CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF CAREER-RELEVANT TEACHING AND LEARNING ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN EMPLOYMENT SKILLS LITERACY INSTRUCTION

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of career-relevant, personalised teaching and learning on student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction for low-literate adult learners. The focus of the study was to improve student engagement in triweekly employment skills literacy instruction. The six-week study involved a small group of six low-literate adult students from the same literacy classroom and one teacher, who was also the researcher in the study. Data was collected through participant observations, qualitative questionnaires, individual coaching session discussions, and my reflective teacher journal. Analysis of the data identified several key factors that enhanced student engagement, which were: career-relevant, personalised learning; well-defined career goals; learning that has the potential for real-life application; individual task work; computer-based learning; and providing a variety of model samples. The results also indicated that, all students in this study experienced an improvement in engagement and found the personalised instruction more interesting and enjoyable than their previous instruction.

Keywords: career-relevant, classroom action research, employment skills literacy, low-literate adult learners, personalised learning, student engagement

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List of Abbreviations

AR	action research
CAR	classroom action research
EMA	Employers and Manufacturers Association (NZ)
NZARE	New Zealand Association for Research in Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OET	Office of Educational Technology (US)
PTE	private training establishment
TA	thematic analysis

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

The Research Context

A classroom in which learners are actively engaged can provide an inspiring and dynamic learning experience for everyone involved. In the educational context, engagement is a complex term that emphasises students' various patterns in motivation, cognition, and behaviour (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Baron & Corbin, 2012; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Given that student engagement is at the core of every literacy lesson in my adult classroom, it is critical that I, as teacher of low-literate adult learners, discover effective ways to harness engagement as an influential component of teaching and learning. To achieve this, I recognise the importance of designing a proactive and supportive adult learning environment that fosters engagement, using content relevant to my students' lives. These considerations are what initially kindled my interest for searching out new research-based and best practice methods to create a stimulating, empowering and engaging learning experience for students. Moreover, it has been my lifelong interest to learn how to motivate others to live into their potential—an interest relevant to education.

Statement of the Problem

Over the course of my nine-year adult-teaching career, I have used a variety of teaching and learning methods to encourage student participation and engagement in my literacy classroom. Yet, despite my strategic and creative efforts to provide interesting, fun and engaging teaching and learning, I have found that most of my students have struggled to engage, or stay engaged, in their employment skills literacy learning.

I have engaged in several discussions with my students about motivation, participation and the barriers that can hinder their learning, but what *enhances* their engagement was never a focus in these discussions. I have since realised that it has been more my own perspective and less the students' perspectives that has guided and developed my teaching practice. Because teachers' understandings of student learning can affect the way they engage their students in the teaching and learning process (Feiman-Nemser, 2001), gaining students' perspectives about their engagement seems crucial to improving it. Moreover, formal research helps teachers and researchers gain access to the cognitive understandings students have about their classroom learning and engagement, and the meanings they derive from them (Alton-Lee, 2003).

As a facilitator of low-literate adult learning, I have a responsibility to help my students to become engaged in their literacy learning by promoting engagement in my classroom—I do not expect students to come to the classroom automatically engaged. Low-skilled adult learners are often not prepared for formal education and they generally do not have practice in active learning skills such as organising, controlling their own learning environments and determining the amount of instruction needed (Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Furthermore, as Carpentieri (2014) emphasises, poorly educated adults tend to be the least likely to engage in education and training because of former negative school experiences and the reluctance of employers to provide training for low-skilled staff.

Considering these factors, conducting qualitative action research (AR) on my own classroom to explore student engagement from both my own and the students' perspectives seemed imperative. A qualitative approach was the most appropriate for this study because it was an exploratory endeavour attempting to answer questions about the multifaceted nature of experience. My objective was to describe and understand the

phenomenon—low-literate adult learning—from the participants' point of view, in a specified time and context (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

After hearing the students voice their understandings about their learning experiences, I anticipated I would gain valuable insights that would help me discover new ways to enhance student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction and improve my own teaching practices. While this study and its findings are context-specific to my own 'unique' literacy classroom, I am hopeful that the study findings will prove useful to other adult literacy facilitators, especially in helping them better understand student engagement in their own literacy classrooms.

Study Objectives

This classroom action research (CAR) study set out to explore and identify the factors that enhance student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction when the teaching and learning is closely linked to students' individual career interests. The focus of the study was to improve student engagement in employment skills instruction for current and future students, as well as facilitate improvements in my own instructional practices. To date, little research has examined the effects of interventions in low-literate adult learning contexts. One reason for this could be that understanding the factors that enhance student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction is not a straightforward task. A major challenge is that descriptions, definitions and assessments of engagement in adult educational programmes vary widely between educational institutes and classrooms (Way et al., 2011).

I have found that as an adult literacy facilitator who manages low levels of student performance daily, learning about and reflecting on the factors that contribute to enhancing

and sustaining student engagement in my classroom has become an essential part of my teaching practice. Therefore, as I explored the characteristics of engaging instruction in this study, my aim was to begin to identify the elements that contribute to high levels of student engagement. Ultimately, it was my hope that by becoming more proficient in enhancing student engagement in my classroom I would be able to respond more quickly and effectively to emerging issues such as poor participation, inadequate literacy skills and low levels of engagement.

Significance of the Research

According to the Ministry of Education's Tertiary Education Strategy (2002), the world economy is changing significantly, "with an increasing emphasis on the creation and application of knowledge as the foundation for prosperity and social inclusion" (p. 10). In modern societies, literacy skills are central to informed decision-making, personal empowerment, and active and passive participation in local and global social community (Stromquist, 2005, p. 12).

Adult literacy encompasses the written and oral language skills that individuals use in their everyday life and work, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, comprehension abilities, problem solving, creative thinking, critical thinking and judgement, numeracy and using information technology, such as computers (Tertiary Education Commission, 2009). While recent data from the Survey of Adult Skills, which is conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, show some improvement in New Zealand's international adult literacy and numeracy ranking (OECD, 2016), Literacy Alliance (2018) report that many New Zealanders do not engage to their fullest potential in society and in the workplace due to having poor literacy skills.

The lack of literacy skills can limit every part of an adult's life, including finding and keeping a job, following instructions, understanding workplace health and safety (Ministry of Education, 2017), raising children and providing for families (Careers New Zealand, 2018). Consequently, foundation skills in literacy, language and numeracy are given priority in education systems, as they are considered vital to taking part in today's high-tech society (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Adult literacy and industry. At the turn of the century, Comings, Sum and Uvin (2000) stated that "workers now need solid literacy and math skills just to get their foot in the door of today's workplace, and over the next few decades, the expectations will only increase" (p. 6). Concerningly, the findings from the 2006 international Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey showed that 1.1 million New Zealanders (43 per cent of adults aged 16–65), 80 per cent of whom are in the workforce, have literacy skills below those needed to fully participate in a knowledge society (Education Central, 2018). Moreover, the OECD (2016) has found that low-literate adults are more likely to be unemployed or in low-paid employment and are therefore less likely to improve their skills through adult education and training. However, the increasingly technology-based nature of jobs today means that individuals will need to have stronger foundational skills in literacy and numeracy, and this will become crucial as workplaces become more dynamic and the need to upskill is essential to sustainable careers (Ministry of Education, 2018).

The Tertiary Education Strategy 2014–2019 states that an improvement in literacy skills can help adults to gain further qualifications and improve their career prospects in the workplace, leading to more productiveness, better pay and sustainable employment (Ministry of Education, 2018). Conversely, low workplace literacy skills can lead to poor

communication, time wasted on proofing material (Employers & Manufacturers Association [EMA], 2017) and dangerous mistakes (Careers New Zealand, 2018), often limiting an employee's ability to progress to the next level (EMA, 2017). Hence, "a person's literacy skills and education almost always determine his or her success in the labour market" (Comings et al., 2000, p. 6).

Adult literacy programmes. There is a significant gap in the research literature in the field of adult literacy. The few research studies carried out on motivation and engagement for adults attending literacy programmes are small-scale and context-specific (Comings & Soricone, 2007; Kruidenier, 2002). Benseman, Lander and Sutton (2005) believe this gap in knowledge presents opportunities for researchers, as there is a range of issues that need answering. For example, Papen (2005) highlights the absence of 'student voice' in the research and suggests there is a need to listen to the voices of learners whose views often go unheard in broader discussions on literacy. In addition, K. E. Porter, Cuban, Comings and Chase (2005) contend that, despite being the most important factors that influence engagement in adult literacy programmes, the barriers formed from poor attitudes about learning are perhaps the least understood.

The link between engagement and academic success. According to J. Burns and Bracey (2001), Dyer (2015) and Reeve (2012), research studies have consistently shown a strong connection between student engagement and student achievement, typically defined as attention to the area of focus, active participation in learning, and time on task (Dyer, 2015). Furthermore, the connection between engagement and academic achievement has remained strong for all levels of instruction, across all subject areas, and for varying instructional activities (Dyer, 2015).

Fredricks et al. (2004) found that students demonstrate engagement when they display a strong interest in the topic, actively take part in a lesson, show involvement in tasks and put real effort into their work. Furthermore, when students engage with instruction and stay on task, their academic achievement increases, and they become more successful—leading to more profound learning (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Hawthorne, 2008; Van de Gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme, & De Munter, 2009). Encouraged by these findings, I determined to explore the effect that altering the teaching and learning in my classroom to align to students' individual career interests had on student engagement, which has been demonstrated to be a predictor of learning and academic achievement.

Thesis Overview

Following an overview and outline of the rationale for this study in this introduction, the thesis moves to a review of relevant literature on student engagement in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes and justifies the research design and methodology, which stem from the research paradigm in which the study is situated. The findings of the study are presented in Chapter 4, and these are discussed and summarised in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by presenting the conclusions, implications, limitations and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

Introduction

While the definitions and descriptions of student engagement in the educational literature are plentiful, there is limited research into the effects of various interventions on engaging low-literate adult learners (Comings & Soricone, 2007). The purpose of this review is to survey the research on student engagement and adult learning, especially in relation to engaging low-literate adult learners. The review begins with an explanation of Knowles' (1984) adult learning theory because his assumptions about adult learning and engagement have significance for this study. Subsequently, I highlight the range of definitions and descriptions of student engagement, accepted understandings of engagement, factors of engagement, and the importance of engagement in the adult literacy classroom. A summary of the literature review's findings concludes the chapter.

Understanding Adult Learning

Andragogy. The study of adult learners has taken place for centuries. However, it was the American educator Knowles who popularised the term *andragogy* in the 1960s and 1970s, defining it as "the art and science of helping adults learn" (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005, p. 61). Knowles' theory of andragogy stems from his belief that adult learning has different characteristics that separate it from pedagogy (child learning) (Knowles, 1970, 1980, 1990; Knowles & Bard, 1984; Knowles et al., 2005; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). Andragogy has since become synonymous with adult learning and education and thus refers to *any form of adult learning* (Conlan, Grabowski, & Smith, 2003; Kearsley, 2010).

Knowles' andragogy theory is based on the psychological definition of 'adult', which holds that people become adults psychologically when they reach a self-concept of being responsible for their own lives—of being self-directing (Knowles, 1984). Andragogy essentially provides a means for students to guide their own learning, matching their demand for lifelong, life-wide and life-deep learning (Knowles, 1973). Initially, Knowles identified four critical andragogical assumptions, but these later expanded to six as he developed and reviewed his theory:

1. *Self-Concept.* As people mature, they move from being a dependent personality towards being more self-directed (Knowles et al., 2005). Since adults believe they are responsible for their lives, they need the freedom to assume responsibility for their own choices in learning environments where they can develop their self-directed learning skills (Brookfield, 1986; Rubenson, 2011).
2. *Life Experiences.* Adults come into an educational environment with a growing reservoir of experience that is a rich resource for learning (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Therefore, their individual differences in background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests and goals create a greater need for personalised teaching and learning strategies (Brookfield, 1986; Silberman & Auerbach, 1998).
3. *Readiness to Learn.* Adults become ready to learn when they experience a need to learn that will help them to cope with real-life situations and responsibilities. They therefore seek educational training which satisfies their need for learning that has immediate relevance to their jobs or personal lives (Knowles et al., 2005).
4. *Orientation to Learning*. As people mature, their perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. Consequently, this shifts adults' orientation towards learning from subject-centeredness to problem-centeredness (Knowles et al., 2005), and thus they seek learning

opportunities that will enable them to solve immediate, real-life problems (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

5. *Motivation.* Despite being responsive to some external motivators, such as a better job and a higher salary, adults' motivational drive for learning is mostly internal (e.g., the desire for increased job satisfaction and self-esteem). Therefore, adults' motivation can be hindered by educational training that ignores adult learning principles (Knowles, 1984; Knowles et al., 2005).
6. *Relevancy.* Adults need to know why they need to learn something, what is in it for them, and how this new knowledge will solve a problem or be immediately applied in real-life situations (Knowles, 1984).

According to Merriam (2001), Knowles' andragogy framework persists as one of the most widely cited theories of adult learning, despite broad debates by scholars on the situational variables that influence the extent to which adults show these six characteristics. For instance, Lee (2003) argues that andragogy is an individualistic concept which focuses only on the context a learner brings from his or her own experiences and fails to consider that individuals do not exist in a vacuum and have many identities that may "affect their views of learning and ways of engagement in the learning process" (p. 12). While Knowles' andragogy theory provides me with a good understanding of adult learning in my own teaching context, I recognise that the low-literate adults in my classroom might sometimes act in ways that do not align with the andragogical assumptions of adult learners listed above. Therefore, I acknowledge that it is important to listen to the voices of the students in my classroom to understand their learning more fully.

