

**A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE EMOTIONAL
RESPONSES OF MOTHERS TO CHILDREN WITH
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

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OF MOTHERS TO CHILDREN WITH
LEARNING DIFFICULTIES**

by

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DECLARATION

I, Cheryl May Williams (9501077) hereby declare that all the resources that were consulted are included in the reference list and that this study is my original work.

C.M. Williams

July 2004

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SUMMARY

A NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF MOTHERS TO CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

by

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Supervisor : Prof. Irma Eloff
Department : Educational Psychology
Degree : MEd (Educational Psychology)

In this study the emotional responses of mothers to their children with learning difficulties were identified and explored. A narrative research design was used to capture a chapter in the life stories of eleven mothers whose children were attending a school specialising in 'remedial' education, relating their experiences and emotional responses regarding their child's learning difficulties. Data was collected by means of individual interviews, letters from the mothers, field notes in the form of journal entries written by the researcher, as well as individual feedback and collaboration sessions with the mothers.

Data was analysed by means of several phases of theme analysis, after which, through a final analysis, 18 emotional response themes were identified. Three emotional response themes were identified as exception themes. The 18 emotional response themes, along with the three exception themes, were then clustered around joyful, sad, fearful and angry emotional response categories. After feedback and collaboration sessions, the themes were then further interpreted through a final level of analysis to weave a narrative of mothers' emotional responses to their child with learning difficulties.

This study found that mothers experience complex emotions in response to their child with learning difficulties. The strongest emotional response themes that emerged, which were reported by all the mothers were *frustration*, *happiness* and *love*. The more positive emotional responses were mentioned in relation to their child being accepted at the school specialising in 'remedial' education, as well as to an increased *understanding* of their child's

learning difficulties. Mothers mentioned that they experienced frustration and a lack of support as regards being helped to *understand* their child's learning difficulties better. It was thus found that an *understanding* of their child's learning difficulties appeared to be related to a decrease in negative emotional responses and an increase in more positive emotional responses. All the mothers in the study indicated an emotional response of *love* towards their child with learning difficulties.

KEYWORDS

- Narrative research
- Mothers
- Emotions
- Emotional responses
- Children
- Learning difficulties
- Special needs education
- Barriers to learning
- Constructivism
- Interpretivism

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTORY ORIENTATION, RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY,
CONCEPTUALISATION AND PLANNED RESEARCH DESIGN AND
METHODOLOGY

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The focus of this study is to explore the emotional responses of mothers who have a child with learning difficulties. Particular emphasis will be placed on the emotions experienced by such mothers in the process from the first identification of possible learning difficulties up to this point in time (i.e. time of the study). There is a vast amount of literature focusing on the difficulties that children with learning difficulties may experience. Most of the references to parents in the literature refer to parents as a single category with little distinction being drawn between mothers and fathers, and are on an informative and supportive level, i.e. for parents to understand what their child is coping with and how they will be able to support their child in the various skills that need to be developed.

The literature shows that minimal attention is given to parents' emotional responses. Little information exists about the emotions mothers go through when their child is experiencing learning difficulties. These emotions can have an impact on how mothers are able to cope, and on how they view themselves as mothers and in this way are able to understand and support their child. The literature that does exist concerning parents' emotional responses makes little distinction between the experiences and emotional responses of mothers and those of fathers. Parents are referred to as one group, where it is assumed that mothers' and fathers' responses to their child with learning difficulties are the same. Dudley-Marling (2000:1) explains in his book, focusing on the experiences of parents with a child who has difficulty at school, that he believes that teachers will benefit from a better understanding of the effects of school trouble on the lives of families. He goes on to explain that he himself has a daughter who experienced difficulties at school and has first-hand experience of the pain and frustration of having a child who struggles in school (Dudley-Marling, 2000:2). He explains that in his study he interviewed six single mothers, ten mothers from two-parent families and seven couples and therefore emphasises that his findings favour the perspectives of mothers (Dudley-Marling, 2000:16).

Through an increased awareness and understanding of the emotional responses that mothers of a child with learning difficulties may experience, those who work in the field of learning difficulties may gain a better understanding of what these mothers go through and a better grasp of how to support and help such mothers to cope with their responses. Creswell (1998:94) refers to Barritt's (1986) explanation of this awareness where it is stated that by heightening awareness and creating dialogue, it is hoped that research can lead to a better understanding of the way things appear to someone else and through that insight, lead to improvements in practice.

In essence, the mothers in this study will be given an opportunity to tell 'their story' of their experiences regarding their child's learning difficulties, which will give a specific perspective on mothers' emotional responses, not the responses of a single category of 'parents'. This process of telling their stories may, in itself, be a therapeutic process for them, possibly leading to greater self-awareness and insight. In addition to those who may support these mothers, mothers may gain a better understanding of who they are if they understand what emotions they may experience in response to their child having learning difficulties. This increased awareness and understanding of their own experiences can help mothers to understand and support their child, both in interaction with their child and in making effective use of resources that can enable them to best support their child. Mothers interpret their child's learning difficulties in a certain way and construct their own meaning regarding the difficulties experienced by the child. This will have an influence on the construction of their emotional responses to their child having learning difficulties.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.2.1 DEFINITION OF THE TOPIC

The field of learning difficulties is a widely researched topic that covers a wide variety of aspects. The literature on the subject ranges from assessment to the actual problems experienced by children with learning difficulties. Lerner (2000) discusses a variety of problems in detail, as well as their causes and the teaching strategies used to support these children. The majority of literature on learning difficulties emphasises definitions, assessment and teaching of skills. Mercer and Mercer (1993) focus on mathematics, language, reading, spelling, handwriting and written expression skills, where they define what each aspect involves, how to assess a child's skill in this aspect and then move on to the teaching of these skills. Bailey (2001:11) states that there is co-morbidity between

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) and learning disabilities, with many students diagnosed with ADHD also having learning disabilities. Hallahan and Kauffman (1991) look specifically at special education. In their chapter on learning disabilities they emphasise the definitions, prevalence, causes, measurement and psychological and behavioural characteristics of learning disabilities. They go on to examine educational considerations, early intervention and teaching of learners. Adelman and Taylor (1993) explore the causes of learning problems (including learning disabilities) and focus on what society in general and schools in particular can do about them. Their book is suitable for application to the South African context as they focus on learning disabilities being one type of learning problem and also look at learning problems within a multicultural context.

This information is invaluable, both to learning supporters and parents, but might be less useful to parents who may not yet have reached a point in their process of understanding where they would be open to making effective use of the available information. There is a lack of emphasis in the literature on the emotional experiences of parents of children who have learning difficulties. There are, however, a few authors who devote some attention to this aspect within the broader context of learning difficulties. Silver (1998:10) discusses the parents' task, which focuses on how parents will support their child who has a learning disability. In addition he explores family reactions to the child or adolescent with learning disabilities, specifically looking at normal and pathological emotional reactions, as well as the reactions of siblings (Silver, 1998:153-175). Richmond (2002:65) takes a brief look at mothers' and teachers' perceptions of the child with a disability. Stone, Bradley and Kleiner (2002:133) discuss parental understanding of children with language or learning disabilities and how these parents and children interact. Scott-Jones (1995:75) refers to parent-child interactions and how these can affect school achievement. Hunt and Marshall (1994:181) suggest that parents form an informal feedback or advisory group where they can share ideas, questions, problems and resources, which can then be shared with teachers. They also look at the effects on the family of having a child with a learning disability (Hunt & Marshall, 1994:211). Smith (1998:449) discusses parental adjustment to a child with a learning disability. Crow and Crow (1997:107) discuss their view that, at times, parent maladjustment can and does negatively affect the adjustment of their children. The above indicates that most available literature that does mention emotional responses of parents looks at the category of 'parents' as a whole. There is little distinction made between the emotional responses of mothers and those of fathers.

From the above it is clear that the primary focus in the literature is on defining learning difficulties and supporting children with learning difficulties. The two key supporters in a child's development are his/her parents and his/her teachers. Parents are emotionally involved in the lives of their children. According to Nichols (2000:29) the majority of parents interviewed in her study reported assisting their children in some way, most commonly helping with homework. If their child has learning difficulties, mothers experience their own emotional responses to this, which in turn has an impact on how they are able to support their child, which in turn has an effect on the child's ability to cope with his or her learning difficulties. The social competence and behavioural problems of children with learning disabilities are related to their parents' stress as a result of their child's disability (Dyson, 2003:6-7). The more positive the parental adjustment, the greater the degree of social competence in the children. It is clear that parents' own stress and emotional responses to their child's learning difficulties are related to their child's own experience of, and ability to cope with, their learning difficulties. In this regard Lardieri, Blacher and Swanson (2000:105-106) state that studies examining the impact of the presence of a child with learning disabilities on the family are emerging, and mention tension and frustration as emotions that such parents may experience. For mothers to cope better and be able to support their child effectively, they could benefit from understanding that the emotions they may experience are a natural response to their child's learning difficulties. By recognising the coping strategies used by the families of disabled children, professionals and service providers can find the right ways to support their adaptation (Taanila, Syrjälä, Kokkonen & Järvelin, 2002:73).

In his book, Dudley-Marling (2000) makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the emotional responses of parents of a child who experiences difficulty at school. This book can be used as a resource by both parents and those in the field of learning difficulties. It is devoted to the effects of schooling on parents whose children struggle in school. Fletcher (1999) also contributes to an understanding of what parents go through in relating to their child with ADHD, where she relates her own experiences and emotions (from a mother's perspective) to her son's ADHD, through her diary entries over a period of four years.

Parents' expectations for their children, among other factors, affect the ways in which a child's learning difficulties are perceived and can be dealt with. As parents' understanding of their child's learning difficulties is likely to influence the kinds of involvement they adopt, their understanding of what causes learning difficulties has implications for parental

involvement (Nichols, 2000:28-29). For example, she cites one parent who was inclined to see her child's learning difficulties as permanent, which was then associated with a pessimistic view of the child's future. Another parent saw the learning difficulties as attitudinal, which can lead to blaming the child. One mother in Nichols' (2000:31) study found that talking to other mothers helped alleviate the stress caused by parenting a child with learning difficulties. Hence the beneficial influences of a support group are highlighted.

Parents tend to react in an emotionally and physiologically negative way to the diagnosis of their child's disability. Some parents experience considerable stress, as well as feelings of depression, anger, shock, denial, self-blame, guilt or confusion (Heiman, 2002 168). However, the majority of parents in Heiman's (2002:169) study expressed such feelings as joy, love, acceptance, satisfaction, optimism and strength, with only 28% expressing such negative feelings as anger, frustration or guilt about rearing a child with a disability. There is growing evidence to indicate that parents of children with learning disabilities face many challenges when raising and educating their children (Brock & Shute, 2001:15). Brock and Shute's (2001:25) study found that like North American parents, Australian parents of children with dyslexia and other learning disabilities experience high levels of stress when attempting to raise and educate their child.

Support teachers often work closely with parents of students with special education needs, and so need to understand something of how parents cope with their children's challenging behaviour (Bailey, 2001:9). In his study in 1999, where he looked at the parental coping styles of mothers of children with ADHD, Bailey (2001:9-11) found three styles of coping, namely, aggressive/confrontative coping, rational coping and indirect coping. Typically, the parent with the major responsibility for managing the child's behaviour is the mother.

1.2.2 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities in the relationship between mothers and their child with learning difficulties. The contributing factors would be firstly, by moving beyond a focus on the supportive role they play with their children, towards an understanding of their emotional responses, and secondly by incorporating the possibility of exploring gender-specific emotional responses.

1.2.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.2.3.1 Primary research question

In consideration of the experiences that mothers may go through in response to their child having learning difficulties, the following primary research question will be explored in this study:

- What are the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties?

1.2.3.2 Subquestions

In an attempt to understand the implications of the above-mentioned question, the following subquestions will be explored.

- How are the emotional responses they experience related to their understanding of their child's learning difficulties?
- How are the emotional responses they experience related to their support of their child?
- How do the emotional responses that mothers experience influence their view of themselves as parents?
- How are emotional responses to their child's learning difficulties constructed over time?

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the proposed study is to explore and understand the emotional responses of mothers to their child with learning difficulties in order to deepen our understanding of mothers of children with learning difficulties.

1.4 CONCEPTUALISATION

1.4.1 NARRATIVE STUDY

This narrative study aims to identify emotional responses that mothers experience regarding their child's learning difficulties. The manner in which this information will be gathered will

be through listening to mothers' stories about their experiences relating to their child's learning difficulties. In narrative research, individuals tell their personal, first-hand accounts to researchers (Creswell, 2002:521). The following characteristics of narrative research can be distinguished (Creswell, 2002:525):

- It seeks to understand and represent experiences through the stories individuals live and tell.
- It seeks to focus on the experiences of individuals and explore the meaning of these experiences as told through stories.
- It seeks to collect field texts that document the individual's story in his or her own words.
- It seeks to analyse the stories by identifying themes or categories of information.
- It seeks to write the study in a flexible storytelling mode.

Qualitative research that is focused on gathering and interpreting the stories that people use to describe their lives is called by various names that can be summarised by the term 'narrative studies' (Hatch, 2002:28). In this regard Schwandt (2001:168) explains that the term *narrative* refers to any spoken or written presentation, but that it is primarily used in a more narrow sense to mean a form or genre of presentation organized in story form. In this study the narrative data or stories will be personal experience stories that relate some significant episode, event or personal experience (the mothers' stories of their experiences and emotions regarding their child's learning difficulties), where the reconstruction of a life is a more encompassing and involved account (Schwandt, 2001:168).

Narrative constructivism is defined as stories constructed about past events that give an accounting of and an account for those events. *Narrative inquiry* is defined as the interdisciplinary study of the activities involved in generating and analysing stories of life experiences and reporting that kind of research (Schwandt, 2001:170-171).

1.4.2 MOTHERS

Mothering is referred to as providing the physical, cognitive and emotional care and stimulation required by an infant or child (Stratton & Hayes, 1993:119). Husen and Postlethwaite (1991:3422) refer to *mother-child relations* as follows:

‘...the quality of the emotional and/or caregiving interchanges between mothers and their children. Interest in the topic stems largely from the assumption that the kind of parenting children receive affects their adult intellectual and emotional functioning, and that mothers usually are the central figures during their offspring’s formative stages.’

On average, mothers are the primary caregivers in their children’s early years and they usually are the focus of their offspring’s initial emotional attachments (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1991:3422). For the purpose of this study *mothers* will refer to female parents who have a child who has learning difficulties and is currently attending a primary school specialising in ‘remedial’ education.

1.4.3 EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

Emotion is defined as the experience of subjective feelings, which have positive or negative value for the individual. Most current theories regard emotions as a combination of physiological response and cognitive evaluation of a situation. It is necessary to distinguish emotions from states (like hunger and frustration), which may give rise to emotions, and from behaviours such as aggression, which may indicate the presence of an emotion but which are not themselves emotions (Stratton & Hayes, 1993:53). In this regard Sutherland (1995:147) defines *emotion* as any feeling accompanied by autonomic arousal, and by a predisposition to behave in a certain way. He states that there is much controversy concerning psychologists’ definitions of emotion.

Magill (1996:606) takes this notion further and explains that *emotion* is a basic aspect of human functioning. *Emotions* are personal experiences that arise from a complex interplay between physiological, cognitive and situational variables, which allow psychologists to understand diverse expressions of behaviour. For the purpose of this study, *emotional responses* refers to the emotions that mothers report experiencing in response to learning difficulties in their child.

1.4.4 CHILDREN

A child is a young person who is developing towards responsible adulthood through the guidance and support of his/her parents and who is being educated through schooling in preparation for adulthood. The period from about the sixth to about the twelfth year of life is generally known as the middle childhood years, which is a period of relative calm and

stability between the rapid development of the earlier preschool period and of the later adolescent years. It is a critical period for the child's cognitive, social, emotional and self-concept development (Louw, Schoeman, Van Ede & Wait, 1991:311). This statement gives an indication of the effect that learning difficulties will have on the child's development in all these areas, which can be related to the manner in which the mother experiences and responds to the child's difficulties.

One of the developmental tasks of middle childhood, among others, is the extension of knowledge and the development of scholastic skills. Balanced development during middle childhood prepares a solid foundation for later development (Louw, *et al.*, 1991:312). Erikson's ego psychological theory refers to the stage from the ages of six to twelve as a stage where the child should develop competence, with the outcomes being either that of industry or inferiority (Meyer, 1995:159). In this phase opportunities are created for learning and cooperation, where formal schooling is directed at the acquisition of basic skills like reading, writing and arithmetic (Meyer, 1995:159). The emphasis in this phase falls on the acquisition of scholastic success. The impact of not being successful in this arena has numerous implications for the child. Meyer (1995:159) takes this further and explains that, according to Erikson's theory, if the child fails to acquire these skills, this can lead to the development of feelings of inferiority. Learning difficulties can be a barrier that prevents the acquisition of these skills and can thus lead to the development of feelings of inferiority. It is here that a mother's response to her child having learning difficulties can relate to the child's feelings concerning his or her difficulties. For the purpose of this study, *children* will be conceptualised as young learners who are in the phase of middle childhood and are experiencing learning difficulties at school.

1.4.5 LEARNING DIFFICULTIES VERSUS LEARNING PROBLEMS VERSUS LEARNING DISABILITIES

Adelman and Taylor's (1993:3) distinction between learning problems and learning disabilities will be used to explain the use of the concept *learning difficulties* for the purpose of this study, where they explain that not all learning problems are learning disabilities. They explain the distinction as a continuum, where learning disabilities (caused by minor central nervous system dysfunctions) are at the one end and learning problems (caused by factors outside the person) are at the other. In the middle of the continuum they place learning problems that are the result of a combination of person and environmental factors (Adelman & Taylor, 1993:14).

From this it can be seen that the term *learning problems* is an ‘umbrella’ term that incorporates *learning disabilities*. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely whether a child has a pure learning disability or merely a learning problem (caused by environmental factors) or a combination of the two. Since it is not the focus of this study to determine what type of learning difficulties a child may have and since the manifestation of any of the three types is often similar, for the purpose of this study the term *learning difficulties* will be used to indicate the scholastic difficulties experienced by a child who has now been placed in a school specialising in ‘remedial’ education. The term refers to all three types identified by Adelman and Taylor (1993:14). The term *learning difficulties* will be used instead of the term *learning problems*, as the word *difficulties* is a less deficit-based and problem-focused word, which supports the shift in psychology towards a more solution-focused emphasis. In addition to this, the term is used in pluralistic form as it then encompasses a range of difficulties and is not merely reduced to a label.

1.5 PARADIGM: CONSTRUCTIVIST AND INTERPRETIVIST

During this study the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms will be used. Constructivism is a view that sees knowledge as actively constructed by individuals, groups and societies, not simply transferred (Donald, Lazarus & Lolwana, 2002:374). Parents (among others) are active agents who are making meaning of their lives within and through their social context (Donald, *et al.*, 2002:101). Constructivism means to interpret or analyse in a manner that places emphasis on a person’s active creation and building of meaning and significance. It offers a unique and potentially valuable alternative paradigm for psychological practice, research and training. (Sexton, 1997:4). Interpretivists celebrate the permanence and priority of the real world of first-person, subjective experience (Schwandt, 1998:223). In this study this would refer to the experiences of mothers of children with learning difficulties.

Schwandt (1998:222) takes this further and explains how research within the constructivist and the interpretivist paradigms are related:

‘The constructivist or interpretivist believes that to understand this world of meaning one must interpret it. The inquirer must elucidate the process of meaning construction and clarify what and how meanings are embodied in the language and actions of social actors. To prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer’s construction of the constructions of the actors one studies.’

Based on this it would appear that mothers construct their own meaning of their child's learning difficulties, based on their interpretation of what it means to have learning difficulties, which is then related to their emotional responses. Their interpretation of what it means to have learning difficulties is, in turn, constructed through their active participation in a social world (filled with its own meanings and constructions of learning difficulties).

Hayes and Oppenheim (1997:21) discuss common principles for a constructivist approach, namely, that development is contextual, individuals are producers of their own development, cognition is an active relating of events and that meaning-making is self-evolution, among others. The constructivist researcher is engaged in a search for the deep structure that underlies the construction of meaning as expressed in specific mental phenomena (Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997:33). This statement supports the notion that mothers of children with learning difficulties will construct their own meaning surrounding their child's learning difficulties, which is then related to their emotional responses.

Constructivists assume a world in which universal, absolute realities are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality (Hatch, 2002:15). The mothers in this study will be given the opportunity to 'tell their story', relating their individual experiences, perspectives and emotional responses regarding their constructions of their view of their child's learning difficulties.

Qualitative research refers to the constructivist paradigm of theory generation within the context of human inquiry, where one gains an understanding of how people construe their world and how they make sense of their experiences (Gregory, 2000:150).

'Human science research in the form of constructivism is actively engaged in understanding how people, individually and collectively, construe their world, as well as their sense of being and knowing and how they apply such knowledge to themselves and others' (Gregory, 2000:157).

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

1.6.1 RESEARCH DESIGN: NARRATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is a qualitative research study. More specifically a narrative research design will be used to capture the essence of the mothers' stories, drawing out their experiences and emotional responses. Creswell (2002:521) extends this line of thought and states that for

individuals searching for a research design that reports personal stories, narrative research may be ideal, as it seeks to understand and represent experiences through the stories that individuals live and tell. Qualitative research that is focused on gathering and interpreting the stories that people use to describe their lives is called by various names that can be summarised by the term 'narrative studies' (Hatch, 2002:28). Narrative studies are based on the notion that humans make sense of their lives through story. Rapmund and Moore (2002:23) refer to Rappaport's (1993) view that narratives or stories function to order experience, give coherence and meaning to events and provide a sense of history and of the future. Narratives explain people to themselves and others (Rapmund & Moore, 2002:23). Further on there is reference to Dean's (1998) view that narratives create identities and influence the way in which people manage their lives.

Narrative work fits most comfortably within the paradigmatic boundaries of constructivist and critical/feminist thinking, where emphasis is placed on the meanings individuals generate through stories that are told as part of the research (Hatch, 2002:28). In this regard Hayes and Oppenheim (1997:34) state that rather than a search for grand unifying narratives in a system of similarities, a constructivist approach celebrates the unity to be found in a diversity of individual narratives. In this study each participant's story will be her individual narrative, with unity being located in both diverse and common emotional responses that emerge.

Willig (2001:150) concurs with the preceding stance and points out that qualitative research provides the researcher with an opportunity to study meanings. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials, including personal experience and interviews, amongst others, that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000:3). Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in the personal nature of experience and in how people make sense of their worlds by telling stories about them (Paola, 2002:134).

In this study the emotional responses of participants to their child's learning difficulties will be explored. Underlying these emotional responses and directly influencing the emotional responses of mothers, is the meaning that they construct and ascribe to their child's learning difficulties. The focus of narrative research, according to Creswell (2002:525), is to explore the meaning of the individual's experience as told through a story. Narrative research typically focuses on gathering data through the collection of stories, reporting individual experiences, and discussing the meaning of those experiences for the individual (Creswell,

2002:521). Narratives are stories that relate the unfolding of events, human action or human suffering from the perspective of an individual's lived experience (Muller, 1999:221).

In this study the narrative will take the form of a partial life story because the focus will be on the participants' experiences and emotional responses regarding their child with learning difficulties and how this has affected each mother. Their whole life story is not an aspect of this study. Creswell (2002:524) shares this opinion and explains that narrative studies can focus on an episode or single event in the individual's life, and refers to this as a personal experience story.

1.6.2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1.6.2.1 Literature study

One of the researcher's first aims should be to find out what has been done in one's chosen field of study (Mouton, 2002:87). From the literature study conducted to date, it has become clear that little emphasis is placed on the emotional responses of parents to their child having learning difficulties. Even fewer studies allow for gender variation in the emotional responses of such parents. This indicates that there is a need for research focusing on the emotional responses of parents of a child with learning difficulties, including looking at gender-specific responses. This study looks at the emotional responses of mothers.

1.6.2.2 Empirical study

a) Place of study

The participants for this research study will be selected from a Pretoria school specialising in 'remedial' education. Each participant will be a mother of a child who is currently at this school. The school goes from grade 0 up to grade 7. There are approximately 160 learners in total at the school. Each grade consists of two classes with eleven learners in each class, except for grade 0, which has one class of approximately five to nine learners. The school staff consists of fifteen educators, who have training in special educational needs ('remedial' teaching), three occupational therapists, three speech therapists, two part-time psychologists and a resource teacher (specialist in learning support).

A learner achieving poorly in mainstream schooling is usually referred to the school by his or her teacher for a full assessment. Before a learner is accepted at the school, he or she undergoes an occupational assessment, speech assessment, psychological assessment and educational/scholastic assessment. On the basis of the results of these assessments the learner may be placed at the school. The school accepts learners of average and above-average intellectual potential. The school aims to assist each learner, through using a multidisciplinary approach, to be reintroduced to mainstream education as soon as possible. Regular case conferences are held to discuss individual progress in learners. The class teacher, occupational therapist, speech therapist, psychologist and school principal are present at these conferences.

The interviews to be conducted with participants (see par. 6.2.2.3) will take place away from the school premises. This is to support adherence to the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity.

b) Selection of participants¹

Qualitative research is concerned with in-depth inquiry, participants' perspectives and description of a single setting, not generalisation to many settings, and therefore requires sampling different from that found in quantitative research (Gay & Airasian, 2003:115). In this study the researcher will request approval from the school's principal to conduct the study. Teachers from the various grades at the school will be asked to volunteer names and contact numbers of mothers of children in their classes. The researcher will then contact these mothers telephonically. The research study will be explained to them in terms of the letter of consent laid out in Appendix B, with emphasis being placed on confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation. An appointment for an interview will then be scheduled with mothers who agree to take part in the study.

The participants chosen for this study will be chosen with the following criteria in mind. Each participant will be a mother who has a child with learning difficulties who is currently attending the school specialising in 'remedial' education. The children of the participants in this study will vary from grade 0 to grade 7 and will be between the ages of six years and 12 years. In this regard Gay and Airasian (2003:115) refer to purposive sampling, where the

¹ Due to the gender specificity of the participants in this study the term 'mother' or 'mothers' will mostly be used when referring to the participants in this study. Furthermore, the term 'mother' or 'mothers' will mostly be used due to the perceived 'distancing' effect of the use of the term 'participant(s)'.

researcher selects a sample based on his/her experience and prior knowledge of the group to identify criteria for selecting the sample. The researcher purposefully selects an individual to learn about the phenomenon. The participant may be someone who is typical or someone who is critical to the study because he or she has experienced a specific issue or situation (Creswell, 2002:534). In this study, mothers who have a child with learning difficulties who is currently in the school specialising in 'remedial' education will be selected on the basis of their experience of this specific situation.

Approximately twenty names of mothers will be selected and no fewer than ten interviews will be conducted. In this regard Creswell (2002:534) points out that several individuals may be studied in a project, each with a different story that may conflict with, or be supportive of, each other.

c) Data collection

▪ **Interviews**

A widely used method of creating field texts in narrative inquiry is the interview, which may be turned into written field texts through the transcribing of the tape-recorded interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:110). In this study permission will be requested from participants to audiotape the interview for the purposes of transcribing. Willig (2001:25) concurs with this notion and points out that it is important that the researcher should explain to the participants why the recording is being made and how it is going to be used. The best way to gather the story is to have the individual tell about his/her experiences, either through personal conversations or interviews (Creswell, 2002:534).

The face-to-face interview is a flexible technique for gathering accounts of experiences (McLeod, 1996:67). In this study participants will be interviewed through the use of a face-to-face, semi-structured interview, which allows them the freedom to tell their story, but also allows for their emotional responses to be drawn out in this process. The questions that will be used to guide the semi-structured interview in this study are presented in Appendix C. Interviews will be tape-recorded and then transcribed so that the first level of analysis can then take place. Silverman (1994:119) refers to Heritage's (1984) view of the advantage of using recorded data, explaining that it is an essential corrective to the limitations of intuition and recollection.

Narrative research aims to collect field texts that document the individual's story in his or her own words. The stories constitute the data and are typically gathered through interviews or informal conversations (Creswell, 2002:525-526). Interviewing provides a way of generating empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002:112). Gay and Airasian (2003:209) extend this line of thought and explain that interviews permit researchers to obtain important data that they cannot acquire from observation. They explain that the information is obtained from people's own words and that interviewers can explore and probe participants' responses to gather more in-depth data about their constructions, experiences and feelings. Interviewers can examine attitudes, interests, feelings, concerns and values more easily in this way than by using observation (Gay & Airasian, 2003:209).

Interview questions in this study will relate to aspects of Creswell's (2002:530) three-dimensional space narrative structure, which involves looking inward at the participant's feelings, hopes, reactions and dispositions, and outward at social interaction to include other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions and points of view. There is a consideration of the past that is remembered, the present relating to experiences of an event, and the future, looking forward to possible experiences.

Naturalistic qualitative research methods are the data collection and analytic tools of the constructivist. Researchers spend time interviewing participants in an effort to reconstruct the constructions participants use to make sense of their worlds (Hatch, 2002:15). In the present study this would refer to the constructions parents use to make sense of their child's learning difficulties, which relates to their emotional responses. Constructivist interviewers will work with informants to coconstruct understandings that are reported as interpretations or narratives (Hatch, 2002:23). In relation to this, Hatch (2002:91) mentions further on that qualitative researchers use interviews to uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organise their experiences and make sense of their worlds. Miller and Crabtree (1999:89) define the interview as a research-gathering approach that seeks to create a listening space where meaning is constructed through an interexchange/cocreation of verbal viewpoints in the interest of scientific knowing.

In this study the interview session will be an opportunity for mothers to tell their story, which will include the meaning they have ascribed to their child's learning difficulties, which relates to their emotional responses. Thus, through the interview session, with the researcher as listener and 'prober' and the participant as storyteller, participants may construct further

meaning of their experiences through what Miller and Crabtree (1999:89) refer to as an “interexchange/cocreation of verbal viewpoints”. The notion that the interview may, in itself, become a therapeutic situation for the mothers in this study, is therefore reinforced.

The interview used in this study will be a semi-structured one that allows for participants to tell their story, but at the same time guides the focus towards their experiences and emotional responses. In semi-structured interviews, researchers have questions about certain topics in mind, but they are open to digressions, they expect the interview to move in the direction that the informant takes it, and they create probes or follow-up questions based on the responses they receive (Hatch, 2002:95). Willig (2001:22) concurs with this stance and explains that the semi-structured interview provides an opportunity for the researcher to hear the participant talk about a particular aspect of his or her life or experience, where the questions asked by the researcher function as triggers that encourage the participant to talk. In this regard Gay and Airasian (2003:211) refer to partially structured interviews, where questions are formulated and ordered by the interviewer. The interviewer may add questions or modify them as deemed appropriate, but questions are open-ended and may be taped.

