

THE APPLICABILITY OF FAIRY TALE-BASED SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS AMONG HIGH- FUNCTIONING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

by

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

**MAGISTER EDUCATIONIS
(EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY)**

in the

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Faculty of Education
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PRETORIA

2007

**In loving memory of my mother...
~ my rolemodel & inspiration**

*Herinneringe aan Ma
het my deur gedra...
ek verlang*

DECLARATION

I, Rachel Karen Steenberg (2012088), hereby declare that all the resources I consulted are included in the reference list and that this study is my original work.

R Steenberg

Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Please allow me to thank a few people for their support and guidance during my journey...

- Dr Ronél Ferreira, thank you for being an amazing friend, outstanding supervisor and lecturer for the past seven years! Thank you for being my support, motivation and inspiration... always believing in me and inspiring me to reach for the stars!
- Dr Liesel Ebersöhn, thank you for your inspirational guidance and encouragement.
- Dr Cobie Lombard, thank you for always being there for me with a cup of coffee and words of wisdom and encouragement.
- My husband, Freek, thank you for being my strength and motivation during the highs and lows of this long journey. Thank you for all the times you took care of our little angel, giving me extra time to work. Thank you for all your love and for giving me wings to fly... *You are the wind beneath my wings... I love you!*
- My dearest little girl, Joané, thank you for all the joy you brought to my life! You are my reason to live... to give my best... and to complete this journey!
- My father, Johan Crafford and my second-mom, Annalien, thank you for all your support, encouragement and continuous prayers in my life. Thank you for always being willing to look after your dearest grandchild during the last year and for helping wherever you can. Daddy, thank you for always believing in me, for supporting me to reach for my dreams. Thank you for being my pillar of strength!
- Other friends and family members, thank you for your continuous prayers and boundless support during the last few years of my journey.

- Prof Jack Pretorius, thank you for your professional and exceptional language editing of this dissertation.
- The participants in my study, thank you for allowing me into your life-worlds! Thank you for helping me to discover the amazing persons behind the autism...
- My Heavenly Father, thank you for giving me the strength and courage to complete this journey as part of Your calling in my life...

'For I can do everything God asks me to with the help of Christ who gives me the strength and power'

(Philippians 4:13)

ABSTRACT

THE APPLICABILITY OF FAIRY TALE-BASED SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS AMONG HIGH-FUNCTIONING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

by

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The *purpose of my study* was to explore and describe the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. My conceptual framework was based on existing theory relating to *high-functioning children with autism, the development of social skills, sociodramatic play* and *fairy tales*. I followed a qualitative research approach, guided by an interpretivist epistemology. I employed an instrumental case study design and conveniently selected a school that specialises in the accommodation of learners with autism. I purposefully selected three high-functioning children at the school as primary research participants, and their parents/caregivers as well as one educator from the foundation phase class at the school, as my secondary research participants. I developed and implemented a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, conducted face-to-face interviews and assessments of levels of social functioning, and utilised observation-as-context-of-interaction as data collection methods. I relied upon audio-visual methods and a reflective journal as methods of data documentation.

Three main themes emerged as a result of the inductive data analysis and interpretation that I completed. Firstly, I found that the primary participants displayed an ***improved tendency to ask for help and express their feelings*** after they had received fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. Secondly, I found that certain additional ***changes in social experience and***

behaviour had occurred during the course of the research process, such as an apparent *improvement in turn-taking, problem-solving and perspective-taking abilities, and an increased involvement in peer relationships and peer support*. Despite the apparent changes in the participants' abilities to ask for help and express their feelings, a few **areas of no change** also emerged. No change was observed in the primary *participants' tendency to not seek help from peers*, as well as their tendency to *rely on their body language*, rather than on verbalisation, to ask for help and express feelings. Based on the findings, **fairy tale-based sociodramatic play** can therefore be regarded as a valuable tool for the development of the social skills of *asking for help and expression of feelings* among high-functioning children with autism.

LIST OF KEY WORDS

- Asking for help
- Autism
- Expression of feelings
- Fairy tales
- Fairy tale-based sociodramatic play
- High-functioning children with autism
- Social skills
- Social skills development
- Sociodramatic play

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE

1.1 INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The purpose of my study was to explore and describe the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. Recent times are characterised by a growing interest in the unique social characteristics of a specific group of children with autism, namely those who have relatively intact cognitive functions – also known as high-functioning children with autism. It appears that high-functioning children with autism often experience difficulties with the initiation of social interactions and in social-emotional understanding, rather than with social insensitivity or social disinterest (Bauminger, Shulman & Agam, 2003; Bauminger, 2002; Meyer & Minshew, 2002; Rinehart, Bradshaw, Brereton & Tonge, 2002).

A growing realisation of the need to enhance the quality and frequency of social interactions and social-emotional understanding attained by high-functioning children with autism also seems to exist (Bauminger, 2002). Downs and Smith (2004), as well as Bauminger (2002), argue that high-functioning children with autism can compensate to some extent for the social challenges that they experience by employing their relatively high cognitive abilities that enable them to engage in a higher level of social relationships and in more complex emotions, compared to low-functioning children with autism. It therefore seems that they could show improvement in their behaviour and social skills when exposed to intervention programmes and suitable antecedent conditions (Swaggart & Gagnon, 1995).

As a result, various studies have been conducted with the purpose of exploring methods to develop the social skills of high-functioning individuals with autism. Some recent studies focus on methods such as the use of social stories (Sansosti, Powell-Smith & Kincaid, 2004; Yapko, 2003; Norris & Dattilo, 1999; Swaggart & Gagnon, 1995), the implementation of various degrees of mediations, manipulating the child's social environment by using different social partners (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003) and using puppets, peer modelling and reinforcement of social

behaviours in order to enhance social skills (Barry, Klinger, Lee, Palardy, Gilmore & Bodin, 2003).

Despite various studies (for example Rutherford & Rogers, 2003; Stahmer, 1995) focusing on the cognitive and symbolic aspects of play, limited research has been done on the use of play as a possible medium for social interaction among children with autism. This is surprising, though, as play seems to be significant in laying the groundwork for communication. During my inquiry into this topic, I furthermore found that little research has been done on sociodramatic play as a potential social skills intervention technique for high-functioning children with autism. Yapko (2003), however, suggests that play skills could easily be included in the activities that are selected to develop social skills among high-functioning children with autism. **I thus approached this study with the assumption that one could possibly apply fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism.**

Based on existing research, I started wondering about questions such as the following: *What is the effect (if any) of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism? To what extent will high-functioning children with autism be able to generalise the social skills learned from fairy tale-based sociodramatic play to their everyday social interactions? What are additional outcomes (if any) of using fairy tale-based sociodramatic play among high-functioning children with autism?*

In this regard, I approached this study with **the working assumption that the primary participants in my study may possess the required developmental prerequisites to engage in sociodramatic play in such a way that they may benefit from it, by acquiring new social skills.** I further assumed that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could be a valuable tool for the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism. When using fairy tale-based sociodramatic play, a specific social skill might be identified in the story and practised during role-play after the children have seen visual pictures in a storybook or on picture cards. In addition to the development of (a) particular social skill(s), children's understanding of other people's points of view might also be supported.

My study therefore attempted to provide insight into the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.

Consequently the focus of my study was to explore and describe the applicability of fairy-tale based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. Research in this area could contribute to existing literature on intervention strategies for high-functioning children with autism, and might be useful to professionals, educators and parents in helping this group of children to learn how to interact socially (which includes the development and understanding of social rules and cues).

Besides the above-mentioned apparent need for more research in the field, personal reasons motivated me to conduct this study. While working as an intern psychologist at a school for learners with autism, the seriousness of the social challenges that learners with autism face came to my attention. I developed an interest regarding the social functioning of children with autism, especially the higher-functioning children with autism, resulting in me being motivated to enhance my own understanding thereof. In addition, my experiences resulted in an interest in methods that educators and parents could employ to support children with autism in enhancing their social skills.

Due to the fact that nowadays many more educators are expected to manage high-functioning learners with autism in mainstream classrooms, in response to the guidelines on inclusion (White Paper 6: Department of Education, 2001), it is important that significant focus be placed on the improvement of this group of children's skills. However, because I am working from a positive psychology (Snyder & Lopez, 2003) point of view, I believe that it is important to not only teach high-functioning children with autism social skills in order to help them to fit into mainstream schools, but also to support them to flourish in their everyday functioning. All of the above can possibly assist high-functioning children with autism to improve the quality of their lives, by being able to engage in social interactions with other people.

1.2 PURPOSE OF MY STUDY

In order to address the exploratory and descriptive purpose of my study, which was to provide rich descriptions with regard to the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001), I took a closer look at the following: Firstly, I explored and described an educator's and parents'/caregivers' perceptions of the levels of social functioning of selected high-functioning children with autism prior to, secondly, developing and implementing a fairy tale-based

sociodramatic play intervention. Thirdly, I explored and described the manner in which the children reacted during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions. Fourthly, I explored and described the educator's and parents'/caregivers' perceptions of the levels of social functioning of selected high-functioning children with autism after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention had been completed. In addition, at the end of the intervention sessions, I explored and described whether or not there were any changes in the children's application of the skills upon which I had focused.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study aimed to address the following primary **research question**:

What is the effect (if any) of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism?

In an attempt to address the above-mentioned primary question, the following sub-questions were explored:

- To what extent will high-functioning children with autism be able to generalise the social skills learned from fairy tale-based sociodramatic play to their everyday social interactions?
- What are additional outcomes (if any) of using fairy tale-based sociodramatic play among high-functioning children with autism?

1.4 CONCEPTUAL PARAMETERS

For the sake of elucidation, I now clarify the concepts used in the study. A more in-depth discussion of conceptual parameters as part of my conceptual framework is provided in Chapter 2.

1.4.1 HIGH-FUNCTIONING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

The DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) provides a holistic definition of children with autism, describing this group of children as children who display challenges in the development of social interaction and communication, as well as a restricted repertoire of

interests and activities. Relevant literature (for example Bauminger *et al.*, 2003; Rinehart *et al.*, 2002) generally refers to two subtypes of autism, namely low-functioning and high-functioning autism, despite the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) not differentiating between these two subtypes. The high-functioning group of individuals with autism is associated with relatively intact cognitive functions, whereas the low-functioning group of individuals with autism is identified by the presence of significant measurable intellectual barriers to learning (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003; Rinehart *et al.*, 2002).

It is furthermore important to take cognisance of the controversy that exists regarding the difference in definitions between high-functioning individuals with autism and Asperger's disorder. Some researchers (for example Ghaziuddin & Mountain-Kimchi, 2004; Meyer & Minshew, 2002; Rinehart *et al.*, 2002) seem to support the distinction between high-functioning individuals with autism and Asperger's disorder, while others argue that there is currently not enough evidence available to support a differential diagnosis (Yapko, 2003; Greenway, 2000). For example, Rinehart *et al.* (2002) clinically differentiate between high-functioning autism and Asperger's disorder, in terms of the occurrence of clinically delayed language. Meyer and Minshew (2002) support this statement by emphasising an account of Volkmar and Klin that Asperger's disorder could be described and conceptualised as a neurodevelopmental disorder, which relates to autism with regard to restricted or obsessive interest patterns and challenges in social interaction, but is characterised by less severe cognitive and language difficulties.

Other features that might differentiate Asperger's disorder from high-functioning individuals with autism include pedantic speech and motor clumsiness (Ghaziuddin & Mountain-Kimchi, 2004; Peeters & Gillberg, 2003). Ghaziuddin and Mountain-Kimchi (2004) furthermore report that it has been suggested that high-functioning individuals with autism are usually stronger in their non-verbal abilities and often score higher on the performance intellectual quotient (PIQ) than verbal intellectual quotient (VIQ) on standardized tests of measurement, whereas the intellectual profile of individuals with Asperger's disorder usually reflects a high VIQ and a relatively low PIQ. Contrary to these points of view, Yapko (2003) reports that it is debatable whether or not high-functioning individuals with autism should be regarded as a separate diagnostic entity from Asperger's disorder, as the difference becomes irrelevant when the term is being used to identify an individual for intervention.

Within the context of my study, I view *high-functioning children with autism* as children who are able to use their relatively high cognitive abilities to partially deal with the challenges they

experience with regard to social interaction, communication, imagination and behaviour. Since the aim of this research was to explore and describe the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills, no differentiation will be made between high-functioning children with autism and children with Asperger's disorder. For the purpose of this study, I therefore decided to comply with researchers and professionals who advocate the use of one broad term, namely that of "autism spectrum disorder" (ASD), applicable to both categories. As such, I restricted my literature search to sources that describe high-functioning children with autism or with Asperger's disorder.

1.4.2 DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS

Providing support, to enhance the manner in which high-functioning children with autism develop social skills, is essential to help them feel more at ease in what they often experience as a confusing and unpredictable social world (Bauminger, 2002). Social skills can be defined as *'those behaviours, in interaction with others or which lead to interaction with others, that have social value and are associated with successful adjustment during both the school years and adulthood'* (Olley in Greenway, 2000:474).

The development of social skills usually includes aspects such as the ability to solve social problems; understanding, responding to and expressing emotions; communication skills, including body language, facial expression and eye contact; perspective-taking and understanding motives; giving and accepting compliments; as well as initiating, maintaining and terminating interactions. These are but a few of the skills that I assume are required by an individual to be regarded as socially competent (Barry *et al.*, 2003; Yapko, 2003; Bauminger, 2002).

For the purpose of my study, *developing social skills* implies supporting a group of high-functioning children with autism to enhance two specific skills, namely *expressing feelings* and *asking for help*. My decision to focus on these two specific skills rests on my working assumption that the development of these skills could support high-functioning children with autism to feel less isolated and lonely among others, in their daily lives.

1.4.3 FAIRY TALES

Biechonski (http://www.sachinternational.com/library/fairy_tales.htm) provides the following description of what fairy tales entail:

- ...a narrative, usually created anonymously, which is told and retold orally from one group to another across generations and centuries
- A form of education, entertainment, and history
- A lesson in morality, cultural values, and social requirements
- A story which addresses current issues as each teller revises the story, making it relevant to the audience and time/place in which it is told.

Authors such as Joosen (2005) and Parsons (2004) define fairy tales in the same manner as Biechonski (http://www.sachinternational.com/library/fairy_tales.htm). In addition, when children are being exposed to a fairy tale, they may learn value systems, behavioural and associational patterns and how to foresee the consequences of particular acts or situations. Fairy tales, as well as stories in general, could assist children in developing emotional literacy, understanding different points of view and making sense of their worlds (Lieberman in Joosen, 2005). According to Crain, D'Alessio, McIntyre and Smoke (1983¹), fairy tales could help in addressing children's deepest fears and also help them to realise that the challenges they face, do have solutions. In addition, the visual presentation of fairy tales could possibly serve as visual support in teaching social skills to high-functioning children with autism as this group of children are often referred to as 'visual thinkers' (Bogdashina, 2005).

For the purpose of this study, I regard *fairy tales* as visual supports with imbedded lessons in values, morality, and social requirements. The use of fairy tales could assist high-functioning children with autism in the acquisition of social skills.

1.4.4 SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

According to Calabrese (2003:606), sociodramatic play can be defined as '*a form of voluntary social play in which children use their imagination and creativity. They take on different roles, participate in conversations, use manipulatives, and engage in print rich environments*'. Sociodramatic play has been found to be significant for enhancing both emotional and social development in children (without autism) (Johnson, Christie & Yawkey, 1999) and therefore may also be of value to high-functioning children with autism. Johnson *et al.* (1999) emphasise that sociodramatic play could fulfil a significant role in the development of children's (without autism) perspective-taking abilities and social competence.

However, research findings (Wolfberg, 1999) suggest that children with autism experience intense difficulties with regard to the prerequisites for sociodramatic play. They portray distinct

¹ Due to limited recent literature on the value of fairy tales, I rely on more established sources.

difficulties in assuming other people's roles, in spontaneous symbolic play, as well as in playing spontaneously with peers. Despite this potential limitation, a study by Thorp, Stahmer and Schreibman (1995) led to the suggestion that sociodramatic play training might be an effective intervention technique for improving social skills, language and play in children with autism (who appropriately satisfy developmental prerequisites).

Within the context of my study, I regard *sociodramatic play* as a form of pretend play. During sociodramatic play, high-functioning children with autism could be guided toward practising specific social skills while taking on different roles and participating in conversations.

1.5 PARADIGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Although I include a detailed exposition of my epistemological and methodological assumptions in Chapter 3, I now provide a brief overview of these aspects.

1.5.1 EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Working from an *Interpretivist* perspective has enabled me to conduct the study in the participants' natural environments, in order to enhance an understanding of the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. The aim of interpretivist research is to gain an understanding of the meanings, intentions, personal experiences and subjective worlds of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2003; Garrick, 1999; Schurink, 1998), or, as stated by Schwandt (2000:192), to obtain '*a kind of empathic identification*' with the participants. As such, the study is based on the interpretation and understandings of the research participants' (educator's, parents'/caregivers' and children's) perceptions of the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills.

1.5.2 METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

In order to gain an understanding of the personal experiences and subjective meanings of the participants in this study, I selected a *qualitative approach* as my methodological paradigm. Cohen *et al.* (2003), as well as McMillan and Schumacher (2001), state that the basic premise of qualitative research is to describe and analyse people's individual and collective thoughts,

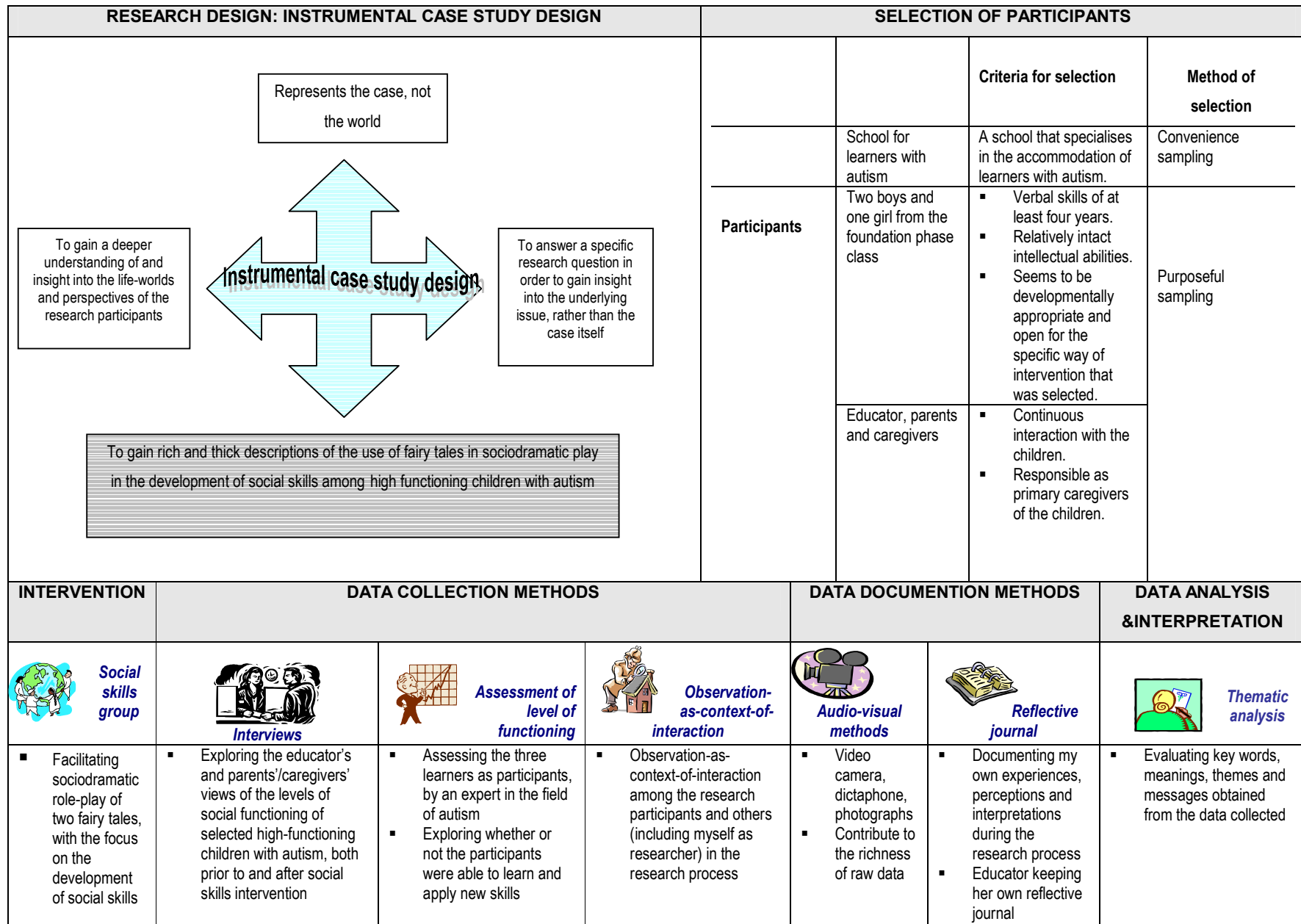
perceptions, beliefs and social actions. This implies that my analysis and interpretation of the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism are based on the meanings and perceptions of the research participants.

1.6 RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Figure 1.1 serves as a visual overview of my research design, as well as the research methodology that I employed, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3. Firstly, Figure 1.1 indicates that I selected an *instrumental case study* design to gain rich and thick descriptions of the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Berg, 2001; Stake, 2000). Figure 1.1 furthermore indicates the procedures that I employed for the *selection of my research participants*, indicating that I conveniently selected a school that specialises in the accommodation of learners with autism. It also indicates that I purposefully selected a group of three high-functioning children (two boys and one girl who have been diagnosed with autism) at the school as primary research participants, and their parents/caregivers, as well as one educator from the foundation phase class at the school, as my secondary research participants (Patton, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 1998).

In addition, Figure 1.1 provides an overview of the methods that I selected for *data collection, data documentation, data analysis and interpretation*. I undertook face-to-face interviews (Miller & Glassner, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002), assessment of levels of social functioning, as well as observation-as-context-of-interaction (Mouton, 2001; Angrosino & Mays De Pérez, 2000) as data collection methods. In addition, I relied upon audio-visual methods (Creswell, 2003; Schurink, Schurink & Poggenpoel, 1998) and a reflective journal (Seale, 2000) as methods of data documentation. I employed thematic analysis for data analysis and interpretation, based on an integration of the data analysis methods as described by Patton (2002), Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002), McMillan and Schumacher (2001), Mertens (1998) and Tesch in Poggenpoel (1998).

FIGURE 1.1: Summary of research design and methodological strategies



1.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Due to the social nature of my research, I did not only have a responsibility towards my profession in the search for knowledge and truth, but also towards the research participants (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Strydom, 1998). As an educational psychologist in training, I firstly adhered to the ethical code of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (www.hpcsa.co.za) in intervening with high-functioning children with autism. The way in which I conducted research, at all times aimed to preserve the dignity of the participants as human beings.

Secondly, I had to adhere to the research ethical principles as prescribed by the Research Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, in order to ensure that the research participants were not deceived, knew what was going on during the research process and did not experience any form of harm or distress (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). I discuss these principles in detail in Chapter 3.

1.8 QUALITY CRITERIA

Qualitative research can be assessed in terms of the basic premise of trustworthiness, in other words the manner in which researchers can convince their audiences that the findings of a study is worth paying attention to, or worth talking about (Babbie & Mouton, 2001). I aimed to obtain trustworthiness in my study by striving towards credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability, as well as authenticity (Shenton, 2004; Golafshani, 2003; Seale, 2000). I discuss these criteria in detail in Chapter 3.

1.9 OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

CHAPTER 1: OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE

Chapter 1 provides a general overview of the study and describes my rationale for undertaking the study. After formulating the purpose of the study and the research

questions, I defined the key concepts and provided a summary of my selected epistemology, research design and methodology. I concluded the chapter by briefly referring to my ethical considerations and quality criteria.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual framework for the study, consulting relevant and authoritative literature on autism and social skills. In addition, I explore literature relating to sociodramatic play and fairy tales. I conclude the chapter by presenting my working assumptions for the study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 provides an outline of my selected research design and research methodology, as well as the research processes that I employed. I discuss relevant methods of data collection, data documentation, data analysis and interpretation, and justify my choices in terms of the purpose of the study and my research questions. I explain the ethical guidelines that I considered, as well as the quality criteria that I strived to adhere to. I conclude the chapter by discussing my role as researcher.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The fourth chapter includes the presentation and discussion of the raw data that I obtained and analysed, followed by a discussion of the findings and my interpretations of the results. I relate the findings of this study to relevant literature, as discussed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The final chapter includes my final conclusions. I relate my findings to the research question as formulated in Chapter 1. I also indicate the contribution of the study, as well as its challenges, and conclude the chapter with recommendations for further research, training and practice.

1.10 CONCLUSION

This chapter served as an introduction to the chapters that follow. I aimed to provide an overview of the rationale for my study, the purpose of the study, clarification of the selected conceptual parameters, my selected epistemological and methodological assumptions, research design as well as research methodology. I also included my ethical considerations, and a brief introduction to quality criteria, in order to maximise trustworthiness.

In Chapter 2, I present a literature review of the concepts related to the study. I explore available literature on *autism*, *the development of social skills*, *fairy tales* and *sociodramatic play*, in order to present the conceptual framework upon which I relied in planning and undertaking the empirical study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter, I provided an overview of the rationale of my study, the purpose of the study, the selected conceptual parameters, as well as my selected epistemological and methodological assumptions. Thereafter, I presented an overview of my selected research design and research methodology. I concluded the chapter with a brief introduction to ethical considerations, as well as to the quality criteria towards which I strived in order to maximise trustworthiness in my study.

In this chapter, I take a closer look at the basic traits of children with autism, with a focus on the unique social characteristics of high-functioning children with autism. My focus on children with autism relates to the potential application value of relevant theory to high-functioning children with autism, whom I selected for the purpose of this study. I furthermore explore the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism, and present an overview of potential interventions for high-functioning children with autism. In order to explore the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism, I also focus on literature pertaining to sociodramatic play and fairy tales.

Considering that high-functioning children with autism find it difficult to identify with story characters (due to challenges they experience with regard to understanding and interpreting the mental states of other people, as well as the challenges they experience with regard to imagination), it might seem inappropriate to use fairy tale-based sociodramatic play to support this group of children in developing social skills. *Why then did I choose to explore the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play activities in the social skills intervention that I developed and facilitated?*

My decision to explore the use of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play is threefold. Firstly, I assumed that fairy tales might serve as visual supports in teaching social skills, as visual

supports are often used in the everyday teaching of children with autism, often referred to as 'visual thinkers' (Bogdashina, 2005). Secondly, my decision to use fairy tales is based on a statement of Johnson *et al.* (1999) that middle-age children become more interested in enacting the roles of characters from fiction, than well-known occupational roles. Thus, I selected three high-functioning children with autism from the foundation phase class (between the ages of ten and twelve years) who could be interested in fairy tales and the enactment of the roles of characters from fiction. Lastly, I assumed that the behavioural examples and social scenarios portrayed in the fairy tales that I selected (for example the pigs in the *Three little pigs* asking each other for help when the wolf threatened them) may serve as guidelines for the practising of specifically selected social skills.

Although a vast amount of literature (for example Bauminger, 2002), pertaining to various intervention strategies that can enhance the social skills of high-functioning children with autism exists, I found that little research has been done on fairy tale-based sociodramatic play as a potential intervention technique for children with autism. During my literature search, I furthermore found more literature relating to sociodramatic play training (for example Dauphin, Kinney & Stromer, 2004) than studies focusing on the use of sociodramatic play for social skills development. The findings of my study could therefore contribute to the existing literature on intervention techniques for high-functioning children with autism, and might support professionals, educators and parents in assisting children to develop appropriate social skills. This chapter serves to provide a review of relevant literature as evidence for the possible extension of the existing knowledge base which I anticipate.

Before I proceed with this chapter, I regard it as imperative to give account of the professional stance from which I approached this study. From a positive psychology background (Snyder & Lopez, 2003), I support the statements made by Bogdashina (2005), as well as by Mesibov, Shea and Adams (2001), that it is important to view the challenges that children with autism experience as qualitatively different ways to interact, communicate and process information which do not correspond with traditional ways. I prefer not to label the challenges that this group of children experience as deficits or impairments *per se*, but rather as qualitatively different ways of interacting, communicating and processing information.

2.2 WHAT IS AUTISM ?

In this section, I firstly provide a brief introduction to the basic diagnostic criteria for the spectrum of autism, whereafter I present a discussion of the three basic diagnostic characteristics of children with autism. I furthermore include some examples of the ways in which these characteristics are displayed by high-functioning children with autism. It is essential to take note that, within the autism spectrum, high-functioning individuals with autism seem to be among the most difficult to diagnose, as the difficulties that they experience with regard to the triad of challenges (as discussed below) seem to be subtle and could be difficult to recognise (Mesibov *et al.*, 2001). However, the impact of these difficulties in social situations should not be underestimated, even though they appear subtle on the surface. During this study, I became increasingly aware of and reflected on the pitfalls of assuming that high-functioning children with autism understand basic social concepts, when in fact they experience difficulties in understanding and applying the subtle rules and cues of reciprocal social interaction and communication.

2.2.1 DIAGNOSTIC CHARACTERISTICS

Autism is a multifaceted, lifetime developmental challenge that usually becomes noticeable during the first three years of a child's life. It appears to be the result of hampered brain development and function, affecting the quality of the child's development in the areas of *social interaction, communication and restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests and activities* (Greenspan, 2006; Maione & Mirenda, 2006; Williams & Wright, 2004; De Clercq, 2003; Peeters & Gillberg, 2003; Yapko, 2003; Rinehart *et al.*, 2002; American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000; Wenar & Kerig, 2000). Even though it is required of individuals with autism to display social difficulties, language challenges, and restriction of behaviours, interests and activities for diagnosis (refer to Appendix B for the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-IV-TR, American Psychiatric Association, 2000), it is significant to take into account that the degree to which these traits are experienced and demonstrated differs broadly among individuals with autism (Greenspan, 2006; Welton, Vakil & Carasea, 2004). I therefore chose to regard each child who participated in this study as an individual with his/her own difficulties with regard to the triad of challenges associated with autism (social interaction, communication and restricted patterns of behaviour), instead of viewing them solely through a diagnostic lens.

As I indicated in Chapter 1, this study emphasises the area of *socialisation*. However, the triad of challenges (namely social interaction, communication and restricted patterns of behaviour) associated with autism are interlinked and cannot be regarded as separate entities, as the challenges that children with autism experience with regard to *communication* and *restricted patterns of behaviour* may further influence the social skills of this group of children. In the following sections, I provide a brief discussion of each of these three areas, based on the criteria of the DSM-IV-TR (refer to Appendix B). In order to elaborate on the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-IV-TR, I furthermore relied on relevant literature on autism (Greenspan, 2006; Maione & Miranda, 2006; Sherratt & Donald, 2004; Yapko, 2003; Peeters, 2001; American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Wenar & Kerig, 2000; Wolfberg, 1999; Davies, 1997).

2.2.1.1 Reciprocal social interactions

Social challenges, which include complications in the identification and expression of emotions and irregularities in reciprocal interaction, are believed to be among the core identifying characteristics of autism (Bauminger, *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger, 2002; American Psychiatric Association, 2000; Norris & Dattilo, 1999). The difficulties this group of children experience with regard to participation in age-appropriate reciprocal social interactions usually start at a young age when they seem to have difficulty obtaining joint attention behaviour. The difficulties may continue throughout their lives (Bogdashina, 2005; Meyer & Minshew, 2002).

The first facet of the social criteria of the DSM-IV-TR is a '*marked impairment in the use of multiple non-verbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction*' (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75). High-functioning children with autism often display limited or no eye contact. They also seem to display either an emotionless facial expression or constant smiling while staring overattentively at another person's face (Mesibov *et al.*, 2001). Based on this typical characteristic, I had to frequently reflect on my interpretations of the primary participants' body language and facial expressions throughout the research process, as children with autism often do not convey the same messages with their body language as people without autism do (see my reflective journal in this regard in Appendix D).

The second aspect of the social criteria is '*a failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level*' (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75). The difficulty that children with autism experience with regard to establishing peer relations is influenced by various

factors. It seems that some children with autism are simply not interested in friends, as they perceive social relationships as puzzling and unpredictable. Others may unpretentiously regard children in their class as friends, but may not have the skills to establish relationships. Mesibov *et al.* (2001) indicate that high-functioning children with autism often attempt to interact with their peers, but choose topics that are of no interest to the other children, which influences their ability to maintain a conversation. The difficulties that children with autism experience, with regard to their evaluation of the effect of their conversations and behaviours on others, in turn influence their ability to initiate social approaches and respond to social approaches from their peers. Children with autism therefore experience difficulty with the social perceptiveness essential for effective communication and the establishment and maintaining of social relationships at home, at school and in other social settings (Peeters, 2001).

A *'lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest)'* is the third element of the DSM-IV-TR's social criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75). Although children with autism might become excited when they, for example, hear specific songs or see a favourite commercial, they may not necessarily draw anybody's attention to their experiences (Mesibov *et al.*, 2001). However, based on my observations in the class during my internship as educational psychologist and the research process (refer to Appendix E for my observational field notes), it appears that high-functioning children with autism may, to some extent, be able to share their enjoyment with others.

The last aspect of the DSM-IV-TR's social criteria includes a *'lack of social or emotional reciprocity'* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75). The social relationships of children with autism are influenced by the difficulties they might encounter with regard to their evaluation of the effect of their conversations or behaviours on others, as they often experience difficulties in understanding and interpreting other people's mental states. Children with autism may have particular difficulties in 'reading' faces, thoughts, intentions and the emotions hidden behind their perceptions, in other words behind what they literally see (Peeters, 2001). Subsequently, the abilities of children with autism to initiate social approaches and respond to social approaches from other people are also influenced.

The difficulty that children with autism experience with regard to their *'intuitive judgments of what other people are thinking'* (Ritblatt, 2000:53), is described in literature by Baron-Cohen as difficulties with *Theory of Mind* (Peeters, 2001). Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind* refers

to the ability to understand and interpret the mental states (for example thoughts, intentions, feelings and ideas) of other people and to predict behaviour accordingly, which influences their ability to take their own, and other people's emotions, into account (Downs & Smith, 2004; De Clercq, 2003; Peeters & Gillberg, 2003; Yapko, 2003; Bauminger, 2002; Meyer & Minshew, 2002; Rinehart *et al.*, 2002; Ritblatt, 2000; Wenar & Kerig, 2000; Wolfberg, 1999; Ozonoff & Miller, 1995). People with autism are, to an extent, 'mind blind' (Peeters & Gillberg, 2003), or socially blind. They apparently view the world through their own eyes which seems to result in feelings of frustration and confusion when others (people with or without autism) do not perceive what they perceive, see what they see, experience what they experience, or know what they know (Yapko, 2003).

It is essential to emphasise the basic premise of Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind*, as it seems to play an important role in sociodramatic play (which I discuss in section 2.5). Children may gain experience by viewing things from different perspectives, when engaged in the enactment of various roles during sociodramatic play. In planning the intervention that I facilitated, I had to keep in mind that children with autism usually experience challenges with regard to understanding and interpreting the mental states of other people and to predict behaviour accordingly. They might further experience difficulties to adopt the roles of characters in fairy tales. In this regard, I ensured that the abstract social concepts were always paired with visual support in the form of visual pictures portraying the two fairy tales, namely *Three little pigs* and *Red Riding Hood* (refer to my reflections on the intervention sessions in Appendix D). Concrete, visual objects provide a sense of grounded reality for children with autism, who experience difficulties in constructing and understanding abstract concepts, as well as in comprehending the meaning behind the physically perceptible reality (Bogdashina, 2005).

2.2.1.2 Language and communication

The DSM-IV-TR's criteria for the challenges that children with autism experience with regard to communication, consist of four aspects:

1) delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language; 2) impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others; 3) stereotyped and repetitive use of language; and 4) lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75).

However, based on my literature study of high-functioning children with autism (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger, 2002; Mesibov *et al.*, 2001), as well as my observations and experiences at the school for learners with autism, during my internship as educational psychologist, I formulated a working assumption that the social criteria for high-functioning children with autism might differ from the criteria as described above. In this regard, I observed (refer to my observational field notes in Appendix E) that the primary participants were able, to some extent, to engage in short conversations with me. In addition, I observed that the primary participants were able to participate in make-believe play activities during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. Although children with autism usually portray a delay in, or lack of, the development of spoken language and the application of reciprocal interactions, I assumed that high-functioning children with autism display a qualitatively different way of applying spoken language and partaking in conversations and make-believe play, rather than a lack of these abilities.

During my initial literature review, it furthermore appeared that it may be difficult to separate the symptoms of the 'social' and 'communication' challenges which high-functioning children with autism experience. This working assumption is based on Peeters and Gillberg's (2003) comment, that the basic communication challenges that children with autism experience, are the application of reciprocity, and difficulty to comprehend the meaning of language-use that implies the sharing of information (knowledge and feelings) between two persons. Although the language skills of high-functioning children with autism could be well-developed, they often do not understand the principles behind conversational flow, and find it difficult to sustain a conversation that is focused on one topic or theme (Sonders, 2003). This idea corresponds with the fact that high-functioning children with autism often attempt to engage in conversations, but then only focus on their own topics that are of no interest to others, or display pedantic speech, using awkward phrases and big words. It therefore seems that children with autism do not recognise and apply language as a tool toward acquiring social connectedness with another (Sonders, 2003; Mesibov *et al.*, 2001; Hadwin, Baron-Cohen, Howlin & Hill, 1997). In this study, knowledge of this difficulty allowed me to understand the non-pragmatic language usage of children with autism. It was thus imperative to not only facilitate social concepts, but also to assist the participants in making themselves understood, by often rephrasing their sentences to them, in order to clarify the meaning and purpose of their language-use. It became clear that an in-depth knowledge of the thinking patterns and subsequent verbal manifestations of high-functioning children with autism is essential when developing and implementing social skills interventions for this group of children.