Understanding Student Engagement

Since the 1950s, understandings of student engagement have focused on engagement as participation in an institute as a social system (Finn, 1989; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992); as the behavioural intensity and emotional quality of a person's active involvement during a task (Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Koenigs, Fiedler, & Decharms, 1977); and as a cognitive function used during specific academic tasks (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Helme & Clark, 2001; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). More recently, the focus of student engagement has been on developing students' abilities to "learn how to learn" or become lifelong learners in a knowledge-based society (Gilbert, 2007, p. 1).

With no consensus among researchers on what defines student engagement, researchers have instead described different *forms* of engagement and how they work for different students under varied conditions (Kuh, 2009; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Kuh (2009), for example, defines engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to take part in these activities" (p. 683). Comparably, Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer (2009) describe engagement as the quality of students' participation or connection with the educational endeavour and with the activities, values, people, goals and place that form it.

Coates (2007) expands on these definitions, defining engagement as a "broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience" (p. 22). He further contends that engagement includes active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by academic learning communities. Adding to these

conceptions, Harper and Quaye (2008) argue that engagement also requires feelings, sense-making and activity, as acting without feeling engaged is mere involvement or ‘compliance’ and feeling engaged without acting is ‘dissociation’. However, even with increased researcher and practitioner interest in student engagement, Appleton et al. (2008) argue there is a need for more research to develop the terms and conceptualisations that provide consensus around these areas.

The multi-dimensional concept of engagement. The multifaceted nature of engagement is well supported in the literature (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 60). For example, Taylor and Parsons’ (2011, p. 4) review of the literature revealed the following dimensions of student engagement: academic, cognitive, intellectual, institutional, emotional, behavioural, social, and psychological. However, it is the multidimensional constructs of engagement theorised by Fredricks et al. (2004) that inform this CAR study. These authors synthesised a multitude of ideas and definitions surrounding student engagement and condensed the term into three main categories: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. They recommend developing a synthesis of these dimensions to gain a deeper and more meaningful understanding of student engagement.

***Behavioural engagement*.** This dimension of engagement involves complying with behavioural norms such as attendance, involvement and participation, attention, persistence, effort, asking questions, student behaviours related to concentration, and contributing to class discussions (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hattie & Anderman, 2013). In the adult classroom, examples of behavioural engagement may include respecting others, listening to instructors and peers, engaging in group discussions, and taking part in group work (Harper & Quaye, 2008).

***Emotional engagement*.** This dimension of engagement concerns how students feel about their educational experience, including the characteristics of students' affective reactions such as interest, excitement, enjoyment and a sense of belonging (Fredricks et al., 2004). It also refers to students' attitudes and values, and to students' positive or negative interactions with faculty, staff, students, the institution and the education community (O'Donnell, Reeve, & Smith, 2011). According to Sylwester (1994), emotion is important because it drives students' attention, which in turn, drives their learning and memory.

***Cognitive engagement*.** This dimension of engagement relates to students' investment in learning, motivation to learn, and self-regulated learning as it relates to thoughtfulness and a willingness to put in the effort to comprehend complex ideas and to master difficult skills (Blumenfeld, Kempler, & Krajcik, 2006). It also involves metacognition, application of learning strategies, and being strategic in thinking and studying (Fredricks et al., 2004). Students engaged at a cognitive level invest in their learning, seek to go beyond the requirements, and enjoy the challenges (Fredricks et al., 2004). In adult learning, examples of cognitive engagement might include the effort in understanding the course material, completing written assignments or online tasks, analysing information, applying learning concepts to real-world examples, and deepening insights through exploration and interaction (Harper & Quaye, 2008).

Accepted understandings of engagement. Despite the varied definitions and descriptions of student engagement in the literature, there are some commonly accepted understandings among researchers of what student engagement involves. Students are engaged when they are attentive, focused on the task at hand, interested in the taught topic, seek to solve problems, and show an awareness of learning opportunities to

increase their understanding of the concepts. Moreover, engagement is generally understood as a positive and proactive term that captures students' quality of participation, investment and commitment, identification with the educational institution, and institute-related activities to enhance students' performance (Audas & Willms, 2002; Christenson et al., 2008; Hawthorne, 2008; Kuh, 2003; Skinner et al., 2009; Skinner, Wellborn, & Connell, 1990).

Factors of engagement. The factors that influence student engagement are discussed widely in the educational literature. However, studies seem to focus more on examining the factors that keep students engaged and less on the factors that disengage them (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). For example, Eccles and Wigfield (2002), Knowles (1984), Martin (2006) and Schuetz (2008) emphasise student agency and motivation as important factors in engagement, whereas V. J. Russell, Ainley and Frydenberg (2005) view engagement as "motivation in action", or the "connection between person and the activity" (p. 1).

There are also researchers who call attention to the role of teachers and teaching as being influential to engagement, particularly in relation to teaching methods and how teachers relate to their students (Kuh, 2001; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Other researchers, including Porter (2006) and Sandeen (2003), highlight the role of institutional structures and cultures as important factors of engagement, while McMahon and Portelli (2004) and Yorke (2006) emphasise the sociopolitical context in which education and engagement take place. Eck, Edge and Stephenson (2007) and Miliszewska and Horwood (2004), on the other hand, bring to light the effects of environmental influences, including family background and economic status, as factors of engagement.

***Relevance*.** While the educational literature mentions the concept of relevance and highlights its importance in adult learning and education, explanations of its characteristics are scarce. However, there are numerous research studies that confirm 'perceived relevance' is a crucial factor in maintaining student interest and motivation, and that adults want learning content to be relevant and immediately applicable to their real lives outside of the classroom (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Holyoke and Larson (2009); Knowles, 1980, 1984, 2005, 2012; Migletti & Strange, 1998; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000; Willms, Friesen, & Milton (2009).

Relevancy contributes to students' inherent motivation, and engagement and can help to create conditions where students can make the personal investment required for rigorous work and optimal learning (Frymier & Schulman, 1995; Jones, 2008; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Sawyer, 2006). This is because working with relevant, real-life problems engages students and builds a sense of purpose to the learning experience (Claxton, 2007; Dunleavy & Milton, 2009; Willms et al., 2009). According to Roberson (2013, para. 4), relevance is the insight that something is "interesting" and "worth knowing". In other words, when students decide the content is interesting and worth knowing, it will hold their attention and engage them. Therefore, when educators provide relevance for adult students, they are helping them to perceive these two things.

To support adult literacy learners in their quest of seeking and recognising relevancy, Wolowiec (2012) and Roberson (2013) suggest adult educators ask students at the commencement of the learning experience what they expect to learn and what their goals, needs and desires are. Furthermore, having students relate their own perceptions and

experiences to the current topic through discussion or in written form, and asking students to reflect on a personal experience and explain how the experience relates to the reading in class, helps students to process information on a deeper level. Moreover, discussing with students how their personal experiences relate to the topic allows teachers to clarify students' understanding or correct their misunderstanding, and can inspire comments and responses from other students in group discussions (Roberson, 2013).

Jones (2008) argues that one of the barriers to effective engagement is the lack of rigorous and relevant instruction, and that teachers should therefore focus on designing educational programmes for rigorous and relevant learning in adult education. To help achieve this goal, Melody (2006) suggests educators should understand the theory of constructivism to promote adult engagement and participation and take advantage of technology that uses, for example, interactive methods such as online projects and tasks to motivate participation and engagement.

***Personalised learning*.** The US Office of Educational Technology (OET, 2017) describes personalised learning as involving a variety of educational programmes, instructional approaches, learning experiences, and academic-support strategies intended to address the unique learning needs, interests, aspirations or cultural backgrounds of individual students. According to the OET, personalised learning focuses on the individual learner with the goal of improving the educational experience, outcomes or access. However, it also notes that the means for achieving this can vary.

Given that every student brings to the classroom their own individual characteristics, including varied knowledges and interests, a unique learning style and different expectations, Basye and Grant (2014) contend that it is unrealistic for teachers to expect

that each student will learn in the same way, at the same pace and use the same learning material (Brookfield, 1987; Jones, 2008). For these reasons, personalised learning aims to facilitate the academic success of each student by first determining their learning needs, interests and aspirations to provide them with tailored learning experiences that will help them to achieve success (Basye & Grant, 2014). To accomplish this goal, institutes, teachers, facilitators and other educational professionals may use a wide variety of educational methods, from fostering trusting educator-student relationships to altering assignments and instructional strategies in the classroom, to redesigning how students are grouped and taught in the learning environment (Education Development Trust, 2016).

According to J. S. Russell (2018), because personalised learning focuses on individual learner needs, it is effective for improving student engagement and making the learning experience more relevant for adults. Rather than striving for proficiency in a broad area, such as would be the case in a traditional programme, students can focus on specific competencies that will help them to achieve their goals (J. S. Russell, 2018). A major benefit of personalised learning that is relevant to low-literate adult learners is that it frees up the teacher's time. This 'free time' allows for more interaction with students in one-to-one learning, thus promoting self-directed learning and enabling and empowering each student's individual learning goal or learning path (Basye & Grant, 2014).

***Real-world application*.** Across the research literature, many studies have shown that adult students want learning and material that is relevant and immediately applicable to their real lives outside of the classroom (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Donaldson et al., 1993; Migletti & Strange, 1998; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). As Knowles (1980, 1984) and Knowles et al. (2005) emphasise, adults seek educational training opportunities that they believe will

satisfy their need for learning things relevant to their jobs or personal lives, and which will help them cope more satisfyingly with real-life tasks or problems. For example, adult learners who are job seekers are more likely to engage if they perceive the learning as meaningful, and when the curriculum, instruction, interactivity and collaboration are relevant to the skills and knowledge crucial to the workplace (Casimiro, 2016; Hilliard, 2015). Therefore, to engage students adult educators should use learning content that is relevant and interesting, and which connects with students' real-world aspirations (Dunleavy & Milton, 2009).

***Establishing clear learning goals*.** Research has shown that personal goals, which motivate learners to achieve, are shaped by aspects of their environment, such as their classroom learning environment (Ames, 1992; Ames & Ames, 1984; Midgley, 2002). Austin and Vancouver (1996) contend that goals are extremely important in motivating and directing adult students' behaviour and should be challenging to increase engagement and persistence with learning and progress. Therefore, facilitators of adult learning should encourage and help their adult students establish short-term (proximal) and long-term (distal) literacy goals to motivate their engagement and help them progress in their literacy learning (Elliot & Fryer, 2008). Moreover, helping students set specific learning goals and then measuring their progress towards these goals through assessment helps adult learners not only to engage but also to experience more success in their learning (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, 1999; Elliot & Fryer, 2008).

Manderlink and Haraciewicz (1984) and Schunk (2010) suggest one strategy teachers can use to encourage engagement in adult literacy learning is to help learners set their own 'challenging' short-term literacy goals that are achievable within a short period of time. Unlike long-term goals, which can take months or even years to obtain, Schunk (2010)

suggests short-term goals are particularly effective for motivating engagement in complex areas of learning such as reading and writing. Also, adult learners will more likely continue to set new goals as they reach their short-term goals and recognise that these achievements are the route to achieving their long-term goals. Conversely, focusing only on long-term goals can frustrate adults and hinder their engagement if they perceive their progress is minimal (Schunk, 2010).

According to Kearsley (2010), adult learners are more likely to become inspired and motivated to engage in literacy projects and complete them successfully when they can relate the assigned learning tasks to their own goals. Moreover, adult students who set goals can see their progress more tangibly, and this can increase their sense of self-efficacy and lead them to set more challenging goals, because goal-directed behaviour that results from goal setting is empowering and proactive (Elliot & Fryer, 2008; Zimmerman, 1990).

***Autonomy and independence*.** Research has shown that adult students' inherent motivation is higher when they are taught in classrooms where instructors are perceived as being supportive of student autonomy (Deci, Eghrari, Patrick, & Leone, 1994). Furthermore, higher levels of perceived self-control predict several positive outcomes, including engagement and academic achievement (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998).

Jarvis (2004) suggests educators can offer autonomy and independence to adult students to promote engagement by allowing them to "work at their own speed, choose what aspects of a course to study, adopt whatever learning style suits them best, and be free to choose what they learn" (p. 154). Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon and Barch (2004),

meanwhile, emphasise that facilitators can enhance student engagement when they relinquish control (without losing power) to the students, instead of promoting compliance with directives and commands. For example, Deci et al. (1994) found that providing a meaningful justification for doing an uninteresting activity, acknowledging that students may not want to participate in the activity, and minimising the use of controlling language while emphasising choice resulted in increased reports of autonomy.

Boiche, Sarrazin, Pelletier, Grouzet and Chanal (2008) assert that adult learners who are more intrinsically motivated or who perceive their behaviours as autonomous show better outcomes for text recall in their literacy learning. However, the research in education settings with elementary students, high school students and college students has relied mainly on students' reports about whether they perceive their learning behaviours as autonomously driven or controlled (R. M. Ryan, Connell, & Plant, 1990).

***The use of technology in adult learning*.** Today's students need competent computer skills because "it has become apparent that computer competency is necessary not only for citizens to function efficiently on a personal level in our society, but to develop, advance, and succeed in their professional lives" (Orr, Allen, Poindexter, & Canning, 2001, p. 26). Therefore, to offer relevancy for adult learners, J. D. Bryson (2013) suggests facilitators should incorporate balanced and appropriate use of technology.

