

## AN ACTION RESEARCH-BASED INTERVENTION TO TACKLE INTER-GROUP CONFLICT: A CASE STUDY OF WORK WITH EDUCATORS IN A SOUTH AFRICAN SECONDARY SCHOOL

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*Inter-group tensions have long and complex history in South Africa (ZA) and appear to flare up particularly at times of increased societal discontent. The limited recent redress of profound race-based economic inequalities, compounded by a decade of problems with service delivery and seemingly widespread governmental corruption, have led to a resurgence of expressions of race-based conflict. These are also somewhat fuelled by the global economic downturn, along with the conservative and authoritarian turn evident in a number of countries. Action Research (AR) is valuable in conflict situations, though its utility in applied psychology has been somewhat under-reported. It provides a framework for communication about different perspectives and power differentials; aspiring towards active negotiation, changed interpersonal relationships and structures. This paper explores the unfolding processes in a case study involving secondary school educators and two trainee psychologists; including reflections that deepened understanding. We were invited to work with the head teacher and her staff members in a secondary school in the Eastern Cape, to address conflicts between two groups of educators, which appeared to be race-based. In order to work collaboratively with the educators, AR was employed, to explore some solutions and improve relationships. We report on a process that evolved over a period of 5 months, which seemed to ease tensions through providing ways of improving communication and mutual understanding. Although this was a limited engagement, shifts seemed to occur interpersonally and tensions appeared to diminish. However, it was challenging to translate the ideals of participation and thus sustainability into practice, given the time constraints of both the situation and trainee psychologists' programme. These elements also limited the potential for any longer-term evaluation of impacts.*

**Keywords:** action research, inter-group conflict, conflict resolution, peace-building, community-based practice

### 1. Introduction

Inter-group tensions between people, often based upon racially defined categories, have a long and complex history in South Africa (ZA) (see Higson-Smith, 2002, for a valuable summary of the contributory historical factors). These tensions appear to flare up particularly at times of increased discontent, leading to various conflictual situations, perhaps because the

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root causes related to inequality and racism in the society have not been adequately addressed. With roots in both slavery and the colonisation of the country, ZA has a race-based and patriarchal history of oppression of the majority, accompanied by violence. Seedat and Lazarus (2011, p. 253) note that *apartheid* (literally meaning apart-ness) was “a racist and gendered system of economic, social, and political exploitation of the majority by a political minority”. In the decade immediately post-apartheid (from 1994), there were a number of initiatives that actively worked towards conflict resolution and peace-building, for example: the noteworthy Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), where an eminent psychologist served as a commissioner (see Gobodo-Madikizela, 2014); the wide-reaching work since 1989, especially in peri-urban areas by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV, 2019); the programmes of the National Peace Accord Trust from 1992; as well as smaller regional NGO-based programmes, such as *Sinani* (Programme for the Survivors of Violence) in KwaZulu Natal, which worked in strife-torn communities, towards peace between different factions (Higson-Smith, 2002). Community psychologists were often deeply involved in such work (see Seedat & Lazarus, 2011).

However after 25 years of democratic government, the lack of redress for the profound race-based economic inequalities, compounded by the past decade of limited service delivery and seemingly widespread governmental corruption, have led to an apparent resurgence in race-based conflicts. These are no doubt also fuelled by the conservative and authoritarian turn towards right-wing rhetoric that is evident in many countries, fuelling pernicious talk related to white supremacy as well as increased xenophobia towards people from other African countries. In addition, Gobodo-Madikizela (2016) draws attention to the transgenerational nature of unresolved trauma, which may be evident in increased interpersonal violence when such issues are left unattended.

ZA communities are impacted by the above challenges, with there being widespread exposure to violence and crime, also linked to unacceptably high levels of unemployment and poverty (Lazarus, Bulbulia, Taliip, & Naidoo, 2015); as well as the devastating consequences of the HIV pandemic that has affected many lives. Some populist politicians, whilst ostensibly supporting re-distribution of wealth and land to the majority, also engage in provocative race-based announcements and slogans, potentially further fuelling angers that have a firm basis in lived realities. In the face of all of this, the current psychology establishment is not fully transformed to equip psychologists with the necessary skills (Pillay, 2003), to respond to such thorny issues as racial group tensions and conflicts, adding to practice challenges. However, there are concerted efforts at a continental level to rehabilitate the psychology establishment (for example the recent establishment of the Pan-African Psychological Union), aimed at diminishing the influences of elements of both colonialism and apartheid; and such efforts give practitioners hope (e.g. Nwoye, 2017).

