

TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF MOTHERS' DREAM, DESIGN AND DESTINY PROCESSES IN THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR CHILDREN IN A LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT: AN APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Elmari Botha-Verhage, Susanne Jacobs

This qualitative paper promotes a phenomenological understanding of how mothers from a low socio-economic environment (LSEE) envision, design and implement the future perspective of their relationship with their children. This single instrumental case study utilised two consecutive focus group discussions with twelve purposefully selected participants, through the World Café Method and Appreciative Inquiry: 1) to collect data; 2) as a research method that also facilitates change. Findings revealed difficulties envisioning a future. Dreams are clouded by parenting issues. Insight was gained that interaction influences relationships for the future. Support needed for interventions in building on strengths is highlighted.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The quality of relationships, including those between mothers and children, is influenced by the nature of the socio-economic environment in which they prevail. Mothers living in low socio-economic environments (LSEEs) have to cope with multiple challenges such as low income, unemployment, poverty, overcrowded and poor living conditions in small dwellings (often without water, electricity and sanitation), domestic violence, substance abuse, low educational levels, and teenage pregnancies (Bergin & Bergin, 2015; Leon-Guerrero, 2013). Limited resources unavoidably trigger stress, and as a result the pressure and anxiety experienced by mothers influence their relationships with their children.

Poverty in South Africa is caused by various mutually interactive and context-specific factors. Even though the poverty rate in South Africa dropped from 57.2% in 2006 to 45.5% in 2011, the dilemmas related to socio-economic, political and environmental issues remain (Statistics South Africa, 2014). Elements pertain to the distribution of wealth, income and societal power in terms of race, gender, age and locality, as well as environmental factors such as poor environmental conditions and inadequate access to available natural resources (Theron, Davids, Berns & Maphunye, 2005).

Poverty is referred to as entailing *low socio-economic status* (Bergin & Bergin, 2015), or as “one’s social position pertaining to the level of family income, parent education, family structure and the neighbourhood in which the family lives” (Msall, 2009). People living in LSEEs are often regarded as having a lower social status, since they are often poorly educated, and thus earn low incomes from low-skilled jobs and are mostly underprivileged. In particular, mothers who live in LSEEs are a common phenomenon all around the world (Okafor, 2012).

Poverty has an impact on the family as a whole, in particular on the emotional well-being and mental health of the parents, leading to family stress. In addition, limited economic resources may cause marital distress. This in turn has an impact on the relationships within the family and subsequently on how parents treat and respond to their children, which could be harsh and controlling (Gutman & McLloyd, 2005).

Living in a low socio-economic environment for a long period of time has been shown to increase levels of stress in both parents and children. Pressure and anxiety experienced by mothers influence their outlook on life, their motivation, as well as their ability to encourage their children (Wilmshurst, 2011). Children exposed to prolonged poverty can be at risk of poor physical and socio-emotional outcomes (Fiese & Winter,

2008). Individuals who do not experience anything positive in their environment or upbringing become negative people. Human activity does not develop in a social vacuum, but rather is rigorously situated within a socio-historical and cultural context of meanings and relationships (Uddin, 2011); therefore relationships between mothers and their children cannot be viewed in isolation but are influenced by the broader socio-economic environment.

Being a mother means that a relationship of some kind will be established especially between her and her children. Existing research on mothers and their relationships with their children focuses on the attachment formed during infancy and its effects later in childhood (Brisch, 2011). Attachment theory (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988) emphasises the importance of the formation of a secure attachment between the mother and infant in the first year of infancy, which has an impact on the formation of future relationships with peers and other family members (Hirschy & Wilkinson, 2010). For children in middle childhood it is important to know that they have access to primary caregivers when needed (Bosmans & Kerns, 2015). It is therefore considered important to invest time and energy in relationships in order to improve and create a positive experience of the relationship.

Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory (BET) third phase (1993-2006) (Rosa & Tudge, 2013) forms the theoretical foundation of this article, as it expresses the view that the developing individual is consistently influencing and being influenced by the environment. The process of human socialisation is a key to understanding human interactions within a particular context. The theory also views the child's development as occurring within a system of relationships that shapes his or her environment. The BET shows how individual characteristics, in combination with the four elements of which it is formed – process, person, context and time – simultaneously and mutually influence human beings' developmental outcomes (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:250). This means that aspects of the context, both spatial and temporal, influence proximal processes, or the "engines that drive development" (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000:118). The developing person can be seen as being in the centre of, and embedded in, various environmental systems from immediate, such as the family, to broader environments, such as culture (Budd, Clark & Connell, 2011). The parent and the child are affected by the parents' experiences outside the family (Bronfenbrenner, 2013; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Sommers-Flanagan, 2015). According to Shaffer and Kipp (2010:65), the systems approach (micro-, meso-, exo-, maxo- and chrono) recognises that parents influence their children. Therefore, the extent of stress that the mother experiences with regards to the environment that she lives in has an impact on her interaction with her child.

Researchers addressing problems regarding women in poor communities emphasise difficulties, but there are few studies that teach a skill based on strengths. Most programmes to date have been primarily intended to prevent physical and neuro-cognitive difficulties in children (Meja, Calam & Sanders, 2012) and focus on children who may be at higher risk of emotional and behavioural difficulties. The needs identified pointed towards research investing in resources for evaluation and

implementation of evidence-based parenting interventions in developing countries, the use of alternative technologies to provide access to hard-to-reach parents, collaboration between different fields, and considering culturally appropriate measures and interventions (Meja, Calam & Sanders, 2012).