The link between the 'social' and 'communication' challenges that children with autism experience, is further evident in literature that deals with high- and low-functioning children with autism. One cannot socialise without at least an understanding of communication. Children with autism seem to experience difficulty in understanding the pragmatic use of language, which implies that they understand and apply language literally with a focus on the meaning of the words, rather than on what the speaker's purpose is (Bogdashina, 2005). Children with autism also have difficulty modifying their speech or behaviour to adapt to changing social situations (Downs & Smith, 2004) and would therefore often use phrases or sentences that are irrelevant to the situation. Some children with autism never develop purposeful speech and are functionally mute, while others, who do develop speech, display difficulties in prosody, syntax and semantics (Trepagnier, Sebrechts, Finkelmeyer, Stewart, Woodford & Coleman, 2006; Bogdashina, 2005; Sonders, 2003; Wenar & Kerig, 2000; Hadwin *et al.*, 1997). The challenges that some children with autism experience with regard to the reversing of personal pronouns, such as 'you' for 'I', 'we' for 'you' or 'he' for 'she'; as well as echolalia and neologisms (the construction of new words), may add to the difficulty they display in responding to social approaches made by other people (Peeters & Gillberg, 2003; Yapko, 2003; Rinehart *et al.*, 2002; Wenar & Kerig, 2000).

In addition to challenges experienced with verbal language, children with autism usually experience difficulties with regard to understanding and using non-verbal elements of communication, such as tone of voice, body language and facial expressions. Not only do they struggle to interpret these signals in the way they are usually interpreted by people without autism, but also, others around them often misinterpret their body language and facial expressions (Mesibov *et al.*, 2001). As mentioned before, I had to continuously reflect on my interpretations of the primary participants' body language during this study, as it would be unfair to assume that I could identify their feelings based on my interpretation of their body language and facial expressions. Furthermore, I had to provide the primary participants with explicit explanations and instructions during the social skills intervention sessions, as they could experience difficulty in understanding non-verbal cues (refer to my reflections on the intervention sessions in Appendix D).

2.2.1.3 Restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests and activities

According to Peeters and Gillberg (2003), most people with autism display a restricted repertoire of behaviours and interests, which may further negatively affect social skills (Downs & Smith, 2004). Mesibov *et al.* (2001) emphasise that the restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour that children with autism display, should be viewed as unusual behaviour, rather than impairment or inadequate skills.

Firstly, children with autism display an '*encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus*', according to the American Psychiatric Association (2000:75). Low-functioning children with autism would often play exclusively with one (often unusual) object, such as a stick, a leave or pieces of glass; or they would play with toys in odd ways, such as spinning or lining up objects. Among high-functioning children with autism, the obsession with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest is often seen as obtaining huge amounts of information concerning highly restricted topics, such as sport statistics, weather maps and names of songs (Mesibov *et al.*, 2001). In planning the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention during this study, I had to keep this possibility in mind and allow for the likelihood of the participants' attention being influenced and distracted by possible intense interests in some other topics.

Secondly, children with autism appear to display an '*inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals*' (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75). Mesibov *et al.* (2001) indicate that even high-functioning children with autism could become anxious and restless in erratic situations, when their expectations are not met or when routines are changed. They seem to function much better in structured situations with clear routines, rules and schedules, than in unstructured or loosely structured settings. Keeping this aspect in mind during the development of the intervention, I included two sessions at the beginning of the intervention which focused on providing the primary participants with information on what to expect during the social skills intervention sessions (refer to Appendix F for an outline of the specific sessions).

Thirdly, children with autism often develop '*stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms*' (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75) such as body-rocking, hand-twirling, hand-waving or hand-flapping. These motor stereotypes might even develop into self-destructive activities

such as head-crashing, face-hitting or wrist-biting (Peeters & Gillberg, 2003; Yapko, 2003; Wolfberg, 1999). However, self-injurious behaviours are not regularly displayed by high-functioning children with autism, as the behaviours usually seem to be a result of frustration because of difficulty in expressing themselves verbally (Mesibov *et al.*, 2001). As self-injurious behaviours and stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms could be intrusive in any educational setting and require specific and constant intervention, I chose high-functioning children with autism as participants for my study who did not display these behaviours, in an effort to better focus on my specific goals. Yet, the primary participants appeared to often display stereotyped and rigid thinking, although subtle and not as overtly visible as with bodily mannerisms. I had to be flexible with regard to the planning and implementation of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, allowing the primary participants to display rigid thinking, and as a result, adjusting the session accordingly.

The last aspect of the DSM-IV-TR's criteria for restricted, repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities, emphasises the '*persistent preoccupation with parts of objects*' of children with autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75), which seems to be one of the most frequently observed traits of autism. Children with autism might open or slam doors repeatedly, spin the wheels of their bicycles, or may be obsessed by small visual details, such as dirt on the windows of cars, slightly opened drawers or strings on clothing. High-functioning children with autism might be preoccupied with thinking about small details of their world, such as mathematical calculations, which could interfere with their ability to understand the larger meaning of the different aspects of their milieu, restricting the development of flexibility, and constraining exploration and play (Mesibov *et al.*, 2001; Jordan & Libby, 1997). In planning the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, I therefore decided to present visual cards that did not exhibit too much visual detail, as insignificant visual detail on the pictures could capture and preoccupy the primary participants' attention.

According to Peeters and Gillberg (2003), as well as Meyer and Minshew (2002), these behavioural habits could be regarded as a reflection of the challenges children with autism experience with regard to imagination, as they lead to the manifestation of a restricted behavioural repertoire. Children with autism usually find it difficult to construct abstract verbal concepts and to comprehend the meaning behind the physically perceptible reality, mainly as a result of their cognitive processes that are qualitatively (and contextually) different relative to people without autism (Bogdashina, 2005; Williams & Wright, 2004; Peeters & Gillberg, 2003). The imagination challenges that children with autism experience therefore inevitably influence

areas of social interaction, communication, behaviour and play activities, which depend on the construction of meaning. Since the social skills intervention that I developed and implemented focused on the possible effect of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play activities, I had to keep in mind the necessity of primary participants applying some form of imagination in order to act out stories. I approached the intervention sessions with the assumption that high-functioning children with autism do not display a lack of imagination, but rather a qualitatively different kind of imagination relative to people without autism. In an effort to bridge the imagination challenges that children with autism experience, I assumed that the visual presentation of fairy tales might produce some opportunity for the participants to form connections between concrete visual thinking and a world of make-believe.

2.3 HIGH-FUNCTIONING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

As the focus of my study involves exploring the possibility of developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism, it is important to examine the unique social characteristics of high-functioning children with autism. In this section, I therefore provide a discussion on high-functioning children with autism, focusing on the typical challenges that high-functioning children with autism may experience with regard to social and emotional understanding (refer to section 1.4.1 in Chapter 1 for an overview of defining high-functioning children with autism). I also explore the potential characteristics of high-functioning children with autism, which may eventually result in them being enabled to compensate for the social challenges that they experience.

2.3.1 CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED WITH REGARD TO SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL UNDERSTANDING

Social interactions of children with autism can be arranged on a spectrum: from challenges in peer relationships for those who are high-functioning at the one end, to a lack of awareness of others and total isolation and withdrawal from others by those experiencing the most serious social challenges (Bauminger, 2002). As I mentioned previously, high-functioning children with autism seem to experience difficulties with regard to initiating social interaction and with regard to social-emotional understanding, rather than with social disinterest or social insensitivity (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger, 2002; Norris & Dattilo, 1999). Although high-functioning children with autism often experience a desire to be socially involved with their peers, and often express depression and loneliness in the absence thereof, they do not know how to initiate and

maintain friendships with peers, due to limited social-emotional understanding (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003). The *unusual obsessive interests and rituals* of children with autism, as well as their *qualitatively different information processing, perspective-taking abilities and imagination skills*, that are not shared by their peers, seem to be contributing factors to the difficulties they experience with social interaction (Bogdashina, 2005; Barry *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger, 2002). They therefore seem to be “trapped” in a vicious circle of social isolation, loneliness and helplessness (Barry *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger *et al.*, 2003; Peeters, 2001; Wolfberg, 1999). The poor quality of the relationships between children with autism and their peers may further maintain such feelings of loneliness.

As a result, feelings of loneliness and social isolation, as well as feelings of poor social involvement and support, may result in the onset of depression. This accentuates the need for social skills intervention at an early as possible age. I approached my study with the assumption that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could address these feelings of loneliness and social isolation, as well as feelings of poor social involvement and support, by providing peer support and improving the frequency and quality of social interaction for high-functioning children with autism.

2.3.2 THE IDENTIFICATION AND EXPRESSION OF EMOTIONS

Bauminger (2002) emphasises the importance of bearing in mind that children with autism may harbour strong emotions related to social interaction and peer relations, although they might find it difficult to express their emotions. Children with autism further experience difficulty with the identification of emotions in others, or to adjust their emotional experiences to those of other people. In addition, children with autism also generally experience difficulty with reflecting on their emotions, or using their emotions to assess situations and permeate them with personal meaning. However, significantly, high-functioning children with autism can often be sensitive to the emotional state of others, or to the mood of a situation, even though they may not really understand it. Evidence exists that high-functioning children with autism could recognise simple emotions, although they seem to find it difficult to explain the causes of simple and socially complex emotions, and to express their own emotions (Bauminger, 2002; Peeters, 2001; Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000; Powell & Jordan, 1997). It is to this end that I employed visually concrete presentations of otherwise abstract concepts (in the form of visual presentations of fairy tales) to explain and clarify various emotions, and to support the participants to express emotions by means of sociodramatic play.

2.3.3 COMPENSATING FOR CHALLENGES EXPERIENCED

As mentioned in Chapter 1, it would appear that high-functioning children with autism could employ their relatively high cognitive skills (refer to section 1.4.1) to compensate to some extent for the social challenges that they experience. The relatively high cognitive abilities of high-functioning children with autism seem to support them in becoming involved in high levels of social relationships and intricate emotions. The possibility exists that high-functioning children with autism may be able to cognitively understand the emotions and thoughts of others, and may also try to engage in cooperative social behaviour (Downs & Smith, 2004; Bauminger, 2002). As such, the relatively high cognitive abilities of high-functioning children with autism might therefore enable them to attain a better understanding of a world that they do not experience as highly understandable. Meyer and Minshew (2002), as well as Hadwin *et al.* (1997), assert that the perspective-taking abilities of children with autism further seems to progress with increasing language proficiency. I assume that this could be due to the use of compensatory verbal techniques to solve problems.

In the light of the above line of reasoning, I assumed that high-functioning children with autism could benefit from intervention that enables the development of their social skills. Social skills intervention could support high-functioning children with autism by incorporating skills such as expanding their repertoire of emotions, linking emotions to different social situations, the ability to *express their emotions*, as well as the ability to *ask for help* when needed. Social skills intervention may furthermore support high-functioning children with autism in developing an understanding of other people's mental states (Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind*), which could enable this group of children to take their own and other people's emotions into account during social interactions. In the following section, I provide an overview of the development of social skills, specifically with regard to high-functioning children with autism, in an attempt to accentuate the necessity of being able to apply social skills development for this group of children.

2.4 AUTISM AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS

In this section, I explore the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism, social skills intervention, as well as the generalisation of social skills.

2.4.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS

Facilitating the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism is essential for supporting them to approach the social world, which they often experience as puzzling and unpredictable, with ease and self-confidence (Bauminger, 2002). Children with autism usually experience challenges in grasping the unstated rules and cues of social interaction, and therefore strongly rely on explicit instructions and interventions for the development of social skills (Maddock, 1997).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the development of social skills usually includes aspects such as perspective-taking and understanding motives; communication skills, including body language, facial expression and eye contact; giving and accepting compliments; the ability to solve social problems; asking for help; understanding, responding to and expressing emotions; initiating, maintaining and terminating interactions, as well as developing higher cognitive skills, play-skills and turn-taking skills (Barry *et al.*, 2003; Yapko, 2003; Bauminger, 2002). For the purpose of my study, I decided to explore the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism by focusing on the development of two specific skills, namely *expression of feelings* and *asking for help*. As mentioned in Chapter 1, my choice to focus on these two specific skills was based on my working assumption that the development of these skills could support high-functioning children with autism to feel less isolated and lonely among others, in their daily lives.

2.4.2 SOCIAL SKILLS INTERVENTION

Aarons and Gittens (in Bogdashina, 2005) assert that high-functioning children with autism could benefit from social skills intervention, especially by means of drama and role-play. These authors indicate that the main objective of a programme could be to facilitate the acquisition of necessary strategies for communication and interaction, not simply as rote-learned responses, but as significant interactions that necessitate reflection, and that may assist high-functioning children with autism to understand the actions and intentions of people without autism. Aarons and Gittens (in Bogdashina, 2005) assert that it is possible that high-functioning children with autism could show adjustment and progress due to good cognitive abilities that support them in acquiring the social skills (through learning), which people without autism absorb naturally. Recent research findings indicate that the results of interventions are usually more favourable if initiated when children with autism are still young, supporting them by means of a proactive and skill enrichment model that emphasises accommodations and reinforcements for apt social

interactions (Karande, 2006; Bogdashina, 2005; Welton *et al.*, 2004). As a result, I planned and developed a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention to explore the question whether proactive support to young high-functioning children with autism could influence the developing of social skills in a comprehensible and enjoyable way.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, some recent studies focus on intervention strategies such as the implementation of various degrees of mediations, manipulating the child's social environment by using different social partners (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003), the use of social stories (Sansosti *et al.*, 2004; Yapko, 2003; Norris & Dattilo, 1999; Swaggart & Gagnon, 1995), and using puppets, peer modelling and reinforcement of social behaviours in order to enhance social skills (Barry *et al.*, 2003; Norris & Dattilo, 1999). One of the more recent approaches to the support of high-functioning children with autism in the development of appropriate social behaviour consists of providing them with specific social scenarios by means of visual support (with the underlying principles corresponding to those of social stories). Visual supports are used in an attempt to offer external scenarios as compensation for the difficulties children with autism generally experience with regard to 'inner language'. These scenarios may be descriptive, such as 'the phone rings', or may be a combination of both a description of the scenario as well as an indication of the expected behaviour. Social scenarios as part of an intervention may be used to individualise the skills for each child. It may also be used to prepare children with autism for a potential change (Peeters & Gillberg, 2003; Swaggart & Gagnon, 1995). In planning this study, I decided to include the use of social scenarios in fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention in order to individualise and contextualise the social skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings* for each participant.

Recently, a growing realisation of the significance of group approaches to social skills intervention for children with autism seems to have emerged. Techniques used in group approaches with high-functioning children with autism (who display higher cognitive abilities than low-functioning children with autism) usually include recreational games, coaching, role-play and modelling. Applying this knowledge to my study resulted in my planning of the format of the intervention to include role-play and social scenarios in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play activities that I facilitated. Mesibov *et al.* (2001) emphasise that, although teaching social skills should be initiated by an adult working with children with autism, the practising of social skills has to be done with peers. One of the rationales for using a group approach seems to be that it could provide an opportunity for high-functioning children with autism to discover more effective means of interacting and collaborating with other people, as well as enhancing their

self-esteem (LeGoff, 2004; Greenway, 2000; Norris & Dattilo, 1999; Ozonoff & Miller, 1995). It appears to me that literature usually refers to peer support meaning that children without autism support children with autism within the context of inclusive education. Only limited research has been done with regard to peer support in situations where the participants are children with autism. For the purpose of my study, I only included high-functioning children with autism in the group, and explored the ways in which they could support each other in the development of social skills during fairy tale-based sociodramatic play.

2.4.3 THE GENERALISATION OF SOCIAL SKILLS

One of the challenges most often experienced in research studies relating to intervention techniques for children with autism, is the tendency of children to display limited generalisation of newly learned skills to their everyday situations and environments. Generalising social skills from a learned context to a new context appears to be a challenge for children with autism, mainly due to the difficulties that they experience with '*seeing beyond the perception*' (Bogdashina, 2005; LeGoff, 2004; De Clercq, 2003; Peeters, 2001; Hadwin *et al.*, 1997; Maddock, 1997). The unique cognitive and information-processing styles of high-functioning children with autism therefore seem to increase the possibility that newly learned skills may not be generalised to other contexts spontaneously and flexibly. In the attempt of children with autism to find meaning in the social world by applying cause-and-effect logic, they continuously need to analyse what they are observing and learning, which usually requires a huge amount of 'thinking time', as they may experience delayed processing, due to their fragmented perception. Keeping this in mind, I planned the intervention I facilitated to allow for ample 'thinking time' by rephrasing the participants' role-play sentences for them, as well as by asking questions with regard to the scenarios that had been acted out.

The ability of children with autism to generalise newly learned skills to other contexts is furthermore influenced by their tendency to obtain understanding of their physical and social milieu by searching for meanings in the patterns of repeating events, rather than exploring the deeper meanings (Peeters, 2001) As a result, I aimed to repeat the application of the skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings* in a variety of social scenarios. I included various relevant social scenarios in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I planned and employed, in an attempt to enable the primary participants to apply the newly learned skills in various contexts (refer to Appendix F for examples of the social scenarios). However, as no social situation is ever precisely repeated, children with autism need to memorise and

understand each new social situation step by step. This could explain why children with autism often experience meaning that is irrelevant to the context, and why experiences, no matter how comparable to prior ones, are often perceived as erratic and strange (Bogdashina, 2005; Sherratt & Donald, 2004; Peeters, 2001; Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000).

In addition to the above statement, that children with autism tend to memorise each new social situation, in order to be able to adapt to that specific situation, Jordan and Libby (1997) declare that many of the pretend-behaviours produced after skills training sessions are often exact replications of acts introduced during the intervention, in other words memorised behavioural acts. It furthermore seems that the children tend to view a specific skill that had been introduced during an intervention session, as part of that specific social situation, and might therefore not generalise the skill to their everyday social environments. In the light of the above, I started wondering about the feasibility of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention of my study as my fieldwork progressed. *Could it be that the selected high-functioning children with autism may only be able to apply the skills during the sessions? To what extent might the selected high-functioning children with autism be able to generalise (or not) the social skills learned from the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play to their everyday social interactions?*

This challenge implied that I had to consider the possibility that generalisation across contexts and skills may necessitate explicit teaching within an intervention programme. I also kept the proposal of Maddock (1997) in mind, which emphasises that children with autism ought to be supported to plan their own activities to be involved in, and to record progress while in the process. My assumption was that this might be one way to assist the primary participants in developing a more effective memory for generalising key skills, although I did not apply this method in the true sense of the word. Furthermore, it was also critical to work on broadening the context by focusing on coordination between the participants' various environments. In the next section I situate the mode of social skills intervention that I selected, namely sociodramatic play, within the context of autism.

2.5 AUTISM AND SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

Johnson *et al.* (1999) distinguish between two kinds of play training, namely sociodramatic play training and thematic fantasy play, which is described as adult-guided enactment of fairy tales. As I integrated these two forms of play training during the intervention that I developed and

employed, I decided to use the term *fairy tale-based sociodramatic play* for the purpose of this study.

As described in Chapter 1, sociodramatic play can be defined as a type of social play (or social pretend play) where children can apply their imagination and creativity in a thematically related set-up. During fairy tale-based sociodramatic play activities, children can assume various roles, use manipulatives, engage in print-rich environments and partake in different dialogues, while acting out make-believe situations or stories (Dauphin *et al.*, 2004; Calabrese, 2003; Johnson *et al.*, 1999). Fairy tale-based sociodramatic play therefore implies a type of sociodramatic play as a form of pretend play, where high-functioning children with autism can be guided toward practising specific social skills while taking on different roles from characters in fairy tales. In this section, I relate autism to sociodramatic play, whereafter I provide an overview of the value of sociodramatic play for social skills development. I then explore literature pertaining to fairy tales, and then discuss the potential value of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play with high-functioning children with autism. Lastly, I take a closer look at the potential challenges implied when using fairy tale-based sociodramatic play.

2.5.1 SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF AUTISM

Before I proceed with my discussion of autism and sociodramatic play, I elaborate on the way that children with autism play. The challenges that children with autism experience with regard to play are significant to the extent that the ability to play forms part of the diagnostic criteria for autistic spectrum disorder (refer to Appendix B).

Children with autism (in general) seem to display a qualitatively different kind of play with restricted variability, content and complexity, and are therefore often perceived as children who cannot play (Bogdashina, 2005; Dauphin *et al.*, 2004; Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000; Thorp *et al.*, 1995). According to Wolfberg and Schuler (1993), the triad of challenges that children with autism experience are mirrored in the difficulties they experience with regard to spontaneous play. The flexible, imaginative, spontaneous and social engagement usually related to play is therefore most often absent. When children with autism have the chance for free play, it appears that they would rather engage in stereotyped and repetitive activities in social isolation

(Wolfberg, 1999; Thorp *et al*, 1995). Pretend play² seems to be exceptional, and, when it does arise, it is generally dominated by particular themes, related either to specific television programmes that the child is preoccupied with and imitates, or to special interests (Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000). It is, however, essential to keep in mind that the play behaviours of children with autism do not only reflect the challenges that they experience with autism, but also their histories, their current contexts and their individual personalities.

2.5.2 THE POTENTIAL VALUE OF SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY FOR SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Sociodramatic play has been shown to be closely associated with the domains of social, emotional, physical and cognitive development (Calabrese, 2003). Sociodramatic play is regarded as a potential medium for socialisation and the acquisition of social knowledge, as it might accomplish a number of social-cognitive functions for developing social competence. Children's ability to establish and maintain relationships is enhanced as they learn to observe, mimic and increasingly incorporate roles and complex actions, such as issues of negotiation, turn-taking, cooperation, compromise, trust and intimacy, in order to achieve interpersonal coordination in play (Johnson *et al.*, 1999; Wolfberg, 1999). To this purpose, I formulated a working assumption that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play might support the participants in developing social skills. I furthermore also assumed that the participants' peer relationships might be enhanced when they participate in the sociodramatic play activities that I planned and facilitated.

By enacting various roles during sociodramatic play, children learn to view things from different perspectives. Pretending during sociodramatic play therefore appears to be instrumental in developing a child's *perspective-taking ability*, and his/her ability to 'read' and understand another person's mental state (identifying other people's feelings and thoughts), also known as Baron Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind* ability (described in section 2.2.1). The enactment of various roles furthermore influences children's ability to apply social cognition, which includes the capability to identify central and peripheral social and emotional information; the ability to spontaneously read and correctly infer verbal and non-verbal social and emotional cues; and the knowledge of diverse social behaviours and their consequences for various social tasks (Bauminger, 2002; Johnson *et al.*, 1999). Based on these potential positive outcomes of sociodramatic play I started wondering about the applicability of this type of play for enhancing

² For the purpose of this study, the term 'pretend-play' is used for both functional and symbolic play – which forms an essential part of sociodramatic play (Jordan & Libby, 1997).

the development of social skills of high-functioning children with autism. I pondered upon questions such as: *How could sociodramatic play be used to support high-functioning children with autism in developing the social skills of asking for help and expression of feelings? What is the effect of sociodramatic play on peer relationships among high-functioning children with autism?*

Sociodramatic play furthermore seems to promote communication skills, as *metacommunication* is continually fostered during role-play activities. According to Johnson *et al.* (1999), metacommunication refers to the negotiation and planning that occurs during play activities, as children learn how to communicate their intentions and ideas to each other, and to verbally resolve disagreements over rules, roles, the make-believe identity of objects, and the course of a story line. Metacommunication usually occurs when children momentarily break the play frame and comment about the play itself while resuming their true identities. During the course of my study, I had to constantly be aware of and reflect on the possibility that the participants might use verbal and non-verbal language to communicate their intentions and ideas to each other.

In the light of the above, it appears that children continually alter back and forth between their true identities and their pretend-roles while engaging in sociodramatic play. Johnson *et al.* (1999) assert that children require substantial levels of representational abilities in order to be able to move back and forth between their own identities as their experiences of reality, and their pretend-roles. Keeping in mind that children with autism experience challenges with regard to imagination and pretending, I considered the following questions: *To what extent will high-functioning children with autism be able to shift between two mental representations, between their experiences of reality and the reality being played out in the sociodramatic play? How could high-functioning children with autism be supported to engage in pretend-play during sociodramatic play activities?*

In an attempt to address questions like these, I firstly considered Jackson, Fein, Wolf, Jones, Hauck, Waterhouse and Feinstein's (2003) statement that high-functioning children with autism do indeed possess the capacity for pretend-play, which forms an essential part of sociodramatic play, if prompted. High-functioning children with autism might therefore be able to participate in fairy tale-based sociodramatic play when guided by their peers or an adult. Based on Vygotsky's theory of '*Zone of Proximal Development*', it seems possible that adults could create a social environment for high-functioning children with autism that supports and advances the attainment of social skills during sociodramatic play activities (Korat, Bahar & Snapir, 2002;

Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000). Various studies focusing on the use of '*guided participation*' (as portrayed by Vygotsky) in play activities of children with autism suggest that high-functioning children with autism may be able to understand and construct more complicated (such as pretend-play) and socially coordinated forms of play when prompted and supported by an adult, without peers, or together with peers in integrated play settings (for example Korat *et al.*, 2002; Libby, Powell, Messer & Jordan, 1997; Wolfberg & Schuler, 1993). Calabrese (2003) proposes that the adult's role in sociodramatic play activities could be seen as that of '*stage manager*' – not directing the story, but supporting the process.

During the development and implementation of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, I had to take cognisance of my participation during sociodramatic play activities which could support the primary participants in developing (or not) the social skills upon which I focused. As a result, I did not only read the fairy tales to them, but also participated in the sociodramatic play activities. By participating in the sociodramatic play activities, I could facilitate the process, providing the primary participants with suggestions with regard to the enactment of the various social scenarios, as well as presenting to them various examples of ways in which the scenarios could be acted out and practised.

Conversely, although my involvement, as well as those of peers, in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention might have been significant in the development of social skills, it also posed a challenge to this study. As I did not control for the effects of peer interaction and my involvement during the intervention sessions, the possibility exists that the development of the social skills (refer to Chapter 4 for my findings) might have been caused by the social interaction in the group or my involvement, rather than by the play component of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I facilitated.

In a further attempt to address the above-mentioned questions, I elaborated on sociodramatic play in its traditional format, by incorporating fairy tales in the intervention that I planned and employed for the purpose of this study. I now turn my discussion to the potential use of fairy tales for high-functioning children with autism, during sociodramatic play.

2.5.3 THE POTENTIAL USE OF FAIRY TALE-BASED SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

In order to emphasise the potential value of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play for high-functioning children with autism, I now discuss fairy tales as such. After exploring the concept

of *fairy tales*, focusing on their potential use and advantages, I elaborate on the use of *fairy tale-based sociodramatic play with high-functioning children with autism*.

2.5.3.1 What are fairy tales?

Fairy tales can be described as cultural barometers, cultural artifacts and historical documents, exhibiting didactic potential with the intent to convey knowledge and/or teach attitudes and behaviour (Joosen, 2005; Parsons, 2004). Fairy tales were initially told and retold in many cultures before they were written down and they have also been written and rewritten by many authors for many reasons over the years.

Dobrusky (in Mason, 1997) declares that the main reason for the creation of fairy tales is to educate the young in symbolic and metaphorical ways. Fairy tales are therefore '*powerful cultural agents that tell us how to be*' (Parsons, 2004:136). Children may learn behavioural and associational patterns and how to foresee the consequences of particular acts or situations, when being exposed to a fairy tale. Although a fairy tale is not a ready-made recipe for a moral act, it might offer models and examples of morality, such as good and evil, or loyalty and betrayal (El'Koninova, 2001). As children might recognise themselves and their friends in fairy tales, especially with regard to their feelings, struggles and fears, they can readily identify with the characters (Parsons, 2004).

2.5.3.2 Potential use of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play with high-functioning children with autism

Based on the practice that visual supports are often used in the everyday teaching of children with autism, who are frequently referred to as 'visual thinkers' (Bogdashina, 2005), I formulated a working assumption that fairy tales might serve as visual supports in teaching social skills to high-functioning children with autism. Yet, according to Dauphin *et al.* (2004), relatively few researchers seem to have explored the effects of using visual supports as part of sociodramatic play in teaching social skills to children with autism.

Beyer and Gammeltoft (2000) provide a brief outline of the facilitation of play activities by means of visual scripts. The aim of using a sequence story in the form of a visual script is to supply the child with a structure to encourage play activities, seeing that many children with autism find it difficult to create the content of play. High-functioning children with autism may become skilled

in playing with sequence stories, as ‘*how to play out the story*’ is made comprehensible during sociodramatic play activities. The repeated performance of a story may further expand the social understanding of children with autism, as the play activities in sociodramatic play could help to make the social features of a story real and explicit in an enjoyable and comprehensible way (Dauphin *et al.*, 2004; Welton *et al.*, 2004; Beyer & Gammeltoft, 2000:81; Swaggart & Gagnon, 1995). By incorporating fairy tales, the advantages of sociodramatic play can further be enhanced, as fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could serve as a scaffolding to bridge the abstract and concrete worlds of high-functioning children with autism.

For the purpose of this study, I therefore assumed that fairy tales, as visual support during fairy tale-based sociodramatic play, may be a significant tool for the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism. During the planning of the intervention, I identified specific social skills in the stories that I selected, and integrated different social scenarios which the primary participants practised during role-play, after they had seen visual cards of the stories (refer to Appendix F for examples of the selected social scenarios).

However, I was cognisant that sequenced stories, such as fairy tales, may restrain children’s own initiatives as the story lines could become linked to the illustrations. My assumption at the onset of my study was that this potential challenge could be overcome by providing the primary participants with different social scenario options to act out in the fairy tales, thereby guiding them to expand on the stories (refer to Appendix F for examples of the social scenarios).

2.5.4 POTENTIAL CHALLENGES OF EMPLOYING FAIRY TALE-BASED SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

In the light of the above, it seems that involving high-functioning children with autism in sociodramatic play activities, implies potential challenges. Children with autism seem to find it challenging to play spontaneously with peers (refer to section 2.5.1). Although they have a desire to interact with peers, they display difficulties with regard to the social skills necessary to establish and sustain a shared focus in play. They often resist social approaches, passively enter play with little or no self-initiation, sustain poor eye contact or avoid their peers as far as possible (Wolfberg, 1999). In planning and implementing the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I facilitated, I had to be conscious of the challenges of children with autism with regard to peer interactions, as sociodramatic play implied continuous interaction between the various participants.

Furthermore, the fact that sociodramatic play directs children to participate in ‘another reality’ implies yet more challenges to children with autism (El’Koninova, 2001). Calabrese (2003) describes sociodramatic play as a world of make-believe, yet it is bounded to reality. In sociodramatic play, the skills involved are those that go beyond perception, beyond the literal. Pretend-play, which is an essential part of sociodramatic play, usually includes the ability to add meaning to perception, as well as the construction of verbal narratives that involves sequencing and organisation, intricate planning, as well as well-developed language abilities.

However, it appears that children with autism seldom construct pretend-play by activating dolls as agents, transforming objects, or inventing imaginary roles, objects and events (Rutherford & Rodgers, 2003; Peeters, 2001; Wolfberg, 1999). The challenges that children with autism experience with regard to imaginative and pretend-play, involve that they might experience challenges in sociodramatic play (Sherratt & Donald, 2004; Rutherford & Rodgers, 2003; Peeters, 2001; Williams, Reddy & Costall, 2001; Wolfberg, 1999; Stahmer, 1995; Thorp *et al.*, 1995). In addition, the inclusion of fairy tales adds yet another dimension to sociodramatic play, implying the challenge of acting out a make-believe story that could be difficult for children with autism, who often experience difficulty in applying their imagination skills.

Yet, in planning and implementing the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention I facilitated, I considered the potential challenges it implied for high-functioning children with autism and attempted to address the challenges by adopting a scaffolding role during the sociodramatic play activities. I facilitated the social interactions between the participants during the sociodramatic play activities. Furthermore, I also supported them to engage in pretend-play by providing them with prompts, suggestions and examples for the enactment of the fairy tales. In the next section I conclude the chapter with a summary of the assumptions with which I approached the empirical part of the study, based on my exploration of relevant literature.

2.6 ASSUMPTIONS

I approached this study with the following working assumptions:

- High-functioning children with autism may possess the necessary developmental prerequisites to participate in and benefit from fairy tale-based sociodramatic play as social skills intervention.

- High-functioning children with autism display a qualitatively different way of applying spoken language, partaking in conversations and participating in make-believe play, as opposed to children without autism.
- High-functioning children with autism do not display a lack of imagination, but rather a qualitatively different kind of imagination relative to people without autism.
- High-functioning children with autism could benefit from an intervention to enable the development of their social skills, specifically with regard to *asking for help* and *expressing their feelings*, with the conversion thereof into their daily activities.
- The development of the selected skills, namely *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*, could support high-functioning children with autism to feel less isolated and lonely among others, in their daily lives.
- Fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could address possible feelings of loneliness and social isolation of high-functioning children with autism, as well as feelings of poor social involvement and support, by providing peer support and improving the frequency and quality of their social interactions.
- Fairy tale-based sociodramatic play might support high-functioning children with autism to develop some understanding of other people's mental states (*Theory of Mind*).
- Fairy tales, as visual support, could be a significant tool for the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism. When using fairy tales as part of sociodramatic play, a specific social skill could be identified in a story, and different social scenarios practised during role-play, after children had seen visual pictures in a storybook.
- The social scenarios and behavioural examples depicted in fairy tales could serve as guidelines for the practising of specifically selected social skills.
- The incorporation of additional social scenarios in sociodramatic play activities, could enhance the practising of the specific social skills, as well as guide the primary participants to expand on the stories, in an attempt to address the potential challenge of being restrained by the story line.
- Fairy tale-based sociodramatic play activities might support high-functioning children with autism to develop additional social skills, which are not necessarily included in the focus of the intervention that I planned and facilitated.

2.7 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I presented the conceptual framework upon which I relied in planning and undertaking my study. I explored available literature on autism, social skills, fairy tales and sociodramatic play, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the potential use of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.

In the following chapter I discuss the research that I conducted, focusing on my selected paradigmatic perspective and research design, as well as research methodology and data analysis procedures. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the ethical strategies and quality criteria that I attempted to adhere to in conducting the study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2 I presented the conceptual framework on which I relied in planning and undertaking my study. In order to gain a deep understanding of the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism, I explored available literature pertaining to autism, social skills, fairy tales and sociodramatic play.

In this chapter I discuss my selected paradigmatic perspective and research design, as well as the research methodology, data analysis and interpretation procedures that I employed to conduct the study. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the ethical strategies and quality criteria that I followed in undertaking the study.

3.2 PARADIGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

In the following section, I discuss my selected epistemological and methodological paradigms.

3.2.1 AN INTERPRETIVIST EPISTEMOLOGY

As stated in Chapter 1, I undertook this research from an *interpretivist* paradigmatic viewpoint, which implies that I obtained knowledge from observation and interpretation during an interactive process. My ontological stance proposes that reality is socially constructed and can be understood and interpreted, but not predicted or controlled (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; Mertens, 1998; Schurink, 1998). The aim of interpretivist research is to understand and interpret the subjective world of human experience that motivates everyday human action, thereby emphasising the firmness and precedence of the real world of first-person, subjective experience (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Schwandt, 2000; Schurink, 1998; Ferguson, 1993). According

to Terre Blanche and Kelly (in Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002:123), the interpretivist approach assumes that '*people's subjective experiences are real, that we can understand others' experiences by interacting with them and listening to what they tell us...*'.

In working from an interpretivist perspective, the focus in this study was to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences, not on the basis of my own perspectives and categories, but from the participants' viewpoints, thereby applying an *emic*, rather than an *etic* perspective (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Schurink, 1998). In an attempt to empathetically understand and interpret the research participants' views, the meanings that underlie their social actions, as well as the social worlds they live in, I focused on their stories, descriptions, language and metaphors (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; Garrick, 1999). Additionally, I regarded it as significant to gain an in-depth knowledge and understanding of autism *per se* (refer to Chapter 2), in an attempt to enhance my own understanding of the life worlds, experiences and challenges of children with autism.

I also took cognisance of both the personal and societal contexts in which the participants' views occurred, or, as Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002) indicate – recontextualising, thereby putting and understanding the text in its context. As such, I preferred to work *with* the participants rather than *on* the participants, thereby subscribing to the notion of respect for and loyalty to their life-worlds (Schwandt, 2000; Garrick, 1999). With the above taken into consideration, I aimed to support intersubjective understanding – in other words to understand and give voice to multiple perspectives, without imposing my own world-view on the research participants (Seale, 2000).

3.2.2 A QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

I chose to follow a qualitative approach in an attempt to obtain an understanding of the subjective meanings and personal experiences of the participants of this study. Cohen *et al.* (2003) state that the primary focus of qualitative research is that of understanding the ways in which individuals create, interpret and modify the worlds in which they live – in other words an understanding of what is particular and unique to individuals (Burrell & Morgan in Cohen *et al.*, 2003). Reality is constructed by individuals in interaction with their social worlds (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Supplementary to this statement, Babbie and Mouton (2001) assert that qualitative research implies that individuals are understood in terms of their subjective interpretations of reality, and that society is understood in terms of meanings that people

attribute to specific social actions in that society. Qualitative research is therefore based on the assumption that numerous viewpoints and interpretations of single events and situations exist, and that reality can only be understood and interpreted through the eyes of the participants, and not in terms of nomothetic and causal explanations in terms of universally valid laws.