In a milieu such as that outlined above, psychologists need to find ways of working with groups, to reduce conflicts and develop better forms of communication towards greater solidarity. Whilst the ideal would be more explicit work at broader levels of society; with the lack of current governmental support for counselling psychologists in the public health system (Bantjes, Kagee, & Young, 2016), at times one needs to start at micro-levels (Kaye, 2017), hoping that the effects might then expand outwards into other contexts (Harris, 2017). The case study to be explored in this paper is a very modest attempt to do this. We aim to explore the processes that unfolded in a case study of secondary school educators (the preferred term for ‘teachers’ in ZA); including the Action Research (AR) emphasis on reflection (McNiff, 2010), which promoted deeper understanding and enabled us to develop ways to take the next steps in our work in the school.

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## 2. Frameworks underpinning the intervention

### 2.1 *Community based service-learning by psychology Master's degree trainees*

This sub-section provides the context informing the work done on the case study by trainee counselling psychologists. In ZA, there are no 'stand-alone' training programmes for community psychologists. Rather, most psychologists' Master's degree training programmes include community psychology as an integrated core module (Yen, 2007), because it has applications relevant to all categories of psychology, given the needs of the country. Master's level trainees will have had diverse levels of prior exposure to community psychology (on a continuum from minimal exposure through to extensive NGO-based work).

As a response to criticisms by various authors (such as Pillay, 2003; Ahmed & Pillay, 2004; and Carolissen, 2006), training programmes for psychologists have taken up the challenge of transforming programmes to provide better experiences of working within community settings. Practice-based community psychology strives to equip trainees for work with the majority of the population, who lack access to formal psychological services due to the still discriminatory structures and systems in healthcare, where only those with medical insurance (less than 20% of people) have the financial support to seek psychological assistance. The majority thus still have unequal access to resources. It is in this complex context that trainee psychologists need to translate into practice both the theory and skills they have learnt, through supervised community-based projects.

Service-learning originated in the USA in the 1980s and has gained in popularity there, spreading to other contexts. The pedagogy of integration of service into coursework is known by various names, depending on the context (Hart & Akhurst, 2016). Here, we prefer to use the term 'community-based service learning' (CBSL), since this highlights the community-based partnerships that are essential to this work. Through CBSL, trainees take the theory and skills they have learnt and integrate these with the local knowledge they gain during their project work. Thus they are sensitised to social injustices; and are required to consider their roles as change agents (Mitchell, 2008) through critical reflection (Gilbert & Slied, 2009). CBSL thus presents trainees with a unique opportunity to become deeply involved in a community, meta-reflecting on this engagement as active citizens (Akhurst, Solomon, Mitchell, & van der Riet, 2016). CBSL is thus designed to be mutually beneficial for both trainees and communities (Akhurst, 2017), resonating with the participatory elements of Participatory Action Research (Kidd, Davidson, Frederick, & Kral 2017).

The CBSL literature has debated the degrees of emphasis on social justice of various approaches (e.g. Mitchell, 2008), emphasising the need for this to be a central consideration to counter attitudes based on charity. Strain (2007) proposes that when engaging with people in circumstances different to ours, we become aware of being interconnected hoping that this "scours away ... any patronising or condescending attitude, any trace of moral superiority" (p. 5). Reflection on such material enables trainees to shift and change perspectives and attitudes through their evolving engagements.

With the above as background, during 2017, six pairs of Master's students (n=12) worked on CBSL projects. In our context, we prefer project work to be responsive to invitations from various community organisations, promoting more shared collaborative work, rather than a patronising 'top-down' approach. One of the pairs (the two co-authors of this work) agreed to follow up a request from a local school, to assist the head teacher with conflict that she was experiencing between groups of staff. The work that evolved, based upon an AR framework, is the empirical basis of what follows.