A number of researchers have shown that technology can variously enhance literacy development, support learning, motivate students, influence language acquisition, provide greater access to information and have a positive impact on the self-esteem of students (Boster et al., 2004; Kenny & Gunter, 2004; Mann, Shakeshaft, Becker, Kottkamp, 1999; Taylor, Hasselbring, & Williams, 2001), particularly for at-risk students with low self-esteem

and self-confidence (Kenny & Gunter, 2004; Taylor et al., 2001). There is also considerable evidence that incorporating any type of modern technology such as computers and video instruction as an instructional tool enhances student learning and educational outcomes (Caruso & Kvavik, 2005; Gulek & Demirtas, 2005). Moreover, M. Johnson (2011) contends that research has shown that when adult students receive appropriate technological training they become highly motivated learners capable of understanding both the content and the technological skills necessary to succeed in the community.

Using technology in the classroom has a more profound effect than merely benefiting students. For instance, Gulek and Demirtas (2005) found that teachers who incorporate technology in their classrooms typically have a constructivist approach to teaching. They also suggest that the use of technology in the classroom means teachers talk less, because their students are involved in critical problem-solving activities, active learning and interactions with other students.

A major advantage of the technology-enabled learning of today is that learners can use technological resources and expertise anywhere in the world, starting with their own classrooms and communities (OET, 2017). Also, technology-enabled learning environments allow less experienced adult learners to access and take part in certain learning contexts and settings, progressing to more complex activities and deeper participation as they gain the experience needed to become skilled members of the community (OET, 2017).

The Importance of Engagement in the Adult Literacy Classroom

Engagement is one of several classroom processes to consider when understanding the adult literacy classroom (Beder & Medina, 2001). While there is widespread literature describing the practices used in adult literacy programmes, studies into the effects of various interventions for motivating and engaging low-literate adult learners have been described as insufficient (Comings & Soricone, 2007). Researchers have instead specified different ways of understanding the broad construct of engagement, including its contextual, socioemotional, psychological and cognitive components, although there is a gap in the literature when it comes to the *cognitive engagement* of students in adult literacy programmes (Fredricks et al., 2004).

According to Bynner and Parsons (2006), the research on low-literate adult learners shows that many of these adult students are unaware of, or unwilling, to acknowledge or recognise their own skill and learning weaknesses, and that skill loss is strong for those who left school with poor numeracy and literacy skills. Furthermore, even when adult learners realise their own weaknesses, they may face obstacles that hinder their engagement or want to avoid classroom environments that remind them of their past educational experiences and failures. Therefore, facilitators must understand the various motivations of low-literate adults and their barriers to learning as these are crucial to designing teaching strategies that enhance adults' engagement and persistence in learning (Bynner & Parsons, 2006).

It is clear that a range of factors influence engagement in adult learning, with motivation being key amongst them (Klem & Connell, 2004). Slavin (2003) argues that motivation is crucial for promoting student engagement and achievement in the classroom, defining it as "what gets you going, keeps you going, and determines where you want to go" (p. 329).

Irvin, Meltzer and Dukes (2007) suggest that as motivation leads to engagement, motivation to engage could be considered the ‘first stage’ to improving literacy practices and skills. They further contend that helping students become active participants in their pursuit to develop proficiency in literacy should help them improve their skills. However, Blumenfeld et al. (as cited in Sawyer, 2006) point out that motivation on its own does not necessarily or singularly lead to engagement and academic achievement, as there are other factors involved such as relevance to learning.

The importance of engagement in reading. Guthrie, Wigfield, Metsala and Cox (1999) assert that engagement in reading involves interactions with text that are motivated and strategic, and that when students are engaged in reading they comprehend better and have stronger reading outcomes than when they are not engaged. Moreover, motivation and engagement might influence the development of reading comprehension because motivated students typically want to understand text content fully and to process information deeply. Therefore, as motivated students read frequently with cognitive intent they are more likely to develop reading comprehension proficiency (Guthrie et al., 1999).

Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) found that literacy skills develop through a cycle of engagement and instruction. For example, engagement with reading directly relates to reading achievement, and an increase in engagement encourages more reading, which in turn contributes to enhanced learning. In addition, Kasten and Wilfong (2005) showed that students who refer to themselves as readers and have positive dispositions towards reading are more likely to continue to engage in reading-related activities as adults.

Therefore, educators should have a thorough understanding of adult learning principles and the instructional designs and teaching strategies that can lead to an increase in

student engagement in order to develop successful education programmes that result in engagement and the facilitation of learning (Bishop & Pflaum, 2005; Brozo et al., 2007). Considering these factors, I determined that, as an adult literacy educator, an important question that should become an ongoing part of my practice should be: How do I ensure the literacy content is relevant and how do I communicate that relevance to students?

Summary

This literature review has identified the factors and strategies which contribute to successful adult learning, engagement and achievement. It has emphasised that teachers are key in fostering students' engagement, and that to achieve this teachers should seek to develop a comprehensive understanding of adult learning principles and instructional designs and strategies that promote engagement in their classrooms. In addition, the review has identified a significant gap in the research literature in the field of adult literacy education, with the few research studies carried out on motivation and engagement for adults attending literacy programmes being small-scale and context-specific. The findings of this literature review were instrumental in the design and approach of this research project, as described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3: Methods

Introduction

This chapter describes the research design and methodology used in this study. After presenting the research question of the study, the chapter outlines the research paradigm of this study and the qualitative approach adopted. Thereafter, I explain the research design, which incorporates action research (AR), classroom action research (CAR), my role as the teacher-researcher and reflexivity. Next, I describe the study's methods, including the research setting and participants, ethical considerations, data collection and data analysis, and matters concerning reliability and validity. A summary concludes the chapter.

Research Question

The specific research question that this study seeks to answer is:

> *What is the impact on engagement when the teaching and learning in employment skills literacy instruction is closely linked to students' identified career interests?*

Research Paradigm

Interpretive research paradigm. This research study is situated in the interpretivist paradigm. The term *paradigm* as used in social science refers to a collection of ontological and epistemological (philosophical) assumptions that describe an entire way of seeing and making sense of the world (Davidson & Tolich, 1999; Le Compte & Schensul, 1999). Unlike the positivist paradigm, interpretive research aims to explain the subjective reasons and meanings that lie behind social action (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994). It takes everyday, ordinary life experience as its subject matter (Scott & Usher, 1999) and

focuses on the full complexity of human sense-making as the situation emerges (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Davison & Tolich, 1999). Interpretivism recognises that human action is inseparable from meaning and experiences (Holloway, 1997; Scott & Usher, 1999) and therefore uses systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through interviews and direct observation of individuals in natural settings in order to develop inductive understandings of the phenomena through "accessing the meanings participants assign to them" (Orlikowsky & Baroudi, 1991, p. 5).

The constructivist research framework. Interpretivism and constructivism are closely related. While interpretivism often addresses critical elements of collective meaning and understanding, constructivism develops this concern with knowledge as yielded and interpreted (Ormrod, 2006). Constructivist research recognises that truth and meaning do not exist in some external world but are created by the individual's interactions *with* the world (Ormrod, 2006). In this way, "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 42–43). Constructivism also recognises that people construct their own meanings in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon. Therefore, constructivists focus on deep understanding of specific cases of a phenomenon under examination in order to understand and develop subjective, varied and multiple meanings of participants' experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008). However, the findings from constructivist research are not generalisable as the data is heavily influenced by personal viewpoints and values (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The Qualitative Approach

Qualitative research attempts to answer questions about the multifaceted nature of experience with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomena from the participants' point of view, in a specified time and context (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005).

Qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of people's experience, perception, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour in each context or setting (Curwin, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Such researchers recognise that "people's perceptions are what they consider real to them and are what directs their actions, thoughts, and feelings" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001, p. 396). The qualitative approach also relates to the "meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things" (Berg, 2007, p. 3).

A major benefit of the qualitative approach for this study is that it supports collaboration and interaction between researcher and participants while enabling the latter to tell their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The qualitative approach also aligns well with AR, as the drive for collaboration in AR is grounded in the epistemological assumptions that knowledge exists both objectively outside of, and subjectively inside of, the 'knower', created and formalised by experiences through the sharing of different perspectives about experiences (Warrican, 2006). Moreover, given that my aim was to understand my students' learning experiences as felt, perceived and experienced by them, using a qualitative approach allowed me to obtain rich descriptions of their immediate experiences (Merriam, 2009) and gain a better understanding of their engagement in employment skills literacy instruction.

Research Design

Action research (AR). Kurt Lewin first introduced the concept of AR in 1946 as an alternative to the traditional positivist approach to research that was dominant at the time (Hinchey, 2008). AR is a structured, rigorous form of collective, self-reflective enquiry, typically conducted by participants in social situations to improve and understand their own social or educational practices and the situations in which these practices are undertaken

(Bogdan & Bilken, 1992; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Stringer, 2008).

The AR process involves the systematic collection and analysis of data with the end goal of making changes and improving or solving problems that affect the lives of everyday people (Elliott, 1991; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Stringer, 2008; Wallace, 1998). Hence, there is a twofold responsibility in AR: to study a system and to collaborate with members of the system to change it in what is jointly considered a desirable way (O'Brien, 2001).

Action researchers are characteristically intent on describing, interpreting and explaining events (enquiry) while they seek to change them (action) for the better (purpose). McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996) assert that AR conditions the researcher to be reflective while at the same time taking informed action to answer the research question—in other words, "to do something about it". Therefore, AR offers beneficial opportunities for teachers as it emphasises the inherent empowering quality of the research process and the immediacy and concreteness of its outcomes (A. P. Johnson, 2012; McTaggart, 1997; Mills, 2011; Schmuck, 1997).

While the processes of AR differ across researchers, there seem to be some common characteristics: action is taken to improve practice; the research generates new knowledge about how and why the improvements came about; it is research in action rather than research about action; it is cyclical; it requires separate, yet mutually dependent steps; it is participative, collaborative and involves the researcher and the participants in the process; the data is generally of a qualitative nature; it is a reflective and reflexive process; change is the intended result; and the output is 'actionable knowledge' that is useful to both the practitioner and academic communities (Coghlan, 2007; Coghlan & Brannick 2010; Dick,

2002). Overall, the broad descriptions, definitions and models of AR appear to encapsulate the same concept: that the fundamental nature of AR is learning through action, gathering data, reflecting on the outcomes and reworking as needed to achieve the desired end. Working towards solving practical problems is the cornerstone of AR (Levin & Martin, 2007).

Classroom action research (CAR). CAR is a specific form of AR and was considered an appropriate research design for this study as it is a practice-based, systematic, rigorous and reflective form of teacher research typically employed by teachers who wish to conduct AR in their own classroom to improve student learning and their own teaching practices (Cross & Steadman, 1996; McKeachie, 2002; Mettetal, 2001; Weimer, 1996). CAR exclusively positions teachers to provide an 'insider' view that shows the way students and teachers jointly construct knowledge and curriculum. The emphasis in CAR is "on the interpretations that teachers and students are making and acting on in the situation" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 561). Therefore, its focus is on the practical significance of the findings—not statistical or theoretical significance or hypothesis testing or producing generalisable results (Holly, Arhar, & Kasten, 2009; Mettetal, 2001; Mills, 2011).

The major precept of CAR is that teachers can do their own research on the questions that interest them, as teachers understand that education does not take place in a vacuum but in some unique context, such as cultural, regional, local, individual learner and classroom, and that although there can be global trends or principles, the problems are local and contextual (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Moreover, CAR and the application of the resultant information provides a form of professional development that directly supports teachers' and students' educational needs (Zeichner, 2003), particularly the needs of low-

level learners who struggle with learning in the classroom (Nugent, Malik, & Hollingsworth, 2012).

The process that the teacher-researcher goes through in CAR is cyclical and typically involves the following steps: planning, action, observation, and reflection (see Figure 1).

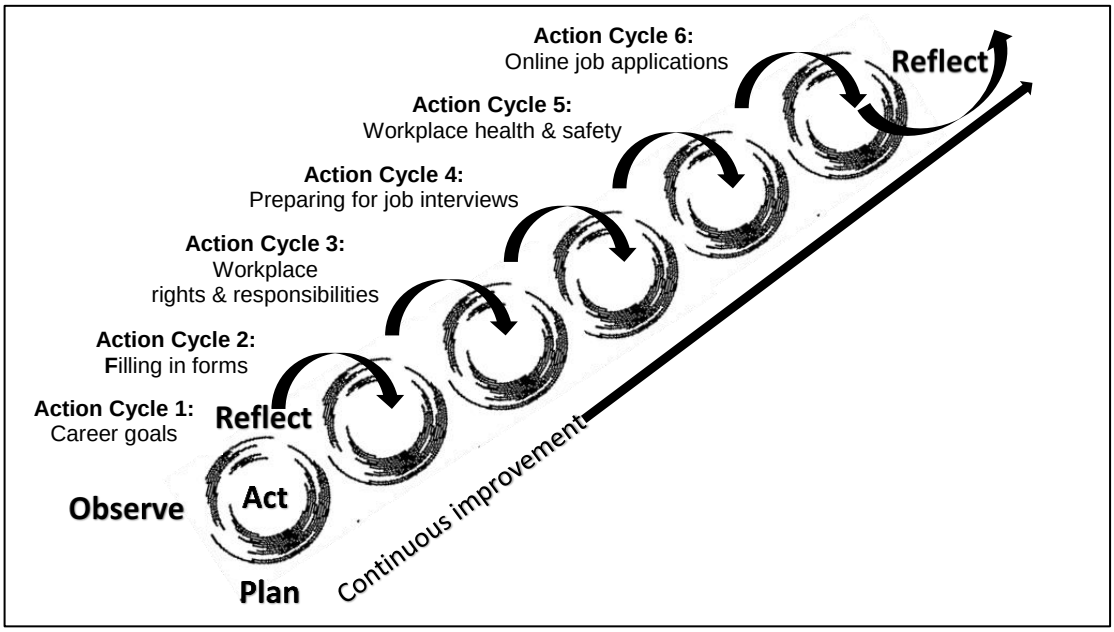

Figure 1. The process followed in each of the six action cycles in this CAR study

The planning stage involves the development of an action plan to achieve one or more agreed goals. According to Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), these plans can involve a change in three 'registers': how language is used in the situation, what activities and practices are used, and how social relationships and organisations are structured.

