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## Capacitating postgraduate education students with lay counselling competencies via the culturally appropriate bibliotherapeutic Read-me-to-Resilience intervention

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This study explored how culturally relevant stories could be used to bolster the lay counselling competencies of teachers furthering their studies in an honours degree in learner support – while working in schools with limited resources and at-risk children. One possible way of supporting teachers to be effective in the lay counselling role is to support them with access to counselling tools. To achieve this aim of providing teachers, functioning as lay counsellors, with supportive tools, 16 South African honours students/teachers voluntarily implemented the intervention called, Read-me-to-Resilience (Rm2R) (see <http://readmetoresilience.co.za>). A qualitative research approach was used employing a pre- and post-intervention evaluation design and, based on the draw-and-write technique for gathering data, the experiences of lay counsellors using the Rm2R intervention were analysed. Participating teachers reported that using the Rm2R intervention promoted a positive adjustment to the challenges associated with lay counselling. The findings suggest that such a ready-made intervention may have value in supporting postgraduate education students being trained as lay counsellors. Culturally appropriate training with similar ready-made interventions might be an appropriate way of capacitating teachers being trained as lay counsellors.

**Keywords:** bibliotherapy; education students; intervention; lay counsellor; resilience; school support; teachers

### Introduction and Problem Statement

Qualified teachers pursuing postgraduate studies in learner support and undergoing training to support learners on an emotional level, often struggle with competencies, self-confidence and role clarification regarding lay counselling. These learner support teachers are often called upon to function as lay counsellors; they are usually fulfilling the role of pastoral caretaker in their school context on a voluntary basis, as they are regarded as trained in this field. This is quite a complex matter – at least in the South African context – as no formal description of what they are required to do, exists. Mere knowledge about the role of community, citizenship, and pastoral caretaker (Kottler & Kottler, 2007) does not adequately equip teachers to provide proper emotional support to children in a school context.

The counselling competencies (as adjusted from Pask & Joy, 2007) of a lay counsellor include rational competencies (intellectual skills, analysis, problem-solving, knowledge, therapeutic skills, and informed application), emotional competencies (personal awareness and understanding of how to work with oneself and others), and ethical competencies (values, principles, and scope of practice). These should preferably be taught in a postgraduate programme where the focus is on lay counselling within the broader field of learner support.

Apart from the above-mentioned competencies, the issue of burn-out suffered by many helping professions should also be addressed in training. Burn-out may place the teachers at risk of not functioning well in a consistent way and consequently being at risk for non-resilience (Fleming, Mackrain & LeBuffe, 2013; Theron, 2008; Ungar, 2013). Learners may also be at risk of non-resilience if they are, for example, orphaned, suffer from emotional trauma, or find themselves in poor socio-economic circumstances, which are often indicators of being part of a marginalised group (Betancourt, Meyers-Ohki, Charrow & Hansen, 2013; Caretta, 2015). The number of emotionally related problems such as rape, violence, HIV/AIDS, and poverty seem to increase annually in the school system, causing stress that leads to teacher non-resilience and cries for help from parents, learners, and the community at large (Angotti & Sennot, 2015; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012).

As social crises increase, more and more demands are placed on teachers to function as skilled helpers, especially if other resources are not available (Ferreira, Ebersöhn & Odendaal, 2010; Klika & Herrenkohl, 2013). According to Nelson-Jones (2005) skilled helpers are often referred to as lay counsellors or even life coaches. Most teachers who fulfil lay counselling roles have not been formally equipped to be skilled helpers, let alone to respond to diverse learner needs. It appears, therefore, that an increasing need exists to provide teachers with the capacity to function in the informal role of lay counsellor – with informal support tools to address pressing issues in the under-resourced education support environment of South African schools (Theron, 2009).

In a study conducted in the Free State and North-West Education departments, Hay (2016, 2018) found the ratio of registered psychologists to learners in the Free State to be 1:108,333 (six psychologists in the department). In the North-West province this ratio increased to 1:193,250 (four psychologists in the department). Added to this, most South African schools do not have the financial resources to employ full-time registered psychologists or counsellors (Verrijdt, 2012). Cook, Jimerson and Begeny (2010) report that access to professional psychologists is more likely in developed countries. Developed countries have a higher regard for

the importance of professional psychologists, because these countries have more stable economies and emancipated world views (Cook et al., 2010). South Africa is viewed as a developing country and hence access to professional psychologists in schools might, in the light of economic barriers, be regarded as less important. Despite these challenges, well-documented plans for District-based Support Teams to offer counselling support exist, but this has not come to fruition (see Verrijdt, 2012). The result of support structures not yet in place is that parents need to seek professional help outside of the school system, which many cannot afford (Verrijdt, 2012). A need for professional psychologists or counsellors to help parents and learners to handle issues like HIV/AIDS, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, rape, and family violence, clearly exists (John, 2012; Van Niekerk & Hay, 2009), and should be complemented by effective training of teachers as lay counsellors.