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## 2.2 Action Research as a tool in Conflict Situations

AR has been found to be a valuable tool in conflict situations, though in the psychology literature its utility appears to be somewhat under-reported. The sociologist, Fals Borda (1995) called for knowledge to be shared and ‘community action’ to be located within research to “combine ... skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities ... (to) recover local values, traits, beliefs, and arts for action by and with the research organisations ... diffuse and share what you have learned together with the people”. Drawing from the spirit of this call, there are ZA examples of AR being applied as the basis of work in post-apartheid conflict situations, towards peace-building: reported for example in Higson-Smith (2002) as well as Kaye and Harris (2017).

In our modest project, we chose to use AR because it would provide a framework to explicitly plan a step by step process, as we cautiously engaged first with the gatekeeper and then onwards with the educators. As a learning framework, AR’s focus is on practitioners taking an active role through a series of cycles, which have a firm base in self-reflection (McNiff, 2010); and collecting evidence, hoping to evolve towards change in practices and systems. The aim of AR is to link theory with practice, through Lewin’s cycle of learning steps, similar to professionals’ implicit daily problem-solving and decision-making (Koshy, 2010). In addition, AR potentially creates shared awareness of different perspectives and the way power operates; to move toward changing relationships and hopefully the related social structures.

Briefly, we need to distinguish AR from Participatory Action Research (PAR). In the case study that follows, we are very aware that our engagement could not fully be termed Participatory Action Research, because a number of the basic elements of co-researching were not present from the inception, although we strived towards making our approach increasingly more participatory as it unfolded. We are sensitive to critiques that draw attention to neoliberal tendencies to colonise more liberatory research paradigms such as PAR, where such methodologies are co-opted by the developed world (Jordan, 2003). In addition, McIntyre (2008) notes that authentic PAR must comprise three elements: *viz.* the co-construction of knowledge; promoting self and critical awareness to lead towards social change; and alliance-building between researchers and participants at all stages from the planning, through investigation to its dissemination. Our approach only partially met these requirements because it was an evolving approach, where collaboration was encouraged and the activities were planned in consultation with participants. However, following the reflexive cycle proposed in Kidd, Davidson, Frederick & Kral (2017), we were striving for what is termed a PAR ‘attitude’: our response was to a call for assistance to address an inequitable situation; thus we offered our expertise to the group, striving to locate power and ownership with the group itself; taking positions of humility, being open to learning from the group’s expert knowledge of the situation, to co-construct new knowledge.

## 3. Methodology

At the inception of this case study, we had not intended to write it up, but were motivated to do so once we had a sense of how the project had unfolded; and also by the need in ZA psychology for more case studies of actual community psychology practice (Bantjes et al., 2016) to be formally reported. We draw from two counselling psychology trainees’ experiences in the Eastern Cape (EC) province of ZA.

A case study approach has been chosen, since it is often the preferred means to convey an unfolding process of AR (Reason, 1994), hence the focus of this paper. Following ethical

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clearance (approval was granted by an ethics review committee, PSY2016/03, with this permission extended in 2018), the analysis and write up commenced. The case to be outlined below is thus firmly based in practice: we were striving to work in culturally sensitive ways, drawing from ideas of what might work in conflict management. We needed to adapt our engagement to the local conditions through action research cycles, to develop activities that would be acceptable to our participants. Our aim below, following McNiff (2010) is to illustrate the roles we played in the cycles, including our self-reflections.

Since this research had retrospective elements, our data comprised (i) the individual written and critically reflective reports by the co-authors, drawing from their observations and memories of group discussions, as well as (ii) their spoken reflections during a presentation (which were recorded by the first author), in a subsequent colloquium with peers. We aimed to provide a summary of the cycles of the AR, to describe what unfolded and reflect on our actions, using the four stages of plan – act – observe – reflect, as described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) in their AR spiral.

Key elements of the data were thus selected from the reports (i) using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), complemented by reflections in the presentation (ii). We were thus using a variant of thematic analysis, since our data themes were selected *a priori*, rather than following the full process suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## **4. The unfolding action research process and findings**

### ***4.1 Cycle 1: Gaining entry and negotiating access***

School A was originally set up by the local university in the 1940s, in order to provide a teaching practice site for trainee educators and to provide schooling for learners of mixed-race (during a time of segregated schooling). Over time, the school diversified to a wider representation of ethnic groups, both amongst learners and teachers. The school is now attended by Afrikaans- and isiXhosa-speaking individuals, serving over a thousand learners, with 38 full-time educators from various backgrounds, employed by the state. The school is situated in an area of socio-economic deprivation and faces challenges arising from the many systemic inequalities still present in ZA.