In narrative approaches it is the researcher’s responsibility to be a good listener and the interviewee is a storyteller rather than a respondent (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000:31). However, given the importance of the narrative form to all social communication, a story is often chosen to answer even direct questions. Researchers can ‘narrativise’ topics, that is, turn questions about given topics into story-telling invitations, e.g. ‘tell me about your experiences of...’ (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000:35). Semi-structured interviewing contains features of an informal conversation, with the emphasis on narrative and experience (Willig, 2001:23).

In this study the researcher will have an interview schedule prepared, with questions being asked in a relatively set order. Participants will, at the outset of the interview, be encouraged to tell their story and to elaborate on aspects they feel they would like to. The researcher will also make use of empathic listening, probes and additional questions where deemed necessary in order for participants to tell their story. The questions asked will guide the interview towards the focus of this study and in addition will encourage participants to talk freely. Some participants may speak easily about their experiences with little need for the researcher to ask too many questions. The questions in the interview schedule will, in

addition, function as the triggers mentioned previously by Willig (2001:22), which help participants in telling their story.

Appointments will be scheduled at a later date with each participant to share and discuss the initial findings of the study with them, in order for them to give their input regarding the findings and be a part of the research process, as well as to gain an additional source of data. Narrative research aims to collaborate with the participant when writing the research study (Creswell, 2002:525). Ezzy (2002:68) concurs with this stance and states that it is important to consider how evolving interpretations of the data can be checked with participants.

- **Field notes**

The transcribed interviews, as well as the letters written by the participants (see next bullet), will be the central field notes to be used for data-analysis. In this regard Gay and Airasian (2003:213) state that transcripts are the field notes for interview data.

The personal experience of the researcher is an integral part of the research process (Ezzy, 2002:153). Field notes in the form of journal entries consisting of reflections written by the researcher throughout the research process will be included as an additional source of data. These field notes will be written after contact with participants, especially after each interview session, as well as reflecting on the stepping-stones along the research path. Field notes combined with journals written of one's field experience provide a reflective balance (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:104). Extending this line of thought is Ezzy (2002:71-72) who states that journals can be used to reflect on the practicalities of conducting fieldwork and emergent interpretations of the significance of data collected. Journals and memos are a systematic attempt to facilitate the interpretative process that is at the heart of qualitative research. Keeping a journal encourages researchers to reflect routinely on their emerging understanding of the data.

- **Letters from mothers**

Participants will be asked to write a letter reflecting on their experiences regarding their child's learning difficulties, with specific focus on the emotions they have experienced, as well as their views of themselves as parents. In addition to this, part of the letter will concern a reflection on the experience of telling their story by means of the interview. The

participants will be provided with self-addressed, stamped envelopes at the end of the interview. They will be given a choice of either posting their letters or leaving them at the school, from where the researcher will collect them. Participants will be permitted to keep their letters anonymous. Creswell (2002:528) concurs with this stance and explains that letters are a form of data collection for gathering stories in narrative research. In this study the letters will be an additional source of data, which will draw on Creswell's (2002:525) notion that the collection of field texts should document the individual's story in his or her own words.

In narrative research, participants may author letters, because it is through writing letters that people try to give an account of themselves and make sense out of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:106-107). In this study participants will be given the opportunity to reflect on themselves and the interview session and in that way endow these experiences with meaning, again reinforcing the notion that this process may be therapeutic for the participants. In this regard Clandinin and Connelly (2000:108) refer to Davies (1996:176) where she states that letters enable one to get in touch with one's own thoughts and feelings, in one's own time and space, as well as allowing for a deeper level of reflection on the part of the writer.

d) Data analysis and interpretation: Theme analysis

'The aim of analysis is to understand the various constitutive elements of one's data through an inspection of the relationship between concepts, constructs and variables, and to see whether there are any patterns or trends that can be identified or isolated, or to establish themes in the data. Interpretation involves the synthesis of one's data into larger coherent wholes' (Mouton, 2002:108-109).

Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning, a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others (Hatch, 2002:148). In interpretation, one's results and findings are related to existing theoretical frameworks or models, where it is shown what level of support exists for the new interpretation (Mouton, 2002:109). In this study, theme analysis will be used to analyse the transcribed interviews to identify the emotional responses reported by mothers. Theme analysis will also be used to analyse the data from the mothers' letters. During subsequent levels of analysis, the results from the theme analysis will be analysed along with the data from the follow-up sessions to weave a narrative that will explore the in-depth meanings of the emotional responses of mothers to their child having learning difficulties. Creswell (2002:525-526) supports this stance and

explains that narrative research seeks to analyse the stories of individuals by identifying themes or categories of information that emerge during the story. In the data analysis process, researchers narrate the story and often identify themes or categories that emerge. Ezzy (2002:86) concurs with this and states that coding in thematic analysis is the process of identifying themes that run through the data.

Ezzy (2002:64), in his discussion of qualitative data analysis, states that the aim of qualitative research is to allow the voice of the 'other', of the people being researched, to inform the researcher. Qualitative data analysis is an interpretive task, where interpretations are actively constructed through social processes (Ezzy, 2002:73). In this regard Miller and Crabtree (1999:130) identify five phases in the interpretive process, namely describing, organising, connecting, corroborating/legitimizing and representing the account. According to Ryan and Bernard (2000:780), themes are abstract constructs that investigators identify before, during and after data collection. In this study, parts of the transcribed interviews will be highlighted and themes identified. In connection with this, Egan (2002:78-79) states that one should pay careful attention to three aspects when listening to stories, namely the person's *experiences* (what happens to them), their *behaviours* (what they do and do not do) and their *affect* (feelings, emotions and moods). All three of these aspects will be noted during the theme analysis, but the specific focus will be on the emotional responses named by participants. These emotional responses, however, need to be seen in the light of each participant's experience of a situation and how she reacted to and behaved in that situation. Their reactions to and experiences of happenings will be interpreted to give an idea of their underlying constructions of events and thus their emotional responses. The resulting constructed interpretations will be a reflection of the voices of mothers of children with learning difficulties.

Ezzy (2002:88) suggests that *open coding* be used in the first stage of theme analysis, where transcripts are read and notes or codes are made in the margins referring to the basic theme being reflected through what the participant has said, noting meanings, feelings and actions. The next step is *axial coding*, which involves integrating codes around the axes of central categories. Finally there is *selective coding*, which involves the identification of the core category or story around which the analysis focuses (Ezzy, 2002:91-92). A good thematic code is one that captures the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998:31). Extending this line of thought, Gay and Airasian (2003:228) suggest that visually displaying one's data can help one to see it in a new light and aid one's understanding. For example, concept maps can be useful in identifying relationships in the data. In this study

open coding will be used first, where each transcript will be read and notes will be made referring to the emotional themes emerging from all the participants' stories. Secondly, axial coding will be applied and specific responses will be highlighted according to themes as explained in the preceding paragraph referring to Egan's (2002:78-79) three aspects, with a specific focus on the emotional responses that emerge. These themes will be interpreted further through a second level of analysis to weave a narrative of mothers' emotional responses to their child with learning difficulties. During this level of analysis a theme map will be used in order to visually grasp the emerging interpretation and to draw together the narrative. This analysis would reflect aspects of selective coding.

1.6.3 THE ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The role of the researcher will incorporate that of being an interviewer, using empathic listening skills to help mothers to 'tell their story'. In addition to this the role of transcriber and analyst will also be part of the researcher's role, where the interviews will be transcribed and the resultant data analysed as discussed previously in (d). A further role of the researcher will be to integrate and present the results, as well as provide the participants with feedback on the initial findings of the study. Contact will be maintained with participants through follow-up phone calls regarding their letter writing, as well as through arranging appointments for feedback on the initial findings of the study. This supports Creswell's (2002:525) and Ezzy's (2002:68) view that collaboration and checking interpretations with participants are an integral part of narrative research.

The role of the researcher will also be that of listener, hearing mothers tell their stories by means of the interview. In addition, questions will be asked to elicit responses from mothers that relate their experiences and emotions in connection with the process that they have walked with their child. In this regard Creswell (2002:528) states that narrative researchers retell the story in their own words, which will be an important aspect in both the feedback discussion sessions with the mothers, as well as in the discussion of the findings from the study in the final research report.

1.6.4 STRENGTHS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Narrative research captures an everyday, normal form of data that is familiar to individuals. For the participants who are being studied through narrative research, sharing their stories may make them feel that their stories are important and that they are being heard. In

addition, telling a story helps individuals understand aspects that they may need to process and understand. It is a natural part of life and individuals all have stories about their experiences to tell others (Creswell, 2002:531). Creswell (2002:532) points out Riessman's (1993:22) view that although distortion may influence the stories participants tell (see par. 6.2.2.7), narrative researchers remind us that stories are truths of our experiences.

1.6.5 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Creswell (2002:532) mentions that the retelling of the story in a *narrative report* is a process that is labour-intensive and also mentions Connelly and Clandinin's (1990:10) view that the participant may 'fake the data', relating a very positive story with a happy ending. Narrative researchers rely heavily on self-reported information from participants, which may lead to a distortion of the data (Creswell, 2002:532). This point appears to be particularly relevant if the participants in this study are in a phase of denial regarding their child's learning difficulties. Gay and Airasian (2003:115) mention that the main weakness of *purposive sampling* is the potential for inaccuracy in the researcher's criteria and resulting sample selection.

1.6.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE DATA

Qualitative methodology focuses on understanding the world in which one lives, and interpreting it from the participant's frame of reference. The object of study is defined as it is actually experienced and observed by the participants themselves and data credibility need not be forfeited (Niemann, Niemann, Brazelle, Van Staden, Heyns & de Wet, 2000:285). In relation to this Denzin and Lincoln (2000:21) explain that terms such as 'credibility', 'transferability', 'dependability' and 'confirmability' replace the usual positivist criteria of internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity. In this study the emotional responses of mothers to their child's learning difficulties is the focus. It is *their* accounts of their experiences and their resulting emotional responses that are being researched. The very essence of their emotional responses is subjective. *Their* perceptions and constructions are what are important, as well as how they see things from their own frame of reference. In this regard Hatch (2002:15) explains that knowledge produced within a constructivist paradigm is often presented in the form of rich narratives that describe the interpretations constructed as part of the research process:

‘Accounts include enough contextual detail and sufficient representation of the voices of the participants that readers can place themselves in the shoes of the participants at some level and judge the quality of the findings based on criteria other than those used in positivist and postpositivist paradigms.’

From this it becomes clear that in this study it will be important to represent the findings in such a way that the voices of these mothers who have a child with learning difficulties are truly represented. Whether their accounts are ‘truth’ or reality is not what is contested. What is important are their perceptions of their experiences, which are related to their emotional responses. The contention then is that the reality of their child’s learning difficulties as they experience it and respond emotionally to it is where the ‘truth’ lies. What will be important to control is the researcher’s own bias and subjective feelings towards participants. One way in which this will be controlled is through the reflective journal entries by the researcher. Any personal biases on the researcher’s part will be dealt with by means of journal entries, where the researcher can become aware of any biased feelings and in that way remain aware of them whilst interpreting the data.

Interviewing seems to invite unacceptable forms of bias, but this criticism only holds if one takes a narrow view of interpretive practice and meaning construction. ‘Any interview...relies upon the interaction between participants’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002:123). In this study empathic listening by the researcher is an essential aspect of the interviews. It follows that a degree of subjectivity is important in order for the researcher to really ‘hear’ participants’ stories and to fully come to understand their experiences, perceptions and emotional responses. In this regard Gay and Airasian (2003:214) suggest important questions that all qualitative researchers should ask and answer to reduce bias and enhance validity, namely:

- How much confidence can I place in the data I have collected?
- What is the quality of the data I have obtained from participants?
- Have my personal biases intruded into my data collection?

The above discussion has shed light on how these questions will be addressed during this study. Attention to issues of bias are important for maintaining the integrity of qualitative research (Gay & Airasian, 2003:215). When research participants are asked to describe their experiences they do so with many operative defences and self-deceptions that were inherent in the experiences they described (Churchill, 2000:44). Reality in qualitative research and within a constructivist paradigm points to the reality of individuals’ experiences

and perceptions as interpreted and constructed by them, not as they are 'out there'. This would mean that, in this study, any distortion from the lived to the known would still render that data as trustworthy (in qualitative terms). In conclusion, Churchill (2000:59) says that by making ourselves better acquainted with modes of self-deception evident in narrative research, our intuition will serve us better when listening to others' accounts of their experiences.

1.6.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1.6.7.1 Informed consent and voluntary participation

All mothers contacted telephonically will be given information regarding the study and their role therein. The content of the information given to the mothers telephonically will be as laid out in Appendix B. Interview appointments will then be scheduled with mothers who agree to participate in the study. Research participants should be told the nature of the study to be conducted and be given the choice of either participating or not and if they agree to participate, they must be aware that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001:107). Christians (2000:138) expands upon this line of thought, explaining that research subjects have the right to be informed about the nature and consequences of research they are involved in and must agree voluntarily to participate, that is, without physical and psychological coercion.

At the interview appointment, the procedure will be that the letter of consent (see Appendix B) will be given to participants to read, to query and then to sign. Emphasis will be placed on the fact that they may still withdraw from the study at any time. In this regard Sieber (1998:130) states that the consent statement should explain the research to be undertaken, should be simple and friendly in tone and should translate a scientific proposal into simple, everyday language, omitting details that are unimportant to participants, but including details that are indeed important to them.

Participants are allowed to withdraw from the study at any time, as well as contact the researcher or supervisor with any queries at any time during the study. Sieber (1998:130) concurs with this stance and explains that voluntary informed consent is an ongoing, two-way communication process between researcher and participants.

1.6.7.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

The information that participants share with the researcher in this study will be kept confidential and their identities will not be revealed in the study or interview data. Leedy and Ormrod (2001:108) support this need for confidentiality, stating that under no circumstances should a research report, either oral or written, be presented in such a way that others become aware of how a particular participant has responded or behaved. Interviews with the participants will be scheduled to take place away from the school premises in order to adhere to the principles of confidentiality and anonymity.

A code number may be used to refer to participants, or within the written report, a pseudonym (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001:108). In this study interviews will be numbered in the order that they occur, e.g. Interview 5 will be participant 5 for the purpose of the data analysis. Christians (2000:139) concurs with this stance and emphasises the importance of protecting people's identities when he states that all personal data should be concealed and only made public behind a shield of anonymity:

‘...no one deserves harm or embarrassment as a result of insensitive research practices.’

1.6.7.3 Protection from harm

Holloway and Jefferson (2000:100-102) mention three principles that they see as central to research with human beings, namely honesty, sympathy and respect. No human rights may be violated during this research study.

1.7 OUTLINE OF THE CHAPTERS THAT FOLLOW

CHAPTER 2: MOTHERS, EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The second chapter outlines the conceptual framework for the study, consulting available literature on parents and parenting, mothers, children, emotions and emotional responses, learning difficulties and emotional responses of parents to children with learning difficulties. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding the underlying assumptions of this study.

CHAPTER 3: EXPLORING NARRATIVES: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the research design and methodology, as well as the entire research process followed in this study, specifically referring to the narrative research design methods.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION OF THE THEMES AND NARRATIVE OF THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF MOTHERS TO CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

The fourth chapter presents the results of the theme analysis, followed by a detailed discussion of the findings and results of the study. Congruent with a narrative research design, the chapter concludes with a narrative describing the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties.

CHAPTER 5: SYNOPSIS OF FINDINGS, LITERATURE CONTROL, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the concluding chapter the results of the study are related to relevant literature as discussed in the conceptual framework in Chapter 2. The conclusions of the study are discussed and the findings are related to the research question and subquestions posed in Chapter 1. Limitations of the study, as well as its contribution are presented and recommendations for practice, training and further research are suggested.

1.8 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Parents of children with learning difficulties experience emotional responses to their child. However, little emphasis in the literature is placed on their emotional responses, with more attention being given to definitions of learning difficulties, assessment of learning difficulties and strategies for helping these children. The focus is on the parents' supportive role. In addition to this, much of the literature that does refer to the emotional responses of such parents refers to 'parents' as a single category with the underlying assumption that the emotional responses of mothers and fathers are the same. Little distinction exists between the emotional responses of mothers and those of fathers to their child who experiences learning difficulties. This study will attempt to identify and explore the emotional responses

of mothers to their child with learning difficulties in order to deepen our understanding of mothers of children with learning difficulties. The following chapter provides a more in-depth description of the conceptual framework for this study.

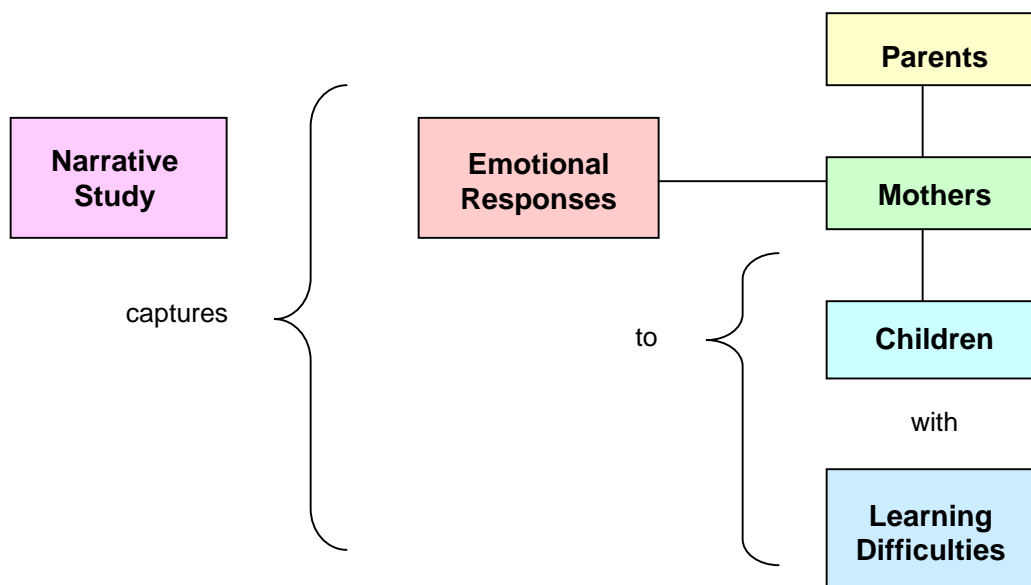
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**CHAPTER 2
MOTHERS, EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND CHILDREN WITH LEARNING
DIFFICULTIES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This study explores the emotions that mothers experience in response to their child with learning difficulties. This chapter provides a more in-depth discussion of the conceptual framework for the study, where relationships between the concepts are explored and highlighted. Relevant literature discussing emotional responses of parents and mothers to their child with learning difficulties is also explored. Towards the end of the chapter there is a more integrated focus and the assumptions of the study are discussed. This research study and its conceptual framework are viewed within the paradigmatic boundaries of the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. Figure 2.1 gives a schematic representation of the interrelationships between the concepts within the conceptual framework for this study.

Figure 2.1: Interrelationships between concepts within the conceptual framework



2.2 NARRATIVE STUDY

‘The essence of humanness...has come increasingly to be described as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative’ (Johnstone, 2003:635).

Qualitative research that is focused on gathering and interpreting the stories that people use to describe their lives is called by various names that the term ‘narrative studies’ covers (Hatch, 2002:28). A narrative research design is used in this study. Telling stories is a part of life that people encounter every day in their conversations with others. People are storytellers by nature (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998:7). Creswell (2002:531) shares this opinion and states that narrative research captures an everyday, normal form of data that is familiar to individuals. In this study the use of a narrative research design will enable mothers to tell their story of their experiences and emotions in response to their child with learning difficulties in a manner that is thus familiar to them. Narrative research focuses on exploring the meaning of individuals’ experiences as told through their stories (Creswell, 2002:525). As stated earlier, Hatch (2002:28) takes this notion further and explains that narrative work fits most comfortably within the paradigmatic boundaries of constructivist and critical/feminist thinking, where emphasis is placed on the meanings individuals generate through stories that are told as part of the research. In this study the emotional responses of mothers to their child’s learning difficulties will be explored. These emotions are related to the meaning that they ascribe to their child’s learning difficulties. The meaning that mothers ascribe to their child having learning difficulties is, in turn, related to their constructions of what it means to have learning difficulties. These constructions are an integration of their own experiences of schooling and learning, as well as societal views of what it means to have learning difficulties.

According to Muller (1999:221) narratives are stories that relate the unfolding of events, human action or human suffering from the perspective of an individual’s lived experience. Stories open valuable windows into the emotional and symbolic lives of individuals, offering researchers a powerful research instrument (Gabriel, 1999:135). This opinion is shared by Sikes (2002:xii) who states that narrative research offers an exciting, important and exploratory way forward for educational research. Human beings are storying beings, who live their lives through stories. It is natural for individuals to make sense of their lives, the lives of others and the contexts in which they live through telling and hearing/reading stories (Sikes, 2002:xii). This underlines the fact that in this study, telling a story is a familiar process that enables mothers to talk about their experiences with their children who have

learning difficulties. Each mother can speak of her experiences in a relaxed story-telling way, making the process less threatening.

A narrative is a story of events and individual experiences, told most often in a chronological fashion, for the purpose of understanding, conveying and creating the meaning of experience. Stories create a sense of order out of chaos and give significance to an inexplicable event (Stuhlmiller, 2001:64-65). In this regard Johnstone (2003:640) explains that personal narrative is how we make sense of ourselves as individuals and as members of groups. In this study the interview session itself may be an opportunity for mothers to make sense out of their experiences regarding their child's learning difficulties. Telling a story about oneself can be an experience of healing and growth, in that being heard by an interested listener can result in change (Stuhlmiller, 2001:66). Thus it is possible that for some of the mothers in this study, the interview session may be a therapeutic process. Stuhlmiller (2001:78) goes on to explain that narrative research methods can exert a therapeutic effect because they have the strength, power and generative capacity to uncover and foster growth, possibility and relatedness.

Creswell (2002:521) is of the opinion that for individuals searching for a research design that reports personal stories, narrative research may be ideal, as it seeks to understand and represent experiences through the stories that individuals live and tell. This opinion is shared by Muller (1999:223) who explains that a narrative approach is firmly grounded in qualitative traditions and stresses the 'lived experience' of individuals. She delineates some dimensions of a narrative approach:

- A narrative approach assumes that people like to tell stories, that they organise their significant experiences in terms of stories, and that the telling of stories is a way, perhaps the most basic way, for humans to make sense of events in their lives.
- Narratives have structural properties of time and plot. The story is made up of events that unfold sequentially.
- Narrative has the power to shape human conduct as well as to reflect an individual's life experience.
- Narratives have a contextual focus. They do not arise by themselves, but are nested within a cultural context. Although narratives are particularistic in that they are the stories of individuals, they also transmit or reflect cultural messages about the nature of reality.

- Narratives are relational. Stories are told to others and narratives are frequently produced in conversation, taking shape in the interaction between teller and listener.

In this study the stories told by the mothers are in the form of a partial life story because it is their experiences and emotions regarding their child's learning difficulties that constitute the essence of the research. A narrative research design, as used in this study, captures the essence of participants' stories in a way that is familiar to them. It allows for the researcher to listen empathically and in doing so, draw out their emotional responses in a non-threatening manner concerning what may be a difficult or sensitive issue for some.

2.3 PARENTS AND PARENTING

'Being a parent is seldom easy. This is especially true when your child feels badly, underachieves or misbehaves at school. Those struggles and failures become yours' (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:276-277).

Being a parent is one of the most important and demanding roles that any adult can play. Parents will play the pivotal role in their child's development (Tanguay, 2001:32). Parenting involves a commitment to a child to support and guide the child towards becoming a responsible adult. It means fulfilling the needs of the child in whatever way is necessary and supporting the child in needs that arise. Mothers, fathers or both parents together can undertake parenting, as can foster and adoptive parents.

Parents want their children to become healthy, effective, successful adults (Crow & Crow, 1997:4). Goldstein and Mather (1998:xi) take this further and explain that all parents have great hopes for their children – that they will enjoy learning, perform well at school, behave appropriately, and grow up feeling confident and self-assured. Many parents have assumptions of perfection for their children's future, expecting only the best and having limited conception of the problems that their child may encounter along the way. Just such an unexpected problem may be a child who experiences learning difficulties at school. Dudley-Marling (2000:20) is of the opinion that through the eyes of parents, newborn infants have almost unlimited potential for intelligence, wisdom, beauty and athleticism. He further explains that the initial parenting of infants requires that parents adjust – however slightly – their initial vision of their children as 'tiny bundles of perfection'. The impact of a child with learning difficulties on this parental view of perfection can result in an array of emotional responses from the parent.

Stratton and Hayes (1993:138) refer to *parenting* as a term that is used instead of mothering either to emphasise that any adult could be providing the care, or to refer to a specific aspect of care of the young that is undertaken by either parent. Some parents mention that parenting is a task that one can never fully be prepared for. Parents who have a child who copes well and does not experience any form of difficulty or disability sometimes mention this. The parenting task may therefore be influenced and made more challenging when there is a child who experiences some form of difficulty or disability. Pelchat, Ricard, Bouchard, Perreault, Saucier, Berthiaume and Bisson (1999) (as cited in Woolfson, 2004:1) share this opinion and explain that parents of children with disabilities have reported greater levels of stress than parents of children without disabilities. In her study Dyson (2003:6) found that the social competence and behavioural problems of children with learning disabilities are related to their parents' stress surrounding their child's disability. The more positive the parental adjustment, the greater the degree of social competence in the children (Dyson, 2003:7). Many parents of children with disabilities find their own ways of coping with and adjusting to their child's disability (Woolfson, 2004:11). It is clear that parents' own stress and emotional responses to their child's learning difficulties are related to their child's own experience of and ability to cope with his/her learning difficulties.

The above indicates that parents of a child with learning difficulties may experience the parenting task differently from parents whose child experiences no difficulties. There may be additional stress involved in the parenting task, which may result in an array of emotional responses being experienced by such parents. In addition to this, these parents are often put in the position of making educational decisions based on very little information, which can result in conflict between parents (Hunt & Marshall, 1994:211). Silver (1998:36) emphasises that the parenting role in cases where there is a child who experiences difficulty with learning, involves understanding everything about one's child's difficulties and how they affect the child, the parent and other members of the family. In relation to this Stone, Bradley and Kleiner (2002:146) mention that parents of children with learning difficulties tend to have lower expectations for their children. This may have an impact on parents' relationships with their other children, as well as relationships between the siblings themselves.

Silver (1998:16) is of the opinion that a child with learning difficulties can experience success, but that that success depends entirely upon the parent, specifically that parent's action, assertion, perseverance and advocacy. He further points out that this parenting task will be frustrating and confusing, but will eventually bring reward. He concludes by saying

the following to parents, 'The task is inescapable, imminent, and above all, ultimately yours alone'. In relation to this, Crow and Crow (1997:109) underline the importance of the task of parenting when they say that in part, children become what their parents tell them they will become. This indicates the enormous pressure that is placed on parents to help their child succeed and overcome their difficulties. Parents experience their own emotional responses to their situation, their task and their child's learning difficulties, yet this aspect is seldom referred to or dealt with in the literature on the subject.

As discussed in the preceding section (see par. 2.2), telling stories is a way of making sense out of one's experiences and of working through one's emotions. The experiences of the parenting task with a child who has a difficulty or disability (such as learning difficulties) are unique to such individuals, who may need to make sense of their situation. A narrative approach provides an opportunity for such individuals to tell their story and possibly at the same time make sense of and endow their experiences with meaning. This study will give mothers of children with learning difficulties just such an opportunity, with specific emphasis on their expression of the emotions that they experience in response to their child's learning difficulties.

2.4 MOTHERS

Where literature does refer to emotional responses of parents to having a child with learning difficulties, the discussion often surrounds emotions of 'parents' as a homogeneous category. Little distinction is drawn between the emotional responses of mothers and those of fathers. The question that is subsequently raised is the following: Do mothers and fathers experience the same emotional responses to their child with learning difficulties or are there gender-specific emotional responses? Where parents are referred to in this manner, there is the underlying assumption that both mothers and fathers experience their child's difficulties in the same way and that they experience the same emotional responses to the situation. Although this may be an accurate assumption, it may also not be. This study therefore focuses on the emotional responses of mothers to their child with learning difficulties, in order to deepen our understanding of mothers of such children.

Ironically enough, *mother* is a term rarely defined in the literature, within the fields of both education and psychology. The term can be explained as involving the same tasks discussed previously, referring to the role of being a parent, except that the focus is then specifically on the female parent, the mother. On average, mothers are the primary

caregivers in their children's early years and, as mentioned earlier, they are usually the focus of their offspring's initial emotional attachments (Husen & Postlethwaite, 1991:3422). Dudley-Marling (2000:83) mentions that among the parents he interviewed, mothers carried a disproportionate share of the emotional and material burdens of having a child who struggled in school. Overwhelmingly, school trouble is a mother's burden. Dudley-Marling (2000:16) also explains that in his study he interviewed six single mothers, ten mothers from two-parent families and seven couples, and therefore emphasises that his findings favour the perspectives of mothers.

Mothering refers to providing the physical, cognitive and emotional care and stimulation required by an infant or child (Stratton & Hayes, 1993:119). This definition, however, cannot be seen as being gender-specific to mothers only, as fathers too may provide their child with mothering. For the purpose of this study *mothers* will refer to female parents who have a child with learning difficulties who, at the time of the research, was attending a primary school specialising in 'remedial'² education.

2.5 CHILDREN³

Most literature, in attempting to define the concept '*children*', looks at the term 'child' or 'children' from a developmental perspective, with reference to particular theories of developmental psychology. In this study *children* are discussed from a developmental perspective, with reference to Erik Erikson's ego psychological theory. Erikson's ego psychological theory refers to the stage from the ages of six to twelve as a stage during which the child should develop competence, with the outcome being either that of industry or inferiority (Meyer, 1995:159), depending on whether the child experiences success or failure at school. In this phase, opportunities are created for learning and cooperation, where formal schooling is directed at the acquisition of basic skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic (Meyer, 1995:159). The emphasis in this phase falls on the acquisition of scholastic success. The impact of not being successful in this arena has numerous

² The term '*remedial*' school or *school specialising in 'remedial' education* is used in this study, as this is the term which most parents tend to use in their reference to such a school. The school itself refers to 'specialising in remedial education'. The term 'remedial' is placed in inverted commas, as it is not a term referred to in more recent psychology, with the focus on inclusive education and a more positive psychology, which is less problem-focused. A more recent term is that of *special educational needs* or *barriers to learning*.