Therapeutic interventions are support tools for school-based lay counsellors who support emotionally at-risk learners. Typically, therapeutic interventions can entail various forms of individual and/or group therapy to encourage, for example, resilience in distressed teachers (Bellin & Kovacs, 2006; Cluver & Gardner, 2007; De Villiers & Van den Berg, 2012; Mo Yee, Greene, Kai Shyang, Solovey, Grove, Fraser, Washburn & Teater, 2009). Another possible way of supporting teachers to be capacitated in their informal role as lay counsellor in the face of challenges endemic to our schools, is to improve teachers' access to resilience-supporting interventions as support measures. These interventions could consist of an informal set of tools that does not require intensive professional training or high-level psychological skills, given that school-based lay counsellors fall outside of the scope of practice of registered or professional counsellors (Van Niekerk & Hay, 2009).

In the absence of access to appropriate competencies and meaningful resources, school-based lay counsellors could continue to struggle and feel inadequate to support their school/community and probably struggle to be resilient themselves (Ferreira, Ebersöhn & Odendaal, 2010). Masten, Cutuli, Herbers and Reed (2009:129) endorse "asset-focused strategies: improving the number or quality of resources or social capital" as a pathway to resilience. Theron (2008:215) supports teacher resilience by giving groups of at-risk teachers access to a support programme entitled, Resilient Educators. Likewise, Ferreira, Ebersöhn and McCallaghan (2010) use their Supportive Teachers, Assets and Resilience (STAR) intervention programme to promote awareness of social capital and support the resilience of at-risk teachers.

These studies, and the promotion of access to resources to improve competencies, prompted the

researchers to use bibliotherapy as an inexpensive intervention that can be applied informally. Read-me-to-Resilience (Rm2R) is an example of such an intervention. This tool, which entails the reading or telling of stories that teach adaptive behaviours, has been proven by many counsellors and researchers to be an effective tool to support children/adults experiencing mild to moderate stress, anxiety and depression, as well as to enhance resilience (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Reeves, 2010; Wood, Theron & Mayaba, 2012).

While some studies have explored the experiences of therapists' use of bibliotherapy as a therapeutic technique (Bergner, 2007; Butler, Guterman & Rudes, 2009), we struggled to find studies that focused on the use of bibliotherapy by lay counsellors, particularly when these lay counsellors are also teachers. More than fifteen years ago, a study was done on the use of bibliotherapy in the classroom (Mitchell-Kamalie, 2002). A later study focused on resilience and orphans (Stortz, 2007), and a more recent study focused on using bibliotherapy as a tool for improving resilience in orphans (Du Toit, 2010). Other recent studies (Wood et al., 2012) explored the resilience-promoting potential of the 22 stories comprising the Rm2R as a form of a ready-made bibliotherapeutic intervention.

Although all these studies suggest that the intervention held resilience-promoting value for orphans and vulnerable children, there was no mention of the potential value for adults using the intervention to support orphans and vulnerable children. We wondered how teachers furthering their studies in learner support would find the Rm2R intervention as an example of a ready-made bibliotherapeutic intervention. What would their experiences teach us in general (as researchers, academics, and trainers of teachers) about the value of providing teachers functioning as lay counsellors with a ready-made intervention? And what would their experiences indicate about the value of the Rm2R intervention as a pathway to capacitate them in supporting learners?

Based on the outline above, the research reported on in this article was guided by the following research question: How could practicing postgraduate learner support education students be capacitated in terms of lay counselling competencies via the ready-made, culturally appropriate Rm2R intervention?

The study was based on the following conceptual and theoretical framework.

#### Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was provided by Positive Psychology, which focuses on the strengths of individuals and their communities and is concerned with interventions that offer "buffers against adversity, nurture resilience and

limit pathology” (Seligman, 2005:4–6). Resilience transactions draw on the capacity of individuals to access resources, and the capacity of their physical and social ecologies to make these resources available in ways that are meaningful to the individual and are congruent with his/her culture (Ungar, 2011). The understanding that resilience is shaped by both internal and external resources is formalised by Ungar’s (2011) Social Ecology of Resilience theory. This theory of resilience mirrors Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posits that development relies on interactive inputs from all levels of an ecosystem.

The Social Ecology of Resilience theory (Ungar, 2011) and Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) are the foundation of explaining how teachers, functioning as lay counsellors, could benefit from ready-made interventions in a challenging school context. For example, a protective factor for teachers functioning as lay counsellors is the importance of embracing a religious belief system that enhances meaning and value in the informal role as lay counsellor. Non-African studies reveal that when individuals embrace their religious belief systems, meaning and values are encouraged that might promote resilience (Masten, Monn & Supkoff, 2011). South African studies also recognise that traditional, religious, and spiritual practices are fundamental to how people adapt to challenging situations (Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012).