In the account that follows, the first person will be used, since much of this is drawn from combined written reflections of the two trainees. In response to a request for assistance to the university's community engagement Director, a meeting was arranged between the head teacher and ourselves, the trainees (with the work being supervised by the first author). The aim of the first meeting was an initial needs assessment from the head teacher's perspective. Since she was very keen to have support from us, she shared her perceptions of the main challenges she experienced: cultural differences between different groups of educators, high workload, difficulties in communication, people's personal issues interfered with work and that some groups tended to isolate themselves from others. She added that she believed that there was a lack of respect between people of different race groups.

After reflecting on our experiences of this initial meeting, we presented ideas to our peers in a class session, proposing a way forward and outlining possible intervention strategies. In this we described the head teacher's insight into the challenges of the school. At this early stage, we hypothesised that a breakdown in trust and communication between the teaching staff and management had occurred. Thus we felt that the teaching staff were expressing anger, felt demotivated and misunderstood. The request had been for help to facilitate better communication and build partnerships. In order to be positioned as co-workers (and to diminish potential power differences), we needed to strive to be as neutral as possible, that is not to be seen as a proxy

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of the management structure. It was important to create an atmosphere that focused simultaneously on the problems of the management as well as those of the staff members, as opposed to solely the goals of management. After the initial meeting, we therefore asked to meet with the entire complement of staff as soon as we could.

In the subsequent meeting with the educators, we outlined that we wanted to offer some workshops designed to meet their needs (since we could not do individual consultations in CBSL), stressing that we hoped to work in collaboration with them. We then invited them to let us know their perceptions of the main issues that were troubling them. Areas of concern that they highlighted were, in no particular order: personality clashes, communication problems, too much work, cultural differences, personal issues affecting their ability to work, feeling misunderstood, lack of respect and unresolved conflict. This list appeared similar to those issues identified by the head-teacher. However, additional topics they raised were class sizes, socio-economic problems that included learners being involved with drug-taking, an erratic application of school rules, and finally their perceptions of a hierarchical structure that appeared indifferent to their plight, as well as not being ethnically representative. After this session we summarized their input as bullet points, to share with them.

#### ***4.2 Cycle 1: Observations and reflections***

Our two separate meetings, between school management and the staff members, both raised some similar issues. However, the staff members were also alluding to systemic and structural matters that could be difficult for us to address, since we had been invited by the head teacher to assist, so we were aware that we needed to be careful not to alienate her (thus risking further involvement), or to both groups to seem to be ‘taking sides’. We were sensitive to our positioning as outsiders, there on invitation; and that we needed to be both cognisant of the power issues of appearing to be agents of the school management, as well as the implicit meanings that might be made from our roles as trainee psychologists.

Following the initial information gathering, we presented the material to our peers during ‘peer group supervision’ (PGS, Akhurst & Kelly, 2006). We asked our peers to suggest practical and effective ideas for workshops. Various ideas were put forward, with suggested ways of approaching the major systemic issues (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) as well as practical ideas for running workshops. For example, constructive ideas were produced for the content of an initial feedback letter to the school staff, summarizing the initial meeting and suggesting a way forward. Following on from that helpful suggestion, those peers with teaching experience offered practical insight into ways these workshops might best be integrated into the staff members’ already busy schedules. Additional suggestions were offered as to what type of workshops would be beneficial, given the major areas of concern: conflict resolution, team building, communication styles, and dealing with stress. It was also suggested that the educators were made aware of what the workshops could and could not achieve. In summary, the PGS was productive and provided a wealth of content to allow us to devise an initial plan.

#### ***4.3 Cycle 2: Planning and Acting***

We summarized our first meeting with educators in the form of an open letter (drawing from our summary of bullet points noted above), which was sent to them ahead of our next meeting. We proposed a schedule of workshops (following the suggestions above) that would begin to address the issues they had raised, noting that we would plan ideas and activities for a first

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workshop, but that we would devise the content of all subsequent workshops in consultation with them (in order to improve the participatory aspect of the work).