The action stage involves implementing the plan while recognising the need for flexibility and judgement. It also includes the monitoring and observation of the results and

acknowledges that reverting to the planning stage may be necessary if the proposed actions cannot be implemented (Dick, 2000).

Observation feeds into the next stage of the cycle by providing the basis for the final phase*, reflection*. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) describe the reflection phase as the point at which the researcher and the group collaboratively "analyse, synthesise, interpret, explain, and draw conclusions" (p. 86) about what was achieved and then decide on ways of going forward. Reflection on these effects forms the basis for further planning and subsequent, critically informed, ongoing action through a succession of stages (Dick, 2002; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Lewin, 1946).

As the cycles advance, a better understanding develops through the repeated refining of methods, data and interpretation (Dick, 2002). However, the most important aspect of CAR is the *actions*, and these can be changeable due to the tentative results achieved during the process (Dick, 2000, 2002). The vital characteristics of responsiveness, flexibility, reflexivity and emergence in the CAR process must also be recognised, as CAR must respond to the emerging needs of the situation (Dick, 2000).

To help guide my CAR process, I adapted some common-sense AR steps provided by McNiff (2000, p. 7) in order to develop my own CAR steps:

1. Review my current teaching practice.
2. Identify an aspect of my practice I want to improve (i.e., engagement in employment skills literacy instruction).
3. Envisage a way forward (Plan).
4. Try it out (Act).
5. Notice what happens (Observe/monitor).

6. Revise my action plan based on what I have discovered (Reflect).
7. Continue with the revised action.
8. Monitor what I do and evaluate the revised action.
9. Continue this cyclical process until I am satisfied with this aspect of my teaching practice (i.e., an improvement in employment skills literacy instruction).

CAR methods recognise that the teacher-researcher is primarily a teacher, and that the research should not take precedence over student learning (Holly et al., 2009). Therefore, my role as a teacher-researcher enabled me to collect data while teaching as there was no requirement for a separate transition between my two roles, minimising any interruptions in my teaching processes. Moreover, this unobtrusive positioning allowed students to simultaneously collaborate on the research outcomes, making them feel a part of the study process without detracting from their learning (Holly et al., 2009).

According to A. Burns (2010), a major advantage of CAR is that the consistent analysis of data allows teacher-researchers to inform their practice during their study and to act instantly on the findings without having to revise them. Furthermore, the improvements that happen in CAR are ones based on systematically collected information (data) by the action researcher, and thus any changes made in the teaching situation arise from solid information rather than intuitions or assumptions. Moreover, given one of the goals of the research was to inform instruction, there is no concern that changing practice based on preliminary data will impair the study (Moore, 1999, as cited in Campbell, 2013).

My Role as the Teacher-Researcher

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) contend that the qualitative researcher often adopts multiple roles and employs multiple methods and approaches when conducting a qualitative study.

In CAR, the self-reflective nature of the research shifts the traditional role of the teacher to that of an action researcher who can evolve into a change agent (Massingham, 2014), decision-maker, consultant, curriculum developer, analyst, activist, institute leader (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 17) and active participant (Dick, 2000). Since my primary responsibility as the teacher-researcher in this CAR study was to my students, I had to constantly balance my multiple roles and research goals with the professional demands of my teaching throughout this study.

While these multiple roles all played an important part in my experience as a qualitative action researcher, becoming an active participant with the students in my classroom affected me the most. CAR positioned me as an active participant and participant observer in this study and allowed me to interact more collaboratively with my students as we jointly made sense of their learning and engagement experiences (Dick, 2000). My active presence in the research situation as a participant also enabled me to gain useful insights into the effectiveness of the career-relevant, personalised teaching and learning I implemented throughout the study, especially in relation to the students' engagement experiences. Moreover, incorporating an enquiry-based, student-centred approach in the classroom created a 'community of learners' atmosphere in which I was learning as much as I was teaching.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a critical, self-reflective enquiry which helps researchers explore, learn and understand what they bring to their research and how they influence it (T. G. Ryan, 2005). It is particularly important in qualitative research studies because the interpretivist paradigm conceives knowledge as a social and cultural construction, and the interactions between the researcher and the participant can affect the nature of the results (Charmaz,

2006; Holloway, 1997). Becoming a reflexive qualitative researcher involves constantly thinking about the ways in which knowledge has been generated in the study (Roller, 2013). It also includes recognising how and when the researcher's own beliefs and opinions about the topic under investigation might have influenced data collection or analysis, as well as thinking about how the research has affected the researcher personally and professionally (Mason, 2002).

Qualitative research must also contend with the expected issue of bias or the potential misrepresentation of research outcomes due to inadvertent influences from the researcher and research participants (Holloway, 1997; Roller, 2013). Addressing bias is crucial in qualitative research, particularly where interviewers seek to establish strong relationships with their interviewees to deeply examine a topic (Roller, 2013). Hence, to avoid bias in this study I ensured that the prompt questions used in after-lesson questionnaires (reproduced in Appendix A) and the questions posed to students in their individual coaching sessions (reproduced in Appendix B) were open-ended and as neutral as possible, to avoid leading and influencing the students' responses (Patton, 2015).

Ortlipp (2008) and Roller (2013) suggest that the use of a self-reflective journal in qualitative research can facilitate reflexivity, as researchers can use their journal to examine their personal assumptions, goals and clarify their specific beliefs and biases. In this study, the regular use of my self-reflective teacher journal not only helped me to develop my reflexivity as a researcher but also enabled me to make these features an acknowledged part of the research project, from the initial planning stages to the interpretation of the findings. This involved repeated questioning of the assumptions that I brought to my teaching practice and how my assumptions, views and emotional responses

impacted on the research process to interpret the complexities of the multiple perspectives involved (Charmaz, 2006; Holloway, 1997).

Overall, practising reflexivity and self-reflectiveness throughout the study helped to develop my understandings of my teaching practices and relations at a deeper level, to shed light on my own position in the CAR process, and to highlight the ways that I could contribute to my students' learning. Drawing on Gouldner (1970), as I developed reflexive self-awareness as a teacher-researcher some important questions I asked myself were: How has this CAR study transformed me? Has it penetrated deeply into my daily life and work? Has it influenced my self-awareness of my work as a researcher?

Research Setting

The research study took place in an adult literacy classroom, situated in a private training establishment (PTE) in Hawke's Bay, New Zealand. The PTE has several offices and training classrooms situated throughout New Zealand and provides a range of adult educational programmes for individuals aged 16 years and above. My own classroom setting was the most appropriate choice in which to conduct my study because the focus of the study was to improve student engagement in my own literacy classroom context. Permission to carry out the research project was received from the PTE prior to conducting the research.

Research Participants

This study involved a mixed-gender group of six low-literate 'second chance' adult students and one teacher (myself), who was also the researcher. I invited all 10 adult students from my own literacy classroom to take part in the study, based on their enrolment being full time and their willingness to participate in the study. I term these

students ‘second chance’ as they were all early school leavers with little or no formal postsecondary school education. Also common to these students was their unemployed status and their desire to improve their literacy and employment skills to better their employment opportunities. Non-participating students continued to attend regular programme lessons, including the triweekly employment skills literacy lessons.

Ethical Considerations

It is well-known that in qualitative research settings the researcher has power over the researched within the research relationship (Fontes, 1998). This has led to the acknowledgement of issues of research ethics and the development of processes to protect the researched. The planning and implementation of this research study was guided by the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations involving Human Participants (2015). Prior to conducting the research, appropriate procedures to address potential issues in this study were proposed and accepted by the Massey University Ethical Review Committee (see Appendix C).

As collaboration and participation must be voluntary in CAR, I obtained informed consent from students in my classroom before undertaking my research project (see Appendix D). Students were advised both in writing and verbally of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without reason and consequences (see Appendix E). To protect students’ anonymity and confidentiality (Creswell, 2009), pseudonyms instead of their real names were used in the recording, processing, and the writings of the study report (see Appendix E). Students were further provided with written and verbal explanations of the purpose and aims of the study; what the study involved; how they might benefit; how the information would be accessed and stored; how the results would be used; how and to whom it would be reported; and the extent of public availability (New Zealand Association for Research in

Education [NZARE], 2010). In addition, I ensured that students understood how I would value and respect their voices, contribution and participation during each phase of the research project. Following this ethical process helped me to avoid any deceptive practices in the design of my project (Massey University, 2015; NZARE, 2010).

An important point to mention here is that CAR differs from traditional approaches in that confidentiality, anonymity and data protection challenge university research ethics procedures in ways that non-participatory research does not (Pain, 2009). CAR explicitly challenges the 'do no harm' ethical guideline by insisting that objects of inquiry be involved in the process. In this study, this meant that informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and data protection were valued differently and addressed through the processes of dialogue and open discussion between me (the researcher) and participating students (Pain, 2009). This is mostly because CAR is a broad approach to research that treats human participants as collaborators and research *partners* rather than research *subjects* (Dick, 1999). Moreover, as the research unfolds, CAR demands continuous reflexivity about, and sensitivity to, emergent ethical issues (Pain, 2009).

Data Collection

Four data collection methods were utilised to gather data in this CAR study: participant observations (see Appendix F), qualitative paper questionnaires (see Appendix A), individual coaching sessions (informal interviews), and my reflective teacher journal. It is characteristic of qualitative research that researchers can draw on several data collection methods to gain insight and understanding of their research topic (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) and therefore "anything else can be used to help [qualitative researchers] answer their research question" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005, p. 143). In addition, as my discussions and writings in this study are viewed in relation to the

participants, my own subjectivity, and reflexivity (emotional and interpersonal responses) as a researcher are included as part of the data.

Data Sources

Participant observations. Le Compte and Schensul (1999) define participant observation as “the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting” (p. 91). During this CAR study, I observed students in my classroom during employment skills literacy lessons as they attended to their literacy learning and activities. To collect observation data for later discussion, review and analysis, I used a simple one-page participant observation form (reproduced in Appendix F), which included eight categories of engagement behaviours adapted from Fredricks et al. (2004) and Hattie and Anderman (2013). The simple ‘tick box’ design of the form allowed me to unobtrusively collect data while teaching, thereby minimising any disruptions to my teaching processes. To make it easier to elaborate on my field notes and to make better sense of the data, I entered the gathered data into an electronic document as soon as possible after each employment skills literacy lesson (outside of teaching time) while the information was fresh in my mind.

While the participant observations provided me with a preliminary understanding of the students’ level of engagement in their employment skills literacy learning, there were certain things I could not directly observe. Therefore, I employed qualitative after-lesson questionnaires and weekly individual coaching sessions to obtain more detailed information about students’ learning experiences and engagement.

Qualitative questionnaires. Distributing qualitative after-lesson questionnaires were already part of my existing teaching practice. However, for his study I specifically

designed three different qualitative questionnaires (reproduced in Appendix A) to capture information about students' learning experiences during employment skills literacy instruction. To make them comprehensible and manageable for students, the questionnaires included just two simple open-ended questions, which were adapted from questions provided by Angelo and Cross (1993), Chizmar and Ostrosky (1998) and Dörnyei (2003). The purpose of the after-lesson questionnaires was to capture quick responses from the students about their learning experiences in each employment skills literacy lesson while the information was fresh in their minds. Students' questionnaire responses were discussed after each cycle in their individual coaching session.

Individual coaching sessions. Individual coaching sessions are a regular part my literacy programme and take place once weekly for a duration of approximately 20 minutes. They are like semi-structured interviews but are less formal. An individual coaching session enables me to guide a student in an extended discussion that draws out details about their learning (Patton, 1990). A major benefit of these coaching sessions is that their informal and conversational approach allows me to informally converse with students about their learning and concerns. They also provide space for immediate and constructive feedback. C. Bryson and Hand (2007) contend that students are more likely to engage when supported by teachers who make themselves available to discuss their learning progress. Thus, it made good sense to utilise these naturally occurring one-on-one coaching sessions in this CAR study for following up on students' questionnaire responses and for understanding individual constructions (Creswell, 2005; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Throughout this study, the last 10 minutes of students' individual coaching sessions were reserved for discussing their after-lesson questionnaire responses and employment skills

learning experiences. A qualitative approach proved invaluable as it supported collaboration and allowed me to explore students' thoughts and feelings, as well as interpret their reported experiences. It also helped me to understand the benefits and limitations of the adult literacy programme from the perspectives of the students themselves (Creswell, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

To elicit genuine responses from students and to gain a greater depth of understanding about engagement, I drew upon a range of open-ended and probing questions (see Appendix B), which were adapted from Patton (1990, 2002, 2015), Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Seidman (2013). While the emergent nature of the coaching sessions made it impossible to know exactly which questions I would ask students ahead of time, knowing the questions beforehand enabled me to 'talk' my questions to students conversationally rather than read them out as the session unfolded. Hence, following the initial opening questions, subsequent questions developed as participants gave their responses to me, which were drawn from the reservoir of readily available prompt questions already in my mind. To capture students' responses in the last 10 minutes of their coaching sessions, I used a digital audio recorder. This enabled me to record a considerable amount of information while fully participating in the discussion.