McCann (2010) emphasises another protective factor for counsellors (that could apply to teachers functioning as lay counsellors), namely the importance for counsellors to find meaning in their work to play a protective role within a trusting relationship between the child and counsellor. The trusting relationship serves as a protective factor for teachers functioning as lay counsellors, especially if there is a cultural understanding of the diverse children that they need to support.

Authors such as Swanson and Spencer (2012) foreground the importance for adults working with children from other cultural backgrounds, to learn more about multiple cultures, and becoming culturally competent. Among others, Ungar (2013) suggests that when adults provide culturally unaligned support for children, its efficacy is limited; thus the need arises for cross-cultural training. Cross-cultural training includes the need for lay counsellors to gain experience in working with diverse children and their need to respond to diverse needs (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005; Pillay, 2012). Swanson and Spencer (2012) report that wanting to engage with children from other cultural backgrounds is important for developing competence in counselling children from diverse

backgrounds.

The following section contains a report on the empirical investigation that was launched, based on this conceptual and theoretical framework.

## **Methodology**

### **Aim of the Research**

The aim of the research was to contribute to the growing body of research on possible capacitating measures such as the Rm2R as an example to support practicing postgraduate education students who wish to acquire basic competencies as lay counsellors.

### **Approach and Design**

The extent to which participants were capacitated was constructed by discovering how the participants interpreted and experienced the Rm2R intervention. Therefore, we chose a qualitative research approach (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2010) consisting of a phenomenological strategy of inquiry and a pre- and post-test evaluation design (Creswell, 2009). A qualitative approach was chosen for this research because the meaning that the participants attached to the Rm2R intervention strategy and its value to them, were explored.

### **Intervention Instrument**

The research done in this study was an extension of the Rm2R intervention project. The aim of the Rm2R, a SANPAD-sponsored research project (see <http://readmetoresilience.co.za>), was to determine whether traditional African stories have the potential to encourage resilience in African orphans. The primary research formed part of the South African Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development (SANPAD) for the project known as Rm2R. While other students and researchers had shown that the stories do encourage resilience in orphans, the focus here was on capacitating teachers as lay counsellors, (Wood et al., 2012).

In 2009 stories were collected for the original Rm2R project. Three researchers of the SANPAD team sourced 30 traditional stories from community members (elders) familiar with traditional African stories that encourage positive coping. Community members were asked to retell stories from their youth that helped them to cope with difficult circumstances. Through a review process, using a multi-racial panel of psychologists, educators, and researchers in the SANPAD team, 31 of 90 stories were selected as being most likely to improve resilience. A multiracial panel of five South African psychologists then ranked the 24 stories most likely to encourage resilience.

The 24 stories chosen then formed the content of the Rm2R intervention. These stories were

piloted, and it was found that two were not suitable to use for research. Anecdotal reports and initial analyses found that the Rm2R intervention in general encouraged black South African at-risk children between the ages of 9 and 14 to cope more adaptively with their challenges (Wood et al., 2012). The communities involved in piloting the Rm2R intervention were positive about the changes they observed in the participating orphans (Mayaba, Wood & Theron, 2010). Following the pilot, the 22 stories that were considered to promote resilience were the ones used with the teachers who participated in this study (see <http://readmetoresilience.co.za>).

### Participants

Participants were purposively selected in terms of their suitability and convenience for the study (Creswell, 2009; Terre Blanche, Durrheim & Painter, 2006). All the participants were students at the university where the researchers taught, and were therefore easily accessible. Although we understood that recruiting students from our institution could be interpreted as a type of sampling bias (Mertens, 2009), the easy access to these students meant that the study was logistically simpler. Furthermore, at our institution students who are enrolled for an honours degree in learner support, which includes counselling-focused modules, are expected to be involved in interventions at their schools. Their participation in this study, therefore, also suited their needs.

To be included in the study, participants had to comply with specific criteria. These included that they were

- qualified teachers working in an informal counsellor role in schools with challenges as described in the introduction of this article;
- enrolled for modules in community counselling and lay counselling as part of their Bachelor of Education Honours (BEd Hons) degree in Learner Support in the School of Education Sciences at the North-West University (NWU), Vaal Triangle Campus, and
- willing to participate in the Rm2R study.