Other programmes focus on parents (Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) (Gordon, 2000) and teach communication and conflict-resolution skills for effective relationships. The Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (S.T.E.P.) (Dinkmeyer & Dinkmeyer, 1979) programme educates parents on the different developmental milestones of children, how children grow and behave, discipline and problem-solving when they have to deal with challenging behaviour. The Pen State Family Intervention Program (Nezworski, Tolan & Belsky, 1988) and Teeter (1998) focus on (1) improving the mother's negative perceptions of herself and her world; (2) exploring stressful parenting and family experiences; and (3) examining the emotional reactions of mothers in the parenting role. However, the literature on such programmes is scanty. Moreover, only limited research is available on assisting people who are living under stressful circumstances and on how mothers who live in a challenging environment in South Africa in LSEE envision the future for their children and how they plan to fulfilling their desired dream. It is important to know what mothers dream for their children, because LSEE circumstances have an impact on mothers' ability to parent as well as their emotional wellbeing and motivation.

### **Appreciative inquiry (AI): Two pillars**

Appreciative inquiry (AI), developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), rests on two pillars: firstly as an appreciative perspective, also seen as a strength-based approach (Merriam, 2014) that simultaneously induces and facilitates change management (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010); and secondly as a method of inquiry (Bester, 2011; Hammond, 2013) in organisations, communities and education globally and locally (Abdul, Aziz & Rahman, 2013).

The appreciative perspective as paradigm is underpinned by a social constructivist philosophy, viewing the social world as one to be created and co-constructed in dialogues through debates and the stories people tell each other (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Grounded in positive psychology, AI aims to recognise what is going right in life, thus shifting the focus from repairing negative experiences and a preoccupation with them towards addressing the positive aspects (talents, traits, characteristics, coping skills) of individuals, groups and their environments, even though their circumstances may be difficult (Peterson, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Moreover, AI aims to build on strengths already existing in the system and to create an awareness of the positives within (Lewis, 2011; Van Tiem & Rosenzweig, 2006) rather than spending more time and energy on searching for problems. The principles of AI are: 1) Reality is socially constructed through language (constructionist principle); 2) Change begins from the moment a question is asked (simultaneity principle); 3) The choice of what is being studied determines what is discovered (poetic principle); 4) The image of the future shapes the present (anticipatory principle); and 5) Positive questions lead to positive

change (positive principle) (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008; Kung, Giles & Hagan, 2013).

The appreciative method of inquiry is implemented through four consecutive distinct stages that form a cyclical process; the phases are: discovery, dream, design and destiny (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008). Appreciative questions underpin the inquiry during each of the four phases (see data collection).

### **Phase 1: The discovery phase**

The aim is to start an extensive search through the use of appreciative questions posed to participants to understand the “best of what is and what has been” in the particular situation (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) and is aimed at identifying existing strengths which are shared through stories (Lewis, 2011).

### **Phase 2: The dream phase**

During the dream phase the aim is to build on and encourage participants to share what has been revealed in the previous (discovery) phase. This refers to wishes, hopes and dreams for the desired future and what might lie beyond the present regarding a specific topic and sharing these aspirations (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008; Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2011). Participants shape and refine their own dreams while listening to those of others. According to Van Tiem and Rosenzweig (2006), when designing the dream, it is not finding the problem but rather focusing on creating a desirable vision in order to move forward to the next phase that is important.

### **Phase 3: The design phase**

In aiming to build a bridge from the best of “what is”, from the present, towards a speculative “what might be” in the future (Bester, 2011), strengths are discovered and need to be aligned in order to achieve the desired vision (Van Tiem & Rosenzweig, 2006). Participants work together towards creating a reality for the future; therefore the design phase is often referred to as a collective activity (Stratton-Berkessel, 2010). Discussions are held around how ideas can be put into practice and who will be involved, thus making decisions about support for the delivery of the envisioned dream (Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2011).

### **Phase 4: The destiny phase**

The focus is on celebrating positive changes and innovations resulting from the AI process (Bester, 2011) and the facilitator can invite individuals to explore what may contribute towards sustaining and amplifying the energy and outcomes of the AI experience. However, the goals and action plans set in place during this phase become the individuals’ own form of measurement (Stratton-Berkessel, 2010). This final phase of AI aims to transfer the new discoveries by focusing on putting ideas generated in the design phase (insights and excitement) into action. Plans are made to strengthen personal commitment in order to empower and sustain (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010) part of everyday interactions (Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008; Stratton-Berkessel, 2010) and then to review their effectiveness.

Using AI is of relevance to this study because, firstly, it focuses on understanding and giving more insight into mothers' unique qualities and strengths, and secondly, it creates awareness of how mothers envision their future, even though from a community with limited resources, ultimately to support building on existing qualities leading to more reciprocal positive relationships.