³ The term *children* or *child* is used in this study instead of the term *learner* as the context for the use of the term within this study relates to and is focused on the children in connection with their mother and the mother's role and experience in parenting.

implications for the child. According to Erikson's theory, if the child fails to acquire these skills, this can lead to the development of feelings of inferiority (Meyer, 1995:159).

From a developmental perspective, the children of the mothers in this study are between the ages of six and twelve. Louw, *et al.* (1991:311) explain that this period of life is generally known as the 'middle childhood years', which is a period of relative calm and stability between the rapid development of the earlier preschool period and of the later adolescent years. It is a critical period for the child's cognitive, social, emotional and self-concept development (Louw, *et al.*, 1991:311). The negative impact that learning difficulties may have on a child's development in all these areas is evident. Children's experience and acceptance of their learning difficulties can be related to the manner in which their mother experiences and responds to her child's difficulty. The way in which a mother responds emotionally to this will subtly indicate to her child what it means to her to have learning difficulties (based on her constructions thereof). See par. 2.9 for a more detailed explanation regarding the underlying assumptions of this study. This meaning-giving that her child sees in her contributes towards her child's experience and acceptance of his or her learning difficulties, as well as her child's social, emotional and self-concept development. It also contributes towards her child's own personal constructions of what it means to have learning difficulties.

Balanced development during middle childhood prepares a solid foundation for later development. Two of the developmental tasks of middle childhood are the extension of knowledge and the development of scholastic skills (Louw, *et al.*, 1991:312). The importance of acquiring scholastic skills during the phase of middle childhood is essential for positive self-concept development, where the child feels competent in executing scholastic tasks effectively and in acquiring new scholastic skills. Learning difficulties can be a barrier that prevents the acquisition of these skills and related feelings of competency and can thus lead to the development of feelings of inferiority, as referred to in Erikson's theory. In addition, a mother's response to her child having learning difficulties can relate to her child's feelings concerning his or her difficulties.

For the purpose of this study, *children* will be conceptualised as young learners who are in the phase of middle childhood and are experiencing difficulty in learning at school. At the time of this research all children of the mothers in this study were attending a school specialising in 'remedial' education.

2.6 EMOTIONS AND EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

There is much controversy concerning psychologists' definitions of emotion (Sutherland, 1995:147). Harris and Huntington (2001:134) share this opinion and state that conceptions of emotion and feelings are contested at the definitional level. With this in mind, however, emotion is a basic aspect of human functioning. Emotions affect all human beings at all stages of the life course and are an important part of everyday life (Harris & Huntington, 2001:142). *Emotions* are personal experiences that arise from a complex interplay among physiological, cognitive and situational variables, which allow psychologists to understand diverse expressions of behaviour (Magill, 1996:606).

Stratton and Hayes (1993:53) define *emotion* as the experience of subjective feelings, which have positive or negative value for the individual. They go on to explain that most current theories regard emotions as a combination of physiological response and a cognitive evaluation of the situation. Emotions are an everyday part of life. Individuals experience emotions in unique ways, varying in aspects such as intensity and duration. Emotions cannot occur in isolation. An individual must firstly experience an event, which is then responded to emotionally by that individual. Emotions thus occur in response to an experience. The emotional response that is experienced is related to the meaning that an individual gives to an experience. This meaning is in turn related to an individual's construction of meaning about the world and about what that type of experience means. This unique meaning is constructed through experiences in the individual's life and also within the context of the society in which the individual lives. Donald, Lazarus and Lolwana (2002:101) take this further when referring to constructivism and explain that parents (among others) are active agents who are making meaning of their lives within and through their social context.

The emotional impact of being the parent of a child with moderate to severe learning difficulties can be devastating for parents (Dudley-Marling 2000:90). For the purpose of this study the term *emotional responses* refers to the emotions that mothers report that they experience in response to learning difficulties in their child.

2.7 LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Adelman and Taylor's (1993:3) distinction between learning problems and learning disabilities will be used to explain the use of the concept *learning*

difficulties for the purpose of this study, where they explain that not all learning problems are learning disabilities. They explain the distinction as a continuum, where learning disabilities (caused by minor central nervous system dysfunctions) are at the one end and learning problems (caused by factors outside the person) are at the other end. In the middle of the continuum they place learning problems that are the result of a combination of person and environmental factors (Adelman & Taylor, 1993:14). The relationship between learning difficulties, learning problems and learning disabilities was discussed in Chapter 1 (see par. 1.4.5).

Stenhouse (1996:113) mentions that there is a fairly high correlation between learning disabilities and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), which is characterised by a short attention span, impulsiveness and constant motion. Silver (1998:36) discusses learning disabilities in his book and explains that they are life disabilities. By this he means that they do not only interfere with school, but also other activities, such as home life, friends and sports. The child with learning disabilities begins to feel the stress of school and of less or little success with learning, and may react with anxiety or depression (Silver, 1998:120). Many families do not realise that their child has a learning disability until he or she reaches school age and begins to fail at a school-related task (Hunt & Marshall, 1994:211). Hunt and Marshall (1994:211) are of the opinion that there tends to be a stigma associated with the label 'learning disabled' or with placement in special education services.

2.8 EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF PARENTS TO CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

'...the downward spiral of school failure can lead to desperation, hopelessness, anxiety and depression – for both children and parents' (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:277).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, much of the available literature places emphasis on the causes, assessment, definitions of and intervention strategies for, learning difficulties (Adelman & Taylor, 1993; Hallahan & Kaufmann, 1991; Lerner, 2000; Mercer & Mercer, 1993). However, there is little reference to emotions that parents experience in response to their child's learning difficulties. These emotions may play a role in parents' ability to understand and support their child effectively. In addition to being mothers and fathers, parents are also human beings who have their own feelings and thoughts (Silver, 1998:154). What follows is a discussion of literature referring to the emotional responses of parents to their child who experiences some form of difficulty or disability.

Studies examining the impact of the presence of a child with learning disabilities on the family are emerging, and tension and frustration are mentioned as emotions that such parents may experience (Lardieri, *et al.*, 2000:105-106). In Dudley-Marling's (2000:92) study, parents of children with learning difficulties reported feeling tremendous frustration when having to do homework with their child, often mentioning that it takes a very long time to complete. One way in which parents try to relieve some of the emotional stress of school trouble is by trying to locate the cause of their child's difficulties (Dudley-Marling, 2000:92). They may blame themselves or one another in an attempt to pinpoint a cause for their child's difficulties (Smith, 1998:449). Some parents feel angry towards the child or the school, which can lead to blaming others (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:124).

It is often the school or a professional who is usually the bearer of the bad news and so they become the object of the parents' anger (Smith, 1998:449). Smith (1998:449) also mentions that parents, who see their child's problem are sometimes told by professionals that there is nothing wrong with the child and this makes them feel angry. This reduced support from others can lead to feelings of isolation and frustration (Smith, 1998:449). Parents who deny the problem tend to seek a more favourable opinion from another professional and this may lead to four or five assessments with the parents waiting for someone to tell them that their child does not have a problem. This delays the process of starting a suitable intervention plan for the child (Smith, 1998:449).

In relation to this, Crow and Crow (1997:107) mention that some parents do not adjust well to accepting that their child has learning difficulties. This, they explain, can seriously interfere with their child's day-to-day functioning and with his or her ability to handle life's challenges and opportunities successfully. These parents are also not fully available to their children. This indicates that it is possible that the emotions that mothers experience in response to their child with learning difficulties may have an impact on their ability to support their child effectively. Even when parents recognise that their child has learning difficulties, they may not know how to resolve the situation (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:xiii).

In Dudley-Marling's (2000:32) study, parents mentioned that the most painful experience for them was to see the effect that their child's difficulties had on their child. Most parents hurt when they see their children suffering. When parents see the difficulties that their child experiences academically and socially it can be very painful for them and they may become overprotective of their child in order to try and save him or her from the pain (Hunt & Marshall, 1994:211). In addition, parents may experience guilt, which leads to self-blame,

doubt and feelings of inadequacy, and then to a cycle in which parents feel hopeless, helpless, angry and resentful (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:124). Parents often need to combat discouragement (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:277).

The emotions that parents experience in response to their child with learning difficulties may have a negative impact on their ability to support their child adequately. Tanguay (2001:33) shares this opinion and explains that there are some very real human emotions that may derail the efforts of parents to help their child with his or her learning difficulties. She mentions denying or minimizing the child's difficulties, grieving and feeling defeated. Margalit and Al-Yagon (2002:64) refer to Antonovsky's (1993) view that confronted with the pain, stress, increased demands and unwanted life changes introduced by their children's difficulties, parents often report that they feel lonely.

Goldstein and Mather (1998:123) explain the following to parents about the emotions they may experience regarding their child's learning difficulties:

'As a parent, you want to provide emotional support to your child, but being able to do this requires you to pay some attention to your own emotional state. When your child has school problems, your emotions pull you in two different directions. Sometimes you see yourself as a normal parent with an abnormal child; at other times, you feel that your child is normal but you are a poor or inadequate parent. Both thought patterns are counterproductive. The first leads to anger and resentment; the second encourages guilt and overpermissiveness on your part, which can result in a lack of control in your child'.

According to Silver (1998:155), at the moment when their child is diagnosed with learning difficulties parents feel the first rush of anguish, fear, helplessness, anger, guilt and shame all at once. Parents may feel overwhelmed, with little understanding, hope or inkling of what direction to take. Professionals need to acknowledge these feelings and indicate a positive course of action to be taken (Silver, 1998:155). Some parents may experience shock, anger, guilt, denial or sorrow on first learning that their child has learning difficulties (Smith, 1998:449). Others have difficulty accepting that their son or daughter is different and that something is wrong (Silver, 1998:154).

'They may experience a series of reactions not too different from the grief reaction that people have when someone dear to them dies, although this grief is of a lesser intensity. Initially parents might fear that they have to "give up" a part of their child, or at least their ambitions for the child that the parents fear may never be realised' (Silver, 1998:154).

These feelings are not only normal, but they are to be expected (Silver, 1998:154). Silver (1998:154) further mentions a series of emotions that parents of children with learning difficulties may experience, namely:

- **Denial**, where parents just cannot believe that this has happened.
- **Helplessness**, where parents do not understand how this could have happened to them. Included here may be **self-blame** and **guilt**, where parents feel they must have caused the difficulties. This helps them to take control and find a cause for the difficulties.
- **Blaming others** for what has happened, which results in **anger**, but provides parents with the assurance that they can control the future by dealing with that person.

Gradually parents work through this grief and begin the long mourning process, where they slowly accept the loss and move on with life and the challenges of helping their child (Silver, 1998:155). These emotional reactions are normal and are only seen as pathological or abnormal reactions when they become a chronic life pattern (Silver, 1998:158). Smith (1998:449) shares this opinion and points out that:

‘In finally coming to grips with the reality of having a child with a disability, many parents have had to “mourn” the loss of the ideal concept they had envisioned for their child. Some parents react to their own anger and disappointment by becoming overprotective or overindulgent’.

Some further emotions reported by the parents in Dudley-Marling’s (2000:62-92) study in response to their child’s scholastic difficulties were tension, anxiety, stress, frustration, anger, resentment, sympathy, worry, fear, sadness, self-blame and guilt. Gldenpfennig (2000:49) discusses the emotional reactions of parents to their premature babies with low birth weight and refers to a series of overlapping stages of emotions that occur, namely shock, denial, sadness and anger, equilibrium and, finally, reorganisation. This opinion is linked to Whitehead’s (2004) research, which suggests that the parent of a child with learning difficulties may go through a series of emotions before truly accepting that the child has a real problem. These stages are very unpredictable and a parent may move from stage to stage at random, stay in a particular stage for an extended period or skip a stage (or stages) altogether.

These stages and examples of each, according to Whitehead (2004), are set out below. She explains that if a mother and father are at different stages, this can lead to communication difficulties and hence to marital conflict.

- **Denial:** 'He'll grow out of it'
- **Blame:** 'It's your family'; 'You baby her too much'
- **Fear:** 'Will my child have a normal life?'
- **Mourning:** 'He could have been such a success'
- **Bargaining:** 'It'll improve if we send him on a camp'
- **Anger:** 'It's the teachers!'
- **Guilt:** 'I'm being punished, so she's being punished'
- **Isolation:** 'No-one else understands our problem'
- **Flight:** 'I'll find a doctor who tells me what I want to hear'

However, there are some parents who experience a feeling of relief and comfort when they learn of their child's difficulties, where they feel they have an answer for what they always felt was going wrong (Silver, 1998:154). Smith (1998:449) shares this opinion and states that some parents are relieved when told that their child has learning difficulties as it confirms their suspicions.

The preceding discussion indicates several studies that have examined the emotional responses of parents to their child with some form of difficulty, disability or learning difficulty. These studies give insight into what parents of children with learning difficulties may go through emotionally, but little distinction is drawn between the emotional responses of mothers and those of fathers. Where parents are referred to as a homogeneous category the assumption is that both mothers and fathers experience the same emotions. This assumption may be as correct as it may be incorrect. This study, therefore, takes this existing research one step further by examining the emotional responses of mothers to their child with learning difficulties, thereby contributing towards the minimal amount of existing literature that does reflect a gender differentiation between the emotional responses of parents to their child with learning difficulties.

2.9 UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY

Based on the preceding literature review, there are a number of assumptions concerning this study. Mothers go through their own school and learning experiences when they are at

school. These experiences may be of a positive nature, where the mother found learning easy and achieved well, or of a negative nature, where she had learning difficulties and did not experience much success scholastically. It also involves her experiences of seeing her peers' experiences of school and learning. These experiences contribute towards her constructions of what it means (to her) to go to school, to learn, to have or not to have learning difficulties and to even perhaps receive 'remedial' education.

From a constructivist perspective, these constructions do not occur in isolation, but in interaction with the social and cultural world in which she lives, a world that expresses views concerning school, learning, learning difficulties and 'remedial' education. These societal views (which can be either positive or negative) are part of a world in which the mother is immersed and also form part of her constructions of what it means, again, (to her) to go to school, to learn, to have or not to have learning difficulties and to perhaps receive 'remedial' education.

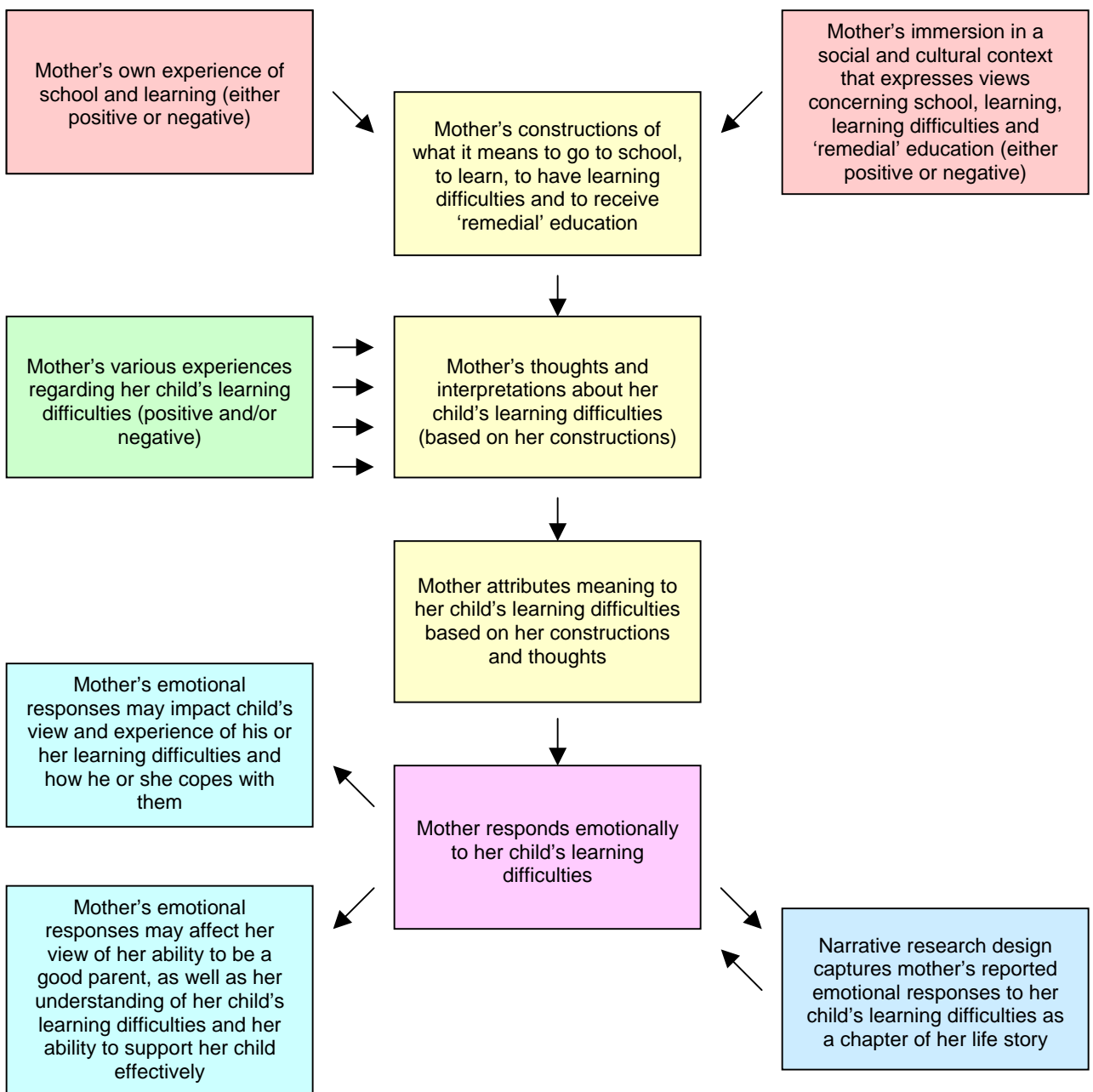
Individuals' emotions flow from the meaning that they attribute to their experiences. This meaning that is attributed flows from their thoughts about their experiences. These thoughts about their experiences are, in turn, based on their constructions of how they see the world. Thus, it would appear that the emotions that mothers experience in response to their child's learning difficulties are related to their constructions surrounding school, learning, having learning difficulties and receiving 'remedial' education. These constructions influence a mother's thoughts about her child having learning difficulties (for example, 'it is something terrible' or 'it is a small problem that can be dealt with'). These thoughts play a role in the meaning that a mother attributes to her child having learning difficulties and receiving 'remedial' education, which influences how she feels about her child's difficulties (i.e. how she responds emotionally to them). All these emotional responses appear to possibly have an impact on a mother's view of her ability to parent her child adequately and also on her ability to understand and support her child with his or her learning difficulties. These emotional responses are also possibly related to her child's own experience of, and ability to cope with his or her learning difficulties.

This process is dynamic and mothers' thoughts and constructions can change on the basis of any new experiences that they may have (positive and/or negative). In essence, their constructions, thoughts, meaning-giving and emotional responses are a chapter (of everything related to how they view their child's learning difficulties) in the story of each mother's life. A narrative approach is used in this study to capture this specific chapter in

each mother's life story, with a focus on their emotional responses. For a schematic representation of these underlying assumptions, see Figure 2.2.

Based on the literature consulted it seems that the emotions that these mothers may experience (based, as indicated above, on their constructions) do not seem to occur in any set order. They may experience different emotions at different times and in response to different experiences and challenges that arise. Certain emotions may be felt continuously or again at later stages and may also differ in intensity at different stages.

Figure 2.2: Schematic representation of the underlying assumptions of the study



2.10 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This chapter provided an in-depth discussion of the conceptual framework for this study. The central concepts were schematically related and then discussed. Relationships between these concepts were pointed out and links between them identified. A review of recent literature concerning the emotions of parents and mothers of children with disabilities or learning difficulties was also given, after which the underlying assumptions for this study were discussed and schematically represented. The following chapter provides a discussion of the research process conducted in this study.

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CHAPTER 3

EXPLORING NARRATIVES: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

When undertaking any research it is essential to have a clear idea of the lens through which one views the research topic, as well as the research design that will be the most appropriate method to collect, analyse and represent the findings of the research. In this study a narrative research design was used to capture the emotional responses within mothers' stories relating their experiences with their child with learning difficulties. The process was viewed through the lenses of the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms.

This chapter provides a discussion of this paradigmatic perspective, followed by a discussion of the narrative research design used in this study, as well as the trustworthiness of the data, the role of the researcher and the ethical considerations for this research. This is followed by a discussion concerning the research methodology and process followed in this study.

3.2 PARADIGM: CONSTRUCTIVIST AND INTERPRETIVIST

This research study is a qualitative study. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2001:101) qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of phenomena, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view. They state that the qualitative approach is also referred to as the interpretative or constructivist approach. Creswell (1998:254) refers to Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) explanation that a paradigm is the philosophical stance taken by the researcher that provides a set of beliefs that guide action. As stated, this qualitative research study was undertaken from within the constructivist and interpretivist paradigmatic viewpoints.

As mentioned previously, qualitative research often refers to the constructivist paradigm of theory generation within the context of human inquiry, where one gains an understanding of

how people construe their world and how they make sense of their experiences (Gregory, 2000:150). Constructivists assume a world in which universal, absolute realities are unknowable, and the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality (Hatch, 2002:15).

The mothers in this study were given the opportunity to 'tell their story', relating their individual experiences, perspectives and emotional responses regarding their child's learning difficulties. According to Gregory (2002:157) human science research in the form of constructivism is actively engaged in understanding how people, individually and collectively, construe their world, as well as their sense of being and knowing and how they apply such knowledge to themselves and others.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN: NARRATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

3.3.1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades there has been increasing interest in the personal nature of experience and in how people make sense of their worlds by telling stories about them (Paola, 2002:134). Narrative has come to be important to people throughout the humanities and social sciences (Johnstone, 2003:643). Creswell (2002:521) states that for individuals searching for a research design that reports personal stories, narrative research may be ideal, as it seeks to understand and represent experiences through the stories that individuals live and tell. Narrative studies are based on the notion that humans make sense of their lives through story (Hatch, 2002:28). Extending this line of thought is Rappaport (1993) (as cited in Rapmund & Moore, 2002:23) who explains that narratives or stories function to order experience, give coherence and meaning to events and provide a sense of history and of the future. Narratives explain people to themselves and others (Rapmund & Moore, 2002:23). Dean (1998) (as cited in Rapmund & Moore, 2002:23) states that narratives create identities and influence how people manage their lives.

In this study a narrative research design was used in order to draw out mothers' stories relating their experiences and more specifically their emotional responses to their child's learning difficulties. Storytelling is an elementary form of human communication (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000:58) and for some of the mothers it was an opportunity to verbalise these feelings, something they had not spoken about before. Others reported that

they felt they realised certain things that they had not considered before. In this regard Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2000:58) state that:

‘By telling, people recall what has happened, put experience into sequence, find possible explanations for it, and play with the chain of events that shapes individual and social life. Story-telling involves intentional states that alleviate, or at least make familiar, events and feelings that confront ordinary everyday life’.

Johnstone (2003:644-645) explains that narrative is socially and epistemologically constructive, that, through telling, we make ourselves and our experimental worlds. Rather than a search for grand unifying narratives in a system of similarities, a constructivist approach celebrates the unity to be found in a diversity of individual narratives (Hayes & Oppenheim, 1997:34). In this study each participant’s story is their individual narrative, with unity being located in both diverse and common emotional responses that emerged. In considering the results of this study the emphasis is placed on the more common emotional responses that emerged.

3.3.2 STRENGTHS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Narrative research captures an everyday, normal form of data that is familiar to individuals as it is a natural part of life and individuals all have stories about their experiences to tell others (Creswell, 2002:531). For the participants who are being studied through narrative research, sharing their stories may make them feel that their stories are important and that they are being heard (Creswell, 2002:531). One mother in particular in this study said in her letter that she thoroughly enjoyed the interview session as she had never ‘...conversed with anyone regarding issues relating to (her son) in an in-depth manner, nor verbalised...’ how she felt. She explained that ‘...it opened a few emotions and feelings...’ that she previously had not thought of or spoken about openly. In addition to feeling heard, telling a story helps individuals understand aspects that they may need to process and understand (Creswell, 2002:531).

When conducting research within any field where human beings are involved and there is an examination of the very essence of their humanness (including a study of emotions), a research methodology and design that is qualitative is essential. Such a study of humanness requires a methodology and design that takes into account the uniqueness of every person and allows room for the subjective, interactive and interrelational component

of being a researcher in a world of complex human nature. In this regard Johnstone (2003:642) states that qualitative social-scientific research is challenging the methodological authority of quantitative research paradigms in education, sociology and psychology. Thus, this study, concerning the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties, is supported in its efforts to explore this dimension through using a narrative research design.

In this study a narrative research design was a way to capture both unique and common emotional responses of mothers of children with learning difficulties. This allowed for all data that addressed the research question to be included and not lost. The essentially subjective and qualitative information was captured. In referring to quantitative research, Sikes (2002:xi) points out that research where findings can be expressed in mathematical terms, is unlikely to be sophisticated enough to sufficiently accommodate and account for unique differences that are involved. She says:

‘There is a need for research which explores and takes account of...subjective perspectives, and which acknowledges that qualitative information is essential...’

In addition to this, narrative researchers may present the research results in a format different from that of traditional formats, in that results can be presented through a fictionalised narrative. This offers researchers the opportunity to use aspects of data derived from various real events, feelings and conversations and integrate them into a narrative, thus providing the protection of anonymity to the research participants without stripping away the rawness of real happenings. Narrative is useful in that it opens up a deeper view of life in familiar contexts, whereby it can make the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Clough, 2002:8-9).

3.3.3 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Although a narrative research design is an excellent method of collecting and interpreting data, there are shortcomings that need to be considered when conducting narrative research. Connelly and Clandinin (1990:10) (as cited in Creswell, 2002:532) state that the participant may ‘fake the data’, relating a very positive story with a happy ending. Narrative researchers rely heavily on self-reported information from participants, which may lead to a distortion of the data (Creswell, 2002:532). When research participants are asked to describe their experiences, they do so with many operative defences and self-deceptions

that are inherent in the experiences they describe (Churchill, 2000:44). Churchill (2000:44) takes this further and emphasises that out of concern for the validity of narration one must consider the possibility of 'distortion' in the reflexive movement from the lived to the known. This point appears to be particularly relevant to the participants in this study who may have been in a phase of denial regarding their child's learning difficulties or those who wanted to appear to be coping well.

There is also a tendency in narrative research to rely on available narratives in reconstructing and presenting one's data. This means that one has a sense of expectancy about what the results may indicate. In this study, this applies to the emotions one imagines that mothers would experience in response to their child's learning difficulties. This reliance on available narratives, based on the researcher's own experiences and knowledge, may result in certain aspects of the data not being included. In this study the initial phase of the data analysis included all possible aspects of the stories reported by mothers. This included their experiences, behaviours, thoughts, opinions and emotions. These results were slowly sifted through in order to capture the emotional responses inherent in the mothers' stories, decreasing the possibility of losing any of the essential data, some of which may have fitted into 'non-available' narratives.

3.4 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE DATA

Knowledge produced within a constructivist paradigm is often presented in the form of rich narratives that describe the interpretations constructed as part of the research process (Hatch, 2002:15). As stated earlier, the emotional responses of mothers to their child's learning difficulties is the focus of this study. It is *their* accounts of their experiences and their resulting emotional responses that have been studied. The very essence of their emotional responses is subjective. *Their* perceptions and constructions are what are important, as well as how they see things from their own frame of reference. Although the object of study is defined as it is actually experienced and observed by the participants themselves, data credibility need not be forfeited (Niemann, *et al.*, 2000:285).

In this study the researcher placed a substantial amount of trust in the data collected, as the quality of participants' storytelling appeared high for the following reasons. Good rapport was established with participants before the interview commenced and participants spoke openly about their experiences with their child and his or her learning difficulties. The emphasis was on their subjective, personal experiences and the meaning that they ascribe

to their situation, which, as part of a qualitative study, reflects their 'truth' and the trustworthiness of the data. Churchill (2000:59) points out that by making ourselves better acquainted with modes of self-deception evident in narrative research, our intuition will serve us better when listening to others' accounts of their experiences. Any personal biases on the researcher's part were dealt with by means of the journal entries (see par. 3.7.3.2), where the researcher became aware of any biased feelings and remained aware of them whilst interpreting the data.

It must be emphasised in this study that reality in qualitative research and within a constructivist paradigm points to the reality of individuals' experiences and perceptions as interpreted and constructed by them, not as they are 'out there'. This would mean that, in this study, any distortion from the lived to the known (Churchill, 2000:44) in the participants' stories does not render that data untrustworthy (in qualitative terms).

3.5 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

The researcher assumed a number of roles in this study. The primary role was that of being an interviewer, using empathic listening skills to help mothers to 'tell their story'. The role of the researcher within this important phase of interviewing involved being that of listener, hearing mothers tell their stories by means of the interview. A minimal number of questions were asked to elicit responses from mothers that related their experiences and emotions during the journey that they had walked with their child.

In addition to this, the role of transcriber and analyser was also part of the researcher's role, where the interviews were transcribed and the data obtained analysed through theme analysis as discussed in par. 3.7.4. Further roles of the researcher were to integrate and present the results, as well as provide the participants with feedback on the initial findings of the study and receive their input regarding these findings. Contact was maintained with participants through follow-up phone calls regarding their letter writing, as well as through arranging appointments for feedback on the initial findings of the study. Participants were encouraged to contact the researcher or supervisor if they had any queries at any time. The feedback sessions with participants support Creswell (2002:525) and Ezzy's (2002:68) view that collaboration and checking interpretations with participants form an integral part of narrative research.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.6.1 INFORMED CONSENT AND VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

In this study, mothers who were initially selected through the names selected at the 'remedial' school, were telephonically contacted requesting their participation for the study. The aims and procedures for the research were explained to them, as well as their role in it, as set out in the consent form in Appendix B, with the emphasis on voluntary participation.

Appointments for an individual interview session were then scheduled with mothers who agreed to participate in the study at a time convenient to them. At the scheduled interview appointment, the letter of consent was given to participants to read, and they were given an opportunity to ask any questions before signing the consent form. It was emphasised that they could still withdraw from the study at any time. Before the interview proceeded, the researcher briefly explained that, although there were questions that would cover certain aspects, each participant was encouraged to speak freely about her experiences and emotions regarding her child's learning difficulties – that it was her opportunity to tell her story. Each participant was given a copy of the consent form, with contact details to take with them and an invitation to feel free to contact the researcher or supervisor with queries at any time.

3.6.2 CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

In initial telephonic contact with mothers and again during both the interview sessions and feedback and collaboration sessions with participants, participants were assured that their identity would not be revealed (i.e. it be withheld from appearing in the study or interview data) and that the information they shared would be kept confidential. The consent form included this information too.