In the second meeting, we reiterated the difficulties of communication that had been noted in the first meeting and asked for examples. They seemed reluctant to respond to this request. As a break in the awkwardness and their seeming difficulties to talk openly, we then asked them to form a line. The first person in the line had to whisper a message to the person next in line, and so on, to the end of the line. The person at the end of the line then spoke aloud the message they had received, followed by the original message from the person who had initially spoken it. The two messages were then compared, with much hilarity when they realized how the message had changed. The idea of the exercise was to highlight the difficulty of accurate communication between individuals and how easily the initial content of a message can get distorted. A lively discussion then ensued, including explorations of the the definition and importance of communication, the reasons for and ways that communications happen; and the staff members appeared more willing to offer examples.

#### ***4.4 Cycle 2: Reflection and supervision***

From our reflections on the discussions, we observed that the different styles in which communications occurred, with more and less dominant voices and groupings; and that at times the tense atmosphere and glances between participants indicated secrets that we were not party to (or what we called ‘pink elephants’) in the room. Intuitively, we had sense of things that were not being openly aired (rather they skirted around some topics); leading to discomfort. We were not surprised at this, since it was early in the process for people to feel able to open up; and some of the topics might also be difficult to address in unemotive terms. The topics included: concerns around respect for each other, often verbalised in general terms, as well as that conflicts between groups of staff were also apparent to learners. They talked about manipulative and deceitful ways that appeared to characterise the communications of some; and the importance of working on their relationships with each other. However, we realised that it was likely that concerns about trust and our positioning might again be impacting on our gathering information.

The challenges of finding ways to address the issues raised and in particular what was not being said (but was alluded to) were taken to the first author (as supervisor) for consideration and feedback. After an account of the processes described above and an awareness that raising some of the sensitive issues aloud might be difficult at this early stage, the supervisor suggested that a “secret note box” could be used, to gain an anonymous sense of what it was that was not being talked about openly. We thus found a box that could be used and prepared paper for the notes.

#### ***4.5 Cycle 3: Planning and acting***

For the third meeting, we started the session with further reflections on communication, having asked the participants for their thoughts after the previous session. A few issues were raised, including some individuals communicating in the language of Afrikaans in the important school meetings, which is not understood by everyone; as well as others ‘pulling out a race card’ as a defence, when they were reprimanded by management for perceived misbehaviour.

The raising of these more sensitive issues laid a good foundation for the “secret note” technique. When it was introduced, the majority seemed very excited and enthusiastically participated. The educators were asked to write anonymous notes describing their perceptions

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of the causes of the problems amongst them, and then to drop these into a box. We took the box away, read all the notes, and collated the main themes for them in time for the next workshop, so we could provide them with a summary.

#### ***4.6 Cycle 3: Observations and reflections***

We had not considered language as a potential stumbling block or challenge, so their raising of this issue was an important realisation of the shadow still being cast of the history of both the school and the country. Since this school had previously been for learners who were predominantly of mixed-race, the language of Afrikaans (which was common in this grouping as a result of their heritage) would have been predominantly used. When the school opened up to include the majority group in the area, *viz.* both learners and staff members with isiXhosa as first language, the language of learning and teaching then changed to become English. However, some of the people might revert to using their first languages in various situations as a means of excluding others. In the case of Afrikaans, perhaps it was used as a means of retaining power, since more members of the school management team, for example, would have used it. Furthermore more broadly, Afrikaans as language of instruction was one of the main factors in the well-known 1976 protests in Soweto, since the learners viewed it as the language of the oppressors; hence their protests against being forced to use it.

The “race card” example illustrated a further tricky issue: where actions of others could be read as being driven by racist attitudes, even when potentially they may not have been intended as such. This was a very tricky tension to navigate, but we were fortunate in that as a pair of trainees from very different ethnic groups (one isiXhosa-speaking black male and the other English-speaking white male from another country), we could openly discuss the topics between us during our facilitation; with John taking a stance of needing to understand the historical issues (that he had little knowledge of) and Simnikiwe could explain, in carefully phrased words to avoid offence.

