Exploring the Impact of Narrative Arts Activities on the Self-concept of Grade 9 Learners in Group Context

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ABSTRACT

In this study we investigate the impact of a narrative arts learning programme on the self-concept of Grade 9 learners in the Life Orientation classroom. The programme was designed in response to a suggestion contained in the government guidelines for Life Orientation. The aims of narrative counselling were employed to allow the learners to tell their stories to themselves and others, and the arts component allowed the learners an opportunity to give visual substance to their individual and collective narratives. Brief video recordings were made of each group's interactions during the narrative arts episodes in order to compile an edited video overview of the process. The aims of positive psychology were embedded in the structure and design of the arts episodes and activities.

INTRODUCTION

While much has been written internationally about the arts therapies as **single** modalities in counselling research scenarios, multiple literature searches undertook by the researchers revealed that there is less research interest in the application of the arts therapies as **multiple** modalities in either counselling or educational settings. The idea of combining **multiple** arts therapies as a unit of narrative arts activities is clearly a novel idea. On a national level, completed arts-based research in South Africa indicates that the arts were employed previously as single modalities in non-educational environments with children

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and teenagers in adverse situations. A study that contained an artsbased aspect linked to a self-concept focus with a group of Grade 9 learners could not be identified either. At the private faith-based school where the research was undertaken, no evidence of a previous multiple arts modalities methodology could be traced. One particular aspect of the data collection of this study which could be enlarging the artsbased (educational) research field, internationally and nationally, is the use of **video** as an integrating medium.

To summarise, the literature gaps that could be addressed by this study are: How the **combined arts modalities** impact on the self-concept of the adolescent within a group scenario, the value of a multiple arts modalities approach for an educational group setting, the merit of video as an integrating, affirming cinematic medium, and the potential of a multiple arts modalities approach to facilitate the teaching of life skills and to portray a personal narrative.

In this article we will address the motivation for the study, the problem statement, the conceptual framework, the research design, research methodology, the limitations and findings of the study.

MOTIVATION FOR THIS STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which narrative arts activities are meaningful in the facilitation of possible self-concept development or growth in Grade 9 learners – guided by particular outcomes of the (South African) Life Orientation and Arts and Culture curricula.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The general problem statement of this study can be formulated as follows: What it is the impact of the narrative arts therapies on the self-concept of Grade 9 learners in group context?

Formulation of the research questions

- How is an individual's self-concept affected by narrative arts activities within a group context?
- How do individuals from diverse backgrounds respond to narrative arts activities?

- How does the arts-based approach impact on group dynamics?
- How does the facilitator (teacher-researcher) experience the arts-based approach?

DISCUSSION OF THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study combined the aims of narrative therapy, the therapeutic arts and Rogers' self-concept theory in its conceptual framework (see Figure 1). The therapeutic arts experience was "removed" from the separate counselling environment and located in a classroom context in which learners could engage freely with the arts in a non-therapeutic environment in an attempt either to enhance or to alter personal insight whilst interacting with others.

Theory of the self-concept

The subjective experience the person has of her/himself impacts on the self-concept and the personality. The environment may either facilitate or inhibit positive personal growth, but the
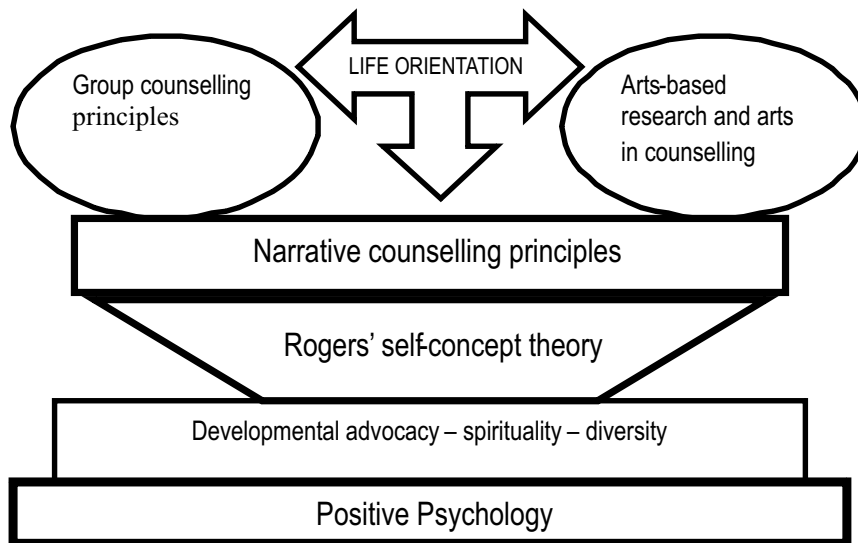