### **World Café Method (WCM)**

The WCM is also a strengths-based approach (Brown, 2005) engaging groups of people in a conversation (core process), where a topic that is important to the group is discussed (Brown, Isaacs & The World Café Community, 2005). Multiple perspectives are revealed through brainstorming and problem solving (Brown & Isaac, 2005; Bunker & Alban, 2006). When used in conjunction with AI, WCM encourages positive conversation (Brown, Homer, Isaacs, 2009). In order to facilitate appreciative inquiry and create a relaxed environment and free sharing, WCM was chosen to collect data from mothers in the context of an LSEE.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The research was conducted in two research phases and findings are reported in two separate reports. This article reports on the second research phase.

During the second phase of the research, the three phases of AI pertaining to dream, design and destiny were used to implement the research design as method of inquiry to collect data using a single instrumental case study in order to gain knowledge and insight about a specific social issue (Fouché & Schurink, 2011), or when a particular case is examined in order to provide insight into a specific phenomenon. The purpose is more likely to be known in advance and designed around established theory and methods (Punch, 2014). The closeness of the case study to the real situation allows for a view of the reality as experienced by these mothers.

According to Blaikie (2010:57), a research project is built on the foundation of its research questions, providing focus and direction of the research, and determining which methods will be utilised for data gathering and analysis. The overarching research question was: What are mothers' dreams for their relationship with their children for the future, and how do they design the dream and destiny process with regard to their relationships with their children?

The aim, making use of an appreciative perspective, was to explore, describe and gain insight into how mothers *dream* (what might be); what the world is calling for (envisioning results); in order to *design* (what should be); and to articulate their *destiny* (to empower and sustain) regarding their relationships with their children in LSEE. A qualitative approach as methodological paradigm was utilised with a phenomenological research approach (Merriam, 2014), in order to study occurrences in their natural setting, and also to ensure authenticity in studying intense human experiences with affective and emotional components. The design therefore is most suitable for exploring and describing mothers' dreams with their children in an LSEE, as it is concerned with the human being as a whole as well as all the parts that contribute to the experience. To

make sense of meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) the interpretivist perspective was used.

## **Sample and context**

A total of 12 women in an LSEE on the East Rand of Gauteng participated and were representative of a vulnerable community: women living in poor conditions (overcrowding, domestic violence, alcohol abuse, poor education, low intellectual abilities, and single mothers who have low income because they are unemployed). All were proficient in Afrikaans and had children in middle childhood attending the same special education school. All had between 3 and 5 children, one mother had a Grade 12 certificate, most had Grade 8; the average age for having their first child was 20 years, most were single or cohabitating. Seven were unemployed and 5 worked part time in a low-income job. Participants were purposively selected on the basis of their willingness and participated in all four AI cycles.

## **Ethical consideration**

Vulnerable populations are in need of special protection, such as women, children, the elderly, homeless, people with disabilities, and those living in poverty or low-income situations (Camp, 2014; DHRSA, 2015; Greeff, 2015) and should not be excluded from research, as these populations are most in need of being served and understood (Sieber & Tolich, 2013).

Because of mothers' vulnerability it was important to be actively engaged with and sensitive to their needs. Potential discomfort or harm identified was identified in recalling traumatic or distressing events, thus possibly being re-traumatised (Greeff, 2015). The decision to include these particular participants was that benefits would outweigh risks, because of the opportunities to participate in the group (Greeff, 2015). Focus groups were found to be more appropriate for participants as they allowed the mothers the freedom to share experiences regarding their relationships with their children, who were important to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011), rather than using in-depth open-ended questions.

Ethical consent was obtained from the North West University research committee (NW-00125-11-S1), the school principal and the participants. Important aspects were providing information to participants on the background of the study, their freedom to withdraw, aims, use of information, benefits outweighing risks, time-frames, confidentiality, their written consent and willingness to participate in recorded interviews; it was also pointed out that information would be disseminated in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. Direct benefits communicated to participants were that they would have an opportunity to voice their opinions and develop awareness concerning the issue.

## **Data collection**

Using the WCM, data were collected in two consecutive focus group discussions; the 12 participants were divided into three groups of 4. Questions were: "What do you dream

your relationship with your child would be like in the future?" "In which way can you make your dream regarding your relationship with your child become a reality?"

In the second discussion a month later, with the same participants, the focus was on the destiny phase (phase 4) with the emphasis on the present: "How would you describe your relationship with your children now?" "What do you and your children talk about lately?" "What influences your relationship with your children?" Notes from the discussions were written on paper tablecloths as indicated next.

### **The World Café process**

A Café host is assigned to run the WCM and has specific duties such as welcoming, orientation and managing the process, posing the question to be explored around each table and providing a structure on practical aspects to the conversation (World Café Community Foundation, 2007). Four people are seated at a café-style table to explore an issue that matters to them. Other participants are seated at other tables and explore similar matters at the same time. A table host is assigned at each table. Each round is between 20 and 30 minutes in duration. After an initial round participants are invited to change their tables and travel, carrying new insights that emerged from the prior dialogue into a newly formed group conversation. However, one person remains as the 'table host' while other members blend with other groups to form new groups at other tables. The process is repeated two or three times and then it is followed by a whole-group discussion where insights, actionable ideas and recommendations are shared.