3.3 PURPOSE OF MY STUDY

For the purpose of my study, I decided to focus on the descriptive and exploratory purposes of research, as my epistemological and methodological paradigms imply that I should not seek to declare ultimate truth. McMillan and Schumacher (2001) assert that research studies with descriptive and exploratory purposes usually add to existing literature by generating rich descriptions of intricate phenomena, and by providing recommendations for future research.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the exploratory and descriptive purposes of my study were to provide rich descriptions of the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. As a result, by presenting rich descriptions of the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play among high-functioning children with autism in literature, it could serve as a valuable tool for professionals, educators and parents to be used for the development of social skills in group interventions, in the classroom, or at home. Based on the findings of this study, which are presented in Chapter 4, this study could furthermore add to existing literature on high-functioning autism, by providing recommendations for future research.

However, by conducting an exploratory study, I faced the potential challenge of losing my focus on the purpose of my study, as new and puzzling themes constantly seemed to emerge. I attempted to address this potential challenge by continuously reflecting on the purpose and process of my research, as well as through regular debriefing sessions with my supervisors. In addition, I kept the new and puzzling themes that emerged in mind, and presented the themes as recommendations for future research.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

I conducted the study according to an *instrumental case study* design, with the focus on the “*applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-*

functioning children with autism” as my case. The application of an instrumental case study design enabled me to gain a deep understanding of the life-worlds of the research participants (Mouton, 2001), in order to obtain insight into the participants’ perspectives (Huberman & Miles, 2002). I aimed to gather sufficient information of the “case”, to effectively understand how the case operates or functions.

A case study can be defined as a *‘research strategy which focuses on a particular case (an individual, a group or an organization) and uses a variety of methods to explore complex phenomena within the context of the case or cases’* (Walshe, Caress, Chew-Graham & Todd, 2004:677). For this study, an instrumental case study design was applied, with the main purpose of answering a specific research question, in order to gain insight into the underlying issue, rather than the case itself (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Berg, 2001; Bergen & While, 2000; Stake, 2000). Berg (2001) emphasises that the purpose of an instrumental case study is to support the researcher to obtain a deep understanding of some external theoretical question or problem. Although the selected case was investigated in-depth, the contexts analysed and the regular activities detailed (Stake, 2000), the case merely served a supportive role in exploring the research phenomenon. In this way I could gain rich and thick descriptions (Cohen *et al.*, 2003) with regard to the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.

In applying a case study design I faced certain potential challenges. Some of these challenges include that generalisations cannot be made from single case studies; that the dynamics of one individual or social entity may bear little correlation to the dynamics of others; that causal links are difficult to test; that case studies are prone to the possibility of observer bias and prejudice, and that case studies may be subjective, personal, and selective (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). Merriam (1998) further states that case studies can oversimplify or amplify a situation, which could lead the readers of a research report to invalid conclusions.

Despite the above-mentioned potential challenges, research from an interpretivist viewpoint does not require generalisations, as the focus is on exploring and understanding the case, not generalising the results. I aimed to explore the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism within a fallibilistic framework. As such, I did not seek to declare ultimate truth, which implies that the purpose of my study was on exploring, rather than on generalising and establishing truth (Seale, 2000). I

aimed to seek transferable rather than generalisable findings, by presenting adequate rich, descriptive information of the phenomenon under study, as well as of the subjective meanings of the individuals that emerged during the research process (Shenton, 2004; Seale, 2000).

Working from an interpretivist viewpoint further implies that it was acceptable for me, as the researcher, to be subjectively involved in the research process, and that observer bias and prejudice should therefore not be seen as a challenge *per se*. I chose to apply an emic perspective and constantly reflected throughout the research process (in my reflective journal) on the possible influence of my own background and perceptions on my data analysis and interpretation.

3.5 RESEARCH PROCESS

In this section, I present an overview of the research process that I employed in my study (Figure 3.1). This is followed by a brief discussion of the research process, as a detailed discussion of the process is provided in the rest of the chapter.

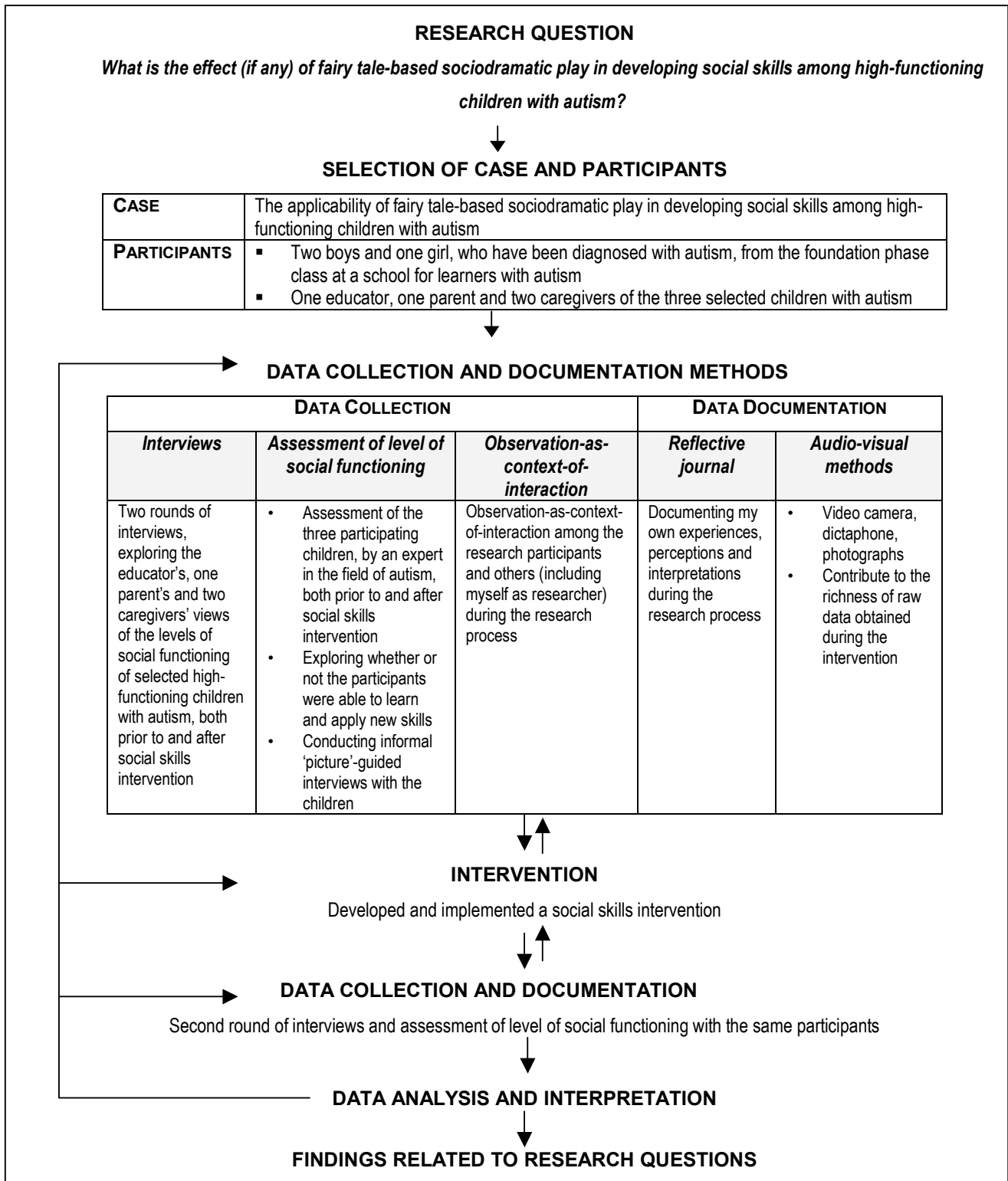


FIGURE 3.1: An overview of the research process

In order to answer my research questions, I had to employ specific methodological procedures. Firstly, I selected my case and the participants for the study. Secondly, I employed interviews, assessment of the participants' levels of social functioning, as well as observation-as-context-of-interaction as data collection methods to explore the participants' levels of social functioning at the onset of my study. I documented raw data, using audio-visual methods and a reflective journal. Thirdly, I developed and implemented a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. Thereafter, I employed follow-up interviews and re-assessment of the participants' levels of social functioning after the social skills intervention had been completed, in order to explore whether or not there were any changes in the social abilities of the selected high-functioning children with autism. Fourthly, I analysed and interpreted the raw data, whereafter I related the findings to my research questions.

3.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this section I provide a detailed description of the research methodology that I employed in conducting this study.

3.6.1 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

I *conveniently selected* the school for learners with autism, as I had completed my internship as an educational psychologist at this particular school in 2005 (Cohen et al., 2003). My connection with the school enhanced my accessibility to the research participants, as well as to suitable and available facilities to conduct the group sessions at the school, as part of data collection. Being present at the school on a daily basis for six months also enabled me to establish good relationships with most of the children at the school, the educators, the psychologist and the headmaster, prior to the onset of my fieldwork.

I *purposefully selected* a group of three children (two boys and one girl, who have been diagnosed with autism), their parents/caregivers, as well as one educator from the foundation phase class at the school. The participants' parents/caregivers (one parent or caregiver per child) were contacted through the psychologist at the school, under whose supervision I completed my internship as an educational psychologist. I applied purposeful sampling, as the purpose of this study was not to generalise findings, but rather to gain insight regarding the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in the development of social skills among

selected high-functioning children with autism (Patton, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Merriam, 1998). Cohen *et al.* (2003), as well as Patton (2002), emphasise that the significance of purposeful sampling lies in the selection of information-rich cases for an in-depth study. Table 3.1 indicates the age, race, language and gender of the participants who partook in my research study.

| PARTICIPANTS | | AGE | RACE | LANGUAGE | GENDER |
|--------------|-------------------------|----------|-------|-----------|--------|
| Children | Aladdin ³ | 11 years | White | Afrikaans | Male |
| | Cinderella | 11 years | Black | Zulu | Female |
| | Tom Thumb | 11 years | Black | Sotho | Male |
| Parent | Parent of Aladdin | 42 years | White | Afrikaans | Female |
| Caregivers | Caregiver of Cinderella | 54 years | Black | Sotho | Female |
| | Caregiver of Tom Thumb | 29 years | White | Afrikaans | Male |
| Educator | | 53 years | White | Afrikaans | Female |

TABLE 3.1: Particulars of participants in the study

I selected the three children (primary participants) purposefully according to the following criteria, based on the clinical observations and recommendations of the psychologist and the educator at the school:

- the child possesses verbal skills of at least on a four year old level (since sociodramatic play does not develop in children before three or four years of age)
- the child has relatively average intellectual abilities (since high-functioning children with autism usually display average intellectual abilities)
- the child seems to be on an appropriate developmental level, which implies that he/she is open for the specific mode of intervention that was chosen, such as enjoying fairy tales and sociodramatic play activities.

McMillan and Schumacher (2001) indicate that the possible challenges of applying convenience and purposeful sampling lie in the difficulty of generalising to other subjects; the likelihood of error due to researcher bias; and that it seems to be less representative of an identified

³ I decided to describe the participants as 'fairy tale heroes', as I view them as heroes in the intervention process, acquiring and practising new skills to improve the quality of their lives.

population. It is, however, important to keep in mind that I approached this study from an interpretivist viewpoint, which implies that my study does not require generalisations, as my aim is to explore and describe the phenomenon under study. Working from an interpretivist approach also implies that my participants did not need to be representative of an identified problem, but that the focus was rather on the selection of an information-rich case for an in-depth study. I therefore aimed to seek transferable rather than generalisable findings, by providing rich, descriptive information with regard to the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism (Shenton, 2004; Tobin & Begley, 2004; Seale, 2000). Lastly, interpretivism implies that researcher bias is not a challenge *per se*, as it is acceptable for me, as a researcher, to be subjectively involved in the research process (Cohen *et al.*, 2003).

3.6.2 FAIRY TALE-BASED SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY INTERVENTION

I developed and implemented a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention for the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism (refer to Appendix F for an outline of my planning and the program). Prior to the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention sessions, I conducted two sessions with the participating children to establish sound rapport and gain the children's trust, as intervention is based on firm relationships of trust and a safe environment. During the intervention, I focused on the development of two social skills, namely *expression of feelings* and *asking for help*. As mentioned in Chapter 1, my choice to focus on these two specific skills was based on my working assumption that the development of these skills could support high-functioning children with autism to feel less isolated and lonely among others, in their daily lives. I only included two skills, due to the difficulties that children with autism generally experience with the internalisation and generalisation of social skills. The aim was to explore whether or not the children were able to learn (understand and implement) the specific social skills during the sociodramatic play activities.

Three high-functioning children with autism in the foundation phase class, who I purposefully selected for this study, took part in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention group. Although none of the primary participants speak English as a first language, I conducted the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions in English, due to the fact that the primary participants receive their education in English, and use English as their expressive language.

I selected two fairy tales for the purpose of the group sessions, namely the *Three little pigs* and *Red Riding Hood*. My choice of these two fairy tales was based on the fact that in both fairy

tales, the main characters were asking for help and both of the fairy tales also provided opportunities to focus on the skill of expression of feelings. These two fairy tales therefore supported my attempt to focus on the development of the two specific social skills, namely *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*.

I conducted six sessions of thirty minutes each with the *Three little pigs*, and four sessions of thirty minutes each with *Red Riding Hood*. As far as the school's programme allowed me, I conducted two to three sessions per week. I recorded the sessions with a video camera, which enabled me to revisit the sessions and to document my observations in my reflective journal (refer to Appendix D). I furthermore took some photographs to serve as visual presentation of the sociodramatic play activities (refer to Appendix C for a selection of the photographs). I must, however, mention that the photographs were not used for data analysis purposes, but merely to serve as visual documentations of sessions to support my observations and field notes.

Sessions included me reading the fairy tale to the primary participants, whereafter I requested them to firstly tell the story and then act out the story. The primary participants took turns to tell the story with the aid of picture cards (refer to Appendix F for an overview of the materials needed for each session). Figure 3.2 gives a visual presentation of one of the primary participant's story telling.



FIGURE 3.2: Participant telling the story of *Little Red Riding Hood*

Initially, my intention was to let the primary participants use hand puppets to act out the story until they felt confident enough to act the roles in the stories themselves. However, the role-play had to be restricted to the use of the hand puppets or other manipulatives (such as a basket and a red cloak for *Red Riding Hood*), as the primary participants were resistant by refusing to act out the roles themselves. Figure 3.3 gives a visual presentation of the use of the hand puppets

to act out the stories, and Figure 3.4 gives a visual presentation of the hand puppets that were used during the sociodramatic play sessions.



FIGURE 3.3: The use of hand puppets to act out *Little Red Riding Hood*



FIGURE 3.4: The hand puppets of *Little Red Riding Hood*

3.6.3 DATA COLLECTION

I selected specific data collection techniques based on a basic tenet concerning the social construction of reality, namely that research might only be conducted by means of interaction between the researcher and the research participants (Mertens, 1998). I employed multiple methods by utilising face-to-face interviews, an assessment of the children's levels of social functioning, and observation-as-context-of-interaction, as strategies to add depth and richness to the study. I therefore relied on *crystallisation*, using different methods to add to and reflect upon different nuances of the data that I had gathered (Tobin & Begley, 2004; Janesick, 2000). The process of crystallisation supported me during the course of the research, to enhance the richness and complexity of the view of the reality being researched, namely the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. I now briefly discuss the methods that I used during the data collection process.

3.6.3.1 Face-to-face interviews

I conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews, as a meaning-making process, with the aim of exploring the educator's and parents'/caregivers' (as secondary research participants) views of the levels of social functioning of the selected high-functioning children with autism, both prior to and after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. From an interpretivist point of view, the purpose of the interviews was to allow me to enter into other people's perspectives and to understand and document others' understandings of the things which I could not directly observe (Miller & Glassner, 2004; Patton, 2002). Through the interviews, I was therefore able to get to know the participants, so that I could understand their knowledge, values and preferences, as well as their attitudes and beliefs (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002).

Holstein and Gubrium (2004) suggest that an interview ought to be treated as a social encounter during which knowledge and meaning are actively constructed between the researcher and the participant. As such, an interview is therefore constructive and interactional by nature. A qualitative interview can be regarded as an interaction between the researcher and research participant, during which the researcher has a general plan of inquiry for the interview, but not a detailed set of questions that must be asked in particular words and in a particular order (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

In essence, a qualitative interview is a conversation during which specific topics that are raised by the participant, are expanded upon, while the interviewer determines a general direction, in order to obtain research-relevant information, or, as Dexter (in Merriam, 1998:71) explains – '*a conversation with a purpose*'. For the purpose of my study, interviews were guided by open-ended questions, in order to provide opportunities for the participants to share their personal opinions and beliefs (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; Schurink, 1998).

I conducted two thirty-minute semi-structured interviews with each of the three children's parents/caregivers, as well as two one-hour interviews with the educator of the participating children. I conducted the interviews with the educator, parent and caregivers in the language of their choice, as this could contribute to the validity of their responses. I offered the Sotho-speaking caregiver the possibility of conducting the interviews in her home language with the aid of an interpreter. She indicated that she preferred to have the interview in Afrikaans, as

Afrikaans was her spoken language at the school and the residence. Table 3.2 presents a summary of the interviews that I conducted as part of my data collection process.

| PARTICIPANT | | DATE | DURATION |
|-------------------------|-------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Educator | Interview 1 | 24 April 2006 | One hour |
| | Interview 2 | 12 June 2006 | One hour |
| Parent of Aladdin | Interview 1 | 25 April 2006 | Thirty minutes |
| | Interview 2 | 14 June 2006 | Forty minutes |
| Caregiver of Cinderella | Interview 1 | 26 April 2006 | Thirty minutes |
| | Interview 2 | 13 June 2006 | Thirty minutes |
| Caregiver of Tom Thumb | Interview 1 | 26 April 2006 | Thirty minutes |
| | Interview 2 | 13 June 2006 | Twenty minutes |
| Aladdin | Interview 1 | 15 June 2006 | Twenty minutes |
| Cinderella | Interview 1 | 15 June 2006 | Fifteen minutes |
| Tom Thumb | Interview 1 | 15 June 2006 | Fifteen minutes |

TABLE 3.2: Summary of face-to-face interviews

The first round of interviews focused on initial perceptions of the children’s functioning in terms of their application of social skills, in an attempt to explore their levels of social functioning at the onset of my fieldwork. I audiotaped and transcribed the interviews verbatim for the purpose of analysing and interpreting the raw data (refer to Appendix G). Figure 3.5 presents an overview of the topics that guided the questions during initial interviews.

| TOPICS FOR INITIAL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring the research participant’s own experience with regard to working with children with autism. • Exploring the research participant’s experience with regard to typical strengths and challenges that high-functioning children with autism display in terms of social skills. • Exploring each individual child who participated in the study in terms of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ background |

- social functioning in the classroom, on the playground, as well as at home or at the residence
- strengths and challenges concerning social skills.
- Exploring the research participants' perceptions of the children's abilities to *ask for help* and *to express their feelings*, by asking them to rate the primary participants on a scale of one to ten (where one indicates no ability, and ten indicates an outstanding ability).
- Exploring the strategies that are already being implemented by the school and the parents, to enhance the social skills of high-functioning children with autism.

FIGURE 3.5: Interview schedule for initial interviews

Two weeks after completing the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, I conducted follow-up interviews with the educator and the parents/caregivers. The aim of these interviews was to explore whether or not there had been any changes in the levels of social functioning of the selected high-functioning children with autism, after the social skills intervention. I requested the educator and parents/caregivers again to rate the children's abilities to *ask for help* and to *express their feelings* on a scale of one to ten, in order to explore whether or not they perceived any changes in the children's levels of social functioning after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention had been completed.

I also conducted one fifteen-minute informal interview with each of the three selected high-functioning children with autism, in order to explore whether or not the skills that they had focused on, had been internalised at the end of the sessions that I had facilitated. In the beginning of the informal interviews, I asked each participant to draw me a picture of one of the stories whereafter I started asking them questions relating to the stories (refer to Appendix H). The informal Interviews with the primary participants were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysing and interpreting the raw data (refer to Appendix H).

Cohen *et al.* (2003) point out that the direct interaction of a research interview is most often the source of both its advantages and challenges. The advantages of unstructured interviewing are closely related to the objectives of qualitative, interpretivist research. Reality can be reconstructed from the world of the research participant(s), whereby the researcher is enabled to attain an "insider view" (emic perspective) of the social phenomenon. The technique of interviewing also allows for greater depth than other methods of data collection, since the

researcher is able to explore other possibilities and themes emerging during the research process. Socially and personally sensitive topics might be openly discussed. Another advantage of a research interview is that it can be matched to individuals and circumstances, and in cases where the participants do not understand a specific question, repeated, or its meaning explained (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Ary *et al.*, 2002; Schurink, 1998). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001), member checking can also be done within an interview, when topics are rephrased and explored to attain more comprehensive and delicate meanings.

In selecting the interview as data collection strategy, I faced certain potential challenges (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004; Miller & Glassner, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Ary *et al.*, 2002; Patton, 2002; Schurink, 1998). Firstly, interviews could be time-consuming, and a tremendous amount of data are usually gathered that need to be organised and analysed. The quality of the information obtained by means of interviews may also be influenced by the presence of the researcher, and this could bias the responses of the participants. The possibility exists that participants may not trust the researcher, may not understand the questions, or may purposefully mislead the researcher in their responses, in order to provide self-serving or socially desirable answers. Lastly, interviewing is prone to the bias and subjectivity of the researcher.

I attempted to address the above-mentioned challenges by reflecting (in my reflective journal) (refer to Appendix D) on my possible influence on the responses of the participants, as well as on my own experiences and perceptions (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Seale, 2000). I furthermore made use of member checking with the psychologist, with the educator, as well as with the parent and caregivers, as a way to overcome the possibility that misunderstanding could influence the data (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Seale, 2000).

3.6.3.2 Assessment of levels of social functioning

An expert in the field of autism (namely the psychologist at the school) assessed the three participating children's levels of social functioning prior to the commencement of the group sessions. After I had completed the series of group sessions, she re-assessed the children's levels of social functioning, for the purpose of exploring whether (or not) any changes had occurred in the children's abilities to *ask for help* and to *express their feelings* (see Appendix I for the outcomes of the assessments).

Based on her expertise in the field of autism, the psychologist employed clinical observation of the three selected high-functioning children with autism, in both structured and unstructured situations over a period of eight weeks in order to assess whether or not they had attained the social skills focused on in this study. She decided not to employ any formal testing, as available standardised tests do not seem to specifically assess the above-mentioned skills.

3.6.3.3 Observation-as-context-of-interaction

Case study research often includes observation in naturally occurring situations over time, as well as writing extensive field notes to describe what is happening. Angrosino and Mays De Pérez (2000:676) emphasise that it might be useful to move away from observation ‘as a “method” per se to a perspective that emphasizes observation as a context for interaction among those involved in the research collaboration.’

I engaged in the role-play activities during the social skills training sessions, and spent time with the three selected high-functioning children with autism as research participants in their classroom and on the playground. During the course of the social skills intervention, I attempted to observe them on the playground twice a week, and also spent approximately three hours a week observing them in the classroom (refer to Appendix E for my observational field notes). I mainly focused on observing and documenting the modes of interaction between the participating children and myself (Patton, 2002), as well as between them and their educator, and between them and their peer group (Angrosino & Mays De Pérez, 2000), with specific reference to the two social skills that formed part of the focus of this study. Supplementary to the abovementioned process, I asked the educator and parents/caregivers to observe the selected high-functioning children with autism on a continuous basis.

I used field notes (refer to Appendix E) to describe my observations-as-context-of-interaction, and also provided a detailed description of the physical setting, events, behaviour, conversations and activities during the research process (Patton, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Mouton, 2001). The descriptive information in my field notes allowed me to revisit observations during the process of data analysis, and might assist the reader of this research report to understand the research activities as described in this report.

I faced distinct challenges while using observation-as-context-of-interaction as data collection technique (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002; Mertens, 1998). It is possible that my presence

during the social skills group activities, as well as in the classroom and on the playground, could have influenced the behaviour of the three selected high-functioning children with autism who I observed. My observational data was further constrained by the limited areas and samples of activities, as practical considerations hindered my observation of the participants at the residence or at home.

However, since the aim of observation-as-context-of-interaction is rather the description of the interaction between the research participants and myself, as well as between the participants and others, I assumed that the observations that I made at the school at various times of the day and various days of the week, could suffice. I was also constantly aware of and reflected on the influence of my own subjective perceptions on the documentation of my observations (see Appendix D for my reflective journal). In addition, I relied on crystallisation, whereby the assessment report of the school psychologist (refer to Appendix I), as well as the extensive interviews with the educator (refer to Appendix G), were used in conjunction with my observations during data analysis and interpretation.

3.6.4 DATA DOCUMENTATION

I now briefly discuss the methods that I employed to document the data that I had collected during the interviews, the intervention and observation-as-context-of-interaction.

3.6.4.1 Audio-visual methods

I used audio-visual methods as part of the data collection process, mainly as means of data documentation. These methods provided me with visual records of the activities of the group under study, and enabled me to collect information that might have been difficult to obtain otherwise (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Schurink *et al.*, 1998), such as non-verbal communication that could be missed during interaction with the participants at some stage in the social skills training groups. As such, audio-visual methods contributed to the richness of the raw data that I obtained. By applying audio-visual data collection and documentation methods, the potential partiality of my observation of a single event could be surmounted, as well as the possible tendency towards only recording frequently occurring events (Cohen *et al.*, 2003).

One advantage of video-recording the interviews and the group sessions was that it allowed me to obtain a record of the interviews and the sessions without being distracted by constant

detailed note-keeping (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002). Although I was initially cautious about installing a video camera at the group sessions, as it implied the potential challenge of reactivity, with the participants constantly aware of their actions being recorded, the video-recordings eventually seemed to have enhanced the participants' participation in the sociodramatic play activities. The children appeared eager in the beginning of the sessions when they saw the camera and could hardly wait for me to start recording.

3.6.4.2 Reflective journal

Seale (2000) proposes that researchers should aim to place reflexivity at the centre of methodological thinking. Supplementary to the methods discussed above, I therefore kept a reflective journal (Appendix D) of my own experiences, perceptions and interpretations. Bogdan and Biklen, in Cohen *et al.* (2003), as well as Altheide and Johnson, in Seale (2000), identify aspects that could be included in a research journal, which I attempted to include in my reflective journal. I namely reflected on how I gained access to the research setting; the methods I used during the process of data collection and analysis; the extent to which I believe that trust and rapport were attained; my own reactions to what I observed and recorded; as well as ethical issues, tensions and challenges that I experienced during the process. My reflective journal furthermore included possibilities and suggestions for further inquiry.

In addition, I requested the educator to keep a reflective journal of her own, recording her experiences, perceptions, observations and interpretations during the time of the research. However, the educator could not find the time to keep a reflective journal, but instead provided me with the three selected high-functioning children with autism's progress reports. Although a reflective journal might have displayed more rich, thick descriptions for data analysis and interpretation, the progress reports (refer to Appendix K for an extract from a progress report) also provided me with valuable information regarding the participants' progress on social, emotional and academic levels. This furthermore contributed to the richness of the data.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Data analysis can be described as a method of categorising, ordering, manipulating and summarising data to attain answers to a specific research question (De Vos & Fouché, 1998). I regard data analysis and interpretation as an ongoing, interactive process throughout the

research process that allowed me to generate authentic and trustworthy findings (Merriam, 1998; Mertens, 1998). Geertz (in Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002) indicates that the purpose of interpretative analysis is to firstly provide ‘thick descriptions’ – that is a detailed description of the processes, transactions, characteristics and contexts that comprise the phenomenon being studied, and secondly, to place them in some kind of perspective.

Patton (2002) emphasises that researchers have a responsibility to evaluate and give account of their own analytical actions and methods as fully and honestly as possible. For the purpose of this study, I implemented *thematic data analysis*, which enabled me to evaluate key words, themes, messages and meanings obtained from the collected data (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002). I aimed at exploring the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.

After the interviews had been transcribed verbatim, I analysed them inductively, searching for emergent topics and themes in the data. In addition, I analysed the content of my field notes and reflective journal, as well as the assessments completed by the psychologist at the school and the progress reports I obtained from the educator. Against the background of my theoretical framework, I analysed the data by means of coding, whereby participant information and question responses were converted to particular thematic categories. The selected method of data analysis that I employed is based on an integration of the data analysis methods as described by Patton (2002), Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002), McMillan and Schumacher (2001), Mertens (1998) and Tesch, in Poggenpoel (1998).

Firstly, I cautiously read through all the transcripts, as well as through the content of my field notes, audio-visual material and reflective journal, in order to acquire a sense of the whole. *Secondly*, I read one transcript at a time, writing down ideas, thoughts (topics) and personal reflections in the margin as they came to mind, with the aim of identifying major themes that are represented in the whole. I drew diagrams and brainstormed with my supervisors to become familiar with the data. *Thirdly*, I identified a few major thematic categories by clustering similar topics together. The analytical technique called ‘constant comparison’ enabled me to develop thematic categories by constantly comparing each category with other categories to identify their distinct characteristics. In the *fourth* place, I developed a coding scheme by condensing these themes as codes and writing these codes next to the appropriate sections of the texts. In the *fifth* place, I re-read the transcripts to start the formal coding in a systematic way. I underlined and colour coded the units of meaning that related to the identified major themes. In

the *sixth* place, I sorted the units of meaning into major thematic categories, and identified subcategories within the major categories. *Lastly*, I identified relationships between the major thematic and sub-thematic categories (See Appendix G for examples of the transcribed text as well as data analysis).

After I had analysed the data in terms of topics and themes, I consulted the educator and parents/caregivers who participated, in order to check the accuracy of the topics and themes that I identified. Based on the basic assumptions of Interpretivism, I decided to include participant evaluation as part of my data analysis and interpretation procedures, as this could enhance the dependability of the findings (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Seale, 2000). Participant evaluation (or member checking) is often significant and valuable in the sense that participants might wish to include more information, or even propose an alternative way of conveying the issue at hand.

The data analysis process that I employed was supported by literature control, in terms of my conceptual framework, as provided in Chapter 2. After analysing the data, I interpreted the results from a position of empathetic understanding, by making assumptions relevant to the research relations studied, and drawing conclusions about these relations that are applicable to the research question (Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; De Vos & Fouché, 1998). Although I am aware of software programmes such as Atlas Ti as an aid to manage, store and retrieve information and perform other functions supported by the software (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; Mouton, 2001), I preferred to follow the process as described above, as I felt confident with regard to the application thereof.

I experienced certain challenges during the process of data analysis and interpretation (Patton, 2002; Mertens, 1998; Poggenpoel, 1998). One of the challenges that I faced was making sense of the substantial amount of data. Due to my choice of data collection methods, including observations-as-context-of-interaction, a reflective journal and interviews, I obtained extensive raw data to analyse. In an attempt to address this challenge, I viewed data analysis as an ongoing, interactive process throughout the research process. I transcribed the interviews as soon as possible after the sessions, whereafter I read through them to acquire a sense of the whole. This enabled me to explore emerging topics and themes on an ongoing basis, that could be used during the follow-up interviews.

Furthermore, I faced the potential challenge of the influence of my own background and perceptions (Mertens, 1998). Although researcher subjectivity is acceptable when working from an interpretivist viewpoint, I was continuously aware of and reflected on the possible influence that my own attitudes and views could have on the data analysis and interpretation. I also employed member checking as a way to overcome the possibility of my background and perceptions influencing the interpretations of the data (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Seale, 2000).

3.8 QUALITY CRITERIA

The basic premise of trustworthiness is that of how inquirers can convince their audiences that the findings of a study are worth paying attention to, or worth talking about (Golafshani, 2003; Babbie & Mouton, 2001). Shenton (2004), Golafshani (2003), as well as Seale (2000) describe Guba's model of trustworthiness as corresponding to the criteria of validity and reliability, employed by the positivist researcher, as follows:

- a) Credibility (preference to internal validity)
- b) Transferability (preference to external validity/generalisability)
- c) Dependability (preference to reliability)
- d) Confirmability (preference to objectivity).
- e) Authenticity

I now discuss the ways in which I aimed to maximise the trustworthiness of my study.

3.8.1 CREDIBILITY

Credibility aims to provide a true picture of the phenomenon under investigation and is established while the research is being undertaken. Poggenpoel (1998:351) defines credibility as follows: *'to demonstrate that the research was conducted in such a manner as to ensure that the phenomena were accurately identified and described'*.

I attempted to provide credible findings by means of the development of an early familiarity with the culture of the participants, in order to gain an adequate understanding of the level of functioning of high-functioning children with autism, and to establish a relationship of trust with the research participants. I furthermore aimed to acquire credible findings by employing well-established research methods for qualitative research. This was supplemented by my use of

crystallisation, as well as through literature control, and the method of data analysis that I applied, during which multiple perspectives were considered simultaneously and presented as thick descriptions. I furthermore employed member checking, whereby I presented the interview transcripts and data analysis to the educator and parents/caregivers as research participants. This provided the research participants with an opportunity to agree or disagree with the way in which I presented the research results. Frequent debriefing sessions between my supervisors and myself further added to the richness and credibility of the findings (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004; Pickard & Dixon, 2004; Shenton, 2004; Tobin & Begley, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Cresswell, 2003; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Seale, 2000).

3.8.2 TRANSFERABILITY

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2002), as well as Babbie and Mouton (2001), define transferability as the extent to which the findings of a study can be applied with other participants or in other research contexts. Due to the fact that meanings vary across different contexts of human interaction, I aimed to seek transferable rather than generalisable findings, by providing sufficient rich, descriptive information of the phenomenon under investigation, as well as of the individual subjective meanings that emerged during the research process. This could enable the readers of my research report to judge the applicability of my findings to other situations (Shenton, 2004; Tobin & Begley, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; Seale, 2000).

3.8.3 DEPENDABILITY

Dependability in qualitative research provides an indication of whether or not the findings would be the same if the study was replicated in the same (or a similar) context or with the same participants (Shenton, 2004; Babbie & Mouton, 2001). According to Guba and Lincoln (in Babbie & Mouton, 2001), a demonstration of credibility seems to be sufficient to ascertain the existence of dependability.

As mentioned before, the aim of this study was not to generalise, but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of the potential use of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. The fact that I sought contributions from other persons during data analysis, namely from the participants involved and through frequent debriefing sessions with my supervisors, strengthens the possibility of the findings being fairly

dependable and probably comparable to other similar groups of people and situations. However, the uniqueness and complexity of autism always need to be taken into account. I also aimed for '*reflexive methodological accounting*' by allowing my supervisors, as well as a peer researcher, to provide me with critique on the methods that I used, as well as a check on the consistency and transparency of the methods (Seale, 2000:141).

Since it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that the research process is logical, traceable and clearly documented, I aimed towards providing an in-depth methodological description in this report to allow the study to be repeated (Tobin & Begley, 2004; Shenton, 2004; Seale, 2000). I also kept my own reflective journal, documenting and reflecting on the proceedings and developments in the research process, as well as on my own participation during the process (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004; Pickard & Dickson, 2004).

3.8.4 CONFIRMABILITY

Confirmability implies that the findings of the study are the product of the focus of the inquiry, and not of the biases of the researcher (Pickard & Dixon, 2004; Babbie & Mouton, 2001). However, freedom from bias in research contradicts the underlying assumptions of the interpretivist approach, according to which the values and motives of the researcher do play an essential role in the research process. Without allowing such influence to be detrimental to the extent that the results become inappropriate, I aimed to understand and interpret the intentions and meanings that underlie the various actions and interactions of the high-functioning children with autism who participated. I was also continually aware of and reflected on my potential influence on data collection, analysis and interpretation, thereby providing the readers of the research report with a methodologically self-critical account of how the research was done (Creswell, 2003; Seale, 2000).

3.8.5 AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is established if researchers can display a balanced representation of a range of different realities, with portrayals of their associated problems, concerns and underlying values (Steinke, 2004; Tobin & Begley, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Seale, 2000). Working from an interpretivist viewpoint, I aimed to give first-person account of the intentions, meanings, personal experiences and subjective realities of the various research participants of this study. In addition, the process of crystallisation supported me during the research process to enhance

the complexity and richness of the view of the reality being researched. In order to attain ontological authenticity, I attempted to assist the participating educator and parents/caregivers to develop more refined understandings of the use of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. This was achieved during member checking, as well as during the discussion of the findings with the various research participants (Steinke, 2004; Seale, 2000).

3.9 ETHICAL STRATEGIES

As an educational psychologist in training, I firstly adhered to the ethical code of the Health Professions Council of South Africa in intervening with high-functioning children with autism as participants. In addition, I adhered to the research ethical principles as prescribed by the Research Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the way in which I conducted the research aimed to ensure that the research participants knew what was going on during the research process, that they were not deceived, and that they did not experience any form of harm or distress (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). I now discuss the ethical strategies that I employed in this study, in order to preserve the dignity of the participants as human beings.

3.9.1 INFORMED CONSENT

I obtained written informed consent from the Department of Education (Appendix A), the school for learners with autism, the research participants (namely the teacher and the parents/caregivers), as well as the parents of the children who participated in the research process (Appendix A). In addition, I obtained informal informed assent from the participating children. Research participants had the right to choose whether or not to participate in the study, after being informed of the purpose of the study, the procedures that would be followed, as well as the possible advantages of the outcome of the study (Hopf, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001). I also emphasised the right of participants to withdraw from the study at any time (Ary *et al.*, 2002).

3.9.2 PRIVACY, CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

I adhered to the ethical principle of privacy, by protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants at all times (Hopf, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2003; Ary *et al.*, 2002; Patton, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2002; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001; Strydom, 1998). I did not disclose the identities of the research participants during the study and dealt with the information obtained during the research process in a confidential manner. My field notes, audio-visual material, transcripts and other raw data are currently preserved in a safe environment, and will be destroyed after the required period of fifteen years.