The primary researcher recruited participants by word of mouth: she informed students about the project by speaking briefly about it at the end of the lessons in the module in lay counselling. Letters of information were handed out to those who were interested. Initially nine participants agreed to participate. As this is a typical sample size for a

phenomenological study (Creswell, 2009; Greeff, 2005), the primary researcher proceeded to train the participants to use the Rm2R intervention in their various schools. Guidelines on how teachers can use these stories in their classroom were provided, and it was explained that the stories were applicable for children under the age of 18 years (see <http://readmetoresilience.co.za> for a full explanation of these guidelines).

It was emphasised that participants only possessed baseline professional training and psychological skills, as school-based lay counselling falls outside the scope of practice of registered or professional counsellors (Van Niekerk & Hay, 2009). The participants were all in their second year of training and possessed basic counselling skills in terms of referral to registered counsellors and social workers, where trauma was identified among the children during the storytelling. By signing consent forms, the children's guardians gave permission that the teachers could read stories to the children. The guardians were given access to the stories to ensure that they agreed to the cultural contexts of the stories. The teachers knew the children that they worked with and told two stories per week in a group context after school hours. The teachers were expected to record how they experienced the stories in a research diary, and to document significant behaviour for possible referral purposes.

When the primary researcher reviewed the data generated by the participants, it was clear that the level of data saturation (i.e. when the same information is heard repeatedly; see Greeff, 2005; Strydom & Delpport, 2011) was not sufficient to answer all the research questions guiding the study. Therefore, an additional seven participants were recruited. The additionally generated data resulted in data saturation as the same information was repeatedly reported and no new information came to the fore (Greeff, 2005; Strydom & Delpport, 2011). The total sample thus comprised of 16 participants. In summary, the sample size was increased until enough data was gathered to enable full understanding of the experiences of the participants' use of the Rm2R intervention to allow us to theorise about the value of such ready-made bibliotherapeutic interventions (Greeff, 2005; Strydom & Delpport, 2011).

**Table 1** Description of the participants

Participant	Sex	Age	Years of teaching, following formal qualification as educators	Prior/current experience of school-based challenges and/or challenges relating to lay counselling duties	Type of school	Race and language <sup>i</sup>
P1	F	24	3	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	Coloured Afrikaans
P2	F	23	2	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P3	M	24	3	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P4	F	47	26	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P5	F	24	2	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P6	F	24	3	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P7	F	31	9	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P8	F	24	4	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P9	F	25	3	Yes	Primary Suburban Public	White Afrikaans
P10	F	25	3	Yes	Primary Township Public	Black isiZulu
P11	M	43	22	Yes	Primary Township Public	Black Sesotho
P12	F	51	20	Yes	Primary Township Public	Black isiZulu
P13	F	45	15	Yes	Primary Township Public	Black Sesotho
P14	F	43	15	Yes	Primary Township Public	Black Sesotho
P15	F	40	15	Yes	Primary Township Public	Black isiZulu
P16	F	46	15	Yes	Primary Township Public	Black Sesotho

Table 1 offers a visual representation of the type of schools at which the participants taught as well as the age, race, gender and years of teaching experience.

#### Ethics Procedure

This research was part of the Rm2R project, which was approved by the North West University Institutional Ethics Committee (approval number

0011-08-A2) and the Gauteng Department of Education.

#### Data Generation

A pre- and post-intervention evaluation was used based on the draw-and-write technique for gathering data about the experiences of lay counsellors using the Rm2R intervention. Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith and Campbell (2011) define

the draw-and-write technique as a visual record of how the drawer understands the phenomenon being investigated. The draw-and-write technique can be done in a group context of six to eight participants (Creswell, 2009) or on a one-to-one basis. Drawings are often a form of projection that allows participants to communicate their experience of a phenomenon through self-selected symbols. In this way, drawings, like other representations, can be used as ways of understanding how people view their world (Theron, 2008).

Before the participants implemented the intervention as explained, the primary researcher asked the participants to think and reflect about how this experience may affect their being lay counsellors. She then asked them to capture these reflections in a hand-drawn picture. The specific brief was: "Draw a picture about your experiences as a lay counsellor. Remember, how well you draw is not important." Participants were asked to draw in pencil on white paper. They were asked to sit apart from one another and not to look at others' drawings. Following this, participants were asked to explain their drawing by writing a paragraph about it (Rose, 2001).

The same procedure was followed after the intervention to obtain data about post-intervention experiences.

#### Data Analysis

The data obtained was analysed by means of the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009) using inductive content analysis (Ellingson, 2011). Inductive content analysis means that the data directs the emergent set of codes and themes rather than the researchers imposing a set of codes onto the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). The inductive data analysis relies on the constant comparative method (Merriam, 2009). The constant comparative method means that each data set is analysed inductively, and the analyses are compared to determine themes within the data before comparing the themes across the sets (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2010). This method led to a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences of the Rm2R intervention. We took care to conduct a trustworthy study and are confident about the validity of the findings (for an in-depth explanation of the coding process for the drawings, see Wood et al., 2012).