The task of the café host is to motivate everyone to participate, write, doodle or draw ideas on the tablecloths assisting the group to focus on the issue, speak their mind and heart, listen in order to understand and gain insight and connect ideas (Brown, Isaacs & World Café Community, 2005; The World Café Community Foundation, 2007). Participants are able to support each other, speak, listen and ultimately become more aware of contributing towards the collective whole.

The WCM as a data-collection method has been found to be even more effective when combined with traditional qualitative data-collection techniques such as interviewing, drawing and narratives as it allows participants to reflect and share (Koen, Du Plessis & Koen, 2015); it also allows for a great amount of data to be collected within a short period of time. It seemed a suitable choice for this study as the interaction between participants may create understanding with regard to participants' own experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

The data comprised 1) visual notes (on paper tablecloths as written text while talking and discussing questions) and 2) audio (videotaped). These data were thematically analysed, which is appropriate for developing a detailed descriptive account of a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2013) according to the six steps of Braun and Clark (2013): (i) familiarisation took place by reading and making notes of interesting ideas; (ii) initial codes were generated by categorising sections of the data into phrases; (iii) themes were searched and reviewed; (iv) they were linked with other identified themes; (v) once themes were defined and named identifying their essence, themes were written

up to produce a coherent account by referring to the research question and the relevant literature (Braun & Clarke, 2013); (vi) finally, data were interpreted (Delport, Fouché & Schurink, 2011) according to Bronfenbrenner's Bio-Ecological Theory (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

## FINDINGS

The analytical process yielded themes presented with extracts from the mothers' stories. As questions asked focused on consecutive phases of AI, themes will be discussed in this order.

Briefly, in **phase one (Discovery)**, not reported on in this article, exploring and describing mothers' experiences of their relationships through the appreciative discovery process of AI, women reported affection and closer relationships in spite of hardships when these were shared. Communications were described to be around day-to-day events, but when there was physical touch more meaningful conversations occurred. Reciprocal affection is appreciated; however, mothers mentioned the challenges in dealing with their adolescents' behaviours. Moreover, most participants doubted their competence at good mothers (Botha 2016).

## THEMES: DREAM, DESIGN AND DESTINY PHASES

### Dream Phase

Initially mothers kept talking about anything that came to mind and struggled to keep to the topic, reverting back to the present; verbalising in lower-level and simple language unrealistic dreams, not being able to provide ideas towards realistic implementation. *“Are we now going to gossip about our children...?”*

Initial difficulty in conceptualising 'Dream': Difficulties were experienced in expressing their vision. *“I don’t know how you can declare how to dream your relationship with your child should be, because it is a dream that a mother has that is so deep, and lies so far...”*, *“You yourself don’t even know yet what it is. You can’t even explain it to yourself ... how can you explain it to someone else...”*

### Theme 1: Dreaming of strong emotional relationship

#### *Subtheme 1.1: Dreaming of a bond that lasts*

A mother's dream about their relationship starts with the bond prior to birth. Some participants remarked: *“It starts from the beginning, in the womb.”*; *“Even from the day that you hear that you are pregnant.”* One participant further said: *“...ahh and then you think about this little bundle inside of you and you think ... how will I bring it up ... what will happen with this bundle, how will he or she be or look like one day and already here a bond starts to form...”*. A participant stated: *“A relationship is more than you can see ... for a long time”*.

#### *Subtheme 1.2: Dreaming of reciprocal relationships*

Being there for each other creates reciprocal happiness. Parenting is sometimes infused with the parents' own childhood struggle for attention. Dreams were based on

participants' own relationship with their mothers, who were not present when they were growing up: "A mother needs to be there for her daughter to assist her when she struggles..." Other participants said: "I did not have this with my own mother, I was adopted". "For me a mother is someone that can help a child, the mother is there". The child in turn must feel free to approach his/her mother: "She needs to be able to come to you for support".

### ***Subtheme 1.3: Dreaming of a long-lasting "just happy" relationship***

Participants showed awareness that the present influences the future. A few participants wanted their children also to share happy moments: "Happiness, between me and my child, personally this is when she comes to me and says mom I achieved this and then I say to her jay!" "Happiness, just happiness is what I want ... we must all be happy".

A participant expressed her wish to maintain good communication when her children are grown up and live far away: "If he for example sits in Cape Town, he must still phone me and talk to me". Another participant stated: "We must be together, there mustn't come a break ... when they are big they must help each other in fights ... we must be happy because one day they must look after me...".

### ***Sub-theme 1.4: Dreaming of friendship relationships***

Four participants said that their relationship has to be a friendship where everything is shared in a reciprocal way: "Like your child can come to you and talk to you about everything and anything she wants and bothers her you know...". Another participant said about her own stress: "She needs to know what is bothering you, because you have many problems ... you must tell her". "You have to have a friendship relationship, I must tell him what bothers me...".

Fahlberg (2012) states that after conception parents start to form expectations and hopes for themselves as parents and for their future relationship with the child. The mother-child relationship is unique, intimate and fundamental for the forming of future relationships and is important for a child's social, emotional and personality development.

The dream of interpersonal interaction is prominent. Humans have an inner need for a relationship, a most important source of wellbeing and life satisfaction (Reis & Gable, 2003). A strong and happy relationship that is long-lasting is significant because it speaks of continuity and adapting to change in human development. These are biopsychosocial characteristics of human beings as individuals and groups over the course of life, across successive generations and through historical time both past and future (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244).