Figure 1. Conceptual framework components

individual himself is the only person who is able to actualise personal potential. An atmosphere in which unconditional acceptance prevails is the ideal space within which the individual may actualise his potential optimally (Meyer, Moore and Viljoen, 1989, p. 375; Rogers, 1980, pp. 114–119; Sharry, 2004, p. 38; Schoeman and Van der Walt , 2001, p. 173).

Five self-concept domains were identified: the academic, social, personal-emotional, social and moral domains. These domains were determined based on the self-concept domain descriptions by Bracken (1992, p. 3), Harter (1999, p. 119), Kruger (1999, pp. 10–13), Marsh (see Byrne, 1996, pp. 148–153), and Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton (1976, p. 413). We will now proceed to discuss arts-based elements and counselling perspectives and sketch the broad outlines of the South African Life Orientation curriculum pertaining to the conceptual framework.

Arts-based elements and characteristics

The intention was to employ the arts because of the deep personal benefits they offer the client or "art participant". The benefits of the arts therapies that could be determined from the literature are listed in Table 1.

Narrative counselling techniques and aims

The basic narrative process entails telling the story, allowing alternatives to emerge, adopting a worthier story, making the implementation of the new story known and inviting support (McLeod, 1997, p. 109–111).

The key feature of narrative therapy is in its methodology, namely the externalising privilege, which affords the client an opportunity to engage with the problem from a new vantage point and from the perspective of emotional distance (Russell and Carey, 2004, pp. 4–5; White, 2004, pp. 87–89).

Group counselling principles

Certain of the advantages of groupwork with adolescents may be found in the ability of the group to facilitate peer learning in peer culture as it may lead to the establishment of friendships and render supportive and accurate peer information. The

TABLE 1

Benefits of the arts therapies

Beneficial element
1 **A cathartic experience**, which may render the client receptive for further therapy (Carlson, 2001, p. 5; Feder, 1981, p. 223; Granick, 1995, p. 3 and Wilkins, 1999, p. 28).
2 An **awakening of creativity** that may lead to the **uncovering of spiritual paths** (Reynolds, 2000, p. 113; Rogers, 1993, pp. 187–188, 201–202; Weiser, 1993, p. 37).
3 **Healing of early psychological wounds** may be facilitated in the reparative space of the arts therapies (Bradway and McCoard, 1997, pp. 11, 49–50; Franklin, 2000, p. 3; Rogers, 1993, p. 70; Spaniol, 2001, p. 222).
4 **Metaphors**, which may allow the counsellor and client to transcend communication barriers (Krauss, 1983, p. 60; Landgarten, 1993, p. 3; Weiser, 1993, p. 10; Sharp, Smith and Cole, 2002, pp. 2–4).
5 **Opportunities for projection**, allowing the client to reveal personal material in an affirming environment (Landgarten, 1993, p. 1; Weiser, 1993, pp. 10–19; Yaretzky and Levinson, 1996, p. 2).
6 **Rituals** that may establish a healing frame for personal ceremony (Duggan and Grainger, 1997, p. 38; Salas, 2000, p. 290).
7 The **heightening of spirituality** as a result of the inner order being facilitated by the arts experience (Rogers, 1993, pp. 184–187; Snyder, 1999, p. 3).
8 **Symbolism** that affords the client the opportunity to express difficult personal issues (Krauss, 1983, p. 61; Wadeson, 2000, p. 39).
9 The **enhancement of self-knowledge** in all the aspects of self by the "mirror" function of the arts therapies (Franklin, 2000, p. 5; Ihde, 1999, pp. 118–119; Kahn, 1999, p. 2; Kramer, 2001, p. 5; Reynolds, 2000, p. 108; Snyder, 1997, p. 1; Wadeson, 2000, pp. 38, 40, 42).
10 The **rising of unconscious issues** to the conscious mind by the unexpected, as well as planned, discoveries prompted by the arts therapies (Carlson, 2001, p. 3; Spaniol, 2001, p. 228; Stanton-Jones, 1992, p. 7; Weiser, 1993, pp. 8, 16).

driving force of the group stems from the individual differences represented in the group. The adolescent group methodology is characterised by the balancing of activities and discussion, and includes a very real element of fun which serves as reward for the serious aspects of groupwork (Chazan, 2001, pp. 55–56; Sharry, 2004, pp. 110, 115).

