

**EMBEDDING ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY IN TEACHING  
AND LEARNING PRACTICES TO ENHANCE PSYCHOLOGICAL FLEXIBILITY  
IN PSYCHOLOGY HONOURS STUDENTS**

by

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## Declaration

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*“I declare that the abovementioned research thesis is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references (APA 7th edition style for referencing was applied).*

*I further declare that I submitted the thesis to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.*

*I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.”*



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## Abstract

Postgraduate students enrolled for a psychology honours qualification should be prepared with particular soft skills to enhance coping amidst the challenging South African world of work. Psychological flexibility, which refers to the ability to deal effectively with challenges despite discomfort, has been identified as an essential soft skill promoting coping.

Psychological flexibility is a central concept in the broader field of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Educators have critical roles to play in promoting coping among students. In this thesis, I have argued that embedding Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, with specific emphasis on psychological flexibility, is an effective method to promote coping among postgraduate students enrolled for an academic honours qualification in psychology. Furthermore, the role of educators will be foregrounded. The overarching aim of this thesis is to report on a study that investigated the professional development of educators to embed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in their teaching and learning practices as an avenue to enhance psychological flexibility among psychology students. Additionally, the thesis reports on the psychology students' experiences as part of the process. The study was conducted at a private higher education institution in Gauteng, South Africa. A qualitative, interpretative, and collaborative action research approach was adopted. The research approach comprised four collaborative cycles that spanned across ten months. A case study sample of 13 psychology honours students and seven educators. The results from the study indicated that the educators were able to embed Acceptance and Commitment Therapy into their teaching and learning practices, which students experienced as positive. These results indicated that embedding Acceptance and Commitment Therapy into teaching and learning practices effectively promotes psychological flexibility. The study's results add to the existing body of knowledge by offering theoretical and practical contributions towards: (a) an educator professional development protocol, (b) a postgraduate psychology training manual, and (c) a

teaching and learning protocol. Additionally, the study offers insight into ways that postgraduate psychology students can be prepared to manage commonplace discomforts effectively. Finally, the study paves the way for further research into the field of integrating Acceptance and Commitment Therapy into teaching and learning.

*Key Terms* Acceptance and Commitment Therapy; action research; educator professional development; higher education institutions; mindfulness; psychology students; psychology honours students; psychological flexibility; soft skill development; teaching and learning practices

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my husband, Grant.

Thank you for helping me embrace this beautiful mess we call life.

Throughout life and especially during the PhD journey, there have been days where everything has felt calm and peaceful. My vision and goals were clear, and the world was mine for the taking. I was able to embrace life wholeheartedly. Other days, I struggled to find meaning in the hurt, hardship, and challenges faced. The battle scars and gaping holes are a constant reminder of how hard life can be. On those days, life was harder to embrace. This contrast is a reminder that there will be days (sometimes months) where life propels you forward and other times where taking a single step forward seems impossible.

There have been two deaths, a marriage, two births, a job change, two promotions and a pandemic – in hindsight, the circumstances were not ideal for my PhD journey. However, I have learnt through the PhD process that when you let go of trying to control this messy journey and instead decide to embrace it (with everything that comes with it), you may be surprised at what you will manage to find. I found meaning.

So, in this beautiful mess we call life, I am grateful for my family who walk this journey with me.

## Acknowledgements

“At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.” - Albert Schweitzer (1965)

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In remembrance of my dad, Keith. He taught me the values of hard work, resilience, and dedication. Thank you for showing me how to reach my goals, even in adverse circumstances.

In remembrance of my mom, Joy. She taught me to grab every opportunity, to find the silver lining and make the most of life. Thank you for showing me how to create a life of meaning, despite the challenges faced.

To my brother and sister, Jonty and Candice. Thank you for teaching me that despite how difficult life can be, there is so much joy we can still experience. You both inspire me.

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### List of Acronyms

Acronyms	Meaning
APA	American Psychological Association
AAQ	Acceptance and Action Questionnaire
ACT	Acceptance and Commitment Therapy
AHPCSA	Allied Health Professions Council of South Africa
AR	Action Research
ASSAf	Academy of Science of South Africa
CAR	Collaborative Action Research
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CHE	Council on Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQF	Higher Education Qualification Framework
HPCSA	Health Professions Council of South Africa
HSE	Health Sciences Education
IAAP	International Association of Applied Psychologists
IPCP	International Project on Competence in Psychology
IUPsyS	International Union of Psychological Sciences
MBSR	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
UNISA	University of South Africa
WHO	World Health Organisation

## Chapter 1 Introduction and Orientation

“If you wish to understand why professions develop as they do, study their forms of professional preparation.” - Shulman (2005)

### Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)<sup>1</sup> are being challenged to think about their responsibility in equipping graduates with the hard and soft skills<sup>2</sup> to thrive in the difficult South African work and life contexts (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Burke et al., 2020; Cimatti, 2016; Fraser et al., 2019; Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017; Tholen & Brown, 2018). There is growing research interest in Health Sciences Education (HSE) about how specific disciplines, such as psychology, are trained to prepare for the challenging, career-specific environments (Middendorf & Pace, 2004; Parker et al., 2016).

As the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf) (2011) states, one goal of HSE is to produce knowledgeable and competent psychology students and graduates who can work in diverse, challenging environments while providing a broad spectrum of care to society. Furthermore, the HSE sector acknowledges that the majority of postgraduate psychology students graduate as non-professional healthcare workers<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, both professional<sup>4</sup> and non-professional psychology graduates need to be well-trained and

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<sup>1</sup> Higher education institutions (HEIs) refers to a private or public tertiary educational institution, that is registered and regulated by law in terms of the Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act No 101 of 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Hard Skills, often referred to as technical skills, refer to a person's cognitive ability in areas such as literacy and numeracy, which are measurable by academic tests (Azim, et al., 2010). Soft skills refer to a set of attitudes, behaviours, and strategies such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control, which are more challenging to teach and measure (Geber, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Non-professional healthcare worker is a graduate from a qualification not registered or recognised by the HPCSA; however, the qualification still enables graduates to work within the healthcare environment, such as psychology graduates who work as lay counsellors.

<sup>4</sup> Healthcare professional is a graduate with a health professional education qualification who has registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) as a pre-requisite for professional practice, such as a registered psychologist.

appropriately skilled to work within the challenging career-specific environment (ASSAf, 2018).

Change, challenges, and unpredictability are inevitable experiences for psychology students and graduates because of the nature of their work and the challenging healthcare environment. These inevitable experiences will continue to persist, necessitating the need to equip psychology students with the skills to cope and thrive (Nelson & Low, 2011).

Cultivating skills that equip psychology students to embrace and thrive within expected discomforts is a deliberate practice that should be learnt (Goleman, 2014). Therefore, it would compel the need to investigate resources and strategies that could assist in responsibly preparing psychology students. The concept ‘discomfort’ in this study refers to painful, unpleasant, unwanted, and uncomfortable private experiences, such as thoughts, feelings, sensations, and memories, in response to external stressors (Zhang et al., 2018).

A substantial portion of HSE literature has focused on healthcare student preparation through curricula, curriculum development or what is taught within specific healthcare programmes (Hewitt, 2006). Only in recent decades have educators<sup>5</sup> drawn attention to the importance of how the curriculum is taught and the need for research to investigate teaching and learning practices<sup>6</sup> (AlHaqwi & Taha, 2015; Felten, 2013; Huber & Hutchings, 2004). Educators have only recently asked, ‘Are psychology students taught in ways that prepare them with the hard and soft skills to thrive within the career-specific work environment?’ (Middendorf & Pace, 2004).

Despite the growing interest in and importance of investigating teaching and learning practices, psychologists and those teaching psychology students have been slow to develop

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<sup>5</sup> Within South African Education policy, ‘educator’ is defined as “an inclusive term referring to teachers, lecturers, facilitators, assessors, moderators and other teaching, educating, training, facilitating, assessing, or enabling learning in learning contexts” (South African Qualifications Authority [SAQA], 2014, p.4).

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘teaching and learning practices’ is an umbrella term, which infers the study of how best to teach (Wyse et al., 2015).

standards for collegiate teaching and learning practices (Cardaciotto et al., 2008; Halpern, 2010; Moyer et al., 2017, Pakenham, 2015; Räsänen et al., 2016). Sparse attention has focused on preparing psychology students enrolled for non-professional programmes, such as an academic psychology honours programme<sup>7</sup> (Rock & Hamber, 1996). Given the lack of consensus in the literature around how best to prepare psychology students, specifically psychology honours students, with the skills for the challenging career-specific environment (Dunn, 2015), exploration and investigations into this area are warranted.

This chapter provides the context, positioning and purpose of this study and describes the research problem, rationale, and theoretical context. The chapter concludes by defining common concepts utilised in the study to guide the reader.

## **Background to the Study**

This section comprises five segments. First, a discussion on the importance of soft skill development in HEIs. Second, it highlights the need for soft skill development for postgraduate psychology students. Third, it discusses three possible soft skill development models in HEIs before further unpacking the embedded teaching and learning model as the conceptual framework in segment four. Last, it notes that educator professional development is vital for the success of the embedded teaching and learning model. Collectively, this section sets the stage for introducing the research problem in the next section.

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<sup>7</sup> An academic psychology honours programme is a one-year, postgraduate programme aimed at providing students with a range of theoretically-based skills and knowledge which does not lead to professional registration with the HPCSA. In comparison, a professional psychology honours programme is an 18-month, postgraduate programme incorporating an internship, designed to lead to professional registration with the HPCSA.

### ***Importance of Soft Skill Development in Higher Education Institutions***

In modern times, education needs to be multifaceted and diverse, equipping students to cope and thrive in uncertainty (Sichombe, 2017). Within general discourse, there is an emergence of the importance of equipping students and, more specifically, graduates with the soft skills to cope with uncertainty. Notably, HEIs should take accountability in being deliberate with this skill development (Kruss, 2004; Pauw et al., 2007). Hard skills, such as problem-solving and analysis, aid students' professional development (Azim et al., 2010). However, this training becomes inapt if soft skills training is not prioritised (Barkhuizen et al., 2015). The concept of soft skills is comparable to life skills, a concept identified and described by the World Health Organisation (WHO), Division of Mental Health (1994). Soft skills or life skills are defined as a set of socio-affective skills and strategies, which assist individuals in coping with challenges in all life contexts (WHO, 2003). Thus, soft skills that enhance one's capacity to persist in the face of discomfort have become a vital life skill in the modern world (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Soft skills or life skills, which relate to the ability to persevere in pursuing meaningful outcomes, despite the discomfort, have been studied under various conceptual labels, such as resilience, psychological flexibility, grit, reduction in impulsivity, growth mindset and mental toughness (Burke & Christie, 2018; de Beer & van Heerden, 2014; Primi et al., 2016). Research on these related soft skills extends over 70 years. From the 1950s, the focus was on student self-actualisation (Neto, 2015). In the 1960s, there was a focus on the soft skills of self-efficacy, locus of control, and achievement motivation (Bandura, 1994). In the 1970s, the focus included resiliency, intrinsic motivation, growth mindset, and delaying gratification (Kustka-McLaughlin, 2017). Conscientiousness and openness were investigated in the 1980s (Brothen & Wambach, 2001). In the 1990s, emotional intelligence was introduced into the research focus (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). From the 2000s, interest and research increased in



student development (Quinlan, 2014) or holistic student development (Kuh, 2018), with a recognition for the need for greater integration between hard and soft skill development.

Despite various research investigations highlighting the need and importance of soft skill development to assist individuals in thriving in adverse circumstances, a focus on teaching hard and cognitive-oriented skills has remained a priority in student development literature (Hettich, 1998; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2017b; 2018). While extensive research indicates that soft skill development is critical for success in modern-day life, it is most lacking in graduates (Mishra & McDonald, 2017; UCAS, 2018). Fortuitously, soft skills can be developed, and recommendations have been put forward for incorporating soft skill development in HEIs through coaching, teaching practices, curricula, and support workshops (Hodges, 2017; Holdsworth et al., 2018; Lloyd & Campion, 2017; Maree, 2018). While there are various soft skills and soft skills approaches, there is no consensus on which skills or skill-sets are of most importance or what application approach would be most effective (Farrington et al., 2012). The lack of clarity and direction in the literature around soft skill development in HEIs contributes to the focus on and priority given to hard skill development especially at a postgraduate level.

In HEIs, postgraduate resources focus almost exclusively on developing hard skills required in the educational and research processes, such as equipping students with methodological skills and developing academic writing skills (Trafford & Leshem, 2008). Developing hard skills in postgraduate programmes remains a priority, partly due to HEIs being measured against completion rates and research outputs (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). Thus, the assumption appears to be that equipping students with hard skills would enhance completion rates and the number of research publications. However, little attention has been paid to assisting students in developing the soft skills

required to deal with the discomfort that characterises much of the postgraduate journey (Benshoff et al., 2015; Havenga & Sengane, 2018).

The need for a student to adapt in response to adverse situations throughout their academic studies, places HEIs in a significant and central role in developing these vital soft skills in postgraduate studies. Embedding the development of soft skills that help students persist despite discomfort within postgraduate programmes could be critical to improving retention, throughput, and success within the programme, and then in careers as graduates.

The terminology of soft skills and hard skills are commonly cited concepts throughout literature, spanning across disciplines, including psychology (Cimatti, 2016). While the concepts are ill-defined, evolving and critiqued (Joynes et al., 2019), recent national and international research studies, which focus on psychology preparatory programmes, still make reference to these concepts (Fynn et al., 2019; Torres et al., 2020; Vera & Tejada, 2020). While the terminology may be evolving, the concepts of hard and soft skills have, for the most part, created a shared understanding for a wide audience such as academics, students and the workforce (Williams, 2015). The concepts of soft and hard skills are used within this research study given the accessibility and relevance within the psychology discipline.

### ***Soft Skill Development: Postgraduate Psychology Students***

The transition from higher education to the labour market is a significantly stressful experience, and the cultivation of soft skills could empower students to deal with the challenge constructively (Ribeiro et al., 2018; Tholen & Brown, 2018). Research investigated the need for soft skill development in specific careers (Krpálek et al., 2021) and within particular graduate programmes (Hodges, 2017; Morgan, 2016), allowing for a more specified and practical approach to soft skill development in students. A specific research

area that has recognised the importance of soft skill development to prepare students adequately for the field is within the HSE (Sanderson & Brewer, 2017).

Health professional education strives to inculcate the profession-specific knowledge, skills and generic competencies and attributes as mandated and regulated by professional councils (ASSAf, 2011). The Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA)<sup>8</sup> regulates and stipulates training and educational requirements for healthcare professionals in South Africa. Despite educational and training stipulations provided by the HPCSA, the Department of Health (DoH) has noted that education and training have not kept pace with society's demands and needs (DoH, 2011). However, the DoH recognises the pivotal and transformative role HEIs have in preparing graduates for the field and has encouraged further exploration and improvements.

Delivering high-quality, effective healthcare that meets individuals' and communities' changing needs depends on student training and preparation to develop the required skills (Field et al., 2014). Research confirms that healthcare students need to develop the soft skills to adjust, adapt and persevere to be better prepared for their career-specific environments (Allister & McKinnon, 2009; Havenga & Sengane, 2018). Eley and Stallman (2014) also indicate that healthcare students, for example in the field of psychology, require specific soft skill training in HEIs to prepare them for the field's challenges.