## **Theme 2: Dreaming of open and respectful honest communication between mother and child**

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Dreaming of respect, trust and honesty***

Various participants' envisioning of their relationship with their children was based on good, open and honest communication with respect. One participant stated: "Yes good

communication ... like you want to laugh together and talk about things together." Each of these participants had different features they envisioned communication would be like. Participants wanted their children to feel comfortable and trust them enough to share anything with them. More comments included: "Honesty ... she needs to feel that she can trust you and that you can come to her and know you trust her." "It has to be open. Talk to me straight."

Participants felt that respect is reciprocal and emphasised the importance of modelling respect. Two participants stated: "She needs to have respect for you." "This needs to be reciprocal, because if you don't have respect for your child, you cannot expect that your child will have respect for you, because I have seen many times how parents and children talk to each other; those children do not have any respect for nobody."

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Dreaming of fearlessness in the future***

Participants want their children to be strong for the future, and in order for this to happen they often stand back and allow children to solve problems themselves in order to learn from situations: "I want them to be strong, against the things that life poses." "I think they need to experience things in life before they can learn from it." "When something has got him under and he is down and out, I must not help – they need to be able to get up." "You can give advice but you can't tell them what to do." "They must one day enjoy what they choose".

The dream phase highlights the importance of strong relationships: mothers reveal how their bond started, the envisioning of a happy and reciprocal long-lasting and happy relationship, where they will in turn be looked after in old age. This togetherness should be built on trust and on open, honest and respectful communication, where the child is encouraged to be fearless in the future and to enjoy choices made and taking responsibility. When parents spend special and quality time with their children they build on the quality of the relationship between parent and child (Bloomquist, 2013).

A research study on single mothers in poverty conducted by Schein (2012) indicates that many mothers appeared not to have any dreams for the future, while those who had dreams described them as impossible ones; some found it difficult to dream, others could not see that their lives would change and dreaming is risking wanting what you cannot have, setting yourself up for failure, as dreams are being broken and it is too painful to dream and a waste of time. According to Stavros and Torres (2005:122), some people have a difficult time dreaming; they have spent a lifetime limiting themselves by what they think is not possible.

It is clear that mothers' relationships were intertwined with those of their children, consequently they find challenging to separate their own future from that of their children. This finding ties in with a co-dependency of the mother and the child, depending on each other in a harsh environment with limited support. An enmeshed family pattern refers to family members who are over-involved with each other's affairs and over-concerned about each other's welfare (Wilmshurst, 2011). Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) emphasise the impact that the environment has on the parent as well as on the child, and influences the relationship between parent and child.

## Design Phase

**The concept 'design':** Participants' vision was clouded by the difficulties experienced in the present pertaining to discipline; a participant said: "*my children are naughty ... I want them to listen...*" Another participant said about being strict: "*One day I want my children to look back and say: this is what I learnt from my mother... not the things I gave him*".

### Theme 1: Designing support for children by fulfilling their needs

During the design phase participants were invited to discuss strategies about how they could make their dreams a reality. A theme that stood out was the importance of fulfilling the needs of children distinguished as emotional, physical and cognitive support.

#### Sub-theme 1.1: Designing emotional support

With regards to emotional support, participants felt that it is important not to set unattainable goals, but rather to motivate their children: "*You shouldn't set unreachable goals for your child ... you know what your child can do.*" "*You must tell him that he can ... and when he does it and he does not get to eighty but he gets to sixty, then you say 'well done!'*" Mothers also expressed the importance of showing affection as emotional support: "*Show love, give hugs, give kisses.*" "*Sometimes I get so overwhelmed with love and then I give her a hug... 'ouch mommy'... you know then I hugged that child so hard.*"

#### Sub-theme 1.2: Designing physical support

Participants emphasised the importance of spending quality time especially by doing activities that children enjoy together. "*You need to make time and put an effort in.*" "*Spending time with your child ... quality time.*" "*Make time to talk to them*". Part of the design phase is to apply action into plans. When asked when they would be able to create special time the response was: "*Early in the mornings when you make coffee and breakfast for them.*" "*When they come from school and you sit with them while they do their homework.*" "*More during the night ... when they have eaten and bathed ... me and my daughter have lots of time, because she baths with me and my son more during bedtime.*" "*Play together.*"

#### Sub-theme 1.3: Designing cognitive support

For cognitive support, participants felt that it is important to allow children's opinions to count: "*If you move to another flat ask the child 'what do you think? I think this is how you build a relationship with your child, because they see that their mother cares about what they think.*" A participant said: "*You need to pay attention to your child, what he says ... look at the body, what it says...*". Participants further expressed the importance of allowing children to make career choices: "*Children need to see that they can choose what they want ... to say I have to make choices in life.*" A participant stated: "*My son wants to be a cricket player and my daughter a model and a doctor ... I need to support them*".

As proposed by the BET model (Rosa and Tudge, 2013:24), the family members play the key role in evaluating developmental occurrences and outcomes that emerge as a result of the active engagement of the four interdependent components: 1) process, implying interactions between members; 2) the person, implying personal characteristics of all individuals in the family; 3) the context (microsystem), for instance, the social class that influences child rearing; and 4) time.