A fundamental assumption in groupwork is that new social skills will be imparted during the interaction with peers in a safe environment. The information provided by the group is easier to accept than the suggestions of the individual counsellor, because the opportunity for mutual strengthening prevents the group counsellor from manipulating the environment (Billow, 2003, p. 158; Rose and LeCroy, 1991, pp. 425–427).

Comprehensive school counselling programmes and spirituality

It was our intention to employ an arts-based experience that could touch the lives of the participants on various levels and, in this way, alleviate certain of their developmental and spiritual needs. It was important to meet some of the developmental needs of the students by giving them the opportunity to socialise within the research context while they were constructively engaged in a "non-threatening" process that included colourful, manageable and meaningful tasks. Galassi and Akos (2004, pp. 146–158) reviewed the American models of school counselling and proposed developmental advocacy as the approach for school counselling in the twenty-first century. The incorporation of positive psychology, resiliency and positive youth development into school counselling programmes in order to facilitate the comprehensive developmental approach will replace the remaining elements of the "disease-oriented model of human functioning".

Sink (2004, pp. 309–316) advocates the incorporation of the spiritual element into the comprehensive (developmental) approach because its inclusion could be seen as a means of assisting students to develop a sense of purpose in life and to cope with challenges. Sink (2004) suggested that space be allocated for meaning-making and self-energising activities (that voice morals and values) in order to channel emotional expression and, in the process, enhance the spiritual state of the students.

The design of an arts-based programme emulates the values of Life Orientation as suggested by the curriculum for Grade 9.

The next section encapsulates the essence of the South African Life Orientation perspective so that the reader can gain insight about the contribution of this study when contextualised within South Africa.

South African context and the Life Orientation curriculum

Broadly speaking Life Orientation within the South African context aims at enhancing existing knowledge of human rights and HIV and AIDS – it embraces inclusivity and strives for environmental and social justice. In order to foster the growth of these Life Orientation ideals the teacher needs to assume various roles ranging from advocate of democracy to facilitator of interpersonal skills – aiming at a learner-centred approach. In order to maximise the learning experience for the learners, learning content takes place "within" learning activities so as to enable learners to take responsibility for their own learning.

The teacher should be able to assist the individual and the group as a whole to become aware of the skills, resources, talents and dreams within, to be able to name these specifically and to motivate the parties involved in a manner that is non-threatening and beautiful. The afore-mentioned sentence describes part of the eco-systemic model (Hoelson and Van Schalkwyk, 2001, pp. 247–248), and captures the "heart" of what the practical part of the research process intended to instil in the learners.

Human beings are creative, spiritual beings who are endowed with a body, mind and soul. A successful Life Orientation programme should embrace all these elements in order for it to be termed holistic. The network of interrelated life skills components and processes are seen as an integrated broad system that may be broken up for teaching purposes. The micro-system of the individual is seen as being in dynamic interaction with the internal and external environments and this dynamic interaction is perceived as the element that ensures human survival (Hoelson and Van Schalkwyk, 2001, p. 248). We will now proceed to discuss the research design, validity, methodology and findings of this study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This was essentially an interpretive, interactive, qualitative and idiographic inquiry, which employed predominantly the

phenomenological paradigm (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001, pp. 35–36; Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p. 51). According to Guba and Lincoln (1999, pp. 141–144) the interpretive paradigm can be described with the following axioms: the nature of reality is multiple and therefore requires a broad enquiry methodology, the enquirer-respondent relationship exerts a noticeable influence in both directions, the nature of truth statements pertains only to the specific individual and context, causality needs to be left alone because complex cause-effect sequences sustain human relationships and values selected intentionally or unintentionally by the researcher impose an influence on the research.