In psychology, there is an increased need for graduates who are called upon to empower, care and support the community despite the challenging, under resourced, work environment (Council on Higher Education, 2016; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2016; Taormina, 2015). This highlights the need for psychology graduates to develop the vital soft skills to

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<sup>8</sup> The HPCSA is established to provide for control over the education, training, and registration for practising of health professions registered under the Health Professions Act. As a statutory body, the HPCSA is guided by a formal regulatory framework, namely, the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974 and the Constitution of the Professional Board for Psychology, Regulation No. R1249 of 2008.

persist in the face of challenging circumstances and adverse working conditions. Thus, part of psychology students' educational training should include equipping students with the soft skills, knowledge, and capacities to work effectively in diverse and challenging work environments (Havenga & Sengane, 2018).

While there is widespread recognition of the importance of soft skill development in HSE, the focus area remains under-researched with limited conceptual models and robust interventions to guide the way (Sanderson & Brewer, 2017). In the South African context, there is also limited literature on what specific soft skills should be prioritised and how these skills should be developed in psychology students (Archer & Meyer, 2021; Archer & Turner, 2019; van Schalkwyk et al., 2020). Thus, it is recognised that there is a pressing need for well-rounded graduates within the healthcare field who can cope and persist in the ever-changing and challenging work environment. This highlights the importance of further research (Havenga & Sengane, 2018; Robles, 2012). Against this backdrop this study aimed to explore how to develop soft skills in psychology students and psychology honours students.

### ***Soft Skill Development Models in Higher Education Institutions***

Several HEIs have introduced resources and programmes such as intervention programmes, mentorship initiatives and counselling services to promote soft skill development (Chigeza et al., 2017; Mason, 2019; McKinzie et al., 2006; Moseki & Schulze, 2010; Waters & Stokes, 2015). The literature associates soft skill development in HEIs almost exclusively with either a support programme model or a stand-alone subject model (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Hassel & Ridout, 2018). The support programme model provides both individual (personal counselling) and group formats (workshops) predominantly linked to student development centres (Chigeza et al., 2017; Pakenham, 2014;

2015). The stand-alone subject model offers soft skill guidance through a formal, credit-bearing subject within a study programme (Hassel & Ridout, 2018; Strydom, 2017). Both models provide general soft skill development and support to cater to the broader student population (Pakenham & Stafford-Brown, 2012; Strydom, 2017).

General soft skill development and support may be scalable and universal; however, these are not necessarily sufficient to cater to the specific stressors that students face while pursuing postgraduate qualifications or within career-specific programmes such as psychology (Kagee, 2014). Another major criticism is that traditional soft skills approaches are disconnected from developing hard skills taking place in the classroom (Farrington et al., 2012). Thus, the general soft skill development and support approaches may have limited bearing and scope in preparing professional programme- or career-specific students for their work environments, rendering them unsustainable (Boone & Manning, 2012; Waters & Stokes, 2013). There is an apparent need for solutions that integrate hard and soft skill development in a unified approach for programme-specific students, including psychology honours students (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014; Maasdorp & Holtzhausen, 2011).

As the following subsection will outline, the embedded teaching and learning model in HEIs is an effective method of combining hard and soft skill development within the classroom, encapsulating a unified approach to student development (Ngang & Chan, 2015). Therefore, educators who teach psychology honours students may focus on specific soft skill development relevant to the career-specific environment. In this manner, the embedded teaching and learning model gives rise to sustainable, proactive, and career-specific soft and hard skill development and support (Carstens, 2016; Schulz, 2008; Subramaniam, 2013).

However, there is a lack of specificity in terms of what and how soft skills should be taught or embedded in teaching and learning practices in the first place, which makes it increasingly difficult for educators to incorporate soft skills into their teaching practices

(Farrington et al., 2012). Despite limited guidelines provided in the literature to guide soft skill development in psychology honours students, students' ability to strive toward meaningful goals, despite the discomfort, is deemed necessary and worth investigating (Goleman, 2014; Nelson & Low, 2011).

### ***Embedded Teaching and Learning Model: A Conceptual Framework***

The embedded teaching and learning model, which integrates soft skill development in teaching and learning practices for psychology students, was the focal area for this study. Soft skills that assist psychology honours students in embracing and thriving in discomfort and challenge are deemed important (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Teaching and learning practices that incorporate mindfulness<sup>9</sup> practices have been used to assist students in developing the soft skills to embrace discomfort (Ambrose-Oji, 2013; Napoli, 2004; Schwind et al., 2017). Mindfulness, as Chodron (2000) describes, is about “diving into your real issues and fearlessly befriending the difficult and blocked areas and deep-seated habitual patterns that keep us stuck in ignorance and confusion” (p. 301). Thus, mindfulness practice allows students to build a new relationship with their discomfort; a feeling they would usually push away, now becomes a transformative resource that enables personal and professional growth. Studies confirm the effectiveness of mindfulness practices to enhance HEI students' ability to cope with discomfort thus enhancing well-being (Baer, 2003; Brown et al., 2007; Shapiro et al., 1998; Shapiro et al., 2008).

Over half a century, mindfulness-based practices, rooted in Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, have become a priority of focus in research across disciplines,

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<sup>9</sup> Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003)—one of the six core processes in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) referred to as present moment awareness (Harris, 2009).

including within psychology (Arch & Craske, 2006; Erhard, 2019). Kabat-Zinn, one pioneer of mindfulness-based research, influenced the development of the international Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) model and has informed such programmes as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy, and Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (Kabat-Zinn, 1993; Rogers & Maytan, 2012). As a mindfulness-based model, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is gaining traction in the educational context and provided the conceptual framework for this study.

Researchers describe ACT as a theory-driven, evidence-based, scalable and proactive model that aims to enhance individuals' functioning holistically (Sarath, 2003; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Harris (2009) explains that ACT is a psychotherapeutic<sup>10</sup> model. It is psychoeducational and mindfulness-based, aimed at upskilling and empowering individuals to develop psychological flexibility. The concept psychological flexibility refers to the skill to respond more effectively to life challenges and the ability to respond more effectively to discomfort. When individuals can be flexible about how they feel, think, and behave, they tend to present with greater adaptability levels, which suggests enhanced coping in the face of stressors or discomfort (Peterson, 2016). Developing mindfulness-based soft skill psychological flexibility could assist postgraduate psychology students with the vital skill of embracing discomfort while striving toward meaningful goals (Cherniss, 2000; Duckworth et al., 2007).

However, there is a paucity in the literature exploring how educators can integrate mindfulness-based psychotherapeutic models, such as ACT, in their teaching practices to contribute to student development (Seligman, 2011). Despite the lack of guidelines, the South

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<sup>10</sup> Psychotherapeutic models are theoretical models, applied in the treatment of psychological challenges and used predominantly in psychotherapeutic settings (Hill et al., 2017).

African CHE has encouraged practitioners and educators to consider operationalising the conceptual principles of, among other things, mindfulness-based theories such as ACT, to inform student support initiatives (CHE, 2017). Therefore, the theoretical and practical application of ACT, embedded in teaching and learning practices to promote psychological flexibility soft skill development within psychology honours students, seems to be a suitable model to explore (Zhang et al., 2018).

### ***Embedded Teaching and Learning Model: Educator Professional Development***

The embedded teaching and learning model relies on educators to incorporate relevant soft skills within their teaching and learning practices to enhance student development. Extensive literature indicates that teaching and learning practices cannot be separated from the promotion of student development (Barbezat & Bush, 2014). Researchers like Whitehead (1993), Eames (1995), Hughes et al. (1998), Mertler (2013) and Laidlaw (1996) explore the depths of the role educators play in education. However, educators' professional development<sup>11</sup> remains a neglected research area in South Africa, despite the recognised importance of educators' influence in student development (CHE, 2017). One proposed process for educator professional development is Collaborative Action Research (CAR).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) describe the CAR approach as a systematic and controlled process where HEI educators can engage in professional development practices to enhance student development. The involvement of educators in CAR professional development can be a meaningful experience, as they are focused on targeting areas of practice in which they want to improve or which they believe are important (Clauzet et al., 2008; Mertler, 2013). As educators engage in CAR professional development, they increase

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<sup>11</sup> In its broadest sense professional development refers to the development of a person within his or her professional role i.e., educator training (Villegas-Reimers, 2003).



their understanding of the educational context, student development, and teaching practices informing research and evidence-based practices (Cornelissen & van den Berg, 2013).

The CAR approach offers a systematic methodology to introducing innovations in teaching and learning practices by putting the educator in the dual role of producer of educational interventions and user of the theory developed (Johnson, 2012). This is a powerful way of both producing knowledge about educational theory and practices and improving teaching and learning practices in practical applications (Cain & Milovic, 2010; McNiff, 2002; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The CAR methodology stipulates there is no need for separation between the design of professional development training for educators and the delivery of this training. Nor is there a need to separate the development of student interventions from researching these activities (Cain, 2008).

Within a CAR approach, educators recognise the considerable influence they have on their students' development (Rhodes, 2008). Educators cannot separate their influence from how they mould their students' development (Cain & Milovic, 2010). Moreover, any enquiry into student development should include enquiry into the educator. This involves educators interrogating their role to explain their contributions to the situation studied (Zambo & Isai, 2012). Exploring the experiences of those teaching and those being taught in the embedded teaching and learning model becomes crucial to ascertain development experiences. Also, capturing experiences is essential when working with the novel, conceptual frameworks, and where there is a gap or lack of consensus in the literature regarding guidance.

An important goal of CAR research and professional development is to assist the researcher and educators in developing new theories or expanding existing scientific theories (Greenwood, 2012). Through the process of CAR professional development, educators can develop a reasoned justification for their work. As the educators are engaged in the research process, their experience, practice, and interaction with theory provides valuable inside

information. This inside information is developed and tested and provides a critically-examined rationale for the educator's area of practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

ACT and CAR have an extensive evidence base, but scant research indicates that these approaches have been embedded in teaching and learning practices. A considerable search on online databases as well as a variety of peer-reviewed journals, using the key search terms of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Collaborative Action Research and embedded teaching and learning in various combinations, rendered no relevant hits. Considering the intensive literature search and the paucity of empirical material that emerged, this study's findings promise to contribute to the extensive body of literature on ACT, CAR and teaching and learning literature on basic and applied levels.

Furthermore, CAR professional development emphasises that change in practice is a vital signifier of successful professional development. The findings and insights gained from the CAR process should not only be of theoretical importance but also lead to practical improvements in the problem areas identified (Zuber-Skerrit, 1992). As CAR's primary aim is to provide solutions to problems identified in a specific setting, the outcome should provide insights and tools for solving these challenges. The educators and primary researcher<sup>12</sup> identified the need to equip postgraduate psychology students with the skills to embrace and thrive in discomfort. The educators incorporated the mindfulness-based soft skills guided by the ACT framework in their teaching and learning practices. The educators' experiences, knowledge and feedback of implementation are valuable practical contributions and give rise to other opportunities and further investigations.

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<sup>12</sup> Hereafter, the primary researcher is referred to in the first person narration "I" as is consistent with the insider-researcher positionality within this study's qualitative, interpretivism, and action research methodology (Trowler, 2011).

## **Research Problem and Rationale**

A growing body of literature suggests that students who can persist and perform in stressful circumstances are more likely to succeed in various life contexts (Cherniss, 2000; Duckworth et al., 2007; Luthar et al., 2015). Thus, students who embody a sense of ACT tend to present with better outcomes in various life circumstances, making psychological flexibility a vital life skill for postgraduate psychology students, among others (Hayes et al., 2013; Rudaz et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2018). Most postgraduate psychology students work within the healthcare environment as non-professionals, necessitating a focus on appropriately equipping these students for common discomforts. Hence, I argue that the development and promotion of psychological flexibility among psychology students enrolled for an academic psychology honours programme could assist them in thriving within the programme and career-specific contexts. However, more research is needed.

To date, limited empirical research focuses on assisting postgraduate psychology students in developing the skills to strive toward meaningful goals and persist despite discomfort (Peterson, 2016; Riberio et al., 2018). There is also mounting evidence that soft skills can be developed and enhanced through embedding mindfulness-based psychotherapeutic models, such as ACT, in teaching and learning practices (Brown et al., 2007; Ngang & Chan, 2015). Due to a scarcity of available guidelines for embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices, research must be guided by what educators and students are learning and experiencing in the classrooms.

Besides the theoretical arguments presented here, my personal and professional experiences played an essential role in the study's conceptualisation. As a lifelong student of psychology, I have been privileged to work in various professional roles. These roles include working as a qualified counselling psychologist in a student counselling position (2014 – 2017), a psychology lecturer (2013 – 2021), and a postgraduate support manager (2015 –

2017). These roles allowed me to support students in developing both hard and soft skills. Through engagement with various students, I learnt of their difficulty in adapting and persevering when encountering challenges. These experiences made me mindful of the importance of offering students proactive, scalable resources that enhance soft skills, such as psychological flexibility. Repeatedly, I interacted with students who possessed the cognitive abilities to succeed in their postgraduate studies but lacked the emotional fortitude to perform in the face of challenges. Hence, the importance of soft skills, in particular psychological flexibility, became glaringly evident.

The personal experiences I have reflected on paved the way for me to enrol for a PhD in psychology. Initially, the intention was to focus on integrating soft and hard skills support provided to postgraduate students at public HEIs. However, in 2017, I had a career change one year into my study. I moved from the public HEIs space into the private HEIs space, where I was appointed to manage an educator faculty. I was responsible for educators' professional development and overseeing student development. My role had shifted from being student-focused to faculty-based. This shift in focus presented a challenge for my PhD as student development is predominantly associated with student support services. Initially, my study seemed to fall outside of my job description and daily operations. As I started my new role, I questioned the study's feasibility, focus, and purpose.

Upon further reflection, I realised that the faculty of educators I worked with directly influence student development through their teaching practices in the classroom. This realisation presented me with a new opportunity to re-focus my study. While it remained focused on psychological flexibility soft skill development with postgraduate psychology students, the method of delivery changed. Psychological flexibility soft skill development was no longer enhanced through a support programme but rather by embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices to enhance psychological flexibility's soft skills. Introducing

deliberate soft skill development in teaching and learning practices provides a more scalable, proactive approach for psychology honours students and possibly postgraduate students in general (Williams, 2015).

As an insider researcher, where I would be immersed in the research environment, I aimed to provide context-embedded knowledge from the experience of working with the faculty of educators. Within the research environment, the educator faculty model comprises solely adjunct educators contracted for teaching cycles. The research environment has no full-time, permanent teaching faculty. I am responsible for the adjunct educator faculty, focusing on educator development, innovative practices, and quality assurance. I hold the view that it is essential for a faculty of educators, even adjunct educators, to offer explanations for how and why they teach the way they do in the classroom (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). I anticipated that this study and the findings would convey a rich narrative of purposeful actions grounded in knowledge about the processes of teaching and learning of psychology honours students.

Against this backdrop, this study focused on educators' professional development to enhance the mindfulness-based soft skill of psychological flexibility in psychology honours students. While psychology students enrolled for an academic psychology honours programme provided the context of the study, the enquiry was directed towards educators' perception and practices regarding an embedded teaching and learning model. Psychology honours students' experiences of the embedded teaching and learning model were also explored as the beneficiaries through the ongoing improvement of educators' teaching and learning practices.

It was envisioned this study would contribute to the existing body of knowledge by providing evidence for embedding ACT into teaching and learning practices and the possibility of it promoting psychological flexibility in psychology honours students. This

study aimed to provide practical solutions and context-specific information to address the problem identified within this specific setting, ultimately providing insights and tools for solving these challenges. Whereas the study's external validity would be a limitation, the study would uncover principles that could be transferred to various other contexts, such as other HEIs and other postgraduate students.