Micro time refers to continuity versus discontinuity; meso time refers to how often the episodes occur over days and weeks, and macro time refers to changing expectations and events in the wider society both within and across generations. Heritability is higher when proximal processes are strong and lower when such processes are weak. The developmental power of proximal processes would be increased if they occurred among people who developed a strong emotional relationship (Rosa & Tudge, 2013:244).

## **Theme 2: Designing the enhancing of functional competence: discipline**

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Difficulties experienced with discipline***

Most participants stressed the importance of discipline. Participants had had difficulties in putting their designs in place, as they struggle to discipline efficiently. Throughout participants voiced their challenges and frustrations regarding disciplining their children and expressed a need for guidance and assistance.

*“He [son] is just getting worse, he does not want to go to school, I have to pull him out of the car.” “This morning I felt like a bad mother because sometimes it feels that I can’t control my children. I try my best.” “At times you have to discipline them if they do something wrong. ‘My mother loves me but I am wrong’ ... if you are not going to discipline him, he will think that he can think and do what he pleases.” “I don’t know what to do ... I scream and plead and talk nice and ignore ... I say ... no TV for 4 weeks...his father is not there to help me.”*

For mothers their effective discipline would be reflected in their children listening, paying attention and adhering to requests. One participant felt that the ‘teenage years’ are especially challenging, while another mother struggled with disciplining her child who displayed severe behavioural challenges: *“Discipline and (silence) ... No he needs to listen if you talk to him, but he does not really do this ... but if he could just listen once you have spoken, but now lately he doesn’t care. You talk to him but it goes into the one ear and out the other.* A participant revealed strong tendencies towards wanting to punish *“I want to hit him”*; *“I feel tired, tired...”*; *“If he doesn’t listen I get his father to give him a hiding when he comes home and no TV”*. One participant dreamt that her adolescent child will listen to her as he did when his father spoke to him: *“My child is a rebel at this age. He will do everything for his father, jumps when he talks ... but nothing for me. I struggle to get him to do anything ... I’ve been trying everything in my power to show him that I love him. I give him space, he can go and play, he can do as he pleases, but he still does what he wants.”*

Mothers seem to be controlling, pleasing or pleading. It was also seen earlier on that mothers from LSEE want to have 'open friendships' with their children, but do not take into consideration the age appropriateness in sharing of problems; however, they then contradict their "friendship" by applying punitive parenting styles. This is an indication of diffused roles and boundaries (Bush & Peterson, 2013).

According to Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford and Goodman (2005) possible causes of behavioural problems and rebelliousness in adolescence include poverty, families having more than four children, and the consequence of living in a low socio-economic background. Often a more punitive parenting style is used, since children display behavioural and scholastic problems, leading to poor relationships with family members (Bush & Peterson, 2013; Sigelman & Rider, 2015). These aspects tie in with Bronfenbrenner's 'person' characteristics (the second 'P' of the PPCT) or person development outcomes, which are most likely to be influenced by the characteristics of force:

- 1) Generative force characteristics (those that initiate or sustain proximal processes) involve active curiosity, the tendency to initiate and engage in activity alone or with others, responsiveness to initiatives and readiness to defer immediate gratification in order to pursue long-term goals. Mothers, although from LSEE sustain proximal processes by not only engaging in activities with their children, but also being able to defer immediate gratification to pursue long term goals for their relationships.
- 2) Disruptive force characteristics (impeding or interrupting proximal processes) where individuals tend toward impulsiveness, explosiveness, distractibility, inability to defer gratification, or in a more extreme form, resorting to aggression and violence. Mothers from LSEE and can resort to aggression towards children.

### ***Subtheme 2.2: Requests for support***

Participants, through expressing frustrations, indicated a need for help. "*I need to talk about my problems ... the men don't understand, you know ... I get angry too often ... I grab him by the ears ... I must smoke too often... nobody (swears) listens*". "*I feel like a bad mother, I must be the worst mother*".

Living in LSEE imposes extraordinary burdens on mothers, such as struggling financially, having to deal with poor support, unsatisfactory household conditions and limited access to resources (Letherby, 2010). Since contextual factors have an influence on how people live and interact, the stress that an LSEE imposes induces mothers to show signs of anxiety, leading to withdrawal, feelings of being incompetent with little energy to parent and, consequently, being more critical in their interactions with their children (Jankovic, 2008). Feelings of hopelessness are "accompanied by a negative attitude to life" (Uddin, 2011). The power of proximal processes to actualise genetic potentials for developmental competence will be greater in advanced and stable environments than in those that are disadvantaged and disorganised. By contrast, in settings that are unstable and disadvantageous, proximal processes would function by avoiding or reducing the outcomes of developmental dysfunction (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

In summary, in the design phase mothers stressed that in order to develop a supportive and positive relationship with children, parents should create an environment that is supportive of the children's needs, providing emotional, physical (at particular times) and cognitive support, but with effective discipline accepted by all their children, no matter their age. Mothers expressed frustration with parenting, a need to be in control, but were aware that children should not always be controlled.