The difficulty pertaining to phenomenological research lies in the fact that the researcher is not able to separate his own experiences from the experiences of the participants. Creswell (1998, pp. 53–55) identified the following procedural elements that concern employing phenomenology: the researcher ignores preconceived ideas and prefers participants' perspectives, research questions target individuals' meanings of lived experiences, lengthy interviews characterise data collection and a phenomenological report reveal the meaning making structures individuals attach to lived experiences

STRATEGIES TO ENSURE THE VALIDITY OF THE STUDY

During the research process the validity of the findings was a major concern. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001, p. 407) qualitative design validity assists researchers to observe what they intend to observe and to understand meanings within the research context appropriately. Cohen et al. (2000, p. 115) cautions that it is easy to slip into invalidity and it should be "build out" in the design if the researcher is to have confidence in the research plan elements. Various strategies were utilised to secure valid results and these are listed in Table 2.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Case study design

A case study employs various data sources as it examines a case over time, which could be a programme, an activity or a group of people as a collective in time and space (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001, p. 36). A case study can access situations on

levels not possible by mere numerical analysis and it could be likened to a "television documentary" as it allows events and situations to present themselves instead of presenting researcher judgements and interpretations (Cohen et al., 2000, pp. 181–182). The researcher can focus on significance, rather than frequency, as the case avails insight into the true dynamics of scenarios and human relations. The goal of the case study researcher is to ascertain the "characteristics of an individual unit" (p. 185) and to explore the various components of the topic deeply, before any generalisations to a wider population are formulated (Cohen *et al.*, 2000).

ETHICAL ASPECTS

The researchers were clear in their use of research methods and analysis of findings. Ethical measures were in place to ensure the emotional well-being of the learners and the participants during the duration of the research. Informed, written permission was obtained from the school executive to conduct the research at the school. The researchers obtained written permission from the parents or guardians of the 47 learners to video record segments of the Life Orientation classes as well as written permission from the parents of the 14 learners who wanted to be interviewed. Participants who took part in the interview process were aware of the fact that they could withdraw at any stage. The data analysis findings protected the identity of the participants and the teacher-facilitators.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following limitations existed and are acknowledged: The two-month data collection (or research) period occurred at the school where one of the researchers teaches and a specific faith-based culture prevails. The principal teacher-researcher compiled the narrative arts learning programme according to his understanding of manageable arts activities–based on literature examples and personal Art teaching experience and was assisted in the data collection by two (specific) interviewers and five (specific) observers, and the principal agent conducting the data analysis (reviewed by an external coder).

The learners and participants knew the principal teacher-researcher and they were conscious about being video recorded

TABLE 2

Strategies used in this study in an attempt to increase the
validity of the findings.

Strategy	Description
Prolonged and persistent fieldwork	This research project spans two complete months of the first school term (2006).
Multimethod strategies	Data were collected primarily by means of in-depth participant audio-recorded interviews. Interview questions were based on the narrative arts activities and interactions that occurred during the Life Orientation classes. The interview data could be aligned with participant information contained in worksheets, arts constructs, photographs, questionnaires and video recordings.
Triangulation measures or methods	
Time triangulation	The narrative arts class episodes occurred during the same Life Orientation lesson each week and the participant interviews occurred at regular intervals.
Space triangulation	The same classrooms were used for the arts episodes and the participant interviews were conducted in the same venues.
Combined levels of triangulation	The arts episodes involved two complete classes, 14 individual participants, three teacher-facilitators, five observers and three interviewers.
Theoretical triangulation	Various theories are applied in this study as revealed in the conceptual framework (see Figure 1).
Investigator triangulation	Three teacher-facilitators, five observers, three interviewers and one video recorder were employed in this study.

Table 2 continues opposite

Table 2 continued

Strategy	Description
Methodological triangulation	During the two-month period, 13 narrative arts episodes occurred, comprising discussions and arts activities. The fact that the participants were exposed to 13 different and similar narrative arts exercises or episodes could ensure credible participant responses. The four rounds of interviews were conducted with the same interviewer and the same participant using the same tape recording method.
Participant language and verbatim accounts	Participant interviews were tape recorded (as they occurred) and all 56 interviews were transcribed verbatim.
Multiple researchers and external coder	An external coder scrutinised the records of the recorded data and the data analysis procedures.
Mechanically recorded data	Tape-recorded participant interviews and video snippets of every lesson for each small group and their interactions served as evidence.
Participant researchers	The principal teacher-researcher: kept a reflective diary which recorded all the impressions of the research project and the incidents as they occurred, structured the learning programme, and facilitated two small groups of 8 learners alongside two fellow teachers who were facilitating the other 4 small groups. Observers were present in each small group who recorded what transpired on an observation schedule.