3.9.3 PROTECTION FROM HARM

I strived to avoid (or at least recognise and communicate) probable risk to the participants, such as exposure to psychological, physical or social harm (Ary *et al.*, 2002; Berg, 2001; Strydom, 1998). I used the two principles mentioned by McMillan and Schumacher (2001), namely caring and fairness, to protect the participants in the study from harm. I aimed to achieve this by adhering to the principles of confidentiality, anonymity and trust. I did not reveal any personal data, nor did I discuss individual cases outside the work of the project (Hopf, 2004). The use of member checking further ensured that no data were revealed that could harm any of the individuals. No human rights were violated during this study.

3.9.4 PRINCIPLE OF TRUST

I adhered to the principle of trust, which implies that I did not deceive the research participants at any time during or after the research process. Through continuous interaction with the research participants, I ensured that they were at all times aware of the true purpose and conditions of the research process. I also focused on not betraying the research participants by presenting a true account of the information disclosed by them, in such a way that it would not cause them any anxiety, distress or humiliation (Cohen *et al.*, 2003; McMillan & Schumacher, 2001).

3.10 MY ROLE AS RESEARCHER

During my study, I had to fulfil the dual role of *researcher* and *interventionist*. I aimed to assimilate these roles in terms of the methodological decisions that I made. Even though I was also an *intern educational psychologist* at the school where I undertook my research, I did not enter the research field as such. In an attempt to balance my roles as researcher and interventionist, and to integrate my roles as interventionist and intern educational psychologist within my role as researcher, I relied on constant critical self-reflection and continuous debriefing sessions with my supervisors.

In addition, I assumed the role of *acting as research instrument*, whereby I acted as the main instrument for data collection, analysis and interpretation. I constantly had to reflect on the possible influence of my values, beliefs and assumptions on the research process, in my reflective journal and during debriefing sessions with my supervisors. Furthermore, I had to reflect on the implications for my role as research instrument when working from an interpretivist viewpoint. I adopted an emic perspective (insider approach) throughout the research process, in an attempt to gain an understanding of the perceptions, values and viewpoints of the participants within their distinctive contexts.

3.11 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I presented a detailed description of the paradigmatic perspective, research design, research methodology and data analysis and interpretation procedures that I used. I also discussed the ethical guidelines that I considered, elucidated the quality criteria of the research, and reflected on my role as researcher.

In the following chapter, I present and discuss the raw data that I obtained and analysed. Thereafter, I provide a detailed discussion of the findings and interpretations of the results, relating them to relevant literature, as discussed in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3, I presented a detailed description of the paradigmatic perspective, research design, research methodology and data analysis and interpretation procedures that I employed. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of the ethical guidelines that I considered for this study, and elucidated the quality criteria of the research.

In this chapter, I firstly present my general reflections on the research, which includes an introductory description of the three selected high-functioning children with autism who participated in this study. Thereafter, I present and discuss the results that I obtained during data analysis. I conclude the chapter with a detailed discussion of the findings and interpretation of the results, relating them to relevant literature as discussed in Chapter 2.

4.2 REFLECTIONS ON THE CONTEXT AND PROCESS OF THE STUDY

I commence this section by providing a brief overview with regard to the levels of functioning of the three selected children with autism, in terms of the two selected social skills, namely *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*, prior to the social skills intervention. Thereafter, I proceed with a detailed discussion of the context and process of the research, with specific focus on the intervention sessions.

4.2.1 INTRODUCING THE PRIMARY RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

I decided to introduce the three primary participants before reflecting on the context and process of the research, as it is important to me that the readers, when studying my research report, know the 'fairy tale heroes' who participated in the study. The information is based on the raw data that I obtained by means of the initial interviews that I conducted with the educator and the parents/caregivers (see transcripts in Appendix G), my observations (see observational field

notes in Appendix E), as well as the initial assessment done by the school psychologist (see report in Appendix I), prior to the social skills intervention that I facilitated.

4.2.1.1 Aladdin

Aladdin is an eleven-year-old boy who seems to be a strong leader in his class. Although his home language is Afrikaans, he often intermingles Afrikaans and English to the extent that he believes he is speaking one language. School files indicate that Aladdin was admitted to the school for learners with autism in January 2000 after being diagnosed with traits of autism in 1999, as well as with a mild developmental delay and specific barriers to learning.

At the onset of my study, Aladdin's mother reported that he seemed to have a well-developed level of imagination, which he often applied in acting out existing stories, as well as in creating his own stories. He furthermore appeared to have a caring personality, often trying to help other people. His mother, as well as the educator, indicated that they believe that he possesses an outstanding ability to "read" and understand other people's emotions. The educator reported (I-1, Ed, p.7)⁴: "*xxx (Aladdin) is one that will ask, 'Are you okay xxx? What's wrong xxx?' He will just take my facial expression... So then I explain that I'm having a headache or this or that.*" He also seemed to possess the ability to distinguish between various abstract emotions, and to explain his emotions to his mother, as stated by her (I-1, P/Aladdin, p.4): "*His ability to distinguish between various emotions is exceptionally accurate. I asked him the other day: 'Why are you cross with me?', and then he said: 'No, I'm not cross with you. I'm only sad because you cannot buy that for me.'*"⁵

However, the educator reported that Aladdin sometimes expressed his emotions without considering other people's feelings. Both the psychologist and the educator indicated that the challenges that he experiences with intermingling Afrikaans and English further seemed to influence his ability to appropriately express his feelings, as he often experiences difficulty in

⁴ Throughout the rest of the dissertation, the following abbreviations are used:

- I-1: Interview one; and I-2: Interview two
- P: Parent
- C: Caregiver
- Psych: Psychologist
- Ed: Educator
- RJ: Reflective Journal

⁵ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: "*Sy onderskeid tussen verskillende emosies is ontsettend akkuraat. Ek vra nou die dag vir hom, 'Hoekom is jy kwaad vir my?' Toe se hy: 'Nee, ek's nie kwaad vir jou nie. Ek is net hartseer omdat jy nie dit vir my kan koop nie.'*"

finding the correct word to describe his feelings. The educator stated: *“He also struggles with his vocabulary and finds it difficult to express himself because he puts the two languages together”* (I-1, Ed, p.11). The psychologist explained that Aladdin tried to cope with his feelings through ritualistic behaviour such as walking up and down in the garden while acting out various stories, such as *Superman*, emphasising the fact that these behaviours are not an indication of outstanding imagination abilities. She furthermore reported that he also made use of thumb sucking to calm himself when feeling anxious.

At the onset of my study, both his mother and the educator reported that Aladdin often believed that he knew what to do when facing problems, and that he did not need help to solve problems. According to the educator, he sometimes *“believes that he doesn’t need help, especially with computers”* (I-1, Ed, p.12). Aladdin’s mother also indicated that, although he would sometimes ask for help, he would refuse to accept the help that is offered to him.

4.2.1.2 Cinderella

Cinderella is a shy eleven-year-old girl who seems to prefer and enjoy her own company. Cinderella’s school files indicate that she was accepted for admission to the school and residence in 2001, after being diagnosed with features of autism and a developmental delay in 2000. Cinderella’s home language is Zulu, but since she receives her education in English, she prefers to speak English to her peers, educator and caregivers.

Before the commencement of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, Cinderella appeared to be independent in terms of daily activities, especially in the residence. Cinderella’s independency seemed to imply that she did not need to ask others for help. The caregiver at the residence did, however, indicate that she was able to ask caregivers for help when necessary, as she appeared to be open to express and explain her feelings to the caregivers at the residence: *“Here, she will ask. She is open towards us”* (I-1, C/Cinderella, p.3).⁶ The caregiver furthermore emphasised that, even though Cinderella was able to ask for help and express her feelings, she would only approach her caregivers at the residence, and not her peers: *“She does not want to ask the other children for help. She will call us”* (I-1, C/Cinderella, p.7)⁷.

⁶ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: *“hierso sal sy vra. Sy’s oop met ons.”*

⁷ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: *“Sy wil nie die ander kinders vra vir hulp nie. Sy sal ons roep.”*

In addition, the educator reported that Cinderella's social abilities, which include her abilities to express her emotions and to ask for help, were gradually starting to emerge within the structured situation at the school. The educator reported that Cinderella would often do her work on her own, and then sit and wait, or just write one word, and wait for her (the educator) – apparently therefore not verbalising her need for help. The educator explained:

'She would do her work on her own and then sit and wait or just write one word and wait for me. And she wouldn't ask me, 'Oh please xxx, come and help me?' But then I said to her: 'xxx (Cinderella) I wouldn't know if you do not ask me. So please ask me. Say, xxx, come and help me.' This is taking a long time. Now she is slowly starting to call me and say: 'What must I do here?' or 'Please will you help me?'" (I-1, Ed, p.14).

The psychologist attempted to explain Cinderella's reluctance to verbalise her need for help, by indicating in her assessment report (see Appendix I) that Cinderella experienced difficulty with understanding the mental states of other people (Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind*). The difficulty that Cinderella reportedly experienced with regard to understanding other people's mental states seemingly contributed to the challenges that she experienced in understanding that others may not always anticipate her needs.

4.2.1.3 Tom Thumb

Tom Thumb is a shy eleven-year-old boy. His educator reported that he was very committed to his role as leader of the class once a week and fulfilled his duties with pride. The school files indicate that Tom Thumb was diagnosed with traits of autism in 2002, in addition to a mild developmental delay, whereafter he was admitted to the school and the residence in 2003. Although Tom Thumb's home language is Sotho, he uses English as his spoken language at school and in the residence. The psychologist explained that formal testing at the school indicated that Tom Thumb understands English better than Sotho, and that he has acquired a great deal of his language from English television.

At the onset of this study, the educator described Tom Thumb as a shy boy who needed a lot of motivation: *"He is still as shy as xxx (Cinderella) was last year. He still needs a lot of motivation"* (I-1, Ed, p.16). However, his duties as class leader once a week, as well as his responsibility to do the dishes in class, seem to have a positive influence on his self-confidence. The educator reported the following in this regard: *"He gained so much self-confidence in doing*

the dishes that it is his job now and he gets his attention there... It made him feel good about himself" (I-1, Ed, p.16).

According to the caregiver at the residence, as well as the educator, it seemed that Tom Thumb's ability to express his need for help was gradually starting to emerge, prior to the commencement of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. It seemed that he would indicate his need for assistance by only providing information with regard to the problem. The caregiver explained: *"He has never come to me and said, 'Help me with this' or 'Help me with that'. He would rather say 'It's broken' or 'It's torn'. I mean, he is... he is an informant... He never really asked me for help"* (I-1, C/Tom Thumb, p.4).⁸ He furthermore displayed the tendency to use body language to indicate his need for help or to withdraw from a task that he perceived as too difficult.

The psychologist indicated that Tom Thumb experienced difficulty with abstract concepts such as feelings and emotions. The psychologist moreover reported that Tom Thumb possessed the ability to indicate basic emotions when visual assistance was combined with questions regarding his feelings. According to the educator, Tom Thumb's ability to express his emotions was starting to emerge: *"He is slowly beginning to loosen up"* (I-1, Ed, p.18). The educator, as well as the caregiver at the residence, both indicated that he often used body language to show how he was feeling. In addition, the educator also mentioned that Tom Thumb tended to become quiet when feeling upset: *"He gets very upset when she (his mother) is so anxious and will then become very quiet"* (I-1, Ed, p.18).

4.2.2 ESTABLISHING RAPPORT

Being present at the school as an intern educational psychologist enabled me to establish rapport with the research participants prior to the commencement of my fieldwork. I regularly visited the foundation phase class in my role as intern educational psychologist, spending valuable time with the learners and the educator. I also met on frequent occasions with the parent/caregivers at school meetings and functions. My regular interactions with the research participants prior to the field work not only enabled me to establish rapport with them, but also enabled us to build mutual trust. I approached the caregivers and educator individually after a

⁸ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from *"Hy't nog nooit na my toe gekom en gesê "Help me with this" of "help me with that" nie. Hy sal eerder net sê "it's broken" of "it's torn". Ek meen hy's... hy's 'n informant... Hy't nog nooit vir my regtig hulp gevra nie..."*

general staff meeting, explaining the purpose and process of my research to them, whereafter I requested their participation and provided them with letters of informed consent. After explaining the research process to the research participants, I made appointments with them for the initial interviews. I contacted Aladdin's mother telephonically and explained the purpose and process of my research to her. After I had requested her participation in my study, we arranged for a date for the first interview, and agreed that she would sign the letter of informed consent prior to the interview. In addition, I met with the three primary participants a week before the commencement of the group sessions, briefly explaining to them what the intervention would entail and asking them if they were willing to participate. Subsequently, they indicated that they were willing to participate in the group sessions, whereafter we agreed upon a time for the first session.

4.2.3 INITIAL DATA COLLECTION AND DOCUMENTATION PHASE

I entered the initial data collection and documentation phase of my study with feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and being overwhelmed on the one hand, but excited and curious on the other. I employed interviews, assessment of the participants' levels of social functioning, as well as observation-as-context-of-interaction as data collection methods to explore the primary participants' levels of social functioning prior to the commencement of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I facilitated. I used audio-visual methods and a reflective journal to document raw data.

Prior to the intervention, I conducted one thirty-minute semi-structured **interview** with each of the three children's parents/caregivers, as well as a one-hour interview with the educator of the children (refer to Appendix G). These interviews focused on the educator's and caregivers'/parent's initial perceptions of the primary participants' functioning in terms of their application of social skills, in an attempt to explore their levels of social functioning at the onset of my fieldwork. I decided to interview the educator first, with the purpose of obtaining an overview/picture of the three primary participants. The educator and I decided that a Monday afternoon would be an appropriate time to conduct the interview without being disturbed by learners, as the educators at the school are required to work until four o'clock on a Monday afternoon. During the initial interview, the educator displayed enthusiasm with regard to teaching children with autism, as well as a willingness and an ability to share her views on the children's levels of social functioning.

I conducted the interviews with the caregivers on the residence premises. My decision to go to the residence was twofold. Firstly, conducting the interviews at the residence made it easier for the caregivers to find time in their schedules for the interviews. Secondly, I wanted a glance into the participants' life-worlds at the residence. It seemed to me that my effort to go to the residence for the interviews further added to the establishment of rapport between the caregivers and myself. They were both willing to cooperate in the research process and positively participated in the interviews.

I conducted the interview with Aladdin's mother in her office at work. She provided me with valuable information with regard to Aladdin's social functioning. In addition, Aladdin's mother was inquisitive about the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I was planning to implement. I was, however, cautious of the possibility that her knowledge of the programme could influence her observations of Aladdin during the course of the intervention, as well as her perceptions about possible changes in his level of social functioning at the end of the intervention. After explaining my concerns to Aladdin's mother, we agreed that I would provide her with detailed feedback after the intervention had been completed.

Apart from the interviews, I further employed **observation-as-context-of-interaction**, which I documented by means of observational field notes (refer to Appendix E), to observe and document the modes of interaction between the primary participants and significant others (myself, their educator and their peer group) with specific reference to the two social skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*. For the purpose of observing the primary participants, I engaged in the sociodramatic play activities and spent approximately three hours per week in the foundation phase class (structured situation). In addition, I also observed them on the playground (unstructured situation) twice a week. When observing the primary participants in their classroom, I tried to position myself behind a bookshelf in order to limit the possibility that my presence would influence their behaviour. Being in the background enabled me to observe the primary participants without distracting their attention. On frequent occasions, I engaged in some of the activities in class, observing their interactions with me.

In order to crystallise my results, I furthermore relied on an **assessment of the primary participants' levels of social functioning** at the onset of my study. The assessment was conducted by an expert in the field of autism, namely the psychologist at the school. She assessed the primary participants' levels of social functioning before the commencement of the

group sessions, employing clinical observation of the primary participants in both structured and unstructured situations over a period of eight weeks.

4.2.4 THE INTERVENTION

I decided to employ two fairy tales during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention sessions, namely *Three little pigs* and *Red Riding Hood*. I conducted six sessions of thirty minutes each with the *Three little pigs*, and four sessions of thirty minutes each with *Red Riding Hood*. In addition, I conducted two sessions with the specific focus of establishing rapport and providing structure at the beginning of the programme, as well as a closing session at the end of the programme. I conducted two to three sessions per week, as far as the school's programme allowed me. Ideally, within the framework of autism and the subsequent difficulty with generalisation of newly acquired skills, daily sessions may have been more effective. However, time-constraints and the school's programme prevented me from conducting daily sessions, as the participants were already involved in other activities as well, such as art and computer classes.

I conducted the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions in English, as the three primary participants receive their education in English and use English as their expressive language at school and in the residence. I recorded the sessions with a video camera, which allowed me to refer to the sessions and to document my observations in my reflective journal (refer to Appendix D). Furthermore, I took some photographs to serve as visual presentation of the sociodramatic play activities, in an attempt to add richness to the data (refer to Appendix C).

I henceforth provide a detailed outline of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention sessions that I employed. The discussion includes the content of the specific sessions, as well as my reflections after the completion of each session.

4.2.4.1 Session one

The purpose of session one was to build relationships with the primary participants of the study. In addition, the session served to provide the primary participants with a brief introduction on what they could expect during the course of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. I decided to start the session with a board game (Snakes and ladders) that could enhance the participation of the primary participants in the group sessions. Thereafter I proceeded by

providing them with a brief structured overview, by means of a visual schedule (refer to Appendix J), of what the following twelve sessions would entail. The session took place in the school's small library, as there were no other open rooms available.

Looking back at Session 1:

Extract from my reflective journal

The three participants appeared slightly apprehensive at the beginning of today's session. The board game (Snakes and ladders) was a good choice to begin with as part of relationship building, as they were not expected to talk too much in the beginning. They became more relaxed as the games progressed, and slowly started to give comments. Aladdin, who is the most verbal among the three, took the leading role from the beginning. He took the initiative to explain the game to the other two and wanted to start first.

It was very important to provide them with a structured overview on what to expect from these group sessions, as children with autism tend to need a lot of structure. It was clear from the primary participants' body language that they became more relaxed when they knew what was going to happen. This also played a role in building trust, as I felt that they trusted me more when they knew what we were going to do. Maybe it would have been better to start with this activity, and, as they felt more secure, to proceed with the board game.

I think the room is perhaps too small for the sociodramatic play activities of session three onwards. Although it was appropriate for today's activities, as we only played a board game, I'll have to find another venue for the upcoming sessions.

4.2.4.2 Session two

The second session served as a reinforcement of the first session. The purpose of this session was also to build relationships, as well as to provide the primary participants with a structured overview by means of a visual schedule regarding the sessions that were going to follow. However, I decided to commence session two with a review of the previous session and to emphasise the structure of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention programme.

Thereafter we proceeded with the board games as rapport building activity. Session two was conducted in the art therapy room, which allowed for more space.

Looking back at Session 2...

Extract from my reflective journal

I started today's session with a review on what we discussed last week in terms of the structure of the sessions. Once again, I saw that it made the children feel more relaxed, and, in a way, more willing to participate. This was a better start to the session than last time when I used the board game as a start. They do need structure!

The board games (Snakes and ladders; Ludo) worked very well again. I emphasised that it is important that we should take turns to be first and all three of them agreed. However, it was interesting to see that Aladdin was still the one who decided who "goes" first in each specific game. I think it may be significant if I could facilitate his willingness to take the leading role in supporting the other two participants, without allowing him to dominate the sessions.

4.2.4.3 Session three

The purpose of session three was to assist the primary participants in learning the story of the *Three little pigs* with the aid of picture cards as visual presentation of the story. It was important to provide the primary participants with many opportunities to learn the story before we started to dramatise the story. I read the story a few times to the primary participants while showing the picture cards to them. I used a dramatised tone of voice when reading the story to the primary participants, in order to facilitate the use of the story in sociodramatic play.

Looking back at Session 3...

Extract from my reflective journal

Since the aim is to use this story in sociodramatic play, I tried to dramatise the story while reading it to the primary participants. All three of them listened very intensely. On the one hand, Aladdin was clearly interested and showed excitement, while Tom Thumb did not have

any expression on his face in the beginning. Tom Thumb only started to show interest later on, as the session progressed. I was very excited today as Cinderella started making eye contact with me during the session. She seems to be more relaxed than during the first two sessions and more willing to participate.

The picture cards with the story written at the back worked very well, as I could read the story while they looked at the pictures. I decided to use the cards rather than a storybook, mainly because of the big pictures. Aladdin was often distracted by small visual details in the pictures, as children with autism often tend to focus on visual details of a picture, rather than the 'big picture'. As a result, he often wanted to talk about the details. We agreed, however, that we could discuss the pictures after I had read the story to them twice. This agreement seemed to work well, as Aladdin waited with his questions and comments on details in the pictures until I had finished reading the story.

Unfortunately, the art therapy room was booked for today and we had to find another place to conduct the session. I suggested to the participants that we should go to the playground and they all agreed. In retrospect on the session, I think that sitting outside under the trees was a good idea and might have added to the participants seeming more relaxed. Maybe we should continue conducting the sessions on the playground...

4.2.4.4 Session four

As in session three, the purpose of this session was to assist the primary participants in learning the story of the *Three little pigs*. I read the story again, using a dramatised tone of voice to enhance the sociodramatic play. Thereafter, I gave each primary participant the opportunity to tell the story to the rest of the group with the aid of the picture cards.

Looking back at Session 4...

Extract from my reflective journal

It was very interesting today to see how the participants followed my example in reading the story in a dramatised voice to enhance the sociodramatic play. After that, each one of them had a chance to take the cards and tell the story to the rest of the group. It was positive to see

how the pictures assisted them to remember and to tell the story. Aladdin wanted to be first again and told the story with enthusiasm. It was very interesting to observe that his story didn't end when the pictures ended. He actually created his own storyline to go on with the story. Although Cinderella and Tom Thumb needed some support to tell the story, they did it with a lot of enthusiasm too.

Keeping Vygotsky's concept of 'scaffolding' in mind, it seems that my example, the visual pictures, as well as the peers in the group, supported the participants in telling the story. It happened once or twice that Aladdin corrected Cinderella in a kind manner, suggesting to her the correct way to tell the story. It appears that Aladdin's tendency to take the lead and help others, may support the rest of the group in a positive way.

Somebody asked me yesterday: "Why fairy tales and sociodramatic play if you know that children with autism experience challenges with applying their imaginations?" I know this is a very intricate question to answer and that a completely new study could be done based on that question. In short, I just want to provide an example from today's session that surprised me and made me realise that one cannot say there is a lack of imagination... Aladdin created his own storyline as extension of the story of the Three little pigs and told us a longer version (his own version) of the story. He had to use imagination to be able to do that!

4.2.4.5 Session five

The main purpose of session five was to facilitate the application of the social skill *asking for help* during sociodramatic play activities. Firstly, the primary participants had another opportunity to tell the story of the *Three little pigs* to the rest of the group, thereby assisting them in learning the story for the sociodramatic play activities. Thereafter, each of the primary participants had the opportunity to choose a hand puppet that represented a character from the *Three little pigs*. The session then proceeded with me assisting the primary participants in dramatising the story of the *Three little pigs* with the hand puppets, during which I facilitated scenarios in the story in which the primary participants had to *ask for help*. Figure 4.1 gives a visual presentation of the hand puppets used to act out the story of the *Three little pigs*.



FIGURE 4.1: The use of hand puppets to act out the *Three little pigs*

Looking back at Session 5...

Extract from my reflective journal

Today's session filled me with excitement! At the start of the session, Aladdin suggested that we should give Cinderella the opportunity to tell the story first. We all agreed, whereafter I tried to boost her self-confidence by giving her positive feedback with regard to her positive participation in the previous sessions. After being hesitant at first, she smiled (wow!) and started to tell the story with the aid of the pictures. Cinderella continuously looked at me while telling the story as if she needed reassurance. I responded by smiling at her and nodding my head as she proceeded. Tom Thumb was next! He managed to tell the story with a little support from me. To my surprise, he even used a dramatised voice at times.

After giving each one a chance to tell the story again, they each chose a pig puppet for the dramatisation of the story. The three children played the parts of the three little pigs (their own choice) and I was the wolf. At first, I showed one picture at a time to them and they acted that specific part of the story. Later during the session, I took away the pictures and we started playing the story. It was very positive to see to what extent they could remember and represent the story. During the course of the story, I continuously facilitated the scenes where they had to ask each other or other people for help.

I realise that the scenarios of the Three little pigs that we acted today, mainly focused on asking for help when in danger. In order for the primary participants to gain confidence in acting the story, I decided to only use the story as it is for today. During the next session, however, I shall include additional scenarios in the story with the purpose of facilitating the application of the skill of asking for help in various situations and contexts.

4.2.4.6 Session six

In order to facilitate the application of the social skill *asking for help* during the sociodramatic play activities, I included the use of various social scenarios in session six. The primary participants firstly dramatised the original story of the *Three little pigs* with the hand puppets. Thereafter, I facilitated the dramatisation of various additional social scenarios incorporated into the original story of the *Three little pigs*.

For example: while the pigs were still building their houses, they ran short of building material and had to go to town and ask for some more. In addition, each one of the pigs experienced some kind of trouble in building their houses and was required to go and ask their brothers for help, for example, to fix the roof.

Looking back at Session 6:

Extract from my reflective journal

During today's session I tried to incorporate different social scenarios into the story in order to enhance the acquisition of the skill 'asking for help'. Two examples: while the pigs were still building their houses, they ran short of building material and had to go to town and ask for some more. Each one of the pigs also experienced some kind of trouble in building his house and had to ask his brothers to help him fix the roof. A few more examples of asking for help were incorporated and practised.

Although it seemed a bit difficult for them in the beginning, the participants soon started helping each other in acting out the various scenarios. For example: Cinderella suggested to Tom Thumb how he could ask her to borrow some sugar. By requesting the participants to act out the various additional social scenarios, I attempted to challenge their ability to use their imagination, as the scenarios which they had to dramatise did not form part of the story.

Although I provided them with a lot of support at first, they displayed an increased ability to perform this task by supporting each other.

4.2.4.7 Session seven

The purpose of session seven was to facilitate the application of the social skill *asking for help* during the sociodramatic play activities, building on the experiences and knowledge gained during the previous sessions. We started the session by using the hand puppets in acting out the story of the *Three little pigs*, as this method was familiar to the primary participants. Thereafter, I introduced the primary participants to the use of masks and various props (such as grass, sticks and bricks) in sociodramatic play activities. The primary participants then acted the story with the use of the masks and props. Finally, I asked the primary participants to try to suggest a few scenarios that we could act out, specifically with regard to asking for help. Figure 4.2 gives a visual presentation of the mask and props that were used to act out the story of the *Three little pigs*.



FIGURE 4.2: The use of masks and props to act out the *Three little pigs*

Looking back at Session 7...

Extract from my reflective journal

Today's session was a bit challenging for the children. After we had acted the story with the hand puppets, I gave them masks and various props, such as grass, sticks and bricks, and asked them to act the story again. They were a bit hesitant in the beginning, but once the masks were on their faces, they started acting the story. Thereafter, I asked them to think of

scenarios that we could incorporate into the story – where they had to ask for help. Aladdin was able to suggest a few, but Cinderella and Tom Thumb needed a lot of support from me to create their own scenarios. Aladdin also provided them with some ideas and suggestions. Perhaps I expected too much of their abilities to think abstractly and to use their imaginations. However, they could provide me with examples from the previous sessions and therefore strongly relied on their abilities to remember. I really hope that they will be able to use their memory skills when applying the newly learned skills in their everyday situations.

In retrospect, I think I included too many activities in today's session. It appeared as if the activities overwhelmed the primary participants. Perhaps it might be better to divide the activities of this session into two separate sessions. Additionally, I assume that the participants' hesitancy towards acting the story with the masks and props, may be related to them acting the roles themselves for the first time (with masks) and not as someone else (puppets).

4.2.4.8 Session eight

In session eight, I again aimed at facilitating the application of the social skill of *asking for help* during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. I started this session by giving the primary participants a choice of what they wanted to use during the sociodramatic play – puppets, or masks and other props (such as grass, sticks and bricks). Thereafter, I again provided various additional social scenarios in the story to practise the social skill of *asking for help*. Examples of scenarios include: Pig number three asked Pig number two to help him fit the door of the house; Pig number two asked Pig number one to accompany him to town, as he was too scared to go alone; Pig number one asked Pig number three to take a message to their mother.

At the end of the session, I requested the primary participants to dramatise the story themselves, without the use of hand puppets or masks. However, the primary participants displayed a resistance towards the request of dramatising the story themselves. I decided to rather terminate the activity, and concluded the session. There seems to be a correlation between the participants' hesitancy to act the story with the masks in session seven, and their apparent resistance towards acting the story themselves.

Looking back at Session 8:

Extract from my reflective journal

Today's session went very well, better than I expected. I requested the participants to choose the medium with which they wanted to act the story today. They chose to play with the masks and other props, such as straw, sticks and bricks. They had to "build" their houses with the props, continuously asking others to help them with various tasks. I decided to rather provide the participants with scenarios to act out, as they had seemed anxious during the previous sessions when asked to create their own scenarios. In addition, I also decided to use scenarios from previous sessions with the aim of reinforcing the practise and application thereof. The repetition of the previous scenarios seems to have reinforced the participants' abilities to apply the skill of asking for help in the specific scenarios during the sociodramatic play session.

Thereafter, I asked the participants to take off the masks and dramatise the story themselves, but they refused. The participants indicated that they did not want to act the story without the masks or the hand puppets. It might be that the session was too loaded and that it would have been better if I did this in two different sessions. Alternatively, could it be that they find security in the hand puppets and masks? On the other hand, I wonder about the possibility that the masks and the props may support the participants to stay in 'fantasy' play. Based on these questions, I assume that the participants may benefit from the masks and the props as these mediums seem to support the participants to stay in 'fantasy' for a longer period of time, providing them with more opportunities to practise the social skills. In retrospect, I think that I might have required too much change too early during the intervention, preventing the participants from spending prolonged periods of time in 'fantasy play'.

4.2.4.9 Session nine

In session nine, I focused on assisting the primary participants in learning the story of *Red Riding Hood* with the aid of picture cards. I read the story twice to the primary participants in a dramatised tone of voice, while showing them the picture cards. Thereafter I gave each primary participant a turn to tell the story of *Red Riding Hood* to the rest of the group with the aid of the picture cards.

Looking back at Session 9:

Extract from my reflective journal

I read the story only once whereafter the participants informed me that they knew the story and that they would prefer to tell it to me. After reading the story one more time, I gave each participant a turn to tell the story with the aid of the picture cards. I conjecture that the six sessions that we did with the other story, as well as familiarity with the approach that I followed, may have contributed to the self-confidence with which they approached the new story. They were willing to take turns and Aladdin suggested that they should give Cinderella the opportunity to start today, since she is the only girl.

4.2.4.10 Session ten

The purpose of session ten was to facilitate the application of the social skill *expressing your feelings* during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play session. At the start of the session, I provided each of the primary participants with an opportunity to tell the whole story again, with the aid of picture cards. Thereafter, I presented the hand puppets of *Red Riding Hood* to the primary participants and asked them to choose a character that they wanted to be during the sociodramatic play activity. During the dramatisation of the story, I used every opportunity in the story to ask the primary participants how they thought a specific character felt at that stage.

Looking back at Session 10:

Extract from my reflective journal

Wow! Aladdin noticed that some of the characters in Red Riding Hood were also asking for help in this story. This was unexpected, as I did not think that the participants would be able to transfer the skill of asking for help to the new story. Now I'm wondering: would he be able to identify and apply the skill in other contexts as well?

Each one of the primary participants then had a turn to tell the story (starting with Tom Thumb today) and to show the pictures to the group. I aimed to link the story of Red Riding Hood with the skill of 'expressing your feelings'. During today's session, I used every opportunity in the

story to ask them how they think a specific character in the story felt. They seemed more able to tell me how Red Riding Hood felt, than to talk about the feelings of the wolf.

The primary participants further displayed a resistance with regard to acting the role of the wolf and indicated that they would rather choose one of the other characters. When I think back to the previous sessions where they had to choose the hand puppets of the story of the Three little pigs, they also preferred to act the roles of the pigs, rather than the role of the wolf. The following questions come to my mind: Why do the primary participants seem to prefer to act the role of protagonist? Why are they seemingly more able to identify with the protagonist in the story, than with the 'bad wolf'? Would it be better to use a story without any threatening characters?

4.2.4.11 Session eleven

Session eleven served as a reinforcement of the effects of session ten, where I again facilitated the application of the social skill of *expression of feelings*. I facilitated opportunities during the sociodramatic play of the story for the primary participants to practise the skills of *expressing their feelings*, for example: Red Riding Hood saying 'I feel scared' when she sees the wolf; or 'I feel happy' when her mother asks her to visit her grandmother. In addition, I also sought opportunities to reinforce the skill of *asking for help* during the sociodramatic play session.

Looking back at Session 11:

Extract from my reflective journal

Today's session was challenging for the participants, especially for Tom Thumb. They seemed to find it easier to give me an answer as to how the characters felt, than to act as if they were expressing the character's emotions. I had to provide the participants, especially Cinderella and Tom Thumb, with examples, support and scaffolding. Cinderella and Tom Thumb also often used Aladdin's words as examples of expressing feelings. At the start of the session, I supported the participants by providing them with examples of what to say. As the session progressed, I provided less direct examples and more prompts by asking, for example, "How does she feel? How can you then tell someone that you are scared?" I'm wondering: Why do

the participants experience more challenges with regard to expressing the feelings of the characters, than with regard to identifying the feelings of the characters of the story?

4.2.4.12 Session twelve

The purpose of session twelve was to strengthen the primary participants' abilities to apply the social skill of *expression of feelings* during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play session. At the start of the session, I requested the primary participants to act the story out by themselves, without the use of hand puppets or any other mediums. They refused again to act the story out as themselves. I then gave the primary participants additional masks and other props, such as a picnic basket and a red cloak for Red Riding Hood, to use during the sociodramatic play session. Figure 4.3 gives a presentation of the mask and props that were used to act out the story of *Red Riding Hood*.



FIGURE 4.3: The use of masks and props to act out *Little Red Riding Hood*

During the course of the session, I facilitated opportunities for the primary participants to identify the characters' feelings, and then for expressing the characters' feelings. For example: Red Riding Hood saying 'I feel worried' when she does not recognise her grandmother in the bed; or 'I feel scared' when the wolf jumps out of the bed.

Looking back at Session 12:

Extract from my reflective journal

It is amazing to see how their self-confidence in acting the stories during the sociodramatic play intervention has increased since the first session. However, they still didn't want to act the

roles themselves – they asked for the hand puppets. They acted the story again with focus on expressing the characters’ feelings. Cinderella and Tom Thumb still needed a lot of support to incorporate the expression of emotions in their stories, while it appeared that Aladdin was able, to some extent, to express the characters’ feelings. I decided to let them exchange roles for a while during the role-play. Interestingly, when Cinderella was playing Red Riding Hood, she was more able to express her feelings than to express the feelings of the grandmother or the wolf.

I assume that the difficulty that the participants experienced in expressing the feelings of the characters may also be related to their hesitancy to act the roles themselves. The possibility therefore seems to exist that the ‘fantasy’ should be external to the participants until they feel confident to transfer the fantasy to themselves (for example, acting the roles themselves), in other words to become part of the fantasy. Then, later, the participants might be guided to transfer themselves from the fantasy play, back into reality.

4.2.4.13 Session thirteen

The final session could be described as a review and ‘saying goodbye’-session. I started the session with a review of the past twelve sessions. I firstly asked the participants what they could remember about the past sessions. Thereafter, I emphasised the application of the two specific social skills upon which we had focused, namely *asking for help* and *expressing feelings*, in their daily interactions. We closed the session with a small party.

Looking back at Session 13:

Extract from my reflective journal

We started today’s session with a quick review of all the sessions that we did. It was interesting to hear how well the participants remembered what we had done in each session. I must, however, emphasise the fact that their feedback was more on the activities that we did, than on the skills upon which I had focused. With a little probing, though, they were able to indicate that they should ask for help and that they can tell other people how they feel. We closed the session with a small party, which they seemed to enjoy.

Refer to my reflective journal (Appendix D) for my reflection and evaluation of the social skills group sessions as a whole.

4.2.5 FOLLOW-UP DATA COLLECTION AND DOCUMENTATION PHASE

I conducted **follow-up interviews** with the educator and the parent/caregivers two weeks after the completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention (refer to Appendix G). The interviews were conducted with the purpose of exploring whether or not the educator and/or parent/caregivers perceived any changes in the levels of social functioning of the primary participants after completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play. For this purpose, I requested the educator and parent/caregivers to again rate the primary participants' abilities to *ask for help* and *express their feelings* on a scale of one to ten.

In addition, I also conducted one fifteen-minute **informal interview** with each of the primary participants after the completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. The aim of these interviews was to explore whether or not the primary participants were able to indicate where and how they could ask for help in fairy tales, as well as identify and express various emotions. I asked each of the primary participants to draw me a picture of one of the stories (refer to Appendix H), whereafter I asked them questions relating to the stories and to the skills upon which we focused, namely *asking for help* and *expressing feelings* (Appendix H).

Additionally, the psychologist **re-assessed the primary participants' levels of social functioning** after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention had been completed. The purpose of the re-assessment was to explore whether (or not) any possible changes had occurred in the participants' abilities to *ask for help* and to *express their feelings*. The psychologist employed clinical observation as re-assessment measure, and provided me with an integrated report on the three participants' abilities to *ask for help* and to *express their feelings* after the completion of the intervention (see Appendix I for the outcomes of the assessment).