Reflecting on this third session, we noticed that the participants appeared relieved to be able to express their thoughts more openly through the secret notes. They engaged in the activity in a seemingly energized way, as if they wanted to be able to vent their frustrations in safety. In the raising of the two tricky issues, we felt that we had managed to connect with them and gain their trust. This also led to us feeling some relief, since we were keen to assist if possible. At the end of the workshop, a participant acknowledged the respect we had shown them; and said that she felt the mood amongst them had lightened, thanking us. This illustrated to us that the classic humanistic principles of empathy, positive regard and congruence are as applicable to such group work as they are to building the therapeutic alliance that is necessary for individual counselling.

The themes that emerged from the secret notes were: lack of professionalism and respect; inconsistent application of rules; racism; language usage; and seeming favouritism of some educators by the head teacher, with reports of maltreatment of the junior staff by people in the upper structures of the school. These issues were incorporated into the interventions to follow.

The Social Action model of community psychology (Visser & Moleko, 2012) involves bringing people together to work on bringing about change in procedures and structures that impact on individuals’ well-being. This model targets those in the lower parts of any hierarchy and works with them to improve their sense of agency, aiming for greater empowerment and self-determination. This model was chosen to guide possible ideas to assist the educators to reflect on the influences of the structures of the school on their wellbeing and how they might come up with effective ways of holding people accountable.

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#### ***4.7 Cycle 4: Planning and acting***

In the fourth workshop we provided the educators with feedback on the secret notes and then we suggested two tasks. One was to complete the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) measure (Center for Victims of Torture, 2019), to gain a sense of the levels of stress and burnout amongst participants. This was in response to the initial reports of high levels of stress.

The second task was to increase communication between people (a key element of the conflict management tool of enhancing mutual empathy and gaining a better understanding of the positioning and intentions of the other). Participants were asked to pair up with someone with whom they did not normally interact; and to tell that person three things about themselves that the other would probably not know. The partner would then reciprocate. This led to animated discussions between the resulting pairs and participants seemed to put energy into both activities.

It is unfortunate, that in the process of a community defining itself, the very process of creating the “us” automatically creates “the other”. Because “the other” is never known and understood as we understand our own group, negative assumptions can be made. One of the educators described how close-knit the staff members had felt during the era of apartheid, when they had a common ‘foe’. The school created a clear identity of who it was, and the teachers of who they were, whilst they were being oppressed by the clearly defined “other”. Interestingly she said that this cohesiveness had been lost when the school embraced diversity. Not only had their own definition of themselves been altered by the loss of the “other”, but their collective identity had been altered by embracing learners and colleagues from different ethnic backgrounds. Individuals’ cultural identities often influence the way they approach and solve their problems, sometimes leading to conflicts, so being able to name these was helpful.

#### ***4.8 Cycle 4: Evaluation and reflections***

After scoring these, the results of the ProQOL questionnaire showed that whilst staff members felt under pressure at work, they were not yet at a point where any had recorded excessively high levels of burnout or secondary traumatic stress. We were relieved to see these results, because we felt some hope for them. Their resilience appeared to be based upon their levels of compassion satisfaction, 60% having average levels of compassion satisfaction, whilst 40% of the teachers scored high levels. We figured that giving them feedback about these scores could provide a positive foundation to try and help them improve the connections with each other, their teams and hopefully outwards to the organizational structure of the school and the surrounding community.

Using the AR model was extremely helpful in evaluating what the next steps would be, as we gradually gained a deeper understanding of the dynamics at the school. It is important to note that as we worked together on the tasks, we also felt that we were building a collaborative alliance with the educators. The activities in sessions two and four prompted laughter and allowed more informal interactions. At each workshop, we felt greater trust building and found that as two people from different ethnic groups ourselves, we could role-model explicit discussions when we perhaps did not agree with each other, illustrating a non-confrontational way of negotiating. Our shared passion for psychology provided a way of bridging our cultural and age differences (a 25 year gap), illustrating how a relationship of mutual respect can be built between two very different individuals.