(Compiled from McMillan and Schumacher, 2001, p. 408; Cohen et al., 2000, pp. 112–115).

occasionally. The nature of the six particular small groups (established by means of judgemental sampling) and the subsequent two-month interactions are localised units.
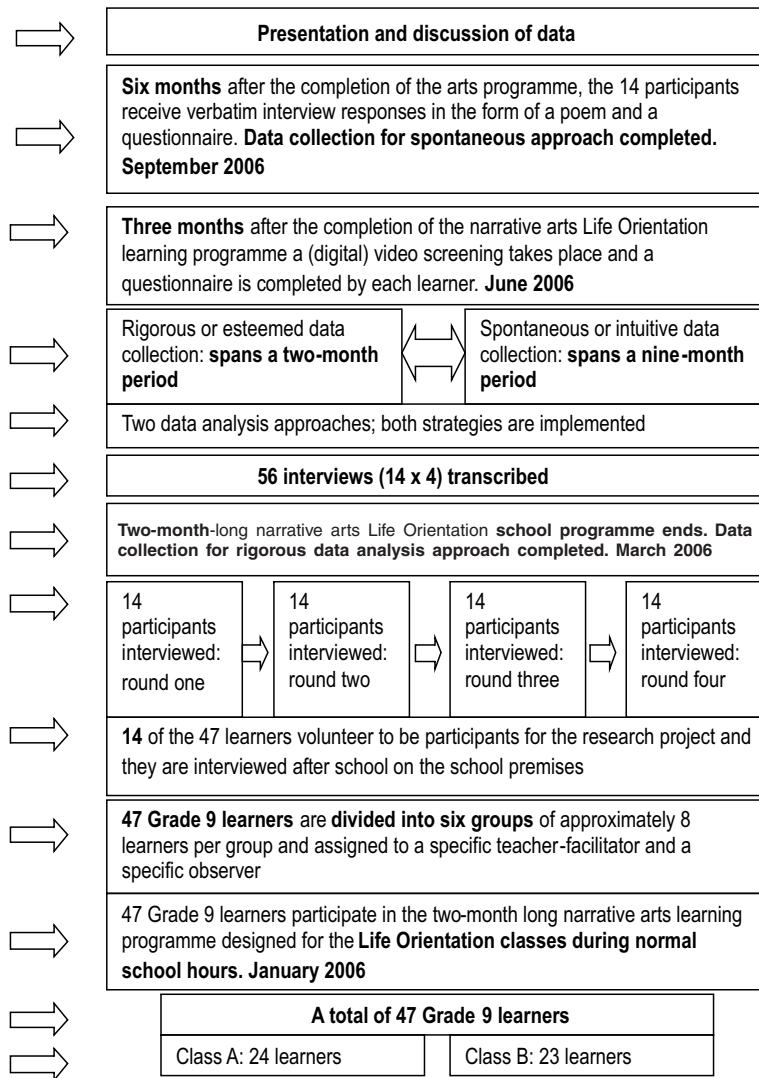
DISCUSSION

Forty seven Grade 9 pupils participated in the narrative arts learning programme during school hours (as a prescribed part of their Life Orientation curriculum), and they were divided into six small groups. Figure 2 provides an overview of the process.

The school process ran for two months and a video camera captured three-minute snippets of each group's interaction over the two-months. These snippets were edited professionally to present the 47 learners with a movie-format of their collective small group narrative journeys. After the video screening the 47 pupils were asked to complete a questionnaire. Various qualitative data collection techniques were employed during the duration of the programme to enrich the data and that could verify that the programme took place, such as: art works, digital photographs, digital video recordings, audio recordings, participant observation, in-depth interviews, group interviews and written personal documents.

Fourteen of the forty seven learners volunteered to become participants to be interviewed after school in four rounds of interviews across the two-month learning programme. The data obtained during the 56 interviews were analysed to determine the impact of the narrative arts activities on the self-concept of these participants. Two triangulating data analysis approaches were employed: a rigorous and a spontaneous approach. The **rigorous** approach spans a two-month period and the **spontaneous** approach a nine month period. The rigorous approach constituted the heart of the data analysis findings. The 47 pupils present the larger collective to which the group interviews and questionnaires pertain and they determined the Grade 9 perceptions regarding the two-month narrative arts learning programme as a whole.