Interviews took place away from the school premises in order to adhere to the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity. The interview sessions were held at the researcher's office, where she was an intern psychologist. The feedback and collaboration sessions with participants were conducted at their homes. By guaranteeing participants' confidentiality, the probability of more cooperation and open and honest responses (Aguinis & Henle, 2002:41) was increased.

3.6.3 PROTECTION FROM HARM

The three principles mentioned by Holloway and Jefferson (2000:100-102), namely honesty, sympathy and respect, were used to protect the participants in this study from harm. No human rights were violated during this research study.

3.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.7.1 RESEARCH PROCESS

The research process followed in this study involved a number of important steps. Figure 3.1 indicates these research steps in diagrammatic form.

3.7.2 PLACE OF STUDY

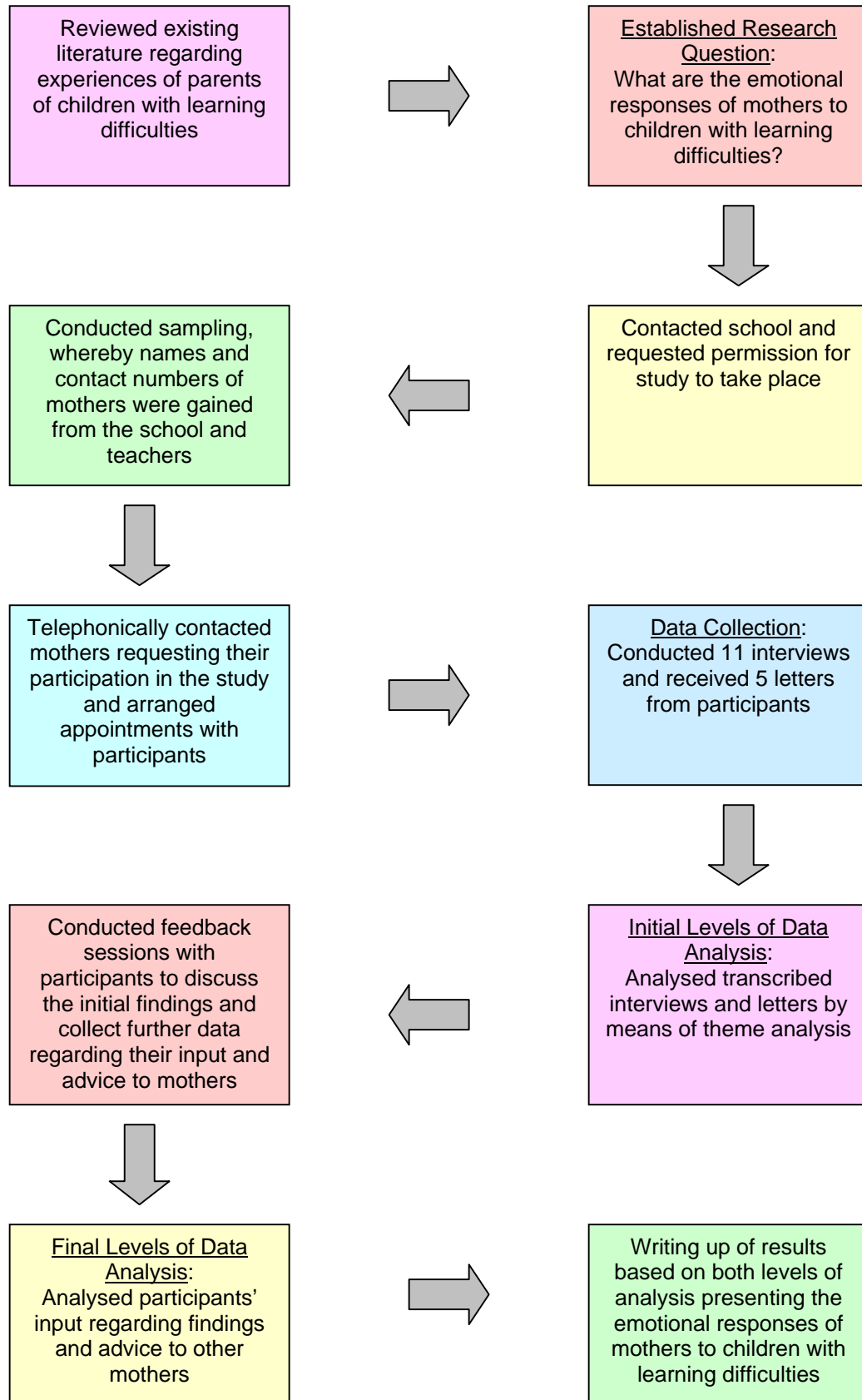
The participants for this research study were selected from a Pretoria school specialising in 'remedial' education. A detailed discussion of the school and its educators was presented in Chapter 1, par. 1.6.2.2(a).

For one-on-one interviewing, the researcher needs to make use of a setting in which participants feel free to speak and share ideas openly (Creswell, 1998:124). Although the researcher requested permission from the principal of the school for the research to take place, the interviews with participants were conducted away from the school premises at the researcher's workplace where she was an intern psychologist. This was done in order to adhere to the principles of confidentiality and anonymity, and also so that participants could feel free to express their views without being concerned that they might be overheard by someone who would recognise them.

3.7.3 PARTICIPANTS

In this study the researcher firstly requested approval to conduct the study from the school's principal. Appendix A indicates the letter of consent in this regard. Teachers from the various grades at the school were then asked to volunteer names and contact numbers of mothers of children in their classes. In total, twenty names were selected. The researcher then contacted these mothers telephonically.

Figure 3.1: Research process



The study was explained to them in terms of the letter of consent laid out in Appendix B, with emphasis being placed on confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation. An appointment for an interview was then scheduled with mothers who agreed to take part in the study.

Participants for this study were thus selected through purposive sampling. They were chosen with the following criteria in mind. Each participant was a mother who has a child who experiences learning difficulties and at the time of the study was enrolled at the school specialising in 'remedial' education. In total, twelve interviews took place, of which eleven interviews were used for the purpose of data analysis. One interview was excluded as the participants included both a mother and father and the information provided was therefore not suitable for the focus of this study.

The eleven mothers included in this study were aged from 36 to 53 years, with the average age being 43 years. Out of the 11 participants selected, seven had a son and four had a daughter attending the school specialising in 'remedial' education. The children of the mothers were between the ages of six and twelve and ranged from grade 0 to grade 6. Four of the children are the youngest in their family, four are the oldest and two have older and younger siblings. One child is an only child. There were nine mothers who are married, one who is divorced, one who is in the process of possibly divorcing and one who has never been married. Two mothers reported having another child with learning difficulties. Seven mothers reported having a relative with learning difficulties, while four mentioned that there was no known relative with learning difficulties. Four mothers mentioned that they themselves and/or their husband experienced learning difficulties. Seven reported coping adequately at school, themselves. Table 3.1 gives a brief description of each participant.

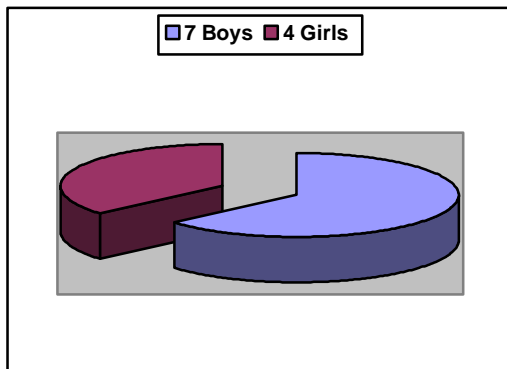
Table 3.1: Descriptions of the participants in this study

PARTICIPANTS	DESCRIPTION
Participant 1	Participant 1 is 43 years old, is divorced and works as a housewife. She has a seven-year-old boy in grade 1 at the 'remedial' school, who has ADD, as well as four other children, two boys, aged three and 12 years and a daughter, aged 14 years, none of whom have learning difficulties. Her ex-husband's brother was diagnosed with ADD.
Participant 2	Participant 2 is 41 years old, has been married for 19 years and has her own business as a development consultant in the socio-economic field. She has a 10-year-old boy in grade 4 at the 'remedial' school, as well as another son, aged nine years, who experiences no learning difficulties. Her husband's two brothers each have a son with learning difficulties and her sister has a son with learning difficulties.

PARTICIPANTS	DESCRIPTION
Participant 3	Participant 3 is 47 years old, has been married for 22 years and works as a housewife. She has an 11-year-old boy in grade 5 at the 'remedial' school, as well as two other children, a daughter, aged 17 years and a son, aged 19 years, neither of whom has learning difficulties. There is no known relative with learning difficulties.
Participant 4	Participant 4 is 45 years old, has been married for 11 years and works in public relations. She has a six-year-old girl in grade 0 at the 'remedial' school, as well as two other daughters, aged five and eight years, neither of whom have learning difficulties. According to the participant there is a possibility that her husband's sister may have had learning difficulties.
Participant 5	Participant 5 is 43 years old, has been married for 16 years and, although she currently does not work, has a teaching qualification. She has a seven-year-old boy in grade 1 at the 'remedial' school and has no other children. There is no known relative with learning difficulties.
Participant 6	Participant 6 is 41 years old, has been married for 15 years and works as a hairdresser. She has a 10-year-old girl in grade 4 at the 'remedial' school, as well as a son, aged 14 years, who does not experience any learning difficulties. The mother, herself, has learning difficulties.
Participant 7	Participant 7 is 39 years old, has been married for 14 years and works as a housewife. She has an 11-year-old girl in grade 4 at the 'remedial' school, as well as twin girls, aged 13 years, one of whom experienced learning difficulties. There is no known relative with learning difficulties.
Participant 8	Participant 8 is 53 years old, has never been married and works as a baker. She has a 12-year-old girl in grade 6 at the 'remedial' school, as well as another daughter, aged 21 years, who experiences learning difficulties. Her child's father's sister had learning difficulties.
Participant 9	Participant 9 is 36 years old, has been married for 13 years and works as an estate agent. She has a 12-year-old boy in grade 6 at the 'remedial' school, as well as another son, aged 10 years, who does not experience learning difficulties. Both she and her husband experience learning difficulties.
Participant 10	Participant 10 is 37 years old, has been married for 12 years and works in her husband's business. She has an 11-year-old boy in grade 5 at the 'remedial' school, as well as a daughter, aged six years, who does not experience learning difficulties. There is no known relative with learning difficulties.
Participant 11	Participant 11 is 39 years old, is in the process of divorcing and works as a business manager. She has a nine-year-old boy in grade 3 at the 'remedial' school, as well as another son, aged five years, who does not experience learning difficulties. Her husband has learning difficulties.

The above table indicates information unique to each individual participant. In contrast, figures 3.2 to 3.7 represent the biographical details of the participants in this study, where common aspects between the participants are reflected.

**Figure 3.2: Ratio of boys to girls
(children of the participants)**



**Figure 3.3: Ages of the children of
the participants**

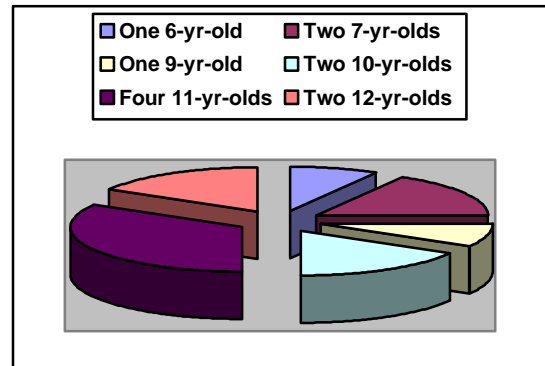
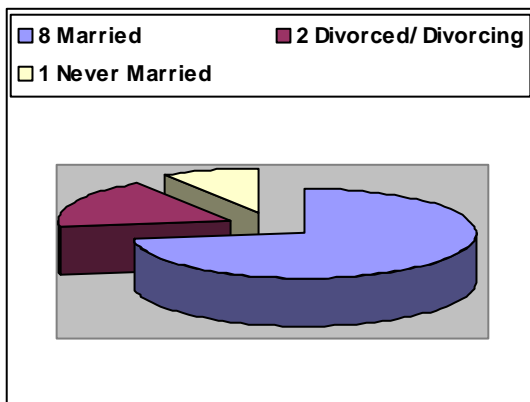
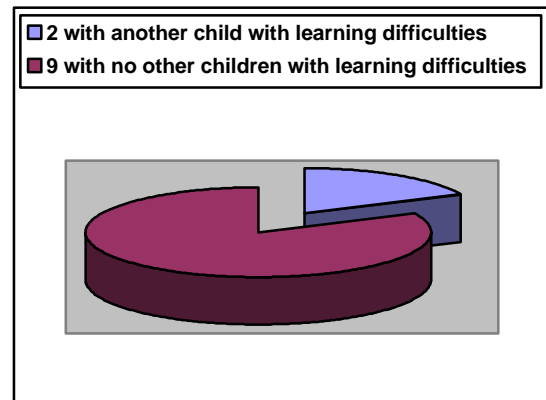


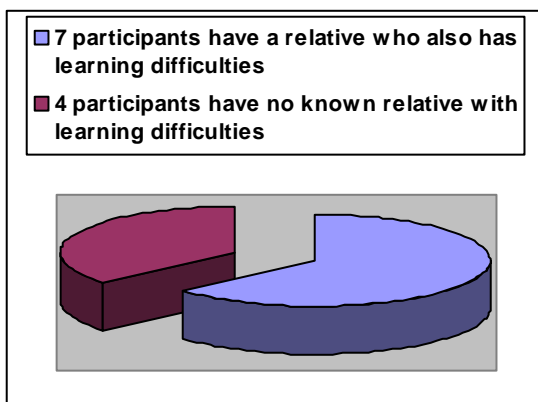
Figure 3.4: Marital status of participants



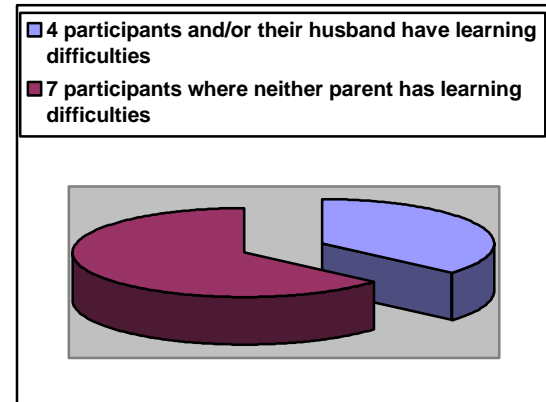
**Figure 3.5: Other children with
learning difficulties in the family**



**Figure 3.6: Relatives of participants
with learning difficulties**



**Figure 3.7: Participants and/or
husband with learning difficulties**



3.7.4 DATA COLLECTION

3.7.4.1 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all 11 participants. Permission was requested from participants to audiotape the interview for the purpose of transcribing. The researcher explained to the participants why the recording was being made and how it was going to be used (Willig, 2001:25). Appendix C gives the format of the semi-structured interview schedule used in this study. The researcher had an interview schedule prepared, with questions being asked in a relatively set order. At the outset of the interview, participants were encouraged to tell their story and to elaborate on any aspects they wished to. The questions asked guided the interview towards the focus of this study and in addition encouraged participants to speak freely.

Mothers were encouraged to speak freely about their experiences and emotions regarding their child's learning difficulties. The semi-structured questionnaire was used to guide the focus towards eliciting their emotional responses. The researcher made use of empathic listening as mothers told their stories and used empathic highlights to indicate to mothers that they were being listened to and understood. Empathic listening centred on the kind of attending, observing and listening – the kind of 'being with' – needed to develop an understanding of the mothers and their worlds (Egan, 2002:76).

Unplanned probes and additional questions were used during the interviews where deemed necessary. Most of the mothers spoke with ease about their experience of the child's difficulties, with little need for too many unplanned questions. The questions in the interview schedule asked by the researcher functioned as triggers (Willig 2001:22) that encouraged mothers in telling their stories.

Interview questions in this study were related to aspects of Creswell's (2002:530) three-dimensional space narrative structure, which involves looking inward at the participant's feelings, hopes, reactions and dispositions, and outward at social interaction to include other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions and points of view. There is a consideration of the past that is remembered, the present relating to experiences of an event, and the future, looking forward to possible experiences.

Interviews were transcribed by presenting the interview format in terms of speaker turn units. In other words, the conversation was broken up into consecutively numbered units for each turn taken by the researcher and the participant. Appendix D presents an example of such a transcribed page.

3.7.4.2 Field notes

The transcribed interviews, as well as the letters written by the participants (see par. 3.7.3.3), were the central field notes used for data-analysis in this study. Gay and Airasian (2003:213) support this view and state that transcripts are the field notes for interview data. These transcribed interviews were analysed by means of theme analysis (see par. 3.7.4).

The personal experience of the researcher is an integral part of the research process (Ezzy, 2002:153) and therefore cannot be ignored. This was particularly important in this study as the interaction between the researcher and participants involved empathic listening and therefore a degree of subjectivity. Field notes were included in the form of journal entries consisting of reflections written by the researcher throughout the research process. These field notes were written after contact with participants, especially after each interview session, as well as reflecting on the stepping-stones along the research path. Appendix E gives an example of a page from the research journal in this study.

Field notes in the form of journal entries written by the researcher provided a reflective balance (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:104). The research journal in this study was used to reflect on the practicalities of conducting the research and emergent interpretations of the significance of data collected (Ezzy, 2002:71-72). The research journal facilitated the interpretative process that was at the heart of this qualitative study. It encouraged the researcher to reflect routinely on her emerging understanding of the data.

3.7.4.3 Letters from mothers

Participants were asked to write a letter reflecting on their experiences regarding their child's learning difficulties, with specific emphasis on the emotions they have experienced, as well as their view of themselves as parents. In addition to this, part of the letter concerned a reflection on the experience of telling their story by means of the interview. The participants were provided with self-addressed, stamped envelopes at the end of the interview. They were given a choice of either posting their letters or leaving them at the

school, where the researcher would collect them. Participants were permitted to keep their letters anonymous, if they chose to.

This data collection strategy was used because letters are especially applicable to gathering stories in narrative research (Creswell, 2002:528). They may be authored by participants and are a means whereby people try to give an account of themselves and endow their experiences with meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:106-107). In this study participants were given the opportunity to reflect on themselves and the interview session, and in that way endow these experiences with meaning, again reinforcing the notion that this process may have been therapeutic for some of the participants. Davies (1996:176) (cited in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000:108) expands upon this line of thought, stating that letters enable individuals to get in touch with their own thoughts and feelings, in their own time and space, as well as allowing for a deeper level of reflection on the part of the writer.

The response rate for returning the letters was average and five out of the eleven participants returned their letters, whilst there was no response from six participants. Follow-up phone calls were made three times and then discontinued.

3.7.4.4 Feedback and collaboration session with mothers

Narrative research aims to collaborate with the participant when writing the research study (Creswell, 2002:525), as it is important to consider how evolving interpretations of the data can be checked with participants (Ezzy, 2002:68). A feedback session with each participant was held after the initial levels of data analysis were complete. The purpose of this session was to inform participants of and discuss with them the initial findings of the study and to receive their input regarding these findings. Further data was collected through note-taking during this session regarding the input from participants. In this regard Aguinis and Henle (2002:42) refer to debriefing and state that it is the primary method used to ensure that participants receive the information on the findings that is often promised as a benefit of participating in research. They refer to Harris' (1988) view that this leaves participants with a sense of dignity and a perception that their time was not wasted.

3.7.5 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: THEME ANALYSIS FLOWING INTO A NARRATIVE

'The aim of analysis is to understand the various constitutive elements of one's data through an inspection of the relationship between concepts,

constructs and variables, and to see whether there are any patterns or trends that can be identified or isolated, or to establish themes in the data... Interpretation involves the synthesis of one's data into larger coherent wholes' (Mouton, 2002:108-109).

During the data analysis in this study, *open coding* was first applied. All eleven transcribed interviews were read, after which emotional responses were listed based on the main emotional responses that seemed to be prominent in all the participant's stories.

Axial coding (Ezzy, 2002:91) was applied as a second step in the data analysis process. Specific responses were highlighted in the transcribed interviews, specifically distinguishing between experiences, behaviour, thoughts/opinions and emotions. Specific attention was paid to the emotional responses reported by the participants. In this regard Egan (2002:78-79) states that one should pay careful attention to three aspects when listening to stories, namely the person's *experiences* (what happens to them), their *behaviours* (what they do and do not do) and their *affect* (feelings, emotions and moods). Each of these aspects was highlighted in a different colour and notes made in the margins. Appendix F presents an example of this step in the data analysis process. The letters from the participants were also highlighted in the same manner. Thereafter these emotional responses were tabulated, according to themes, vertically down the left-hand side and the participants numbered from 1 to 11 horizontally across the top of the page. A marker was put under each participant who mentioned a particular theme, along with the speaker turn unit number evidencing that response. Important opinions and thoughts were included in this step, so as not to lose any important data at this stage, resulting in 129 'themes'.

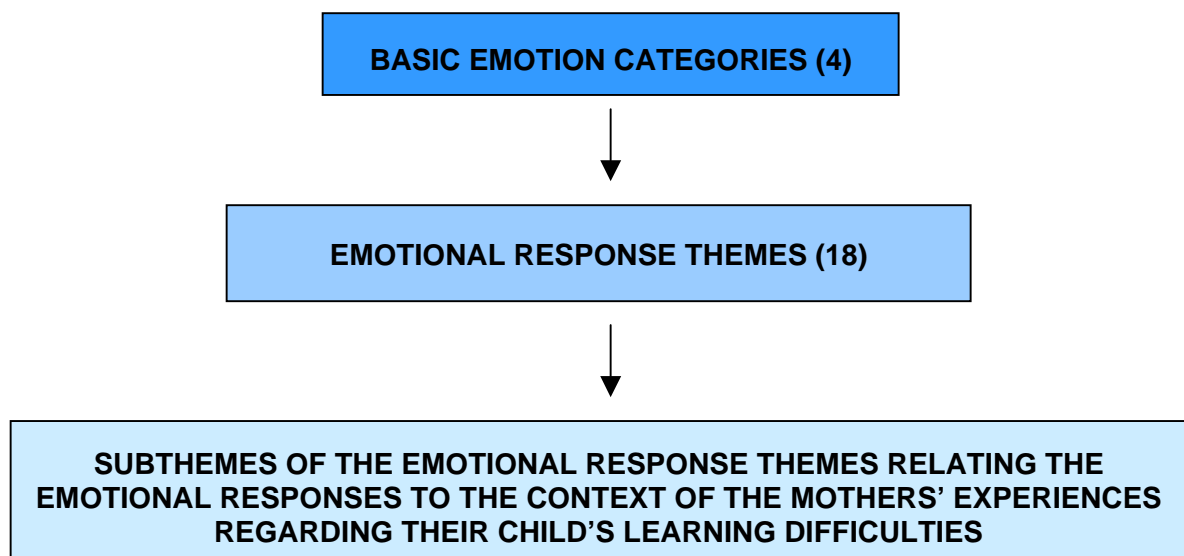
Finally, the concept of *selective coding*, as described by Ezzy (2002:92) was used. This involved the identification of the core category or story around which the analysis focused. In this study this step involved identifying core categories of emotional responses, where 23 such emotional response themes were identified. These 23 themes were integrated from the 129 full themes, with the focus now specifically on emotional responses reported. Each of the 23 emotional response themes included subthemes, which refer to specific aspects of contexts of these emotional responses. The layout in tabular format was the same for these 23 emotional response themes as for the 129 themes, where it was possible to see the total number of participants who mentioned the emotional response, as well more specifically how many participants mentioned the subthemes relating specific contexts. Again speaker turn unit numbers were included for easy reference to the supporting data.

Through further examination and organisation of the results there was a reduction from 23 emotional response themes to 18. Some emotional response themes were merged together as the meaning or understanding thereof was closely related. The themes of **uncertainty** and **self-doubt** were merged and **pride** was included under feelings of **love**. Three emotional responses were removed from the primary results and included under exceptions as a minority of mothers (namely, two) reported experiencing them. Any emotional responses where at least six mothers (more than half) reported experiencing them were including under primary responses, as this was indicative of a 'strong' theme.

To organise the data analysis results more efficiently and present them in a coherent manner, the 18 emotional response themes were then categorised under the four basic emotion categories, namely, sad responses, fearful responses, joyful responses and angry responses. During this level of analysis a theme map was used in order to create a visual representation of the emerging interpretation and to draw together the initial narrative. This analysis involved aspects of selective coding. The intention of this strategy was to capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon (Boyatzis, 1998:31).

Gay and Airasian (2003:228) suggest that visually displaying one's data can help one to see it in a new light and aid one's understanding. For example, concept maps can be useful in identifying relationships in the data. Figure 3.8 presents the concept map used in the interpretation of the data.

Figure 3.8: Overall concept map used during the interpretation of the data



The results of the theme analysis were interpreted further through a final level of analysis, where the results from the feedback and collaboration session with the participants were included, in order to weave a narrative of mothers' emotional responses to their child having learning difficulties. The results of the theme analysis and the accompanying narrative are presented in Chapter 4.

3.8 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Chapter 3 presented a more detailed description of the research design, paradigmatic perspective and research methodology used in this study. An indication was also given of the background information of the participants in this study. The research process followed was discussed, as well as the steps used in the data analysis. In Chapter 4 the results of the theme analysis are presented in tabulated form, indicating the emotional response themes that emerged. This chapter also includes a discussion of these results, where the emotional response themes that were identified through the theme analysis are discussed, with reference to the subthemes that emerged. Finally, a narrative of the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties is presented.

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CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION OF THE THEMES AND NARRATIVE OF THE EMOTIONAL
RESPONSES OF MOTHERS TO CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the results of the theme analysis, providing supporting evidence from the transcribed interviews. The tabulated results of the theme analysis are firstly presented, followed by a more detailed discussion of the results gained through this research study. It discusses the 18 emotional responses identified within the four basic emotion categories. Each emotional response is discussed with reference to subthemes that emerged, which relate the emotional responses to specific contexts or aspects. The chapter concludes with a narrative, which represents the voices of, and depicts a chapter in, the story of mothers of children with learning difficulties.

4.2 RESULTS OF THE THEME ANALYSIS

In total, 18 emotional response themes were identified through the theme analysis. These 18 emotional response themes have been grouped under the four basic emotions, fearful emotional responses, angry emotional responses, sad emotional responses and joyful emotional responses. Table 4.1 presents the results of the theme analysis conducted and gives an indication of the number of participants out of the eleven who reported that specific emotional response. The three emotional responses that are part of the exclusions are also presented in the table and in the detailed discussion. The basic emotion category and emotional response themes are indicated in this table. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of the subthemes that emerged within each emotional response theme, as well as supporting quotations.

Table 4.1: Results of the theme analysis indicating basic emotion categories and core themes

BASIC EMOTION CATEGORIES	EMOTIONAL RESPONSE THEMES	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS
FEARFUL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	Shock	7/11
	Worry	7/11
	Desperation / Despair	6/11
	Uncertainty / Self-doubt	8/11
ANGRY EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	Anger	9/11
	Frustration	11/11
SAD EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	Sadness	9/11
	Despondence / Depression	6/11
	Self-blame / Guilt	9/11
	Helplessness	8/11
	Sympathy	6/11
	Protectiveness	6/11
JOYFUL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	Happiness	11/11
	Understanding	6/11
	Relief	10/11
	Acceptance	6/11
	Hopefulness	8/11
	Love	11/11
EMOTIONAL RESPONSES THAT WERE EXCEPTIONS	Fear	2/11
	Overwhelmed	2/11
	Disappointment	2/11

Three emotional responses are included under exceptions due to the fact that the minority of the mothers (only two in each emotional response category) reported experiencing these feelings. These are the emotional responses of **fear**, being **overwhelmed** and **disappointment**.

4.3 RESULTS OF THE THEME ANALYSIS DISCUSSING THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AND SUBTHEMES OF THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF MOTHERS OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

Mothers of children with learning difficulties have a story to tell regarding the chapter within their life stories that relates their emotional responses to their child with learning difficulties. Emotionally it can be a time when mothers experience periods of ups and downs, as well as a range of emotions, many of which are common to others, but some of which may be unique. These emotions are not experienced in any fixed order, nor are they only experienced once. They can recur at any time during the journey in response to their experiences. The emotional responses may also vary in their duration. There are, however, common emotional responses that were reported by the majority of the participants in this study.

The following discussion presents the results of the theme analysis depicting the emotions reported by mothers of children with learning difficulties. The chapter concludes with a narrative of the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties.

FEARFUL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

 **SHOCK**

'I was quite shocked because he's been at the playschool since he was three years old and his teachers never picked it up...it was a shock to me' (Participant 10, units 4 & 6).

Table 4.2: Emotional response theme: Shock

SHOCK	
Definition	Something that jars the mind or emotions as if with a violent, unexpected blow; emotionally disturbing (Morris, 1973:1196).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'felt surprised', 'felt shocked', 'it shook me' or 'felt devastated' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'self-blame', 'worry', 'self-doubt', 'uncertainty', 'desperation' or 'despair' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, seven mothers reported feelings of shock in response to their child with learning difficulties. The mothers reported feeling shocked when told that their child is experiencing learning difficulties or in seeing their child's lack of progress. Some mentioned that they never expected their own child to have problems. This theme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...and I was shocked...I really didn't want to go that route...'* (Participant 1, unit 38).
- *'...she was really battling with him, and not making progress...and I looked at his books and I was very surprised...'* (Participant 1, unit 22).
- *'[His report] shook me, because I looked at this and I know he's atrocious, but I know that he's a clever little boy and this wasn't a reflection of his true potential...'* (Participant 1, unit 40).
- *'...I got a letter saying she's got to stay behind in grade 0 again and I was devastated...I was like seriously upset...'* (Participant 4, unit 16).
- *'It's like pulling a rug underneath your feet out...because at home – no problems, first term at school – no problems, then all of a sudden the last term of school there was major problems'* (Participant 7, unit 4).
- *'I couldn't believe it was happening to another child... I was just devastated...'* (Participant 8, units 6 & 8).
- *'I was devastated when she first told me...I don't think you ever expect your child to have any defect...you expect your offspring to be perfect...nobody ever tells you there might be problems when you have children'* (Participant 9, units 4, 8 & 10).
- *'...when the teacher started sort of saying things like he might not make grade one, I thought no, that's impossible...he was fine when he started there and really, he was deteriorating badly...'* (Participant 11, unit 28).

Four mothers did not report experiencing feelings of shock. One mother pointed out that she did not feel shocked:

- *'I wasn't really shocked, I was more disappointed...'* (Participant 6, unit 154).

 **WORRY**

'...I worry about her...' (Participant 4, unit 32).

