenological approach which describes a group of individuals' lived experiences (Creswell, 2009).

The sample was made up of 30 primary school educators of age range 26 to 60 years. These respondents were purposively selected from five randomly selected schools. Random sampling enabled researchers to select a sample that was truly representative of the population of teachers of learners who are deaf. The results obtained from the sample were used to make generalizations about the target population (Creswell & Plano, 2007; McMillan & Schumacher, 2011).

The instrument used to collect data from 30 primary school educators was the questionnaire and the interview. Questions covered aspects of their perceptions of emotional wellness of learners with hearing impairment. The respondents completed the questionnaire in the researcher's presence and handed them back as soon as they finished. The researchers used this method to ensure that the same numbers of questionnaires issued were returned. This method also enabled the researchers to further explain the purpose and relevance



of the study and areas which needed clarity were explained during the completion process. The interviews were conducted with 10 teachers so that the researchers in using the concurrent embedded mixed method may gain a broader perspective on teachers' perceptions on learners with hearing impairment (Creswell, 2009).

5. THE INSTRUMENTS

One set of self-completion questionnaire was designed for the 30 educators teaching learners with hearing impairment at the (N= 5) selected schools in Gauteng Province. The questionnaire had two sections; A and B. Section A had six questions on personal life such as gender, age range, home language, deaf education, and work experience in general. In this section, the respondents were required to put a circle around the chosen option. Section B had (N= 3) questions on aspects of emotional wellness for learners with hearing impairment.

The interview elicits information from the interviewee (Creswell, 2010). An interview involves a small number of people being interviewed on their perspectives on the program or situation at stake (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). An interview with largely open ended questions was designed for ten teachers of learners with hearing impairment. The interview schedule had two sections. Section A had biographical data with four questions on gender, age range, experience in deaf education and home language. Section B required interviewees to respond in full on 10 questions. The first five questions required the educator to respond in full on questions about how they feel about their work and how they felt about learners' emotional wellness, and how they were successfully dealing with some of the challenges. Two further questions were asked on how they were dealing addressing emotional wellness. The last question required respondents to identify support services that were assisting them to address emotional wellness. The interview schedule instructions were simple, clear and concise as recommended by (Maree & Pietersen 2007).

6. DATA COLLECTION

It was important for researchers to obtain Ethical Clearance as part of the research process. Ethics arises because of the interaction between the researcher, trying to search for the truth and the participant from whom the truth is obtained (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). The researchers obtained Ethical Clearance from the University of South Africa to protect human subjects who participated in the research study. It also ensured that research was of high quality. The researchers also obtained an approval to conduct research in schools from the Gauteng Provincial Department of Education.

A letter was distributed to participants to request their voluntary participation in the study. In the transmittal letter to the participants, the researcher gave promise of confidentiality and that they could withdraw at any time without fear of reprisals. The researchers made arrangements with the schools to arrange dates and times when they could visit the school. The Principal of each of the schools facilitated access to the participants. During administration of the instruments, the researchers explained possible benefits of the study to the participants. The researchers also conducted a one-to-one interview with ten of the participants. Each interview took about 30 minutes. In order to ensure validity of the interview, the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer was focused, asking relevant, unambiguous questions (Creswell, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The researchers explained that the identity of the participant was not to be shared with any other person.

Probing for more information was done during interviews in order to get in depth information (Maree & Pietersen, 2007:158). This was possible because of items which were open ended in the interview schedule. The researchers manually took notes while conducting interviews. The interviews were carried out in a friendly relaxed atmosphere and the researchers had enough time to record all the finer details of each interview. They also encouraged cooperation with the interviewee and let the participant open up. For example participants were able to say what they felt about the extent of emotional support of the learners using their own experiences.

7. DATA ANALYSIS:

Data from questionnaires were converted into numerical equivalents so that it could be quantitatively analysed and tested. Descriptive statistics were employed. With descriptive statistics, group data were summarized, using a combination of tabulated descriptions such as tables and graphical descriptions with the use of bar and line graphs.

Data analysis began as soon as the first data was collected reducing data overload (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). After each



interview, the researcher organized and synthesized the data (Creswell, 2014). Analysis helped in ensuring that a correct record of the interviews was reflected in the analysis (Creswell, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010). The researcher coded and segmented the data and labeled the categories in the actual language of the participants (Creswell, 2007). Codes were developed using field notes making thorough analysis of the interviews (Babbie & Mouton, 2011). Codes were, therefore developed as the researcher was reading field notes, analyzing the interviews. Codes were carefully selected with the point of focus in mind. Coding enabled categorization of concepts and dimensions so that they could be systematically organized (Creswell, 2010). Significant aspects in the data were identified during coding with descriptions of words to each unit of notes.