### ***Research Questions***

The following three research questions guided this study:

- Research Question 1: What are educators' experiences of the ACT-based professional development training?
- Research Question 2: What are educators' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching, and learning practices for psychology honours students?
- Research Question 3: What are psychology honours students' experiences of their ACT-based development?

### ***Research Aims***

This study focused on exploring the professional development of educators to equip them to embed the principles of ACT in their teaching and learning practices involving psychology honours students.

The specific research aims were to:

- Explore how educators experience, personify, and make meaning of the ACT principles through the professional development training conducted.
- Explore how these educators incorporate the ACT principles into their teaching and learning practices involving psychology honours students to promote psychological flexibility skills development.

- Explore how psychology honours students experience the development of psychological flexibility skills through their educator's teaching and learning practices in class.

### **Clarification of Concepts**

To clarify and create a shared understanding of the concepts used, this section provides a short description of the main concepts used in this study.

#### ***ACT Model***

ACT was developed within a coherent theoretical and philosophical framework and is a mindfulness-based, psychotherapeutic model founded by Steven Hayes in 1982. ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness strategies, with commitment and behaviour change strategies, to increase psychological flexibility (Hayes, 2016). ACT aims to maximise human potential for a meaningful life, which is achieved by accepting what is out of one's control and committing to action that improves and enriches life. This is known as psychological flexibility.

#### ***Educators***

Within the South African education policy, 'educator' is defined as "an inclusive term referring to teachers, lecturers, facilitators, assessors, moderators and other teaching educating, training, facilitating, assessing, or enabling learning in learning contexts" (South African Qualifications Authority, 2014, p. 4). This definition is seen as applying broadly within schooling, adult education and training, and the contexts of HEIs. In this study the educator is seen as a professional responsible for teaching the postgraduate psychology curriculum. The educator faculty all held adjunct teaching contracts. The CHE describes the role of educators who teach in HEIs as "engagement with learners to enable their

understanding and application of knowledge, concepts and processes, including design, content selection, delivery, assessment, and reflection” (CHE, 2017, p. 4).

### ***Educator Professional Development***

Professional development is the deliberate practice and upskilling of an individual within their professional role (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Professional development often refers to a continuous process of activities that enhance professional competency and understanding with the purpose of career advancement (Imel, 1990; Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

### ***Hard Skills***

Hard skills, often called technical skills, refer to a person’s cognitive ability, reflective of technical skills such as literacy and numeracy, which are measurable by academic tests (Azim et al., 2010). For every psychology student, defined and measurable hard skills are taught throughout the curriculum and need to be acquired to ascertain competency.

### ***Healthcare Professional: Psychology***

For this study, a psychology healthcare professional is a graduate from an accredited psychology qualification within the HSE sector, who are registered with the HPCSA as a prerequisite for professional practice, such as a registered psychologist. The HPCSA<sup>13</sup> oversees and regulates the education, training, and registration for practising healthcare professionals registered under the Health Professions Act.

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<sup>13</sup>For a detailed list of professional categories recognised under the HPCSA, refer to <https://www.hpcsa.co.za/>.



### ***Health Professions Council of South Africa***

The vision of the HPCSA is to enhance the quality of healthcare by developing strategic policy frameworks, standards for training, monitoring of professional conduct, ensuring ongoing professional competence, and fostering compliance. As a statutory body, the HPCSA is guided by a formal regulatory framework: the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974 and the Constitution of the Professional Board for Psychology, Regulation No. R1249 of 2008<sup>13</sup>.

### ***Health Professions Education***

The goal of health professions education within the HSE sector is the HEIs qualifications aimed at producing well-trained and appropriately skilled healthcare workers who are equipped to provide services at all levels of the healthcare system. Health professions' education unifies profession-specific and generalised competencies to ensure services are regulated by the professional councils (ASSAf, 2011).

### ***Higher Education Institutions (HEI)***

HEIs refers to a private or public, tertiary educational institution registered, accredited and regulated by law in terms of the Higher Education Act of 1997 Act No 101. Both public and private HEIs are quality assured and controlled by government departments, namely, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), CHE, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF), SAQA, Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) and National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). These controlling bodies ensure that accredited and registered HEIs offer credible, valid and recognised qualifications to students. For this study, a private HEI in the Gauteng province of South Africa was selected as the

specific context or research environment. This private HEI is registered and accredited with all controlling bodies.

### ***Mindfulness***

The most commonly quoted author regarding the term ‘mindfulness’ is Kabat-Zinn (2003; 2005; 2011). This author is seen as a pioneer in implementing mindfulness into healthcare and explains mindfulness as a two-part process: a focused attention on the here and now and a non-judgmental acceptance of thoughts, emotions, and sensations as individuals experience them in the moment. Mindfulness is one of the six core processes in ACT, called present moment awareness (Harris, 2009). Mindfulness has been explored in HEIs with various healthcare students, such as counselling and psychology students (Chrisman et al., 2009; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Keane, 2014).

### ***Psychology Honours Students***

Psychology is an academic and applied discipline involving the scientific study of mental processes and behaviour. Psychology qualifications are offered from undergraduate to postgraduate level (NQF 5 – 10) at HEIs. Postgraduate psychology students are enrolled for NQF 8 – NQF 10 psychology qualifications at accredited HEIs. Furthermore, NQF 8 psychology qualifications are called honours programmes. An academic psychology honours programme is a one-year, postgraduate programme that provides students with a range of theoretically-based knowledge and skills that do not lead to professional registration with the HPCSA.

In comparison, a professional psychology honours programme is an 18-month postgraduate programme incorporating an internship designed to lead to professional registration with the HPCSA as either a registered counsellor or psychometrist. The academic

honours psychology students have a shorter period of training with no practical internship, yet often still work within the challenging healthcare sector, perhaps further necessitating deliberate soft skills development for these students (ASSAf, 2011). This study included psychology honours students enrolled for an academic psychology NQF 8 honours programme.

### ***Psychological Flexibility***

The soft skill of psychological flexibility is the ability to respond effectively to stressful life challenges (Hayes, 2016). Psychological flexibility within a non-psychotherapeutic context has a psychoeducational foundation (Moran, 2015). Thus, psychological flexibility in a non-psychotherapeutic context is the psychoeducational training process oriented towards developing mindfulness, acceptance, and values skills (Hayes, 2016). Psychological flexibility is established through six core processes: acceptance, cognitive defusion, mindfulness, self as context, values behaviour, and commitment. Each process is conceptualised as a soft skill that can be enhanced to foster psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2018). The skill of psychological flexibility assists individuals to persist in or change their behaviour, depending on what the situation affords, to move towards what they value.

### ***Psychotherapeutic Models***

Psychotherapeutic models are theoretical models applied in treating psychological challenges and used predominantly in psychotherapeutic settings (Hill et al., 2017). Psychotherapeutic models have a deliberate focus on developing soft skills, helping individuals to cope and succeed across a broad range of challenges experienced (Cook et al., 2017). However, they have also shown promising results when applied to non-

psychotherapeutic contexts such as education, albeit predominantly in primary and secondary schools.

### ***Soft Skills***

Soft skills refer to a set of attitudes, behaviours, and strategies such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control, which are more challenging to teach and measure (Patrick, 2016). Moreover, soft skills are behaviours that can be learnt and improved with practice; they require reflection, and they benefit from ongoing coaching (Klaus et al., 2007). Soft skill development within healthcare education rarely is embedded into the curriculum and is instead reliant on educators' teaching and learning practices.

### ***Teaching and Learning Practices***

Within education, pedagogy refers to the method and practice of teaching, informed by learning theory (Oxford Dictionaries, 2019). The term pedagogy is often used when referring to teaching practices with children and adolescent populations (primary and secondary schooling). When referring to the teaching practices with adult learners, such as in HEIs (tertiary education), the term andragogy is often used instead because teaching and learning practices are adapted for the adult learner (Oxford Dictionaries, 2019). The term teaching and learning practices is an umbrella term that refers to the study of how best to teach (Wyse et al., 2015).

### **Overview of Chapters**

This thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the research study. The research background, the research context and approach are outlined and justified. The motivation for the research study, the identified gaps in literature and the potential value

of the research are also presented. Furthermore, an overview of important concepts are provided to create a shared understanding.

Chapter Two aims to contextualise the study by presenting a literature review on psychology in South Africa and the commonplace discomforts experienced in the professional, academic, and personal contexts which necessitate particular soft skill development. The chapter situates the study in the literature by introducing mindfulness-based strategies embedded in teaching and learning practices to improve student development. Finally, Chapter Two highlights the importance of educators' professional development to promote student development initiatives.

Chapter Three reviews ACT, the theoretical framework for this study. It contextualises ACT by defining and describing the concept of discomfort, discussing mindfulness strategies, and unpacking the ACT model's operationalisation in education. The chapter argues for the value of embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices and its role in professional development.

Chapter Four presents the methodology adopted in investigating the research questions. Specifically, the chapter discusses the research design, data collection and analysis, and the ethical considerations that guided the study.

Chapter Five offers an explication of the research findings. The data collected and analysed are integrated with the theoretical perspective to answer the guiding research questions.

Chapter Six concludes this thesis. It adopts a meta-perspective by reflecting on the basic and applied implications of the study and reflects on limitations and offers guidance on future studies. I conclude the thesis by reflecting on the journey of conceptualising and conducting this study and disseminating the findings.

**Conclusion**

This introductory chapter provided the study's orientation and background that have informed the three research questions. The research motivation, research design and common concepts were also introduced. The next chapter constitutes the literature review informed by a qualitative approach within an interpretative paradigm and explores the context of this enquiry in teaching and learning practices of psychology honours students in South Africa.

## **Chapter 2 Literature Review**

“It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change.” - Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882)

### **Introduction**

The literature review is presented in three sections. An overview is provided of commonplace discomforts experienced by psychology graduates in South Africa, underscoring the need for preparing psychology students to manage discomfort effectively. After that, I argue that embedding relevant mindfulness-based soft skills in teaching and learning practices promotes students’ abilities to manage discomfort effectively. The literature then emphasises educator professional development as a priority for the effectiveness of embedding soft skills in teaching and learning practices.

### **An Overview of Discomforts in Psychology**

This segment is presented in five sections to summarise psychology in South Africa and the commonplace associated discomforts. The section commences with defining the psychology profession, emphasising the need for psychology graduates to be equipped to work within discomfort. From there, the reader is introduced to the working environment discomforts, the academic environment discomforts and personal discomforts for psychology students and graduates. The section is concluded with a summary of the main ideas and identifying the gap in the literature, which constitutes the reason for this study.

### *Defining the Psychology Profession*

As in all professions, the practice of psychology is necessitated by the development and application of profession-specific knowledge, skills, and behaviours, conceptualised as competencies. Due to the globalisation of psychology, there is an identified absence of a mutually accepted set of competencies that defines the profession, contributing to the lack of a coherent global professional identity (Von Treuer & Reynolds, 2017). The two largest international associations of psychology, the International Association of Applied Psychologists (IAAP) and the International Union of Psychological Sciences (IUPsyS), endorsed the creation of the International Project on Competence in Psychology (IPCP). The IPCP identified a set of globally recognised competencies defining the profession, creating a global profession identity, and contributing toward a coherent training and development framework (IAAP & IUPsyS, 2016). The IPCP identified the need for psychology graduates to have knowledge, skills, and behaviours which equip them to work in diverse and challenging circumstances, underscoring the necessity of preparing psychology students with the ability to work in discomfort.

The set of globally recognised competencies identified by the IPCP aims to ensure that psychology graduates are equipped to embrace the global diversity of psychology training while still adhering to local competencies and contextual needs. Implications of internationalisation and globalisation are important contextual factors in preparing psychology graduates for maximum mobility with continental and global consciousness, equipping graduates as global citizens. However, the IPCP recognises that global competencies need to be adapted to fit within local contexts (Von Treuer & Reynolds, 2017). Given this study's local focus, understanding the South African psychology profession and associated environment is necessary in contextually situating this study.



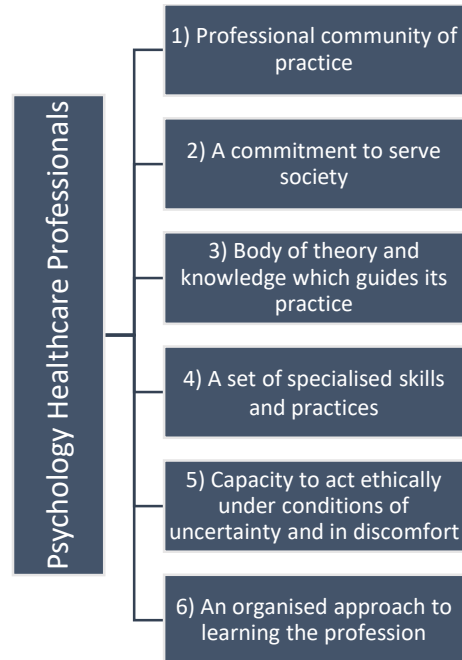
In South Africa, the HPCSA is a statutory body regulating healthcare professionals' competence, training, and compliance to professional practice standards (Health Professions Act 56 of 1974). According to the HPCSA, a psychology healthcare professional is defined as “the profession of a person registered under the Act as a psychologist, psychometrist, registered counsellor, psycho technician or in any other category of registration as may be established by the board” (Health Professions Act 56 of 1974, p. 3). Other psychology healthcare workers not registered or recognised by the HPCSA provide non-professional healthcare to society and are often called healthcare workers, such as psychology honours graduates who work as lay counsellors. The Allied Health Professions Council of South Africa (AHPCSA) is a statutory health body established in terms of the Allied Health Professions Act, 63 of 1982 (the Act) to regulate all allied or complementary health professions such as lay counsellors.

In South Africa, postgraduate psychology qualifications are geared toward professionally developing a psychology student to allow progression into psychology professional qualifications such as a professional psychology master's degree (NQF 9), which would then allow for registration as a psychologist with the HPCSA (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016). The majority of postgraduate psychology students are enrolled in academic psychology honours programmes, which contribute to the majority of psychology graduates working as non-professional workers (ASSAf, 2011; DHET, 2018).

The term profession means a dedication, promise or commitment publicly made through licensure to a public board, such as the HPCSA or AHPCSA (Pellegrino, 2000). The regulations defining the scope of practice for psychology professionals and non-professionals are outlined by the Department of Health (DoH), the HPCSA and the AHPCSA (DoH, 2012). Gardner and Schulman (2005) identified six characteristics common to all professions and applicable in defining psychology, as depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

*The Six Characteristics of Defining a Profession (Gardner & Schulman, 2005, pp. 52-59)*



As depicted in Figure 1, the first characteristic in defining a profession is a community of practice responsible for overseeing and monitoring the quality of practice and education, training standards, and licensure (Gardner & Schulman, 2005). In psychology, the HPCSA in South Africa stipulates rules and regulations for conduct that healthcare professionals must subscribe to and to which they are accountable. Registration and licensure with the HPCSA are required for practising as a healthcare professional (DoH, 2012).

Second, a profession commits to serving society (Gardner & Schulman, 2005). In psychology, professionals have a moral and ethical duty to others and society. The psychology duties are to uphold the South African Constitution's principles (Act No. 108 of 1996) and the obligations imposed by law. Psychology healthcare professionals are responsible for ensuring that fundamental human rights are upheld within their profession's scope of practice.