I employed **observation-as-context-of-interaction** throughout the course of the intervention process. I documented my observations in the classroom and on the playground in the form of observational field notes (refer to Appendix E) and notes on my observations during the intervention sessions in my reflective journal (refer to Appendix D).

4.3 RESULTS

Three main themes emerged during data analysis, namely *Reported changes in social skills*, *Changes in social experience and behaviour*, and *Areas of no change*. I now discuss these themes, as well as the sub-themes that emerged during data analysis. As an overview, I firstly present a summary of the results of my thematic analysis in Figure 4.4.



FIGURE 4.4: Main themes and sub-themes that emerged during data analysis

4.3.1 THEME 1: REPORTED CHANGES IN SOCIAL SKILLS

Certain reported changes seemed apparent in the abilities to *ask for help* and *express feelings* of the selected high-functioning children with autism, after they had received fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. In Figure 4.5, I present a summary of the ratings as provided by the educator and the parent/caregivers in terms of the children's abilities to *ask for help* and to *express feelings*, both prior to and after the social skills intervention.

| | | ASKING FOR HELP (Scale of 1 to 10) | | EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS (Scale of 1 to 10) | |
|-------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| | | <i>Before the intervention</i> | <i>After the intervention</i> | <i>Before the intervention</i> | <i>After the intervention</i> |
| Aladdin | <i>Parent</i> | 6 | 7 | 10 | 10 |
| | <i>Educator</i> | 6 | 8 | 7 | 8 |
| Cinderella | <i>Caregiver</i> | 10 | 10 | 9 | 10 |
| | <i>Educator</i> | 4 | 7 | 5 | 6 |
| Tom Thumb | <i>Caregiver</i> | 2 | 3½ | 2 | 2 |
| | <i>Educator</i> | 6 | 8 | 3 | 5 |

FIGURE 4.5: Summary of perceptions of the primary participants' levels of functioning regarding asking for help and expression of feelings

Based on the difference between the ratings of the educator and those of the caregivers, a disparity seemed to exist in their perceptions of the participants' abilities to apply the social skill of *asking for help* prior to the intervention. Cinderella's caregiver gave her a high rating of ten for her ability to ask for help, in comparison with the educator's lower rating of four, on a scale of one to ten. In addition, Tom Thumb's caregiver gave him a very low rating of two for his ability to ask for help, in contrast with the educator's higher rating of six, on a scale of one to ten. I assume that the disparity between the perceptions of the primary participants' abilities to apply the social skills of *asking for help* could possibly be related to the challenges they might have experienced with regard to generalising the newly learned skills to various environments. On the other hand, I deem it as important to remember that these ratings are based on the caregivers' and educator's subjective evaluations of the participants' abilities to ask for help, and that these ratings are reflections of their perceptions of the possible changes that occurred. The

results as indicated in Figure 4.5 do, however, indicate that there seems to be a positive change in the participants' abilities to *ask for help* and to *express their feelings*, in the case of all three participants.

I henceforth discuss the two sub-themes that emerged under the main theme of *Reported changes in social skills*. Firstly, it seems that a positive change occurred in the willingness to *ask for help* of the three selected high-functioning children with autism. Secondly, it became evident that the selected high-functioning children with autism apparently tried to *express and explain their feelings* more extensively as the study progressed.

4.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1: “Much more inclined to ask for help”

During the follow-up interviews, the educator and the parent/caregivers reported that they had observed certain changes in the three selected high-functioning children with autism's ability to *ask for help*, as the study progressed. Results of the assessment that was done by the psychologist of the school supported this opinion and indicated that the participants appeared to be more prone to ask for help when needed towards the end of the study.

Before the intervention, **Aladdin** seemed to refrain from asking for help – often due to him believing that he knows what to do and that he does not need any help from others. According to the psychologist, he seemed to misinterpret what he really needed. The educator, as well as Aladdin's mother, gave him a rating of six on the scale of one to ten. After the intervention, the mother reported that he still often appeared to believe that he did not need help and still displayed the tendency to only ask for help if he did not want to do the task. However, the educator reported that Aladdin seemed more willing to take risks and ask for help after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention had been completed: “*He feels free to risk and to ask if he needs something*” (I-2, Ed, p.3). The educator further mentioned: “*He will freely come and ask. Because he knows me and he feels comfortable in the class; he feels free to risk and to ask if he needs something. Even if it would involve failure, he knows that nothing would come of that*” (I-2, Ed, p.3). During the follow-up interviews, the educator gave Aladdin a rating of eight on a scale of one to ten, indicating that she (the educator) had perceived a change in his ability to ask for help. In addition, Aladdin's mother gave him a rating of seven on a scale of one to ten, indicating that she had perceived a minor change in his ability to ask for help at home. The psychologist emphasised that his willingness to ask for help could, however, be a result of being less anxious. In this regard, it is important to mention that Aladdin started using

medication for his feelings of anxiety shortly before the commencement of the intervention. The question therefore remains whether or not the increase in his ability to risk and to ask for help could be ascribed to the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, or if the reason could be that he was less anxious due to the effects of the medication. I assume that Aladdin's enhanced ability to ask for help may be the result of both the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention and the effect of his medication.

Before the commencement of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, **Cinderella** appeared to display an emerging ability to ask for help at school and a reasonably well-established ability to ask the caregivers at the residence for help when necessary. However, her reported level of independence regarding daily activities implied that she did not often need to ask for help. The caregiver's high rating of ten, on a scale of one to ten, indicates her (the caregiver's) perception of Cinderella's ability to ask for help at the residence. At school, she frequently resorted to body language (staring at the educator) to indicate her need for help, seemingly not understanding that others may not always predict her needs. When she did ask for help, at school and at the residence, it would be directed towards the caregivers or the educator, and not towards her peers. The educator gave Cinderella an initial rating of four on the scale of one to ten. After completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, the educator reported that Cinderella appeared to be more willing to ask for help in the class, although she still regularly tended to wait for a prompt from her educator: *"But now she's more able or comfortable in asking for help"* (I-2, Ed, p.5). The psychologist supported the educator's statement by reporting: *"She (Cinderella) is much more inclined to ask for help"* (Psych, p.2). Cinderella reportedly continued to be more independent in comparison with her peers, and tended to avoid complex tasks that would necessitate asking for help. During the follow-up interviews, the caregiver gave Cinderella a rating of ten, and the educator gave her a rating of seven on a scale of one to ten, indicating that she (educator) perceived an increase in Cinderella's ability to ask for help at school. Although her ability to ask for help seemed to have increased, she still did not approach her peers for help at the end of the fieldwork (as discussed in Section 4.3.3.1).

Prior to the intervention, **Tom Thumb** reportedly either resorted to body language to indicate a need for help, or avoided tasks that appeared too difficult for him. The psychologist indicated that the difficulties that Tom Thumb experienced with regard to spontaneous verbal communication influenced his ability to ask for help. The caregiver's low rating of two regarding Tom Thumb's ability to ask for help, indicates his (the caregiver) perception of Tom Thumb's

ability to ask for help at the residence at the onset of my study. The educator, however, gave Tom Thumb a rating of six on the scale of one to ten, indicating that his ability to ask for help in the classroom was emerging at that stage. After the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention had been completed, the educator reported that Tom Thumb tended to ask for help more often when he really needed it: *“He will ask adults for help if he really needs it”* (I-2, Ed, p.9). The educator furthermore mentioned that Tom Thumb seemed to be more motivated to be on the same academic level as his peers and would often ask his educator to help him: *“And he wants to be where the others are, he will ask me questions such as ‘xxx, what is this? Will you help me?’”* (I-2, Ed, p.7). In addition, the psychologist reported that Tom Thumb *“seems much more motivated to use his acquired speech to express himself and ask for help”* (Psych, p.3), apparently after being involved in speech therapy, group interaction and practising verbal initiations during the sociodramatic play intervention.

However, Tom Thumb appeared more able to generalise the newly learned skill of *asking for help* to the school setting (structured situation), than to the residence (unstructured situation). His caregiver indicated that Tom Thumb still displayed difficulties with regard to asking for help at the residence at the end of my fieldwork: *“He still does not ask for help”* (I-2, C/Tom Thumb, p.3)⁹ and only gave him a rating of three-and-a-half on the scale of one to ten. Yet, although the rating is still low, it does point towards a slight increase from two to three-and-a-half. In contrast, the psychologist reported that Tom Thumb would ask for help, especially in a structured situation: *“He is able to ask for help when needed, especially in a structured situation”* (Psych, p.3). Tom Thumb’s enhanced ability to ask for help at school is indicated by the educator’s rating of eight, on a scale of one to ten, after the intervention had been completed. My observation-as-context-of-interaction (refer to my observational field notes in Appendix E) furthermore indicated this positive change in the participating children’s ability to ask for help. For example: During week one, I documented the following with regard to Aladdin’s skill of asking for help: *“Tells the educator that he doesn’t need help, as he knows how to do the work”* (Observational field notes, Aladdin, p.2). My observations during week four and five indicated the following: *“Asks the educator to help him with his reading. Asks the educator to help him write a letter. Asks Cinderella to help him build a puzzle”* (Observational field notes, Aladdin, p.2).

⁹ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: *“Hy vra nog steeds nie vir hulp nie”*.

Discussions with the primary participants also confirmed the positive change in their abilities to ask for help. Aladdin provided an example of how he could ask for help, saying: *“If I need some help, I can just ask some questions like ‘Can you please help me over here?’ And then they help me”* (I-1, Aladdin, p.5). During the interview with Cinderella, she indicated the people who she could approach for help: *“I can ask xxx (educator) to help with work”* (I-1, Cinderella, p.14), as well as: *“I ask the housemother to help me with something”* (I-1, Cinderella, p.14). Additionally, Tom Thumb indicated the people who he could approach for help: *“Call the hostel parent for help”* (I-1, Tom Thumb, p.8) and provided an example of how he could ask for help: *“For my teacher to help me with my work... ‘Please help me teacher with my work’”* (I-1, Tom Thumb, p.7).

4.3.1.2 Sub-theme 1.2: “Tries very hard to express and explain his feelings”

During the follow-up interviews, the educator and caregivers/parent reported that they had observed certain changes with regard to the primary participants’ abilities to express their feelings after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention had been completed. The educator’s and caregivers’/parent’s perceptions are supported by the re-assessment report of the psychologist, which indicates an increase in all three of the primary participants’ abilities to express their feelings.

At the onset of my study, **Aladdin** displayed a relatively well-developed ability to express his emotions. Although Aladdin’s mother indicated that he seems to be concerned about other people’s feelings, the educator reported that he seemed to not always take other people’s feelings into consideration when he expressed his own. Aladdin’s mother gave him a high rating of ten on a scale of one to ten, reflecting her perception of his well-developed ability to express his feelings at home. The educator gave him a rating of seven, on a scale of one to ten, also indicating that she perceived a well-developed ability to ask for help. However, the psychologist reported that the challenges Aladdin experienced with intermingling Afrikaans and English, influenced his ability to appropriately express his feelings. After the completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, the educator reported that Aladdin displayed an eagerness to express and explain his feelings, and applied his ability more appropriately: *“But since your intervention, I think he (Aladdin) tries very hard to express and explain his feelings”* (I-2, Ed, p.1). The educator further reported that: *“He (Aladdin) will use everything that he has to explain his feelings”* (I-2, Ed, p.2). Based on the educator’s perception of Aladdin’s enhanced ability to express his feelings appropriately, she gave him an eight on the scale of one to ten.

Aladdin's eagerness to express his feelings is further reported by the psychologist: "*Eager to talk about how he feels. He seems to have generalised these abilities to structured and unstructured situations*" (Psych, p.1). Aladdin seemed to be able to apply his newly learned social skills in structured and unstructured situations by the end of the study. He also appeared to be more aware of the various emotions he was experiencing. Aladdin's mother stated that he had displayed a growth in his ability to experience and express his emotions, by indicating that he has "*grown in his experiences and verbalisation of emotions*" (I-2, P/Aladdin, p.2)¹⁰. His mother furthermore mentioned that he often appeared able to reason about the relationship between his feelings and his actions, and to accurately express what he was feeling: "*He will try to analyse his reactions and emotions, and to reason about the relationship between them*" (I-2, P/Aladdin, p.2)¹¹. Aladdin's mother gave him a ten on the scale of one to ten regarding his ability to express his feelings, indicating that, if she could, she would even give him a higher rating.

Based on the reports of the educator, psychologist and caregiver, **Cinderella** seemed to also display an increased ability to express her feelings at the end of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. Before the commencement of the intervention, Cinderella's ability to express her feelings was reported as gradually starting to emerge. The caregiver at the residence gave Cinderella a rating of nine, on a scale of one to ten, reflecting her perception of Cinderella's ability to express her feelings at the residence. In addition, the educator gave Cinderella a rating of five, on a scale of one to ten, indicating that her ability to express her feelings at school was starting to develop. The psychologist indicated that Cinderella did, however, experience challenges with regard to abstract concepts such as those describing emotional states, and those that are needed to express her emotions appropriately. After the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, the educator reported that Cinderella's ability to express her feelings had increased, although she was still not inclined to express her feelings at that stage: "*She (Cinderella) is still not very open to expressing her feelings... But still to say... I think it is emerging*" (I-2, Ed, p.7). This perception is supported by the psychologist's report that, although she would express her feelings, Cinderella still resorted to body language rather than verbalisations. During the follow-up interviews with the educator and caregiver, both indicated a change on the rating scale with regard to Cinderella's ability to express her feelings. The

¹⁰ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: "*gegroeï in sy ervaring en verbalisering van emosies*".

¹¹ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: "*sal hy probeer om sy reaksies en gevoelens te ontleed, en oor die verband tussen hulle te redeneer*".

caregiver gave her a ten for her ability to express her feelings, after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic intervention, and the educator gave her a six, on the scale of one to ten.

Before the commencement of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, **Tom Thumb** appeared to experience challenges with abstract concepts such as those describing feelings. The educator, as well as the caregiver at the residence, reported that he often resorted to body language to reveal his feelings. Prior to the intervention, the educator gave Tom Thumb a rating of three, on a scale of one to ten, with regard to his ability to express his feelings, whereas after the intervention, she gave him a rating of five. After completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, the educator reported that Tom Thumb's ability to express his feelings seemed to have started to develop. The educator did, however, indicate that Tom Thumb needed some more intervention: *"But I think he still needs a lot of intervention"* (I-2, Ed, p.8). The psychologist's report indicates that Tom Thumb displayed the ability to verbally express enjoyment and frustration occasionally, by the end of the study: *"Expresses enjoyment and frustration verbally from time to time"* (Psych, p.3). In contrast with the reports from the educator and the psychologist with regard to Tom Thumb's emerging ability to express his feelings at school, the caregiver reported that no apparent change could be perceived at the residence with regard to his ability to express his feelings. The caregiver stated the following: *"He will still not come to me and say 'I'm mad' or 'I'm sad'"* (I-2, C/Tom Thumb, p.4)¹². The caregiver gave Tom Thumb a rating of two, on a scale of one to ten, both prior to and after the intervention. The possibility therefore seems to exist that Tom Thumb might only have generalised the newly learned social skills to the structured situation at school, and not to the residence. This is, however, a mere hypothesis, which could be explored further.

In addition, the following quotations from the interviews that I conducted with the primary participants provide supporting evidence regarding their abilities to express their emotions towards the end of my fieldwork:

- *"A little worried. But when I'm lost and I'm alone, then I'll be afraid... very, very afraid"* (I-1, Aladdin, p.5).
- *"Sometimes when people do naughty things or they steal something from me, then I get very angry. Or when somebody keeps on bossing me around so many times, then I get angry"* (I-1, Aladdin, p.5).
- *"I feel happy for the present I got"* (I-1, Tom Thumb, p.10).

¹² Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: *"Hy sal nog steeds nie na my toe kom en sê 'I'm mad' of 'I'm sad' nie"*.

- “*When someone in my family is sick, I feel sad...*” (I-1, Cinderella, p.14).
- “*And if someone is not nice to me, then I’m sad*” (I-1, Aladdin, p.5).

4.3.2 THEME 2: CHANGES IN SOCIAL EXPERIENCES AND BEHAVIOUR

The second main theme that emerged relates to the reported *changes in social experiences and behaviour* that occurred during the course of the research process. In this section, I provide an overview of the additional outcomes that reportedly occurred in the selected high-functioning children with autism’s abilities to wait their turn; their involvement in peer relationships; their ability to provide peer support; their abilities to solve problems; as well as their abilities to apply their perspective-taking skills.

4.3.2.1 Sub-theme 2.1: “They are even able to wait their turn”

Apart from the two specific skills upon which I focused during the intervention, namely *asking for help* and *expression of emotions*, the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention appeared to have had an additional influence on the primary participants’ abilities to take turns. The educator reported the following: “*They are even able to wait their turn now when I’m busy with someone else*” (I-2, Ed, p.11). The educator further emphasised the primary participants’ increased ability to wait their turn as the study progressed, by saying: “*They are more able to wait their turn, especially Aladdin*” (I-2, Ed, p.12). My observational field notes, documented during my observations in the primary participants’ classroom, support the educator’s perception: “*Waits patiently for his (Aladdin) turn when she (educator) cannot respond to his request immediately*” (Observational field notes, Aladdin, p.1).

My hypothesis, that the intervention might have had a possible influence on the primary participants’ abilities to take turns, is furthermore supported by my comments on the intervention sessions in my reflective journal. At the onset of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, I observed a tendency among the primary participants to be unwilling to take turns during group activities. We discussed the importance of taking turns in the group, and “*All three of the participants agreed that it is important that we should take turns*” (RJ, p.2). During the course of the intervention, I observed an increase in the primary participants’ willingness to take turns in reading the story: “*Cinderella suggested that it was Tom Thumb’s turn to start with the reading of the story today and Aladdin agreed with her*” (RJ, p.6).

4.3.2.2 Sub-theme 2.2: “Seeks out the company of specific learners ...”

According to the psychologist, the educator and the caregivers, the primary participants appeared to initiate more peer interaction, both in class (structured situation) and on the playground (unstructured situation) as the study progressed. The educator mentioned that **Cinderella** was starting to interact more often with her peers: “*She is starting to play with others on the playground and she’s also interacting with her classmates in class*” (I-2, Ed, p.5). In addition, the psychologist reported that: “*She (Cinderella) now seeks out the company of specific learners in her class. She also asks to join in ‘games’ during break times*” (Psych, p.2). During my observations in the classroom (Observational field notes, Cinderella, p.2), she appeared more relaxed among the rest of the learners in the class towards the end of the study, than at the beginning of the intervention. I assume that Cinderella’s tendency to be more relaxed may be an outcome of the intervention, as no other specific intervention or administering of medication was done at the time that I conducted the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention.

Tom Thumb seemed to display increased peer involvement, as stated by his caregiver: “*He is much more socially involved with the other children than he used to be*” (I-2, C/Tom Thumb, p.7)¹³. The psychologist also reported that Tom Thumb became “*more aware of his peers*” (Psych, p.3), as the study progressed. The educator further noted that: “*even Aladdin is starting to interact more appropriately with the other learners in the class in a friendship way, and not just with xxx, who is sitting next to him*” (I-2, Ed, p.5). This is supported by my observational field notes, indicating that Aladdin “*tells xxx (another learner) that his drawing is very nice*” (Observational field notes, Aladdin, p.2).

The primary participants seemed to feel more part of the group at the end of my fieldwork. In this regard, the educator stated the following: “*She’s (Cinderella) feeling much more part of the group and she acts as if she’s one of them*” (I-2, Ed, p.5). At the same time, their involvement in group activities appeared to be improving.

¹³ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: “*Hy is baie meer sosiaal betrokke by die ander kinders as wat hy was.*”

4.3.2.3 Sub-theme 2.3: “He also provided them with some ideas and suggestions”

Apart from the increased peer involvement that was observed among the primary participants during the course of the study (refer to section 4.3.2.2), the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I employed in this study appeared to have had an additional influence on the primary participants’ abilities to provide peer support. During the course of the intervention sessions, I observed an increased tendency among the primary participants to help each other, whereafter I documented the following in my reflective journal: *“It was amazing to see how they started helping each other in acting out the scenarios”* (RJ, p.6). The tendency among the primary participants to provide peer support to each other is furthermore supported by the following thought documented in my reflective journal: *“It happened once or twice that Aladdin corrected Cinderella and Tom Thumb, or added a sentence”* (RJ, p.3). In addition, the following examples from intervention sessions also serve as supporting evidence regarding the primary participants’ support-giving skills: *“For example, Cinderella suggested to Tom Thumb how he should ask her to borrow some sugar”* (RJ, p.4), as well as: *“He said to Cinderella: ‘Come, I will go to town with you and show you how to ask for more sticks’”* (RJ, p.4).

The tendency of the primary participants to seemingly support each other became further evident in their interactions in the classroom. In this regard, the educator reported that: *“they (primary participants) even started to help each other with their duties and schoolwork on frequent occasions”* (I-2, Ed, p.9). During my observations in the classroom, I noticed that Aladdin often supported Tom Thumb in gaining an understanding of the instructions given in class: *“Tries to help Tom Thumb understand some of the instructions for a class activity”* (Observational field notes, Aladdin, p.1). Aladdin also seemed to have offered his assistance to Tom Thumb during writing exercises as the study progressed: *“Helps Tom Thumb with writing a sentence”* (Observational field notes, Aladdin, p.1). Ideally, the tendency of the participants to provide support to each other may be explored over a much longer period of time, to establish whether or not they were able to generalise the skill of peer support to their daily interactions.

4.3.2.4 Sub-theme 2.4: “They had to solve the problem”

Based on my observations (refer to my reflective journal in Appendix D) during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions, it appeared to me that practising the various social scenarios might also have supported the primary participants’ problem-solving skills. During the course of the intervention sessions, I provided the primary participants with various additional

social scenarios (refer to Appendix F) in the fairy tales, which they had to act out, focusing on the two skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*.

By supporting each other, they were able to create the scenes to a certain extent. Aladdin usually took the initiative to think of a way in which they could act out the scenarios and often made suggestions to the other two primary participants. The following quotation from my reflective journal supports this: *“I told Cinderella that the sticks for building her house were finished and that she had to go and ask Aladdin for help. He told her that he would take her to town to buy some more, thereby finding his own solution to the problem”* (RJ, p.5). In addition, the following observation corroborates the possibility that the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention might have supported the development of the primary participants’ problem-solving skills:

‘I told Tom Thumb that he didn’t have food in his house for supper and that he had to go and ask Cinderella to help him. Hesitantly, he approached Cinderella and told her that his food was finished (only providing information...). I guided him to ask her if she could please help him to get some food. Cinderella answered that her food was also finished and that they should maybe go to Aladdin. Cinderella is trying to solve their problem by suggesting some action!’ (RJ, p.6).

4.3.2.5 Sub-theme 2.5: “Describes feelings of... someone else”

According to the educator and the psychologist’s report, the primary participants seemed able to identify a variety of feelings of other people at the end of my field work, more specifically basic feelings such as happy and sad, rather than abstract feelings such as jealousy and disappointment. The participants’ enhanced ability to identify and describe other people’s feelings seemingly implies a change in perspective-taking abilities¹⁴. Yet, the psychologist indicated that Aladdin was able to identify and verbalise more abstract emotions at the time of the re-assessment, by stating: *“He (Aladdin) can identify and verbalise more abstract emotions now”* (Psych, p.1). The educator described Cinderella’s ability to identify feelings of other people as follows: *“And she said to me: ‘No, I don’t want that crying one. I want that laughing face.’ So in that regard... But again, it’s not her own feelings. She describes feelings of something or someone else...”* (1-2, Ed, p.7). During the course of the fairy-tale based sociodramatic play intervention, I also observed that Tom Thumb was able to identify the feelings of the various characters in *Little Red Riding Hood* at various stages of the story (RJ, p.8).

¹⁴ For the purpose of this study, **perspective-taking ability** can be described as the ability to identify and describe other people’s feelings and thoughts.

In addition to the educator and the psychologist's excerpts, the primary participants themselves indicated their ability to identify a wide range of feelings. During the interviews with the primary participants, I provided them with scenarios from the stories and asked them how the characters felt. Quotations taken from the interviews with the primary participants indicate this ability: "*Happy... to see grandmother...*" (I-1, Tom Thumb, p.9), as well as: "*When the werewolf came into her house, she was so scared...*" (I-1, Aladdin, p.4). Cinderella also indicated that Red Riding Hood felt happy when her mother asked her to go and visit her grandmother: "*She feels happy!*" (I-1, Cinderella, p.13).

4.3.3 THEME 3: AREAS OF NO CHANGE

Despite the reported changes in the participants' abilities to ask for help and to express feelings, a few *areas of no change* also emerged. In this section, I discuss the challenges that the primary participants experienced with regard to seeking help from their peers, as well as the tendency they displayed with regard to the use of body language rather than verbalisations to ask for help and express feelings.

4.3.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1: "But asking for help for peers, no..."

At the onset of the study, the educator, as well as the parent/caregivers, reported that the primary participants would rather seek help from adults, than from their peers. Cinderella's caregiver reported that: "*She (Cinderella) does not want to ask the other children for help. She will call us*" (I-1, C/Cinderella, p.7)¹⁵. In addition, Aladdin's mother mentioned that he displayed a reluctance to ask his peers for help prior to the intervention, saying that: "*He will not ask other children for help, especially at the school... He would rather ask an adult if he really needs help*" (I-1, P/Aladdin, p.7).

After the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, no apparent change could be observed with regard to the primary participants' tendency to not rely on their peers for help. The educator indicated that Aladdin still tended to go to older friends in other classes for help, but not to his own peer group: "*He would rather go to adults, but he might ask some of his older friends in the other classes for help. But asking for help from peers, no*" (I-2, Ed, p.4). The educator also mentioned that Tom Thumb also seemed to display the tendency not to seek help

¹⁵ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: "*sy wil nie die ander kinders vra vir hulp nie. Sy sal ons roep.*"

from peers, after the intervention had been completed: *“I don’t think he will go to peers for help, but he will ask adults for help if he really needs it”* (I-2, Ed, p.9). This tendency of the primary participants, not to seek help from peers, is further emphasised by Cinderella’s caregiver, indicating: *“I don’t think that she asks the other children for help, but they are talking more”* (I-2, C/Cinderella, p.2)¹⁶.

4.3.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2: “Still resorts to body language rather than verbalisations”

The psychologist indicated that, even though Cinderella seemed to be able to express her feelings and ask for help to some extent towards the end of the study, she still often resorted to body language rather than verbalisations. According to the psychologist, Cinderella seemed to be able to express feelings of irritation and frustration, yet often resorting to body language: *“She will express feelings of irritation and frustration, but still resorts to body language rather than verbalisations”* (Psych, p.2). The psychologist further reported that Cinderella would still often wait for a prompt from her teacher: *“She is much more inclined to ask for help, but still tends to wait for a prompt from her teacher”* (Psych, p.2).

This tendency of the primary participants to resort to body language rather than to rely on verbalisations when expressing feelings or asking for help, is further emphasised by the educator’s perception of Aladdin’s ability to express and explain his feelings after the intervention: *“But then I have to ask him... I see it in his facial expression, and then I will ask, ‘Aladdin, what’s wrong? Are you angry? Or are you not feeling well today?’ And then he is able to explain to me”* (I-2, Ed, p.1). In addition, Tom Thumb often seemed to resort to body language rather than verbalisations in order to express his feelings, as indicated by his caregiver: *“And when he is cross, he will do everything to show me that he is now very cross”* (I-2, C/Tom Thumb, p.1)¹⁷.

4.4 FINDINGS

In this section, I interpret the themes that emerged in terms of existing literature. Firstly, I discuss findings that relate to the changes that occurred in the primary participants’ abilities to

¹⁶ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: *“Ek dink nie sy vra vir hulp by die ander kinders nie, maar hulle praat meer”*

¹⁷ Translated from Afrikaans for the purpose of this dissertation, from: *“en as hy kwaad is, sal hy alles doen om vir my te wys dat hy nou baie kwaad is.”*

ask for help and express feelings. Subsequently, I present the findings that I obtained with regard to the *changes in social experience and behaviour* that occurred after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention had been completed. I conclude this section with a discussion of the *areas where no changes seemed to have occurred.*

4.4.1 CHANGES IN SOCIAL SKILLS

In this section, I discuss the changes that occurred in the primary participants' social skills. I henceforth present my findings with regard to the primary participants' apparent improved tendency to ask for help and express feelings, after I had facilitated the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention.

4.4.1.1 Improved tendency to ask for help and express feelings

Results from my study indicate that certain changes occurred in all three the primary participants' abilities to *ask for help and express their feelings*, after the completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. I therefore found that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could be used in the development of the selected social skills, namely *asking for help and expression of feelings*, among high-functioning children with autism. I hypothesise that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could be used to guide high-functioning children with autism to practise specific social skills while acting various roles of characters in fairy tales. In this regard, I relate Bauminger's (2002) and Johnson *et al.*'s (1999) statements to my study, as they indicate that the enactment of various roles during sociodramatic play might influence children's ability to apply social cognition, and also their knowledge and application of diverse social behaviours in various social situations.

The view regarding the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing the above-mentioned social skills of *asking for help and expression of feelings* among high-functioning children with autism, is supported by Aarons and Gittens (in Bogdashina, 2005) as well as Greenway (2000). These authors state that role-play, drama and modelling could support children with autism in developing social skills, such as their abilities to express feelings and wishes, and to understand social situations. Calabrese (2003), as well as Johnson *et al.* (1999), furthermore support this finding, indicating that sociodramatic play is significant for enhancing the domains of social, emotional, physical and cognitive development in children (with or without autism).

However, a disparity seemed to exist between the primary participants' abilities to apply the newly learned social skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings* in structured and unstructured settings. I found that the primary participants were often more able to generalise their newly learned social skills to structured settings, such as the classroom, than to unstructured settings, at home or at the residence. The difficulty, that the primary participants experienced with regard to generalising the newly learned social skills to their everyday situations and environments, corresponds with the main difficulty encountered in other related recent intervention programmes designed specifically for high-functioning children with autism (for example Downs & Smith, 2004; Barry *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger, 2002). The findings of these studies (Downs & Smith, 2004; Barry *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger, 2002) indicate that high-functioning children with autism tend to display limited generalisation of newly learned skills to other contexts.

The tendency of the primary participants, with regard to being more able to generalise the newly learned skills to structured situations, than to unstructured situations, might indicate that fairy-tale based sociodramatic play can be applicable to enhance the developing of social skills among high-functioning children with autism, but can still seemingly fail to support them to competently perform the skills in a natural environment. I hypothesise that one possibility to support high-functioning children with autism to generalise newly learned skills to unstructured situations (for example at home or at the residence), might be to collaborate with significant others in the children's natural environments. I further propose that collaboration with the parents, caregivers and educators of high-functioning children with autism, when involving these children in such an intervention, could enhance the possibility of the skills being generalised to other environments as well. The view with regard to the need for collaborating with parents, caregivers and educators to enhance the generalisation of newly learned skills, is supported by Maddock (1997).

4.4.2 CHANGES IN SOCIAL EXPERIENCE AND BEHAVIOUR

In this section, I discuss the findings that I obtained with regard to *the changes that occurred in social experience and behaviour* during the research process. I commence with a discussion of the primary participants' abilities to take turns, whereafter I elaborate on my findings with regard to the participants' improved tendency to engage in peer interactions, and to provide peer support. Subsequently, I discuss my findings regarding the primary participants' reported improved problem-solving and perspective-taking abilities

4.4.2.1 Improved tendency to allow for turn-taking

Involving the primary participants in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention seemed to have had a positive influence on the primary participants' willingness to take turns. The primary participants displayed an increase in their willingness to take turns during class activities, and to wait their turns when their educator was busy assisting one of the other learners in the class. I hypothesise that the use of the picture cards during fairy tale-based sociodramatic play might have facilitated the development of this specific skill, as each child had the opportunity to hold the cards and tell the story. I support the findings of Beyer and Gammeltoft (2000), that most children with autism, who do not by nature take turns when interacting (Downs & Smith, 2004), are able to become skilled in turn-taking if the rules are made specific by means of examples, such as picture cards that are passed on. These authors further assert that, by passing on physical objects to indicate whose turn it is, children might see their actions reflected in the behaviour of the other participants in a group, and this visual reflection might in turn enable them to become more attentive of their own actions.

Although turn-taking was not a skill on which I focused as part of the aim of my study, taking turns during the group process seemed to have enhanced the development of this specific skill, especially in the class situation, amongst the participating children. The possibility therefore exists that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention could also be used for the development of social skills other than *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*, such as turn-taking abilities. The extent to which fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could enhance the development of turn-taking abilities could be explored in future studies.

4.4.2.2 Increased involvement in peer relationships

The use of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in a group setting seemed to have had a positive influence on the primary participants' involvement in peer relationships, as they started to interact more often with their peers during the course of the research process, both in the classroom (structured situation), and on the playground (unstructured situation). These findings correspond with Mesibov *et al.*'s (2001) conclusion that high-functioning children with autism might engage in social relationships, although these relationships are not always reciprocal. The significance of social skills intervention for peer involvement is further propagated by Maione and Mirenda (2006), stating that it is doubtful whether or not children with autism will experience the benefits of social relationships in the absence of interventions designed specifically for this

purpose. These authors further state that interventions are of vital importance for the development of peer relationships, as proximity alone is not adequate. Comparing these statements with the results that I obtained, lead to my finding that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play seems to enhance peer relationships among high-functioning children with autism.

In my opinion, the primary participants' participation in a group setting may have enhanced their feelings of belonging. A study done by Barry *et al.* (2003) supports this hypothesis by emphasising that children with autism's participation in a social skills groups could result in increased perceptions of peer social support, and strong feelings of acceptance by peers, resulting in the development of significant peer relationships with other children with autism. In addition, I support Geldard and Geldard's (2001) statement that a level of interdependence usually develops among children in a group, which might help to boost feelings of belonging and being needed. Barry *et al.* (2003) add to this line of argumentation by asserting that group intervention could facilitate the development of friendships among children with autism, as well as support them to feel better about themselves. I therefore hypothesise that it seems significant to implement fairy tale-based sociodramatic play as a group-based approach, as being part of a group may enhance participants' feelings of peer acceptance and support.

It is, however, important to take cognisance of the fact that I only included high-functioning children with autism in the group. The question therefore remains whether or not the inclusion of children without autism in the group process would have produced the same or different results with regard to the social interaction and peer involvement of the primary participants. This question can be related to the statement by Bauminger *et al.* (2003), that it is difficult to form an educated guess regarding whether or not diverse partners (such as a child without autism, another child with autism, or a child with another developmental delay) would have different influences or fulfil different roles in the social interaction of children with autism. Similarly, a question could be raised with regard to the possible influence of a one-on-one fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.

Based on a study undertaken by the above-mentioned authors, they proposed that high-functioning children with autism might profit from contact with children without autism, but that their need to experience belonging seems to be addressed by proximity to other children with autism (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003). I therefore conclude that the involvement of the three high-

functioning children with autism in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, seemed to have enhanced their feelings of belonging, and, as a result, possibly their peer involvement.

4.4.2.3 Peer support

Apart from other social skills, the primary participants seemed to have developed the skill of providing peer support during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. The primary participants regularly supported each other in acting out the fairy tales, especially with regard to generating ideas for acting the additional social scenarios. In my opinion, providing peer support implies that the primary participants were able, to some extent, to anticipate that other group members needed help, and, as a result, provided help. As anticipating another person's mental state (such as the need for help) implies a developed *Theory of Mind* ability, I propose that the primary participants might have developed (at least partially) *Theory of Mind* abilities within the context of peer interaction during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. My results complement the work of Downs and Smith (2004), who emphasise the possibility that high-functioning children with autism may be able to cognitively understand the emotions and thoughts of others, and may also try to engage in cooperative social behaviour.

However, the above line of reasoning contradicts the finding of an earlier study undertaken by Bauminger *et al.* (2003), on peer interaction among high-functioning children with autism, indicating that the participants in their study failed to consider the perspectives of other people after the study had been completed. The authors (Bauminger *et al.*, 2003) concluded that *Theory of Mind* abilities do not manifest themselves in everyday peer interaction among high-functioning children with autism. In addition, Bauminger (2002) emphasises that high-functioning children with autism do not spontaneously transfer *Theory of Mind* abilities to their social interactions with peers. As I did not explicitly focus on the development of *Theory of Mind* abilities in this study, I merely submit the hypothesis that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play might enhance peer support as an aspect of *Theory of mind* ability. I base my hypothesis on my findings that, towards the end of my field work, the primary participants seemed able to anticipate when the other participants would need help, and to provide help accordingly.

Furthermore, taking into consideration that Tom Thumb was reportedly able to provide help to his peers, but did not tend to ask them for help, I started wondering about a possible connection between the abilities of *asking for help* and *providing help*. I hypothesise that the primary participants in this study may have developed the skills of support-giving during the fairy tale-

based sociodramatic play intervention, but seemingly still experienced difficulty with the generalisation of the skill to themselves at the end of my study. This is, however, a mere hypothesis, that needs further exploration in future studies.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, I only included high-functioning children with autism in the group and explored the ways in which they could support each other in the development of social skills during fairy tale-based sociodramatic play. However, it appears to me that literature usually defines *peer support* as children without autism supporting children with autism (for example LeGoff, 2004; Wolfberg & Schuler, 1993), and that only limited research has been done on peer support in a group where the participants are children with autism. Studies focusing on the inclusion of socially competent peers, or peers without autism, such as those by LeGoff (2004), Barry *et al.* (2003), and Wolfberg and Schuler (1993), propose that the inclusion of socially competent peers as play partners could support children with autism to imitate and practise more advanced play behaviours.