The rigorous approach was based on esteemed qualitative data analysis procedures, e.g. McMillan and Schumacher (2001, pp. 466–480) and entailed interpreting participant responses, coding them and placing them in the five predetermined self-concept categories indicated earlier. The data analysis was done in four rounds that corresponded with the four rounds of interviews. An extract of the data analysis is presented in Table 3, for which the researchers selected two categories, particular

END

Presentation and discussion of data

Six months after the completion of the arts programme, the 14 participants receive verbatim interview responses in the form of a poem and a questionnaire. **Data collection for spontaneous approach completed. September 2006**

Three months after the completion of the narrative arts Life Orientation learning programme a (digital) video screening takes place and a questionnaire is completed by each learner. **June 2006**

Rigorous or esteemed data collection: **spans a two-month period**	Spontaneous or intuitive data collection: **spans a nine-month period**

Two data analysis approaches; both strategies are implemented

56 interviews (14 x 4) transcribed

Two-month-long narrative arts Life Orientation **school programme ends. Data collection for rigorous data analysis approach completed. March 2006**

14 participants interviewed: round one	14 participants interviewed: round two	14 participants interviewed: round three	14 participants interviewed: round four

14 of the 47 learners volunteer to be participants for the research project and they are interviewed after school on the school premises

47 Grade 9 learners are **divided into six groups** of approximately 8 learners per group and assigned to a specific teacher-facilitator and a specific observer

47 Grade 9 learners participate in the two-month long narrative arts learning programme designed for the **Life Orientation classes during normal school hours. January 2006**

A total of 47 Grade 9 learners	
Class A: 24 learners	Class B: 23 learners

RESEARCH PROCESS STARTS January 2006

Figure 2. The classes, participants and data analysis components linked over time

TABLE 3

A selection of categories and codes used during the data analysis process and participants' responses.

Categories and codes	Interview one	Interview two	Interview three	Interview four
Social category				
Code: GOB (Group orientation and benefits)	D.i.11.1 I can interact with other people and like talking to other people	G.ii.4.8 There are many rocks, for example in our grade there are a lot of people. If there was only one rock over there it wouldn't be nice	A.iii.19.1 It was fun since we got everyone's opinion and their views of what they want to be	E.iv.10.2 I enjoyed it very much that we could do it all together
	E.i.11.3 I think the group idea is a very stupid idea	C.ii.17.1 It's like in the group we did have in class, I was actually accepted in a group and usually I am completely pushed out	D.iii.20.1 We were like willing to hear what other people's dreams are	G.iv.27.2 We all see the good in each other
	L.i.11.1 I think it is a restriction on your life		K.iii.19.1 We learned a lot about each other	L.iv.27.3 The group I worked with were very ambitious, determined, confident, and this determination embraced my thoughts and it was a real inspiration

Table 3 (continued)

Personal-emotional category

Code: P-EIM (Personal emotional issue and management)	G.i.16.1 If I am angry, I will go punch my cushion, or I will scream in my cushion	D.ii.4.1 I still have a long way to go before I reach my destination	F.iii.9.1 I need to be persistent, because advertising is not an easy job	I.iv.8.1 If I set my mind to it, I can really do it, it is just I must set my mind to it
	L.i.8.9 I cannot deal with my emotions or deal with how I express things that I cannot control	G.ii.10.1 I am neglecting finding direction	N.iii.21.3 I think this whole experience has like opened my eyes to a lot of things, I actually have to work hard	M.iv.8.1 I just need self-discipline, I do have self-discipline to a certain extent
		I.ii.10.1 I am too lazy		N.iv.9.1 Controlling myself, self is very dangerous

codes and corresponding responses to illustrate the nature of the data analysis.

The spontaneous approach was used predominantly as a triangulating device on which the teacher-researcher reflections were based. This spontaneous image-based approach entailed honing in on the single verbatim self-descriptors, words or phrases used by the participants during the interviews and then visualising the self-descriptors by means of an appropriate image. The rationale for the image-based approach was in essence to differentiate meaningfully between the individual journeys of the 14 participants and to "trace" the major self-concept changes "visually". Figure 3 provides an example of an image portrait that was designed for each participant after the first interview had taken place.