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#### **4.9 Cycle 5: Final meeting**

As an attempt to close the cycles, we had a session to give feedback on the questionnaire results and then where we invited educators' reflections on the journey for them individually and as a group. They reflected on how the programme had helped them more accurately diagnose the issues they faced, increasing their understandings of one another. Whilst we realised that they might be too polite to offer criticisms, we were relieved to hear that one of the key aspects of conflict management, related to deepening listening and sharing to enhance empathy, might impact on their inter-relationships. We were also aware however, that a short 5-session intervention could only have limited impact, since it was possible that interactions over a longer period might be necessary to shift patterns of behaviour and reactions.

We also asked them what would happen in the future when such challenges arise (here we were trying to assess the resources they have gained from the programme for future use); and this was also our attempt to foster some form of sustainability. They began planning a picnic or a small 'get together' for themselves to just relax and enjoy each other's company.

Unfortunately we don't know how that social event transpired. This last session was difficult for all of us because we were bidding farewell to each other; and sadly our work contexts were changing, so we would not be in a position to continue the work in the next year. However, we encouraged the educators to request further assistance from the university-based psychology clinic, should they wish to further expand the work we had begun.

### **5. Discussion**

The above description of the process of using a reflective form of AR (McNiff, 2010), gives details of the way in which a process evolved over a period of 5 months, with a meeting each month. We acknowledge that it was a very modest intervention, as two Master's level trainees carefully engaged with a group of educators experiencing conflicts. When using AR in conflict situations, Harris (2017, 139) notes that an "obvious benefit of action research is that some peace is built immediately, albeit for small numbers of people, as students go through the process of exploring a problem, devising and implementing an intervention and evaluating its outcome". The findings show some evidence of some improvements in the 'atmosphere', as noted by one participant. However, we are aware that a relatively short intervention might not have longer or sustained effects. Kaye (2017) discusses the role of such small-scale interventions, acknowledging that they might have limited effects on broader societal levels. Given that we were working with key influencers, it is sometimes not possible to predict how the work might shift attitudes and relationships, rippling outwards. Thus whilst the outcomes of our AR process might appear to be constrained to micro levels, there could be a wider spread of the effects. In addition, given that the trainees were moving on to a setting in a counselling centre, where they could be called upon to run similar workshops, these experiences of their planning and facilitation could also have wider benefits with other groups. A further potential benefit mentioned by Harris (2017) is that should either of the trainees take up future roles in planning interventions or policy development, they will have experienced the unfolding of what might be possible to achieve in a group-based project, as well as being aware of the support and discussion necessary for implementation.

The AR cycles as described also illustrate a shift from working with educators, where we were in the position of perhaps being viewed as 'experts' towards increased openness of participants and greater collaboration, as levels of trust built up. This shows how the 'participatory' element of AR might be gradually increased as a project evolves. In addition, as trainees the role-modelling of open negotiation as we proposed workshop activities, showed

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how differences in opinion could be worked through peacefully. Thus, the trainees were developing what in Freire's (2005) original Portuguese is translated as "critical consciousness". This was evidenced through considering and role modelling how to create what Kagan (2015, p. 16) refers to as "new forms of social relations", including the "development of alliances", through carefully analysing the situation and striving to accompany those in need of support. It was these aspects that we hope to have begun to illustrate. AR therefore provided a framework for the evolving process, enabling communications from different perspectives. Whilst the trainees were aware of and strived not to be too allied to the existing power structures in the school, they aspired towards active negotiation and through the activities tried to promote some shifts in interpersonal relationships. However, we acknowledge that this time-limited intervention could not address the existing structures of power: all we could hope for was that the final session supported approaching difficulties through communicative means.

The form of AR that we used encouraged reflexivity between the two trainees (McNiff, 2010), supported by journaling and discussions during meetings together. The cyclic spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) of AR provided a framework to follow in each step of the unfolding process, supplemented by reference to Gibbs's (1988) six-stage reflective cycle that encourages deepening reflection through posing various questions, to take different perspectives on our experiences. The reflective process was then further enhanced by the PGS with peers, providing different perspectives and ideas. The AR framework played a role in effectively 'holding' the intervention, because we could not determine what would evolve or in which direction the work would take us; and given our levels of professional experience we needed assistance from the models we used, in order to be responsive to the context.