Third, a profession has a body of theory and knowledge that guides its practice (Gardner & Schulman, 2005). In psychology, to regulate the standards and practices of qualifications offered, qualifications are accredited by the CHE, the SAQA and the NQF. Furthermore, the HPCSA stipulates particular areas of competence and training standards required, dictating compliance for psychology healthcare professionals. In terms of section 16 of the Health Professions Act, 1974 (Act 56 of 1974), the HPCSA is the Standard Generating Body (SGB) for psychology and is the professional board of psychology in South Africa. The HPCSA is mandated to set the minimum standards of education and training for registration to ensure that the interests of the public are protected. The mentioned bodies of authority and associated frameworks (CHE, SAQA, NQF and HPCSA) ensure that the standard of qualification reflects the profession's training requirements (DHET, 2012).

Fourth, a profession has specialised skills and practices identified or unique within the domain (Gardner & Schulman, 2005). Section 33(1) of the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974, as amended by Act No. 29 of 2007 and on the recommendation of the HPCSA, informs the scopes of practice for psychology (DoH, 2012). The HPCSA outlines different scopes of practice that prescribe particular skills and responsibilities that psychology healthcare professionals are qualified and registered to provide. The scopes of practice ensure that healthcare professionals remain within the boundaries of expertise, training, and formal education and promote competence in particular areas of services (DHET, 2012).

Fifth, a profession ought to act ethically under conditions of uncertainty and discomfort (Gardner & Schulman, 2005). The Health Professions Act, 1974 (Act No.56 of 1974), Annexure 12, stipulates the rules and regulations around psychology healthcare professionals' ethical practices. Psychology healthcare professionals need to have the skills to work and perform under challenging circumstances and still provide ethical decision-making in unpredictable working conditions (Parker et al., 2016). Thus, preparing students to practice

in dynamic and unpredictable conditions is necessary to prepare graduates for the career-specific work environment (Tholen & Brown, 2018). However, the literature highlights that psychology healthcare professionals require further development in this area (Dunn, 2015).

Last, a profession has an organised approach to learning the discipline and growing new practice-based knowledge (Gardner & Schulman, 2005). Due to the diverse, challenging, and ever-changing healthcare professional working environment in South Africa, developing a consensus on preparing psychology students and graduates remains a debate in the literature (Louw, 2010; Rock & Hamber, 1996). Due to the lack of consensus, investigating and establishing an organised, standardised approach to learning the psychology profession has been slow to develop (Laher, 2005; Leach et al., 2003; Long & Foster, 2013). While the HPCSA provides guidelines, scopes of practice, and duties, there is less guidance on teaching and preparing psychology students with the skills to thrive in discomfort for this career-specific work environment (Halpern, 2010).

The final two characteristics that define a profession, provide a foundation for this study (Gardner & Schulman, 2005). These two characteristics are (a) the capacity to act ethically under conditions of uncertainty and discomfort, and (b) a profession with an organised approach to learning the profession and growing new practice-based knowledge. The literature that follows will demonstrate that psychology graduates face professional, academic, and personal discomforts and require a focused approach in HEIs to enhance students' and graduates' ability to thrive in this discomfort (Middendorf & Pace, 2004). Also, while the literature highlights the need for more focused training, there is no consensus on how to appropriately prepare psychology students for career-specific uncertainties and discomforts. As such, innovative approaches are required, and this highlights the literature gap for this study.

### ***Overview of Mental Healthcare in South Africa: Working Environment Challenges***

Sound mental health remains central to promoting the well-being of individuals, providing opportunities for satisfying and meaningful lives. The WHO defines mental health as a “state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (WHO, 2014, p. 1). The Western Cape Government (2014) reiterates that mental health relies on how one deals with the opportunities, difficulties, and challenges of everyday life. This emphasises the need for individuals to be equipped with the skills to embrace and thrive, despite discomfort and challenges.

Mental health can be viewed on a continuum, ranging from good mental health and well-being to mental illness and distress, where there is substantial personal suffering and impairment (Patel et al., 2018). Despite the ubiquitous nature of mental illness, global and public mental healthcare efforts are still in their infancy (Whiteford et al., 2015). Globally, mental health research started only 30 years ago to frame mental health as a public priority, leading to various research investigations to understand public mental health implications (Kessler et al., 2009).

A pivotal study on global mental health was conducted by Desjarlais (1995), who investigated mental health and particular challenges in low-income countries. Then, in 2001, the first World Health Report on mental health was released, emphasising mental healthcare as an area for further investigation and support (WHO, 2014). Lancet then published its first series of studies on global mental health. By 2011, global mental health was recognised as a public priority, where human rights of access, funding, resources, and support are required (Patel et al., 2018). Lancet (Kakuma et al., 2011) and WHO (2014; 2017) continue to drive research around global mental health.

The South African National Health Act and Mental Health Care Act (17 of 2002) integrates mental health into primary care. The concept of primary care refers to making healthcare accessible to all individuals in society (WHO, 2014). The Act has provided the foundation for the first mental health policy released, which guided its 2013-2020 strategic plan for mental health in South Africa (DoH, 2012; WHO, 2003). However, there is no national mental health policy ratified beyond 2020 (Perera, 2017). Provincial health departments manage the South African public health sector and all public health services, and planning is coordinated through the National Department of Health (Malakoane et al., 2020). The public health sector serves around 84% of the population, yet only 4.6% of the DoH's budget allocated to public health is spent on mental health services (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2018).

The South African population is documented to have a high prevalence of mental illness—30% of the 55.7 million people have experienced a mental illness condition within their lifetime (Petersen, 2009). Depression and anxiety are leading causes of psychological distress in South Africa (Malakoane et al., 2020; Schneider et al., 2016). The most commonly studied mental health conditions, given the prevalence, and disabling consequences, are depression (29.7%), psychoses (12.6%) and conditions specifically related to stress (12.6%) (South African Human Rights Commission [SAHRC], 2019). Due to high conflict, elevated stress, and violence, combined with a lack of access to mental healthcare, the South African population is more vulnerable to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or symptoms of the disorder (Ng et al., 2020). The South African population's stress and trauma levels are exacerbated by racial discrimination, inequality, economic challenges, and interpersonal violence (Jack et al., 2014).

Furthermore, the mental healthcare sector in South Africa is burdened with a lack of healthcare workers available to provide the care and support for those in need (Docrat et al.,

2019). The country's public health system and the policies around mental healthcare are fragmented with poor coordination of services, under-resourced workforce, public neglect, and underfinancing (Coovadia et al., 2009; WHO, 2017). Inadequate information systems to measure the actual burden of mental health conditions contribute to the ineffective allocation of resources for the sector (Pillay & Kramers, 2003). Moreover, stigma and misinformation regarding mental health conditions also contribute to the lack of accurately measuring the prevalence of mental illness in South Africa, with reportedly 75% of people with mental illnesses never receiving treatment (WHO, 2017).

Considering the national challenges concerning well-being and mental illness, it seems critical that psychology students be empowered with the required skills, knowledge, and attitudes to embrace and thrive in challenging conditions (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Understanding the challenges psychology graduates face in the mental healthcare working environment in South Africa is necessary for stakeholders, such as HEIs, to investigate proactive ways to prepare and equip psychology students to meet society's needs more effectively (Andrews & Higson, 2008; Burke et al., 2020; Cimatti, 2016; Fraser et al., 2019; Rothwell & Rothwell, 2017; Tholen & Brown, 2018).

### ***Overview of Psychology Training: Academic Environment Challenges***

The burden of mental illness in South Africa and the humanitarian imperative to reduce suffering often attract many students to gain a health professional qualification, such as psychology. The academic journey for psychology students is competitive and fraught with challenges, from undergraduate to postgraduate studies, requiring students to adapt and persevere for academic success (Rousseau & Thompson, 2019; Twenge et al., 2019).

In South Africa, psychology students' academic journey commences with an undergraduate degree (NQF 7) with a psychology-focused major (Pillay et al., 2008). DHET

(2013) and the ASSAf (2011) illustrate that the most significant attrition remains in the first year of higher education. Students who complete an undergraduate psychology degree progress to postgraduate studies, enrolling for a postgraduate psychology honours degree (NQF 8) (Hofstee, 2006). Postgraduate degrees combine advanced academic training and research into the curricula and are often labour-intensive and challenging.

The progression from an undergraduate degree to a postgraduate psychology honours degree is characterised as challenging, with high levels of disorientation, depression, isolation, and powerlessness in response to academic stress (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Hence, the academic journey is competitive and stressful and requires that students develop grit, tenacity, and mental strength (Traub & Swartz, 2013). Postgraduate students report difficulties in their academic journey related to poor time management, poorly directed focus, and limited support as specific challenges are encountered (Toncich, 2006). Mutula (2009) notes that coping with academic and professional workloads, lack of family support, family commitments and financial constraints are factors that could further exacerbate the already stressful experience of being enrolled for postgraduate studies.

Postgraduate psychology students who exhibit grit, tenacity and mental strength are more likely to complete their academic studies and attain their qualification. However, they are then faced with further challenges (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012; Lipson et al., 2016; Turpin & Fensom, 2004). Statistically, it is documented that most psychology honours students who apply for professional psychology master's degrees (NQF 9) will not be accepted (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016). Students who have gone through the selection process for admittance to this qualification have described the experience as daunting (Mhambi & Thobejane, 2012). Booyesen and Naidoo (2016) state that the uncertainty of being admitted for such a qualification creates anxious and doubtful psychology honours students, which is part of



developing open and reflective psychologists. The uncertainty and related growth resonate with the eventual dynamics with which psychologists must grapple in training and practice.

Given the competitive nature of psychology training, most postgraduate psychology students choose non-professional qualifications (Cooper & Nicholas, 2012). The non-professional psychology graduates often pursue work within the healthcare environment, working as lay counsellors or support workers (Connolly et al., 2021). Both psychology professionals and non-professionals require training and skill development to work in the challenging healthcare environment. Learning to cope with discomfort, changes, and challenges, within academic studies, prepares graduates for the challenging work environment (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016; Siegel, 2010; Tinto, 2014).

Developing soft skills that enable postgraduate psychology students to cope and persist in the face of difficulty equips them for increasing uncertainty, change, and challenge in the academic journey and work contexts (Cherniss, 2000; Duckworth et al., 2007; Hayes, 2016). Despite the need for psychology students, and then graduates, to have the skills to cope with challenges and discomfort, there is a lack of skill development initiatives in HEIs (Rock & Hamber, 1996).

### ***Overview of Psychology Students: Personal Mental Health Challenges***

Studies show that healthcare students in general, specifically in psychology programmes, are challenged with numerous discomforts in their education, both intellectually and emotionally (Mhambi & Thobejane, 2012; Sedumedi, 2002). The postgraduate psychology learning experience is described as emotionally intensive and draining. Students are confronted by emotionally complex and demanding issues in their academic work (Cornell, 2012). Psychology students are exposed to burnout, among other personal

discomforts, as they attempt to cope in a demanding academic programme with the addition of an emotionally rich curriculum (Lerias & Byrne, 2003).

The psychology curriculum and the classroom discussions centre around taboo or sensitive topics rife within the South African context, and this is necessary for the training to be relevant (Thwala & Pillay, 2012). Topics such as racism, prejudice, and trauma can trigger undealt issues for students (Mhambi & Thobejane, 2012). The study of psychology causes students to confront their thoughts and biases on the curriculum topics, which often causes emotional reflection and distress (Rashed, 2013). Moreover, psychology graduates will continue to be confronted with discomfort as they engage with helping others in practice (Richter et al., 1988; Waterman, 1994). Therefore, for students to be equipped to deal with these uncomfortable emotional experiences as graduates, students should embrace a sense of discomfort, with the attitude that discomfort and challenges are necessary avenues for professional growth.

While not unique to psychology students, these students often report emotional discomforts throughout their studies such as low motivation, lack of self-confidence and fear of failure (Toncich, 2006). Additionally, postgraduate students encounter emotional difficulties, such as feelings of perfectionism, procrastination, and isolation (Percy, 2014). With postgraduate students displaying high levels of emotional dependency, anxiety, depression, and the inability to cope and adapt, it is well documented that mental distress becomes commonplace (Mutula, 2009; Walker, 2015).

Furthermore, psychology students and graduates report high burnout, compassion fatigue, trauma-related symptoms, PTSD, stress, and depression (Edwards et al., 2014; Walker, 2015). This could indicate inadequate training and preparation for the challenging, uncertain work environment (Shapiro et al., 1998). On numerous occasions, health professional education and training have shown to be ineffective in preparing students and

graduates for the emotional discomforts as professionals (Koen et al., 2011; Youngson, 2008). Despite evidence indicating the value of soft skill development in health professional education, soft skill development has been less emphasised (McKinzie et al., 2006). Because of the vulnerability of psychology students, innovation in student development is warranted. This suggests that training and skill development ought to be re-looked at to prepare students for the field more effectively.

***Summary: Identifying the Gap in the Literature***

The mental healthcare environment in South Africa is confronted with elevated and increasing mental illness statistics. However, services are fragmented, under-staffed, and under-resourced. They lack healthcare professionals and non-professionals with the adequate training and skills to persevere within the challenging and uncertain conditions (WHO, 2017). Psychology students ought to be prepared to deal with the stressful nature of the work environment they will encounter after graduating; they should be assisted in developing the mental fortitude required to deliver much-needed services to clients in a demanding context. In brief, graduates ought to have the capacity to thrive in the face of discomfort. However, assisting students in coping with expected discomfort, or equipping students to experience discomfort willingly, is not well documented in the literature (Gureje et al., 2001; Hayes et al., 2012; Kakuma et al., 2011).

The multitude of challenges that define and shape the practice of psychology in South Africa requires that HEIs consider how a sense of resilience and psychological fortitude can be concretised. Not only will such approaches benefit students' well-being, but these could have a knock-on effect on the recipients of psychological services (Connorton et al., 2012). Preparing students for the psychology work environment in South Africa requires the skills to thrive despite the expected discomfort, change and uncertainty.

A growing body of literature suggests that individuals who perform, persist, and remain psychologically flexible in the face of demanding situations are likely to be more resourceful in addressing challenges (Zhang et al., 2018). Siegel (2010), agreeing, uses the acronym FACES to describe succinctly the qualities that could provide a competitive advantage when encountering challenges. The acronym denotes Flexibility, Adaptiveness, Coherence, Energised, and Stable. Siegel argues that persons who embody the 'FACES' qualities would be more likely to manage the extremes of chaos and rigidity.

Individuals, including psychology students, who can develop and embrace the skills of flexibility, openness to discomfort and value-driven behaviour, are more likely to view stressors as challenges and aim to deal with obstacles in growth-enhancing ways (Siegel, 2010; Slaski & Cartwright, 2003). There is a need to develop self-aware students equipped to step outside of their comfort, allowing adaptable behaviour in a changing environment. Thus, given the academic and work environments being high-pressured, fast-paced and emotionally draining, soft skill development is vital to assist postgraduate psychology students in developing the perseverance required for success (Hawkins, 1999; Walker, 2015). A case can be made to develop and offer resources aimed at developing soft skills among postgraduate psychology students.

However, while the psychology work environment dictates the necessity of well-rounded graduates with both hard and soft skills, there are limited studies that document how to develop soft skills effectively in postgraduate psychology students (Havenga & Sengane, 2018). There is a growing number of reasons why researchers are searching for alternative ways of implementing soft skill development in psychology programmes. Mindfulness-based practices have shown promise and effectiveness in enhancing soft skill development in healthcare programmes and are deemed worthy of further investigation. Mindfulness-based, soft skill development for the effective management of discomfort is explored next.

## **Preparing Psychology Students for Discomforts: A Way Forward**

This section is presented in three parts to argue for the incorporation of mindfulness-based soft skills in teaching and learning practices to prepare psychology honours students. First, an emphasis is placed on the effectiveness of mindfulness-based soft skill development with healthcare students in HEIs. After that an overview of mindfulness-based soft skill development approaches in higher education is outlined, concluding that the embedded teaching and learning approach is most appropriate for student development. The section concludes with introducing mindfulness-based teaching and learning practices.