Reflective teacher journal. Reflective journals are one means of collecting data in qualitative research (Janesick, 1999) and are an effective way to obtain information about a person's feelings (Cohen et al., 2011). In this study, my reflective teacher journal became my 'reflexive' teacher journal and was useful for capturing my daily thoughts, ideas, and reflections about my research project. Initially, my approach to journal writing was quite formal, but as the study progressed it became much less formal. This was mostly because my thoughts, insights and reflections would emerge at any time, and in

these instances I would simply grab the nearest paper and a pen and jot down my thoughts in the moment so as not to forget them later. My reflective journal entries were particularly useful in this study for helping me interpret the data during the data analysis process. This helped to develop my reflexivity and provided me with a deeper understanding of my teaching practices.

Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis (TA) to analyse the qualitative data in this CAR study. TA is a widely used and highly inductive qualitative data analysis method that focuses on identifying emerging themes across a dataset that are inherent in the data itself and not imposed or predetermined by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A major advantage is that TA allows for flexibility in the researcher's choice of theoretical framework and can be applied with any theory the researcher chooses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994), making it a popular choice for novice researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After transcribing the data in each action cycle, I first read and then reread the data in front of me to familiarise myself with the content. I then sifted, sorted and organised the large amounts of data to generate a larger, consolidated representation (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010; Merriam, 2009). Next, I coded the dataset after each cycle, and across all six cycles, using an inductive coding process that involved coding every two or three lines of text with labels or 'code names' that identified key features of the data, such as keywords, concepts, elements, images and reflections that I considered might be relevant to the answering of my research question (Merriam, 2009). I then collated all the codes along with all relevant data excerpts for later stages of analysis.

The next stage of the coding process involved examining the codes and collating the data to identify important broader patterns of meaning or 'potential themes' (Merriam, 2009). This involved more sorting, sifting, note-taking and reviewing the data in front of me (repeatedly) to find keywords, phrases, patterns of meaning, themes and subthemes in the data about students' learning experiences and engagement in employment skills literacy instruction. I then defined and named the themes by developing a detailed analysis of each theme (Merriam, 2009). This included working out the scope and focus of each theme, determining the 'story' of each theme, and then deciding on a useful name for each theme. A part of this process involved reviewing and refining the themes by splitting, combining and discarding some of them to make sure they told a convincing story of the data—a story that answered my research question (Sagor, 2000).

To provide additional meaning in the data analysis process, I drew upon my observation notes and reflective teacher journal entries that described the behaviour of participants, and adapted some common-sense questions put forward by Le Compte (2010) and Sagor (2000) to help me make better sense of the data as I read the text: What is this saying? What does it represent? What is this an example of? What do I see is happening here? What occurrences are at issue here? What is this conveying about engagement? What is the overall story about engagement told by these data? And why did the story unfold this way?

Through attempting to answer these questions as I read the text after each cycle, I was able to gain a better understanding of the students' learning experiences and engagement in employment skills literacy. I then was able to produce a grounded concept regarding what actions I could implement in the next action cycle and data collection phase of the

study. Overall, the complete data analysis process helped me to reduce the data to a story and its interpretation (Le Compte & Schensul, 1999).

The suggestions put forward by Patton (2002, 2015) and Stake (1995) guided my data analysis process. Patton (2002) states that as researchers are the instrument in qualitative research, bias is inevitable, and therefore researchers should "do the very best with their full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveals given the purpose of the study" (p. 433). Stake (1995) further suggests that researchers should include their own personal perspectives in the interpretation and "use their experience to know what leads them to significant understanding, how to recognise useful sources of data and how to test the robustness of their interpretations" (p. 50). Hence, as an active participant in the CAR research process, the writing up of this study (i.e., this thesis) is in the first person and includes my own reflections and interpretations.

Reliability and Validity

Babbie (2010) contends that reliability is an issue any time a single observer is the source of data in a research study, as there is no safeguard against the influence of that one observer's subjectivity. Furthermore, because reliability issues are often associated with subjectivity, once a researcher adopts a subjective approach towards the study, the level of reliability of the work is compromised (Wilson, 2010). This means that the findings of this CAR study should not be used as reliable evidence in other adult learning contexts due to their non-generalisable nature and relatively low reliability.

Credibility and authenticity are key constituents of validity in qualitative research. Elliott (1991) addresses the concept of validity in AR, suggesting that teacher-researchers should monitor the effects of their actions by using monitoring techniques which provide

evidence of how well the course of action is being implemented. Additionally, they should use techniques which provide evidence of unintended and intended effects, and use a variety of techniques that enable the researcher to look at what is happening from several different perspectives (Elliott, 1991, p. 76). Therefore, in this study I had to first collect data which could be used to evaluate the implementation of the actions; remember to collect data that would provide evidence for the existence or non-existence of unintended effects; and triangulate the data to gain different perspectives on the situation (Feldman, 1994), as validity in CAR is achieved through the triangulation of data (Mettetal, 2001).

Triangulation across the areas of methodology, data collection and data sources in this study allowed me to examine and observe the data from several different perspectives as the theory developed (Cohen et al., 2011; B. Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Mason, 2002; Stake, 1995). It also helped to increase my confidence that I had interpreted what I observed and heard to the best of my abilities as a novice researcher. Although the use of triangulation techniques for the purposes of validating research findings has been deemed theoretically questionable, the critics of this technique do not dispute its validity for augmenting findings (Mason, 2002; Silverman, 2000).

Summary

This chapter has described the research paradigm and framework that scaffold this study and explained and justified the choice of a qualitative approach and CAR design, which together enabled an in-depth investigation of the research question. It has also outlined my role as the teacher-researcher, discussed reflexivity and described the research setting, participants and ethical considerations. Lastly, this chapter described the data collection and data analysis procedures, including the instruments employed to determine the study findings, and addressed the issues of reliability and validity. To ensure the findings were

based on credible and reflective data collection, ethical, credibility and trustworthiness measures were carefully considered and applied in the planning, action and data collection and analysis stages of this study. The findings from this research study are reported in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: Findings

Introduction

This CAR study aimed to explore the impact of personalised, career-relevant teaching and learning on student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction in order to discover the key factors that enhance engagement. This chapter organises and reports the findings of the six action cycles as determined through an in-depth thematic analysis (TA) of the transcribed data in this study. The discussion of each action cycle includes a brief overview of the teaching theme, the presentation of relevant qualitative data, an explanation of the changes made to my teaching practices, and the effects of any changes made in former cycles. I then discuss two additional findings that emerged from the overall data. The chapter closes with a summary of the six major themes identified across the six cycles of the study. These themes will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

Action Cycle One

The teaching and learning in this cycle (week one) centred on career goals, with a focus on students' own individual career goals as identified by them on their individual learner plan at the onset of the literacy programme. The three lessons in this cycle included learning about the importance of having a well-defined career goal, the various strategies for achieving a career goal, and how to map a career goal on poster paper.

Key Findings

Personalised, individual task work perceived as "most relevant". The data gathered in this cycle (week one) showed that students enjoyed creating their individual career goal poster in lesson three, and that they found the career-goal mapping activity the most relevant of all the learning in this cycle. When asked what was most relevant in this

cycle, for example, Kate stated: “I enjoyed making my poster.” Kez provided a similar response on her after-lesson questionnaire: “I liked making the poster the most.”

When analysed, the data gathered through conversations in students’ individual coaching sessions showed that, overall, students enjoyed creating their individual career goal map in lesson three because of the *personalised* aspect of the activity and the enjoyment they derived from *working on their own*. While the data indicated that students enjoyed paired and group learning “sometimes”, they preferred working on their own “most of the time” because they enjoyed having the freedom to produce their own individual work. The following reasons gathered through the individual coaching sessions exemplify this finding: “Because it was just about me and what I want to do and no one else” (Jen); “because it’s mine and I could do it however I wanted … good doing it on my own too” (Kerry); and “it was my goal and I liked being able to create it the way I wanted it. I just like doing my own thing I guess” (Jed). These responses link in well with my observations and teacher journal entries, which noted that students appeared to enjoy working (quietly) on their own as they created their individual career goal poster.

A variety of model samples helped students “know what to do”. Even though I provided students with a detailed whiteboard model sample and verbally explained each step of the goal-mapping process in lesson three, the findings in this cycle showed that most students found it difficult to identify which steps they could take to achieve their own individual career goal. For example, on his after-lesson questionnaire, Joe responded: “Thinking of all the steps was hard.” Jed provided a similar response in his coaching session: “It was hard getting going on them though … my mind just went blank.”

The data gathered in individual coaching sessions conversations showed that most students felt they needed more model samples and demonstrations to help them better understand what to do. For example, Joe commented: “More of those examples I suppose … as long as one of them is about horticulture so I know what to do.” Kerry gave a similar response in his coaching session: “More different samples would be good.”

This finding corresponded with my observations and reflective journal notes for lesson three, which showed there were instances of disengagement early on by most students as they tackled the first part of their career goal map. This was the part that involved working out what steps they might need to take to achieve their career goal. However, my observations and journal entries additionally noted that, despite the initial setbacks, there was evidence of concentrated effort and enjoyment, and increase in engagement as students progressed through the activity.

Computer-competent students preferred to use a computer to produce their work. The findings in this cycle additionally revealed that computer-competent students preferred to use a computer rather than poster paper to create their career goal map. For example, in his coaching session Joe responded: “I like both, but I’d rather do it on the computer so if I make a mistake I can change it and not make a mess of it … you can do a lot more on there.” Jed’s response was similar: “Yeah that would be good … then I can save it and add to it later or change it.” This finding contrasted with my observations and reflective journal entries, which noted that students appeared to enjoy creating their individual career goal map on the poster paper.

Changes Made to My Instructional Practices

Based on the findings in cycle one, I made two changes to my teaching practices before launching into cycle two: 1) in light of Joe and Jed's responses, I decided to offer all students the option of using either a computer or a paper-based method to produce their work, where possible and practicable; and 2) based on student feedback, I decided to incorporate at least two different model samples into subsequent employment skills lessons, including one paper-based sample and one digital sample, appropriate to their current learning. I made this second change so that students would be able to see the range of possibilities available to them, imitate the various samples as they developed their own skills and understanding to create their own personalised work, and gain a much clearer understanding of the expected outcome.

Action Cycle Two

The teaching and learning in this cycle (week two) focused on filling in industry-related forms, including paper-based and online job application forms, leave forms and timesheet forms. The forms I gave students aligned to their own individual career interests, and they used the information in their own résumé to help them fill in the various forms. In relation to the changes made following cycle one, I provided students with two paper-based job application samples and two online job application demonstrations to guide them in their learning, specific to each student's career interests.

Key Findings

Real-life learning considered relevant and important. Overall, findings in this cycle showed that students perceived the online job application activity as the most relevant and important aspect of the learning that week. The data further showed that

students perceived the online activity as ‘real’ and helped them know what to expect for the real job applications they would be tackling in cycle six.

When analysed, the data gathered through conversations in coaching sessions showed that students found the online job application task relevant and important because of the ‘realness’ of the activity, as Jen’s response indicated: “The online forms [were relevant] because they were real and that’s the kind of job form I’ll need to fill in when I apply for jobs.” Two other students put forward similar responses in their coaching sessions: “Doing the online forms made it more real for me … I want to get good at them so I can apply for those jobs later” (Kate); “It was the real thing … we just didn’t submit them … so now I know what I need to do” (Kez). Jed’s coaching session responses highlighted the relevance of the online job application task: “Really relevant … way better than filling in just any random form … I can use this one when I fill in a real one, as a guide.”

Personalised learning helped students to focus and engage. The data gathered through after-lesson questionnaires and coaching session conversations showed that students perceived the online job application task helped them to focus and engage in their learning. For example, in his coaching session, Jed responded, “I felt more focused I guess.” Similarly, Kez stated: “I was more focused and engaged.”

Overall, the data analysis showed that most students attributed their focus and engagement to the *personalised* aspect of the online job application task. For example, Joe was engaged because “it’s what I want to do”. Kerry’s coaching session response was similar. He was able to focus because “they are the kind of jobs I want to apply for”. The two main findings in this cycle corresponded with my own observations and reflective

journal entries, which noted focus, concentration, effort and an enhancement in engagement as students attended to their online job application task.

Students with low computer skills perceived computer-based activities as an opportunity to improve their computer skills. An interesting finding that emerged in this cycle was that students with poor computer skills perceived the computer-based, online learning tasks as an opportunity to improve their computer skills. The data gathered through coaching session discussions showed that, despite the challenges these students faced in their computer-based learning, they “enjoyed” computer-based tasks because they wanted to “get better” at using a computer. Their desire to become computer-competent was mostly so they could use a computer at home to search and apply for jobs online and for social networking purposes.

A response put forward by Jen in her coaching session emphasised the importance of computer-based tasks for improving her computer skills: “I want to be good on it. I’m still quite slow but every time I use it I’m improving.” Kerry gave a similar response in his coaching session but also related computer skills to his future employment: “I want to get good at using computers … [I] will need to know how to use them when I’m working … the more I use it the better I’m getting.” My observations and reflective journal notes for this cycle showed that students with poor computer skills often appeared frustrated and annoyed when they became challenged in their computer-based learning and frequently requested my help. It was only through individual coaching session discussions with students that I was able to understand their emotional and cognitive perceptions of their engagement.

Changes Made to My Instructional Practices

The findings from this cycle highlighted an urgent need for incorporating appropriate computer skills training into my literacy programme to meet the needs of students with poor computer skills. While the time constraints of this study made it difficult to immediately address and fully resolve this issue, I was able to allow space for small changes and improvements in the meantime. Therefore, in response to student feedback I decided to change the seating arrangement in my classroom so that students with poor computer skills could sit together for computer-based learning tasks. My purpose in doing this was twofold: first, I believed it would make it easier for the students to support each other in their computer-based learning; and second, I figured it would make it more manageable for me, as I would be able to help the students as a group with the same kind of issues—freeing up my time for other teaching matters.