#### Results and Discussion

We used the drawings developed by the participants (where **PreD** indicates the **pre-drawing** and **PostD** the **post-drawing** used; **P** stands for the **participant** whose drawing was used; and **N** represents the **narrative** explanation of the drawing used) to support the themes that emerged from the data analysis. In the explication of the themes, we refer to the number of participants as indicated below:

- **few** refers to between one and four participants;
- **many** refers to between five and nine participants; and
- **most** to between 10 and 16 participants.

Participants reported that using the Rm2R intervention promoted their positive adjustment to and competencies regarding the challenges of lay counselling. This included the opportunity to develop counselling competence and the promotion of cultural awareness.

#### Theme 1: Opportunity to Develop Counselling Competence

**Many** participants reported that their use of the Rm2R intervention promoted counselling competence. By this they meant that it provided them with the opportunity to develop more counselling skills through exposure to the Rm2R intervention, made them feel more competent as lay counsellors and allowed them to identify with the role of a school-based lay counsellor. Two sub-themes informed the theme of counselling competence, namely the opportunity to develop counselling skills and informed acceptance of the school-based lay counsellor role. These are detailed below.

##### *Sub-theme 1.1: Opportunity to develop counselling skills*

**Many** participants were grateful because the Rm2R intervention provided them with an opportunity to develop their counselling skills. All the participants were post-graduate students and in acquiring the further qualification, they were formally taught lay counselling skills, but **many** of them had scant opportunities to practice these skills. As illustrated in Figure 1, Participant 3 explained in his pre-drawing that he felt that he did not get the opportunity to use his counselling skills, even though he had some knowledge (symbolised by him sitting on a pile of books):

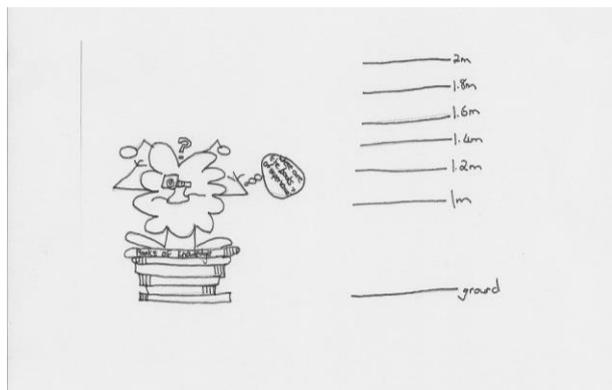
*I feel I need to gain more experience about counselling. Now I have the knowledge but don't get opportunities to use the knowledge in a certain situation. I need to grow more to be able to use my skills and knowledge to help students. (PreD, P3, N)*

Participant 3's written comments changed in his post-drawing and he communicated that he felt more competent in using his counselling skills. This was evident in the light-like lines emanating from the head and broad smile of the character in his drawing, symbolising clarity in his post-drawing (see Figure 2). He commented:

*I am better in evaluating situations and to give a helping hand. Previously I would avoid helping. I would want to reach out more to students to give them advice and to give them support. I can also identify more quickly what mistakes me and colleagues make and try to change it immediately. (PostD, P3, N)*

Similar positive changes were noted in the drawings of Participants 1, 5, and 7 to 9. All the

drawings emphasised participants' growth in terms of their counselling skills.



**Figure 1** Lay counsellor's uncertainty (PreD, P3)



**Figure 2** Empowered with answers (PostD, P3)

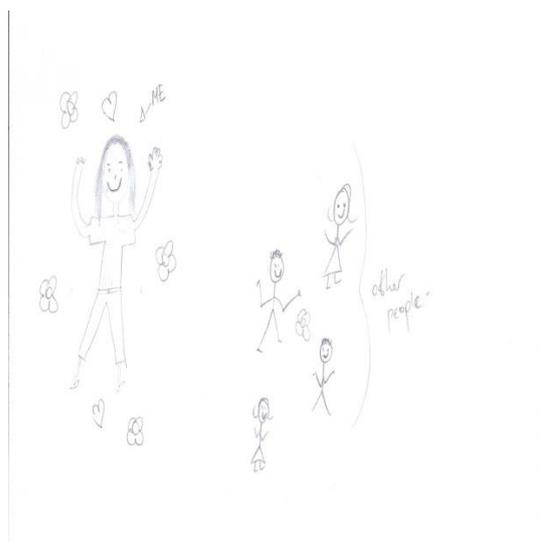
*Sub-theme 1.2: Informed acceptance of the lay counselling role*

Informed acceptance of the lay counselling role refers to participants learning to identify with or accept their role as school-based lay counsellor. **Many** participants reflected that in using the Rm2R intervention they had learnt to view being a counsellor as part of who they were, and they learnt through experience to understand that being a school-based lay counsellor was multifaceted and complex.