### ***Mindfulness-based, Soft Skill Development with Healthcare Students***

Mindfulness is rooted in ancient Buddhist philosophy and has evolved over the past four decades. A lack of consensus in the literature concerns the definition of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2013; Gilbert, 2013). Kabat-Zinn (2005; 2011), a pioneer in the study of mindfulness, describes the concept as a process that comprises two interdependent parts focusing attention on the here and now, and requiring a non-judgmental acceptance of thoughts, emotions, and sensations as they arise in consciousness. Mindfulness-based soft skills focus on equipping students to effectively manage discomfort while pursuing success (Hayes et al., 2012).

Equipping students with the soft skills to cope and persist in the face of challenge and discomfort enhances the probability of success in various contexts (Cherniss, 2000; Duckworth et al., 2007). The capacity to persist in the face of discomfort has become a critical life skill in the modern world and needs to be cultivated in HEIs (Mutula, 2009; Percy, 2014; Toncich, 2006; Walker, 2015). However, despite the identified need for soft skill development, there is a lack of focus on skill development resources available to assist students. HEIs need to think thoughtfully about how they train, prepare, and support students

in developing the required soft skills to allow them to thrive in commonplace discomfort (Leach et al., 2003).

The recognition and application of mindfulness-based practices and training in education has evolved in the past century (Baer et al., 2019; Capel, 2012; Weare, 2019). However, the practice of mindfulness in HEIs, and the body of literature associated with it, is not so well established. The majority of mindfulness-based research into education and HEIs has been carried out in the United States of America (Caldwell et al., 2010; Ramsburg & Youmans, 2014; Weare, 2019), although there is a growing body of literature from across Europe (Hyland, 2015), Asia (Mahani, 2012) and New Zealand (Mapel, 2012) as well. Despite the slow incorporation of mindfulness in HEIs, internationally and locally, studies continue to show the benefits of its incorporation with HEI students.

Most of the empirical research available for the effectiveness of mindfulness uses the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Kabat-Zinn developed this programme in 1979 as a training approach to relieve stress, pain, and illness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Khoury et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis to evaluate the efficacy of MBSR for non-clinical populations and recommended that the target population that might have benefited the most from MBSR or mindfulness-based soft skills was healthcare students to ameliorate the high level of stress within this field.

Considerable challenges exist in preparing psychology students capable of working within complex and dynamic healthcare environments (Sales & Schlaff, 2010). There are growing critiques of the over-reliance on hard skill development, such as pursuing technological and scientific knowledge at the expense of soft skill development, which promotes values and meaning and embraces discomfort (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Zajonc, 2009). Even at the postgraduate level, there has not been a deliberate focus on equipping graduates with the skills to cope and thrive in challenge and discomfort (HPCSA, 2012;

Pistorello et al., 2016). Notably, there has been a rapid growth in mindfulness-based practices in HEIs and with healthcare students to help restore balance and promote soft skill development (Eppert, 2013; Meiklejohn et al., 2013; Shapiro et al., 1998).

Mindfulness has been explored with premedical and medical students (Rosenzweig et al., 2003; Shapiro et al., 1998), in nursing (Dubert et al., 2016), with social work students (McGarrigle & Walsh, 2011), and in various studies involving mental health practitioners (Christopher & Maris, 2010; Newsome et al., 2012; Ponton, 2012). While most studies have been conducted with counselling and psychology students (Brown et al., 2013; Fulton & Cashwell, 2015; Keane, 2014), mindfulness is not a generally recognised practice in HEIs, or in health professional education.

The mindfulness research conducted with healthcare students, albeit limited, yields consistent support with a range of benefits for the student and the graduate. The studies conducted typically investigate three broad areas, namely (a) enhancing well-being (Brown et al., 2007; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Gilbert, 2013; Kabat-Zinn, 2011), (b) personal and professional development (Fulton & Cashwell, 2015; Keane, 2014; Rothaupt & Morgan, 2007; Shapiro et al., 1998) and (c) promoting the skill to accept and function within discomfort (Brown et al., 2007; Dubert et al., 2016; Fatter & Hayes, 2013; Keane, 2014; Newsome et al., 2012).

Bamber and Schneider (2015) argue that mindfulness-based practices can reduce stress, enhance well-being, and strengthen resiliency skills so that graduates can respond more effectively in the career-specific environment (Berila, 2015; Caldwell et al., 2010; De Bruin et al., 2015). Creswell and Lindsay (2014) suggest that future studies should examine mindfulness as a skill that could be developed and cultivated within a healthcare programme.

In light of the above, I argue that mindfulness-based soft skills are applicable, necessary, and even non-negotiable when training healthcare psychology students to manage

commonplace discomforts effectively. Mindfulness-based soft skills could enable psychology students and graduates to remain flexible in the face of challenges and interpret stressors as part and parcel of the working environment. Hence, it is imperative to consider the inclusion of mindfulness-based soft skills in preparing psychology students for discomfort in the here and now.

### ***Mindfulness-based, Soft Skill Development Models in Higher Education***

When students can be flexible about how they feel, think, and behave, they enable themselves to adapt to all situations, even the most challenging (Peterson, 2016).

Nevertheless, for many students, flexibly approaching challenges or even sitting in discomfort is difficult and is usually not a skill taught to them. Thus, mindfulness-based soft skills need to be taught and nurtured within HEIs.

Documented in the literature are three models in HEIs that enhance hard and soft skill development in students: a support programme model, a stand-alone subject model, and an embedded teaching and learning model. The support programme model provides a variety of services in HEIs to address everyday student needs and challenges, such as recreation, cultural activities, sports, testing, orientation, career assistance, job placement, financial assistance, and disability services (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012). Given the plethora of challenges and needs that students experience, with the lack of capacity and resources at HEIs, the support programme model targets specific areas of need to support as many students as possible (van Heerden, 2009). Hard skill development support and resources are often prioritised over soft skill development (Barbezat & Bush, 2014).

The stand-alone subject model allows students to develop soft skills through specific subjects offered as part of their degree programme. The subject usually forms part of the overall credits and requirements that make up the degree programme. The stand-alone subject



model is included in degree programmes to help students obtain specific soft skills deemed important for student success and functioning. A variety of soft skills development can be prioritised in this manner, such as values and attitudes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), personal and social responsibility (Jizi et al., 2014), civic responsibility (Hoekema, 2000), holistic student development (Braskamp, 2004), wisdom (Sternberg et al., 2007), and service-learning (Harkavy & Hartley, 2010). However, stand-alone subjects geared toward soft skill development are uncommon in postgraduate programmes or within psychology honours programmes (Hassel & Ridout, 2018).

The embedded teaching and learning model integrates specific soft skills in the teaching and learning practices of a programme. While limited, mindfulness-based soft skill development has been embedded in the teaching practices of a programme (Ambrose-Oji, 2013; Napoli, 2004; Schwind et al., 2017). The embedded model does not require students to take any additional subjects besides the already existing subjects in the respective programme. As a result, students are guided through formal teaching and learning practices to master soft skills relevant to their programme, therefore, preparing students with career-specific skills (Ngang & Chan, 2015).

The embedded model integrates hard and soft skill development within the classroom and provides a structured and sustainable method for skill development (Waters & Stokes, 2015). The soft skill development is tailored to the programme. It allows students to understand the importance of soft and hard skill development required for the programme and working environment (Boone & Manning, 2012). The embedded teaching and learning model offers healthcare students a scalable, integrated, and proactive approach to soft skill development (Weissman et al., 2006).

Given the body of evidence for the effectiveness of mindfulness in healthcare student development, there is reason to believe that mindfulness-based teaching and learning

practices could enhance mindfulness-based soft skills to enable healthcare students to manage discomfort effectively (Dobkin & Laliberté, 2014). Further investigations and explorations in applying mindfulness-based practices, particularly in teaching and learning practices, with healthcare students, are warranted (Glanville & Becker, 2015).

### ***Mindfulness-Based Teaching and Learning Practices***

Mindfulness-based teaching and learning practices appear to have a place in health professional education but represent a new journey for both student and educator. Upskilling students with the skills to embrace discomfort, uncertainty, and challenge prepares students for the academic and work environments (Cherniss, 2000; Duckworth et al., 2007). There is a need to challenge students, unsettle them, and help them explore outside of what is comfortable within safe classroom environments (Hayes et al., 2012). Promoting situations of uncertainty, where discomfort naturally occurs, in healthcare student training has been advocated as good teaching by educators such as Dewey (1904), Schön (1983), Eisner (1991), Kolb (2015) and Bruner (2020).

However, while postgraduate healthcare students ought to be characterised as independent, self-directed learners accustomed to challenging learning experiences, students are often underprepared for this type of learning (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). This is mainly because secondary schooling, and often undergraduate tertiary schooling is characterised by rote, passive learning (Roberts, 2019), perpetuating rigid students and graduates who struggle to embrace discomfort and challenge. Furthermore, postgraduate healthcare students often have straightforward career and academic goals, which hinder them from embracing unfamiliar ideas, concepts, or experiences. Despite these challenges, educators have the opportunity to facilitate mindfulness-based teaching and learning practices in their classes, promoting soft skill development.

When promoting soft skill development in healthcare students, educators are challenged to align mindfulness-based skills in their teaching and learning practices (Sitler, 2009). A consistent challenge raised in the literature around mindfulness-based soft skills is the lack of a framework to guide implementation (Felten, 2013; Keane; 2014). Educators are raising the necessity for a theoretical and application framework, which guides the implementation of mindfulness-based practices in education (Keane, 2014). One specific research area proposed to assist with a mindfulness-based application framework is the incorporation of ACT in the framework (Hayes, 2016; Schoeberlein et al., 2009). ACT is a mindfulness-based, psychotherapeutic model designed to enable individuals to effectively manage discomfort in all life contexts (Hayes et al., 2012).

Researchers have established ACT as a framework to guide development (Hayes, 2016). the ACT model itself is empirically validated, and the theory and framework could serve as a common language for educators to implement mindfulness-based soft skills into teaching and learning practices (A-Tjak et al., 2015; Öst, 2014). ACT has been selected as the theoretical framework for this study and will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter.

Educator professional development needs to be prioritised to operationalise ACT for teaching and learning practices. The effectiveness of the ACT framework in the classroom depends on the professional development of educators in the ACT principles (Zeichner, 2003). Consequently, the success of mindfulness-based teaching and learning practices is contingent on professionally developing educators (Crane et al., 2010; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; 2005; McCown et al., 2010). Before educators can embed mindfulness-based skills in their teaching and learning practices, they need to embody and practice them in their own lives first (Fong & Kim, 2019).

Through their personal experiences, educators learn to incorporate and refer to mindfulness-based skills in their unique teaching practices (Davis, 2012; Gingerich et al., 2012). The educators' facilitation, guidance, and mentoring skills would strongly promote student development in the postgraduate psychology programme (Ngang & Chan, 2015). Thus, the effectiveness and success of embedding mindfulness-based skills in teaching and learning practices relying on the educator's competency (Gingerich et al., 2012; Weare, 2019). Well-trained and supported educators endeavour to be innovative and modify teaching and learning practices to improve student development (Cornelison & van der Berg, 2013; Weare, 2019).

### **Overview of Educator Professional Development**

This section is presented in two parts to summarise the professional development of educators in South Africa. The section commences with outlining the scarcity of professional development training of educators in South Africa. From there, the reader is introduced to a proposed professional development approach for educators.

#### ***Professional Development of Educators: A Neglected Area***

The CHE states that the professional development of educators in HEIs is "all aspects of support for higher education learning and teaching, including professional learning and student learning" (CHE, 2017, p. 5). The National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers further reiterates the need for and importance of educators' development in HEI (DHET, 2019). Teaching and learning practices directly influence student development and their success; therefore, educators' professional development is an area worthy of additional investigation (CHE, 2016; DHET, 2013). This further underlines that educators' teaching and learning practices are a vital contributor to student success (DHET,

2012). Despite the recognised need for educator professional development, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) states that there is “weak support for professional development and recognition of academic staff in the area of... teaching” (DHET, 2019, p. 354).

While there may be no prescriptive framework for professional development, HEIs have endeavoured to provide a range of formal, non-formal and informal learning activities to contribute to educator development (DHET, 2013; Quin, 2012). Educator professional development predominantly involves hard skills training such as teaching models, classroom management, pedagogy, assessment design and moderation techniques (Goody, 2007). However, the traditional role of the educator as one who offers content knowledge and hard skill acquisition must be broadened to contribute to the soft skill development of students (Dixon et al., 2010).

By incorporating soft skills development into educator professional development, educators can promote soft skill development in their students, expanding the resources and support for students from support staff or centres to the classrooms (Mitchell et al., 2012). However, from the sparse literature around educator professional development, initiatives in HEIs rarely involve soft skill development (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). Soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, resilience, or conflict management, would be presented as a one-off workshop and not as an integral part of educator development (Linder & Felten, 2015). Hard skill development is vital for educators to remain abreast of the ever-changing HEI landscape. However, complementary soft skills training could enhance educator engagement, teaching quality, and student development.

Despite the recognised importance for educator professional development and the need to incorporate soft skills training, educator professional development remains a neglected area of research and practice in HEIs (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). Moreover,

the CHE has called for further conceptual and empirical research into educator professional development in South Africa (CHE, 2017). Research should explore how we adapt theories to advance contextually appropriate knowledge for improving teaching and learning practices (CHE, 2017). A proposed effective method for professional development is through Action Research (AR). AR professional development entails educators examining their practice through engagement in scholarship, enquiry, and research; working collaboratively in small groups; and, participating in coaching and mentoring (Healey et al., 2014).

### ***Collaborative Action Research: Educator Professional Development Approach***

Literature credits Lewin (1940) with developing the AR theory while Corey (1953) was among the first to use AR in education (McNiff, 2002). Mertler (2013) describes AR as a process that allows educators to investigate their practices and better understand and improve their quality and effectiveness as professionals. Collaboration within an AR context relates to CAR and professional learning communities, characterised as educators working together as a team, focusing on a common problem or goal to provide greater insight, learning and growth (Clauzet et al., 2008; Mertler, 2013). Although a CAR approach is widely acknowledged in the research field, there is no universally accepted definition because the concept is interpreted in various ways. For this study, the definition provided by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) is used. They describe CAR as “the involvement in and commitment to the improving of the practice of teaching for student outcomes.” (p. 5)

The true benefit of engaging in CAR is that educators focus and direct their professional growth and development in specific areas deemed important instead of having professional development topics dictated to them (Ferrance, 2000). CAR allows educators to focus on specific areas of weakness or areas identified as important to them, personalising the professional development approach. Furthermore, the CAR professional development

approach differs from traditional professional development which typically involves an outside expert training educators on a specific topic to improve practice (McNiff, 2002). Since the 1980s, CAR has been a recognised method for educator professional development, advocating for those involved in educational practice to inform research, instead of outside experts dictating educational practice (Oliver, 1980).

Literature indicates that educators are more likely to participate in professional development initiatives if the training can be used in practice immediately, or relates to a current concern or problem identified (Mertler, 2013). Also, educators are more likely to engage in professional development initiatives related to their area of content or the discipline they teach in to discuss and brainstorm ideas with fellow educators (Hughes, 2008). CAR educator professional development encourages educator investment and involvement in the process as it allows for action in practice and working alongside fellow educators (McNiff, 2002).