The trainees were not 'insider' researchers (the form of positioning recommended by McNiff, 2010), however this case study illustrates the potential of an 'outsider' to be a catalyst for the potential initiation of change (Harris, 2017). One of our roles was to make proposals for and design activities for each session, even though the activities should ideally have been collaboratively designed. We acknowledge our positioning and leading of the activities as some of the limitations of this work and what might have been a better scenario would have been for educators from within the system to adopt an AR approach themselves (as evidenced when educators use AR in their classrooms). However, given the situation of the tricky interpersonal dynamics and power differentials that we encountered between staff members, it may have been difficult for an 'insider' to facilitate the discussions and activities, given potential perceptions of vested interests, established alliances and structural inequalities. Whilst we could not claim that change was sustained, nor that there was transformation in the system (Kaye, 2017), this AR project gave insight into the complexities and context of the problems; and enabled us to trial a collaborative approach.

The trainees' experience of CBSL also facilitated and promoted their further understanding of the impact of social inequalities in a post-apartheid school setting. By compassionately and critically enacting their own citizenship, the trainees construct their own meanings through their psychological, physical, spiritual and intellectual engagement (Seedat, 2014). We hoped to transform the expression of interpersonal conflict into more open-ended communications that might enable changed positions, but given the long history and societal complexity of inter-group conflict in the country, it was evident that such a relatively short-term intervention could not adequately challenge the power dynamics and structures in the school, illustrating the needs for broader work in the surrounding systems. These are further limitations of our approach, and raises the thorny questions of how to scale up the engaged inquiry process beyond small group dynamics in order to include broader 'communities of interest' and citizens committed to peace-building. Some of our approaches were inspired by work done in the health sector by the Wellness for Effective Leadership (WEL) programme, as described in Wilson, Davids and Voce (2015), but this required systemic, monetary and time resources for a programme that

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involved staff members being away from work for seven days spread over six months (an intensive three day workshop, followed by another two day workshop a month later, then with two subsequent one-day follow ups).

AR is a form of interventionist research, combining the provision of services to a group, with an underpinning research agenda. In this case study, our accounts and evaluation are further limited by the sensitive nature of our engagement: we could not collect direct participant data, nor their reports or material. We were however encouraged by the new AR scholarship of reflective practitioner learning as proposed in McNiff and Whitehead (2011), drawing on our own observations and learning. Such approaches are of value in a developing country such as ZA, where research needs to work in conjunction with action, towards providing possible solutions to problems and hopefully to lead to changes in practice.

## 6. Concluding comments

McIntyre (2008) describes PAR as a recursive process, in which “various aspects are braided within one another in a spiral of reflection, investigation, and action” (p. 6). Through the iterative AR cycles of meeting to reflect, planning subsequent actions, acting, observing and evaluating, leading to further reflections and onwards, we hope that insights were gained by all participants leading to shifts in their interpersonal and systemic communications and deepened understanding of each other and the situation (as discussed in sessions 3 and 4). We are very aware that the pernicious nature of conflict rooted in the racist attitudes embedded in many aspects of life in ZA is “a major barrier to peace” due to the deep “violation of the dignity of human beings” (Kaye, 2017, p.9).

We therefore hope that a small-scale project such as ours could be repeated many times over, in many organisational contexts in ZA, to diminish the effects of such conflict over time (as evidenced in the work described in Wilson et al., 2015). It would appear that there are ideas and models that could be replicated, as we have done, in order to strive towards the sorts of interpersonal and organisational transformations needed in ZA; potentially highlighting an important role and function for counselling psychologists, to take up this community psychology inspired work, towards improved social relations in groups (as described in Bantjes et al., 2016).

It would have been valuable to follow up the case study in the following year, in order to establish whether the changes we observed managed to be sustained. However, we could not do any follow up without being invited back by the staff members to continue the work (as agreed at the final session): we felt that it would be intrusive and disrespectful to make enquiries. Given the emphasis of AR on change, we hope that some of the participants gained “practical knowledge that is useful to people in the conduct of their lives” (Kagan, Burton, Duckett, Lawthom, & Siddique, 2011, p. 8), leading to improved wellbeing amongst the educators, to the benefit of the functioning of the school.

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