Before the Rm2R intervention a **few** participants did not draw and describe any specific lay counselling roles, even though their pre-drawings contained some positive symbols. After the Rm2R intervention a **few** participants reported

a growing acceptance of a caring and supportive role. For example, although Participant 2 expressed positivity about herself and her ability to help in the description of her pre-drawing (see Figure 3) – “I feel good about myself and want to help other people” (PreD, P2, N) – she did not describe her role as a lay counsellor as well as she did in her post-drawing (see Figure 4):

*I feel that after the Rm2R intervention I know more what it means to be a lay counsellor at school. It means to gain knowledge and skills to be competent in helping my school. I realise the tremendous need for lay counsellors to fulfil the role of helper. I feel I am able now to ask my school how I can be of assistance to them. (PostD, P2, N)*



**Figure 3** Lay counsellor in non-distinctive role (PreD, P2)



**Figure 4** Lay counsellor in supportive role (PostD, P2)

The participants' perceptions that the Rm2R intervention facilitated an opportunity to develop

counselling skills could be an indication of how the intervention influenced them positively. Utilising

the intervention made **many** participants feel better equipped as lay counsellors. Pask and Joy (2007) give examples of the basic counselling skills that counsellors should acquire for counselling competence. As part of their experience of the Rm2R intervention, **many** participants reported a better understanding of how to apply the basic skills that they had learnt, because the stories provided a medium that allowed empathic connections to children. Pask and Joy (2007) confirm that being able to apply basic skills empathically is key to being a competent counsellor.

The participants experienced that the Rm2R intervention scaffolded an informed acceptance of their lay counselling role. This could be indicative of the protective value of using this intervention. It seemed that in using the intervention **many** lay counsellors had an opportunity to find meaning and make sense of challenges facing them as teachers functioning as lay counsellors, and to make sense of what they could and could not do to support at-risk children. They gained a deeper understanding of the importance of their roles as lay counsellors and were able to experience meaning in fulfilling this role. Furthermore, **many** participants felt that their work was worthwhile, and this gave them a reason to continue to support children. Research also confirms that counsellors who accept their particular roles might be more reflective and overcome obstacles easier, thus contributing to resilient functioning (McCann, 2010; Tadlock, 2009).

#### Theme 2: Promotion of School-Based Lay Counsellors' Cultural Awareness

The Rm2R intervention promoted **most** school-based lay counsellors' willingness to be more culturally competent and/or created an awareness of their cultural strengths, making them aware of which values they could draw on to strengthen themselves and learners. To show cultural awareness means that the individual identifies with his/her cultural roots and engages in critical self-reflection to examine his/her personal bias and assumptions and to understand other cultural values and show openness to other cultures. Within Theme 2, the sub-themes of an awareness of cultural strengths and the need for cultural competence are presented below.

##### *Sub-theme 2.1: Awareness of cultural strengths*

Before the Rm2R intervention **most** participants did not realise the strengths found in their cultural heritage. For example, Participant 14 described her religious beliefs in a limiting manner in her pre-

drawing (see Figure 5) – *“I trust in God to direct me and lead me with every child. That is why I do a prayer and ask for direction in every situation”* (PreD, P14, N). However, after the Rm2R intervention **most** isiZulu-/Sesotho-speaking participants reported a sense of awareness of their cultural strengths that was reawakened when they worked with the stories in the Rm2R intervention. A **few** school-based lay counsellors reported that their communities and families had taught them to be religious and to draw on their faith, particularly in challenging times. For example, for Participant 14 the stories reminded her that her religion could supplement her strengths and support her as school-based lay counsellor. Participant 14 reflected as follows in her post-drawing (see Figure 6):

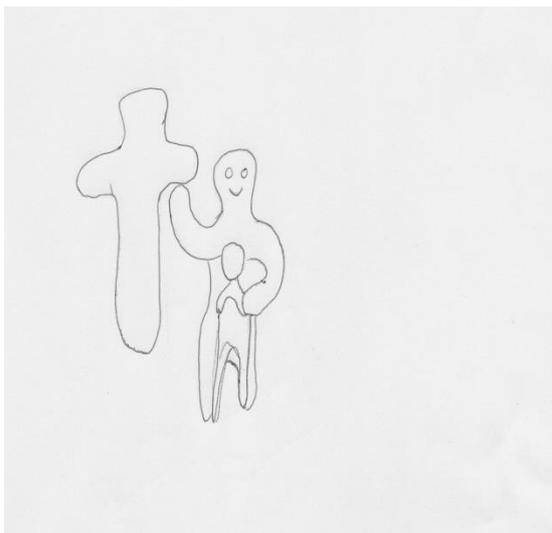
*I am comfortable with the stories because it is part of my culture and family background ... I am proud of it ... in our culture we learn about Sangomas as well as the values like love that is reflected in some of the stories ... it is all part of our traditions ... I feel that I am able to overcome any problem when I am reminded of my traditions.* (PostD, P4, N)