Table 4.3: Emotional response theme: Worry

WORRY	
Definition	To feel uneasy about some uncertain or threatening matter; to be troubled; to feel anxious (Morris, 1973:1476).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'felt worried', 'felt concerned', 'felt apprehensive', 'felt anxious' or 'felt nervous' were considered to illustrative of this theme.

WORRY	
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'helplessness', 'shock', 'uncertainty', 'self-doubt', 'desperation' or 'despair' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, seven mothers reported experiencing feelings of worry. They reported that they felt worried because they could see that their child was experiencing tremendous difficulty with schoolwork and was not coping. Some mentioned that this was even more of a worry when their child's scholastic performance was not as good as that of his or her peers. Mothers reported worrying about seeing the continued difficulties experienced by their children and not knowing what to do or who to turn to for help in this regard. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...when he was diagnosed with ADD, it was like a jigsaw puzzle...all the pieces were falling into place, but on the other hand I was worried about him' (Participant 1, unit 28).*
- *'...it's just...you've got the worry...'* (Participant 1, unit 38).
- *'...we were concerned from about grade two because his reading was very slow...'* (Participant 2, unit 2).
- *'...if you're not coping, then there is cause for concern...'* (Participant 3, unit 12).
- *'...every parent is terribly apprehensive if there's something not...that falls without the outers of the norm...'* (Participant 3, unit 110).
- *'I've got a big worry about her repeating Grade 0...I don't want her to feel different' (Participant 4, unit 48).*
- *'My concerns for [him] are that he already can see he is not as strong as his fellow pupils...he tries his best and often wishes he could be like his friends...'* (Participant 5, letter).
- *'...she was always alone and that was worrying me...'* (Participant 7, unit 4).
- *'...the more anxious I got, the more anxious he got' (Participant 11, unit 30).*

Three of these mothers reported worrying about the future of their child. Some were concerned that their child would always be disadvantaged and have to work harder academically than others. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...you see, my worry is that I'll end up with two little girls in grade 0 if she fails...the baby will be in grade nought and she will be in grade nought...and the little one really is as bright as a button...I worry about twenty years in advance...'* (Participant 4, unit 34).

- *'...I definitely worry about the future because they're so close together...and worst case scenario is that my bottom little one is going to pass the next one...that to me is of great concern' (Participant 4, unit 36).*
- *'...I have an apprehension about his future...I'm apprehensive about his future and yes, it worries me, but I'm positive and take it one day at a time' (Participant 5, unit 30).*
- *'...it worries me, because when he grows up...it does eventually affect them later on if you're constantly being told to be quiet because you talk too much' (Participant 5, unit 62).*
- *'...I was very worried about him...I mean, I do have my worries' (Participant 11, unit 44).*

Two of the mothers reported experiencing feelings of worry at the thought of taking their child out of the 'remedial' school and returning him or her to mainstream education. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...he must stay there next year and then go back to mainstream...I look at next year and I'm okay about that, but as soon as I look a bit further it makes me a little bit nervous...'* (Participant 1, unit 130).
- *'...we think we've found the right [mainstream] school, but we're anxious about it...because it's moving away from supporting networks' (Participant 2, unit 46).*

Two mothers reported feelings of worry in relation to their child having to take medication for concentration. They expressed concern for the side effects and for the long-term usage of the medication. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I worried about the side effects, which he still has, but I supplement his lunch...'* (Participant 1, letter).
- *'I must admit that I am still worried about the long-term use of [the medication]...'* (Participant 1, unit 130).
- *'I don't like the idea of him being on a drug...it worries me...but if it helps and the dose is small, that's fine' (Participant 5, unit 14).*

Four mothers did not report experiencing feelings of worry.

 **DESPERATION / DESPAIR**

'Desperate...I just felt desperate...like nobody understood...' (Participant 8, unit 22).

Table 4.4: Emotional response theme: Desperation / Despair

DESPERATION / DESPAIR	
Definition	<u>Desperation</u> : The condition of being desperate; nearly hopeless; in an unbearable situation because of need or anxiety. <u>Despair</u> : To lose all hope; to

DESPERATION / DESPAIR	
	be overcome by a sense of futility or defeat; utter lack of hope; that which destroys all hope (Morris, 1973:358).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'felt desperate', 'just too much', 'feeling despair', 'I would try anything' or 'nothing works' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'despondence', 'depression', 'helplessness', 'worry' or 'frustration' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, six mothers reported experiencing feelings of desperation or despair. Mothers said they felt desperate about not knowing what to do or who to turn to for help. They could see that their child was not improving and were willing to try anything. Some mothers felt as if no-one understood them. They also expressed feelings of desperation about trying different solutions, but seeing that nothing was making an improvement in their child's scholastic skills. Some expressed the despair of feeling that their child was never going to cope because of the lack of improvement. This theme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'By now I felt desperate and didn't know which way to go' (Participant 1, letter).*
- *'I got quite a desperate feeling...'* (Participant 1, unit 32).
- *'...sometimes I was just in tears because I couldn't, I'm a single parent, so at times it was just too much' (Participant 1, unit 38).*
- *'...it's all sort of a feeling of despair...just wondering where you're going...'* (Participant 4, unit 30).
- *'I couldn't get her to do homework because she didn't want to do homework and when she didn't do homework then the teachers jump down her throat and then she didn't want to go to school, so it was just...I just got to a point where I would try anything...anything' (Participant 6, unit 10).*
- *'...because I was quite desperate' (Participant 9, unit 16).*
- *'I think at home at times it's been strained, because of the [medication] thing, so...I even considered sneaking a [tablet] because I was so desperate. I just thought, you know, we've tried everything' (Participant 9, unit 62).*
- *'I think there were days when I just could have packed my bags and just walked...you just feel...you just get to a stage where everything you try is not working' (Participant 9, unit 94).*
- *'[I feel] "moedeloos" (desperate)...it's a constant battle...I feel every day is just a struggle. I feel I do my best that I possibly can and it's still not good enough...'* (Participant 11, unit 22).

UNCERTAINTY / SELF-DOUBT

'...it's such an uncertain process...you don't know where to go next, you don't know which way to turn, which way to help...I don't really know where to go or what to do...who to speak to...it's just all these problems' (Participant 6, unit 248).

Table 4.5. Emotional response theme: Uncertainty/Self-doubt

UNCERTAINTY / SELF-DOUBT	
Definition	<u>Uncertainty</u> : The condition of being in doubt; lack of certainty (Morris, 1973:1394). <u>Self-doubt</u> : To be uncertain or sceptical about oneself; to be undecided (Morris, 1973:393).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'felt confused', 'didn't/don't know', 'don't understand', 'difficult to interpret' or 'not sure' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'despondence', 'depression', 'helplessness', 'shock', 'worry', 'desperation' or 'despair' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, eight mothers reported experiencing feelings of uncertainty and self-doubt. They reported that they did not know what to do to deal with their child's learning difficulties. They said that they felt they did not have enough knowledge, understanding or experience regarding learning difficulties and the process needed to help their children effectively. Some mentioned that this uncertainty led to them relying on and accepting what professionals explained and recommended. They felt that this hindered their ability to support their child effectively. Mothers doubted themselves. They said that they were unsure if they were doing the right things and making the right decisions. They wondered if they should be doing more. This theme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I could identify what I was being told, but still felt confused...'* (Participant 1, letter).
- *'I didn't know exactly what to do...there's no book that says to you, okay, there's your child, now do one, two and three...equals four...'* (Participant 1, unit 30).
- *'I like to know...and I didn't know, so I felt very much in the dark...'* (Participant 1, unit 38).
- *'I didn't know enough'* (Participant 1, unit 102).
- *'We didn't realise the extent of the learning difficulties...and auditory and visual perceptual problems...we didn't know what they were and we didn't*

know how to help, so we just followed the advice of the teacher...' (Participant 2, unit 8).

- *'...you're a bit confused, because you don't understand, you're not an educator, so you don't really understand what the issue is'* (Participant 2, unit 12).
- *'...actually, as a lay person, I think it's quite difficult to interpret the findings'* (Participant 2, unit 14).
- *'...I don't fully understand why this disconnection happens...'* (Participant 2, unit 24).
- *'...you're not sure what to do because you don't really understand, you don't have the experience, you know...you're just dealing with this for the first time'* (Participant 2, units 32 & 34).
- *'...basically not being trained yourself, you go on what the teachers are telling you...you rely on their input'* (Participant 3, units 4 & 6).
- *'...you don't really know...you kind of just rely on what they're going to say, what they're going to do'* (Participant 3, unit 6).
- *'...you sort of say, what's going to happen to my child, what's my child going to, is he not going to get through school, what's going to happen, what...'* (Participant 3, unit 76).
- *'Is he slipping back? Is it because we took him off the [medication]? What is it? Is something upsetting him?...I can't...I don't know'* (Participant 5, unit 26).
- *'I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help'* (Participant 5, unit 56).
- *'I don't actually know what to do'* (Participant 5, unit 60).
- *'I don't know which one is right or wrong, so I just carry on'* (Participant 5, unit 68).
- *'I think if maybe I just had a little more knowledge in what to do with him'* (Participant 5, unit 80).
- *'I think the bottom line is having more knowledge on how to deal with him'* (Participant 5, unit 90).
- *'I didn't know what to do'* (Participant 6, unit 10).
- *'I don't know how to make things better...I don't know down which road to go'* (Participant 6, unit 66).
- *'I didn't know where to start...it's difficult to not know where to start'* (Participant 6, units 208 & 210).
- *'I didn't know what to do, how to deal with it'* (Participant 8, unit 8).
- *'I asked why...why with her intelligence is she suffering like this? I was told it was imbalances in the brain, but I found it difficult to understand'* (Participant 8, unit 28).
- *'I wondered why it happened to [her]...I can't understand that'* (Participant 8, unit 50).
- *'I started doubting the diagnosis of the therapists'* (Participant 9, letter).
- *'...because as a first parent, you don't really know whether you're right or wrong or what's going on'* (Participant 11, unit 2).
- *'...I just couldn't understand why can't he get it and why is he so slow...and it's not that he's stupid'* (Participant 11, unit 30).
- *'...in the beginning I didn't know how to deal with it'* (Participant 11, unit 78).
- *'I feel in the beginning I wasn't...because I didn't know myself what it was about and I felt I couldn't really support him'* (Participant 11, unit 112).

Three mothers did not report experiencing feelings of uncertainty or self-doubt.

ANGRY EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

📖 ANGER

'...when she came home crying I'd feel angry...I'd get very cross with the teachers because they hurt her...sort of show her problems to the rest of the world...that made me very angry because they knew she had a problem...' (Participant 6, unit 116).

Table 4.6: Emotional response theme: Anger

ANGER	
Definition	A feeling of extreme displeasure, hostility, indignation or exasperation toward someone or something; rage; wrath (Morris, 1973:51).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'feel angry', 'teacher should have', 'was furious', 'felt cross', 'felt irritated', 'want to shake him' or 'fighting' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'self-blame', 'protectiveness', 'shock', 'desperation', 'despair' or 'frustration' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, nine participants referred to feelings of anger within different contexts. Six mothers expressed feelings of anger in relation to the fact that their child's difficulties were not identified earlier. These mothers felt angry towards and at times blamed a teacher or school for not identifying the learning difficulties and suggesting an assessment. They felt that the difficulties could then have been dealt with and their child would be coping better, not being so far behind his or her peers. Some mothers expressed anger related to a teacher or doctor who told them that their child was still developing and needed more time or who refuted the mothers' suggestion that there might be a problem. Some mothers felt that it is the teacher's responsibility to identify difficulties that their child may have with schoolwork and that parents trust what professionals say. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...it was the wrong kind of steps and the teacher didn't help him at all there...and we actually felt that the teacher lacked in identifying the problem, which, had it been identified in grade two, would have been easier for him to deal with...what she should've advised us to do was to*

do an assessment...she was a very warm, caring person, but she wasn't doing much teaching...' (Participant 2, unit 2).

- *'...he didn't get the kind of attention he should've needed in grade two or grade three...so I did feel that the school didn't put my child in a suitable class from the beginning...we expected that if there were issues, they should be picked up by the teachers at the school and they weren't. We did feel that they had not delivered on our expectations'* (Participant 2, unit 4).
- *'...we just followed the advice of his teacher, which said he just needs to strengthen his basics, his basic concepts and it'll improve and of course, it didn't'* (Participant 2, unit 8).
- *'...when you feel angry ...you wish this wasn't here...you may take decisions based on the wrong kind of emotions...you can be angry with the school and as a result remove your child from that particular school, which may not be the right thing to do'* (Participant 2, unit 122).
- *'...they kept saying, don't worry, it's just immaturity, don't worry, it's just immaturity...you could see it wasn't just immaturity and then it became a psychological problem, because he was falling behind...not being trained yourself you go on what the teachers are telling you...'* (Participant 3, unit 2).
- *'...I wasn't a hundred per cent happy with what they were telling me ...it's definitely not a school for any sort of – not even a learning disability – but any sort of kid that's battling a little bit...they put too much pressure on the kids...'* (Participant 3, unit 8).
- *'...she did mention, he's not coping, but don't worry, that sort of thing...if you're not coping, then there is cause for concern, surely'* (Participant 3, unit 12).
- *'...they should've helped her earlier...I don't think I would have put her [that school] if I'd have known she had a problem'* (Participant 6, unit 148).
- *'I was very angry that her problems were found so late...things should've been done from the beginning...'* (Participant 6, unit 208).
- *'...no-one tells you about [the remedial school]...you're paying these people to sort out your problems and there is a solution to your problem...why don't' they give it to you, you know...that gets to me...'* (Participant 6, unit 250).
- *'...the teacher said I don't have to worry, there's no problem with the child...then the other teacher called us in August and said, okay, this child doesn't work in class, can't read, can't spell, nothing...'*
- *'...I was just furious, because the teacher didn't tell me before, you know, if they told me in February, we could've done something...I was furious, I wasn't emotional, I was not crying, nothing, I was just furious'* (Participant 7, unit 10).
- *'...I was just angry, that was the main thing...it was just anger...they can do big red letters in the book, but just to tell you please come and see me, that they couldn't do. That made me cross, that's why I was angry...I was just furious...I was ready to kill...for my kids I will kill...'* (Participant 7, units 40, 42 & 44).
- *'...I approached the school and headmaster and teachers and they just said there's nothing wrong with your child...I was furious...they couldn't see anything...you're just imagining it, your child's doing very well...'* (Participant 8, units 18 & 20).

- *'I was very irritated with them...I just never bothered to go back, because they just tell me my child is fine...'* (Participant 11, unit 10).

Four mothers reported experiencing feelings of anger when doing homework with their child.

This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...when we want to do homework, it's a nightmare...he can't sit still...it takes us forever...sometimes I want to shake him...'* (Participant 1, units 52 & 54).
- *'...and then I get cross with her...I often get cross with her...when she doesn't want to do it...'* (Participant 6, units 214 & 216).
- *'...sometimes I get angry with him because he doesn't do what I want him to do when I want him to do it'* (Participant 9, unit 36).'
- *'...we got to a stage where we'd just look at each other and the nails are out...because he got to a stage where he didn't want to work. I got to a stage where he was going to work, even if I was going to hold his hand with a pencil in it and make him do the work, he was going to work'* (Participant 9, unit 102).
- *'...he's not like ready to do any work, only by force. If I say, please go and sit down and do your homework...that really irritates me...'* (Participant 10, unit 20).
- *'...there's conflict, because him and me were like fighting all the time for him to do his homework...'* (Participant 10, unit 34).
- *'...I have at stages felt very irritated with him, thinking he's doing this on purpose just to make life difficult...I've been angry...I've been angry...'* (Participant 11, unit 56).

One mother mentioned experiencing anger in general. This subtheme is supported by the following quotation:

- *'...the anger was not directed at him...it was more sort of angry like general, like how could this happen to him, why would this happen to him...'* (Participant 9, unit 40).

Two mothers did not report experiencing feelings of anger.

FRUSTRATION

'...you know how frustrated I get...sometimes I just want to scream...' (Participant 1, unit 112).

Table 4.7: Emotional response theme: Frustration

FRUSTRATION	
Definition	The condition or instance of being frustrated; to prevent from accomplishing a purpose or fulfilling a desire; to thwart (Morris, 1973: 530).

FRUSTRATION	
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'feel frustrated' or 'it's frustrating' were considered to be illustrative of this theme. The tone of voice used and the manner in which they spoke about something was also indicative of this theme, where the tone indicated frustration and irritation.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'helplessness', 'desperation', 'despair' or 'anger' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, all eleven mothers reported experiencing feelings of frustration. Seven mothers reported feeling frustrated because they did not know what to do or who to turn to for help and because their child was not improving scholastically. Some reported feeling frustrated that professionals (including teachers, therapists and doctors) did not provide enough information or explain properly what is going on with their child and what needs to be done. They felt that there is not enough support available to parents. Mothers also felt that they do not have enough knowledge, understanding or experience of learning difficulties and the process entailed in helping children with learning difficulties to support their child adequately. They therefore accept what professionals recommend. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I could identify what I was being told, but still felt...frustrated...'* (Participant 1, letter).
- *'...I got to a point where I was feeling frustrated...'* (Participant 1, unit 32).
- *'He had to go for so many assessments...the child was put under enormous pressure and then we had all these assessments coming in and we actually convened a meeting of all the different therapists together to say to us now which one's right because they didn't all say the same thing...as a lay person it's quite difficult to interpret the findings...'* (Participant 2, units 12 & 14).
- *'...it's frustrating, because I think I was still in a phase of wanting to fix things quickly...'* (Participant 2, unit 96).
- *'...they couldn't really explain what they were doing or how they were going to do it, so we really didn't know whether it was going to improve or not...'* (Participant 2, unit 102).
- *'...the fact that you have to go to like five different therapists to get assessments...I mean how are we meant to interpret...if one says the main problem is visual perception and the other one says the main problem is auditory perception. Which one are you meant to believe? How many assessments can your child go through in a month? They get tired of it'* (Participant 2, unit 104).

- *'...you feel frustrated...'* (Participant 2, unit 122).
- *'...nobody sort of sits down and explains that it's actually not the end of the world...when you go and see the psychologists, they kind of give you from an academic point of view and I think a lot of parents are battling emotionally more than academically, because they can understand what's going on if they're just told...but they're not told...'* (Participant 3, unit 76).
- *'...the only thing I would change is the route that you've got to go through to come out at the other end. I just feel that there's not enough information...I don't feel that the people you've got to go through have time to actually sit down and explain every step to you or your options...'* (Participant 3, unit 96).
- *'Right now I'm very frustrated because he's been doing so well and now he's slipping back...so at the moment I'm terribly frustrated with what is going on...'* (Participant 5, unit 26).
- *'I'm frustrated on his part...because I don't know what to do, I don't know how to help...'* (Participant 5, unit 56).
- *'...had I known that there could have been a problem, I probably would have tested her before school...I didn't know...there's just not enough support...'* (Participant 6, unit 252).
- *'...I felt very frustrated...I couldn't do anything...I went to see this one to that one to that one...'* (Participant 7, unit 66).
- *'...he just takes so long...and that sometimes is a bit frustrating...'* (Participant 11, unit 108).

Five mothers reported feeling frustrated when doing homework with their child either because their child does not want to do homework, takes a very long time to finish it or because the child cannot concentrate on finishing it. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...[he] had to sit down and do some homework and that causes complications...it's just...frustrating...very frustrating, sometimes I was just in tears because I couldn't...at times it was just too much'* (Participant 1, unit 38).
- *'...in the afternoons when we want to do homework, it's a nightmare. It's draining, very draining...very tiring...he can't sit still...he says, I just want to go look there quickly...and his thoughts are in a million places, so it's very hard...it takes us forever to do the homework...he's off quickly and then I have to go fetch him...and it's frustrating...'* (Participant 1, units 52 & 54).
- *'...I'm as patient as I can be...I sometimes wish that I was more patient...sometimes I get a day where I think, no, jeepers, just do your homework...'* (Participant 1, unit 88).
- *'...it was very slow [working with him], you could almost nod off to sleep...and I'm quite an impatient person by nature, so I don't think that I was the best teacher...it's frustrating...'* (Participant 2, units 92 & 96).
- *'...when she doesn't want to do her homework, then I get frustrated...'* (Participant 6, unit 216).
- *'...when it comes to homework...you have to almost be a slave-driver to get him to do it...'* (Participant 9, unit 30).

- *'...the homework...that was another story...I would get so frustrated...I just couldn't understand, why can't he get it, why is he so slow...and it's not that he's stupid...'* (Participant 11, unit 30).
- *'...sometimes when I had to do the homework with him, I would get very frustrated and tell him to wake up and focus...it's very frustrating and he doesn't listen...'* (Participant 11, units 156 & 158).

Three mothers reported feeling frustrated due to conflict with their husbands. They felt that their husbands could not understand the situation because they were not there all day to see the child and to deal with everything as mothers are. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...we've mostly agreed on things where he is concerned...we've had minor disputes about he should do this rather than that...and I said it doesn't work that way, you're not here all day to see this...or...you shout too much, you shouldn't shout that much...you're not here all day to deal with it...'* (Participant 5, unit 40).
- *'...we didn't agree with wanting to send her to [the remedial school]. He didn't agree with the speech and occupational therapy, he said it's just nonsense...you see, he's at work, he doesn't understand...I'm sitting at home with her trying to do homework...he has absolutely no interest in her...he won't go to school meetings with me, he's always busy...so that sort of thing is all left to me...'* (Participant 6, units 30 & 34).
- *'...but my husband...there's always clashes with my husband...about the way he sees it and the way I know how to deal with it and he's not consistent in his ways of dealing with it, so I think that confuses the rule even more...most of the things we don't agree on...my husband was very much against the fact that he had go to [the remedial school]...'* (Participant 11, units 18, 20 & 26).

Three mothers reported feeling frustration when there was criticism from family or relatives about the child. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...my mother will say, well, she can be a hairdresser, which doesn't really help me...and she's got this thing that she's going to stay with us forever, you know, stay in the house...and that's terrible, I mean she's far behind, but she's not that far behind...she's capable of looking after herself...'* (Participant 4, unit 54).
- *'...my aunt...would say things like she takes her hat off to us dealing with what we have and coping with what we have and that we just so fantastic...and I kind of go what about, he's my normal child...so that's frustrating when she gets going...'* (Participant 5, unit 32).
- *'...then he will come and still criticise and say I'm not there for him if something goes wrong...then he would blame me for it...immediately...'* (Participant 11, unit 22).
- *'...their family is very much on achieving, achieving, achieving...so they very much on being the best...I felt I had to explain him or justify him...but now I don't even bother...'* (Participant 11, unit 88).

Three mothers reported getting easily frustrated with their child and being impatient and then ‘snapping’ at their child. They wished that they could be more tolerant, patient and understanding. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *‘...at the end of the day when he’s constantly talking, you say, oh, would you shush...I feel so awful saying that...so that’s the frustration I get to...’ (Participant 5, unit 62).*
- *‘...I think I would try and be more patient and more tolerant and try to be more understanding...I think you just get some days where you get to a stage where you just cannot...you just don’t know what else to do...I’d just try harder to be more patient, more understanding...’ (Participant 9, units 106 & 108).*
- *‘I would like to change being...impatient all the time...because there are times that he used to drive me mad, that I used to get really, really...quite insane with him and mad at him...I would’ve maybe been a bit easier on him’ (Participant 11, unit 146).*

One mother reported feeling frustrated that her child’s core, underlying problem was not being identified and then addressed. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *‘...I feel frustration...frustration in the sense that I felt that kids in a remedial school are umbrella-ed very quickly and I was getting a bit frustrated because each and every individual is different and should be treated so, but they are not...and I just found that reading the assessments and going through the assessments, they weren’t actually seeing where the problem was. Frustration certainly set in...’ (Participant 3, unit 38).*
- *‘...that’s where the frustration set in because I was absolutely adamant that there was an underlying problem that we hadn’t picked up...’ (Participant 3, unit 40).*

SAD EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

 **SADNESS**

‘I felt sad for him, because I could see he was...he really tried...and then I really felt...I felt sad for him’ (Participant 11, unit 128).

Table 4.8. Emotional response theme: Sadness

SADNESS	
Definition	A feeling of being low in spirit; dejectedness, sorrowfulness or unhappiness; feeling melancholy or downcast (Morris, 1973:1171).

SADNESS	
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'felt sad', 'feel down', 'makes my heart very sad', 'it's sad', 'feel sad for', 'very unhappy' or 'it hurt' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'despondency', 'depression', 'helplessness', 'sympathy', 'desperation' or 'despair' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, nine mothers reported feelings of sadness, which came to the fore for many of the mothers in response to seeing the negative impact that their child's learning difficulties were having on their child, specifically on an emotional level. Six mothers reported feelings of sadness in relation to this. They saw in their child a lack of self-confidence, lowered self-esteem, insecurity, as well as disappointment and frustration, as a result of having difficulty with their schoolwork. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'Sometimes I even felt sad' (Participant 1, letter).*
- *'I felt so sad...because I could see how it was affecting him' (Participant 1, unit 26).*
- *'It was sad...he'd feel very bad about himself. He thought he was stupid and lost self-confidence' (Participant 2, unit 114).*
- *'...because he was traumatised, the little guy was traumatised' (Participant 3, unit 20).*
- *'She used to come home and say to me I'm too stupid to do that...and it's not nice to hear...it was sad' (Participant 6, unit 8).*
- *'It hurt to see...she used to come home crying often' (Participant 6, unit 110).*
- *'I felt sad...but we couldn't find out why he was always crying...he never wanted to go to school' (Participant 9, unit 12).*
- *'I felt sad for him, because I could see he was...he really tried and then I really felt...I felt sad for him' (Participant 11, unit 128).*

Two mothers reported feelings of sadness in seeing their child's lack of progress or when they were told that their child has learning difficulties. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...I'm sad that she's battling...'* (Participant 6, unit 52).
- *'I felt very sad [when they first said there was a problem], because my older daughter also had problems...we'd been through it before and I couldn't believe it was happening to another child...to go through it again...'* (Participant 8, unit 6).

One mother in particular expressed feelings of sadness that her child's most fundamental difficulty was not being identified. To her it was a mountain of ever-increasing new 'problems' that needed to be dealt with. The sight of this never-ending mountain resulted in her feelings of sadness. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'It gets me down, especially when I get a letter like now where she's got this eye problem...and you think, oh no, not another thing...'* (Participant 6, unit 172).
- *'It's just sad...it's not as if they're actually finding what's bugging her and working with it...it's like they find this and then they find that. It just seems to me that the problem's getting bigger and bigger'* (Participant 6, unit 178).

One mother explained that she did not experience any sadness in response to her daughter's learning difficulties as she had already been through a similar process with her older daughter and felt that her previous experiences helped her to cope more easily with a second child having difficulties. This is supported by the following quotation:

- *'...because one of the twins had the same problem...so I knew what I was going to do...I was prepared...I think I was really prepared'* (Participant 7, units 56, 106 & 108).

Another mother did not report any feelings of sadness and explained that it had been a very easy process for her, because she wasn't concerned with other people's opinions and did not view her son's learning difficulties as very serious. The following quotations support this:

- *'...it was easy for me, because I wasn't out there to impress anybody...I'm just there for my child, that's all'* (Participant 10, unit 66).
- *'...if I look at his problem, it's not such a serious, serious problem...it's not other deformalities [sic] that's not normal, you know...it just makes me feel a bit better'* (Participant 10, unit 74).

 **DESPONDENCE / DEPRESSION**

'There have been times when I have felt so depressed, when I have felt and started to believe that there is no way out of this situation...that possibly there is no solution' (Participant 9, letter).

Table 4.9: Emotional response theme: Despondence/ Depression

DESPONDENCE / DEPRESSION	
Definition	Depression of spirits from loss of hope, confidence or courage; feelings of dejection, hopelessness and discouragement (Morris, 1973:358).

DESPONDENCE / DEPRESSION	
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'felt depressed', 'it's depressing', 'want to give up' or 'felt miserable', 'feel like I can't go on' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'helplessness', 'sympathy', 'desperation' or 'despair' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, six mothers reported experiencing feelings of despondency and/or depression in response to their child's learning difficulties. Two mothers mentioned feeling despondent or depressed about the impact that their child's difficulties had on the mother-child relationship. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'When I home-schooled him...school was not important to him...so that had a very negative impact on our relationship...and you sort of become like despondent...'* (Participant 9, unit 102).
- *'I was very depressed...I used to say myself, why am I going through this, is it really worth it...especially for a mother-son relationship...you think you're doing the best for your child and the child doesn't want to accept or see it'* (Participant 10, unit 38).

Two mothers reported feelings of depression in response to not knowing what to do or who to turn to for help. They could see that their child's schoolwork was not improving and felt that no one understood what they were going through. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I've actually been very depressed about everything...you just don't know what to do...but I hope he'll be fine'* (Participant 11, unit 56 & 64).
- *'There were days when I was depressed about her development'* (Participant 4, letter).

One mother reported feelings of depression in relation to practising something with her child over and over again and then seeing that her child still couldn't remember what was needed. This subtheme is supported by the following quotation:

- *'...we'll do it over and over again and she just...has no clue, so it's things that you teach over and over again and she just doesn't...it's very depressing...I just feel very depressed'* (Participant 4, unit 26 & 28).

Another mother mentioned feeling so despondent that she felt she couldn't go on. She just wanted to give up because there seemed to be more and more 'problems' being identified in her child. She felt that there was no solution and the learning difficulties were just becoming bigger. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'It always seems like there's another problem here and another problem there...it seems like there's a lot more problems than they originally thought' (Participant 6, unit 238).*
- *'Sometimes I just feel like ...I don't feel like doing anything anymore...I just want to give up...'* (Participant 6, unit 166).
- *'...I don't really know where to go or what to do...who to speak to...it's just all these problems' (Participant 6, unit 248).*

Another mother reported feeling depressed when she saw that her child was doing much worse scholastically than the peer group. This subtheme is supported by the following quotation:

- *'...you take a look at children who you think are on par with your child and you suddenly realise there's no way, she's actually miles behind...that was just...depressing' (Participant 4, unit 32).*

One mother felt despondent when criticised by family members for the manner in which she handled her child's difficulties. This subtheme is supported by the following quotation:

- *'I do have an aunt who is a school teacher...and when she gets going it actually makes me a little bit depressed' (Participant 5, unit 32).*

Another mother mentioned that at times she felt depressed because she had no hope and believed that her child was never going to succeed. She felt that despite so much being done, her child was still struggling. This subtheme is supported by the following quotation:

- *'I just feel very depressed...I think this is just never going to come right, this poor child is never going to make it...'* (Participant 4, unit 28).

Five mothers did not report experiencing any feelings of despondence or depression.