FINDINGS

We used five predetermined categories (see discussion of the self-concept, namely: the academic, social, personal-emotional, physical and moral categories) to help us identify the themes and sub-themes within the data (McMillan and Schumacher, 2001,
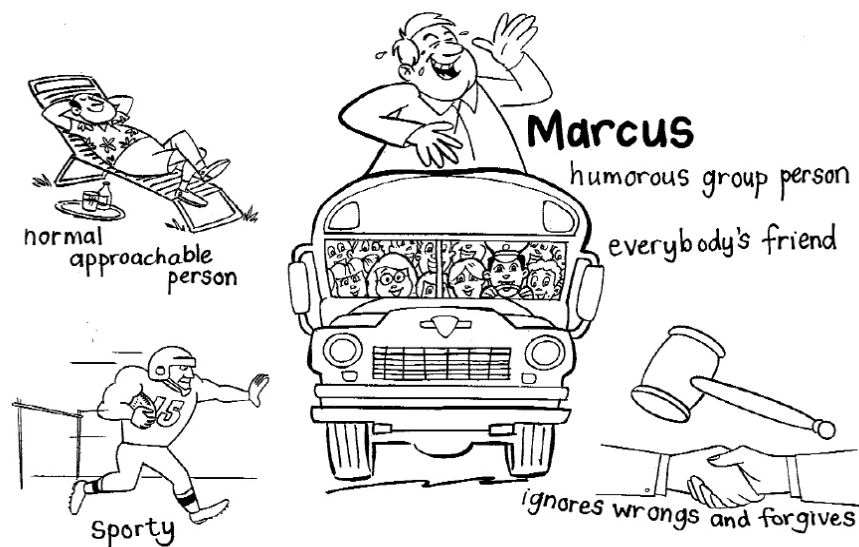

Figure 3. An image portrait example

pp. 473–474). In other words, we followed a deductive approach.

With regards to the benefits of the arts therapies, the data revealed that the participants primarily utilised the metaphoric, ritual and symbolic aspects (seen in Table 1). Table 4 reveals how a selection of participants' responses displays the benefits of the arts therapies and most of these responses are linked to the identity collage the participants created.

The findings of revealing the impact of the episodic narrative arts activities on the self-concept of the individual learner and the learner collective were established primarily through the participant interviews and questionnaires. These findings were supported by the evidence of class assignments, group (class) interviews and questionnaires. The findings are: The rigorous approach established that the two-month narrative arts Life Orientation learning programme essentially affected the social and personal-emotional self-concept domains of the 14 participants (collectively), see Table 3.

The small group narrative arts context allowed the participants to become gradually more other-focused as they learnt from each other over the course of the two-month process and their self-descriptor social roles and subsequent values indicated this. The narrative arts activities assisted the participants to become bolder in their self-estimations or self-evaluations and their levels of personal honesty were heightened as the two-month narrative arts process progressed. The arts process as a whole stimulated self-growth and self-insight in the participants. The spontaneous approach revealed that nine (of the 14) participants experienced growth in both the social and personal-emotional self-concept domains, whilst five (of the 14) participants experienced growth principally in the personal-emotional domain.

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH

The results of this study indicate that the employment of the arts in a positive educational small group environment could be of value to certain domains of the Grade 9 learner's self-concept. The aesthetic and beneficial art making elements that come to the fore as the learners create their images or constructs allow them opportunities to discover self and to become open towards the self (and others).

TABLE 4

Participants' responses illustrate the benefits of
the arts therapies.

Particular arts therapies benefit	Evidence gleaned from participants' responses
Metaphor	D.ii.6.1 This flower, especially this flower, actually, because it says that I am a nice person, and I feel good about being a nice person. D.ii.14.3 These eyes also bring like depression and guilt, they make me think of what I would like people to do unto me, if I look at the outside, then you know, it is not that nice, so. E.ii.4.3 – 4 There is a picture of a lily, a beautiful flower, I think it just says I am delicate, I can also be hurt. Just because I am strong does not mean you can throw any comments at me whatever.
Ritual	L.iii.19.1 – 2 I felt like I was making a statement. I was delighted with the dreams on the tree, for me it was kind of like an Amen thing, like, let it be so.
Symbolism	C.ii.4.4 – 6 And the guy falling through the air represents freedom and then I am fragile, so hmm, the grass makes me think of gentleness and the graceful. E.ii.4.7 There is a picture of a person sitting on a chair looking very important, and I feel I am very important in many people's lives.

NOTE

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