Although I agree with the basic premise of the above-mentioned statement, I choose to support Gutstein and Whitney (2002) within the context of my study. These authors emphasise the importance of involving primary social partners who are more or less on the same level of social functioning. Gutstein and Whitney (2002) assert that involving children without autism in the group might hinder the child with autism from feeling competent. I therefore propagate that high-functioning children with autism could benefit from support by other high-functioning children with autism in a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play group setting, based on my findings that the participants were able, to some extent, to anticipate each other's needs and to provide support accordingly. I propose that, instead of involving socially competent peers without autism in the group, it could be significant to involve one or two high-functioning children with autism who seem to be more socially competent than the other high-functioning children with autism. In this regard, I hypothesise that high-functioning children with autism may support each other in imitating and practising social skills during fairy tale-based sociodramatic play.

4.4.2.4 The development of problem-solving skills

Arising from the results that I obtained, I propagate that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could possibly enhance the development of problem-solving skills among high-functioning children with autism. The primary participants in this study were constantly supported during the intervention to explore and develop alternative ways in which they could ask for help in different

social situations, thereby solving a problem. These findings corresponds with the findings of a study done by Bauminger (2000) with regard to the social-emotional understanding and social interactions of high-functioning children with autism, indicating that in his study, the tendency of the participants to produce nonsocial solutions to problems decreased, with an increase in their ability to produce more relevant social solutions after intervention. My views with regard to the potential influence of sociodramatic play on the development of problem solving abilities are furthermore supported by Johnson *et al.*'s (1999) statement, that play might enhance children's problem-solving abilities by increasing their behavioural options.

However, since I did not explore the primary participants' problem-solving abilities before and after the intervention, I cannot give account of the development and generalisation of this specific skill to their everyday situations. Yet, based on Williams and Wright's (2004) report, that children with autism could deal with the difficulties that they experience with problem-solving skills through learning the solutions by rote, I hypothesise that acting out the various social scenarios might have supported the primary participants to become skilled at applying some solutions through rote learning.

4.4.2.5 The identification and verbalisation of feelings as perspective-taking abilities

Being able to identify and verbalise various kinds of feelings of other persons forms part of a person's perspective-taking abilities, which are closely related to Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind* abilities (Bauminger, 2002; Johnson *et al.*, 1999). The primary participants in my study seemed able to identify various kinds of feelings of other people at the end of my fieldwork. Aladdin was able, for example, to identify and verbalise more abstract emotions after the intervention had been completed, which might be an indication of the development of a more advanced level of Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind*. Fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention therefore seems to have had a positive influence on the perspective-taking abilities of the selected high-functioning children with autism.

However, these findings seem to contradict findings of a research study conducted by Downs and Smith (2004), providing evidence that high-functioning children with autism generally experience challenges in their abilities to recognise other's facial expressions accurately. I propose that the disparity between the findings of this study and the one by Downs and Smith (2004) may be based on the difference in the stimuli that were provided to the participants in order to elicit their emotion-recognition responses. Downs and Smith's (2004) results are based

on their participants' abilities to recognise emotions in facial expressions on photographs, as opposed to the results of my study, which are based on the primary participants' abilities to recognise and identify the emotions of characters during sociodramatic play sessions. As such, I cannot argue against the findings of Downs and Smith (2004), as I did not apply the same methodological procedures in my study. I contend that the acting out of the various roles during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention in the format that I employed it, seemed to have supported the primary participants to mentally identify with the characters' situations and, to some extent, to experience the social environment from the characters' perspectives. This idea is supported by Johnson *et al.* (1999), who state that sociodramatic play might fulfil a significant role in the development of children's perspective-taking abilities. These authors propose that group dramatisations, where children are required to act out a variety of roles, might result in the development of the ability to mentally put themselves in other people's places, and to experience the world from other's points of view.

It is, however, important to take note of the conclusion drawn by Downs and Smith (2004), reporting that, although high-functioning children with autism may be able to display a cognitive understanding of the emotions and thoughts of other people, enduring challenges with regard to visually processing other people's faces may persist in holding them back from engaging in reciprocal social interactions. Engaging in reciprocal social interactions necessitates the accurate processing of facial expressions and other non-verbal emotional signals that are constantly changing. The question therefore remains whether or not the primary participants in my study will be able to display the same emotional-recognition and perspective-taking abilities when confronted with facial expressions and other non-verbal emotional signals in future.

4.4.3 AREAS OF NO CHANGE

In this section, I give account of my findings with regard to the areas where no apparent changes in social behaviour seemed to have occurred. I commence the section by discussing the primary participants' reluctance to seek help from peers, whereafter I elaborate on the tendency of the primary participants to rely on body language, rather than on verbalisation, to ask for help and express feelings.

4.4.3.1 Resistance towards seeking help from peers

During the course of the research process, it became clear to me that the high-functioning children with autism, who participated in the study would rather approach adults or older peers

for help, than relying on their peers. No apparent change could be detected with regard to their inclination to not rely on their peers for help. My finding with regard to the tendency of the primary participants to approach adults for help rather than their peers, is supported by Jackson *et al.*'s (2003) statement, that the interactions of children with autism with their peers differ from interactions with adults, in that it is more prone to be merely social, and less prone to be need-fulfilling. This tendency further corresponds with findings of a study done by Stahmer (1995), indicating that although children with autism respond better to adults after social skills intervention, they still do not often respond well to peer initiations. In support of the above line of reasoning, Bauminger *et al.* (2003) emphasise that although children with autism in general display improvement in behaviour in most research studies, concerns are often raised with regard to the participants' abilities to generalise new social skills to their social behaviours with peers.

I hypothesise that the primary participants' reluctance to approach their peers for help, could be part of the challenges they experience with regard to the application of Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind* skills, which are not spontaneously converted into peer social interactions (Barry *et al.*, 2003; Bauminger, 2002). I support Bauminger *et al.* (2003) that high-functioning children with autism might experience difficulties in utilising their relatively high cognitive and social abilities when asking for help within their peer social interactions, based on my findings that, although the primary participants' abilities to seek help from adults increased, they still displayed a resistance towards seeking help from peers. Yet, results from my study pointed towards a tendency among the participants to anticipate the other group members' need for help and to provide help accordingly, which implies an increase in their *Theory of Mind* abilities. In this regard, I refer to my assumption in section 4.4.2.3 that the primary participants in this study may have developed the skills of support-giving during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, but seemingly still experienced challenges in the generalisation of the skill to themselves at the end of my study. This is, however, merely a hypothesis that necessitates further exploration in future studies.

4.4.3.2 The use of body language

Although the participants seemed more able to express their feelings and ask for help at the end of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, they still often resorted to body language rather than verbalisations. This could be a result of the challenges they experience with Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind*, which might contribute to difficulties in understanding that

others may not always anticipate their needs or understand their feelings. I hypothesise that, although the primary participants seemed able to apply the newly learned skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings* at the end of my study, they still experienced difficulties in knowing when and in which situations to use their newly acquired skills, and would therefore rather rely on the use of body language than verbalise their need for help or their feelings. Literature (Attwood, 2001; Peeters, 2001) supports this finding by indicating that, although a person with autism might have knowledge about other people's minds and the application of specific social skills, they can still experience difficulties in applying this knowledge effectively. The difficulties, that the primary participants in this study appeared to experience with regard to the application of their newly acquired social skills, furthermore correspond with the findings of Downs and Smith (2004), according to who the *Theory of Mind* abilities of children with autism are more easily changed than their actual application thereof.

Yet, my hypothesis with regard to the difficulties that the participants experienced in understanding that others may not always anticipate their needs or understand their feelings, seems to contradict my findings in section 4.4.2.3, indicating that the participants displayed a possible tendency to anticipate the needs of others and to provide help accordingly. In this regard, I refer to a hypothesis that I formulated in section 4.4.2.3, stating that it could be possible that the primary participants experienced difficulties in generalising the newly learned social skills to themselves.

4.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I firstly introduced the three selected high-functioning children with autism as primary participants of this study. Thereafter, I presented and discussed the results that I obtained during data analysis. I concluded the chapter with a detailed discussion and interpretation of my findings, relating them to relevant literature, as discussed in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 5, I present an overview of the preceding chapters, whereafter I present my final conclusions, relating my findings to the research question as formulated in Chapter 1. I also present an indication of the potential contributions of my study, as well as the challenges that I faced. I conclude the chapter by formulating recommendations for further research, training and practice.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4, I presented and discussed the raw data that I obtained and analysed, followed by a discussion and interpretation of my findings. I then related the findings of this study to relevant literature, as discussed in Chapter 2.

In this chapter, I present an overview of the preceding chapters, whereafter I formulate final conclusions that I drew on the basis of my research. I present my conclusions by relating my findings to the research questions as formulated in Chapter 1. Subsequently, I discuss the potential contributions of the study, as well as its challenges, and conclude the chapter with recommendations for further research, training and practice.

5.2 OVERVIEW OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

In **Chapter 1** I presented a broad outline of the study and stated my rationale for undertaking the study. After formulating the purpose of the study and the research questions, I defined *high-functioning children with autism, the development of social skills, fairy tales, and sociodramatic play* as the key concepts of the study. I presented a summary of my selected epistemological and methodological assumptions, as well as of my research design and methodology, in an attempt to provide the necessary background against which the other chapters could be read. I concluded the chapter by briefly referring to the ethical guidelines that I considered and the quality criteria that I strove to meet.

In **Chapter 2** I outlined the conceptual framework of my study, for which I consulted relevant and authoritative literature on *autism* and the *development of social skills*. I commenced the chapter by exploring the diagnostic characteristics of autism, and high-functioning children with autism specifically, relating the characteristics to my study. Thereafter I elucidated the *development of social skills*, referring to social skills interventions and the generalisation of

social skills. I explored *sociodramatic play within the context of autism*, with specific reference to the *value of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play* for high-functioning children with autism. I concluded the chapter by formulating my working assumptions for the study. In presenting my conceptual framework, I gave account of the possible value and applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.

In **Chapter 3** I provided a detailed overview of *Interpretivism* as my selected epistemology and a *qualitative approach* as my methodological paradigm. I described my research design, being an *instrumental case study*, whereafter I discussed my research methodology, as well as the research process that I employed. I discussed the methods of data collection, namely *face-to-face interviews*, *assessment of the participating children's levels of social functioning*, and *observation-as-context-of-interaction*, and gave account of the data documentation methods that I used, namely *audio-visual methods* and a *reflective journal*. Subsequently, I elucidated the processes of data analysis and interpretation that I employed, and justified my choices in terms of the purpose of the study and my research questions. I explained the ethical guidelines that I considered, as well as the quality criteria that I strove to adhere to. I also reflected on my role as researcher.

Chapter 4 included my presentation and discussion of the raw data that I had obtained and analysed, followed by a discussion and interpretation of my findings. Throughout, I related the findings of this study to existing literature, as discussed in Chapter 2. I attempted to highlight correlations, but also identify and explain contradictions.

5.3 CONCLUSIONS IN TERMS OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this section, I present my conclusions regarding the study. I present my conclusions by relating my findings and conclusions to my secondary research questions.

5.3.1 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION 1: *To what extent will high-functioning children with autism be able to generalise the social skills learned from fairy tale-based sociodramatic play to their everyday social interactions?*

Based on the findings of my study, I conclude that certain changes occurred in the selected high-functioning children with autism's abilities to ask for help and express their feelings after

they had participated in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. The specific skills, practised during the sociodramatic play intervention allowed for some generalisation to the primary participants' everyday social interactions, specifically with regard to structured situations, such as the classroom. Although one of the participants seemed to have generalised the social skills to both structured and unstructured situations, I found that the other two participants often experienced difficulty in generalising the newly acquired skills to unstructured situations and peer interactions – even at the end of my fieldwork.

I hypothesise that the explanation for this somewhat contradictory finding could be twofold: Firstly, I propose that Aladdin's mother might have been more involved in the process than the caregivers of the other two participants, indicating the importance of collaboration between the interventionist and the significant others in a participant's life. Secondly, I hypothesise that the number of intervention sessions might not have been enough to allow for broader generalisation of social skills. I therefore conclude that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention with high-functioning children with autism needs to be conducted over a lengthy period of time, in collaboration with the participants' parents/caregivers and educators, to better allow for generalisation of social skills to structured and unstructured situations.

In addition, I also found that the participants still often relied on body language rather than verbalisations to indicate their need for help or to express feelings, after completion of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. One explanation for this tendency could be that the primary participants possibly still experienced difficulties in knowing when and in which situations to use their newly acquired skills, therefore rather relying on the use of body language. On the other hand, the tendency of the primary participants to rely on body language to indicate their need for help or to express their feelings, could also be a result of the challenges they seemed to still experience with the application of Baron-Cohen's concept of *Theory of Mind*, which might contribute to their difficulties in understanding that others may not always anticipate their needs or understand their feelings.

Yet, another contradictory finding occurred within the context of my study. Although the primary participants displayed a tendency to experience difficulties with the application of their *Theory of Mind* abilities (as described above) and with seeking help from peers, I found that the participants were able, to some extent, to anticipate each other's need for help, and to provide help accordingly, which implies a developing *Theory of Mind* ability. Taking into consideration that the participants experienced difficulty with regard to the generalisation of their newly

acquired skills, I hypothesise that even though it seems that the participants displayed a developing *Theory of Mind* ability, the possibility exists that they may have experienced difficulties in generalising the newly acquired skills to themselves.

Based on the above, I conclude that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may support high-functioning children with autism to develop and generalise the social skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*, specifically with regard to structured situations. In addition, fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may also support high-functioning children with autism in developing *Theory of Mind* abilities, with the conversion thereof in their peer relationships, but often excluding themselves.

5.3.2 SECONDARY RESEARCH QUESTION 2: *What are additional outcomes (if any) of using fairy tale-based sociodramatic play among high-functioning children with autism?*

Apart from the specific social skills that seemingly developed during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, namely *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*, I found that some *changes occurred in the primary participants' social experiences and behaviour*. Firstly, I found that their ***turn-taking abilities*** seemed to have developed, based on the participation of the selected high-functioning children with autism in fairy tale-based sociodramatic play. The primary participants reportedly displayed an increase in their abilities to take turns during class activities, as well as the ability to wait their turns while the educator attends to other learners. In addition, I also observed the primary participants' enhanced turn-taking abilities during the intervention sessions, and in the classroom.

Secondly, I found that the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention seemingly had a positive influence on the primary participants' ***peer interactions***. Hypothetically, involvement in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention may have enhanced their feelings of belonging and/or of being accepted, which may have resulted in peer involvement. I found that the primary participants appeared to have started to interact more with their peers during the course of the research process, both in the classroom (structured situation) and on the playground (unstructured situation). These indicators were, however, not measured specifically and thus remain on a level of conjecture, until further research. In addition, I found that the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention might have supported the primary participants in developing the additional social skill of ***providing peer support***, which implies a developing *Theory of Mind* ability. I found that the primary participants were able, to some extent, to

anticipate that other group members needed help and as a result, provided help. I hypothesise that both the participants' increased peer interactions, as well as their enhanced ability to provide peer support, may be related to the group approach that I followed in conducting the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention.

Similarly, my findings indicate that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play might have enhanced the development of **problem-solving skills** among the participants. The primary participants were continuously supported during the intervention to explore and develop alternative ways in which they could ask for help in various social situations, thereby solving a problem. Along these lines, findings indicate that the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I facilitated improved the **perspective taking abilities** of the selected high-functioning children with autism, which can be regarded as an indication of the development of *Theory of Mind* abilities. In this regard, the participants were able to recognise and identify various kinds of feelings of the different characters in the fairy tales. It appears that the acting out of the various roles during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention may have supported the primary participants to mentally identify with the characters' situations and, even possibly to some extent, to experience the social environment from the characters' perspectives.

Based on my findings, I conclude that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may be used as a valuable tool for the development of *turn-taking*, *problem solving* and *perspective taking abilities* of high-functioning children with autism. In addition, the group process of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may support high-functioning children with autism in the *improvement of their peer interactions*, as well as the *enhancement of peer support-giving skills*. However, these suppositions require further investigation.

5.4 POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

In this section, I present my reflections on the possible general contributions of the study, in terms of my primary research question as presented in Chapter 1: ***What is the effect (if any) of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism?*** By answering my primary research question, this study may (i) provide a more nuanced understanding of the potential applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in the development of some social skills among high-functioning children with autism. This study may further contribute by (ii) extending existing research on both *sociodramatic play* and

the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism. In addition, (iii) the study adds to existing literature regarding the applicability of *fairy tale-based sociodramatic play* in relation to *high-functioning children with autism.*

A further potential contribution of my study lies in (iv) the possibility that social skills development, other than *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*, emerged, namely turn-taking abilities, problem-solving skills, increased peer interactions and peer support, as well as perspective-taking skills. Furthermore, the study also reportedly contributed to (v) the quality of the primary participants' and their significant others' lives, as the newly learned skills may support them in their daily social interactions. Lastly, besides adding to existing literature on intervention techniques for high-functioning children with autism, the study deals with (vi) sociodramatic play intervention as a possible tool for professionals, educators and parents to be used in the development of social skills among children with autism. A detailed description of the session-planning of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I developed and implemented for the purpose of this study is included as an appendix (refer to Appendix F) to this study, enabling professionals, educators and parents to implement the intervention in other contexts.

Thus, this study implies potential contributions to the field of Educational Psychology, as well as to existing theory on autism, high-functioning autism, the development of social skills, as well as the value of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play as intervention technique. The potential contribution does not merely pertain to theoretical value, but also to practical application value, as educational psychologists may use fairy tale-based sociodramatic play as a possible therapeutic tool in developing social skills among children with or without autism.

5.5 POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

I henceforth discuss the potential limitations of my study, which might relate to certain general challenges that I experienced whilst conducting the study. Additionally, I account for the manner in which I attempted to address the potential limitations.

5.5.1 BROADER APPLICATION OF SKILLS

As mentioned in Chapter 2, one of the challenges most often experienced in research studies pertaining to intervention techniques for children with autism, is the inclination of this group of

children to actualise limited generalisation (application) of newly acquired skills to their natural environments and everyday situations, within the framework of the challenges that they experience. Within the context of this study, I experienced this challenge first-hand, as the primary participants seemed to display limited generalisation of their newly learned skills to unstructured situations. It appeared that the primary participants related the newly learned skills to the school environment, most probably due to the fact that the sessions were conducted on the school premises, as well as due to the educator's attempt to integrate their newly learned skills and knowledge into the class situation. As mentioned in section 5.3.1, I recommend that a collaborative partnership between the interventionist on the one hand and the caregivers, parents, educator and other professionals on the other, may support participants in generalising newly acquired skills to their natural environments. Such a collaborative partnership may include continuous communication between the relevant parties, with regard to the participants' progress during the course of the intervention, as well as regular follow-up activities to be used by the caregivers, parents and educators after the completion of each session.

Another possible explanation for the primary participants' limited generalisation of the newly acquired skills, could be the short time-frame in which the intervention was conducted. I hypothesise that the limited number of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions that were conducted, did not provide enough opportunity for the children to practise the social skills in relation to their natural environments (unstructured situations). The possibility also exists that I may not have provided them with enough time to engage in fantasy play during the sessions. In this regard, I propose that lengthier fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions could be conducted with the primary participants more often, with the aim of supporting them in the application of the newly learned skills to their natural environments. In addition, I propose that the participants' limited generalisation of their newly acquired skills to their daily lives may also have been influenced by my choice of fairy tales. As emphasised in section 5.5.4, I realised that both of the fairy tales that I employed involved a frightening character and threatening situations, thereby limiting the situations in which the participants could practise the application of the specific skills *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*. Refer to section 5.5.4 for a discussion of the attempts that I made in order to address the above-mentioned challenge. Yet, I hypothesise that the possibility also exist that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could not be used for the participants' generalisation of newly acquired skills to their daily lives. Future research studies may be conducted to explore the above-mentioned hypotheses.

5.5.2 THE COMPLEXITY OF AUTISM AND THE POTENTIAL INFLUENCE OF OTHER FACTORS

The complexity of autism, as such, was a challenge to this study. My presence as an adult facilitator during the group sessions might have influenced the manner in which the primary participants acted during the role-play, as children with autism generally tend to interact on a higher social level with adults than with their peers. Yet, I did not control for the effect of my involvement during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, neither for the effects of the participants' peer interactions, for the natural maturation of the primary participants, as well as for the potential input from the educator. As a result, the likelihood exists that the development of the social skills may have been caused by one of the above factors (or others), rather than by the play component of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention. I attempted to address this potential challenge by reflecting (refer to Appendix D for my reflective journal) on my potential influence during the sessions, as well as focusing on the educator's, parent's/caregivers' and my own observations of the primary participants' social interactions with their peers in their natural environments. I would, however, recommend the possibility of using a control group during future studies, in order to rule out the likelihood that the primary participants' improvement in their social skills could be the result of other factors than the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play.

5.5.3 LANGUAGE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

I identified language differences as a possible challenge to this study, as I entered the field as a person with a different background and language abilities to that of some of the research participants. According to Berg (2001), the interviewer's communication should be understandable to the research participants and (ideally) conducted on their level or in their preferred language. Although none of the participants speak English as a first language, the interviews and fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions with the primary participants were conducted in English, due to the fact that they use English as their expressive language and receive their education in English. Furthermore, my experience at the school for learners with autism pointed towards the tendency of learners with autism to rather express themselves in other languages than their home language. Within the context of my study, all three of the primary participants preferred to use English as their expressive language at school.

The interviews with the educator, parent and caregivers were conducted in the language of their choice. Although I offered the Sotho-speaking caregiver the possibility of using a translator during the interview, allowing her to use her first language, she indicated that she preferred to

have the interview in Afrikaans, as Afrikaans was her spoken language at the school and at the residence.

5.5.4 CHOICE OF FAIRY TALES

With regard to the selection of the two fairy tales (*Three little pigs* and *Red Riding Hood*), the fact, that both of the stories involve a threatening character (the wolf), is yet another potential challenge of this study. In the first place, I found that the primary participants preferred not to act out the role of the bad, threatening antagonist character. In an attempt to address this challenge, I suggested that the primary participants take turns in acting the various roles, thereby affording each participant the opportunity to act the protagonist role. In addition, I realised that in both the stories, the characters were only asking for help when they were confronted with a threatening situation. As a result, I consciously aimed to integrate additional social scenarios into the stories. I hypothesise that the enactment of the additional social scenarios could provide them with the opportunities to practise the skills of asking for help in situations related to everyday experiences.

Furthermore, the question remains whether or not the selected fairy tales could be described as culturally appropriate within the context of my study. As *fairy tales* seem to be a traditionally western concept, the possibility exists that some of the participants had not been exposed to the stories prior to the commencement of their school careers. Although they may have been exposed to fairy tales at school, I wonder about the possibility of using traditional folktales in a South African context as part of sociodramatic play for developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and potential limitations of my study, I now present my recommendations for training, practice and future research. I also present some guidelines on how to implement the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention, based on my own observations during the sessions, as well as relating the guidelines with my findings.

5.6.1 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRAINING

As a result of the findings that I obtained during my study, I recommend that it may be beneficial to include material regarding the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in

developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism in the training programmes of educational psychologists, educators, and other therapists. Such training programmes should be aimed at both undergraduate and postgraduate students in the field of educational psychology, students studying to become educators, as well as students specialising in the field of special needs education. In addition, I recommend that caregivers may receive in-service training for social skills intervention, as well as for fairy tale-based sociodramatic play. These training opportunities may assist those working with high-functioning children with autism to support this group of children in developing social skills.

5.6.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Based on the outcomes of my study, I recommend that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may be applied for the development of social skills (specifically *asking for help* and *expression of feelings*) among high-functioning children with autism. As the implementation of this specific intervention does not involve significant costs or extensive training for the facilitator, I further recommend that any professionals, educators and parents supporting high-functioning children with autism in the development of social skills, may use the intervention programme. Furthermore, as the development of life skills forms part of the national curriculum outcomes of the Department of Education, as well as of prescribed Learner support programmes implemented by departmental schools, I recommend that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may be adapted (or used as it is) and applied in the classroom for the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism. Educators and therapists may possibly implement this technique as part of their already existing intervention strategies for the development of social skills. However, further research with regard to the application of a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention by educators and therapists seems necessary.

In developing and implementing a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention in order to develop social skills among high-functioning children with autism, the following guidelines might be considered:

- I observed that the primary participants seemed to display *object-dependent* play during the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention that I facilitated. Object-dependent play implies a tendency to rely on the utilisation and transformation of existing objects, such as hand puppets, props and arrangements in the environment, to create an imaginary world for pretend-play (Johnson *et al.*, 1999). I therefore propose that additional objects, such as hand puppets, may be used during sociodramatic play sessions, to enhance pretend play.

However, the tendency of high-functioning children with autism to display object-dependent play is not well researched and documented in literature relating to high-functioning children with autism. I therefore only hypothesise about its applicability within the context of my study. Subsequently, I recommend future research with the focus on the possible tendency of high-functioning children with autism to display object-dependent play during sociodramatic play activities.

- I submit that the primary participants needed additional support to be able to engage in the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play activities, as well as to generalise the newly learned skills to other contexts. I therefore recommend that facilitators and educators may support children in a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention to (i) act the stories and (ii) to generalise the newly learned skills to their natural environments. In addition, facilitators and educators may also encourage and facilitate peer support among children who participate in such programmes.
- A need to work in close collaboration with the primary participants' caregivers, parents and educators, emerged during the course of my study. I propose that the involvement of significant others in practical activities (for example reading the stories at home), at home or in the classroom, may support children in developing and generalising newly learned social skills.
- In my study, the primary participants seemingly displayed a preference for acting the protagonist role during sociodramatic play activities. I recommend that specific fairy tales may therefore be selected that could encourage participants to rather act a protagonist role, than a role of a threatening character.
- I further propose that visual aids may enhance sociodramatic play activities, as visual aids may support children with autism in making abstract concepts more concrete.
- In order to support the participants in a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention in developing and generalising new social skills, I recommend that at least eight to ten sessions be conducted with each selected fairy tale.
- I recommend that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may be implemented as a group-based approach, as being part of a group may enhance participants' feelings of peer acceptance and support.

5.6.3 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Arising from my literature study, my observations during the research process, and my findings and hypotheses, I recommend the following potential areas for future research:

- A follow-up research study may be conducted on the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism, based on the findings of this study, to explore the facilitation of both long-term sustainability and application of newly learned skills amongst people (for example siblings or unfamiliar peers) and across environments (for example at home, at school or at a shopping center).
- Future research could further explore the applicability of using popular animation stories (such as *Ice Age*, *Finding Nemo* or *Superman*) as part of a sociodramatic play intervention for the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism, thereby utilising a child's stereotyped interests or behaviours (as children with autism often fixate on stories such as Superman), and finding ways to adapt these to promote the development of social, communication and play skills.
- Research studies may be conducted to explore the possibility of using culturally appropriate fairy tales in fairy tale-based sociodramatic play for the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism. Research may also explore the possibility of using traditional indigenous tales in a South African context as part of sociodramatic play for developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.
- Another avenue for research involves investigating the involvement, and subsequent influence, of peers with high-functioning autism as participants in social skills intervention groups.
- Research studies may also be conducted to explore effective ways of supporting high-functioning children with autism to develop an increased understanding of other children's mental states. Future studies could be based on my finding that the primary participants of this study seemed to have developed the social skill of support giving, which implies that they were able to anticipate their peer's need for help and to act accordingly (*Theory of Mind ability*).
- Research studies could be conducted with the purpose of exploring the tendency (or not) of high-functioning children with autism to display object-dependent play during sociodramatic play activities.
- A follow-up study may also explore the tendency of the primary participants in this study to display a preference for acting the protagonist role during sociodramatic play activities.
- A research study could be conducted with the purpose of exploring the possibility that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in a small group set-up may have an effect on participants' feelings of self-worth and self-confidence.

- Another avenue of research is the potential exploration of the extent to which fairy tale-based sociodramatic play may enhance the development of turn-taking abilities and problem-solving skills.

5.7 CONCLUDING REFLECTION

In this study, I explored and described one possibility of supporting high-functioning children with autism, focusing on the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing some social skills among high-functioning children with autism. In the light of the findings of my study, I conclude that fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could be a valuable tool for the development of the specific social skills of *asking for help* and *expression of feelings* among high-functioning children with autism. Besides apparent changes that occurred in the primary participants' abilities to ask for help and to express their feelings, this intervention technique may also have contributed to the development of additional skills, such as problem-solving, turn-taking, peer interactions and peer support, and perspective-taking.

Fairy tale-based sociodramatic play could therefore possibly assist the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism, supporting this group of children to feel more at ease in what they often experience as a puzzling and unpredictable social world. I conclude with a quotation from a young individual with autism, with the personal belief that this individual's request could be the goal of every person that supports children with autism in developing social skills: *'One day I dream that we can grow in a matured society where nobody would be 'normal or abnormal'; but just human beings accepting any other human being – ready to grow together'* (Mukhopadhyay in Bogdashina, 2005)

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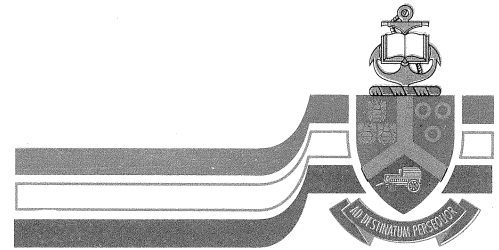
WOLFBERG, P.J. 1999. *Play and imagination in children with autism*. New York: Teachers College Press.

WOLFBERG, P.J. & SCHULER, A.L. 1993. Integrated play groups: a model for promoting the social and cognitive dimensions of play in children with autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 23(3): 467-489.

YAPKO, D. 2003. *Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders. Frequently asked questions*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

APPENDIX A

Permission to do research & informed consent



University of Pretoria

Pretoria 0002 Republic of South Africa Tel 012-420-4111
Fax 012-362-5168 / 012-362-5190 <http://www.up.ac.za>

Faculty of Education

01-08-2005

The Principal
xxx School for Autism
PO Box xxx
XXXXX
XXXX

RE: PERMISSION FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH AT xxx SCHOOL FOR AUTISM

I, Rachie Steenberg, hereby apply for permission to conduct a research study at xxx School for Autism, as part of my Masters studies in Educational Psychology. The purpose of my study is to explore the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism. The research process will include group sessions with three learners from the foundation phase class, with the focus on social skills intervention. This implies an investment of three hours per week for approximately five weeks at various times during selected school days on the school premises. The group sessions will be arranged in coordination with the class educator in order to ensure that the learners will still attend all the necessary school activities. Interviews will also be conducted with the class educator, ms xxx, before and after the social skills intervention programme. In addition, interviews will be conducted with the parents/caregivers (hostel parents) of the selected learners. Additionally, the psychologist of your school will conduct assessments of the children's levels of social functioning, before and after the social skills intervention programme.

I shall make use of audio-visual techniques (DVD camera, dictaphone and photographs) to capture some of the data, namely the group sessions and the interviews. This will contribute to the richness of the data, since non-verbal communication might also be captured, as well as data

that could have been missed during interaction with the participants, during the social skills training group activities. Throughout this process, I shall adhere to the ethical principle of *privacy*, meaning that the *confidentiality* and *anonymity* of the school, the learners and other participants will be protected at all times. Any participant may withdraw from the process at any time, if s/he wishes to do so.

The results of this study could contribute to the existing literature on intervention strategies for high-functioning children with autism, and could be useful to professionals, educators and parents in helping the children to learn how to interact socially. The results of my study will be published in the form of a mini-dissertation, for completion of the Master's degree in Educational Psychology, and may also be used to publish articles in academic journals. No research records will be revealed, however, unless required by law.

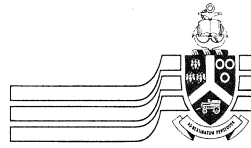
Please feel free to contact me or my supervisors if you have any inquiries regarding the research process.

Thank you in advance,

Ms Rachie Steenberg
(Intern Psychologist)
082 322 9820

Dr Ronél Ferreira
(Supervisor)
083 258 7747

Dr Liesel Ebersöhn
(Co-supervisor)
082 440 6577



UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF EDUCATION
RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

CLEARANCE NUMBER : EP0602/02

DEGREE AND PROJECT

M. Ed. Educational Psychology
Exploring the relationship between fairy tales in sociadramatic play and the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism

INVESTIGATOR(S)

Rachie Steenberg

DEPARTMENT

Educational Psychology

DATE CONSIDERED

13 February 2006

DECISION OF THE COMMITTEE

APPROVED

This ethical clearance is valid for years from the date of consideration and may be renewed upon application

**CHAIRPERSON OF ETHICS
COMMITTEE**

Dr C Lubbe

DATE

13 February 2006

CC

Ms R Ferreira

Mrs Jeannie Beukes

This ethical clearance certificate is issued subject to the following conditions:

1. A signed personal declaration of responsibility
2. If the research question changes significantly so as to alter the nature of the study, a new application for ethical clearance must be submitted
3. It remains the students' responsibility to ensure that all the necessary forms for informed consent are kept for future queries.

Please quote the clearance number in all enquiries.

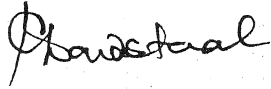
TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

2/08/2005

I herewith confirm that the proposed research study at the abovementioned school as planned by Me. R. Steenberg has been accepted by the School Management Team.

The title of the study is: "Exploring the relationship between fairy tales in sociodramatic play and the development of social skills among high-functioning children with autism."

It is felt that this topic is highly relevant to the field of autism and that the outcome may contribute to the social development of our learners.





| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Date: | 02 May 2006 |
| Name of Researcher: | Steenberg Rachie |
| Address of Researcher: | Lawson Avenue 1299 Waverley Pretoria 0151 |
| Telephone Number: | 0823229820 |
| Fax Number: | (012) 4205511 |
| Research Topic: | Exploring the relationship between fairy tales in sociodramatic play and the development of social skills among high functioning children with autism |
| Number and type of schools: | 1 LSEN School |
| District/s/HO | Tshwane South |

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

Permission has been granted to proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met, and may be withdrawn should any of these conditions be flouted:

1. *The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s concerned must be presented with a copy of this letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*
2. *The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.*
3. *A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*

4. *A letter / document that outlines the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.*
5. *The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.*
6. *Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Senior Manager (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.*
7. *Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year.*
8. *Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.*
9. *It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.*
10. *The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.*
11. *The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.*
12. *On completion of the study the researcher must supply the Senior Manager: Strategic Policy Development, Management & Research Coordination with one Hard Cover bound and one Ring bound copy of the final, approved research report. The researcher would also provide the said manager with an electronic copy of the research abstract/summary and/or annotation.*
13. *The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.*
14. *Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Senior Manager concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.*

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards

ALBERT CHANEE
ACTING DIVISIONAL MANAGER: OFSTED

| | |
|---|--|
| The contents of this letter has been read and understood by the researcher. | |
| Signature of Researcher: | |
| Date: | |

INFORMED CONSENT PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

Dear _____

Your child, _____ is invited to participate in a research project aimed at *exploring the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism.*

S/he will be involved in the study as part of a social skills group, which forms part of the therapeutic services rendered by the school. This implies an investment of three hours per week for approximately five weeks at various times during selected school days on the school premises. The group sessions will be arranged in coordination with the class educator in order to ensure that your child will still attend all the necessary school activities. It will furthermore be of enormous value to the study if you as parent/caregiver of your child are willing to partake in individual interviews, prior to the social skills group sessions, as well as after the sessions have been completed. In addition, I invite you as parent/caregiver of your child to participate in two individual interviews, both prior to and after the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention has been completed.

I shall make use of audio-visual techniques (video camera, dictaphone and photographs) to capture some of the data, namely the interviews and the social skills group sessions. This will contribute to the richness of the data, since non-verbal communication might also be captured, as well as data that might be missed in interaction with the participants during the social skills training groups.

Throughout the research process, I shall adhere to the ethical principle of *privacy*, meaning that the *confidentiality* and *anonymity* of you and your child will be protected at all times. You and/or your child may also withdraw from the process at any time.

The results of my study could contribute to the existing literature on intervention strategies for high-functioning children with autism, and could be useful to professionals, educators and parents in helping the children to learn how to interact socially. Although the results of my study will be published in the form of a mini-dissertation for completion of a Master's degree in

Educational Psychology (University of Pretoria) and may also be used to publish articles in academic journals, no records will be revealed unless required by law.

Please feel free to contact me or my supervisors if you have any inquiries regarding the research process.

Thank you in advance,

Ms Rachie Steenberg
(Intern Psychologist)
082 322 9820

Dr Ronél Ferreira
(Supervisor)
083 258 7747

Dr Liesel Ebersöhn
(Co-supervisor)
082 440 6577

I, _____ understand my child's rights, as well as my rights as the parent/s of the research participant, and I voluntarily consent to my and my child's participation in this study. I hereby consent that the group sessions and the interviews may be recorder with audio-visual methods and I understand that my and my child's identities will be protected during the research process and in the research report. I further understand my and my child's right to withdraw at any time, if s/he or I wish to do so.

Parent's/caregiver's signature: _____

Date: _____

INFORMED CONSENT EDUCATOR

Dear _____

You are invited to participate in a research project aimed at *exploring the applicability of fairy tale-based sociodramatic play in developing social skills among high-functioning children with autism*.

Three learners in your class will be involved in the study as part of a social skills group, which forms part of the therapeutic services rendered by the school. Group sessions will be arranged with you in order to ensure that the learners will still attend all the necessary school activities. During the research process, I shall conduct an initial interview with you before the commencement of the group sessions, as well as a follow-up interview after the completion of the sessions. It will be of enormous value to the study if you could invest some time in writing down your observations of the learners in class during the time of the research process. I shall make use of audio-visual techniques (dictaphone, video camera and photographs) to capture some of the data, namely interviews and social skills group sessions. The interviews will be recorded by means of a dictaphone, whereafter the content will be transcribed verbatim in order to analyse the data.