The CAR literature focuses on two aspects: (a) professional development of educators through modifications in their teaching and learning practices and (b) educators' influence on student development (Gibbs et al., 2017; Sagor, 2005). The central focus in CAR literature aligns with the purpose of this study and guides the research questions, which is about professional development of educators to embed soft skills into teaching and learning practices to enhance postgraduate psychology students' development. This further justifies this study's focus on CAR as an appropriate approach for professionally developing educators (Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

CAR studies have recognised that educators can have a significant influence on student development through educator professional development. CAR takes the stance that educators have professional knowledge and expertise and are already actively attempting to contribute to student development (McNiff, 2002). Literature provides evidence that

educators significantly influence student learning and development (DuFour et al., 2008). Thus, it is not uncommon for educators to investigate their own teaching practice, their student development or the curriculum being taught (Zuber-Skeritt, 1992). Investigating one's practice demonstrates that educators believe that the best way to learn about their role, their students, and the curriculum is by experiencing challenges first-hand (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). This involves active participation, practical experience, and reflection about their experiences.

Guskey (2014) points out that if educator professional development increases educators' knowledge and skills but fails to change educational practice or improve student learning outcomes, this would not be a successful initiative. Therefore, to measure the success of educator professional development initiatives, student outcomes need to be reviewed (Feist & Baron, 1996; Hayes et al., 2016). Research investigating the professional development of educators must capture the voices of both educators and students involved in the research, helping to ascertain what improvements have taken place (van Aalderen et al., 2014). Obtaining feedback or critique on teaching practices from students is key to improving teaching and learning practices (Banerjee et al., 2010; Scherman & du Toit, 2008). Few studies focusing on mindfulness-based practices in HEIs are centred on qualitative data collection (Capel, 2012). This emphasises the need to capture educator and student experiences to inform practice. AR, and specifically CAR, has been selected as the professional development approach for educators in this study. It is also the research methodology and will be elaborated on in Chapter Four.

## **Conclusion**

The chapter addressed three interrelated areas of focus. Firstly, the literature provided an overview of the particular challenges psychology students encounter in their academic,



personal, and professional contexts. It was argued that psychology students require assistance in developing soft skills to embrace and thrive in discomfort and challenge.

Second, through a review of the literature, it was proposed that mindfulness-based soft skill development embedded in teaching and learning practices may be an effective method for enhancing psychology honours students' ability to manage commonplace discomforts effectively. The ACT model was identified as the theoretical framework to embed mindfulness-based soft skills in teaching and learning practices for psychology honours students. ACT, the theoretical framework for this study, is discussed in-depth in the following chapter.

Finally, this chapter outlined the importance of educator professional development. Embedding mindfulness-based soft skill development in teaching and learning practices relies on educators' professional development. With a lack of professional development guidelines for HEI educators, the CAR approach was identified as the professional development strategy for this study.

## Chapter 3 Theoretical Framework

“What you resist, persists.

What you accept, transforms.” - Carl Jung (n.d.)

### Introduction

Chapter Two situated the study in three contexts. First, the necessity of preparing psychology students with the skills to embrace and thrive in discomfort was presented. Second, some argued that embedding mindfulness-based soft skills in teaching and learning practices provides a proactive approach in preparing postgraduate psychology students for discomforts. Third, a case was made that soft skills could be embedded in teaching and learning practices by the professional development of educators. Collectively, it was argued in Chapter Two that embedding mindfulness-based soft skills within teaching and learning practices may be an effective method for enhancing psychology honours students' abilities to thrive in the face of ubiquitous discomforts.

Chapter Three builds on the second chapter's discussion by providing the study's theoretical framework ACT. To reiterate, ACT is a mindfulness-based, behavioural, psychotherapeutic model that assists individuals in developing psychological flexibility. The concept of psychological flexibility refers to the skills and ability to respond effectively to discomfort (Peterson, 2016).

This chapter is organised into two main sections. First, it introduces ACT. It includes a theoretical narrative of the evolution of discomfort within behaviourism and the normalisation of discomfort within the ACT model, and discusses the concept of psychological flexibility and its antithesis, psychological inflexibility. Second, the operationalisation of ACT introduces two generic models, namely the Hexaflex and Triflex

Models. The generic operationalisation models of ACT provide the application framework required for flexibly embedding ACT within teaching and learning practices. The operationalisation of ACT in education has resulted in various protocols and versatile applications, providing multiple reference points for this study.

### **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Theoretical Perspective**

The review of the ACT literature revisits the approach's historical roots, showing the evolution of managing discomfort. From there, the reader is introduced to ACT and the normalisation of discomfort. The section is concluded with a summary of the main ideas.

### ***Behaviourism: The Evolution of Managing Discomfort***

Behaviourism or behavioural psychotherapy is an umbrella term used to describe a range of evolving psychotherapeutic approaches that emphasise behavioural change (Hill et al., 2017). Specifically, behaviourism emphasises changing an individual's maladaptive behavioural responses to specific situations (McKay & Tryon, 2017). Behavioural psychotherapeutic approaches have evolved over three generations from inception to the present time, with each generation outlining its approach to managing discomfort (Hayes, 2016; Hill et al., 2017). In this discussion, the concept of discomfort refers to a multi-faceted construct that entails unpleasant, unwanted, and uncomfortable internal and external experiences that bring about a state of physical, psychological, and social unease (Hayes, 2016). From a historical perspective, the management of discomfort has similarly evolved over three generations and is discussed next.

***The First Generation of Behaviourism.*** The first generation of behaviourism called traditional behaviourism grew in popularity in the 1950-1960s. Leading researchers included

Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936), who investigated classical conditioning and Edward Lee Thorndike (1874-1949), who introduced the concept of reinforcement. The first generation of behaviourism restricted the understanding of discomfort to overt behavioural actions (Araiba, 2020). Traditional behaviourism investigated discomfort through overt behaviours, identifying how challenging environmental events control behaviour (Watson, 1913). Furthermore, traditional behaviourism would attempt to control, eliminate, and reduce the overt behavioural response to discomfort through changing or conditioning behaviour.

While traditional behaviourism is still implemented today, it is no longer the leading behavioural psychotherapeutic approach (Levy, 2007; McKay & Tryon, 2017). The decline is predominantly due to the traditional perspective negating that behaviour can be explained without reference to non-behavioural and subjective mental experience (Guercio, 2020). The decline in traditional behaviourism gave rise to the second generation of behavioural psychotherapy, which emerged in the 1970s and included cognitive interventions as a critical strategy.

**The Second Generation of Behaviourism.** The second generation of behaviourism entailed investigating individuals' inner mental experiences or cognitions. This stood in stark contrast to traditional behaviourism (Kihlstrom & Park, 2016). Furthermore, the second generation heralded the introduction of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) (Hofmann et al., 2013). CBT is widely regarded as the gold standard in psychotherapeutic research due to its focus on empiricism (Araiba, 2020). Other psychotherapeutic approaches have emerged, such as functional analytic psychotherapy (Wei et al., 2015), dialectical behaviour therapy (Linehan, 1993), integrative behavioural couple's therapy (Jacobson & Christensen, 1996) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal et al., 2002). The second generation of behaviourism approaches have the goal of symptom reduction through the utilisation of

mental and behavioural control techniques. These techniques are utilised to reduce discomfort through adapting, changing, and regulating internal mental experiences, content, and activity and modifying unhelpful behaviours (David et al., 2018). While outside the scope of this research study, for further reading on alternative approaches to managing discomfort, utilising first and second generation behavioural models, refer to Hayes (2013); Lappalainen (2007) and Vilardaga (2009).

Both the first and second generation behaviourism approaches utilised control techniques for symptom reduction, in other words managing discomfort (Kihlstrom & Park, 2016). However, initial studies by Wegner (1989), Clark et al. (1991) and Cioffi and Holloway (1993) prompted the investigation into the ineffectiveness of control techniques for symptom reduction and managing discomfort. These studies demonstrated a paradoxical effect when attempting to control discomfort, namely that the discomfort became more prominent. The greater the attention focused on controlling psychologically-related challenges, the more psychologically rigid people became (Wegner, 1989). This paradoxical effect was supported in further studies, and it was hypothesised that mental overload and increased discomfort occur when applying control techniques (Abramowitz et al., 2001; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). With studies indicating that control techniques may increase discomfort, theorists investigated alternative strategies in managing discomfort, which gave rise to the third generation of behaviourism (Hayes et al., 1999).

**The Third Generation of Behaviourism.** The third generation behavioural psychotherapies emerged in the 1990s and emphasised the development of mindfulness-based skills to assist individuals with embracing and accepting discomfort as fundamental conditions of human life (Pérez-Álvarez, 2012). Kabat-Zinn (2003) states that mindfulness in psychotherapeutic approaches refers to “the awareness that emerges through paying attention

on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment” (p. 145). The practise of mindfulness offers a means to directly observe the nature of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations and how they contribute to happiness or suffering (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Therefore, mindfulness promotes normalising the experience of discomfort by enhancing non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of the experience—the opposite of employing control techniques (Martell et al., 2010). Third generation psychotherapies present a paradigm shift away from earlier approaches that pathologised the human condition of discomfort (Araiba, 2020).

The mindfulness-based, third -generation behavioural approaches include ACT (Hayes, 2016), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (Linehan, 1993), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (Segal et al., 2002), and Integrative Behavioural Couples Therapy (Jacobson et al., 2000). The varying third generation of behavioural psychotherapeutic models all differ in their intervention structure, purpose, philosophical background, main techniques and target population (Renner & Foley, 2013). Each mindfulness-based model has an empirical evidence base for its effectiveness in managing discomfort and provides an alternative to ACT (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011). These approaches do not attempt to control or change the content of internal experiences (i.e., thoughts, feelings, sensations, or memories) but through mindfulness-based skills, attempt to change an individual's relationship with these internal experiences (Tisdale et al., 2003). For example, instead of pathologising discomfort by attempting to control it, third-generation approaches would normalise the experience and assist individuals in accepting the discomfort while focusing on achieving particular life goals (Araiba, 2020). Third generation theorists hypothesise that humans can live highly functioning and meaningful lives despite the discomfort experienced (Segal et al., 2002).

Within the ACT community, improving empirical research studies requires responsible criticism of the approach, allowing for critique to be resolved empirically and

transparently in the scientific community (Association for Contextual Behavioural Science, 2021). There are numerous critiques of ACT, namely, methodological weaknesses (Ost, 2008), lack of empirical studies (Corrigan, 2001) and the need for evidence-based treatment protocols (Corrigan, 2001). Researchers have published adding to the defence of ACT and the dialogue is ongoing within academia (Corrigan, 2001; Gaudiano, 2009). Despite the critique, ACT is a leading voice in third-generation behavioural psychotherapies (Hayes, 2016). ACT was selected as the theoretical framework given its suitability within the education context (Hayes, 2016).

### *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Normalising Discomfort*

ACT is an empirically-based, third-generation behavioural psychotherapeutic approach founded by Steven Hayes in 1982 (Hayes, 2016). Drawing on mindfulness and acceptance techniques, with commitment and behaviour change strategies, ACT focuses on assisting individuals in embracing and accepting discomfort while engaging in value-directed life tasks (Hayes et al., 1996). Harris (2009) defines ACT as a mindfulness-based behavioural therapy that challenges most of Western psychology's ground rules.

Much of Western psychology is based on the assumption of healthy normality (Harris, 2006). Western psychological theory and practice assume that humans would function as healthy and autonomous beings if they function in a healthy context and have access to resources (Wilson & Murrell, 2004). However, ACT disagrees, asserting that human language is the root cause of psychological discomfort and, therefore, inescapable (Harris, 2009). Relational Frame Theory (RFT), which serves as a theoretical frame for ACT, state that language and thinking are ineffective approaches in assisting people to overcome and engage meaningfully with discomfort (Hayes & Berens, 2004).

Hence, RFT pundits claim that language itself forms part and parcel of discomfort and the suffering in human existence (Hayes et al., 2006). RFT views language as a two-edged sword, allowing humans to use language for practical problem solving while simultaneously permitting them to dwell on painful events of the past, worry about the future, engage in social comparison, and create ‘rules’ that can be destructive and exacerbate discomfort (Harris, 2009). Cognitive fusion is the ACT process in which individuals regard their thoughts as truth or reality, exacerbating discomfort, as it leads to rumination, anxiety, and negative social comparison, amongst other things (Biron & van Veldhoven, 2012).

Furthermore, healthy normality necessitates that humans strive to alleviate all discomfort as if it is abnormal or a disease that requires intervention or fixing (Wilson & Murrell, 2004). ACT refers to trying to control and alleviate discomfort as experiential avoidance and another process that exacerbates discomfort (Hayes et al., 2006). Efforts to alleviate discomfort often increase in experience frequency and intensity (Feldman et al., 2010; Marcks & Woods, 2005). In contrast, ACT does not ascribe to the assumption of healthy normality and therefore does not have symptom reduction as a goal (Harris, 2009). Instead, ACT assists individuals to perceive discomfort as a natural, transient psychological experience, despite the unpleasantness.

Harris (2009) states that “...human beings commonly handle their pain ineffectively. All too often, when we experience painful thoughts, feelings, and sensations, we respond in ways that are self-defeating or self-destructive in the long run” (p. 8). To assist individuals to handle their discomfort (i.e., pain) effectively, ACT guides individuals in creating a rich and meaningful life alongside the existence of discomfort, versus in the absence of discomfort (Hayes, 2016). The natural yet ineffective control processes of experiential avoidance and cognitive fusion would need to be challenged. Individuals’ ineffective processes of handling



discomfort, namely experiential avoidance, and cognitive fusion, are called psychological inflexibility in ACT.

***Psychological Inflexibility: Ineffective Management of Discomfort.*** The overall purpose of ACT is to increase psychological flexibility—the ability to manage discomfort effectively by learning to change or persist in behaviour when doing so serves valued ends (Peterson, 2016). The antithesis of psychological flexibility is psychological inflexibility (Hayes et al., 1999). When individuals are psychologically inflexible, they become stuck in ineffective cognitive and behavioural patterns. Moreover, they are more likely to struggle to adapt to change, may view discomforts as permanent, pervasive, and all-consuming and be less engaged in living in the present moment (Finger et al., 2020). Two fundamental processes characterise the concept of psychological inflexibility in ACT, namely cognitive fusion, and experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 1999).

Cognitive fusion is a state where individuals act in reactive ways inseparable from their thoughts (Hayes, 1998). Cognitive fusion refers to thinking patterns that dominate and direct behaviour in a reactive manner (Hayes et al., 1999). In this regard, Victor Frankl referred to a space between stimulus and response. Frankl alluded to a metaphorical gap where individuals can enter a metacognitive space and think about their thinking before they engage in action (Pattakos, 2010). Thus, instead of being ‘fused’ to their thoughts, the individuals who embody the principles of psychological flexibility will be in more empowered states of mind to enable them to make wise and conscious decisions (Hayes, 2006; Hayes et al., 2011). However, the individuals who remain psychologically inflexible will, figuratively speaking, become prisoners of their minds (Pattakos, 2010).

The concept of experiential avoidance is linked closely to cognitive fusion. Experiential avoidance refers to attempts to avoid, suppress, or escape from psychologically

painful discomforts that emerge from the process of cognitive fusion (Hayes, 1998). While experiential avoidance may bring about momentary relief, it often exacerbates psychologically unhealthy functioning in the long term (Hayes et al., 1999). A growing body of research shows that attempts to suppress unwanted thoughts, for example, through experiential avoidance, may bring about higher incidences of psychological distress (Kashdan et al., 2006; Wenzlaff & Wegner, 2000). Amongst other things, individuals' lives may become restricted as they avoid pursuing valued life goals and actions to prevent experiencing particular 'unwanted' internal states (Hayes et al., 1996; Hayes et al., 2006). Cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance are defence mechanisms that are reminiscent of the principles embedded in first-generation behavioural psychology.