##### *Sub-theme 2.2: Encouragement to learn about other cultures*

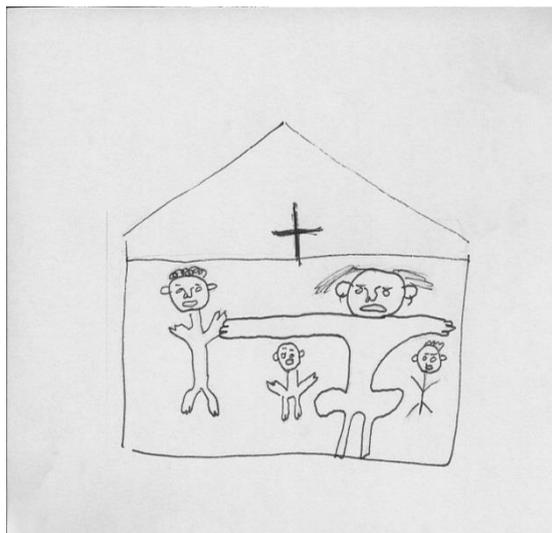
**Most** participants were encouraged to learn about other cultures. However, Participant 7 initially showed resistance and distress to the idea of telling the stories with traditional characters, because she believed that this was against her Christian principles. She felt that the characters would influence learners in a bad way and that she did not want to expose them to this (see Figure 7) – *“I do not believe in sangomas and witch doctors and am not keen on telling the stories to the children”* (PreD, P7, N). However, after experiencing the Rm2R intervention she expressed a willingness to be more flexible. She symbolised this in her post-drawing (see Figure 8) by depicting herself reading to learners.

She explained her post-test drawing as follows:

*The concept of telling the stories as a method is that it is a good method. In the beginning I would have liked to tell my own stories that have Christian principles, because I did not feel comfortable with the traditional characters in the stories. They influence students in a bad way and I did not want to be responsible for exposing them to the characters. I am now more open to the idea of telling these stories because I know it does not threaten my values. I need to learn about other cultures. Stories are a winner with children and help them to think about the principles and they enjoy it. It is an excellent method. It is definitely a good method.* (PostD, P7, N)



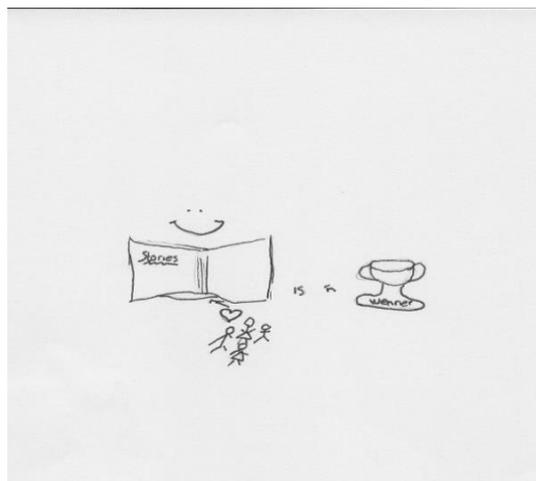
**Figure 5** Lay counsellor restricted in her religious awareness (PreD, P14)



**Figure 6** Lay counsellor found strength in religion as part of her cultural heritage (PostD, P14)



**Figure 7** Participant distressed in telling stories (PreD, P7)



**Figure 8** Lay counsellor overcame her religious restrictions (PostD, P7)

The participants' observation that the Rm2R intervention heightened their awareness of the power of cultural resources implies that the intervention held value for **most** of them. A **few** participants acknowledged knowing some of the stories and this strengthened their sense of awareness of the resources available in traditional African ways. The stories also prompted **most** participants' awareness of their own values, whatever they happened to be, but particularly those that they had been socialised to respect, and participants were reminded to find comfort in their religion and the religious values and practices they had learnt as children as part of their cultural upbringing. This is in line with earlier resilience studies in both African and non-African contexts and could be connected to the protective system of

cultural tradition and religion (Masten et al., 2011; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012).

Those participants who had not grown up hearing the stories included in the Rm2R intervention became aware of the need to develop more extensive cultural knowledge that embraced the values, traditions and beliefs of cultural groups different from their own. The Rm2R intervention seemed to stimulate **most** participants' awareness of the importance of the cultural protective system, and this potentiated value for participants as lay professionals and individuals (Swanson & Spencer, 2012; Ungar, 2013).