SELF-BLAME / GUILT

'I have been angry with myself...how could I not have solved this problem? As parent you have to be Mr./Mrs. Fix-it. Where did I go wrong? How could I let this happen to my child?' (Participant 9, letter).

Table 4.10: Emotional response theme: Self-blame / Guilt

SELF-BLAME / GUILT	
Definition	<u>Self-blame</u> : To hold oneself responsible or to find fault with oneself. <u>Guilt</u> : The fact of being responsible for an offence or wrongdoing; remorseful awareness of having done something wrong (Morris, 1973:552).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'I've done wrong', 'feel guilty', 'I was a failure', 'blame myself', 'my fault' or 'felt bad' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'despondence', 'depression', 'helplessness', 'sympathy', 'worry', 'uncertainty', 'self-doubt', 'anger' or 'frustration' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, nine mothers reported experiencing feelings of self-blame and guilt. Seven mothers reported blaming themselves for and feeling guilty about not being good parents to their children. They felt that they had failed their children as parents. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...somewhere along the line, you do feel, what have I done wrong? You do think...what did I do wrong, what didn't I do, didn't I do enough of something...you feel guilty...you examine yourself as a parent' (Participant 1, unit 70).*
- *'...how can I help him more...I know that he can do better than he has been doing, so what I have I done wrong?' (Participant 5, unit 76).*
- *'...you sort of don't think you're ever good...'* (Participant 6, unit 60).
- *'I think I was a little bit stupid with that...I should have done something more' (Participant 7, unit 70).*
- *'In the beginning I felt like I was a failure' (Participant 8, letter).*
- *'I felt that I was failing him as a parent' (Participant 9, unit 16).*
- *'Some days you feel you've failed as a parent...'* (Participant 9, unit 56).
- *'I used to blame myself and think where did I go wrong...I haven't been a perfect mother...'* (Participant 11, unit 42).
- *'It made me feel inadequate...I felt inadequate...you think you're a terrible mother...I really did feel it was my fault' (Participant 11, unit 78).*

Five mothers reported feeling guilty about and blaming themselves for not identifying or doing anything about their child's difficulties earlier on. They felt that it was their fault that their children were now so far behind scholastically. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'He would have benefited more if I had put him in (the remedial school) earlier' (Participant 1, letter).*
- *'If I didn't have all those hang-ups, if I'd done it all earlier...he wouldn't have had that big gap...he's got this big gap that he has to catch up...and I feel that if I'd done the whole diet route before school...but because I didn't do that, he's got to catch up a lot' (Participant 1, unit 96).*
- *'I thought it was going to come right...I've got three kids and unfortunately, and I think this is probably where I sometimes blame myself...the other little one is a year behind and you're trying to get the one to sleep and the other one wants this, it probably took longer, otherwise I would've noticed it earlier' (Participant 4, unit 4).*
- *'I would have investigated before...I would have investigated earlier...I wouldn't have left it for so long' (Participant 6, unit 146).*
- *'...not having her tested earlier...I blame myself' (Participant 6, unit 212).*
- *'When I did see that there was a problem, I went straight away to see people, but I do think it was left too late...it should've been sorted out before school...'* (Participant 6, unit 222).
- *'If I could have picked up the problem in an earlier stage, I'm sure it would have been better' (Participant 10, unit 110).*
- *'I think maybe if I had sooner realised what the problem was...I would've coped better' (Participant 11, unit 130)*

Two mothers reported feeling guilty about being hard on their children when doing homework or about allowing their child to leave out some homework. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I feel guilty saying sit down and work...'* (Participant 6, unit 214).
- *'When she doesn't want to do her homework, then I get frustrated, then I shout...and then she cries, then I feel guilty, what have I done to this child' (Participant 6, unit 216).*
- *'...some days you feel guilty that you can't get to everything, you know, there just aren't enough hours in the day' (Participant 9, unit 74).*

One mother who had had learning difficulties herself, reported feeling guilty about and blaming herself for passing on her learning difficulties to her child. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...it's the last thing I sort of wanted to pass on' (Participant 6, unit 58).*
- *'...it's sort of passing on the bad gene...I still feel very guilty' (Participant 6, unit 60 & 62).*
- *'...probably just the fact that I passed on her problem...that's sort of what I blame myself for' (Participant 6, unit 212).*
- *'...you do feel if it wasn't for me, she wouldn't have those problems, so you do feel a bit guilty' (Participant 6, unit 218).*

Another mother reported feeling guilty about giving her child medication for concentration because she could see the side effects it had on her child. This subtheme is supported by the following quotation:

- *'...at the same time I was giving it to my child and part of you does feel guilty...I felt bad giving my child this...it takes away his appetite completely...'* (Participant 1, unit 48).

Two mothers did not report experiencing feelings of self-blame and/or guilt.

HELPLESSNESS

'I didn't know how to make things better...I didn't know down which road to go. I just got to a point where I would try anything...anything...I felt so helpless' (Participant 6, units 10 & 66).

Table 4.11: Emotional response theme: Helplessness

HELPLESSNESS	
Definition	A feeling of being unable to manage by oneself, of being defenceless or dependent; ineffectual; without help (Morris, 1973:613).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'felt helpless', 'nothing I can do', 'what must I do' or 'couldn't do anything' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'despondence', 'depression', 'shock', 'worry', 'self-doubt', 'uncertainty', 'desperation' or 'despair' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, eight mothers reported experiencing feelings of helplessness. Five mothers reported feeling helpless in relation to not knowing what to do or who to turn to for help. They could see how their child was deteriorating scholastically. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I could identify what I was being told, but still felt helpless'* (Participant 1, letter).
- *'I was reading whatever I could read about it and...I was feeling quite helpless...because where do you go for help'* (Participant 1, unit 32).

- *'...I know he's intelligent, so his work isn't a true reflection of who my child is, and I know there's nothing I can do about it' (Participant 1, unit 38).*
- *'I think another emotion you feel is a little bit helpless because you're not sure what to put in place to help the child, and then what you're doing is the right thing' (Participant 2, unit 22).*
- *'I knew it was getting worse and there was nothing I could do, I mean I was trying everything and nothing was working' (Participant 6, unit 4).*
- *'She got buried underneath [all the work] and that just...I think that's the worst...that just sort of makes you feel, well, what must I do?' (Participant 6, unit 44).*
- *'My hands were off, I couldn't do anything...I went to see this one to that one to that one...nobody could help me' (Participant 7, unit 66).*
- *'I just felt so helpless...I didn't know how...' (Participant 11, unit 30).*

Two mothers reported feeling helpless when doing homework with their child. They reported that their child either did not want to do the homework, struggled to do the homework or took a very long time to complete the homework. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I didn't know what to do. I couldn't get her to do homework because she didn't want to do homework...I just got to a point where I would try anything...anything...I felt so helpless' (Participant 6, unit 10).*
- *'You don't know what to do...because he got to a stage where he didn't want to work...you try positive things, you try negative things and it just doesn't work' (Participant 9, unit 102).*

Four mothers did not report experiencing feelings of helplessness.

 **SYMPATHY**

'I felt so sorry for him' (Participant 11, unit 30).

Table 4.12: Emotional response theme: Sympathy

SYMPATHY	
Definition	The act of or capacity for sharing or understanding the feelings of another person. A feeling or expression of pity or sorrow for the distress of another; compassion; commiseration (Morris, 1973:1211).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such 'felt sorry for', 'feel for', 'makes things right for', 'isn't fair for' or 'felt upset for' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'despondence', 'depression', 'protectiveness', 'worry', 'desperation', 'despair', 'understanding', 'love' or 'acceptance' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.

SYMPATHY	
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, six mothers reported experiencing feelings of sympathy towards their children. This is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...I wanted to make things right for him...'* (Participant 1, unit 28).
- *'You feel for your child's future...you feel upset about it'* (Participant 2, unit 20).
- *'You just feel upset for him...'* (Participant 2, unit 24).
- *'I took all pressures off him...the pressures on those little people, to me, just isn't fair'* (Participant 3, unit 70).
- *'...I've been upset for her...I feel sorry for her with what she's got to go through'* (Participant 6, unit 52).
- *'I'm a little bit too soft on her...it's just sometimes I feel so sorry for her'* (Participant 6, unit 120).
- *'When this happened to [her] I felt very sorry for her, really, really...I couldn't see her go through that'* (Participant 7, unit 64).

Five mothers did not report experiencing feelings of sympathy.

 **PROTECTIVENESS**

'I felt protective of him, you know...if anybody looked skew at him...I wanted to be able to explain him to everyone...I wanted them to understand it's not his fault, he can't help it' (Participant 1, unit 28).

Table 4.13: Emotional response theme: Protectiveness

PROTECTIVENESS	
Definition	To keep from harm, attack or injury; to guard; adapted or intended to afford protection (Morris, 1973:1051).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'want to protect', 'felt protective', 'overprotective' or 'try and explain/justify' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'despondence', 'depression', 'self-blame', 'guilt', 'helplessness', 'sympathy', 'uncertainty', 'self-doubt', 'desperation', 'despair', 'understanding', 'love' or 'acceptance' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, six mothers reported experiencing feelings of protectiveness towards their children. All six mothers reported feeling protective of their children in the sense that they wanted to protect them from being hurt by others and/or experiencing suffering as a result of their learning difficulties. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I wanted to protect him and make life easier for him. I also felt that I wanted to explain his behaviour and to tell people that he wasn't being naughty' (Participant 1, letter).*
- *'...I protected him because...I could see he wasn't managing like the kid next door' (Participant 1, unit 26).*
- *'...you've become a bit overprotective of him' (Participant 1, unit 32).*
- *'...you feel quite...you have the emotions of...essentially one of feeling...you want to protect your child' (Participant 2, unit 18).*
- *'You'd like to protect your child' (Participant 2, unit 122).*
- *'It does hurt to see him try and not achieve what he wants – and that you as parent have no control. The protectiveness in you as parent does come out there' (Participant 5, letter).*
- *'...to keep him, I suppose to protect him in a way from being pointed at, at school' (Participant 5, unit 20).*
- *'He's always very hard on his sister and then I come down hard on him...I think it's only because I'm trying to protect her' (Participant 6, unit 72).*
- *'...if she'd been normal and everything had been going fine, I don't think I would have tried to protect her so much' (Participant 6, unit 78).*
- *'The only support I've been able to give is to protect her' (Participant 6, unit 88).*
- *'At the moment there's a bit of friction in the family, I come down hard on my son...I'm just trying to protect her because he's always picking on her' (Participant 6, unit 98).*
- *'I'd be happy to keep her there [at the remedial school] because I just feel she's more protected, whereas in a mainstream school she's going to get a bit lost with all those kids in the class' (Participant 6, unit 240).*
- *'...maybe I'm overprotective' (Participant 8, unit 100).*
- *'...with him I felt I had to explain it or try and justify it...' (Participant 11, unit 88).*

One mother reported experiencing feelings of protectiveness when there was criticism from her relatives. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...he gets so cross he says but you must just give that child such a good hiding...I've actually chased him out of my house, I've said, you know nothing at all, keep quiet, you don't know what you're talking about, so go...' (Participant 1, unit 62).*
- *'...I try and explain to them that he doesn't choose not to listen, he doesn't choose to do these things...it's out of his control' (Participant 1, unit 76).*

Five mothers did not report experiencing feelings of protectiveness towards their children.

JOYFUL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

📖 HAPPINESS

'It made me very happy that he could cope better at school...' (Participant 5, unit 14).

Table 4.14. Emotional response theme: Happiness

HAPPINESS	
Definition	Feeling or showing pleasure or contentment; fortunate; apt; pleasing (Allen, 1984:335). Having or demonstrating pleasure or satisfaction (Morris, 1973:599).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'feel happy', 'felt blessed', 'felt good', 'feel comfortable', 'the right decision', 'feel positive', 'felt excited', 'felt delighted', 'it's fantastic', 'feel pleased', 'feel glad', 'feel good' or 'feel confident' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'relief', 'understanding', 'love' or 'hopefulness' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all. There were no exclusions for the emotional response of happiness.

In total, all eleven mothers expressed experiencing feelings of happiness. Mothers expressed happiness at their child being accepted at the 'remedial' school and receiving education there. They expressed the view that it is an exceptional, fantastic school with full, specialised 'remedial' support. Mothers felt that their child had improved scholastically as a result of being at the school, that it had given their child a chance and that their child would not be coping as well in a mainstream school. Mothers also felt happy at seeing the emotional improvement in their child being at the 'remedial' school, for example, increased self-confidence in the child. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...I'd reached [the solution]...because this whole system was going to support us. He didn't have to change to suit the system...I was putting him in the system to suit him...I felt blessed...it was just perfect and I thought that this is where [he] is really going to find himself'* (Participant 1, unit 42).
- *'I feel positive about things...because [he] would have sunk, it was affecting his confidence...I could see how he was losing that sparkle...but he's back...when I walk into his class I turn round and I see this face and*

he's smiling and he's happy and he's running around with his friends and he's accepted...he's doing well...actually getting stars and stickers and merits' (Participant 1, unit 56).

- *'...he's coping brilliantly...I feel so good about this school, because in any school he would've sunk...'* (Participant 1, units 114 & 116).
- *'...I feel good...I think without this school...he wouldn't have a chance' (Participant 1, unit 122).*
- *'...he feels better about himself' (Participant 2, unit 28).*
- *'...we feel very comfortable with the school he's at now...the confidence that he lost last year has been restored. He's done well, so he doesn't have like any issues or problems with himself as a result of his learning difficulty...so we feel very happy...'* (Participant 2, units 40 & 42).
- *'...he's done incredibly well where he is and it was definitely the right decision to make' (Participant 3, unit 20).*
- *'...[I feel] very, very positive...having put him into a remedial school, where he can cope and he can deal and he can feel confident and things like that...very positive' (Participant 3, unit 32).*
- *'...it has been an incredibly positive experience...it's been absolutely fine' (Participant 3, unit 48).*
- *'...yet there were days when I was incredibly excited about something small that she was able to do for the first time' (Participant 4, letter).*
- *'...I was actually quite excited when she got into [the remedial school]...I was delighted, because it was going to be this saving grace for [her]...'* (Participant 4, unit 16).
- *'...to get into [the remedial school] was a definite high...'* (Participant 4, unit 18).
- *'...I thought, this is fantastic, she's in exactly the right niche...'* (Participant 4, unit 32).
- *'I think it's a fantastic school...it's one of the biggest things I was happy about...'* (Participant 4, unit 68).
- *'She's gained an incredible amount of confidence from going to that school, which is fantastic for me...'* (Participant 4, unit 78).
- *'...we were just so happy to go to this school...it's the best chance your child has got...'* (Participant 4, unit 94).
- *'...it makes us happier to know that he was happy...our main thing in life is as long as he's happy, he's comfortable and there's no emotional trauma in his life, that makes us happy...'* (Participant 5, unit 24).
- *'...she's become a little champ...she doesn't call herself stupid anymore' (Participant 6, unit 12).*
- *'...at the moment I'm sort of happier that she's doing alright...I'm sort of happy that she feels alright' (Participant 6, unit 196).*
- *'I'm very pleased, even though there's always a new problem to deal with, I'm glad they pick it up, whereas the other school wouldn't have noticed anything at all...so I'm kind of glad they pick it up' (Participant 6, unit 232).*
- *'I'd be happy to keep her there [at the remedial school]...'* (Participant 6, unit 240).
- *'When I see the change in my child, I was happy...she's reading fluently, she can spell, she can do her maths, everything...'* (Participant 7, units 16 & 20).
- *'...I feel good because I think what they've done there for her...it's the best thing ever' (Participant 7, unit 28).*

- *'I feel very positive...one wants to do the best for your child...it's a great school...they've been very good to her...she's doing okay...'* (Participant 8, unit 24).
- *'I'm very positive because she's coping very well...I'm so happy'* (Participant 8, unit 32).
- *'...every term that you've had a meeting with the teacher, it's like, he's daydreaming, he can do better, but this last term now, it's been pretty good...I had a meeting with [his teacher] and all the therapists to see how he's going...and everything was positive...so I feel very happy...everything's just good'* (Participant 9, units 22 & 24).
- *'Since he's been at the school there's been a positive shift towards something better...some days it's almost as if there aren't any learning difficulties'* (Participant 9, units 28 & 30).
- *'...I know that they are doing their bit at school. I'm confident with what they are doing...he's happy there...he wants to go to school...'* (Participant 9, unit 90).
- *'I felt happiness seeing my child change over the last year and a half at [the remedial school], which has been wonderful. He has come out of himself. He is just blossoming...he is always eager to go to school...he has come through yet another milestone and is just joyful'* (Participant 9, letter).
- *'I was happy about it...I was fine because it is a good school, especially for that kind of problem...'* (Participant 10, units 8 & 12).
- *'...the school is amazing...I think if it weren't for the school...I think I would have lost my head'* (Participant 11, unit 24).

 **UNDERSTANDING**

'I've learnt how to...understand the situation and what she's going through...that helped me to get to where I am now...' (Participant 8, unit 104).

Table 4.15: Emotional response theme: Understanding

UNDERSTANDING	
Definition	To grasp or comprehend meaning; to have understanding, knowledge or comprehension; having or characterised by comprehension, good sense or discernment (Morris, 1973:1397).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'understand', 'gained knowledge', 'know better', 'find out more' or 'realised' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'relief' or 'acceptance' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, six mothers reported experiencing feelings of understanding. Five mothers mentioned reading up on their child's difficulties and speaking to people as factors that led to feelings of understanding. They reported that they now had a better understanding of their child and how things work. Mothers reported that they understood that it was not their child's fault that he or she struggled academically or had difficulty in concentrating in class. Mothers felt they were better able to support their child because of their increased understanding. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I realise how well I know my child, know how he operates and why...life is much better, easier, with this knowledge gained through 2003' (Participant 1, letter).*
- *'I'd read a lot and things started slotting in...all the pieces were falling into place...I could understand' (Participant 1, units 28 & 30).*
- *'I was reading about it...whatever I could read about it...you understand it's not his fault' (Participant 1, unit 32).*
- *'I understand him...how he reacts and why he reacts like that...it just makes it easier' (Participant 1, unit 92).*
- *'I know better how [he] is wired together...I think I know a bit better how that might work' (Participant 1, unit 108).*
- *'I've sort of gone out of my way to find out a little bit more about what happened and what goes on...so it has been an incredibly positive experience' (Participant 3, unit 48).*
- *'...I would definitely recommend that people in a similar position to myself, when first I found out about the problem, having understanding regarding the problem...' (Participant 8, letter).*
- *'I've done a lot of reading...which has helped me to understand better...because when you start reading books...you start to realise that you're not sort of the only parent going through this...you also find positive things that help you carry on...I like to learn things that are going to help me...' (Participant 9, units 56, 58 & 60).*
- *'...I also read up a lot about it...and you realise, but there's nothing really that much wrong with him. He's got a few problems, but he's not that bad...I've made an effort to find out what's going on out there' (Participant 11, units 52 & 54).*
- *'...now that I'm a bit more knowledgeable, I think I can support him better' (Participant 11, unit 116).*

Two mothers, who themselves had learning difficulties, reported that they felt that they could understand their child and what he or she is going through, better. They mentioned that they could identify with their child. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I understand it...I had learning difficulties at school...so to me it's more accepted...I can recognise her problems. I had the same problems at school...I can understand better what she's going through. I understand her lack of interest...because she's battling' (Participant 6, units 22, 24 & 26).*

- *'...I've also had the same problems, so I understand what she's going through...'* (Participant 6, unit 64).
- *'We're very close...because I think I understand what she's going through and of everybody in the family, if she doesn't want to do something, I'll understand why she won't want to do it...I know what's going on'* (Participant 6, units 134, 136 & 138).
- *'I also struggled at school...I still struggle with some things some days...when [he] started with this problem it was like...I identified with a lot of what he was going through, because I was also in the same boat...I could understand what he was going through...it helped me to understand his situation'* (Participant 9, units 38, 40 & 42).

Five mothers did not report experiencing feelings of understanding during the course of this study, although they did not necessarily all report feelings of not understanding.

 **RELIEF**

'...when he was accepted at the school I was relieved...' (Participant 9, unit 18).

Table 4.16: Emotional response theme: Relief

RELIEF	
Definition	Anything that lessens pain, discomfort, fear, anxiety or the like (Morris, 1973:1098).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'is a relief', 'feel relaxed', 'don't worry', 'done the right thing', 'done everything', 'felt better', 'done my best', 'trusted', 'taken a load off me' or 'helps me cope', considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'happiness', 'understanding', 'love', 'hopefulness', or 'acceptance' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, ten mothers reported experiencing feelings of relief. Seven mothers felt relieved with their child being at the 'remedial' school because they trusted the teachers a great deal. They felt that the teachers would pick up any areas of difficulty and address them. Mothers reported feeling relaxed knowing that the teachers know how to handle children with these special needs. They felt that this trust was important in contributing towards their feelings of relief. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I've trusted [the teacher] because I think trust is a very important thing...I trust [the doctors]...when I walk out I don't wonder...it's the same at that school...I trust them...that's a nice feeling' (Participant 1, units 124 & 126).*
- *'...who says...this is what we're going to do...you need to trust that person. So we went from the one school feeling that we had placed our trust in the wrong place, to the new one that said this is our job, this is how we deal with it...' (Participant 2, unit 102).*
- *'...the decision was made carefully...and I'll trust their judgment because the teachers are very clued up on remedial education...their opinion would be right' (Participant 4, units 42 & 44).*
- *'...but I know they are working on it...which is a relief' (Participant 6, unit 68).*
- *'I felt since she's gone to [the remedial school] that I can relax a little bit more, because they're taking the main responsibility...' (Participant 6, unit 120).*
- *'I just let it take it's course...the school will support her to do her best in class' (Participant 8, unit 40).*
- *'I think positive was him being at [the remedial school]...I feel I don't have to worry as much as what I did because they know...I know they are doing their bit at school. I'm confident with what they are doing...' (Participant 9, unit 90).*
- *'...the other school...I trust them, but not to the extent that I trust [the remedial school] with my child' (Participant 9, unit 92).*
- *'...I'm actually feeling quite sort of relaxed about it at this stage...' (Participant 11, unit 34).*

Six mothers reported feeling relieved when their child was accepted at the 'remedial' school because they felt that it incorporates full, specialised 'remedial' support. Although this subtheme may appear similar to the previous one, the preceding one emphasises relief as a result of trust in the teachers. This subtheme emphasises relief associated with their child being accepted at the school and being able to attend the school. These two sub themes are closely related. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...the principal saw him and she saw his books and she said, no, he must come...and that was a relief, you know, it was a relief...when they said yes to [the remedial school], I thought this was a blessing...' (Participant 1, units 40 & 42).*
- *'She's gained an incredible amount of confidence from going to that school, which is fantastic for me. That's just taken a big load off me' (Participant 4, unit 78).*
- *'With [him] being at [the remedial school], it has given him and me such insight and growth to his basic grounding. I do not believe he could have had this at any other school and am completely comfortable and proud of his achievements at [the remedial school]' (Participant 5, letter).*
- *'When she got into [the remedial school]...it was like a relief...it doesn't matter what it costs, as long as she's happy...and she has been...' (Participant 6, unit 12).*

- *'...from then on I didn't have to really worry about her...things are under control'(Participant 6, units 16 & 18).*
- *'..when they said he must go to [the remedial school] I was actually relieved...'(Participant 11, unit 28).*
- *'It was such a relief to put him in [the remedial school]...' (Participant 11, unit 32).*

Seven mothers reported experiencing relief and comfort from knowing that they have done everything they could to help their child and from knowing that they have done the best for their child. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'Once again I knew that I had done the right thing because all the other options had failed...' (Participant 1, letter).*
- *'...the sense that I've done everything I could've done...it made me feel better...' (Participant 1, unit 62).*
- *'...I don't think there was much more that we could've done...' (Participant 4, letter).*
- *'...what helped me to cope was being realistic...I know I've done my best for her...it's not like I sat back and didn't try anything...' (Participant 4, unit 56).*
- *'I know I do everything I can to help them through school...I do everything I can to help them have a good year at school...' (Participant 7, unit 50).*
- *'...just doing my best [has helped me to cope]' (Participant 8, unit 104).*
- *'...as a parent I've tried my best...' (Participant 9, unit 56).*
- *'...I've done the most I could...' (Participant 10, unit 100).*
- *'I realise now that all mothers make mistakes...I will never be a perfect mother, but I do my best' (Participant 11, unit 42).*

Two mothers reported feeling relief when they saw that the medication to help their child to concentrate was having positive benefits for the child. Their initial reluctance turned to relief as they saw how it helped their child to cope. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I wasn't very happy giving my child a chemical, yet I knew I had done absolutely everything that I could possibly do...that I couldn't do more for him...I knew I had to do it. I gave him the minimum dose and it works like a charm...if you look at his work from before and compare it to now, his writing is beautiful and he's very eager...he wants to learn' (Participant 1, unit 44).*
- *'...we said no because we're very anti drugs and stiff in our home, but last year we said we're going to test him on a quarter [medication] and see if there's a difference...and there was an incredible difference...his concentration, the way he wrote...he knew what he was doing...' (Participant 5, unit 8).*
- *'...I felt relieved that he could cope better at school...he'd come home and say, mommy, I didn't finish last...' (Participant 5, unit 14).*

Two mothers reported feelings of relief in realising that their child’s learning difficulties are not their fault or due to anything that they did wrongly. The one mother mentioned that this realisation is related to her having another child who copes well academically, where she came to realise that it was not her parenting skills that caused her child’s learning difficulties, thus leading to a sense of relief. This sub theme is supported by the following quotations:

- *‘...seeing that I have two kids and one is completely different to the other one [helps me to cope]...I can’t believe I’m the same mother bringing up these two kids that are so completely different...’ (Participant 10, unit 46).*
- *‘I feel relieved...because at least I don’t blame myself anymore. Because I used to blame myself and think where did I go wrong and I realise now that all mothers make mistakes...I do my best’ (Participant 11, unit 42).*
- *‘What helped me to cope...was getting over the fact that it’s not my fault...’ (Participant 11, unit 48).*
- *‘It was such a relief...when I realised what it all actually is, that it is a real problem, because they finally explained to me the actual chemical...the imbalance in the brain...that was a major, major relief for me...and to be able to do something about it...’ (Participant 11, unit 78).*

One mother did not report experiencing a feeling of relief in response to her child’s learning difficulties. She reported that she was very accepting of his learning difficulties from the start. This is supported by the following quotation:

- *‘...it didn’t fuss me in the least, because...I knew that he was battling at a certain stage. Either he’d have to overcome it or that was the route we’d have to go through his schooling...no other way...I was very accepting from the start...’ (Participant 3, units 14 & 16).*

 **ACCEPTANCE**

‘...wanting to try and fix it and get it right...maybe that’s part of the acceptance thing...accepting that your child has this problem and that you’re going to have to deal with it for the rest of their academic career and that’s not a short-term thing...so I think I maybe struggled to deal with, maybe that’s what I’m dealing with...acceptance...it takes a while to accept...’ (Participant 2, units 68 & 70).

Table 4.17: Emotional response theme: Acceptance

ACCEPTANCE	
Definition	The act or process of accepting; favourable reception; approval (Morris, 1973:7).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as ‘accepting’, ‘can succeed’, ‘will have opportunities’, ‘realisation over time’, ‘fine with it’ or ‘accepted it’ were considered to be illustrative of this theme.

ACCEPTANCE	
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'happiness', 'relief', 'understanding' or 'hopefulness' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, six mothers reported experiencing feelings of acceptance. Four mothers said that it took them a little time to accept the reality of their child's learning difficulties. They felt that it is easier to cope when there is an acceptance of one's child's difficulties as a long-term problem and a recognition of the fact that it is not the end of the world and that their child can still enjoy a fulfilling life. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...I have come to accept his difficulties as part of our lives. We have learnt to cope with it and now we can move forward...it is not going to go away...but we can work around it...'* (Participant 1, letter).
- *'...he will always need additional support, but he can actually succeed in life...it's not something that's going to stop him enjoying his life...not accepting the reality's not going to get you very far'* (Participant 2, units 24 & 26).
- *'...it's not like your child is never going to be able to have the opportunities that he wants to have'* (Participant 2, unit 54).
- *'The fact that she would have to go to a special remedial school...was a realisation over a very long period of time that this would be the only solution for her...'* (Participant 4, letter).
- *'...I thought it would be six months and it would be over...but they said it was a long-term problem...I just didn't think I wouldn't be able to help her faster...now I accept that it's always going to be there...'* (Participant 6, unit 228).

Two mothers reported that they easily accepted their child's difficulties from the start. They were not ashamed of the fact that their child would have to go to a 'remedial' school. They knew that this was the best for their child and ignored others' views of the stigma attached to attending a 'remedial' school. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...it didn't worry me in the least...it didn't worry me at all that he should go for an assessment or that he should go to a remedial school...there's a huge stigma attached to a kid going to a remedial school, but it didn't fuss me in the least, because...I knew that he was battling at a certain stage. Either he'd have to overcome it or that was the route we'd have to go through his schooling...no other way...I was very accepting from the start...'* (Participant 3, units 14 & 16).

- *'...being positive helped me to cope...not listening to all the parents that say, oh, don't send your child to that school or that's not very good or whatever...going to the school...we accepted it...there's a stigma attached and if you can ignore that, then I think you're fine...it hasn't phased me at all...'* (Participant 3, units 34 & 36).
- *'...I was fine with him going to [the remedial school] because it is a good school, especially for that kind of problem. If you as the parent can accept it that you're doing it for the child's good...'* (Participant 10, unit 12).
- *'I've accepted his learning problem...I've really accepted it...I don't care that my son's at [the remedial school]...I'm not ashamed of it...I'm quite proud that we can afford to take him to that school that can help him'* (Participant 10, unit 22).
- *'Just learning to accept it is a good thing to do, definitely...it was easy for me because I wasn't out there to impress anybody...I'm just there for my child, that's all'* (Participant 10, units 62 & 66).

Five mothers did not refer to the feeling of acceptance, either positively or negatively.

HOPEFULNESS

'...I hoped against hope that she was going to move to grade one...you keep on hoping for a light and that she'll improve...which I also hope for, I think maybe one day, you know...something's going to kick in...' (Participant 4, unit 38).