The antithesis of psychological flexibility is psychological inflexibility, which involves cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance (Hayes et al., 1999). Psychological inflexibility can be conceptualised as engaging in attempts to eliminate or suppress discomfort (Hayes et al., 2006). The primary gain of individuals utilising psychological inflexibility is to control the environment to cope with discomfort and regulate emotions, often resulting in short term gratification (Kashdan et al., 2006; Rothbaum et al., 1982). Secondary gain of psychological inflexibility relates to individuals not attempting to control their environment but rather believing that circumstances were beyond their control, reducing psychological vulnerability or fear of negative evaluation (Tanhan, 2019). Both primary and secondary gains provide a sense of perceived control which is associated with greater psychological and physical wellbeing (Seeman, 1991). Importantly, ACT rests on the concept of workability, meaning if thoughts and behaviours enable an individual to live a full and meaningful life, no changes are required (Harris, 2009). Therefore, some forms of psychological inflexibility can be healthy and may make little difference to long-term life quality (Finger et al., 2020). However, given the scant literature focused on the benefits of

psychological inflexibility, more research attention is required (Biglan et al., 2008). In the next section, psychological flexibility is discussed as a counterpoint to psychological inflexibility.

*Psychological Flexibility: Effective Management of Discomfort.* “One major element of ACT is teaching people how to handle pain more effectively through the use of mindfulness skills” (Harris, 2009, p. 8). The skill of psychological flexibility refers to the ability to be present in the moment, with full awareness and openness to experience, while being guided by personal values (Harris, 2009). Thus, psychological flexibility encompasses the capacity to be present in the here-and-now and to live as a conscious being (being mindful) not driven by hurts in the past, nor overly pressurised by anticipated future anxieties (Hayes, 2006).

Positive psychology theorists, in particular, proposed concepts that share some conceptual overlap with psychological flexibility (Seligman, 2011). These terms include but are not limited to hardiness, resilience, grit, and mental toughness. Hardiness refers to three interlinked concepts, namely commitment (vs alienation), control (vs powerlessness) and the perception of stressors as challenges (vs threats) (Kobasa, 1979; Kobasa et al., 1982; Maddi, 2002). A substantial body of literature indicates that hardiness is positively related to academic performance and inversely associated with academic stress among students (Maddi, 2006; Maddi et al., 2012). Resilience is defined as a person's capacity to withstand or recover from stressful or traumatic challenges and it is positively correlated to numerous psychological well-being indicators (Maddi, 2006).

According to Duckworth (2016), grit refers to sustained passion, drive, and perseverance in pursuing meaningful life goals. Research has indicated that grit is related to a constellation of positive life outcomes and is a better predictor of academic achievement than

intelligence by a factor of two (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009; Fong & Kim, 2019). Duckworth (2016) summarises grit as follows:

To be gritty is to keep putting one foot in front of the other. To be gritty is to hold fast to an interesting and purposeful goal. To be gritty is to invest, day after week after year, in challenging practice. To be gritty is to fall down seven times, and rise eight (p. 274-275).

The above quote epitomises the cycle of life where challenges and setbacks are normative and can serve as the building blocks to concretise hardiness, resilience, and grit. The constructs of psychological flexibility, hardiness, resilience, and grit, present with numerous conceptual similarities. Amongst other things, the mentioned constructs all emphasise an achievement orientation concerned with mental toughness, tenacity, and focus in the face of discomfort and temptations (Kotler, 2014; Mischel, 2014; Seligman, 2011). However, each of the abovementioned concepts differs in their theoretical framework and application (Hayes et al., 1999; Jones et al., 2002). A comprehensive discussion of these and other related constructs falls mainly outside the scope of this study. The interested reader is referred to Duckworth (2016), Kotler (2014), Mischel (2014) and Seligman (2011). The following section will focus on psychological flexibility and its related processes.

**Psychological Flexibility: The Six Core Processes.** Psychological flexibility is established through the six core processes of ACT, namely contacting the present moment, cognitive defusion, acceptance, self as context, values, and committed action (Harris, 2009). Mindfulness forms part of the four core ACT processes of acceptance, cognitive defusion,

contacting the present moment and self-as-context. The remaining two ACT processes of committed action and values relate to behavioural processes (Salande & Hawkins, 2017).

The first process of establishing psychological flexibility is acceptance which refers to the disposition and inclination to experience and deal with discomfort (Villanueva et al., 2019). Acceptance is the counter process of experiential avoidance. Thus, acceptance is about being conscious and mindfully accepting thoughts to be present, without judgement or over-identification (Hayes et al., 1999). More precisely, individuals are assisted and taught methods (often mindfulness-based methods) that encourage them to explore and ‘let go’ of the struggle of trying to control, reduce or minimise feelings or thoughts concerned with discomfort. Acceptance is not an end; instead, acceptance is fostered as a method of increasing values-based action by being conscious of moment-to-moment experiences (Biglan et al., 2008).

The second process, termed cognitive defusion, enables an individual’s ability to enact acceptance through changing the way an individual relates to their thoughts (Kent et al., 2019). Cognitive defusion, through mindfulness-based techniques, assists an individual to witness their internal language (thoughts, feelings, labels, judgements, and comparisons) as experiences and not facts that require reactions (Hayes et al., 1999). Harris (2009) suggests that defusing internal language allows the individual to be psychologically flexible in living out personal values, as opposed to being trapped in reactive behaviours. Cognitive defusion, the counter of cognitive fusion, refers to the capacity to step back into a meta-position from where one focuses on enhancing awareness or, stated differently, focuses on thinking-about-thinking (Hayes, 1998).

Third, the process of contacting the present self refers to being psychologically present in the here and now, consciously connecting with and engaging with life and related experiences (Kashdan et al., 2020; Hayes et al., 1999). According to Gardner and Moore

(2012), contacting the present self is often called being mindful. It is intimately linked to being task-focused and engaged in the present moment. The overriding goal of contacting the present self is to experience the present moment fully, remaining flexible and in sync with personal values (Hayes et al., 2006).

The fourth process—self as context—points to a heightened sense of self-awareness, where the person is aware of personal flow experiences while remaining detached from outcomes (Daks et al., 2020; Harris, 2009). Hayes (1998) theorises that the mind has two distinct components: the thinking self and the observing self. The thinking self is the component that generates thoughts, beliefs, memories, judgments, fantasies, and plans. The observing self is the component that is aware of the thinking component. Therefore, the observing self knows how one thinks, feels, and senses in each moment (Hayes et al., 1999).

Values, which refer to the desired qualities of ongoing action, encompasses the fifth process (Hayes et al., 1999). Values refer to a life direction that assists individuals in engaging in the behaviour in alignment with chosen life directions (Saland & Hawkins, 2017). Within the ACT process, values fulfil a central role by serving as beacons for individuals to assess their behaviour and purpose, focusing on what is important. Values enable the sixth ACT process of committed action (Hayes, 1998; Kashdan et al., 2020).

The sixth process of committed action, refers to thoughts and behavioural activities aligned to values. Values-guided behaviour leads to a wide range of thoughts and feelings, which can be pleasant and unpleasant, and pleasurable and painful (Hayes et al., 2006). Therefore, committed action refers to doing what is necessary to live by values even if this solicits pain and discomfort (Hayes et al., 1999). Committed action is the behavioural process that allows individuals to act, despite discomfort; it refers to mental toughness and tenacity and focuses required to live a life of meaning in the face of challenge, hardship, and stress (Keane, 2014).

### *Summary of the Theoretical Perspective of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*

This section revisited the historical roots of ACT and indicated that ACT emerged following three successive generations of evolving behavioural, psychological perspectives. The first-generation perspective emphasised objective behaviour as the central focus of the investigation. During the second generation's progression, a multivariate perspective was adopted by acknowledging the role of cognition and other subjective experiences. It was during the second generational evolution that CBT was introduced. The initial CBT techniques were characterised by attempts to control psychological processes, which intensifies psychological distress. Consequently, the third generation of behavioural therapy emerged.

Third-generation behavioural perspectives prompted clients to adopt an accepting versus controlling attitude towards discomfort. Hence, psychotherapists and theorists de-pathologised the experience of psychological distress and found that acceptance of discomfort helped establish an empowering mindset where people could address challenges constructively. This counter-intuitive approach paved the way for the emergence of ACT.

ACT refers to assisting individuals to live meaningful lives alongside discomfort, not in the absence of discomfort. Hence, ACT challenges the prevailing discourse about the conditions to promote optimal functioning. RFT, which serves as the theoretical frame for ACT, claims that language can simultaneously promote and negatively affect optimal psychological functioning. Thus, the linguistic capacity to solve problems can also foster rumination and fixation. ACT encourages living a life of meaning despite the omnipresent discomforts in life.

The key concepts of psychological inflexibility (cognitive fusion and experiential avoidance) and psychological flexibility (the capacity to remain mindfully present despite

discomfort) were also introduced. Individuals who embody psychological flexibility are more adaptable to change, likely to embrace challenges as opportunities to grow and be consciously present in their lives (Peterson, 2016). In the next section, the discussion focuses on ways in which ACT can be operationalised.

### **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Operationalisation**

The following section begins with a discussion on the operationalisation of ACT, through two ACT application frameworks. From there, the reader is introduced to the versatile application of ACT in higher education and how ACT assists higher education students to proactively manage discomfort, providing a rationale for incorporating training psychology honours students in ACT.

#### ***Application Frameworks: The Hexaflex and Triflex Models***

The six processes involved in operationalising the concept of psychological flexibility, namely, contacting the present moment, cognitive defusion, acceptance, self as context, values and committed action are iterative and overlap (Harris, 2009). Hence, the processes have no prescribed order and should not be considered prescriptive (Hayes et al., 2012). Instead, the six processes point to a network of interconnected skills that focus on developing the cognitive and behavioural fortitude that could assist persons in dealing with ubiquitous stressors. As mentioned, the antithesis can be described as psychological inflexibility. Two ACT models have been documented, the Hexaflex Model and the Triflex Model (Hayes et al., 1999) to operationalise ACT in any setting.

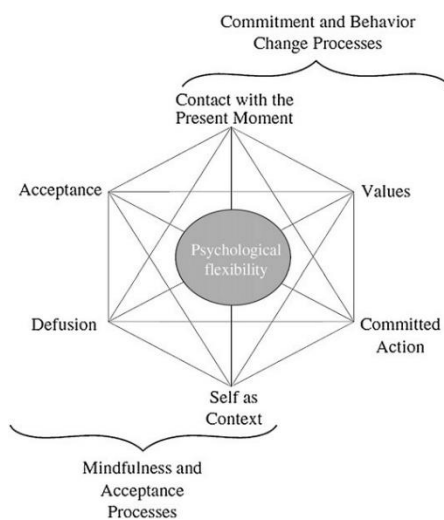
As depicted in Figure 2 below, the Hexaflex re-categorises the six core processes of psychological flexibility (contacting the present moment, cognitive defusion, acceptance, self as context, values and committed action) into two components, the cognitive (mindfulness)



and the behavioural (Hayes et al., 2006). The cognitive component entails cognitive defusion and acceptance, while the behavioural component mobilises committed action and values. Note that the psychological flexibility processes of contacting the present moment and self-as-context are invoked in both the cognitive and behavioural components. As seen in Figure 2, the Hexaflex Model illustrates all processes as connected—in practice, movement in one ACT process almost always results in changes in one or more other processes (Hayes et al., 2012).

## Figure 2

*The ACT Model of the Six Psychological Flexibility Processes*



*Note.* From “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Model, Processes and Outcomes,” by S. Hayes, J. Luoma, F. Bond, A. Masuda, J. Lillis, 2006, *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(1), 25 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2005.06.006>).

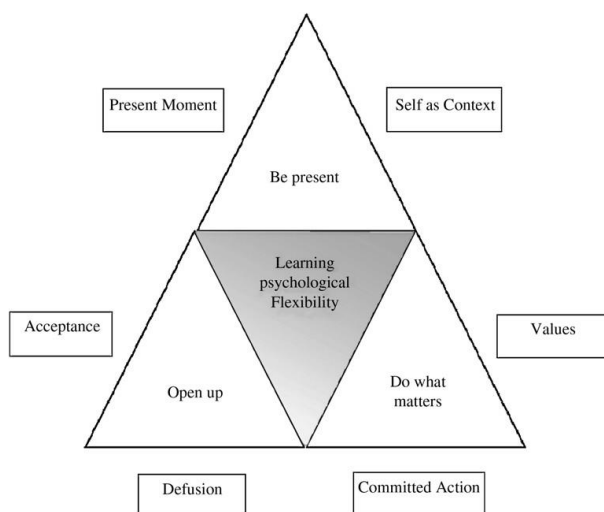
The first component of the Hexaflex Model, namely the cognitive processes, encapsulates the psychological flexibility processes of acceptance and cognitive defusion. Acceptance and cognitive fusion entail viewing thoughts and feelings for what they are

without attempting to change or control them. The cognitive process or the mindfulness process entails opening up and allowing for discomfort (Hayes et al., 1999). The second component of the Hexaflex Model focuses on the behavioural processes, which involve committed action and value behaviour. Committed action and values include cultivating effective behaviours to facilitate life-enhancing engagement. The behavioural processes entail doing what is necessary to thrive in the face of discomfort. When individuals are aware of and willing to sit in their discomfort, they can commit to valued goals despite the discomfort (Hayes, 1998).

The six core psychological flexibility processes expressed in the Hexaflex Model can be compressed into three functional units described in the Triflex Model, as shown in Figure 3 below. In the Triflex Model, psychological flexibility is operationalised into three summary components: be present (contacting the present moment and self-as-context), open up (acceptance and defusion), and do what matters (values and committed action) (Harris, 2009; Hayes et al., 2006; Hayes et al., 1999).

### Figure 3

*The ACT Triflex Model of the Six Psychological Flexibility Processes*



*Note.* From “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Model, Processes and Outcomes,” by S. Hayes, J. Luoma, F. Bond, A. Masuda, J. Lillis, 2006, *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 44(1), 25 (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2005.06.006>).

The psychological flexibility processes of self-as-context and contacting the present moment are utilised within the 'be present' component of the Triflex Model. Being present involves making contact with verbal and non-verbal aspects of the here-and-now experience (Harris, 2009). The psychological flexibility processes of cognitive defusion and acceptance are utilised within the 'opening up' component of the Triflex Model. Opening up involves allowing pleasant and unpleasant thoughts to come and go without becoming infused or constricted by them. Thus, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go independently (Biglan et al., 2008). The psychological flexibility processes of values and committed action are utilised in the 'doing what matters' component of the Triflex Model. Doing what matters involves committing to valued behaviour despite discomfort or unpleasant thoughts or feelings (Hayes et al., 1999).

The Hexaflex and Triflex Models (Figures 2 & 3), are generic ACT frameworks that provide a general intervention strategy that allows for versatile and creative implementation strategies, resulting in versatile application protocols in a given context.

### ***Versatile Application Protocols in Higher Education***

There is no prescribed or regulated ACT certification, training, or licensure process to implement the ACT approach. Instead, the ACT application models, the Hexaflex and Triflex, guide the flexible operationalisation of the six psychological flexibility processes (Luoma & Vilardaga, 2013). The flexible operationalisation of ACT has resulted in no standard protocol for implementation in specific contexts or with particular populations,

necessitating the flexible and creative application of ACT into various settings resulting in varying protocols tailored to fit the needs and resources of the context and population.