The Rm2R intervention was also reported as supporting **many** participants' resilience, because the participants were provided with an opportunity to develop counselling competence, including

counselling skills and an informed acceptance of the lay counselling role. Furthermore, **most** participants' cultural competence was developed by the Rm2R intervention by making them aware of the strengths in their own cultural heritage and encouraging them to learn about other cultures. Because the Rm2R intervention promoted a positive attitude towards counselling competence and the development of cultural awareness, the lay counsellors were able to adjust more positively to the challenges of lay counselling.

#### Implications from the Emerging Findings

The research indicated that the following aspects of teachers functioning as lay counsellors require further attention:

##### *The likelihood that lay counsellors might become dependent on ready-made interventions*

Lay counsellors might become too dependent on ready-made interventions provided by research professionals or others. For example, the participants in the study felt more self-confident and comfortable in helping children when they were provided with the Rm2R intervention as a ready-made tool (see Theme 1). This implies a dependent rather than an innovative stance. Fleisch (2013) reports similar tendencies in that once teachers had used his language catch-up programme, it was replicated endlessly, and the teachers tended not to find independent solutions to challenges they experienced in the classroom. In other words, it might immobilise lay counsellors and prevent them from further developing counselling abilities and solutions. Lay counsellors can then be prevented from taking responsibility for their own professional growth and may remain within the comfort zone of the ready-made interventions supplied to them.

##### *The need to provide the Rm2R intervention in conjunction with cross-cultural training*

The Rm2R intervention was provided to the participants without providing them with cross-cultural training (Holcomb-McCoy & Mitchell, 2005). For example, some participants were biased towards concepts, characters and messages in the Rm2R stories (Sub-theme 2.2). Thus, given the reality of poor multicultural training for lay counsellors (Pillay, 2012), offering a tool that draws on a specific culture means that lay counsellors need training within the specific culture. It is possible that lay counsellors from cultures that differ from the one being drawn on might be biased when using ready-made interventions that do not apply to their own culture. Equally, even if a ready-made culturally aligned intervention is used by lay counsellors from the same culture, it is possible that acculturation or

the fact that culture is fluid (Ungar, 2013) might limit how useful the intervention will be. One solution is for professionals who are competent in and knowledgeable about counselling children in diverse contexts, to facilitate practical exposure to the counselling of children across a variety of contexts (Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012). Thus, lay counsellors from any culture might not be able to use ready-made interventions as effectively without being provided with cross-cultural/cultural training that offers rich information on cultural concepts, symbols, and messages as used in the Rm2R intervention.

##### *The need for lay counsellors to gain experience in working with diverse children*

Cross-cultural training also includes the need for lay counsellors to gain experience in working with diverse children and their need to respond to diverse needs (Swanson & Spencer, 2012; Theron & Engelbrecht, 2012). This suggests that simply providing a ready-made intervention, even one that attempts to be culturally congruent, provides inadequate support to deal with the challenges facing lay counsellors. Moreover, the implication is that providing a ready-made intervention is not a substitute for sound counselling skills that can be used to competently address the diverse needs of diverse children.

#### Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study were rooted in subjective data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) generated by postgraduate students/teachers who were also functioning as lay counsellors. For this reason, the findings have limitations: these are rooted in the theories of resilience and bio-ecological systems, based on participants' experience of one ready-made intervention (namely the Rm2R intervention). This does not diminish the contributions that they make, but rather suggests that lay counsellors should explore possible interventions that might be applicable to their unique school contexts. In future teachers acting as lay counsellors might not choose the Rm2R intervention, but could also include other ready-made interventions yet to be tested by a broader population.

#### Conclusion

This research demonstrated that postgraduate education students were capacitated with lay counselling competencies via the culturally appropriate bibliotherapeutic Read-me-to-Resilience intervention. The findings suggest that such a ready-made intervention may have value in supporting postgraduate learner support education students being trained as lay counsellors. Culturally appropriate training with similar ready-made

interventions might be an appropriate method of capacitating teachers being trained as lay counsellors.

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### Authors' Contributions

Carmen Joubert conducted the interviews, conducted all thematic analyses and developed the original manuscript. Johnnie Hay partook in adjusting, re-focusing and re-writing the original manuscript. All authors reviewed the final manuscript.

### Notes

- i. The fact that participants in the first group of nine were all Afrikaans speaking and mainly white (eight out of nine) and those in the second group of seven were all black and speakers of African languages, was purely coincidental and reflects no preference on my part.
- ii. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence.
- iii. DATES: Received: 27 June 2017; Revised: 15 December 2018; Accepted: 5 July 2019; Published: 31 August 2019.

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