Effects of the Change Made Following Cycle One

All students reported that the various model samples I gave them in this cycle, including the online demonstrations, made it easier for them to know what to do, what outcome I expected of them, and understand what kind of information they needed to include in their job application forms. Students also reported in their coaching sessions that having a variety of model samples helped them to focus on their learning because they had some good comparisons in which to guide them. Coaching session responses indicated that these features were “really helpful … helped me focus … not sure I would’ve known what to do … it’s hard to think of that kind of stuff yourself” (Jed); and that they “helped me know what to put in there. I would’ve taken way longer without those” (Kate).

Action Cycle Three

Workplace rights and responsibilities were the focus of the teaching and learning in this cycle (week three). In these three lessons, students learned about employer and employee rights and responsibilities in the workplace, including individual and collective employment agreements. In lesson three, students had the opportunity to create their own individual employment agreement using an interactive online agreement builder. The information students used to write their individual agreement imitated their real-life employment goal. At the end of lesson three, students participated in an informal 10-minute panel quiz designed to test students' knowledge of the learning in cycles one, two and three in a fun way.

Key Findings

Personalised, career-relevant learning perceived as useful and important to future employment. The data gathered through questionnaires and coaching session conversations indicated that students perceived the online, individual employment agreement task in lesson three as the most relevant of all the learning in this cycle. Jed's after-lesson questionnaire response highlighted the relevance aspect: "The agreement was the most relevant because I've never read one and I want to understand it." Kerry provided a similar response in his coaching session: "[It] would have to be the employment agreement … that was relevant for me."

The data gleaned from students' coaching sessions showed that students' perceived relevance was because they considered the employment agreement as "useful" and "important" to their future employment. For example, Kerry responded: "It's useful for when I get a job … so they can't deceive me." The responses of two other students were similar: "Doing the online agreement was good … I can compare mine to the one I get … to make

sure they do it right" (Jen); and "I think it's important because we have to have one when we are working, so I need to know about it and what it all means" (Kez).

The relevance of the individual employment agreements to students was further emphasised when they requested a print copy of their agreement for future use. These findings aligned with my observation and reflective journal notes, which showed a concentrated effort by students as they created their individual employment agreement.

Career-relevant learning deemed more relevant than 'fun' learning. An interesting finding that emerged from the data was that despite the fun and enjoyment students experienced as they participated in the panel quiz in lesson three, they found it less relevant compared to other career-relevant employment skills literacy learning. The data gathered in students' individual coaching sessions showed this clearly. For example, when asked about the relevance of the quiz, Jen replied: "Not that relevant really … I couldn't think of the answers on the spot even though I knew most of them … I enjoyed it though." Likewise, Jed responded: "It was fun, but I think some of the other things we do are more relevant … like learning about real job stuff."

In addition, the data gleaned from questionnaires and coaching session discussions showed that most students found the quiz bell "annoying" because it was "too loud". While my observations and reflective journal entries did not note any annoyance in relation to the quiz bell, they did note that students smiled and laughed a lot and appeared to experience fun and enjoyment as they participated in the quiz.

Changes Made to my Instructional Practices

Based on these findings, I made two small changes to my instructional practices before moving forward into cycle four: 1) I decided to invite the students to help me redesign the quiz so they could decide for themselves how they could make it more relevant to them; and 2) in relation to student feedback, I decided to replace the quiz bell with a quieter buzzer so it was less annoying for students in future quizzes.

Effects of the Change Made Following Cycle Two

An important contribution to enhancing student engagement in cycle three came from the change I made following cycle two—to group students with low computer skills at the same table for computer-based learning. The findings showed that the revised seating arrangement made the computer-based learning more enjoyable for the students and enabled them to help one another more easily in their learning. This change also made the lessons more manageable for me as a teacher, because fewer students required my help—enabling me to progress through the lessons in a smoother and more timely manner.

Action Cycle Four

The teaching and learning in this cycle (week four) centred on basic interview skills. This topic generated a keen interest among students as they realised they were moving closer to applying for real jobs and attending real job interviews. The learning in this cycle included preparing for a job interview and learning how to confidently respond to 10 common interview questions. In lesson three, students were each required to perform a short mock job interview in front of the class with me as the interviewer. The interview questions I posed to students in their mock interview were personalised to their individual career interests.

Key Findings

Personalised learning for real-life application perceived as most relevant.

Overall, the findings showed the mock job interviews in lesson three to be the most relevant learning for the students in cycle four. The data collected through after-lesson questionnaires and coaching session discussions showed that students perceived the mock job interviews as relevant because they found them “interesting”, “useful” and “good practice” for the real job interviews they hoped to soon attend.

The findings further showed that the personalised interview questions I asked students in their mock job interview were perceived by them as “real” because they were the kind of questions they expected to receive in a real-life job interview, as Kate’s coaching session response suggested: “The role-playing we did … the mock interview … it was like real-life … really serious … they were helpful… the type of questions I’ll most likely get, so it’s really relevant.” Jen put forward a similar response in her coaching session: “The mock interview [was most relevant] because it was you asking the questions … and it was like a real job interview for a dairy farm job.”

Despite the perceived relevance and helpfulness of the mock interviews, two of the six students reported in their coaching session that they were a bit nervous about the learning in this cycle, as they had never attended a real job interview. While my observations and reflective journal entries did not note any nervousness, they did note that the mock job interviews quickly captured the students’ interest and held their attention.

Changes Made to my Instructional Practices

After reflecting on the findings in this cycle, the only change I decided upon was to make a point of conversing with every student about the next cycle's learning in their coaching session the week before, so I could recognise early on which students might need more teacher support. I made this change because of the two students who confessed to being a bit nervous about the job interview learning. While this was not a key finding as such, I did consider it an issue that needed addressing.

Action Cycle Five

The teaching and learning in this cycle (week five) focused on workplace health and safety. As this was a broad topic, I divided the lessons into three main topic areas: protective clothing and equipment, hazard identification systems, and hazard management and reporting. In keeping with the change identified during cycle four, I made students aware of the learning in this cycle ahead of time, so I could identify those students who needed more learning support.

Key Findings

Workplace hazard instruction perceived as important and useful to future employment. Overall, the findings in cycle five showed that students perceived workplace hazard learning and as the most relevant learning in this cycle. The data gathered through after-lesson questionnaires and individual coaching session conversations showed that students found this learning relevant because they considered it "important" and "useful" to their future employment. For example, in her coaching session, Jen responded: "Identifying hazards on the forms was the most relevant … I didn't know what that even meant before this week … [and it] will be useful later." Joe provided a similar response in his coaching session in relation to workplace hazards: "That was relevant … I know that

when I'm on the job I might need to do those things … so learning about them now is important … it will be good for when I go into a job."

Personalised learning helped students to focus and engage. The findings further showed that the personalised learning helped students to focus and engage in the workplace health and safety learning. This was most obvious when I conversed with students about their after-lesson responses in their coaching sessions. For example, Kate replied that the workplace health and safety learning "was relevant to me … especially the caregiving hazards". Jed's session response was similar: "Health and safety stuff…learning about finding hazards … especially the hort [horticulture] stuff … that's what made it relevant for me." These two findings aligned with my observations and teacher journal entries, which noted students appeared interested and engaged as they participated in the workplace hazard learning, especially in the hazard register tasks.

Too much teacher-talk time during instruction perceived as "boring". Another finding in this cycle was that most students found the instructional phase of the cycle "boring". Joe emphasised this in his coaching session: "A bit too much talking … I get bored. I prefer to just get straight into the computer work." Likewise, Kerry responded that it was "a bit boring".

The findings further indicated that students liked the inclusion of the video clips in the instruction and wished to have more of them. For instance, Kerry commented that "some more online videos would be good". Jed stated: "I like the videos", and Jen felt the same way: "I like the videos." These findings linked to my observations and reflective journal entries in this cycle, which noted that most students demonstrated at least some

disengagement behaviour during instruction, except for when the video clips were showing.

Changes Made to My Instructional Practices

To address the disengagement issue during instruction and to prevent it from happening in subsequent lessons, I decided to lessen my talking time in cycle six by incorporating more career-relevant industry video clips into the instruction. The purpose of doing this was to generate more student engagement by stimulating the students' emotional interest in the current learning.

Effect of the Change Made Following Cycle Four

My decision to converse with students about the next cycle's learning proved beneficial for finding out which students needed more teacher support for their learning in this cycle. The data gleaned from individual coaching sessions showed that students liked finding out ahead of time what they would be learning in the next cycle because it helped them to feel more organised and confident.

Action Cycle Six

The teaching and learning in this cycle (week six) centred on applying for real jobs online. Included in these lessons was cover letter writing, how to register with recruitment agencies, and how to submit a real job application online with an attached cover letter and résumé. Considering the changes made in earlier cycles, I included additional video clips relevant to the students' career interests in the instructional phase of the lesson and offered them a variety of model samples, including an online demonstration. I also grouped students with low computer skills at the same table for the computer-based learning.

Key Findings

Real-life learning perceived as most relevant. Overall, the findings from cycle six showed students perceived the online job application task as most relevant learning in this cycle. The data gleaned from students' individual coaching sessions showed that they found this task relevant because the jobs they had applied for were real jobs they wished to obtain.

Joe's coaching session revealed the personal relevance and realness of his online job application: "Completing my job application was the most relevant because that's real … [it] will get me a job hopefully." Similarly, Kate responded: "I enjoyed it because it was real … and relevant". Kez's response revealed her engagement in the task: "I was really focused because it was real." This finding aligned with my observations and reflections, which noted that students appeared to be serious, focused and engaged as they attended to their online job applications.

Individual computer-based tasks helped students to focus. Another finding that emerged in this cycle was that students enjoyed working on their own to do the computer-based online job tasks. The data gathered through after-lesson questionnaires and individual coaching sessions showed that working on their own had helped students to focus on their online task and complete it within the set period, as Kez's response suggested: "I like having my own computer so I can work on my own at my own pace … I get my work completed because I don't get as distracted." Jed's response was similar: "Doing it on my own is good too … helps me to focus and get it finished." My observations and reflective journal entries aligned well with this finding, as they noted an increase in focus and engagement whenever students worked on their own to complete computer-based online tasks.

Effect of the Change Made to My Instructional Practices

The coaching session data showed that students found the additional video clips in the instructional phase of the lesson "interesting" and "enjoyable", as Joe's response suggested: "It's good when you give the instruction but I also liked the videos … made it more interesting." Likewise, Kate commented: "I like it when you give instruction but it's good to have something different too … variety is good I think." This finding aligned with my observations and teacher journal entries, which noted students appeared much more interested, focused and engaged due to the inclusion of additional video clips during this cycle's instruction.

Final Questions Asked

In the students' final coaching session following cycle six, I posed the following two questions to them to gain a deeper understanding about their perceptions of their own engagement across all six cycles of the study: 1) "Over the past six weeks, I provided you with personalised teaching and learning relevant to your individual career interest. Can you tell me what overall effect this had on your engagement in your employment skills learning?" and 2) "At the start of the programme I helped you to set your own career goal. Can you tell me what impact this had on your engagement in employment skills literacy learning?"

Key Findings

Personalised learning instrumental to improving engagement. In relation to the first question, the responses showed that all students perceived the personalised learning as instrumental to improving their engagement in employment skills literacy learning. While not all students recognised a *significant* improvement, most

students acknowledged a *noticeable* improvement. Moreover, students reported that when personalised to their own career interest, they found the learning more “relevant”, “interesting” and “real”. Students also agreed the personalised learning helped them to “focus” more. Kez’s response highlighted some of these factors:

> Yeah, good … really relevant … better than before. It made it more real for me, I guess … you know, especially because that’s what I want to do, not all those other jobs. I wanted to learn about farming, and this isn’t even a farming course, but I’ve learned heaps more about it, especially all that health and safety stuff.

Having a career goal gave students purpose and direction. In response to the second question, the responses showed that students felt that having their own career goal established at the start of the programme was relevant as it gave them “purpose” and direction. Furthermore, most students reported that having their own career goal helped them to persist in their learning and not give up on the course, as Jen’s response suggested: “It was really helpful … it made me want to come to course and not miss anything … made me think more about my career goal and how important it is to make sure I get there.” Jed provided a similar response: “Yeah, it helps me a lot … gives me purpose … otherwise, I’d probably keep doing what I was doing … not much.”

Overall Themes Identified

The analysis of the data revealed two main themes that cut across all six cycles of the study: 1) Student engagement was evident *most of the time*, and 2); engagement was most noticeable when students were doing individual computer-based work relevant to their own individual career interest. By stating that engagement was evident “most of the time”, I mean that in every employment skills literacy lesson throughout this study student engagement was noticeable regardless of any occurrences of disengagement.

More specifically, the data showed that students who had earlier showed a high level of disengagement during employment skills literacy instruction became engaged early in the study and managed to sustain their engagement most of the time throughout the six cycles. Students who had demonstrated some engagement earlier also reported they experienced an increase in engagement and were able to sustain it most of the time. The data additionally revealed that, overall, students found the employment skills literacy learning more interesting and enjoyable. The students reported experiences aligned with my own observations and reflective journal entries, which noted that there was an overall increase in student engagement despite the challenges each student faced in their employment skills literacy learning.