A pattern of categories emerged from the coding process identifying codes with similar meaning. These categories were further grouped into clusters of similar meanings. This helped to bring out substantive connections and build a picture which was clearer than the initial impressions (Henning et al, 2004). From these categories the researchers further grouped data into clusters of similar meanings and collapsed them into themes.

8. FINDINGS TO THE STUDY

The study synthesized the findings to obtain three themes.

Theme 1: Learners who are deaf face several emotional challenges

Findings in this study are that educators felt that learners who are deaf face several challenges in both quantitative and qualitative studies of the mixed method study. Respondents in the quantitative study indicated low levels of emotional wellness for learners who are deaf. Teachers respond with only 44.3% (N=13) revealing that learners with hearing impairment were able deal well with sadness. On the item, "*Control of emotions*" only 43.5% (N=13) felt that the learners dealt well with emotions. On the question, "*How well learners with hearing impairment manage failure?*" only 26.1% (N=8) felt that they dealt well with failure.

Participants in the qualitative study generally felt learners with hearing impairment experienced several challenges in their emotional well-being. The extract below between one of the researchers and Joyce indicate these challenges.

RESEARCHER: "*How well do learners with hearing impairment deal with their emotions?*"

JOYCE: "*Basing on my experience, it is not good.*"

RESEARCHER: "*Can you please explain further.*"

JOYCE: (Coughs) "*At school they can get out aggressively. Some cry and others just withdraw.*"

RESEARCHER: "*Under which circumstances do the learners display such behavior?*"

JOYCE: "*When they want to express displeasure or when they are going through stressful situation.*"

RESEARCHER: "*What do you do when they display unacceptable behavior?*"

JOYCE: (Short pause) "*I try to cool them down. For example, there is a boy named James (pseudo name), he has serious temper tantrums. He is sometimes violent. I restrain him. After some time he cools down. He has no friends because no one wants to play with a violent person.*"

The above interview indicates that some of the learners with hearing impairment are violent and emotionally unstable. The "cough" and "pause" by the participant shows negative feelings towards some of the learners. The same feelings as reflected by comment by Esther.

Esther said, "*They can become negative and it is very difficult.*"

Theme 2: Mixed views on how learners with hearing impairment deal with stressful situations

Educators reflected mixed views on how learners with hearing impairment dealt with stressful situations

Participant Hazel said, "*They just go with the flow.*"

Participant Frank echoed, "*In general, I think they do not cope efficiently to stressful events,*"

Participant Alice said, "*It depends on the support they receive as well as the coping skills they were taught.*"

Some educators commented that learners did not cope sufficiently with stressful events. Hazel felt that hearing impaired learners could not be relied on. However, some of the participants were more positive.

With different views it shows how different educators deal differently with similar situations but view them differently.



Theme 3: School based support is important for positive emotional development

Findings in this study revealed that participants felt that support services from the school environment were important as evidenced by the following responses from participants:

Participant Grace said: *“With support from teachers through SBST, some of the learners are able to accept their challenging behavior.”*

Ability to identify one’s strengths and weaknesses is an important aspect of one’s emotional wellness. Findings revealed that most participants felt that learners with hearing impairment were aware of their strengths and were able to deal with their weaknesses. The comments from the participants below are some of the positive comments by the teachers:

Brenda noted that learners *are aware of their strengths and weaknesses*. David confirmed positive emotions by saying: *“They know what they can do and cannot do.”* In addition, Estherechoed, *“learners appreciate what they are not good at”*.

Grace felt that learners are aware of their strengths hence she says: *They are aware of their weaknesses but some are a bit impaired.* This shows that although Grace was positive about the emotional wellness of hearing impaired learners, she had reservations because some of them were not emotionally well. According to the participants, learners with hearing impairment are aware of their strength. However, some of them are unable to effectively identify their strength and deal with their weaknesses. According to Joyce *Learners are cautious and ask a lot of questions*. This helps them to deal with things they are not sure of. Additionally, they observed that some learners with hearing impairment are able to realize their mistakes.

Participant Ian felt that hearing impaired learners were accountable for their actions. Hence Ian says: *“They can feel sorry if they have done something wrong and try to correct it.”* However, the home environment did not help much because of family members who could not sign. Participant Grace echoes; *“It is difficult for them to deal with stress because in most times they live with people who do not know sign language, especially at home.”* This therefore implies that lack of communication is a barrier to dealing with their weaknesses affecting negatively their emotional wellness.

9. DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Learners who are deaf face several emotional challenges

Findings revealed that learners who are deaf experience several challenges in their emotional well-being and they were generally unable to deal positively with sadness. Educators also revealed that learners could not deal positively with their emotions. Marshark and Hauser (2012) argue that some people who are hearing impaired have poor vocabulary associated with emotion. This is associated with the learners acting impulsively and showing signs of reduced emotional control. Fernandes and Myers (2010) reported that some learners who are deaf children are impulsive and are likely to struggle with self-concept in dealing with challenging situations.

Findings from the interviews with educators revealed that some of the hearing impaired learners are violent and emotionally unstable. This is supported by some of the comments by the educators. For example, Esther commented that, *“They can become negative and it is very difficult.”* Kirk, Gallagher and Anastasiow (1997) support this view by giving evidence that personality inventories prove that deaf children are not well adjusted compared to hearing children. This is more pronounced in the absence of a role model (Hauser et al., 2010). Several studies revealed that learners with hearing-impairment experience frustration in case of failure to perform or achieve something. They further maintain that learners who are hearing impaired generally display rigid, egocentric; lack of inner control and that they are impulsive (Hauser, et al, 2010; Kirk, Gallagher & Anastasiow, 1997). It is also important that opportunities should be created for self realization by guiding young people with hearing impairment by exposing them to adults to guide the young individual. One good way is that having adults who are deaf as role models to guide the young learner (Storbeck, 2009).

Theme 2: Mixed views on how learners with hearing impairment deal with stressful situations

Findings in this study revealed that learners under study did not cope sufficiently with stressful events. In the literature, there is a strong suggestion that children who are hearing impaired are impulsive, egocentric, socially immature and that they have poor self-concept (Gascon-Ramos, 2008). This is evidenced with a display of reduced emotional control such as impulsivity when confronted with saddening situations (Peel, 2004). However, surprisingly some of the participants in the qualitative study revealed the opposite. In



addition, the study found that with support learners were able to deal effectively with emotional challenges. According to one of the participants Alice, "It depends on the support they receive as well as the coping skills they were taught."

Theme 3: School based support is important for positive emotional development

Findings in this study revealed that it was important for learners with hearing impairment to get support from the school environment. In support of the same idea, Hindley (2000) argues that barriers within the environment that does not consider the special needs of learners with hearing impairment created negativity in the individual with hearing impairment. Better and healthier self-concept is attributable to a supportive school and home environment. Hauser, O'Hearn, McKee, and Steider (2010) in the United Kingdom maintain that with little support, hearing impaired children and youth experience frustration and pain of isolation. In the same vein, Storbeck (2009) observed the positive role of residential learning as creating positive emotional wellness for the majority of hearing impaired learners. The same results were revealed in the present study.

10. CONCLUSION

The study unearthed how the teachers perceive learners' emotional wellness. The educators clearly stated their lived experiences on how learners with hearing impairment dealt with emotions in different situations. Some of the educators felt that the learners with hearing impairment were emotionally unstable. Other studies also yielded the same findings. Additionally it also emerged in the findings that some teachers felt that with support, the learners were able to show emotional stability and high level wellness. It is imperative that the educator use the available support systems to encourage and build strong emotional wellness among the learners with hearing impairment. This study revealed that support from the family is the first step in providing this support. It was also established in this study that, availability of deaf adult role models is a significant support system for learners with hearing impairment. Adult role models provide appropriate behaviors ensuring that the learners get the right deaf culture and behaviors.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of emotional wellness for every child depends on the support systems available. The school, in particular the teacher plays a crucial role in providing school based support. The following recommendations are suggested.

- Teachers are key players in providing the necessary support to build emotional wellness for learners with hearing impairment. The fact that the child does not hear what other people are saying means that the child misses out on incidental learning about emotional wellness. The guidance by the teacher encouraging what is appropriate and discouraging what is not right is the best way to assist the learner and ensure positive emotional wellness.
- The role of the family is also important. This can be provided for through parent education programs in a multi-disciplinary team work involving parents, teachers through School Based Support Teams, psychologists, social workers, counselors and education officials.

12. SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The findings from the study could provide a basis for future research.

- Future research can be carried out on a large scale using quantitative methodologies covering a large geographical area and a large sample of learners with hearing impairment. This can be done across two or three countries to get a comparative analysis of emotional wellness of learners with hearing impairment in those countries.
- Focus for future studies could reveal the voice of the learner with hearing impairment on how they view their emotional wellness. This focus helps to present personal experience of their own feelings and first hand experiences.
- Studies using observation techniques could be highly informative on first hand researcher experiences of how learners with hearing impairment deal with practical situations in classroom and extra-curricular activities.

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