### **The destiny phase**

***The concept 'destiny':*** Difficulties affecting the expression of wishes. A participant stated: "*My things look dark but I'm thankful to be in a relationship with my children now.*"

### **Theme 1: Destiny and final insights: Empowerment through interaction**

#### ***Sub-theme 1.1: Destiny lies in increased interaction: Focus on parenting in the present***

For mothers, the focus should be on being 'in connection', appreciating individuality, and the setting of standards and right examples, spending individualised time: "*you can't expect your child to be a certain way then you are not so.*" Be clear "*Talk right ... push them ... be strong ... don't nag ... don't lie ... keep promises ... tell them why you are doing or saying things grown-ups do ... appreciate them for who they are, and know they are not the same ... don't retaliate ... give everyone his own time..*" Participants stressed perseverance and following through: "*keep on ... don't stop before you are finished.*"

One mother felt that it was also important to support children through difficult times by not emphasising their mistakes and to discipline with affection: "*It is important not to throw rocks. Don't say 'I told you so ... see what has happened ... this not what your child wants to hear!*" "*Yes and help him to get a solution for things that went wrong, don't solve it for him. Give him advice.*"

Throughout dialogue shared, participants dreamed to set the right examples for their children, as children imitate and closely watch parents. This view of modelling was emphasised by a participant stating: "*Yes what you do ... they say a child follows in his parents footsteps. I won't say that the child will do everything that you do, but many of the things that you do the child sees (laugh), but I believe that the child looks at everything.*"

Participants reported back on the implementation of special time with their children and one participant stated: "*Me and my husband we do the following, he takes our oldest son and I take the other two and then they will just go and sit somewhere and play together, not as a group but man to man. It helps, this is what we talked about last time, special time, it works; now he plays with us where he never did before.*"

Participants stressed responsibility: "*If she doesn't listen I will take away her games .... he must do the homework. "She must live with what she chooses". "He must learn now for later, he must find a job one day".*

## Theme 2: Destiny in sharing hardships, problems and solutions with other mothers

### ***Subtheme 2.1: Destiny through awareness and empathy: other mothers***

Participants also gained insight into the problems of others:

*“I appreciate my children more, my children are not naughty ... there are worse things out there.” “It’s good to hear that other parents have problems and that you are not alone, and there are other parents whose situations are worse.”*

*“Since I’ve been coming here, from the first time, I became closer to my son.”*

*“I realised that it does not matter how dark things seem for me, there is always other people that have more sorrows and problems as the little that I have, mine looks small compared to others.”*

In the destiny phase the focus is on parenting in the present in such a way as to empower through greater awareness of their children and positive interaction by spending time, being more focused on individuality and on spending special time for each child. Mothers will make sacrifices for their children.

### ***Subtheme 2.2: The way forward***

Participants talked about future support:

*“I need to phone other mothers.” “I know they can listen now.” “I can see they can need me.” “I will talk to my friends at the school.”*

Mothers realise that other mothers experience the same problems, making their own battle easier to bear. Decisions were made to be positive and to support each other, at least by sharing future experiences. The value for participants is that persons from an LSEE environment are often isolated and have few opportunities to share anything about their lives, let alone how they experience their relationship with their children. WCM is effective in settings where individuals are very conservative and need to participate with each other to hear different perspectives on a situation (Brown, Isaacs & World Café Community, 2005; Bunker & Alban, 2006). However, the goals and action plans set in place during this phase become individuals' own form of measurement (Stratton-Berkessel, 2010).

During the destiny phase participants shared their new appreciative views with regard to their children. Individuals explore what may contribute towards sustaining outcomes of the AI experience. Doing it differently in the present, for example, spending more quality and individualised time will have a positive effect on the future.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings indicated systems that form part of the context influence interactions in the present, as indicated by the Bio-Ecological PPCT Model. The person and environment are operating jointly to produce a developmental outcome advocating interactions between concepts such as process, person (characteristics) context and time (historical) (proximal processes) (Bronfenbrenner, 2006) and the role played by the person in his/her own development (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000). Mothers clearly are influenced by

processes (difficulties) in the; persons (characteristics) and historical and present time in the context of LSEE. To ensure optimal development all participants in the respective systems ought to pursue effective patterns of interaction (proximal processes).

While children and positive reciprocal interpersonal interactions are more important to mothers from an LSEE than anything else, the difficulties with having to live in an LSEE context due to lack of resources and lack social and emotional support are clear. The shortage of economic capacity extends much more widely throughout a person's life, and influences are complex. Poverty is a dangerous mix of stress and inadequate resources (Lötter, 2011).

The relationships that mothers from LSEEs have with their children raise difficulties as a result of inconsistency, co-dependency and insecurity regarding abilities to parent, either when disciplining or in friendship. Moreover, to dream and design a future relationship with their children implies envisioning something that is not yet part of their reality. Furthermore, mothers' dreams were intertwined with own unfulfilled needs as children, pertaining to process, context, persons and time. According to Edelman, Kudzma and Mandle (2014), parents living in poverty have many of their own unfulfilled needs that often cannot meet even their infant's needs, inhibiting mothers' ability to dream about the future; it is difficult for people to engage in profound, meaningful relationships with loved ones, which can hinder the fulfilment of a fundamental human need to relate. A negative self-image may be formed from feelings of personal powerlessness that can wreak havoc on interpersonal and social relationships (Lötter, 2011). Some dreams of mothers referred to the past tense and on missing out on solid relationships, especially those that exist between mothers and daughters.