Summary

This chapter has reported the key findings in this CAR study. The goal of this study was to examine and identify the key factors that enhance student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction. Six major themes emerged from the findings that were found to enhance engagement: 1) career-relevant, personalised learning; 2) well-defined career goals; 3) learning that has the potential for real-life application; 4) individual task work; 5) computer-based learning; and 6) a variety of model samples. Overall, the findings showed that all students experienced an improvement in engagement and managed to sustain it most of the time throughout the six cycles of the study. They also found the career-relevant, personalised instruction more interesting and enjoyable. The six themes that emerged from the data and their relationship to existing research and literature are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter discusses and synthesises the study's findings, in relation to my research question:

> *What is the impact on engagement when the teaching and learning in employment skills literacy instruction is closely linked to students' identified career interests?*

The discussion focuses on the six major themes identified in the data and situates the results of this study within the body of wider research evidence and literature. An additional finding that emerged from the data is also discussed. A summary concludes the chapter.

Key Study Findings

Overall, this CAR study's findings indicate that students were engaged in their employment skills literacy learning *most of the time*. According to Schlechty (2002), this suggests the level of learning in my literacy classroom can now be considered *highly engaged*, as a highly engaged classroom is one where most students are authentically engaged most of the time and where all the students are authentically engaged at least some of the time.

Major Themes. After reviewing the research findings across all six cycles of the study, I was able to identify six major themes that were influential in enhancing student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction:

1. Career-relevant, personalised learning
2. Well-defined career goals
3. Learning which has the potential for real-life application

4. Individual task work
5. Computer-based learning
6. A variety of model samples

***Career-relevant, personalised learning*.** The data yielded by this CAR study indicate that personalised learning relevant to students' individual career interests is a key factor for enhancing student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction. Overall, students perceived the career-focused teaching and learning to be relevant and engaging when the instruction and learning activities were applicable to their own career goal and to the skills and knowledge relevant and essential to the workplace.

This finding suggests that personalised learning, as opposed to learning that is based around gaining competence in a broad area, helps adults to actively engage in the learning process by focusing on a specific, relevant area of learning that will help them to achieve their career goal. My interpretation supports the assumptions of several authors, including Basye and Grant (2014), Brookfield (1986, 1987), Jones (2008), OET (2017), Silberman and Auerbach (1998) and the Educational Development Trust (2016), who agree that tailored learning makes the learning experience more relevant for adult students because it focuses on adults' individual differences in background, learning style, motivation, needs, interests and goals. This means that, as a teacher, when I personalise the teaching and learning to fit my students' needs I am not only fostering engagement but providing the students with an education that is getting them where they want to go.

Students' need for industry-relevant, personalised learning is emphasised by both Casimiro (2016) and Hilliard (2015). There are also several researchers who argue that 'perceived relevance' (students' own subjective perspective about the relevance of their

learning) is a crucial factor in maintaining student interest and motivation (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Donaldson et al., 1993; Frymier & Schulman, 1995; Jones, 2008; Knowles, 1980, 1984, 2005, 2012; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Migletti & Strange, 1998; Ormrod, 2006; Roberson, 2013; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000). This was certainly the case in this study as it was repeatedly demonstrated that students were more interested in employment skills learning when it directly related to their own individual career goal.

***Well-defined career goals*.** Having a well-defined career goal emerged as a key factor for enhancing the students' engagement in employment skills literacy instruction. This finding suggests that, as a facilitator, when I help students establish their own individual career goal at the onset of the programme I am providing them with purpose and direction and helping them to focus and persist in their employment skills literacy learning. Furthermore, the process of setting goals allows students to choose where they want to go and what they want to achieve, and by knowing what they want to achieve, students' can more clearly see what they need to concentrate on and improve.

This finding supports the findings of Comings et al. (1999), Elliot and Fryer (2008), Kearsley (2010), Knowles (1980, 1984), Knowles et al. (2005, 2012), Lee and Reeve (2012), Roberson (2013), Wolowiec (2012) and Zimmerman (1990), all of whom showed that helping students to set specific learning goals improves their inherent motivation and sense of agency, which in turn can increase students' motivation to complete work and achieve success in their learning. This further suggests that when I help students to set, monitor and work towards achieving their set career goals, I am not only promoting their engagement but also helping them take on immediate responsibility and ownership of their

goal, which helps to motivate and lead them in their learning towards their desired outcome.

***Learning which has the potential for real-life application*.** The data yielded in this study indicates that real-life learning that has the potential for real-life application enhances student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction, particularly when relevant to students' career ambitions. This finding suggests that students perceive the learning as meaningful and worthwhile when it can be immediately applied in their personal lives to help them deal with their real-life situations, responsibilities, problems and activities, as well as help them to achieve their career goals.

There are numerous authors and researchers highlighted in the literature review who acknowledge the need adults have for learning that has the potential for immediate real-life application (Bishop-Clark & Lynch, 1992; Donaldson et al., 1993; Dunleavy & Milton, & 2009; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Holyoke & Larson, 2009; Jarvis, 2004; Knowles, 1980, 1984; Knowles et al., 2005, 2012; Martin, 2006; Merriam, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Merriam et al., 2007; Migletti & Strange, 1998; Reeve et al., 2004; Roberson, 2013; Ross-Gordon, 1991; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000; Schuetz, 2008; Willms et al., 2009). Overall, these authors recognise that adult learners are self-directed, task-motivated and problem-centred, and are interested in an immediate application of knowledge that has relevance to their job or personal life. This suggests that in order to engage the adults in my classroom, instructors should focus on providing students with real-life learning that gives them a sense of purpose and enables them to take responsibility for their own actions both inside and outside the classroom.

Given that low-literate adults tend to struggle in many areas of their lives where literacy skills are required (Ministry of Education, 2017), this finding implies that real-life learning helps the students to develop their self-esteem and self-confidence, which in turn helps them to tackle real-life tasks on their own. For example, filling in forms is a struggle for students, therefore becoming proficient at filling in forms is something they wish to achieve, especially as having to ask someone to help them fill in a form (particularly in public) makes students feel incompetent and embarrassed.

Knowles (1984) argues that adults' motivational drive for learning is mostly internal, and that the desire for increased self-esteem is one internal motivator adult learners have. Eccles and Wigfield (2002), Martin (2006) and Schuetz (2008) additionally emphasise that fostering students' sense of ownership, autonomy and agency helps them to build confidence and motivates them in their learning and in their lives outside the classroom. This suggests that when I provide students with relevant teaching and learning that can be immediately applied to their real-life situations, activities and responsibilities, I am not only meeting students' real-life needs but fostering engagement in my classroom. Therefore, my findings appear to align well with those of Brookfield (1986), Knowles (1984), Knowles et al. (2005), Merriam et al. (2007) and Rubenson (2011), who showed that adults seek training opportunities that will enable them to solve immediate, real-life problems and help them to develop their self-directed learning skills.

***Individual task work*.** Working on their own to tackle learning tasks relevant to their own career goal significantly enhanced students' engagement in this study. This finding suggests that adults in my classroom enjoyed the responsibility and autonomy of individual project work, especially when I allowed them the freedom to express their individuality through their work.

Gaining independence in learning is important for students' future employment, as many jobs in industry demand independence and autonomy. According to Carnevale, Gainer and Meltzer (1990), self-motivation, personal initiative and personal responsibility are important characteristics of workplace literacy. Eccles and Wigfield (2002), Martin (2006) and Schuetz (2008) also emphasise that individual work is important for providing adult students with a sense of ownership, autonomy and agency, which in turn can help students to build confidence and motivate them in their learning and in their lives outside the classroom.

While this study's findings show that the students enjoyed individual task work, they also suggest that students actively accepted the challenges in their learning to achieve their desired autonomy when they perceived the learning would help them to become more independent. According to Deci et al. (1994), adult students' internal motivation is higher when they are taught in classrooms where instructors are perceived as being supportive of student autonomy. This suggests that when I support the students' autonomy by positioning them to oversee their own learning so that they can understand and grasp an activity by themselves, I am also fostering the students' sense of control and responsibility over their behaviours and goals. My findings therefore seem to align with the views of Dunleavy and Milton (2009), Jarvis (2004), Reeve et al. (2004) and Knowles (1984), who contend adult students prefer self-directed learning that enables them to take responsibility for their own actions.

***Computer-based learning*.** Computer-based learning emerged as a key factor for enhancing student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction in this study. Overall, students perceived computer-based learning as relevant and important both inside

and outside of the classroom, particularly in relation to applying for jobs, future employment purposes, and social networking purposes.

This finding indicates that aside from providing students with a wealth of employment information at their fingertips, the use of computers in employment skills training interests and motivates students to engage in their literacy learning. My findings appear to verify what many other authors claim about technology in adult learning environments, particularly in terms of it providing a wealth of information, supporting learning, motivating students, enhancing literacy development and enhancing students' self-esteem and self-confidence (Boster et al., 2004; Caruso & Kvavik, 2005; Gulek & Demirtas, 2005; Kenny & Gunter, 2004; Mann et al., 1999; OET, 2017; Taylor et al., 2001).

Based on industry knowledge, the results of the literature review and the media, it is apparent that the competent use of computers is important in adult learning, industry and students' home and community life. Therefore, if adult students do not become skilled at using computers and software applications, they are more likely to become limited in their life and job choices, and even in their communications with family and friends. My findings appear to support the views of Gulek and Demirtas (2005), Caruso and Kvavik (2005), M. Johnson (2011) and OET (2017), who assert that the use of technology, such as a computer, allows less experienced adult learners to develop competency and progress on to more complex activities and deeper participation as they gain the experience needed to become skilled members of the community. Given that computer skills have become an essential part of the workplace, it seems crucial that students seek to develop computer competency.

In the field of education, teaching and learning are becoming more computer-oriented as industry demands increase, and as new resources become available to teachers and students. However, while it is not practical to send every low-skilled student in my classroom elsewhere for computer training, this finding suggests a need for the inclusion of appropriate computer training into my literacy programme to accommodate the needs of those students who come to my classroom with poor (or no) computer skills. As Gulek and Demirtas (2005), Caruso and Kvavik (2005), M. Johnson (2011) and OET (2017) have pointed out, the incorporation of any type of modern technology in the classroom, such as a computer, enhances motivation, engagement and educational outcomes. Therefore, this finding also indicates that, as a teacher, I should identify at the start of the programme those students who may need computer skills assistance to help them make better use of their employment skills training time and not lose valuable time struggling with computer-based issues.

***A variety of model samples*.** Providing students with a variety of model samples to help guide them in their employment skills learning worked well in this study to enhance students' employment skills literacy learning. While one model sample gave students some guidance, providing them with a variety of completed work examples gave them more guidance and enabled comparisons.

This finding suggests that the use of visual planning tools is useful for promoting engagement, supporting students' learning and providing students with a sense of responsibility and ownership in their learning. My finding verifies Knowles' (1984) assumption that adult students need learning environments that foster their need for self-directness and responsibility. Eccles and Wigfield (2002), Martin (2006) and Schuetz

(2008) also emphasise the importance ownership, autonomy and agency in adult learning for helping students develop confidence and become more motivated in their learning.

This finding additionally suggests that providing students with more guidance and comparisons makes it easier for them to imitate the examples and build upon them by developing their own ideas to produce their own individualised work. This means that when I combine the explanation of a task with two or more concrete models of what their process or work should look like, I am not only giving the students direct descriptions of their targeted outcome but also helping them to move progressively towards stronger understanding and engagement, and achievement of the task.

While the educational literature regularly mentions model samples, the research into the effects of model samples on engagement for low-literate adult learners is inadequate. That said, there are several authors, such as Bandura (1986), Ellis (2003), Herber and Herber (1993), Hogan and Pressley (1997), and Larkin (2002), who consider that model samples form an important part of the broader scaffolding concept, in that modelling is a vital part of helping students learn the process of constructing meaning and helping them learn the various strategies and skills involved in their learning process. They also concede that students should be able to (repeatedly) watch their teacher model or demonstrate each step in the task or strategy, as this supports students to understand how to perform each step and why each step is important, leading to students' successful performance of the task or strategy.

Additional finding: Relevant learning valued more highly than fun learning.

An unexpected discovery that emerged in the study's findings was that students in my classroom valued relevant learning more highly than fun learning, particularly career-

relevant learning applicable to their individual career goal. This finding suggests that when students perceive the employment skills learning as relevant and worthwhile to their career goal, the fun aspect of learning is not as important to them.

An exploration of the literature on fun and enjoyment in learning reveals that these dimensions are discussed mostly in relation to the learning of children and older adults, and seldom in relation to learners outside these age groups (Lucardie, 2014). However, one study was carried out on fun and enjoyment in adult learning in Australia in 2012. It gathered data from interview conversations with 40 adult students and nine teachers who were participating in learning programmes that provide basic reading, writing and numeracy skills across a range of domains such as leisure, work and computers (Lucardie, 2014). The results of the study showed that both teachers and learners perceived having fun and experiencing enjoyment as a motivator to attend classes and learn the knowledge and skills. It was also found that fun and enjoyment were perceived as a means for encouraging concentration by learners, helped in the engagement of student learning, and were a proven way of building a socially connected learning environment (Lucardie, 2014).

While Lucardie's (2014) study was not specific to employment skills literacy training, which might have contributed to the different results, the findings in this CAR study showed that although students derived a sense of enjoyment from participating in fun-focused learning and activities, they preferred instruction that was relevant to their own career goal. This aligned with my observations and reflective journal entries, which showed a consistent, focused effort by students across all six cycles of the study as they attended to career-relevant learning that did not focus on fun and enjoyment.

This difference in findings additionally suggests that adult learners perceive things differently according to their own personal needs, and that adults seek learning opportunities which they think will help them achieve their perceived needs and goals. My view supports Knowles' (1984) assumptions that adult learners become ready to learn when they experience a need to learn that will help them to cope with real-life situations and responsibilities. It also confirms the assumption of Knowles et al. (2005) that adults seek educational training opportunities which they consider will satisfy their need for learning and which have immediate relevance to their jobs or personal lives.