Table 4.18: Emotional response theme: Hopefulness

HOPEFULNESS	
Definition	Having or manifesting hope; inspiring, promising. <u>Hope</u> : To be confident; trust; to look forward to with confidence of fulfilment; expect with desire (Morris, 1973:634).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'feel hopeful', 'optimistic', 'I'm hoping', 'feel good about the future' or 'thought it would come right' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'happiness', 'relief', 'understanding', 'love' or 'acceptance' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, eight mothers reported experiencing feelings of hopefulness. Seven mothers reported feeling hopeful and optimistic about their child's future. They were confident that their child would be able to cope. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I'm hopeful when I think about his learning difficulties...because I think that that school's wonderful...'* (Participant 1, unit 50).
- *'I'm fairly optimistic about her future because she's not a stupid child...she's fairly bright...I don't think she'll ever do very well...but she'll cope'* (Participant 6, unit 40).
- *'I'm hoping she'll come out of it...sometimes you need yourself to push yourself and I think she might do it...get to that stage'* (Participant 6, unit 200).
- *'I feel good about the future...I feel good because I think what they've done there for her...it's the best thing ever'* (Participant 7, unit 28).
- *'...[she] wants to be a vet one day and she will be...'* (Participant 7, unit 118).
- *'...I'm positive...I know that she'll go to high school...and she'll manage...I've got no problem about the future...'* (Participant 8, units 34 & 36).
- *'...I feel there's light at the end of the tunnel...'* (Participant 9, unit 26).
- *'...I hope it will be better...I hope that he'll get more responsibility in life...'* (Participant 10, unit 40).
- *'My dream is for him to do what he wants to do...he will do it out of his own...'* (Participant 10, unit 106).
- *'I feel fine about his future...[he] has got an incredible character...he's just got such a generous heart...he's a good child...he's just rock solid...'* (Participant 11, unit 44).

Two mothers reported that initially when the difficulties were first diagnosed, they felt hopeful that their child would improve. They thought that their child was just developmentally slower in maturing. They felt hopeful that the difficulties were not a serious problem. This subtheme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I thought he was a late developer, because the other two were also late developers...'* (Participant 1, unit 6).
- *'...it wasn't anything new to me...I could see it, but I didn't see it as a huge problem...I thought it was something he would get over...like [his brother]...I thought his was the same...'* (Participant 1, units 14 & 16).
- *'...I read about the medication...and I was shocked...I really didn't want to go that route...a part of me was still hoping...I must just find the right way about it...that I'm going to help him cope...'* (Participant 1, unit 38).
- *'I always thought it was going to come right...I thought she was going to come right, I really did. I thought she was going to fine in the end...'* (Participant 4, unit 4).
- *'...at that stage I thought, this is fine, she's going to come right...I didn't really think there was a big problem...'* (Participant 4, unit 10).
- *'...she would've got in on the grounds of her sister being there...I still hoped she was going to go to that school...we knew there were problems right from the beginning, but...there was always hope...'* (Participant 4, unit 12).
- *'...hope, there's always hope...she probably will be fine...'* (Participant 4, unit 16).
- *'...to me it's just developmental...and that's why I keep on hoping...'* (Participant 4, unit 74).

Three mothers did not report experiencing feelings of hopefulness, although they also did not report any feelings of hopelessness.

 **LOVE**

'...he's always been my sort of "hartskind"...I've always had a soft spot for him...I just love him so much...' (Participant 11, unit 66).

Table 4.19: Emotional response theme: Love

LOVE	
Definition	An intense affectionate concern for another person (Morris, 1973:772).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'adore', 'proud of', 'admire', 'nice to be with', 'easy child', 'love' or 'being there' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'happiness', 'relief', 'understanding' or 'acceptance' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where one or more participants indicated opposite responses to that of the majority of the participants. It may also indicate that they did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, all eleven mothers reported experiencing feelings of love and caring for their child and saw this as a way of supporting their child, which they expressed a desire to do, in whatever manner they could. This theme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'I've supported him just by being there for him...lots of love, which he gets...the love is there unconditionally'* (Participant 5, unit 44).
- *'...we got her through the thing and not by buying her with things...by love and care'* (Participant 7, unit 70).
- *'...I am extremely proud of him'* (Participant 1, letter).
- *'...when I look at his work, I'm proud of him, I really am!'* (Participant 1, unit 50).
- *'I adore him and I think he's got a very beautiful nature...I look at that face and there's goodness radiating out of it...I admire him...I'm very proud of him'* (Participant 1, unit 104).
- *'...I admire him for letting me rub that 'o' out three times...he's the one whose battling, he's the one whose doing it and...he's just sitting there and doing it...I admire him'* (Participant 1, unit 112).
- *'He's a very caring child...a very loving child...he's a happy kid...he's nice to be with...'* (Participant 2, unit 112).
- *'I've had it incredibly easy with him...he is a very, very easy child...he's quite phenomenal sometimes...he kind of just is so accepting of everything'* (Participant 3, unit 22).

- *'...he's never been a difficult child...he's been absolutely amazing...he just slots in...he's the most enthusiastic little guy you ever come across, even though he can't read...he just goes at it...it's been incredibly easy on me, it hasn't been difficult...'* (Participant 3, unit 42).
- *'...and she really is a pleasure, she's an absolute pleasure...she's lovely'* (Participant 4, unit 56).
- *'...she's perfect, she's a perfect little girl...people love her...she's such a pretty little girl, she's lovely, she's beautiful...she's like a doll...she's very pretty'* (Participant 4, unit 88).
- *'...she's really such a sweet little kid...she's a very lovable child...'* (Participant 6, unit 108).
- *'She's a sweet little thing'* (Participant 6, unit 244).
- *'I'll support her in whatever way there is...'* (Participant 7, unit 96).
- *'I've supported her by...I'm just understanding and loving and caring...helping her where I can...and encouraging her...'* (Participant 8, unit 62).
- *'I want to help her more, to be more supportive...do as much as I can for her'* (Participant 8, unit 92).
- *'I support him by being his shoulder to cry on when he comes home and he's had a hard day...and to encourage him just to keep going'* (Participant 9, unit 80).
- *'I've supported him by just being there all the time'* (Participant 10, unit 96).

**EMOTIONAL RESPONSES THAT WERE EXCEPTIONS
WITHIN THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY**

 **FEAR**

'...if I think back then it was scary...' (Participant 1, unit 22).

Table 4.20. Emotional response exception theme: Fear

FEAR	
Definition	A feeling of alarm or disquiet caused by the expectation of danger, pain, disaster, or the like; terror, dread, apprehension (Morris, 1973:480).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'scary', 'was scared' and 'my fear is' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'shock' or 'worry' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where the majority of the participants did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, only two mothers reported experiencing feelings of fear. They reported feeling afraid at seeing their child's lack of progress or when told that their child has learning

difficulties. Some reported feelings of fear when thinking of their child's future. This theme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...it's a bit far ahead, but I must admit it's a bit scary...'* (Participant 1, unit 130).
- *'...my biggest fear is that he will start to think that he's not normal, that there's something wrong with him...I'm scared for him...what he has to face in the future...'* (Participant 9, letter).

Nine mothers did not report experiencing feelings of fear.

 **OVERWHELMED**

'...at times I was in tears...it was just too much to deal with...' (Participant 1, unit 38).

Table 4.21: Emotional response exception theme: Overwhelmed

OVERWHELMED	
Definition	Feeling surged over and submerged; engulfed; to be overcome completely, either physically or completely (Morris, 1973:938).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used phrases such as 'it was too much' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'helplessness', 'fear', 'worry', 'desperation' or 'despair' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where the majority of the participants did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, only two mothers reported experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed. This theme is supported by the above quotation and the quotation below:

- *'Last year I used to spend like two hours a day doing homework with him and then he had to do his homework from his therapies as well...it was just too much...it was completely exhausting...'* (Participant 2, unit 88).

Nine mothers did not report experiencing feelings of being overwhelmed.

 **DISAPPOINTMENT**

'I think some days I get a bit disappointed because he doesn't live up to my expectations...' (Participant 9, unit 36).

Table 4.22. Emotional response exception theme: Disappointment

DISAPPOINTMENT	
Definition	The failure of satisfying the hope, desire or expectation of something; made unhappy by the failure of one's hopes (Morris, 1973:374).
Indicators	All the instances from the raw data where participants used the phrase 'feel disappointed' were considered to be illustrative of this theme.
Exclusions	Instances from the raw data where participants referred to 'sadness', 'despondence' or 'depression' were not considered to be related to this theme. Although there are similarities between these, they are separated for the purposes of this study.
Exceptions	This refers to responses where the majority of the participants did not express this particular emotional response at all.

In total, only two mothers reported experiencing feelings of disappointment. They reported feeling disappointed at seeing their child's lack of progress, especially in realising that their child was not coping in mainstream education. This theme is supported by the following quotations:

- *'...I felt disappointed...disappointed that she couldn't recognise certain words...'* (Participant 6, unit 154).
- *'...we took him out of that school because he just wasn't coping...I actually got to a stage where I was feeling disappointed...'* (Participant 9, units 14 & 16).

Nine mothers did not report experiencing feelings of disappointment.

BRIEF DISCUSSION ON THE FEEDBACK SESSIONS WITH PARTICIPANTS

In the feedback sessions, the primary results were discussed briefly with the mothers and their input or comments were requested. Most of the mothers mentioned that they could identify with and relate to the results. One mother even stated that it seemed as if I were telling her own story to her. They pointed out which of the emotional responses they felt that they did not experience, but also mentioned that it felt good to know that what they have been through and may still be going through is a normal response and that other mothers also experience the same emotions. One mother mentioned that she found it interesting that most of the negative emotions were related to the time period before the child was in a 'remedial' school, whilst the positive emotions seemed to be related to the child being at the

'remedial' school. The emotion of **relief** was reinforced in these sessions with mothers mentioning that it came about when their child was accepted at the 'remedial' school. One mother mentioned that she was relieved because she felt that she was being truly heard for the first time. Another mother mentioned that she believes that **understanding** what is going on helps one to cope.

Mothers were asked what advice they would give to other mothers who might be going through the same experiences. Overwhelmingly there were two responses that the majority of mothers reported. The first was that they advised mothers that they should be well informed, i.e. read up as much as possible about their child's difficulties in order to gain a better understanding of what is going on and also in order to equip themselves with information to be able to support their child effectively and make informed decisions and choices. They suggested that speaking to other parents who are going through the same experiences also helps with this. This understanding, it was mentioned, helps one to cope better. One mother explained the benefits of this advice:

- *'...it won't feel like you're in this big, dark and scary place anymore...'*

The second advisory response that emerged clearly was that they advised that mothers trust their instincts, even if others are telling them that they are wrong. They advised them to do what they feel is best for their child, not what others say they should do. In addition to this, they suggested that mothers keep asking questions until they feel comfortable and satisfied. There was also the suggestion that as soon as mothers feel something is wrong, they should start the helping process immediately and not wait. Three mothers said they would do their best to allay the fear in mothers that going to a 'remedial' school is a bad thing and try to dispel the stigma that is associated with it.

4.4 A NARRATIVE OF THE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES OF MOTHERS TO CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

The following presents a narrative of the research results, depicting the emotional responses that mothers experience in their journey with their children with learning difficulties. At times the paths within their emotional journeys may diverge, but for the most part it is a common journey with some shared emotions, a journey, that may possibly be better travelled, if shared. Take some time and allow the mothers of children with learning difficulties to share their emotional journey with you.

Our journey is one that no mother expects to have to take when first she learns that she is pregnant. Our thoughts about our future child are filled with dreams, with hopes and exciting memories to make. For many, our journey is thrust upon us unexpectedly, for others it may gradually become part of our lives, a growing reality that is hard to ACCEPT. From the moment that it enters our lives, we respond emotionally. This journey is not one that is taken alone...we are accompanied by an array of emotions, some of which are welcome, others of which are simply endured. When we first hear or see that our 'perfect' child is not coping at school, we feel SHOCKED and ANGRY, with an array of questions and answers that bombard us unceasingly – How could this happen? Who is to blame? It must be you – the bearer of bad news...or is it us? What did we do wrong? We feel so GUILTY and we BLAME OURSELVES. After all, we are the parents who are raising this child. It must be what we've done...we are terrible parents. We don't UNDERSTAND. What does this mean? We look around for someone to answer, but there is no one to be seen...no one to support us, no one to answer all these questions we have. Is our child normal? Will our child make it through school? Will our child have a normal life? Why did this happen? Why can't my child understand? We feel so UNCERTAIN. We DOUBT our decisions...Are we doing the right things? We look at our child and see that our once shining, smiling, happy child is now losing that sparkle, that self-confidence that used to be there and we feel SAD. We don't UNDERSTAND. We WORRY at seeing our child suffering like this and are driven to PROTECT him or her from this suffering and from cruel remarks from others. We just feel so SORRY for our child...he or she has all our SYMPATHY. We WORRY at the thought of what we should try next and when we see our child's schoolwork deteriorating. However, amongst these negative emotions, we are at times accompanied by HOPEFULNESS, however small it is...things will come right.....won't they?

Not knowing or UNDERSTANDING what this is all about invites some further emotions to join us on our journey. FRUSTRATION and SADNESS join us

when we see our child struggling with these difficulties day in and day out. The UNCERTAINTY makes us feel so HELPLESS. We reach a point of feeling totally DESPERATE, and DESPAIR becomes a companion on our journey. There are days when we feel DESPONDENT and DEPRESSED...when we feel like just giving up because we cannot continue with this difficult journey...but what helps us to keep persevering in our efforts is our LOVE for our child...we can't let him or her down...

Just when our journey seems to be at a point where there is little (if any) light ahead and we are surrounded by negative emotions, there is the mention of a school, a school where children just like ours are being supported and helped in a specialised way. The day that our child is accepted at this school is a day no mother will forget. Suddenly on our journey RELIEF accompanies us. We don't have to go it alone...there are people to help...we don't have to find the solutions by ourselves. This gives us the strength to start reading about our child's difficulties and to be able to talk to other mothers at this school. And a flood of RELIEF joins us again in our journey...so it's not our fault. It wasn't anything we did or didn't do. It's just the way things are. It's really not as bad as we thought...we know that our child can make it through school, especially now that there are people supporting us on this journey. Now we UNDERSTAND what this is all about and the HOPEFULNESS that previously was a tiny light surrounded by UNCERTAINTY, is transformed into a bright light of real HOPEFULNESS for the future.

Although our journey will never fully come to an end, we now UNDERSTAND what is going on and now we are able to help and support our child through the struggles. Learning difficulties can be dealt with by finding ways to help our child move around the obstacles that are there. We know that all journeys have their ups and downs, and there are still and will still be moments where we are joined by FRUSTRATION, such as when doing homework, as well as moments of

SADNESS and WORRY, among other emotions. However, the UNDERSTANDING that we now have somehow minimises these emotional responses and makes room for HAPPINESS and HOPEFULNESS. There is an ACCEPTANCE of our child's learning difficulties through UNDERSTANDING and a realisation that our 'perfect' child is 'not-so-perfect'. But then who is? As mothers we do our best for our child with learning difficulties and through LOVE and UNDERSTANDING we are able to support them in their own journey through school and through life.

4.5 CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This chapter discussed in detail the emotional response themes that emerged from the data analysis and interpretation during this study. The 18 primary emotional response themes were presented, as well as the 3 themes that were exceptions. In addition to this, there was a discussion regarding the feedback sessions with the mothers. The chapter concluded with a narrative depicting the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties. The following, concluding chapter discusses these results in the light of relevant literature, as well as the conclusions of this study and recommendations.

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CHAPTER 5 SYNOPSIS OF FINDINGS, LITERATURE CONTROL, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the literature control of the results of this study. This involves a discussion summarising the results of this study in comparison to the available literature related to the emotional responses of mothers (and parents) to children with learning difficulties. Some of the literature reflects the emotional responses of parents to their child with a disability. This is followed by a brief discussion of the conclusions that can be derived from this study, after which the specific research questions as laid out in Chapter 1 are addressed. The limitations and contribution of the study are then discussed and the chapter closes with recommendations for practice, training and further research.

5.2 SYNOPSIS OF FINDINGS AND LITERATURE CONTROL

5.2.1 PRIMARY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

In contrast to the preceding chapter, the emotional responses that were identified and explored in this study will be discussed from the most commonly reported, moving towards the less commonly reported emotional responses, but where the majority of mothers still reported experiencing that emotion. Finally the exceptions are discussed, where less than half of the mothers reported those emotions. All of these results are discussed with the emphasis on related existing literature. In the light of the intended gender-specificity of this study (see par. 1.2.2) it should be noted though, that the results from this study are now discussed against a body of literature that generally does *not* distinguish between the genders of parents of children with learning difficulties.

The results of this study indicated that the most common emotional responses expressed by the mothers were those of **frustration**, **happiness** and **love**. All eleven participants reported experiencing these emotions. The emotion of **frustration** is supported by Lardieri, *et al.* (2000:105) who explain that parents of children with learning disabilities often mention

frustration as an emotion that they experience. Reduced support from others can lead to feelings of frustration (Smith, 1998:449). In Dudley-Marling's (2000:92) study, parents of children with learning difficulties reported feeling tremendous frustration when having to do homework with their child, often mentioning that it takes a very long time to complete. In this study, five mothers reported feeling frustrated when doing homework with their child either because their child did not want to do the homework, or took a very long time to complete or because the child could not concentrate on finishing it. However, the most common frustration for the participants centred on limited information and support for parents of children with learning difficulties.

All eleven mothers reported feelings of **happiness**, primarily in response to their child attending the 'remedial' school, as well as seeing the emotional improvement in their child being at the school, for example, increased self-confidence and happiness. The emotional response of happiness can thus be related to the previously mentioned *frustration*. Participants experienced *frustration* from lack of support, and then they experienced *happiness* with the support that was now accessible with their child being accepted at the 'remedial' school.

All the mothers reported the emotional response of **love**. Mothers mentioned that they felt that loving their child was a way of supporting him or her. Available literature that was consulted did not specifically mention the emotions of happiness or love in parents, but did mention related emotions such as relief and comfort, which are discussed in the following paragraph. The emotional response of love reported by the participants in this study manifested in a whole range of expressions. They expressed love in terms of admiration, adoration, being proud of their children and also in terms of an appreciation of the unique personality of their child.

Another very common emotional response reported by the mothers in this study was that of **relief**. Ten mothers reported experiencing this emotion, primarily in relation to their child being accepted at the 'remedial' school, but also for some in that they felt they had everything they possibly could have for their child. Others felt relieved, realising they were not to blame for their child's learning difficulties. Silver (1998:154) is supportive of this result and mentions that some parents experience a feeling of relief and comfort when they learn of their child's difficulties, in the sense that they now have an answer for what they always felt was going wrong. This opinion is shared by Smith (1998:449) who states that some parents are relieved when told that their child has learning difficulties as it confirms their

suspensions. Güldenpfennig (2000:49), in her study refers to the emotional reactions of parents to their premature babies with low birth weight and mentions equilibrium and reorganisation as the two final overlapping stages. These emotions may be similar to those experienced by the mothers in this study in their reporting of a sense of relief.

Some other common emotions reported by the mothers in this study are **anger**, **sadness** and **self-blame/guilt**. Nine mothers in each of these emotional response categories reported experiencing these emotions. Mothers in this study reported feelings of **anger** in relation to someone not identifying their child's difficulties earlier, which they felt contributed to their child's difficulties at the time of the study. This anger can be related to a feeling of blaming, where the mothers reported anger towards schools, teachers and/or professionals for not fulfilling what mothers saw as their responsibility.

The response of **anger** discussed above is supported by Goldstein and Mather (1998:124) who explain that some parents feel angry towards the child or the school, which can lead to blaming others. Smith (1998:449) takes this notion further and explains that it is often the school or a professional who breaks the news of their child's difficulties to the parents and so they become the object of the parents' anger. Goldstein and Mather (1998:123-124) mention feelings of anger and resentment in parents as part of a cycle into which they may fall. They explain that anger and resentment usually arise from parents seeing themselves as normal parents with an abnormal child. Silver (1998:154-155) supports this and also mentions anger in parents when their child is first diagnosed with learning difficulties. He explains that parents may blame others for what has happened, which results in feelings of anger. Parents do this as it provides them with the assurance that they can control the future by dealing with that person. Some parents react to their own anger by becoming overindulgent. Feelings of anger and blame as an emotional response to children with learning difficulties are also mentioned by Whitehead (2004) and Dudley-Marling (2000:62-92).

Parents who see their child's difficulties are sometimes told by professionals that there is nothing wrong with the child and this leads to feelings of anger (Smith, 1998:449). This supports the results obtained from this study, where some mothers reported anger in that they felt that professionals or teachers did not support them in their idea that their child might have difficulties. Some mothers reported anger upon doing homework with their child, which can be related to the feelings of frustration discussed earlier.

In this study, nine mothers reported feelings of **sadness**. This was primarily in response to seeing the negative impact that their child's learning difficulties was having on their child, specifically on an emotional level, but also included sadness in response to finding out that their child had learning difficulties. Supportive of these results are the results from Dudley-Marling's (2000:32) study in which parents mentioned that the most painful experience for them was to see the effect that their child's difficulties had on their child. He reports that it may be very painful for parents to see their child's suffering and they hurt when they see the academic and social difficulties that their child may experience. In relation to this, Tanguay (2001:33) mentions that parents may experience grieving in response to their child's difficulties. On first learning that their child has learning difficulties parents may experience sorrow, among other emotions (Silver, 1998:449). Whitehead (2004) mentions that some parents may experience a period of mourning over the loss of their ideal child. Smith (1998:449) states that:

'In finally coming to grips with the reality of having a child with a disability, many parents have had to "mourn" the loss of the ideal concept they had envisioned for their child.'

Feelings of **self-blame** and **guilt** were also reported by nine of the mothers in this study. This was primarily in the context of feeling that they were not good parents to their children and they felt guilty about not identifying their child's difficulties earlier. Smith (1998:449) supports these results by explaining that parents may blame themselves or one another in an attempt to pinpoint a cause for their child's difficulties. This response is also referred to by Goldstein and Mather (1998:123-124) who explain that parents may experience feelings of guilt, which leads to self-blame, among other emotions. They point out that, at times, parents may feel that their child is normal, but that they are inadequate parents. This leads to feelings of guilt and thus overpermissiveness, which can result in a lack of control in their child. In relation to this, other authors (Smith, 1998:449; Dudley-Marling, 2000:69; Whitehead, 2004 & Silver, 1998:155) also mention feelings of guilt, self-blame and shame that parents may experience upon first learning that their child has learning difficulties. Silver (1998:154) takes this notion further and explains that parents experience feelings of self-blame and guilt as a result of feeling that they must have caused the difficulties. This helps them to take control and find a cause for the difficulties.

The next most commonly reported emotional responses in this study, where eight mothers in each category reported experiencing them, were **uncertainty/self-doubt**, **helplessness** and **hopefulness**. In terms of the emotional response of **uncertainty** and **self-doubt**,

mothers reported that they did not know what to do to deal with their child's learning difficulties and to help their child effectively. Mothers doubted themselves. They said that they were unsure if they were doing the right things and making the right decisions. This response is also pointed out by Goldstein and Mather (1998:xiii) who explain that even when parents recognise that their child has learning difficulties, they may not know how to get this resolved. They experience feelings of doubt (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:124). Silver (1998:155) concurs with this response and explains that parents may feel overwhelmed, with little understanding of what direction to take. Some mothers in this study expressed the need for professionals to take time to explain what is going on with their child in order to help them understand better.

In this study, mothers also mentioned feelings of **helplessness** about seeing their child's work deteriorating and not knowing what to do to help their child. There is some support for these results and certain authors (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:124 & Silver, 1998:154-155) mention that parents of children with learning difficulties experience feelings of helplessness in response to their child. Tanguay (2001:33) refers to 'feeling defeated', which would appear to be closely related to feelings of helplessness.

The eight mothers in this study who mentioned feelings of **hopefulness**, specifically referred to feeling hopeful and optimistic about their child's future, feeling positive about their child being able to cope. Some mentioned feeling hopeful when the initial diagnosis of learning difficulties in their child was made, thinking everything would come right. None of the available literature consulted during this study refers to feelings of hopefulness. On the contrary, there is reference to feelings of hopelessness (Goldstein & Mather, 1998:124 & Silver, 1998:155).

Further emotional responses reported in this study were those of **shock** and **worry**. Seven mothers reported experiencing each of these. The emotional response of **shock** was reported by the mothers in the context of being told that their child has learning difficulties or in seeing how their child was not coping scholastically. Smith (1998:449) concurs with this finding and reports that parents may experience shock, among other emotions, when they are first told that their child has learning difficulties.

The seven mothers in this study who reported feelings of **worry** mentioned that they worried about their child's difficulties with schoolwork. Some worried about their child's future. Lardieri, *et al.* (2000:105-106) refer to tension that parents of children with learning

difficulties may experience. Tension can be seen as related to the emotional response of worry. In relation to this, Silver (1998:155) refers to anguish as an emotion first experienced by parents on learning that their child has learning difficulties. In Dudley-Marling's (2000:62-92) study, parents reported experiencing feelings of tension, anxiety, stress and worry in response to their child's scholastic difficulties.

Less commonly reported emotional responses, but still reported by the majority of mothers in this study were the emotional responses of **desperation/despair**, **despondence/depression**, **sympathy**, **protectiveness**, **understanding** and **acceptance**. Six mothers in each emotional response category reported that emotion.

Mothers reported **desperation** or **despair** in relation to not knowing what to do or who to turn to for help. They were willing to try anything. Some mothers felt that no one understood them. Some expressed the despairing feeling that their child was never going to cope because of the lack of improvement. No relevant literature consulted specifically mentions the emotional responses of desperation or despair. Related responses are mentioned as discussed in the preceding paragraphs.

The mothers in this study also reported experiencing the emotions of **despondence** and **depression**. The contexts in which these emotions were experienced were varied and revealed more diversity in what triggered the mothers' feelings of despondence and depression. This was discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Existing literature that was consulted did not refer to these emotional responses, but rather to a less severe form, i.e. feelings of sadness, as discussed previously.

Mothers in this study reported feeling **sympathy** for their child in that they felt sorry for their child because of what he or she was going through. Dudley-Marling (2000:73) concurs with this finding and specifically refers to sympathy that parents may experience in response to their child's scholastic difficulties.

Feelings of **protectiveness**, reported by six mothers, also came to the fore in this study. They reported that they did not want their child to suffer or be hurt as a result of his or her learning difficulties. Mothers wanted to protect their children from this hurt. Hunt and Marshall (1994:211) concur with this finding and explain that when parents see the difficulties that their child experiences academically and socially it can be very painful for them and they may become overprotective of their child in order to try and save him or her

from the pain. In relation to this, Smith (1998:449) explains that some parents react to their own anger and disappointment by becoming overprotective or overindulgent.

Mothers also reported feelings of **understanding**. Mothers reported that reading up on their child's difficulties and speaking to other mothers helped them to gain a better understanding of their child and what he or she is going through. They reported that this helped them to be able to give their child better support. In addition to this, having learning difficulties themselves helped mothers to understand their child better. This emotional response was not mentioned in any of the available literature consulted.

The mothers in this study also mentioned feelings of **acceptance**. Most of those who did indeed mention acceptance explained that it took them some time to accept their child's learning difficulties. Few mothers reported acceptance from the outset. Crow and Crow (1997:107) mention that some parents do not adjust well to accepting that their child has learning difficulties. This, they explain, can seriously interfere with their child's day-to-day functioning and with his or her ability to successfully handle life's challenges and opportunities. These parents are also not fully available to their children. In relation to this Tanguay (2002:33) mentions that some parents who have difficulty accepting that their child has learning difficulties may experience denial or minimise their child's difficulties. Silver (1998:154-155) also refers to denial, but mentions that parents gradually work through their grief and begin the long mourning process, where they slowly accept the loss of their ideal child and move on with life and the challenges of helping their child.

5.2.2 EXCEPTIONS WITHIN THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The emotional responses of **fear**, being **overwhelmed** and **disappointment** were exceptions to what the majority of mothers reported experiencing in this study but were, however, mentioned by at least some of the mothers. Two mothers in each emotional response category reported experiencing these emotions. **Fear** as an emotional response of parents to their child with learning difficulties is referred to by Silver (1998:155), Dudley-Marling (2000:85) and Whitehead (2004) in the sense of parents wondering if their child will have a normal life. Silver (1998:155) also referred to parents feeling **overwhelmed** the moment when their child is diagnosed with learning difficulties. Smith (1998:449) refers to feelings of **disappointment**.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

This study attempted to identify and explore the emotional responses reported by a group of eleven mothers whose children have learning difficulties and who, at the time of the study, were attending a school specialising in remedial education. The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties in order to deepen our understanding of mothers of such children. By means of semi-structured interviews and letters from the mothers, as well as field notes in the form of journal entries by the researcher, their stories relating their experiences and emotional responses to their child were analysed and interpreted. Based on the results of this study it appears that mothers experience complex emotional responses to learning difficulties in their child. A range of emotions, both positive and negative, are experienced. Emotional responses shared by all the mothers in this study are frustration, happiness and love. As dominant themes, these are closely followed by anger, sadness and self-blame/guilt.

When compared to existing literature on the emotional responses of *parents*, it is clear that mothers as a single category do experience most of the emotions mentioned in the existing literature. The results of this study, however, indicate that the eleven mothers reported experiencing more positive emotions than are mentioned in the relevant literature, which refers to parents as a homogeneous category and evidences primarily negative emotions. Further research is needed to determine if this tendency towards both negative and, especially, positive emotional responses, may be gender-specific or possibly related to emotional responses to a child with learning difficulties who attends a 'remedial' school. Recommendations for further research are discussed in par. 5.7.3.

The results also indicate that the emotional responses tend to be very integrated, in two ways. Firstly, mothers may experience a number of emotions at one time in response to the same situation. Secondly and in relation to the first point, many of the emotions are closely related and may flow into one another or cannot exist in isolation from one another. For example, if a mother feels uncertain about what she should do to help her child, this may lead directly to her feeling helpless and then desperate. In the same way, feelings of frustration may give way to anger and desperation. The results indicate that there is not necessarily a specific or even overlapping order in which the emotional responses occur. There may be a general pattern of shifting from more negative emotions to more positive emotions with increased understanding on the part of mothers. This is discussed in more detail further on. The emphasis here is on the fact that emotions are emotional *responses*,

indicating that they occur in response to experiences. Various emotions can arise at various times in response to various experiences.

5.4 ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

5.4.1 PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

- **What are the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties?**

The results of this study indicate that mothers experience a complexity of emotional responses, namely:

FEARFUL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	= ♦ shock ♦ worry ♦ desperation/despair ♦ uncertainty/self-doubt
ANGRY EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	= ♦ anger ♦ frustration
SAD EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	= ♦ sadness ♦ despondence/depression ♦ self-blame/guilt ♦ helplessness ♦ sympathy ♦ protectiveness
JOYFUL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES	= ♦ happiness ♦ understanding ♦ relief ♦ acceptance ♦ hopefulness ♦ love
EMOTIONAL RESPONSE EXCEPTIONS	= ♦ fear ♦ overwhelmed ♦ disappointment

5.4.2 SUBQUESTIONS

- **How are the emotional responses they experience related to their understanding of their child's learning difficulties?**

One of the emotional responses reported was that of uncertainty. Mothers reported that they did not know what to do to help their child with his or her learning difficulty. A number of the mothers mentioned that initially they were frustrated because they did not understand their child's difficulties and could therefore not adequately support their child. Another emotional response reported was that of understanding, later on, where mothers mentioned that through reading up on their child's learning difficulties and by speaking to other mothers

in similar situations, they began to understand their child's difficulties better and were then able to give their child better support.