Both competence and dysfunction are seen in mothers from LSEEs. In contrast to their insecurities, mothers also revealed competencies by indicating a consciousness of and yearning to be a good parent. "Competence" is defined by Bronfenbrenner (2006) as the acquisition and further development of knowledge, skill or ability to conduct and direct one's own behaviour across situations and developmental domains. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013:244), proximal processes mostly act in a positive way on developmental outcomes, whether by promoting outcomes of competence or by diminishing the possibility of dysfunctional outcomes. A strong need exists to empower children and the mothers themselves through interacting regularly on a level of competence that seems efficient to them. By being actively engaged with their children and trying to parent "well", mothers disclose resource characteristics. According to Bronfenbrenner (2006), resource characteristics in proximal processes are those that influence a person's ability to engage effectively and that activates development, knowledge, skill and experience.

'Demand characteristics' (Bronfenbrenner, 2006) are qualities of the developing person that can invite or discourage reactions from the social environment, influencing the way in which proximal processes are established, and could be an agitated or calm temperament, hyperactivity and passivity, age and gender, all affecting the establishment of proximal processes. Mothers also showed incompetence and dysfunction (diffused

boundaries) with regards to effective and consistent discipline and 'friendship relationships'. According to Rosa and Tudge (2013:244) dysfunction is the recurrent manifestation of difficulties in maintaining control and integration of behaviour across situations and different domains of development.

Designing their destiny mothers changed from regretting some of the choices they made and often being fearful of the future to a discovery of strengths to design their future. Although their circumstances were not about to change, mothers recognised the value of sharing, requesting and providing support to each in the future, knowing that their circumstances were not unique. Mothers thus realised that togetherness influences relationships with other mothers as well as with their children, and that the present influences the future.

Progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active evolving bio-psychological human organism and the person, objects and symbols in their immediate environment can be seen (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). To be effective and ensure optimal development, all participants in the respective systems ought to pursue effective patterns of interaction (proximal processes). The interaction must be repetitive and occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time. Although mothers have difficulties, they reveal themselves to be engaged with their children as long as possible and as often as possible. The form, power, content and direction of the PPCT that affect development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person and the environment (immediate and remote) in which the processes are taking place and the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration. Mothers can be active participants in their own development and in the development of their children. There is potential both for enhancing functional competence and for reducing degrees of dysfunction (Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As Bronfenbrenner (2006) recommends, researchers should study the setting in which a developing individual spends time and their relations with others in the same settings, the personal characteristics (the role played by the individual and those with whom he/she interacts), in conjunction with context and the impact of time (spatial, temporal and historical time) in which these individuals live and the mechanism that drive the proximal processes.

Meja, Calam and Sanders (2012) hypothesise that interventions that encompass an ecological framework, empowerment and a strengths-based focus with longer duration, higher level of intensity, concrete and social support will be more successful than those that rely solely on a professional helping approach that is expert-driven, deficit-based and solution focused.

Services provided by the social work profession include facilities to a variety of people in all walks of life, stages of life and in all kinds of situations, in order to promote social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing (Cournoyer, 2016). Social workers need to recognise that in an environment filled with stress, such as LSEE, emotional, financial, social and

physical needs are seldom fulfilled, and especially the ability to think about possibilities beyond what is in the current moment is limited. In order to motivate their children to persevere through challenges posed by the LSEE, mothers need to be motivated themselves to be able to envision a positive future for their children. For needs to be addressed it is essential to be granted opportunities to express needs using a narrative approach instead of providing solutions to their problems.

Practitioners working in similar settings of LSEE should consider appropriate activities, with time spent assisting mothers to practise and exercise dreaming and envisioning a positive future. The literature recommends that visualisation exercises need to be done in order to assist participants to dream (Ashford & Patkar, 2001).

In addition, it is crucial that mothers be helped to become more aware of their own unfulfilled needs and perceptions with regard to their own relationship with their mothers and are assisted to address these. Mothers need to be helped to recognise the images that they are holding in their minds, that they don't have to suppress negative feelings in order to appreciate their children. Mothers need to be helped to reframe situations appreciatively, formulate what they want and to understand that not focusing on dreams impedes their creation. Mothers need to learn to take care of themselves and that children must decide on and create their own future.

Future research should focus on providing effective ways of addressing challenges that mothers experience. More studies on similar environments with larger samples should be conducted, as well as exploring how the use of exercises such as envisioning, for instance, could assist mothers to design the future of their children. Interventions that may be suitable are the use of the WCM in conjunction with AI.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The findings are limited by the small scale of research involving only 12 participants (Afrikaans-speaking whites) from one societal context in one province, thus excluding the application of these experiences in other provinces and more affluent communities and other cultures. Therefore the study cannot be generalised to the population at large; however, based on the rich descriptions provided, the findings might be transferable to similar settings.

## **CONCLUSION**

The aim of the article was to answer the research question, guided by the research processes of AI and WCM to promote a deeper understanding and insight into how mothers in a South African LSEE context dream what their future relationship with their children might be. However, mothers became aware of their own strengths through AI, enabling future expectations and visions for positive and long-lasting relationships. Insight gained can enable practitioners who are directly and indirectly involved in LSEEs to create pathways to support this vulnerable population group.

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