Throughout the research process, I shall adhere to the ethical principle of *privacy*, meaning that your *confidentiality* and *anonymity* will be protected at all times. You may also withdraw from the process at any time if you wish to do so.

The results of my study could contribute to the existing literature on intervention strategies for high-functioning children with autism, and could be useful to professionals, educators and parents in helping the children to learn how to interact socially. Although the results may be published in professional journals or presented at professional conferences, no records will be revealed at any time, unless required by law.

If you are willing to assist me, kindly complete the section below. If you have any inquiries during the research process, you are welcome to contact me or my supervisors.

Thank you in advance.

Ms Rachie Steenberg
(Intern Psychologist)
082 322 9820

Dr Ronél Ferreira
(Supervisor)
083 258 7747

Dr Liesel Ebersöhn
(Co-supervisor)
082 440 6577

I, _____ understand my rights as research participant, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I hereby consent that the interviews may be recorded with audio-visual methods and I understand that my identity will be protected in the research process and in the research report. I further understand my right to withdraw at any time, if I wish to do so.

Participant's signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX B

Diagnostic criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder (DSM-IV-TR)

DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR AUTISTIC DISORDER

(American Psychiatric Association, 2000:75)

- A. A total of six (or more) items from (1), (2), and (3), with at least two from (1), and one each from (2) and (3):
- (1) qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
 - (a) marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
 - (b) failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
 - (c) a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest)
 - (d) lack of social or emotional reciprocity
 - (2) qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:
 - (a) delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime)
 - (b) in individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
 - (c) stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
 - (d) lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level
 - (3) restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:
 - (a) encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
 - (b) apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
 - (c) stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g., hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
 - (d) persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- B. Delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to age 3 years: (1) social interaction, (2) language as used in social communication, or (3) symbolic or imaginative play.
- C. The disturbance is not better accounted for by Rett's Disorder or Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.

APPENDIX C

***Selected photographs as visual presentation of the
fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions***

Visual presentation of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions



APPENDIX D

Excerpts from Reflective journal

REFLECTIVE JOURNAL

Examples of my reflections on the sessions

Looking back at Session 1...

The three participants appeared slightly apprehensive at the beginning of today's session. The board game (Snakes and ladders) was a good choice to begin with as part of relationship building, as they were not expected to talk too much in the beginning. They became more relaxed as the games progressed, and slowly started to give comments. Aladdin, who is the most verbal among the three, took the leading role from the beginning. He took the initiative to explain the games to the other two and wanted to start first.

It was very important to provide them with a structured overview on what to expect from these group sessions, as children with autism tend to need a lot of structure. It was clear from the primary participants' body language that they became more relaxed when they knew what was going to happen. This also played a role in building trust, as I felt that they trusted me more when they knew what we were going to do. Maybe it would have been better to start with this activity, and, as they felt more secure, to proceed with the board game.

I think the room is perhaps too small for the sociodramatic play activities of session three onwards. Although it was appropriate for today's activities, as we only played a board game, I'll have to find another venue for the upcoming sessions.



On a personal level... I'm overwhelmed... I still find it very difficult to understand the complexity of autism. It's like getting a grip on a pot of spaghetti... Although I've been working at this school now for a few months, I still find it challenging. I realise that, in order for me to give an accurate account of these children's behaviours within the context of autism, I'll have to keep on reading about autism and constantly engage in discussions with my supervisors.

Looking back at Session 4...

It was very interesting today to see how the participants followed my example in reading the story in a dramatised voice to enhance the sociodramatic play. After that, each one of them had a chance to take the cards and tell the story to the rest of the group. It was positive to see how the pictures assisted them to remember and to tell the story. Aladdin wanted to be first again and told the story with enthusiasm. It was very interesting to observe that his story didn't end when the pictures ended. He actually created his own storyline to go on with the story. Although Cinderella and Tom Thumb needed some support to tell the story, they did it with a lot of enthusiasm too.

Keeping Vygotsky's concept of 'scaffolding' in mind, it seems that my example, the visual pictures, as well as the peers in the group, supported the participants in telling the story. It happened once or twice that Aladdin corrected Cinderella and Tom Thumb, or added a sentence. It appears that Aladdin's tendency to take the lead and help others, may support the rest of the group in a positive way.

Somebody asked me yesterday: "Why fairy tales and sociodramatic play if you know that children with autism experience challenges with applying their imaginations?" I know this is a very intricate question to answer and that a completely new study could be done based on that question. In short, I just want to provide an example from today's session that surprised me and made me realise that one cannot say there is a lack of imagination... Aladdin created his own storyline as extension of the story of the Three little pigs and told us a longer version (his own version) of the story. He had to use imagination to be able to do that!

Looking back at Session 8:

Today's session went very well, better than I expected. I requested the participants to choose the medium with which they wanted to act the story today. They chose to play with the masks and other props, such as straw, sticks and bricks. They had to "build" their houses with the props, continuously asking others to help them with various tasks. I decided to rather provide the participants with scenarios to act out, as they had seemed anxious during the previous sessions when asked to create their own scenarios. In addition, I also decided to use scenarios

from previous sessions with the aim of reinforcing the practice and application thereof. The repetition of the previous scenarios seems to have reinforced the participants' abilities to apply the skill of asking for help in the specific scenarios during the sociodramatic play session. It was amazing to see how they started helping each other in acting out the scenarios. I told Tom Thumb that he didn't have food in his house for supper and that he had to go and ask Cinderella to help him. Hesitantly, he approached Cinderella and told her that his food was finished (only providing information...). I guided him to ask her if she could please help him to get some food. Cinderella answered that her food was also finished and that they should maybe go to Aladdin. Cinderella is trying to solve their problem by suggesting some action!'

Thereafter, I asked the participants to take off the masks and dramatise the story themselves, but they refused. The participants indicated that they did not want to act the story without the masks or the hand puppets. It might be that the session was too loaded and that it would have been better if I did this in two different sessions. Alternatively, could it be that they find security in the hand puppets and masks? On the other hand, I wonder about the possibility that the masks and the props may support the participants to stay in 'fantasy' play. Based on these questions, I assume that the participants may benefit from the masks and the props as these mediums seem to support the participants to stay in 'fantasy' for a longer period of time, providing them with more opportunities to practise the social skills. In retrospect, I think that I might have required too much change too early during the intervention, preventing the participants from spending prolonged periods of time in 'fantasy play'.

Looking back at the intervention...

Twelve sessions sound a lot, but are actually so little! After I have reviewed the past twelve sessions with the participants, I realised that any intervention with children with autism should be conducted on a long-term basis. However, it is important to keep in mind that the purpose of my study was not to establish long-term changes, but rather to explore the possibility of applying a fairy tale-based sociodramatic play intervention as a tool for therapists, educators and parents to support high-functioning children with autism in developing social skills. Although the participating children were able to describe the activities that we conducted in each session, they seemingly experienced difficulty in identifying and explaining the specific social skills that we have focused upon (maybe my questions were too abstract?). A little bit of

help from my side, however, guided the participants to indicate that they could ask for help and express their feelings.

I am, however, unsure whether the apparent changes in the participants' abilities to ask for help and to express their feelings could be described a result of their involvement in the sociodramatic play activities, or as a result of my continuous involvement during the sessions. I hope that the practising of the skills during the intervention sessions could support the participants' abilities to generalise the newly acquired skills to their everyday situations.

Examples of my reflections on the interviews

Interview 1 – Educator

I was amazed by the educator's passion and understanding for the learners in her class. She uses every opportunity (in the classroom and on the playground) to support the learners in the development of their social skills. With such an educator, who needs therapists? 😊 She seems eager and willing to participate in the study. I felt comfortable during the interview with the educator and never got the idea that she was trying to impress me with her answers. She provided me with valuable information regarding the participants. During the interview, she often mentioned that she believed that supporting high-functioning children with autism to develop feelings of self-worth, could in turn enhance their willingness to take risks and to engage in social interactions. The following question comes to my mind: What is the effect (if any) of a sociodramatic play intervention of high-functioning children with autism's feelings of self-worth?

Interview 2 - Educator

In retrospect, I think I learned more about autism from the educator (during the interviews and my observations in the classroom), than from most of the books that I have read for this study up to now. She taught me more about the individuals behind the autism, than about autism as such. Although the educator could not find time to keep a reflective journal during the research process, she provided me with valuable information regarding the participants, based on her observations.

APPENDIX E

Selected observational field notes *

* The rest of the observational field notes are included on the compact disc.

FIELD NOTES: OBSERVATION-AS-CONTEXT-OF-INTERACTION

Aladdin: Classroom

| | <i>Week One</i> | <i>Week Two</i> | <i>Week Three</i> | <i>Week Four</i> | <i>Week Five</i> |
|----------------------------------|--|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Interaction with me</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asks me how I am doing. • Greets me. • Inform me of the next activity on their schedule. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greets me back and ask me about my weekend. • Wants to know what I'm writing down all the time. • Brings me a message from his teacher. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greets me when I come into the class. • Asks me to help him with his math. • Hugs before I leave the class. • Informs me of the next activity on their schedule. • Invites me to the computer lab to see how well he works on the computer. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greets me every time he sees me. • Asks me if he can help me with something • Teaches me to play a new board game | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tells me he feels sad because it's our last week. • Hugs me to say goodbye. |
| <i>Interaction with educator</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tries to answer all the questions she asks in the class • Offers to help her with the computer • He starts talking to her while she's busy talking to one of the | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demands the educator's undivided attention when she is helping him with his work – gets angry when other learners asks her something while he is still busy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixes his two languages when he tries to explain something to her. • Offers to help her with her camera. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Asks the educator to help him with his reading. • Tells the educator that he loves her. • Wait patiently for his turn when she cannot respond to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helps the educator in planning a sport event. • Tells her not to feel bad about her age after she joked about getting old. • Tries to explain his |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|--|--|
| | other learners | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks her what is wrong with her – if she is feeling sick? | | his request immediately. | feeling of sad to her. |
| <i>Interaction with the other two learners in the social skills group</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comments on things that Tom Thumb does, for example “he is not eating his food”. Almost no interaction between them. Ignores Cinderella. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Still very little interaction with the other two in the class setting. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offers to borrow Tom Thumb his new pencils for drawing Tries to help Tom Thumb understand some of the instructions for a class activity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helps Tom Thumb with writing a sentence Greets Cinderella | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Calls Cinderella xxtjie – involves her in building a puzzle. |
| <i>Interaction with other peers</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> He starts talking to one of the other learners while the learner next to him is still busy talking to him. Tells xxx that he's not clever enough to do the work Concerned about xxx who is not feeling well | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Initiate a 'surprise action' for the educator while she's out of the class Continuously trying to tell xxx (his cousin) what to do Tells the educator when he thinks Tom Thumb needs some help. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very concerned about his friend who is absent for two days. Upset because xxx does not want to play with him while his other friend is absent | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tells xxx that his drawing is very nice. Takes turns when playing board games | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Waits for his turn to speak in a class discussion. |
| <i>Asking for help</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tells the educator that he doesn't need help, as he knows how to do the work. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks the educator to help him with a word he cannot read Still think he doesn't | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks me to help him with his math. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks the educator to help him with his reading. Asks the educator to | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks Cinderella to help him build a puzzle. |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|---|---|
| | | need help in many situations | | help him write a letter. | |
| <i>Expressing of feelings</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shows frustration with educator because she is not responding to his questions immediately. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Educator asks him what is wrong after seeing that he looks upset. He tries to explain that he is angry because his cards are gone. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expresses his feelings of concern about his friend who is sick and at home. Explains to the educator that he is also upset because xxx doesn't want to play with him. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expresses his feelings of love for the educator. Tells the other learners that he is feeling happy today because he is going to a party. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expresses his feelings of sadness with regard to the ending of the group sessions, to both the educator and me. |
| <i>Additional observations</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not always follow the rules Sucks thumb when anxious Mixes the two languages Afrikaans and English | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comments on everything that is done in class Educator needs to remind him to continue with his work – easily distracted. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anxious and upset when there is a change in the routine of the daily activities – asks for a reason why it should change | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seems less anxious than last week. Gets tired later in the day, less motivated to complete his work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enjoys planning events or programs |

Aladdin: Playground

| | Week One | Week Two | Week Three | Week Four | Week Five |
|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| <i>Interaction with me</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greets me and walks past me to the older learners on the playground. • Waves back at me, but makes no effort to engage in interaction with me | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still no real interaction with me on the playgrounds. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I approached him and his friends a few times this week. He did not want to engage in a conversation, as he was busy playing with his phone. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smiles at me and greets me. • Tells me that he will see me later in class because he's going to have a discussion with a friend (older) now. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He still acknowledges my presence on the playground by greeting me, but makes no effort to engage in interaction. |
| <i>Interaction with peers</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He mainly spends time with one learner from his class, as well as one boy from the senior class. • There is almost no interaction between them and the other learners. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One of the younger children tries to approach Aladdin and his friends. Aladdin asks him in a gentle way to please leave them alone. • Although he spends time with his two friends, they only talk about the functioning of the phone during each break. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He tends to be bossy and tells his peers what to do. • Seems a bit anxious because his friend from class is absent for a few days. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although his group of friends is still spending their time apart from the other learners, he does not send the other learners who approach them away. • Talks with Cinderella once during break time this week • Helps one of the younger learners who got hurt | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He stays behind in class during break time and built a puzzle with Cinderella. • Less manipulative over his friends. |

| | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---|--|---|--|---|
| <i>Asking for help</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes no attempt to ask for help | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks one of the older learners to help him with one of the games on his phone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes no attempt to ask for help | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Asks the educator on duty to come and help the learner that got hurt | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Makes no attempt to ask for help. |
| <i>Expressing of feelings</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No expressing of feelings towards peers was observed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No expressing of feelings towards peers was observed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No expressing of feelings towards peers was observed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No expressing of feelings towards peers was observed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No expressing of feelings towards peers was observed |
| <i>Additional observations</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Although he does not engage in interaction with me, it seems that he is doing things to keep my attention focused on him, such as talking loud, looking in my direction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No gross motor play activities. All the interactions resolve around the phone. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aladdin walks up and down the pathway and talks to himself. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> He wants to help other learners when they get hurt. Takes initiative in looking for help. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The extent of the interaction between Aladdin and Cinderella is increasing. |

APPENDIX F

Planning of the fairy tale-based sociodramatic play sessions

PLANNING OF FAIRY TALE-BASED SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY SESSIONS

SESSION 1-2: INTRODUCTION & RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING

SESSION 1

Purpose of the session:

- To build relationship with the participants.
- To provide the participants with a short introduction on what they can expect of the sessions.

Materials needed:

- Any board game that facilitates group participation, for example Ludo or Snakes and Ladders.
- Visual schedule on the outline of the sessions.

Activities:

- Play any board game where everyone in the group can participate, for example Ludo, Snakes and Ladders.
- Provide the participants with a short structured overview of what the following twelve sessions will entail.

SESSION 2

Purpose of the session:

- To build relationship with the participants.
- To provide the participants with a review on the following sessions.

Materials needed:

- Any board game that facilitates group participation, for example Ludo or Snakes and Ladders.
- Visual schedule on the outline of the sessions.

Activities:

- Play any board game where everyone in the group can participate, for example Ludo, Snakes and Ladders.
- Provide the participants with a short review (using a visual schedule) on the structure of the following sessions in order to ensure that they know what is going to happen.

SESSIONS 3-8: THREE LITTLE PIGS

SESSION 3

Purpose of the session:

- To assist the participants in learning the story with the aid of picture cards as visual presentation of the story.

Materials needed:

- A visual presentation of the fairy tale of the Three Little Pigs.

Activities:

- Read the story a few times with a dramatised tone, while showing the picture cards to the participants.

SESSION 4

Purpose of the session:

- To assist the participants in learning the story with the aid of picture cards as visual presentation of the story.

Materials needed:

- The same visual presentation of the fairy tale of the Three Little Pigs as used in Session 3.

Activities:

- Read the story again, using a dramatised voice to enhance sociodramatic play.
- Each participant receives a turn to tell the story to the rest of the group with the aid of the picture cards.

SESSION 5

Purpose of the session:

- To assist the participants in learning the story with the aid of picture cards as visual presentation of the story.
- Building confidence in acting out the story with the hand puppets.
- To facilitate the application of the social skill *asking for help* during a sociodramatic role-play session.

Materials needed:

- Visual presentation of the fairy tale of the Three Little Pigs.
- Hand puppets – the three pigs and the wolf.

Activities:

- Give each one of the participants an opportunity to tell the whole story again (with the aid of the picture cards).
- Each child chooses his/her own puppet.
- Hand out the puppets and start acting out the story.
- Facilitate scenarios where the children have to act scenes of asking for help.

SESSION 6

Purpose of the session:

- To facilitate the application of the social skill *asking for help* during a sociodramatic role-play session.

Materials needed:

- Visual presentation of the fairy tale of the Three Little Pigs.
- Hand puppets – the three pigs and the wolf.

Activities:

- Act out the story again with the hand puppets, adding various social scenarios to the story, for example:

- *Scenario 1:* while the pigs were still building their houses, they ran short of building material and had to go to town and ask for some more.
- *Scenario 2:* each one of the pigs experienced some kind of trouble in building their houses and had to go to and ask their brothers for help, for example to fix the roof.

SESSION 7

Purpose of the session:

- To facilitate the application of the social skill *asking for help* during a sociodramatic role-play session.
- Visual presentation of the fairy tale of the Three Little Pigs.
- Hand puppets – the three pigs and the wolf.

Materials needed:

- Visual presentation of the fairy tale of the Three Little Pigs.
- Masks of the three pigs and the wolf.
- Other props, such as grass, sticks, bricks, etc.

Activities:

- Act out the story with masks and other props, such as grass, sticks, bricks, etc.
- Ask the participants to incorporate a few of their own social scenarios in the play activity.

SESSION 8

Purpose of the session:

- To facilitate the application of the social skill *asking for help* during a sociodramatic role-play session.

Materials needed:

- Hand puppets of the three pigs and the wolf.
- Additional props and masks of the three pigs and the wolf.
- Visual presentation of the fairy tale of the Three Little Pigs.

Activities:

- Give the participants a choice of what they want to use during the sociodramatic play - puppets or masks and other props (such as grass, sticks and bricks).
- Provide the participants again with various additional social scenarios in the story to practice the social skill *asking for help*. Scenarios could include:
 - Pig number three asks pig number two to help him fit the door of the house
 - Pig number two asks pig number one to accompany him to town, as he is too scared to go alone.
 - Pig number one asks pig number three to take a message to their mother.
- Ask the participants to dramatise the story themselves, without the hand puppets or the masks.

SESSIONS 9-12: RED RIDING HOOD

SESSION 9

Purpose of the session:

- To assist the participants in learning the story of Red Riding Hood with the aid of picture cards as visual presentation of the story.

Materials needed:

- A visual presentation of the fairy tale of Red Riding Hood.

Activities:

- Read the story a few times (using a dramatised voice) with the aid of the picture cards.
- Give each participant a turn to tell the story to the rest of the group with the aid of the picture cards.

SESSION 10

Purpose of the session:

- To assist the participants in learning the story of Red Riding Hood with the aid of picture cards as visual presentation of the story.

- To facilitate the application of the social skill *expressing your feelings* during a sociodramatic role-play session.

Materials needed:

- Visual presentation of the story of Red Riding Hood.
- Hand puppets of Red Riding Hood, the wolf, and the woodcutter.

Activities:

- Give each one of the participants a chance to tell the whole story again, with the aid of the picture cards if needed.
- Hand out the puppets and start acting the story.
- Use every opportunity in the story to ask the participants how they think a specific character feels at that stage.

SESSION 11

Purpose of the session:

- To facilitate the application of the social skill *expressing your feelings* during a sociodramatic play session.

Materials needed:

- Visual presentation of the story of Red Riding Hood.
- Hand puppets of Red Riding Hood, the wolf, and the woodcutter.
- Additional masks and other props, such as a picnic basket and a red cloak.

Activities:

- Hand out the masks and the other props and act out the story again.
- Facilitate opportunities during the sociodramatic play of the story for expressing their feelings, for example – Red Riding Hood saying ‘I feel scared’ when she sees the wolf; or ‘I feel happy’ when her mother asks her to go to her grandmother.

SESSION 12

Purpose of the session:

- To facilitate the application of the social skill *expressing your feelings* during a sociodramatic role-play session.

Materials needed:

- Visual presentation of the story of Red Riding Hood.
- Hand puppets of Red Riding Hood, the wolf, and the woodcutter.
- Additional masks and other props, such as a picnic basket and a red cloak.

Activities:

- Ask the participants to act the story out by themselves, without the use of hand puppets or any props (or with the medium of their choice, if they refuse).
- Facilitate opportunities during the sociodramatic play of the story for identifying the characters' feelings, and then for expressing their feelings, for example – Red Riding Hood saying 'I feel worried' when she does not recognise her grandmother in the bed; or 'I feel scared' when the wolf jumped out of the bed.

SESSION 13:

Purpose of the session:

- Saying goodbye!

Materials needed:

- Visual presentations of the stories of the Three little pigs and Red Riding Hood.
- Hand puppets of Red Riding Hood, the wolf, the woodcutter and the three pigs.
- Additional masks and other props used during the sociodramatic play activities.
- Sweets, cookies and cool drink for a party!

Activities:

- Do a review on the past twelve sessions, emphasising the two specific social skills, namely *asking for help* and *expressing their emotions*.
- End the session with a small party.

APPENDIX G

Transcript of selected individual interview*

* The rest of the interviews are included on the compact disc.

INTERVIEW 2: EDUCATOR

| KEY OF ABBREVIATIONS | |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| R: | Researcher |
| E: | Educator |

R: Thank you for the opportunity to have this second interview after the completion of the social skills group sessions. I'm just quickly going to recap on what we talked about during the first interview. We spoke about the three children in your class and where they were at that stage with regard to the specific social skills that we have focused on, namely asking for help and expressing their feelings.

E: Yes, yes. I remember.

R: The purpose of this interview is to get an overview of the children's current level of social functioning, specifically with regard to those two social skills. Maybe we should focus on one child at a time. Let's start with xxx (Aladdin). **Before the group sessions, you said that he would express his feelings, but that it would sometimes be inappropriate. And that he would not always take into consideration other people's feelings when he expresses his feelings.**

Expression of feelings

E: Yes, that's a big part of his autism, of his problem.

R: Yes...

E: **A child with autism is not aware of other people's feelings. Or if they are aware, they don't know how to go about it. Because they only know themselves and often seems very egocentric. And often they mean well, but they just don't have the skills to know the difference.** Yes, xxx (Aladdin) can sometimes be overwhelming, also towards other children. But his intentions are good, I'm sure. **If he could explain his behaviour, I'm sure his intention would not be to not listen to someone or to be rude. But since your intervention, I think he tries very hard to express and explain his feelings.** He is now able, lately, to come and tell me... but then I have to ask him... I see it in his facial expression, and then I will ask, 'xxx (Aladdin), what's wrong? Are you angry? Or are you not feeling well today?'

Perspective taking

Difficulty in explaining behaviour
Expression of feelings

Use of body language

- And **then he is able to explain to me**. And lately he is even able to tell me when he didn't take his tablets... Expression of feelings
- R: His medicine?
- E: Yes, **his medicine to cope with his feelings**. **He knows exactly that his mom or his dad gives him the medicine to help him to stay calm**. Then he will come to me and say, 'xxx, ek het nou nie my pilletjie gedrink, and that's why ek nie so lekker voel nie.' **And in his way to explain his feelings, he will do it in both languages**. And he is not aware that it is two languages. To him, it is still one language. We asked him several times, and we had discussions with the speech therapist, and they all said that he perceives it as one language. **But he will use everything that he has to explain his feelings**. Use of medication
Expression of feelings
Expression of feelings
- R: Do I understand you correctly that he is lately more able to explain his feelings?
- E: **Yes, there is definitely an improvement on his ability to explain his feelings**. However, he **still has the inability to really interpret other people's feelings**. **But to be honest, he is also trying to do that**. **Because now he knows that other people also have feelings and that he mustn't hurt their feelings**. **Or not to decide for somebody else what he might feel**. Expression of feelings
Perspective taking
- R: This is also something that you have been working on with him?
- E: Yes. And we discuss it in the group as well. **Because we try to let each other feel good about themselves** so that nobody will feel that I pick on him or her. And in our class environment it's not like that because we all help each other. **And we say to each other that we all have some difficulties and we must help each other**. They know that I'm an old lady and they will say "Oh xxx, what's going on with your brain again?" Then I will say, "Yes children, you must help me. I'm old now and I forget things." And when I make a mistake, I will use the opportunity and say, "you see, we can all make mistakes. Even though I'm the teacher, I can also make a mistake. And as we all help each other, you must help me as well." And especially xxx (Aladdin) in that regard – he loves that and **he will try and help others not to feel bad**. He has come a long way in that regard, because in the beginning he would not even allow himself to make a mistake. But that is all part of the autism. They don't want to make mistakes. But I also don't like to make mistakes and therefore I can understand them and they can understand me. Reinforcing feelings of self-worth
Peer involvement
Support giving

- R: Before the group sessions, you gave xxx (Aladdin), on a scale of one to ten, a seven for expressing his feelings. If you have to plot him now on a scale, where will you put him? Expression of feelings
- E: I think eight and a half, nine... eight and a half... will that be okay? Let's rather stick to an eight. Another thing I want to mention, because I know him well for five years now, is that you must remember that that is my opinion of him. He knows me and my facial expressions well and knows how to handle situations in my class. So maybe in a strange environment, with a new teacher or somebody else, that might not be the same case. Because they are so sensitive to the atmosphere of a situation, he might act differently in another situation. With you... he knows you well by now and he knows that you listen and that you knows his teacher... and he knows that he can be himself, so... In a strange situation that might not be the same. Expression of feelings
Perspective taking
Difficulty with generalisation of social skills
- R: Yes, I will definitely keep that in mind. And in terms for asking for help?
- E: He will freely come and ask for help. Because he knows me and he feels comfortable in the class, he feels free to risk and to ask if he needs something. Even if it would involve failure, he knows that nothing would come of that. We discuss failure a lot in class. It doesn't matter if you win or loose, as long as you participate. We had many problems in class with winning or loosing, especially with him. They always want to be first, they always want to win. We discussed that in class, many times. And made it our motto. Even though the word participate was a difficult word for them to understand at first, now they know. As I said before, everything is so intervened... It's not a matter of now we work on asking questions and now we work on how to behave Asking for help
- R: You integrate everything as the opportunity arises.
- E: Yes. We do it in the life skills period, numeracy period, whatever. And that's the positive aspect of being in one class, and not moving between classes. Although moving between classes would help them to cope with changing environments in a better way. But at the moment, having them in one class every day helps a lot to enhance the skills they need. Facilitating the development of social skills in classroom
- R: And in terms of his peers – does he ask them for help? Because I have picked up when I talked to xxx's (Cinderella) caregivers at the hostel, that they said that she would ask them for help, but not the other children. What is the case with xxx (Aladdin)? Will he ask his friends for help? Not asking peers for help

- E: He would rather go to adults, but he might ask some of his older friends in the other classes for help. But asking for help for peers, no. There it comes in again that he feels he is big enough and can handle situations. No one in this class wants to be the weaker one. So yes, he will ask, but then to a superior friend. Not asking peers for help
- R: So it must be an older friend, not a same age peer?
- E: Yes. But on the other hand, I do think that it is emerging. When I think about it, there were situations where he asked some of the kids in class for something. I think he will ask if he really needs something. Since your intervention I think it has emerged. Not that I'm saying that it was the intervention per se, but I think that since the intervention, he is concentrating on that more. That was not part of his framework and he would not consider doing that, but know he does. And now that they are more relaxed among each other, they feel that they can ask that person for something. Xxx (Aladdin) will especially ask xxx (Cinderella) to help him. Asking for help?? Or not asking peers??
Peer involvement
Asking for help
- R: Yes, during the story of the Three little pigs, we have played that the three pigs were almost the same age. Among the various scenarios we have acted out, they also had to go to their brothers or their friends to ask for help, in other words to go to other peers and not necessarily to an adult. I'm curious to know whether they are a bit more relaxed among their peers now or not...
- E: You must remember that one of the main things of autism is that what they learn in one situation, they won't necessarily apply in another situation. Difficulty with generalisation of social skills
- R: Yes, I know.
- E: They can't always generalise to other situations. It might be possible that because they are getting older and more mature that they are applying that skill, and not necessarily your intervention. Influence of maturing of participants on results
- R: Yes, that I know and I'm quite aware of that.
- E: I know you are.
- R: Okay, let's move on to xxx (Cinderella).
- E: Yes, with her... She's definitely more willing to ask for help... or more free to ask questions, like "xxx, what must I do here? What must I do here?" And when I tell her to come to me where I'm busy with another child, she will do that. But in the beginning she would not do that at all. Asking for help
Turn-taking
- R: In terms of asking for help, you gave her a three on the scale. Asking for help

- E: Yes...
- R: Where will you plot her now?
- E: **I think she definitely moved up to a seven.**
- R: A seven? Wow! Asking for help
- E: Yes, in terms of asking for help or even just asking questions – she would never have done that in the past. **But now she's more able or comfortable in asking for help.** Asking for help
Peer involvement She's much more at ease now and makes contact with her peers. She is starting to play with others on the playground and she's also interacting with her classmates in class. And even xxx (Aladdin) will talk with her... In the beginning they would just ignore her, but now she's really part of the group in the class. Peer involvement
Peer involvement Maybe the fact that she's the only girl among the boys in the class had a huge influence. But now, she's feeling much more part of the group and she acts as if she's one of them. Even Aladdin is starting to interact more appropriately with the other learners in the class in a friendship way, and not just with xxx, who is sitting next to him.
- R: What would you say, if any, are the influence of having her as part of the group session with regard to her participation in group settings now? I heard that you said that she and xxx (Aladdin) is still communicating...
- E: Yes, for sure. **Because he's now calling her xxxtjie and when he speaks to her or asks her something, she will respond immediately.** Peer involvement
Peer involvement Or she would talk freely to him and xxx (Tom Thumb), spontaneously. And I never saw this with her and xxx (Tom Thumb) before. But again, this might also be part of their process of maturing and feeling safe in their environment... **but the last few weeks there has been a definite change after you had the group sessions.** I even recommended her to go to another school as well... Peer involvement
- R: Did you?
- E: I've tried that and we had a long discussion on that. But in the end there are not many schools... I would not put her in a mainstream school, no. But in a small group school setup, yes. But there is not a school really appropriate for her needs. And I'm also afraid of... because of the autism part of her often strange behaviour, we would not know how she would react when we put her in a new environment. I'm scared that she would regress. So that's always a gamble with our children. They can be number one in the class... because she is number

- one, she's my number one... but when you put her in a different school she might not have the same... the same... self-worth...
- R: And self-confidence...?
- E: Yes, that's the word I was looking for. **Because her self-worth has increased, her self-confidence has also increased.** Increased feelings of self-worth & self-confidence
- R: And you said that she's also starting to play with friends on the playground?
- E: Yes, yes. **And she calls them and you can see her whole body language is more relaxed and open towards others. She, out of her own, will make comments in class and ask me questions like "How's your daughter? How's the baby?" You know, out of the blue, she will initiate conversations.** Peer involvement
Initiating conversations
- R: But that's excellent!
- E: She would never ever have done that. She would only answer your questions. And then she would be very shy. She would hide, although she would talk to me... When her mom comes, she would hide behind her mom and won't talk to me or answer me. But now she will talk to me even if her mom is here.
- R: That's very good...
- E: Yes, so I'm really impressed with xxx.
- R: **And in terms of expressing her feelings? Before the group sessions you gave her a five...** Expression of feelings
- E: **A five... Yes, it's still... it will only be... it's still... But yes, remember that not all their personalities are the same. Not even in the mainstream schools do they express their emotions in the same way. So she is still not very open to expressing her feelings... It is still difficult for her to express her feelings, but I can say maybe it is now more a six.** Expression of feelings
- R: It seemed to me that **she is able to recognise various kinds of feelings, but that she finds it difficult to verbalise what she is feeling. Expressing it as her own feelings, that's difficult for her.** Perspective taking
Expression of feelings
- E: Yes, yes. Although, the day we made a collage with all the carbohydrates – rice and noodles and so on...
- R: Yes, I saw it outside. Looked very nice.
- E: And they had to use a facial expression as a background or a foundation. And she said to me **"No, I don't want that crying one. I want that laughing face."** So in that regard... **But again, it's not her own feelings. She describes feelings of** Perspective taking
Expression of feelings

- something or someone else... And she could verbalise "I don't want that". But still to say... I think it is emerging.
- R: Yes. Last time you also said that she wrote you a letter complaining about a boy teasing her and she also said that she was sad because her mom is sick.
- E: Yes, and she even told me two weeks ago her brother was sick. And she said to me that it was not nice because her mom had to work and she had to stay with her brother. So very slowly it is emerging. Expression of feelings
- R: Okay. Let's move on to xxx (Tom Thumb) now.
- E: xxx (Tom Thumb) had a huge drawback the week after your intervention ended. He was very sick and didn't attend school for a while.
- R: I heard, yes...
- E: And as you know, a few of the children of the school were hospitalised. And when he came back, he had to start all over again with many things. His mom kept him at home for quite a while. And due to the part that autism plays in the problems of our children, he had to start over...
- R: In terms of his emotions or...?
- E: Yes, we had to try all over to let him feel good about himself. It's only now, that he is starting to giggle again. Because he sits next to xxx and xxx will go where nobody else will go – he gets xxx's (Tom Thumb) attention and for him it works. It irritates the other children, but for xxx (Tom Thumb), it's getting attention. He will answer him back and they are often interacting. So it is good for xxx's (Tom Thumb) sake. And now I also started to hear him talk loudly when xxx makes a fuss about something. He is able to see the humor in a situation and that to me is a good level of functioning if you are able to see the humor... Reinforcing feelings of self-worth
- R: Yes...
- E: And that he can pick up in a group situation. He still tries very hard to cope in the scholastic situation, but true to autism – he has fallen behind again after his sickness. And I had to start over. But he is very eager to catch up again. As he sees that the others are getting new reading books, he wants to read to me because he wants a new book as well. Because I let them choose the new reading books themselves. They are all allowed to do it and xxx (Tom Thumb) wants to be part of it. I even try to enhance peer reading and peer work in the numeracy class. And because he is such a slow learner, and he wants to be where the others are, he will ask me questions such as "xxx, what is this? Will Need for peer interactions
Peer involvement
- Sense of humor
- Peer involvement
- Peer involvement
- Asking for help

- you help me?"** And then I will help him, but also emphasising that it is okay for him to work at his own pace. **It's important for me that he has to feel the same good feeling about himself and therefore I try to give him a lot of positive feedback.** Reinforcing feelings of self-worth
- R: In the beginning of the group sessions, he was the quiet one in the group. But as I gave him more opportunities, like giving him the story to read and not to xxx (Aladdin), he slowly opened up and started to participate.
- E: With me, each one gets a day to be the leader in the class. **And don't dare to take the leadership away from xxx (Tom Thumb), because he will tell you that it is his day and I let him finish his work and then go on with the duties. And he will take that initiative and be the leader.** So I can say he is really a quiet observer. He knows exactly what's going on. Leadership responsibility
- R: And he tries...
- E: Oh yes, he tries.
- R: In terms of **expressing his feelings, you gave him a three** on the scale from one to ten. Where would you plot him now? Expression of feelings
- E: **Let's say a four. Maybe a five. Even though there was a drawback, I'm sure we can give him a higher mark. But I think he still needs a lot of intervention. But he will get there, I'm sure of that.** Expression of feelings
- R: And in terms of **asking for help, you gave him a six before the intervention...**
- E: **I think seven and a half, eight maybe.** Asking for help
- R: And in terms of adults vs peers?
- E: **I don't think he will go to peers for help, but he will ask adults for help if he really needs it.** (children make a noise in the background...) Not asking peers for help
- R: We also incorporated a few scenarios in class into our story. In the beginning he was very shy and only said what I said, but later on he would make up his own questions in terms of asking for help. But again, as we've said so many times before, it was in that specific situation. It's still unclear whether he's able to generalise it to other situations or if he only links it to the story.
- E: And you know, he's one of a twin..
- R: Yes, I remember you told me.
- E: And I don't know if that might have an influence on him, you know. Making him even more quiet maybe, because she gets the most attention. And with his mom's depression... But lately it seems to be better with his mom. But on the

- other hand he is very seldom at home because even though they stay in Centurion, they only come and get him during the holidays and closed weekends. I'm never sure how all of these factors affect him.
- R: Yes, I'm thinking now... All of these factors would have an influence on a child without autism. What is the effect then on a child with autism?
- E: Yes, yes. Maybe, maybe not. But you will never know. And he is a very sensitive child and a slow learner... All of these things have an influence. I try not to let him feel like a slow learner, but you will never know what the impact of this is on him. Because he will never say that... But I'm thinking of something else now. **When I think of all three of them in the class situation, I think that they feel more comfortable and free to ask questions and for help now than before.** They even started to help each other with their duties on frequent occasions... And I think the others in the class as well. I think they had an influence on the others in the class as well. That is one of the positive things of grouping these children, which is on the same level together.
- R: Do I understand you correctly that you are saying that the three children that participated in the intervention have influenced the rest of the group?
- E: Yes, it could be. Even though I can't say that it is the case for sure as there is strong individuals among the rest of the group as well, **but I'm sure they have an influence. But not only that.**
- R: Yes...
- E: I think they matured a bit as well
- R: Together with your positive inputs as well...
- E: Yes, that as well. But I think the fact that they have been in one group with me for so long now also plays a very important part. They feel secure and free to grow and to risk. If I think of xxx (Cinderella)... In the past she would get upset when I made a joke with her of when I spoke in Afrikaans. But now, **I think she feels so good about herself and her own improvement, that she herself now tries to speak Afrikaans and makes jokes with me.**
- R: Now she can risk, as you said.
- E: Yes, and that to me is giving back **the whole situation of feeling okay. I'm feeling okay about everything, so I'm able to say Afrikaans words and to risk.** Again, I also think they are feeling more relaxed and know that **they can ask me anytime.** They are even able to wait their turn now when I'm busy with someone else. And

Asking for help

Peer support
Peer involvement

Influence on peer interactions in the classroom

Increased feelings of self-worth

Feelings of self-worth

Asking for help
Turn-taking

- I try very hard to get to them all. If I can't get to answering their questions on that day, I will get back to them first thing on the next day. And they know it. I will say: "Okay xxx, I couldn't get to your question. I will help you first thing tomorrow morning."
- R: And they know that you will help them...
- E: And I try my best to get to them all. And in that regard, even with xxx (Tom Thumb), he knows that I will get back to him. **Although he is quiet and seldom ask**, I will make a point to get to him on an individual level as well. **I try my best to give him his attention as well. Yes, that is very important. They must all feel that they are on the same level.** And I will tell the others that they had their turn, **it's now xxx's turn. It's important that the quiet ones also get their turn.**
- R: Is there anything else that you have picked up that has changed in their functioning during the last few months? Not to say that it was the influence of the intervention per se... With those three especially... For example, I've also worked a lot on turn taking... I didn't plan for it before the time as one of the skills that I was going to focus on, but once we've started I realised that if I'm not going to incorporate that, xxx (Aladdin) is going to take all the time.
- E: If I think about it, yes, definitely. **They are more able to wait their turn, especially xxx (Aladdin). If I tell him that I'm still busy with another child and that he must wait his turn, he will do it. He will even tell the others that they must wait their turn when they are trying to interrupt me while I'm busy with someone else.**
- R: Is there anything else that you have picked up? I know that it is a very difficult question...
- E: Yes, and it is also difficult because they have matured over the last few months as well. But yes, **they are aware when someone's turn is over and they are able to wait their turn. And they wait their turn at the tuck shop, that's not a problem anymore.** Other than that... Well, as I said, they have matured all over.
- R: Yes, and that makes it difficult to say..
- E: Yes, unfortunately. But they loved your intervention and they would love you to come again. **I think they feel so good about themselves when there is extra attention.** After each group session you had they would come back to the class and tell what they did. And that to me was great, that they were able to come and share with us. **But I definitely think the individual attention, even though it was in a group of three, had a huge influence on their feelings of self-worth and**

Asking for help
Reinforcing feelings of self-worth

Turn-taking

Turn-taking

Turn-taking

Individual attention's influence of feelings of self-worth

Individual attention's influence of feelings of self-worth

- self-confidence. And I think that also played a role in their ability to feel free to risk now and to ask for help. Asking for help
- R: Once or twice when I came to your class after the intervention, I heard that you were talking to them about the group sessions...
- E: I can't remember that specifically
- R: It was very positive to me as it could reinforce what we did and help them to maybe generalise some of the skills to their class environment... Educator support
- E: Yes, that is important to me. Even if they go for speech therapy, I ask them afterwards... And not to checkup on the teacher, or the therapist or the person, but just to be part of what they have learned and to help them to see it as part of the class as well. Educator support/ collaboration with therapist
- R: Yes, and thereby reinforcing...
- E: And putting everything into perspective... I try to use anything and every opportunity to reinforce... And the main thing behind everything for me is to let them feel good about themselves. I think anybody, if they feel good about themselves, they are more able to learn and to try new things, whatever. Reinforcing feelings of self-worth
- R: That's the bottom of it all...
- E: Yes, I think so. Even with the autistic children, I think that's the main thing.
- R: I'm just thinking of something else now and I don't know if you'll be able to answer me... During the sessions, we read the story a few times and then started playing the story with hand puppets and with masks and whatever... But the moment I asked them to play the story themselves, not having any costumes or hand puppets, they refused. I don't know if that is part of the autism...
- E: It could be, but it could also be because they were tired.
- R: But I've tried that a few times – once in the beginning of a session. They said they don't want to be the pig, they will play with the pig. Maybe it was to threatening for them, or...
- E: That's interesting.
- R: Yes, it was just something that I've picked up and made me wonder...
- E: Maybe it could be part of autism because they had to be that character in the first-person and it is easier for them to talk in the third-person or as someone else. Also the thing of having a barrier, might make it easier for them. Although in my class they have dramatised a story before without anything with them, just as they are. Maybe they feel more secure. I don't know. I will think about that.