Based on the results of this study it therefore appears that a lack of understanding in mothers of what their child's learning difficulties are all about contributes to feelings of worry, desperation/despair, uncertainty/self-doubt, frustration, despondence/depression, self-blame/guilt and helplessness in that mothers report not knowing what to do to help their child or who to turn to for help. This has implications for practice as discussed in par. 5.7.1. In addition to this, once mothers understood their child's difficulties better, they reported feelings of understanding, relief (especially in realising that they are not at fault), acceptance (especially in that they reported understanding that the difficulties are not as severe as they initially thought), as well as hopefulness (in that they felt positive that their child would therefore be able to cope). These positive emotions, related to better understanding of their child's difficulties, may result in a decrease in the more negative emotions related to not understanding their child's difficulties.

▪ **How are the emotional responses they experience related to their support of their child?**

It thus becomes clear that an understanding of their child's learning difficulties is related to positive emotional responses in mothers, while a lack of understanding is related to more negative emotions, as discussed in the previous paragraph. The findings related to the support of their child were mixed. Some mothers felt that their emotions had an impact on their ability to support their child, while others felt that their emotions had no impact. It appears that a lack of understanding of their child's difficulties and thus the negative emotions experienced may negatively affect their ability to support their child effectively. When mothers have a better understanding of their child's difficulties, they are better able to support them effectively. It thus appears that mothers' ability to support their children with their learning difficulties is related more to their understanding of what their child's difficulties entail, or a lack of understanding, than to their emotional responses. Based on the results from this study, their emotional responses are part of this understanding, but do not appear to directly influence their perceived ability to support their child.

- **How do the emotional responses that mothers experience influence their view of themselves as parents?**

Again it seems that understanding is a key factor related to this subquestion. It appears unlikely that mothers' emotions *per se* are related to their view of themselves as parents. A lack of understanding reported by the mothers contributed to feelings of self-blame and guilt, where they reported that they felt it was their fault that their child was experiencing learning difficulties, that they were failures as parents. With an understanding of their child's learning difficulties, came the knowledge that it was not their fault or their lack of parenting skills that had caused the problem and with that understanding came emotional responses of relief, acceptance and hopefulness.

- **How are emotional responses to their child's learning difficulties constructed over time?**

Although emotional responses occur in response to specific experiences, which can occur at any time in the course of mothers' journeys with their children with learning difficulties, it appears that there is possibly an overall general process of construction. At the beginning of such a journey, mothers may be shocked to learn that their child has learning difficulties. Their lack of understanding of what the difficulties involve contributes to a number of negative emotional responses, such as worry, desperation/despair, uncertainty/self-doubt, frustration, despondence/depression, self-blame/guilt and helplessness. Once mothers start to understand what their child's learning difficulties involve, either through reading up or through speaking to other mothers, they begin to experience more positive emotional responses.

Therefore the construction of emotional responses over time appears to be related to mothers' understanding of their child's learning difficulties. At any time during the process, a mother may be confronted with an experience that she does not understand, which may once again contribute to the experience of more negative emotions in response. As each individual is unique it cannot be estimated how long it will take mothers to reach an understanding, or whether all mothers of children with learning difficulties will ever reach a full understanding. It is clear from this study, however, that an understanding of their child's learning difficulties (or the lack thereof) is related to the emotional responses that mothers experience in response to their child. The results of this study indicate that an experience of increased support and availability of support is related to the experience of more positive

emotional responses in mothers. The mothers in this study reported increased support and understanding when their child was accepted at and then attended the 'remedial' school.

5.5 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study focused on a very specific group of mothers, namely those whose children are attending a school specialising in remedial education. The results therefore reflect the emotional responses of mothers who have a child in a 'remedial' school and thus have the support of this type of school. This could possibly account for why there are more positive emotional responses than are evident in existing literature. This possibility is supported by the fact that positive emotions were primarily mentioned by the mothers in response to their child being accepted at and being part of the 'remedial' school. The possibility exists that mothers of children with learning difficulties whose children are in mainstream education may report experiencing different emotional responses. However, as this study is qualitative in nature, with a constructivist and interpretivist paradigmatic viewpoint, the aim is essentially to reflect the voices of these eleven mothers, relating their subjective experiences and not to generalise the findings to all mothers of children with learning difficulties.

In addition to this it must be mentioned that one participant, at the time of the study, was experiencing marital conflict and possibly the prospect of divorce. It is likely that her reported emotional responses might have been influenced by this emotionally difficult time in her life.

5.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities between mothers and children with learning difficulties, specifically in moving towards an understanding of their emotional responses. There is a gender-specific focus, indicating how *mothers* respond emotionally to learning difficulties in their child. This study contributes towards an extension of existing research that places emphasis on the emotions of *parents* as a homogeneous category. In addition to this, there is the added understanding of how mothers with a child in a '*remedial*' school respond emotionally.

The results include positive emotional responses reported by the mothers. As discussed in Chapter 3, par. 3.3.3 referring to the shortcomings of a narrative research design, there is a

tendency to understand the world in terms of available narratives, i.e. in terms of what one expects such mothers to experience emotionally. For example, most would expect such mothers to go through a very difficult, emotionally upsetting time. The results of this study indicate that although these mothers do experience many negative emotions, they also experience a number of positive emotions in response to their child with learning difficulties. These results extend the existing literature on the subject, which appears to focus mostly on negative emotions. The results of this study thus support the recent trend in psychology to move towards a more strength-focused and solution-focused emphasis. It may be possible that the experience of positive emotions in mothers may be related to an inner strength and resilience in these mothers. An awareness of this is important for those who work in the field of learning difficulties as these strengths could be utilised as a way of supporting mothers of children with learning difficulties. On the other hand, these positive emotions could be related to their experience of their child in 'remedial' education. It is clear that further research into the emotional responses of mothers of children in mainstream education is needed in order to shed light on this result.

A further contribution of this study is that emotions that mothers experience are not simply named, but are explored in depth. Each emotional response was explored in order to understand the different contexts and experiences to which these mothers respond emotionally. As mentioned previously, emotions do not occur in isolation, but in response to specific experiences and based on individuals' constructions. Thus it appears that negative experiences (e.g. seeing their child suffering emotionally, seeing their child's lack of coping, etc.) contribute to negative emotional responses (e.g. worry, sadness, helplessness, etc.). Positive experiences (e.g. seeing their child's self-confidence increase, seeing their child's schoolwork improving, etc.) contribute to positive emotional responses (e.g. relief, happiness, hopefulness, etc.). As mentioned previously, it appears that an understanding of their child's learning difficulties may play a role in the emotional responses that mothers experience.

5.7 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.7.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

From the preceding discussion it is clear that those who work in the field of learning and learning difficulties need to have an understanding of the emotional responses of mothers to their children with learning difficulties. This is especially significant when such a person

needs to bring to a mother's attention the diagnosis of learning difficulties in her child. This is the first essential step that professionals need to take. By being aware of these emotions, professionals can be able to support such mothers more effectively.

Most importantly, professionals need to be aware of the fact that these emotional responses can be (at least in part) the result of a lack of understanding on the mother's part. Professionals thus need to carefully explain all aspects of the child's learning difficulties to mothers, and be open and available to addressing any questions they might have. It is important for professionals to bear in mind that this may be the first time a mother is learning of something like this and that she may have no training or understanding of learning difficulties whatsoever. Mothers in this study expressed the need for professionals to provide them with more information on what their child is experiencing. They reported feeling that there was a lack of support in helping them to understand what learning difficulties in their child really means, as well as the implications concerning what is needed for their child and what the future holds.

Supporting mothers through equipping them with increased understanding and knowledge may lead to the experience of more positive emotions and also to an openness, willingness and capacity on the part of mothers to be able to support their child with learning difficulties more effectively. It is clear that those in the field of learning difficulties play a vital role in helping mothers to understand their child's difficulties and thus the emotional responses that such mothers experience, as well as in fostering the mothers' ability to support their children effectively.

5.7.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAINING

It would be beneficial if training programmes in the field of Educational Psychology and that of Education could include the facet of emotional responses of mothers (parents) to children with learning difficulties. This training would equip those working in the field of learning and learning difficulties to understand what emotions to expect in mothers that they deal with. In addition to this, training emphasising that mothers' emotional responses are, in part, related to their possibly limited understanding of their child's learning difficulties would encourage trainees to take the time to give mothers a proper explanation of what is involved. This would help mothers to gain a better understanding, which in turn would have an impact on the emotions they experience and their ability to support their child. Training would be enhanced by including practical ways to inform mothers (parents) about their child's learning

difficulties in ways that would be easily understood and accessible to mothers (parents). Such training programmes should be directed at both undergraduate and postgraduate students studying to become educators, those specialising in special needs education and students studying Educational Psychology.

5.7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The following further research is recommended:

- Participatory-action research where parents can design a support programme for parents of children with learning difficulties.
- Participatory-action research where educators or educational psychologists can design a support program for parents of children with learning difficulties.
- A study of the emotional responses of fathers to children with learning difficulties.
- A comparative study of the emotional responses of mothers and those of fathers to children with learning difficulties.
- A study of the emotional responses of mothers and/or fathers to children with learning difficulties in mainstream, inclusive education.
- A comparative study of the emotional responses of mothers and/or fathers of children with learning difficulties in mainstream, inclusive education and those receiving special needs education, incorporating perspectives of parents on inclusive and exclusive education.
- A study exploring the degree of relation between personality styles and/or coping styles and the emotional responses of mothers and/or fathers of children with learning difficulties.
- A study exploring the emotional responses of children and/or adolescents to their own learning difficulties and related school experiences.

5.8 CLOSING REMARKS

Being a parent is one of the most important and demanding roles any adult can play in his or her life. This task can be made even more demanding if a parent has a child who experiences learning difficulties. In dealing with their children and all the facets related to managing the difficulties effectively on a daily basis, parents experience a range of emotional responses to these experiences, right from the moment when they are first told about their child's learning difficulties. It is important for both parents and those working in

the field of learning and learning difficulties to understand what the emotional responses of parents of children with learning difficulties may be.

This study identified and explored the emotional responses of mothers to children with learning difficulties by means of a narrative research design, which allowed mothers to share this chapter of their life stories openly. A focus on the responses of *mothers* specifically, allowed for a gender-specific focus, not often encountered in existing literature.

The results of this study indicate that mothers of children with learning difficulties experience a range and complexity of emotions in response to their experiences regarding their child and his or her learning difficulties. It appears that there may be a general range of emotional responses from more negative emotions through to more positive emotions. A key factor that seems to be strongly related to the emotional responses experienced by mothers is that of understanding. The more that mothers understand their child's learning difficulties, the more there appears to be a shift from negative emotions to more positive ones. Those who work in the field of learning and learning difficulties can enhance this understanding through taking the time to explain to mothers exactly what their child's learning difficulties entail. This increased understanding in mothers appears to contribute towards them being better able to support and help their child.

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**APPENDIX A
LETTER OF CONSENT FOR SCHOOL**

Dear Mrs. ***

PERMISSION TO DO RESEARCH AT * SCHOOL**

With reference to our conversation where I explained the goal and process of my research to you, I hereby request your permission for the previously mentioned research to take place at your school.

The research requires that I receive the contact details of selected mothers, whereafter I will contact them requesting their participation in the research, which is voluntary. Interviews with the mothers will be scheduled and take place away from the school grounds, at my work premises.

Thank you
Cheryl Williams

I hereby give permission on behalf of *** School for the above-mentioned research to take place.

Mrs. ***

Principal : *** School

Date

APPENDIX B
LETTER OF CONSENT FOR PARTICIPANTS

Dear Parent

You are invited to participate in a study. The following information regarding the study is provided so that you can decide if you would like to take part. You must be aware that your participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

The study is being undertaken by Cheryl Williams. I am currently a masters student in Educational Psychology at the University of Pretoria. My supervisor for the study is Prof. Irma Eloff, Head of Department of Educational Psychology. For the study I must do research on the emotions that mothers experience in response to their child having a learning difficulty. The goal is to determine what emotions are experienced by mothers during this process and how this influences their understanding of their child's learning difficulty and support of their child, in order to deepen our understanding of mothers of children with learning difficulties.

The research process includes interviews with you as parent. All activities that you participate in will remain confidential, as well as anonymous. No human rights may be violated during the study. At the end of the study I undertake to discuss the initial findings with you. I would also appreciate your input, before the findings are finalised.

If you have any queries, before, during or after the study, you are welcome to contact Prof. Eloff or myself.

Thank you in advance

Cheryl Williams
083-3962011

Prof. Irma Eloff
(012) 420-5503

DECLARATION

I have read the above and understand what the goal of the study is. I understand what activities I will be involved in. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time. I understand that all information will be handled confidentially and that my identity will remain anonymous. I hereby confirm that I will participate in the study. I undertake to direct any queries to the researcher or the supervisor.

Name of Parent (Printed)

Signature of Parent

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX C
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

- I would like you to tell me about your child's difficulties at school and how this has affected your life. The focus is on your emotions, but this is really an opportunity for you to tell your story. I have some questions that I would like to cover, but please feel free to elaborate on anything at any time, as I would like to hear your story. Are there any questions before we start?

- When did you first realise your child might be experiencing a learning difficulty? - did you notice it yourself or was it noticed by a teacher?
- What was the first emotion you experienced? And then when your child was placed at ***?
- How do you currently view your child and his/her learning difficulty?
- What emotions are you currently experiencing regarding your child's learning difficulty?
- How do you feel about the future? Where are you heading in this process?
- What assets/strengths do you feel have helped you to cope? (both within yourself and in the people around you - family, friends, teachers, etc.)
- What other emotions can you remember experiencing from that first moment of realising there might be a potential learning difficulty up to the point where you are now?
- Have these difficulties affected your view of yourself as a parent? In what way?
- What impact has your child's learning problem had on your life and your relationships (with your husband/your other children/friends, etc.)?
- Did you and your husband always agree/disagree?
- What impact has there been on your routines?
- How do feel you have been able to support your child with his/her learning problem?
- Have there been any financial effects?
- How has this process affected your child? And you in seeing this in your child?
- Have there been any changes (positive and/or negative) in how you feel you are able to support your child with his/her learning problem?

- What do you feel would have helped you cope better in supporting your child? (If anything).
- What is your relationship with your child like? / Describe your relationship with your child.
- Has there been any change in your relationship with your child (positive and/or negative) as a result of your child's learning difficulty?
- Have your aspirations/goals for your child been affected?
- If you could change anything about how you have handled your child's learning difficulty up to this point, would you change anything and if so, what?
- Do you feel your emotions influenced your support of your child?

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APPENDIX D
EXAMPLE OF A PAGE FROM A TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEW

SPEAKER "TURN" UNIT NUMBER	TRANSCRIPT	NOTES
22	P: Um...but the attention...that to me was...was quite a big problem, 'cause I could see, you know...academically you're not going to get on if you haven't got that behind you...and then his OT got sick...she didn't see...I think she saw him once or twice and then she got sick...and um...she...I think she was off for two months, and then when she saw him again...you know...she was really battling with him, and not making progress. I looked at his books and I was very surprised...it was actually...if I think back then...it...it was scary...you know...	
23	<i>R: So you felt scared now, once you saw how things were going?</i>	
24	P: Yes...ja...because the physical side...I felt that you can...you're not going to have the muscles of Arnold Swazzernegger, but you can...that's...you know...	
25	<i>R: ...that's how it's going to be...</i>	
26	P: ...unimportant...and that's fine...that's my child, that's fine, but...and then...I could see how it was affecting him, and to me...Paul ⁴ used to be confident and he was...because he's a lovely child, he's got a beautiful nature...and um...happy and outgoing, he's just got a very open nature and I protected him because...um...we could see that he wasn't managing like the kid next door to him was...and um...and I think the deeper it went into the term and into the year, the more it affected him. And then he was moved to the front and it was always his name, his name that was called out, "Paul sit down, Paul this, Paul that"	
27	<i>R: How did that affect you, seeing the change in him? How did you feel?</i>	
28	P: Um...protective of him, you know...if anybody looked skew at him, I would want to, you know...and I wanted to make things right for him, I wanted to, um...be able to explain him to everyone. I wanted to...them to understand it's not his fault, you know, he can't help it...and um...um...I'd read a lot about ADD children...and um...a lot of things started slotting in...um, for example, Paul was quite sickly when he was small and very allergic, and...um...that slots in with the picture of ADD and also the fact that he always wants to drink, he's always thirsty...he always...was thirsty. So little things like that. So when he was diagnosed with ADD...um...it...it was like a jigsaw puzzle, all the pieces were falling into place, but um...on the other hand I was worried about him...um...	

⁴ Paul is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of the participant's child.

APPENDIX E
EXAMPLE OF A PAGE FROM THE RESEARCH JOURNAL

Some responded with true enthusiasm for there being such a study, others wanted some time to think about their decision. Some asked very few questions and others asked many, including what the title of my dissertation was going to be. Some were only too happy to come to my workplace to be interviewed, others requested that I come to them.

All of this already, within an average of a 5-minute telephone conversation, gives me an initial idea of how unique individual perceptions are – how each person responded so differently to what I said (which was the same for each mother). It makes me realise that the stories I will hear from each individual will be so unique and different. Each mother's individual personality traits, her own experiences of being parented and her own childhood experiences of school and learning, will play a role in how she has come to understand her child and will influence the emotions she has gone through up to now. In essence it will be the mothers' constructions of their experiences that determine the story that they are going to tell me and which are related to the emotional responses that they experience regarding their child's learning difficulties.

In a sense, I feel that there will be common ground, common core emotions that these mothers go through, even though they may differ in the order that they experienced the emotions, which emotions they experienced, the intensity of these emotions, as well as the duration of each particular emotion that they experienced. This will undoubtedly have an impact on their relationships with their husband, family, friends and their children, and how they respond to their child's situation.

27 October 2003

Interview 1 down!! I felt that it went really well. As I listened to her story I could already identify emotional responses, as well as perceptions and experiences in her life that have affected the way she has handled her son's learning difficulties. She comes across as a very caring mother and has done everything she could have for her son. After the interview she said that she feels a lot calmer now and that the helplessness is at bay now. She also mentioned that *** is a wonderful school and that it is a scary feeling thinking of when he has to leave, but she realises that *** isn't the real world.

She's a very calm person and appeared to speak openly. She seemed to feel good about sharing her story and was almost realising and verbalising her emotions as we went along. She seems to be a very positive person who will try every avenue to help her son. What struck me was how much she wants to protect him and not have people pick on him. I could sense the change in her emotions from being tense and worried about him beforehand, to the calmness she explains since he has been at ***.

APPENDIX F
EXAMPLE OF THEME ANALYSIS OF TRANSCRIBED INTERVIEWS DURING INITIAL DATA ANALYSIS

	<p>sometimes I was just in tears because I couldn't – I'm a single parent, so at times it was just too much. It's just, you've got the worry and then dealing with the conflict...there's just no peace...no harmony...no time when you have a peaceful meal...it just seems to wear you down...and at the same time you feel quite desperate because where do you go...where do you go, um...I like to know, if my child gets measles I go to my book and I read, this is how long it's going to last, and then in 2 days time they going to be fine, I like to know that...and I didn't know that, so I felt very much in the dark. Then...um...I was told to go and see Dr. *** and then I decided to take *** there, especially when the conflict then was very high...and then I took *** there and she did an evaluation on him and said no he's definitely ADD and I must put him on medication...and um...and you know all the time he's not coping at school, his work is atrocious. Going there and you look at this and it's...it's very hard to accept that because I know he's intelligent, I see he's intelligent, so his work isn't a true reflection of who my child is, and I know there's nothing I can do about it. Whereas with my other children I could see it come right. OK, so then she said I should put him on the medication, then I read about it and I found out about the medication and I was shocked...I really didn't want to go that route...um...a part of me was still hoping, I think stupid and naïvely that it's not that bad, that we somehow, I must just find the right way about it, that I'm going to help him cope...</p>	
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**APPENDIX G
RESEARCH DIARY**

INTRODUCTION TO MY RESEARCH JOURNEY

This research diary documents my personal journey through this research study. It begins at the base of a large mountain and follows the routes that I took in climbing this mountain, through the difficult parts and the easier stretches, through valleys and up steep cliffs. Ultimately the journey ends with reaching the summit and, by looking at the journey that was covered from such a high viewpoint, emphasises the paths chosen and helps me to see the person I became in climbing my mountain. Sit back, relax and accompany me on my research journey.

November 2002 - The Start of a Journey

As I neared my final exams of my Master's year I felt excited that a challenging year was drawing to a close and that I would soon be entering the domain of "Intern Educational Psychologist" in 2003. But as for feeling like a researcher, that was something that contained some self-doubt. I approached my supervisor with a list of ideas that I thought would be interesting to research. Her enthusiasm was infectious and I found myself realising that these ideas (previously only used in research methodology courses as theoretical ideas) could actually become a reality. My supervisor, then and throughout the research process, never forced any of her ideas upon me. She had suggestions, but it was up to me to choose the paths that I wanted to follow. Looking back at this, I realise now how empowering that 'guided freedom' was for me. At the end I felt that I had really accomplished something, that I had conducted a research study.

By the end of November 2002, I felt empowered by the fact that I had gained two things - a supervisor and a 'semi-topic'. After some discussion surrounding terminology of what exactly I was doing - dissertation, mini-dissertation,

dissertation of limited scope or thesis, we decided it would be just perfect to call it my 'skripsie'. And so my research study-cum-'skripsie' was born. I was going to do some sort of therapeutic intervention with two or three case studies - children who were emotionally traumatised after experiencing a home burglary. I was all set for my internship year at the University's Centre for Child and Adult Guidance and was confident that I would encounter clients who would be willing to participate in my research study. Things were, as I like them to be - planned. I was beginning to feel more like a researcher! Little did I know that this step was the easiest - that the process that was to follow in the next year-and-a-half would be far more challenging.

December 2002 - Recharging my Batteries

I enjoyed a relaxing holiday season, with a seaside holiday at Umhlanga Rocks and Christmas time with family. After one of the most challenging years of my life being a full-time Masters student, I was determined to soak up every bit of relaxation I could before the new year of internship and 'skripsie' and so decided that the process of going to the library was best left to a new year!

January 2003 - A Steep Hill

I started out my internship year with enthusiasm, as well as some trepidation, for the year that lay ahead. On Day One at the Centre we were confronted with instant clients to see and assess and little thought was given to research. It was decided that we six interns would motivate each other by making deadlines together. Deadline number one was that Chapter 1 would be handed in by February. Interns were asked to share their title. TITLE!? What title? All I had was a tentative topic. Some anxiety set in and as time went on our group motivational deadlines had seemed to part ways.

To ease some of this mounting anxiety about my lack of progress, my supervisor and I had a meeting. As always, she lifted my spirits and I felt very relieved that I had gained some structure and had a good list of authors to consult. I headed straight off to the library and gave Clarisse Venter a list of keywords to

search for. She was all too happy to help out and I started receiving pages and pages of titles the following week!

February 2003 - It's Okay to Not Know Where You're Going

I spent time going through the fabulous lists from Clarisse and found some wonderful titles, which I collected or ordered via interloans. As I collected this literature, I found that the more I read, the less I felt as if I knew what I was doing. I started wondering how on earth people conducted research. I remember e-mailing my supervisor, saying I didn't know what I was doing. Her reply was that I was completely on the right track. I felt so relieved and her support somehow made me feel that I really was on the right track! By the end of February I had a title - 'Exploring Narrative Therapy with Children who have Experienced a Home Burglary', but still no Chapter 1.

March 2003 - Feeling Lost

By March I found myself immersed in my experiences as 'assessor' and 'therapist', but not as 'researcher' - still no Chapter 1. I became a little more anxious as I saw time flying by and no 'skripsie' progress to match with it. I was still collecting literature, but planned 'skripsie' days passed by filled with intern activities. The more I thought about it, the more I felt as if I was losing that small 'researcher' part of myself I had encountered in November.

April 2003 - A Fork in the Road

At this stage I realised that I was trying to divide myself into two parts - one to give attention to my work as an Intern Educational Psychologist and another part focused on my "skripsie", with the result that I wasn't giving 100% to either. Being who I am, I decided that I could no longer give only half to each part, and so decided to focus my main attention on my personal and professional growth as an Educational Psychologist, whilst gathering literature on my chosen research topic. Looking back, this was the best decision for me because I grew so much as a therapist - more than I imagined I could. I decided to be on the 'lookout' for possible research participants and

I felt relieved that I didn't see this huge mountain in front of me anymore, but a far more manageable hill. My goals were set - to finish my proposal and complete my data collection. I became whole-heartedly invested in my learning curve as 'assessor' and 'therapist' and loved every minute of it.

May to August 2003 - A New Hill to Climb

Throughout this time of focusing on my internship I could feel the acceleration in my personal growth and my increasing confidence in therapy...I enjoyed taking on new challenges! I was also into a steady cycle of literature collection. I would file articles in their categories. With library books, I would sit over weekends reading through my week's collected books and select pages to photocopy, which I would then do the following week after work and then return the books. The literature was carefully filed away and the process was started again.

By the end of August, however, I still had not encountered any clients who could be part of my research study. I had tried every avenue - contacting trauma centres, the police station, churches and emergency personnel, giving my research information and contact numbers. Every path I tried, ended in a closed door and I became a little anxious once again. I started wondering if I should alter my topic. After speaking to my supervisor about my doubts I felt so encouraged by her support - she understood my predicament and would support whatever decision I made. I came to a difficult conclusion - finding clients to participate in my study was going to be a difficult (if not impossible) task and time was marching on. Finally I came to the decision that I needed to change my research topic. By this stage I had managed to collect a large amount of literature on my initial topic and my heart felt heavy as I packed away my previous literature and started the whole process again.

September 2003 - Climbing Higher

September brought a new month, a new season and a new topic, for which I had much enthusiasm, as children and families with learning difficulties is

something close to my heart after my two years work at a 'remedial' school. I felt re-energized to tackle my new research topic. Not being a winter person at all, spring was just the thing to get me going. Once again, Clarisse came to my rescue with a whole new list of searches for me. The research process once again kicked into action, with reading books, photocopying pages, filing them and returning the books. The more literature I read on my research methodology and the less documented information I found on my topic, the more excited I became about doing my research! I contacted the school and obtained their permission. to conduct my research study.

October and November 2003 - I Can See the Summit - I am a Researcher

This was truly a time when I felt that I was doing research. I was so thrilled when I had contacted the first mother and she agreed to participate in my study. I still remember running to the intern in the office next door to me and saying, 'I have a participant!' Suddenly my research pace accelerated and I scheduled my interviews and conducted them all by the end of November. I started my proposal and with my interviews having moved ahead so smoothly, I felt like a researcher. I enjoyed every interview session and loved hearing mothers tell their stories. I was so grateful to the mothers' for their willingness to share their stories and for their contribution to my research.

December 2003 - Moving On and Saying Goodbye

In December I had to say goodbye to my internship year. As I looked back over the past year I felt good about my decision to give 100% to my growth as Psychologist. I reflectively looked at how much I had gained and was so grateful to have been given this opportunity and that I had chosen to make the most of this final year of guidance and learning towards becoming a Psychologist. I looked back and reflected on the year as I emptied my office, handed my key over, knowing it would be someone else's office in the following year. As I said goodbye to the wonderful friends I had made among my colleagues, I felt sad, but in looking forward to 2004, I felt excited because the time was near when I could give 100% of myself to my research!

January and February 2004 - Preparing for the Final Climb

I had a somewhat slow start to the year, after a relaxing holiday and a cousin's wedding in Cape Town. January made me realise how self-disciplined I was going to have to be in working on my 'skripsie' in the comfort of my home. By the end of February my proposal was finalised and my transcribing was the next big task on the list. I now had a clear picture of my goals, where I was going and definite deadlines to achieve. The anxiety I had experienced the previous year had dissipated and I felt ready for the challenges of researching and ready to meet each deadline without any delays this time. I felt that my academic, researching side was emerging once again. It felt exciting!

March 2004 - Preparations at Base Camp

March brought my Departmental proposal meeting. I was very nervous, but also excited that my work would be read by seasoned researchers and academics in the field. I felt good about what I had written. My proposal was accepted, with a few changes to the title. With the proposal meeting behind me, I became more focused and felt free to get going. I finally managed to settle down and finish my transcribing, a formidable task, but one that left me feeling satisfied with a job well done and more than motivated to begin the data analysis process. Chapter 1 was also complete!

April 2004 - I'm On My Way!

In April I embarked on the role of 'data analyser', a task that initially found me very confused as to what I should include and what I shouldn't. After a rather panicky phone call to my supervisor, I found, through her unbelievable support and encouragement once again, the calm to systematically analyse my data. I immersed myself in my emerging themes. The end result of this was a layered process of successive phases that slowly reduced the data analysis results and ended in a detailed document of all my results (which I later discovered was to come in very handy).

May 2004 - A Burst of Energy

May became a month of acceleration and growth in my development as a researcher. With my data analysed, I sat and wrote Chapters two and three, as well as arranged and conducted all my feedback sessions with the mothers. My supervisor, efficient and 'on the ball' as always, returned Chapters 2 and 3 after reading them in record time. I set about making the changes and smoothing out the rough edges of my first draft. In addition to this I completed Chapter 4, my most exciting chapter and submitted it to my supervisor, as well as beginning Chapter 5!

June and July 2004 - Journey's End

By 2 June Chapter 5 was complete and joined Chapters 1,2,3 and 4 on my supervisor's desk. Her efficiency struck me once again, when we had a meeting discussing her feedback on all 5 chapters! With the end so close I made the changes and put the full 'skripsie' together into one document - an unforgettable experience. At that moment, time seemed to compact and I could hardly believe that it had all gone by so quickly! After the final changes, I took the long-awaited steps into the administration building and officially submitted my Masters 'skripsie'.

My supervisor's 'guided freedom' had helped me to achieve something which at times had felt impossible, and allowed me to feel proud of what I had done. I could never have done it without her. Her incredible support, encouragement and positive outlook throughout my personal research journey gave me the hope, courage and perseverance to become the person I had only ever dreamed of being - not only in terms of being a researcher, but also in terms of being an Educational Psychologist. My research journey was one that contained moments of anxiety, but also moments of joy. Having that hope kindled by my supervisor reminded me throughout of the following:

*'HOPE sees the invisible, feels the
intangible and achieves the impossible.'*