Summary

This chapter has discussed the six major themes identified from the study data that were influential in improving student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction. Relevant findings from the existing research and literature were drawn upon throughout the discussion to situate this study's findings within the body of wider research evidence and literature. The conclusions, implications, limitations and recommendations for further research that have emerged from this study are discussed in the subsequent, and final, chapter.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusions, Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

Introduction

This CAR study set out to explore and identify the key factors that enhance student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction when the teaching and learning is closely linked to students' individual career interests. This final chapter first presents the conclusions of the study in relation to the research question and the study results. I then outline the implications and limitations of the study. The chapter closes with some recommendations for future research based on the findings of this study.

Conclusions

The Key Factors That Enhanced Engagement

Overall, a noticeable increase in student engagement was evident across all six cycles of the study. Employing a qualitative CAR approach for this study enabled me to probe deeply into the students' perspectives on engagement to discover the key factors influential in enhancing their level of engagement in employment skills literacy learning. Overall, the study strongly suggests that student engagement improves when the teaching and learning are closely linked to students' identified career interests. More specifically, the findings suggest that career-relevant personalised learning, well-defined career goals, learning which has the potential for real-life application, individual task work, computer-based learning, and a variety of good model samples work well to improve student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction for low-literate adult learners. The results of this CAR study demonstrate that the factors of engagement cannot be presumed and that listening to the voices of students is key to discovering what factors work well to enhance and sustain their engagement.

The Usefulness of CAR as a Problem-Solving Tool

Conducting this research has revealed that CAR is a simple, useful and effective problem-solving tool for exploring student engagement and for investigating and experimenting with new possibilities in my classroom. One major advantage was that CAR enabled me to look more deeply at one aspect of my teaching practice (poor engagement in employment skills literacy) and make changes to the teaching and learning to try and improve the level of engagement in this focal area.

The Impact of CAR on Me and My Teaching Practices

Conducting a CAR study has highlighted for me that promoting student engagement in my classroom is key to fostering improvement in low-literate adult students' learning. It has also made me realise how crucial engagement is for the ongoing achievement and success of the students' learning, and that understanding the principles of adult learning is fundamental to developing learning opportunities that facilitate student engagement. In addition, using CAR as a means for finding ways to enhance engagement in employment skills literacy was a useful task that led not only to improved student engagement but also to an overall improvement in the learning behaviours in my classroom.

Perhaps the most important influence this research study has had on me as a teacher is that CAR has become an input into, and a stimulus for, my teacher reflection and reflexivity. Examining my interactions introspectively as they occurred and then reflecting on the various elements following the action has taught me the importance of continually evaluating myself as a teacher and my teaching practices, including the methods I use in my classroom and how these impact on students' learning and engagement. Therefore, CAR is an excellent approach to my professional development because it addresses the issues I care about and deal with daily in my classroom. Moreover, the knowledge I have

gained from conducting this CAR study has become an entrenched part of my personal teaching philosophy as I move forward in my adult teaching career.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this CAR study revealed some important factors of engagement that improved adult student engagement in my adult literacy classroom. While the study's findings cannot be generalised, this study could be used as a model for other teachers who wish to implement CAR to improve aspects of their own adult classrooms, teaching contexts and teaching practices. Research-based knowledge on student engagement, to which this study makes an important contribution, can benefit other teachers of low-literate adult learners in improving engagement in their own classrooms and teaching contexts. Finally, this study has demonstrated the usefulness of CAR as problem-solving tool that can help teachers fulfil their responsibilities with regard to developing their teaching practices.

Implications

The Need for Immediately Applicable Real-Life Learning

The main implication of this study's findings is that, in order to maximise engagement, employment skills instructors need to provide learning and material that can be immediately applied in students' real lives outside of the classroom. While career-relevant employment skills instruction forms an important part of the programme, the need for non-career learning and material that will help students to deal with their current real-life activities and responsibilities became increasingly clear as the study progressed. Therefore, the information I present to future students will include some non-career teaching and learning relevant to the students' real-life activities and responsibilities as much as possible, so they can make a profound connection with the learning and

materials. Given that adult students are task-motivated and have an interest in the immediate application of knowledge to help them to solve their real world problems (Knowles et al., 2005; Merriam et al., 2007), a good question I could ask myself as I further develop my literacy programme is: “What effect might this learning and material have on students’ current real-life activities and responsibilities?”

The Need to Consider Students’ Varying Computer Skills

While this CAR study achieved its purpose of enhancing adult student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction, the lack of appropriate computer training for students with poor computer skills emerged as a major concern. Typically, most students who commence the course have already used a computer and have at least the basic skills required for the learning in the programme. However, in this study three of the six participating students had very low computer skills and consequently struggled in the computer-based tasks. Facilitators have a responsibility to find ways to provide opportunities for *all* students to access, interact with, and become skilled users of computers as part of education today, especially as the competent use of computers is becoming more crucial to industry (Taylor et al., 2011).

Limitations

Small-Scale Study

This small-scale CAR study involved one facilitator, who was also the researcher, and six adult students in one literacy classroom, based in one PTE in New Zealand. Since qualitative research occurs in a natural setting, it is extremely difficult to replicate studies (Wiersma, 2000, p. 211). The absence of a structured design or a standardised procedure further contributes to the very low reliability and replication difficulties. This means that the small group of studied students and the resultant findings in this study cannot be

representative of the population of interest (Harry & Lipsky, 2014). Unlike traditional research, however, CAR is not about hypothesis testing and producing generalisable results, as the focus in CAR is on the practical significance of the findings (Holly et al., 2009; Mettetal, 2001; Mills, 2011). Moreover, in qualitative research small non-random samples are selected precisely because the researcher wishes "to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many" (Merriam, 1998, p. 208).

On this basis, the research results from my CAR study contribute to the existing knowledge base, and the information gathered in this study can also help meet the requirements of the assessment movement, which state that as an educator I should document student learning (Bell, 1993; Hubbard & Power, 2003; Sagor, 2000). This study further adds to the 'student voice' literature that argues for the necessity of teachers listening to students (McIntyre, Pedder, & Rudduck, 2005). Therefore, CAR was an ideal research approach with which to answer my research question, and one that has both empowered and improved my teaching practices. As Nihlen (1992) points out, effective teacher research empowers teachers, allowing them greater confidence in their ability to promote change individually and collectively.

Problems Resulting from the Research Design

One feature of the research design which may have affected the quality of the findings was my decision to make audio recordings rather than video recordings. However, I had good reasons for making this decision, as prior to undertaking the study the students indicated their preference for audio recording of their individual coaching sessions due to being "camera shy". However, the absence of a visual record limited the exploratory possibilities of this CAR study, particularly in relation to the non-verbal behaviour of participants. For

example, there may have been unobserved behaviours which might have contributed to the study, such as facial expressions and body language. To manage this difficulty, I wrote down my impressions and thoughts in my teacher journal and in the margins of the transcripts. I also transcribed the audio recordings (using a verbatim format) as soon as possible following each individual coaching session.

Choice of Interpretative Framework

It is possible that my choice of interpretative frameworks for this study may have influenced my interpretations of the collected data, which may have been differently had I chosen another interpretive framework. However, characteristic of qualitative researchers is the subjective inclusion of relevant personal experience and insight into the data, as opposed to the pursuit of objectivity characteristic of other non-qualitative research approaches. Therefore, in this study I was able to access my own experiences and insights as a teacher to add value to the data in the analysis process.

The Influence of the CAR Study on the Students' Engagement

Lastly, a potential limitation is the influence the CAR study itself had on students' level of engagement in employment skills literacy. Throughout the research project, students frequently communicated their interest in, and their enjoyment of, the study, mostly during class time conversations and through discussions in their individual coaching sessions. This poses the question of whether and to what degree the students' knowledge of, and interest in, the CAR study itself may have influenced their level of engagement in employment skills literacy.

Recommendations

Further Research

Exploring students' experiences of engagement in employment skills literacy instruction has provided me with a much deeper understanding of the factors that influence engagement in my literacy classroom. However, conducting this CAR study has highlighted several potential opportunities for further research into low-literate adult learning contexts. These include: studies on how the inclusion or exclusion of 'fun learning' influences engagement; studies on the effects of CAR on students' level of engagement; research into the types of technology (such as computers) that motivate engagement and the best ways to introduce technologies and support their use in adult literacy learning; and studies on gaining a deeper understanding of adult learners' real-life circumstances, responsibilities and contexts outside of the classroom and how these relate to the effectiveness of various strategies to support engagement in adult literacy instruction.

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Appendix A: After-lesson Qualitative Questionnaires

What was one important aspect of today's' lesson that helped you to engage in your learning?

.....

.....

What did not help you to engage in your learning?

.....

.....

What was one thing about today's lesson that helped you to stay focused on the learning activities?

.....

.....

What did not help you to stay focused on the activities?

.....

.....

What was the most relevant part of today's lesson that helped you to participate in the learning?

.....

.....

What did not help you to participate in the learning?

.....

.....

(Adapted from Patton 1990, 2002, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2013).

Appendix B: Example of Guided Questions Used in Individual Coaching Sessions

“Can you tell me more about how the career-goal mapping task helped you to engage?

“How were those forms important to you?”

“How was the employment agreement task relevant?”

“What did you enjoy about working on your own?”

“Can you tell me more about how that was distracting for you?”

“Can you tell me more about what that means for you?”

“How important are fun and enjoyment in your employment skills learning?”

“You commented that the mock job interview helped you a lot. How did it help you?”

“How was the workplace hazard learning relevant?”

“What did you think about doing that activity in pairs rather than on your own?”

“Can you tell me a bit more about how the computer-based tasks helped you to engage?”

“Can you tell me more about those challenges you faced?

“How did you manage those difficulties?”

“How did the online application task help you to engage?”

“What did you think about those model samples I gave you?”

“What are your thoughts about watching video clips during instruction?”

“How did they help you to stay focused?”

“Over the past six weeks, I provided you with personalised teaching and learning relevant to your individual career interest. Can you tell me what overall effect this had on your engagement in your employment skills learning?

“At the start of the programme I helped you to set your own career goal. Can you tell me what impact this had on your engagement in employment skills literacy learning?

“Do you have any final thoughts about your employment skills learning you would like to share?”

(Adapted from Patton 1990, 2002, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2005, 2012; Seidman, 2013).

Appendix C: Massey University Ethical Approval

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

HoU Review Group

Reviewer Group
Dr Clare Mariskind
Dr Jayne Jackson

Researcher: Tracy Cusin
Title: Classroom action research: Exploring the effects of career-relevant teaching and learning on student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction

Dear Tracy

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Human Ethics Southern B Committee at their meeting held on 19/07/2017.

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved. Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures, or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

If you wish to print an official copy of this letter, please logon to RIMS

(http://rims.massey.ac.nz), and under the Reporting section, View Reports you will find a link to run the Ethics Committee Report.

Yours sincerely
Dr Brian Finch, Chair
Massey University Human Ethics Committee

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

Classroom action research:

Exploring the effects of career-relevant teaching and learning on student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
Teachers and Appraisers

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions, and withdraw from the study at any time.

By signing this consent form, I understand that I am agreeing to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Your full name: …….. Date: ……

Signature: ……

Please tick this box if you would like to receive a brief summary of the findings upon completion of the research study, and provide your contact details below:

Email: ……Telephone/mobile: ……..……..…

Postal address: ..…….

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
TE KURA O TE MATĀURANGA

Classroom action research:

Exploring the effects of career-relevant teaching and learning on student engagement in employment skills literacy instruction

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of this information sheet is to inform you of a classroom-based research project I am doing as part of my Master of Education degree and to request your assistance in supporting the research. The research study will focus on exploring student engagement in literacy, with the goal of increasing student engagement.

As both the teacher and the researcher for this classroom-based study, I invite full-time students to participate in this research. Approximately six students will participate in the study.

Study details and participants' rights

- Your time commitment to the study will be no more than 20 minutes each week for up to six weeks.
- As a participant, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time, without providing a reason and without consequences.
- If you choose to participate in the study, you will be required to answer two simple questions in writing after each literacy lesson. Your written responses will be discussed

in the last ten minutes of your individual coaching session each week – which will be audio-recorded with your consent (upon signing the consent form given to you).

- Your participation in the study will not be confidential to the other participants involved in the study; however, a false name will be used for you and the training institute in the recording, processing and the writings of the study report.
- The information collected throughout the study will be stored securely for five years and then be safely disposed of by my study supervisor.
- Any NZQA unit standard assessments that you choose to complete, will be marked by another teacher who is not involved in the research project.
- As a participant, you can request a brief summary of the research findings upon completion of the study, which can be emailed or posted to you, using the contact details you provide.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation, however, if you would like to participate in the study, please complete the consent form and give to me in person, and a copy of the form will be given to you.

Project Contacts

If you have any questions about the project (at any time), please contact me.

Researcher: Tracy Cusin Email: (deleted) Mobile: (deleted)

Committee Approval Statement

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application 17/16. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Rochelle Stewart-Withers, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83657, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz

Appendix F: Participant Observation Form

Cycle: _____ Week: _____ Lesson: _____ Topic: _____

Engagement behaviour	**Jen**	**Joe**	**Jed**	**Kate**	**Kez**	**Kerry**
Attentive/focuses on speaker during instruction	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Asks questions to gain clarification	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Appears interested In the taught topic	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Demonstrates concentration, effort & persistence	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Willingly Participates & contributes in learning & group work/discussions	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Appears to enjoy the learning/task	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Makes positive verbal comments	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Completed the set learning tasks	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Adapted from Fredricks et al. (2004); Hattie & Anderman (2013).