R: Thank you for that comment. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

E: Not that I can think of right now... Thank you so much for your intervention. And please feel free to come in again at any time and do anything with them. They can really benefit from any individual attention.

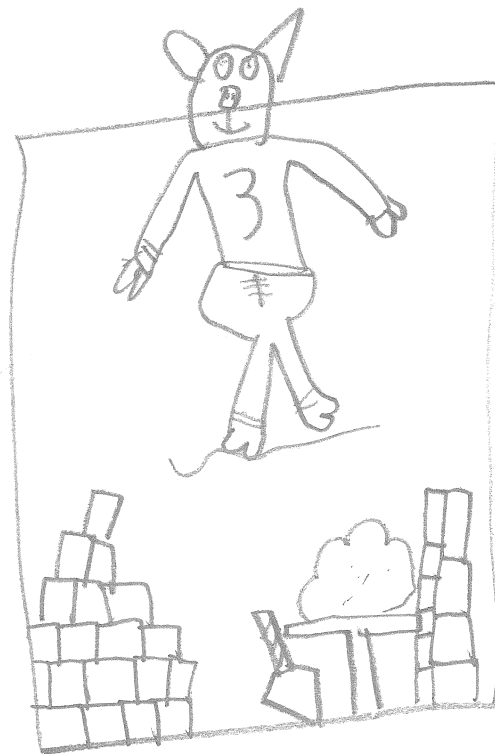
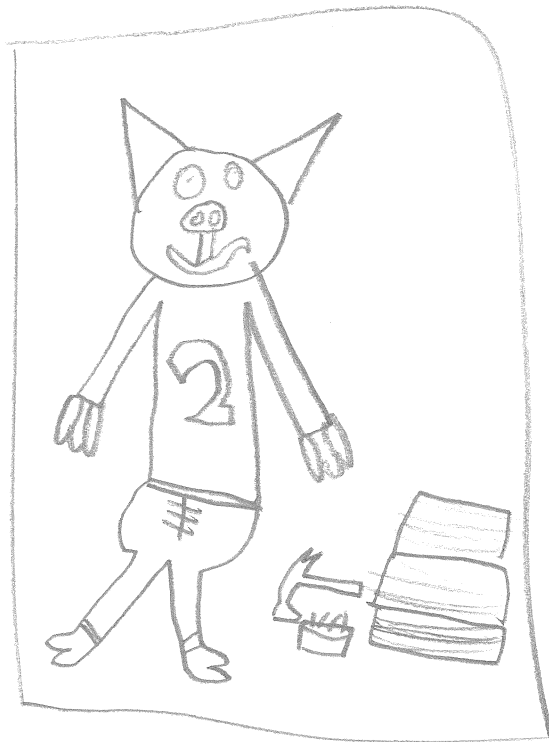
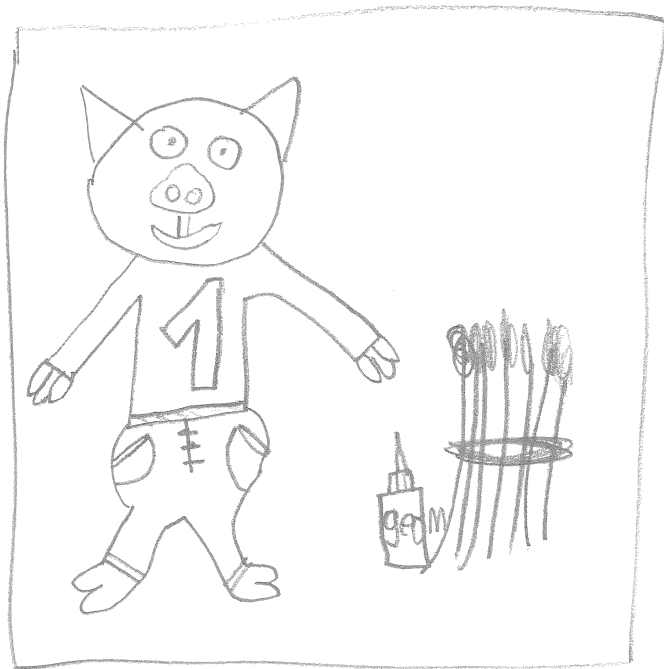
R: Thank you. Thanks as well for all your time and energy in helping me with this project.

APPENDIX H

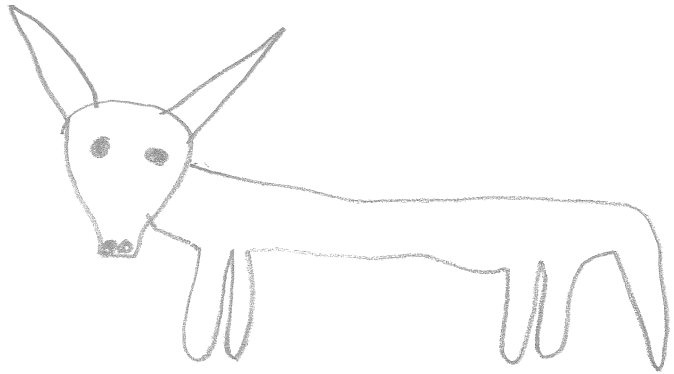
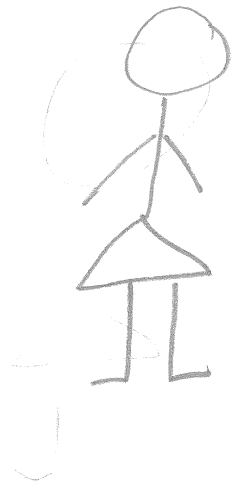
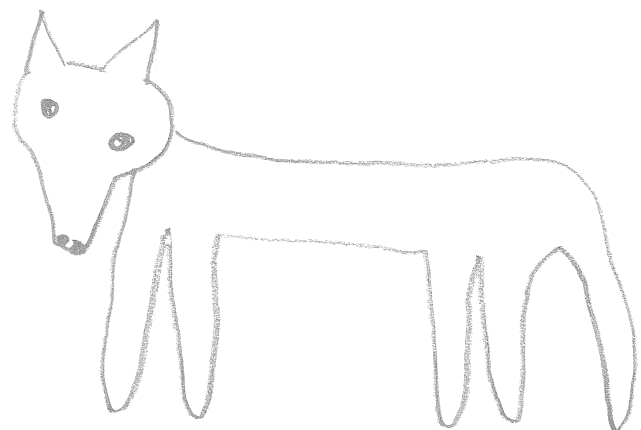
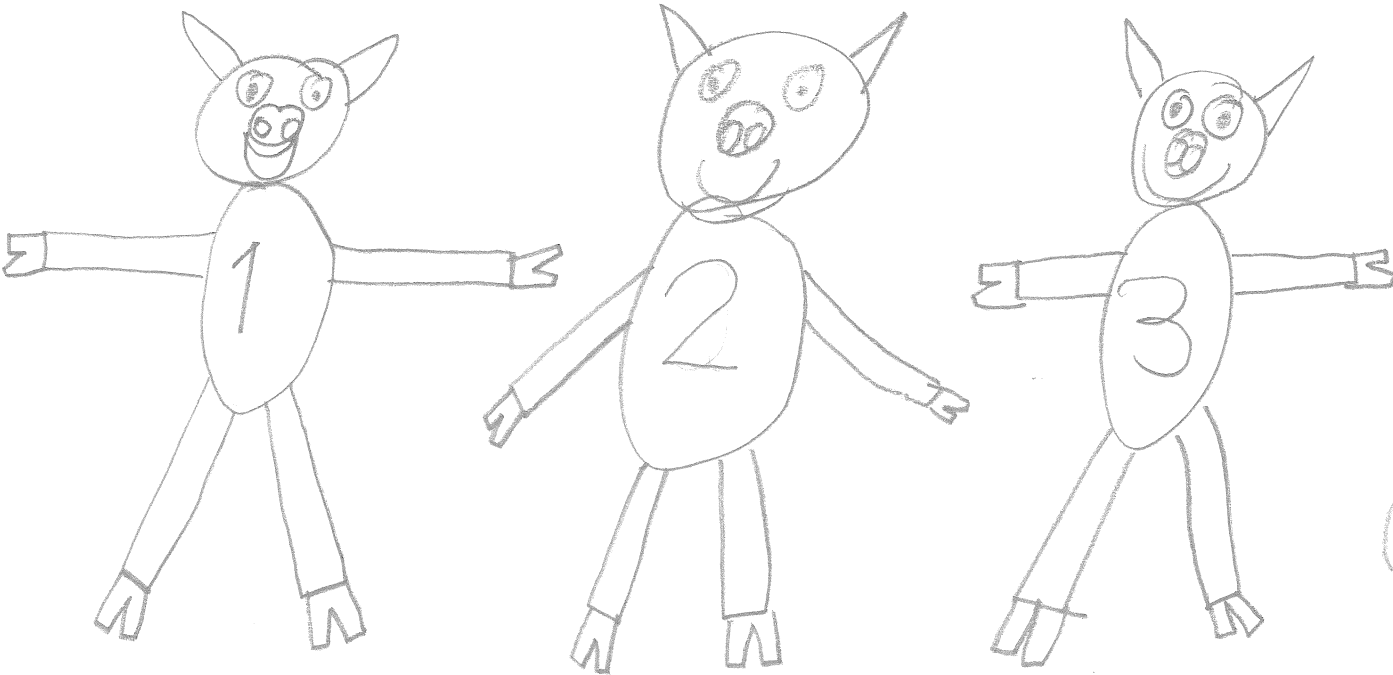
Pictures drawn by the primary participants & selected informal interviews* *

* The rest of the interviews are included on the compact disc.

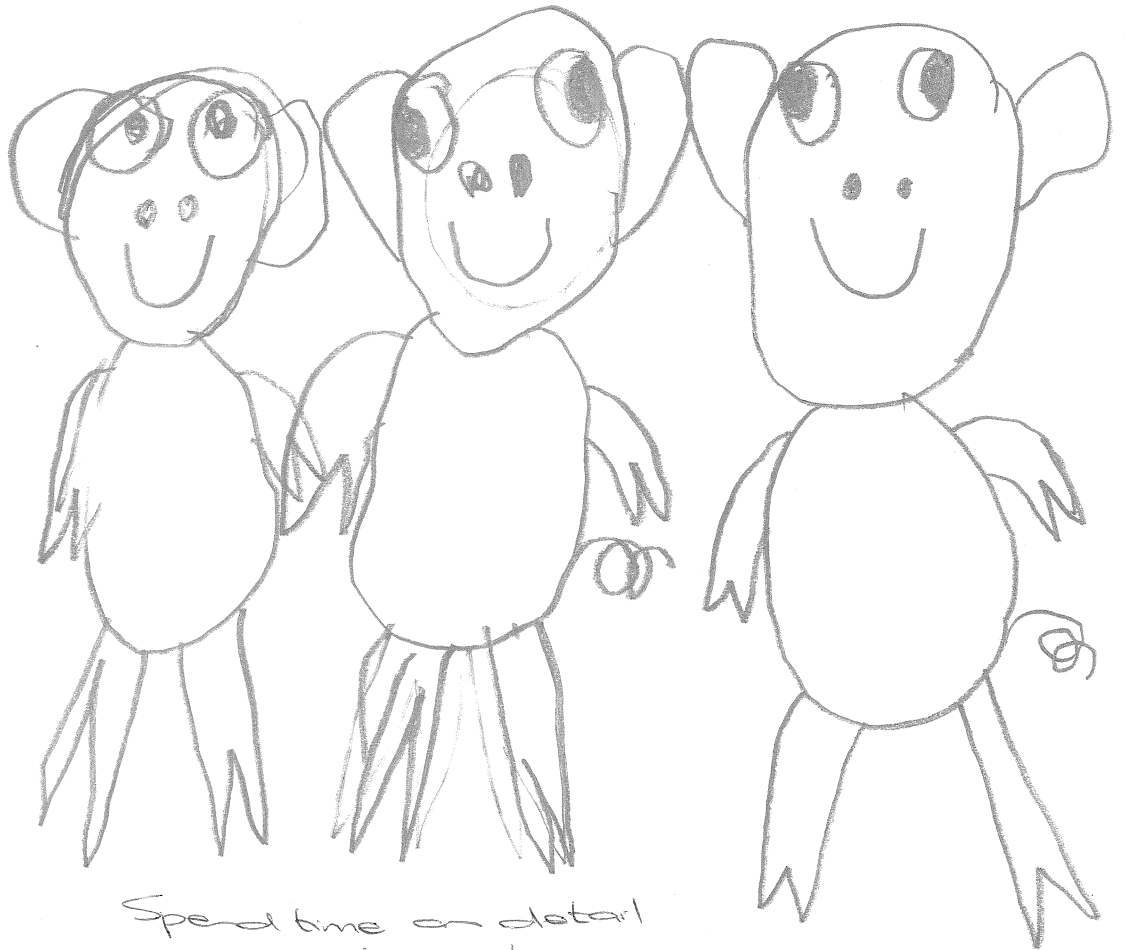
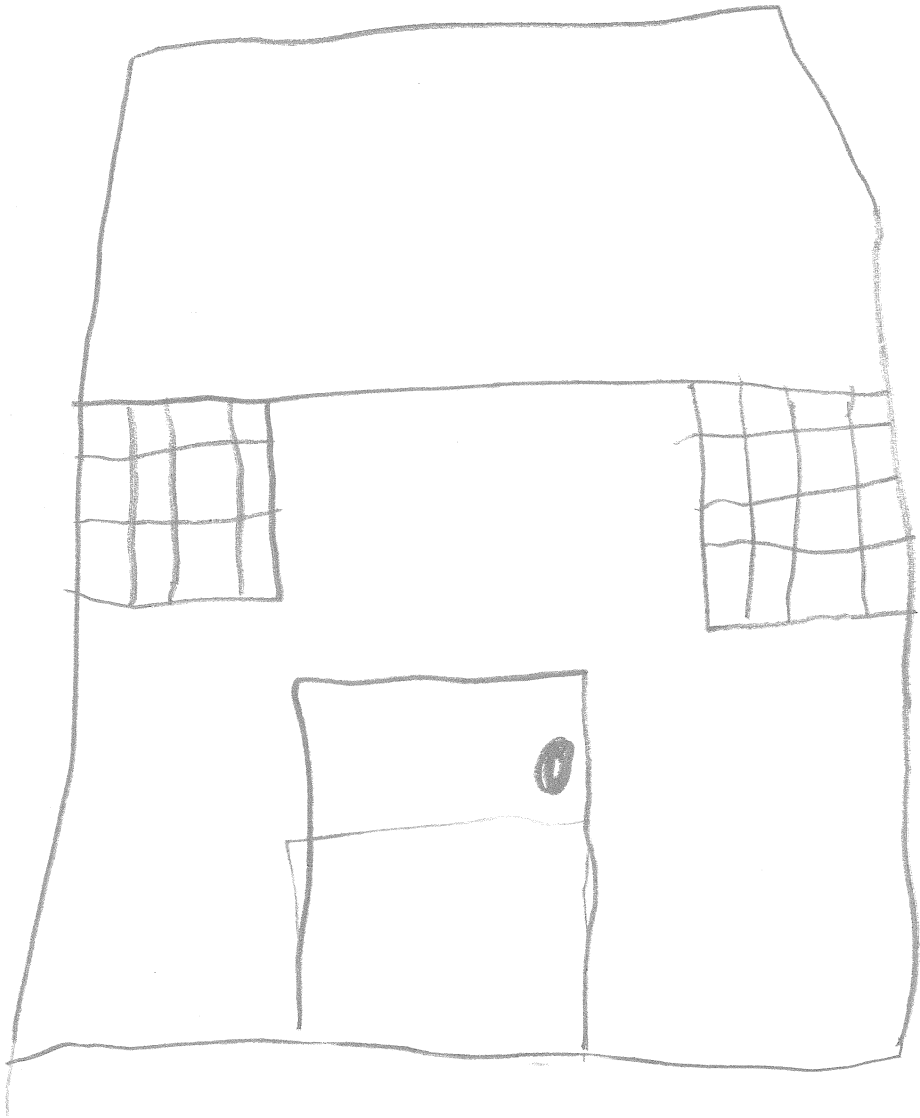
* Additional potential analyses are marked in pink.



Remember detail
Extend story line



- Combines the two stories
- Remember both stories stay lives
- Includes the wolf?



Spent time on detail
Remember both stories
Needed probing

Tam Thamb

INTERVIEW : ALADDIN

| KEY OF ABBREVIATIONS | |
|----------------------|------------|
| R: | Researcher |
| A: | Aladdin |

I started the session by talking a little bit about his weekend, games, etc...

R: Okay, now I want you to draw me a picture. Try and think of any of the stories that we did.

A: We did... uh... we did... uh... the three... Little Red Riding Hood...

R: Yes... And?

A: And... and... the Three little pigs.

R: Think of anything that you can remember of these two stories and draw me picture about that please.

A: Okay....

(Starts to draw the Three little pigs)

A: Don't you think you should put off the tape recorder because it will waste too much time while I'm drawing.

R: Okay, good idea. (Puts it off while Aladdin is drawing)

R: Okay, thank you. Now tell me anything that you can remember about the story.

A: Okay... in the story... the first little piggy... it was... it was... piggy number one... he built his house with straw... and number two with wood and the last one with bricks. You see, they was living in a house, but then they got too big and eat too many food and they got too fat... and the mother said that the house was not big enough... and it was a small house... So apparently they had to move to their own house, to built their own new homes.

R: Mmm...

A: So her mother... then you told us... then you told us that the mother has given them some money... and they went to buy... number one... you said the number one piggy was going to buy some straw and number two went for wood and the last one went for bricks. You told us that... du-du-du(thinking)... but then before

they could relax and phone their mom... no, I'm sorry about that – there were no cellphones in that time... they send her a message... for their mother... and uh... to come and visit to their new house. But before the mother could get there, the big bad werewolf smelled something... he smelled some big fat pigs... he found three houses with three fat pigs... So he started at the small house and he knocked on the door, so you said... And he said *little pig, little pig, let me in...* and then he cuts... no he blows the house down, just like you said... and the other pig quickly went to the other house and went there... and then he said the same thing as he said to number one... and he said *open the door for me* and they said *not by the hair of my chinny chin chin...* and then he blows that house too... so the werewolf actually catches the two pigs but they were so slippery, they just popped out of his hands and quickly ran to the number three house...

R: Mmm...

A: So then they ran to number three house... and then he said the same thing like that other one again and then he blows the house again... and then you said that he said *how can the door not be broken down and the house not blown down?* And then he hit the house and heard 'ting' and found out the house was made of bricks just like you said. And then... and then...

R: Mmm...

A: The door was... he kept on blowing and blowing and trying to make some silly disguises as well but that did not work... and the he looked up and saw some smoke out of the chimney... and he thought if there is a chimney, I can get in... and then he jumps into the chimney... but then the three pigs saw there was something coming down the chimney... and the one piggy said *let's make him feel... let's make a fire...* So they made a fire with a big pot stew... no a very hot pot with 15 million liters of hot, hot water... When the wolf jumped in, he said: *Now I got you!* But he fell in the pot, screamed, jumped out and ran so far, far away and never came back.

R: Very good, you remember so well.

A: Yes, and here's a story I made up myself. So the three little piggies decided to **Imagination? build a more bigger house and they lived happily ever after.**

R: Everybody together in the big house?

A: Yes. All of them and even his mother...

- R: That's a very nice ending to the story. Now, can you remember what was lesson that we've learned while playing the story?
- A: Uhm... uh...
- R: Can you remember what the pigs did when they ran to the other brothers?
- A: They ran because they were scared that the werewolf was going to eat them... and they screamed... Perspective taking
- R: For...?
- A: Help!
- R: Yes! Can you remember?
- A: Yes, we played how they were asking for help... when they ran away... but also when they were building the houses... they... uh... uh... asked for help with bricks and straw... Asking for help
- R: Yes, that's right. And why did they ask for help?
- A: Because they were scared of the werewolf! Perspective taking
- R: And in Little Red Riding Hood, she was also asking for...?
- A: Help!
- R: Yes!
- A: And the two stories each had a werewolf... the one had a werewolf and the other story also had a werewolf...
- R: Yes, and in both of the stories they were asking for help...
- A: Yes, because they were scared. We played that with the puppets and the masks and the... Little Red Riding Hood ran out of the door and was asking for help... and the grandpa for help... his grandpa took his weapon and cut off the wolf's neck and then... and then... Perspective taking
- R: How do think did Red Riding Hood feel when she was walking through the forest to her grandmother?
- A: I think she actually knew that the werewolf was trying to trick her... Perspective taking
- R: And that made her feel...
- A: A little scared...
- R: And when her mother asked her to go to her grandmother, how do think did she feel there? Perspective taking
- A: She feels happy! But she told her not to speak to the big, bad wolf.
- R: Okay, and how do you think did the grandmother feel? Perspective taking

- A: **When the werewolf came into her house, she was so scared...** but before she could scream for help, he ate her... Perspective taking
- R: And how do think did the wolf feel?
- A: **Oh, he feels very happy now because his stomach is full now.** And now he was waiting for Red Riding Hood and before he was preparing for Red Riding Hood, uh... uh... And then Little Red Riding Hood finally came and... and... and... then... and then...(thinking) Perspective taking
- R: And then she saw the wolf in the bed and asked him why his ears were so big... and why are your eyes so big...
- A: Oh yes... and then... and then he said *it's to see you even better, my dear.*
- R: And how do you think did she feel when she stood there and asked these questions?
- A: Oh, that's a bit funky... a bit weird to me. And then she saw the teeth and asked about the teeth and he said he was going to eat her... but then she screamed so loud for help for her grandpa... And his grandpa arrived just in time to attack... and then she found out it was the werewolf...
- R: And how do you think did the grandpa feel when he saw the wolf?
- A: **He was very, very angry and wanted to attack him...** Perspective taking
- R: Now tell me, if someone does something to you that you don't like – how do you feel?
- A: **I'll feel a little bit sad.** But then my mom told me something and told me what I must do... But when someone does something mean to me, I'll do it to them back... Expression of feelings
- R: If they are rude to you?
- A: Yes, I can go to the teacher or I can go and be rude to them myself. **And I will feel unhappy.** Expression of feelings
- R: Unhappy?
- A: Yes, a little bit.
- R: Okay, let's now say that you are in a place in a strange city...
- A: Yes?
- R: And you are all alone. Not your mom or your dad is there... And you can't find your way... How will you feel?
- A: **A little worried. But when I'm lost and I'm alone, then I'll be afraid.** Expression of feelings
- R: Afraid?

- A: Yes, very afraid.
- R: And what can you do then?
- A: I can ask someone for help! Asking for help
- R: And what makes you angry?
- A: Sometimes when people do naughty things or they steal something from me, then I get very angry. Or when somebody keeps on bossing me around so many times, then I get angry. Expression of feelings
- R: And what makes you sad?
- A: Just like the first one that I said, but only if my mom or my dad don't love me. Expression of feelings
- R: That makes you sad...
- A: Yes, and if someone is not nice to me. Expression of feelings
- R: Can you talk to someone if you are feeling sad or angry?
- A: Only with my mom or my dad. When I get angry a lot, then xxx (the educator) helps me to calm down a little bit.
- R: And when you need some help in class, or at home, or when you visit your friends – what will you do?
- A: Oh, if I need some help I can just ask some questions like 'Can you please help me over here?' And then they help me. Asking for help
- R: Is that now at school or at home?
- A: At school yes, but sometimes I do get help at home as well. But only if I really want some help from my mom. Asking for help
- R: Do you only ask if you really want help?
- A: Ja. I will say: 'Oh mommy, will you please come help me. Can I come and sit next to you want ek sukkel bietjie dan?' And then she helps me a little bit. Asking for help
- R: Thank you so much for being part of the group and having so much fun.
- A: Yeah...

APPENDIX 1

Assessment report by psychologist

To Whom It May Concern:

Clinical observation in terms of socialisation, more specifically appropriate expression of feelings and asking for help, suggested the following:

PARTICIPANT ONE

Prior to the intervention

The severe intermingling of languages of the subject has a direct and profound impact on his ability appropriately express his feelings. He becomes easily agitated and anxious but struggles to express or understand his emotional state. He “manages” his emotions through elaborate rituals and insistence on predictable routines. Participant one often attempts to convey his emotions, but word finding problems hamper the effectiveness thereof. Participant one is able to ask for help, but often misinterprets what he really needs. As stated earlier, his expressive language difficulties as well as the tendency to become overly anxious impact negatively on asking appropriately for what he needs.

After the intervention

Participant one seems to now be using English almost exclusively, despite being from an Afrikaans family. His anxiety levels are much more controlled but it has to be pointed out that he started using medication just prior to the commencement of the research. As a result of being less anxious he is now much more capable of expressing his emotions more appropriately and to ask for help when necessary. Participant one can identify and verbalise more abstract emotions now. He seems to be more in contact with himself and is eager to talk about how he feels. Participant one seems to have generalised these abilities to structured and unstructured situations. He is confident to ask for help from the appropriate individuals in a variety of settings and does not always wait for a very familiar person before asking. Rituals are still present, but do not interfere as much with his day to day functioning.

PARTICIPANT TWO

Prior to the intervention

Participant two is a passive and sometimes aloof young lady who prefers her own company. Although she has relatively well developed expressive and receptive language abilities, she still struggles with more abstract concepts such as different emotional states. Although her behaviour is easily managed, she lacks sufficient reasoning skills to express her emotions appropriately and subsequently fails to discuss any feelings of discomfort, disappointment etc. She is able to differentiate between happy, sad and angry but struggles with more advanced emotional concepts.

Participant two comes across as a shy individual. As stated earlier, her demeanor can be characterised as being aloof. As a result, she is very independent in terms of activities of daily living, but lacks the self-confidence to ask for help when needed. Although she understands the concept of reciprocity, she does not necessarily generalise this concept to situations where she needs assistance. Difficulty with Theory of Mind contributes to lack of understanding that others may not always anticipate her needs.

After the intervention

Despite a diagnosis of autism, Participant two is an individual with a specific personality and continues to be shy and somewhat aloof. These features are regarded as part of her specific personality rather than autism. Clinical observations indicate that she now seeks out the company of specific learners in her class. She also asks to join in 'games' during break times. While always polite, she will express feelings of irritation and frustration, but still resorts to body language rather than verbalisations. She is much more inclined to ask for help, but still tend to wait for a prompt from her teacher. In comparison with her peers, she continues to be more independent and seems to avoid difficult tasks that would require her to ask for help.

PARTICIPANT THREE

Prior to the intervention

Although Participant three is a verbal communicator he seems to have difficulty producing speech at will. Spontaneous speech is mostly used to make his immediate needs known and limited facial expression, humor or curiosity in new settings was observed. As a result, the use of abstract concepts such as feelings and emotions is inadequate. He performs best when visual assistance (i.e. a picture of an angry or sad face) is paired with a request of how he is feeling.

The ability to ask for help appropriately seems to be emerging. A general lack of sense of self inhibits the subject's ability to convey what he needs. Since his admission to the school in 2003, Participant three has become more aware of his peers and attempts to assist them when he perceives that they need assistance. This ability has not yet been fully generalised to himself and he will rather withdraw when a task appears too difficult for him.

After the intervention

Participant three seems much more motivated to use his acquired speech to express himself and ask for help. Self-confidence has increased tremendously compared to when first observed at the beginning of the project. He is able to ask for help when needed, especially in a structured situation. He will, however, seek a familiar person to ask for assistance rather than staff he does not see often. He will attempt more difficult tasks and expresses enjoyment and frustration verbally from time to time.

CONCLUSION

After the sessions were conducted, the three learners were observed in both structured and unstructured situations in an effort to ascertain whether they gained social skills with specific reference to asking for help and expressing their feelings. Formal testing was not used as it was felt that the available standardised tests do not specifically assess the abovementioned social skills. In addition, within the framework of autism, is of utmost

importance that these individuals are able to generalise acquired skills in formal and informal settings. Subsequently, clinical observations were made over a period of weeks in the classroom as well as on the playground and during outings. The possibility of using the other learners in this specific group that did not take part in the research as control group was considered, but it is felt that as this is not a homogeneous group, comparison with each other is not scientific nor fair. However, it seems that the three learners that were involved in the study, performed better on average than the rest of the group. It has to be kept in mind that the learners are in an autism specific environment and receive continuous input not only from the teacher and parents, but also from the speech and occupational therapist. It is thus uncertain to what degree the research per se impacted on the positive improvements.

For any inquiries, please feel free to contact me.

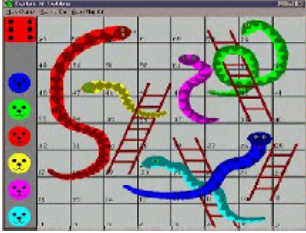



Thank you.

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST (xxx School for learners with autism).

APPENDIX 1

Visual schedule for brief overview of intervention

VISUAL SCHEDULE - OVERVIEW OF SESSIONS

| SESSION | ACTIVITIES |
|-------------|---|
| 1-2 |  |
| 3-8 |  |
| 9-12 |  |
| 13 |  |

APPENDIX K

Extract from a progress report

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | VP,CP ✓ VP ✓ VP ✓ VP ✓ VP,M ✓ | <p><u>AS 4. Explains safety in the home and at school.</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNC AS To be able to distinguish between <u>safe and unsafe substances</u> e.g. medicine, poison, cleaning material. UNC AS To show good awareness of <u>dangerous situations</u> e.g. playground equipment, water, fire and road safety rules. UNC AS To have knowledge of <u>dangerous objects</u> e.g. matches, scissors, plastic bags and broken glass. UNC AS To recognise the <u>danger in places</u> like car parks, drains, sand heaps as well as swimming pools. UNC AS To recognises appropriate <u>road signs</u> and is able to discriminate where it will be <u>safe</u> to play. |
| L.O. 2: The learner is able to demonstrate an active commitment to constitutional rights and social responsibilities and shows sensitivity to diverse cultures | | |
| 1 st Term: Context Basic needs | | 2 nd. Term: Context Living in the community |
| <u>Social development</u> <u>AS 1 Identify basic rights and responsibilities in the classroom</u> | | <u>Social development</u> <u>AS 4 Listens to and retells a story with a moral value from own culture</u> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNC AS To show awareness of <u>basic rights</u> in the classroom and to be able to speak his/her mind. UNC AS To take up certain <u>responsibilities</u> in class. UNC AS To care for his/her own <u>personal belongings</u> and those of others. UNC AS To <u>take turns and share.</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> VP x\ ✓/ VP ✓ ✓ ✓ x\ ✓ VP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNC AS To <u>share the stories</u> of incidents that happen with others. UNC AS To show <u>respect when listening to others</u> and to offer them a fair chance in sharing their opinion. UNC AS To <u>listens to stories</u> in class. UNC AS To <u>share with us from his/her cultural background and family members.</u> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> displays very good manners towards everyone. This was evident during our outing to the Botanical Gardens in February. shared a lot of information with us about the interesting plants and how to care for our surroundings and fellow humans. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓/ VP, M VP ✓ VP | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> will not share information so readily, but will make a comment on what his family did during the weekend or what they had for supper at the hostel. He gets his turn to give us his news every morning and we all encourage him to participate. |
| L.O. 3: The learner is able to use acquired life skills to achieve and extend personal potential and to respond effectively to challenges in her world | | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| <u>Personal development</u> <u>AS 2 Describes what own body can do</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNC AS To <u>show awareness of the finer detail of his/her body</u> e.g. fingernails, elbows, knees, hips etc. UNC AS To show awareness of <u>what his/her body can do.</u> UNC AS To <u>describe his/her body actions</u> easily. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ VP ✓ VP, M ✓ VP ✓ ✓ VP ✓ ✓ VP ✓ | <u>Personal development</u> <u>AS 1 Says own name and address</u> |
| | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNC AS To <u>complete a task.</u> UNC AS To be able to give own <u>address and personal detail.</u> completed his "family tree" task as soon as he was back after his long absence from school due to his sickness. He still needs supervision on how to respond appropriately in certain situations. We are working towards his LPP outcomes in this regard. |
| <u>AS 4 Adjusts to classroom routine and follows instructions</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNC AS To show awareness of the <u>class routine</u> and be able to <u>adhere to it.</u> UNC AS To follows his/her schedule, but also <u>adapts to changes.</u> UNC AS To has the ability to <u>wait for instructions without any disruptions.</u> UNC AS To respond to instructions and commands. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ ✓ ✓ VP ✓ VP ✓ VP, CP ✓ VP ✓ VP ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ x | <u>AS 3 Expresses emotions without harming self, others or property</u> |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> is able to <u>respond to easy instructions and commands, but sometimes he needs to be guided and supervision is needed.</u> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> VP, CP ✓ VP, CP ✓ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNC AS To make appropriate <u>eye contact.</u> UNC AS To <u>interact appropriately</u> with staff, peers and parents. UNC AS To <u>demonstrate decreased resistance to change.</u> UNC AS To be able to <u>seek help in conflict situations.</u> UNC AS To be able to express a range of appropriate emotions |
| L.O. 4: The learner is able to demonstrate an understanding of and participates in activities which promote movement and physical development | | | |
| Physical development and movement | | | |