Applying ACT interventions in any context aims to provide conceptual knowledge of the ACT model, related psychological flexibility skills and ACT techniques through various methods (Flaxman & Bond, 2010). Methods can include didactic teaching, experiential exercises (imagery, metaphors, self-reflection), interactive activities (debates, pair work, collaborative tasks), use of therapy manuals (case conceptualisations, video tutorials), and homework tasks (Robinson & Strosahl, 2009). Kidney (2018) has explored international studies which explain the versatile application protocols, differences in training practices, and the variety of measurements utilised. All studies enhanced psychological flexibility in participants, despite the versatility in application protocols.

Versatile applications of ACT in HEIs have been reported through the traditional soft skill development models, namely a support programme model, the stand-alone subject model and the embedded teaching and learning model (Arambewela & Maringe, 2012; Hassel & Ridout, 2018). ACT has been implemented in HEIs through the support programme model, which are targeted services provided to assist as many students as possible through individual services or group interventions (Pakenham, 2014; 2015). ACT support programme services include prevention programmes (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014; Eustis et al., 2017; Muto et al., 2011), support workshops (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014; Pakenham, 2014), online forums (Chase et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2014; Levin et al., 2015), self-help books (Muto et al., 2011), and college counselling centre services (Boone & Manning, 2012; Pistorello et al., 2013).

ACT has also been implemented through the stand-alone subject model, which offers soft skill support through a formal, credit-bearing subject within a study programme (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). Furthermore, ACT has been implemented in stand-alone subjects, such as

self-care classes (Pakenham, 2015), stress management classes (Pakenham, 2015; Moyer et al., 2017), and curriculum changes of a programme.

There is a scarcity of research documenting ACT as an embedded teaching and learning model (Burgin, 2017; Rosenberg, 2018). ACT embedded in teaching and learning practices is proposed to promote psychological flexibility skill development in unison with the hard skill development of the programme (Burgin, 2017). The generic application models of ACT provide the application framework utilised in guiding and embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices (Rosenberg, 2018). However, there is limited research available guiding embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices, and there is no available ACT teaching and learning protocol.

The versatile application of ACT through the support programme model, the stand-alone subject model, and the embedded teaching and learning model provides preliminary findings of ACT's suitability in the education context and with HEI students (Fullan, 1993; Jackson, 2004). Psychological flexibility skill development initiatives are cost-effective, accessible, short-term (e.g., completed within a single semester), proactive, and scalable (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014; Levin et al., 2014; Muto et al., 2011). Furthermore, the studies highlight the versatile application methods utilised and the resultant variety of protocols developed.

One of the most persuasive arguments for applying ACT in an educational environment is its underlying generic model of psychological flexibility. As discussed in the preceding sections, psychological flexibility combines cognitive and behavioural processes that work together in its application across various domains (Harris, 2009). Hence, perhaps developing psychological flexibility in the HEI context can assist students in transferring such skills to different life domains (Schulz, 2008). Psychological flexibility has been defined as trans-diagnostic, a general life approach that can assist students in embracing the myriad

challenges they are likely to encounter both as students and then as graduates (Rudaz et al., 2017). Consequently, ACT and its application in education have been utilised to manage discomfort proactively (Scent & Boes, 2014).

### ***Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: Proactively Equipping Students to Manage Discomfort***

There is growing consensus that student and graduate success is not dependent on the absence of discomfort but requires the skills to navigate, embrace and thrive within discomfort (Nelson & Low, 2011; Strand et al., 2003). ACT may assist students in learning to embrace the discomfort that accompanies being involved in an educational context and value education as it relates to their own life goals and values (Hayes, 1998; Scent & Boes, 2014). Furthermore, the commonplace discomfort experienced in HEIs, and then within the work environment, requires students and graduates who can persist and reach valued goals despite the many challenges faced (Foxall et al., 2007; Haigh, 2005). Students who can cultivate psychological flexibility and navigate the challenging experiences in education can apply these same skills in both their personal and professional contexts (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014). Thus, learning to develop psychological flexibility can be critical to improving overall life circumstances for students (Hayes, 1998).

In non-psychotherapeutic contexts, such as education, ACT is the psychoeducational training process oriented towards developing psychological flexibility skills (Hayes et al., 2006; Moran, 2015). The skill of psychological flexibility, namely the ability to thrive despite the discomfort, could equip students in dealing meaningfully with the ubiquity of stressors in life. ACT's orientation toward assisting individuals in living a full life despite the discomfort, instead of symptom reduction, suggests the suitability of its application in non-psychotherapeutic contexts (Biglan et al., 2008; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010).

ACT in HEIs has been implemented with both psychotherapeutic and non-psychotherapeutic student samples (Räsänen et al., 2016). Predominantly, ACT strategies for psychotherapeutic student samples in HEI have been reactive (i.e., implemented in response to a problem experienced) (Levin et al., 2014; Pistorello et al., 2013). With psychotherapeutic student samples, psychological flexibility development has been effective in helping students to manage specific psychotherapeutic discomforts and disorders; for example, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, alcohol-related disorders, and associated challenges (Hayes et al., 2006; Levin et al., 2015).

Evidence consistently points to the beneficial role of strategies to enhance psychological flexibility components for HEI students, even for students not currently reporting psychotherapeutic discomforts or impairment due to mental health concerns (Butryn et al., 2011; Räsänen et al., 2016; Westerhof & Keyes, 2010). In contrast to studies focusing on psychotherapeutic discomforts and disorders, a smaller body of work provides preliminary evidence for utilising psychological flexibility as it applies to adaptive outcomes (Martin et al., 2013). Research examining ACT in non-psychotherapeutic student samples in HEIs has examined psychological flexibility's role in the prevention or proactive strategies, focusing on enhancing adaptive behaviours to prepare for expected life discomforts (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014; Eustis et al., 2017; Levin et al., 2014). Research indicates that psychological flexibility is beneficial for students in helping them to develop adaptive behaviour skills (Masuda & Tully, 2012).

Given ACT's focus on persisting in value-driven behaviours despite the discomfort, applying the ACT approach to non-psychotherapeutic student samples may have important implications. First, students not experiencing impairment due to psychotherapeutic discomforts may still benefit from developing psychological flexibility skills (Räsänen et al., 2016). Second, using strategies to foster psychological flexibility skills may have positive

influences on adjustment and resilience when students experience discomfort within their academic journey (Levin et al., 2014). Last, students may be better equipped to handle discomfort as graduates if prepared with psychological flexibility skills in their HEI training (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010; Moyer et al., 2017). This study argued for applying ACT as a proactive strategy with a non-psychotherapeutic sample of psychology honours students (Fledderus et al., 2012; Wersebe et al., 2018).

### **Situating the Study**

Given the complexities and associated discomforts of the mental healthcare working contexts (Whiteford et al., 2015), research suggests that psychological flexibility is a necessary skill to cultivate in responsibly preparing psychology students (Hayes et al., 2006). Aside from one article about ACT being used in a psychotherapeutic setting in the treatment of epilepsy in South Africa (Lundgren et al., 2006), a search using the keywords ‘Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Psychological Flexibility, Education, Healthcare Professionals, South Africa’ resulted in no other relevant research of local ACT was found. Despite a paucity of literature, there have been promising, albeit limited, international results (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Shapiro et al., 1998).

Internationally, psychological flexibility skill development has been fostered in healthcare graduates, such as paramedics, nurses, counsellors, disability staff, and psychology graduates (Kurz et al., 2014; McCracken & Yang, 2008; Mitmansgruber et al., 2008; Pakenham, 2014). ACT has shown positive outcomes in assisting graduates with adaptive behaviours and increased mental well-being (Moyer et al., 2017; Wei et al., 2015). More specifically, ACT interventions with healthcare graduates have shown benefits, including reducing work-related stress and distress, improving work satisfaction, self-efficacy, and self-



compassion, and improving hard skill acquisition, mental health, and flexibility (Meiklejohn et al., 2013; Pakenham, 2015).

The studies provide a better understanding of the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions, such as ACT, with healthcare students and graduates. Furthermore, the studies have raised interesting questions for HEIs around strategies for developing and preparing healthcare students. Given the personal benefits healthcare graduates experience with ACT interventions, an argument can be made that psychological flexibility skill development can be a proactive strategy for healthcare students (Moyer et al., 2017). However, there have been no South African-based studies, and limited international studies, which have focused on preparing healthcare students, and more specifically psychology honours students, with the relevant psychological flexibility skills in HEIs (Cardaciotto et al., 2008; Moyer et al., 2017; Pakenham, 2015; Räsänen et al., 2016).

Cardaciotto et al. (2008), Moyer et al. (2017), Pakenham (2015) and Räsänen et al. (2016) reported on their investigations to prepare postgraduate psychology students. The studies focused on master's (NQF 9) or doctoral (NQF 10) psychology students and embedded ACT training within the psychology programme. The samples of students were drawn from Finland, United States of America, and Australia. The results indicated positive outcomes of enhanced psychological flexibility skills and emotional regulation. While limited, given the preliminary positive effects, the results provide a foundation for further explorations and implementation within a South African HEI context. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the ACT protocols developed to ascertain effective student development, thus providing limited guidelines for replication or adaptation (Pakenham & Stafford-Brown, 2012).

Cardaciotto et al. (2008), Moyer et al. (2017), Pakenham (2015), and Räsänen et al. (2016) indicate that students entering master's (NQF 9) or doctoral (NQF 10) psychology

programmes require better preparation for the discomforts of the programme, and the healthcare working environment (Pakenham, 2015; 2017). This suggests that introducing psychological flexibility skill development in healthcare programmes at the honours level (NQF 8) could aid in the abovementioned recommendation. Moreover, psychological flexibility skill development in psychology honours students (NQF 8) provides additional time for students to cultivate and practise psychological flexibility to prepare for common discomforts in further studies or the healthcare working environment (Strand et al., 2003).

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Three reviewed ACT, the theoretical framework of this study. The chapter introduced behaviourism and the evolution of normalising discomfort. ACT is the leading psychotherapeutic approach in normalising discomfort, stating that individuals can live meaningful lives alongside discomfort instead of in the absence of discomfort. Two generic models, the Hexaflex and Triflex Models, have been established to operationalise ACT. The generic models allow for flexible application in various contexts, including education. Despite limited local ACT research applications, international studies provide the foundation for further HEI explorations with psychology honours students. The following chapter provides details of the study's research design, methodology, and approach.

## Chapter 4 Research Design

“We are convinced that... the consequences of our own teaching is more likely to change and improve our practices than is reading about what someone else has discovered of his teaching.” - Stephen Corey (1953)

### Introduction

The overarching aim of this study was to explore how educators incorporate the mindfulness-based, psychotherapeutic model of ACT into their teaching and learning practices to promote psychological flexibility in psychology honours students. This study was guided by three research questions:

- Research Question 1: What are educators’ experiences of the ACT-based professional development training?
- Research Question 2: What are educators’ experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching, and learning practices for psychology honours students?
- Research Question 3: What are psychology honours students’ experiences of their ACT-based development?

This chapter outlines the methodology utilised to answer the three research questions. The chapter is organised into two sections. It provides a theoretical overview of AR in education and includes the historical roots of AR in education, the AR enquiry model, my positionality as a researcher and the research paradigm. The discussion situates this study as insider research within a qualitative, interpretive paradigm. After that, it outlines the AR research methodology, detailing the research context, data collection and analysis processes, trustworthiness considerations and the ethical implications.

## **Theoretical Overview: Action Research in Education**

### ***Historical Roots of Action Research in Education***

The work of Lewin (1890-1947), who conducted extensive research on social issues, has been credited with coining the term AR in his original writings in 1934 (Mills, 2011). AR was born out of the need to solve social problems, which initiated Lewin's preliminary description of AR as "no action without research; no research without action" (Adelman, 1993, p. 163). As its name implies, AR has the twin goals to achieve both action and research simultaneously. The twin goals allow practitioners to explore ideas to improve practice while also increasing context-specific knowledge practically (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

Stephen Corey was among the first to implement AR in education in the early 1950s. He believed that educators would likely find the results of their research more valuable than that of "outsiders" (Smith, 2001). The 1970s saw the start of the teacher-as-researcher movement, led by the works of Lawrence Stenhouse (Masters, 1995). The movement was initiated by educators questioning whether external researchers and research theories could adequately address and solve context-specific, every day, educational challenges (McNiff, 2002). Thus, they were reinforcing the need for educators to be studying their own teaching to solve their own problems. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the educational AR movement continued to grow through the writings of Jack Whitehead and Jean McNiff (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). The AR movement emphasised the professional development of educators, requiring educators to study their own practice to improve the development of their students (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

From the year 2000 onward, AR in education was recognised as a well-established, systematic research approach conducted by individuals who have a vested interest in predominantly three areas: to promote personal and professional growth, to improve practice for student development, and to advance the teaching profession (Clauzet et al., 2008;

Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Initially, AR was limited to school settings, but it has since been applied to all levels of formal education, including HEIs (Wells, 2002). AR has been employed in educational problem-solving such as curriculum development, professional development, teaching and learning practices, school improvement programmes and policy development (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Mertler, 2012). Moreover, AR provides a framework that guides educators in solving context-specific problems of complex educational phenomena (Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009).

The evolution of AR over the past 90 years has allowed for various AR approaches, each approach differing in purpose, positionality, epistemology, and ideological commitments (Rowell & Feldman, 2019). AR is the term used most as a generic concept in all disciplines and fields of study and serves as an umbrella term for the plethora of related AR approaches (Gibbs et al., 2017). The most common AR approaches are CAR; Participatory Action Research (PAR); Community-Based Action Research; Youth Action Research; Action Learning; Participatory Action Learning and Action Research; Exploratory Action Research; cooperative inquiry; educative research; appreciative inquiry; emancipatory praxis; teacher research; participatory rural appraisal; feminist action research; feminist, antiracist participatory action research; and advocacy activist, or militant research (Lingard et al., 2008).

CAR in education has become a prevalent research methodology among educators over recent decades (Noffke, 2009; Somekh, 2006). CAR is the research enquiry conducted in teams of practitioners, such as educators, with shared interests (Mertler, 2012). The educator teams work together to investigate issues relevant to their interests and improve their own situations (Rowell et al., 2017). The educator teams provide multiple perspectives in the complex nature of understanding teaching and learning practices. CAR can therefore be defined as a variety of stakeholders cooperating to explore questions of mutual interest to

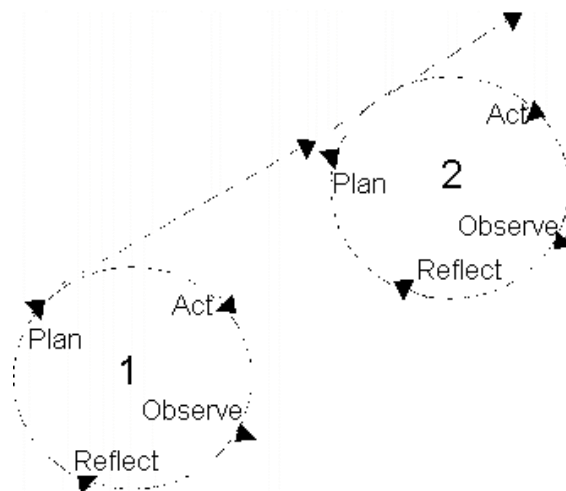
develop insights into particular phenomena, create frameworks for understanding, and suggest actions that improve educational practice (Rowell & Feldman, 2019).

### ***Action Research Model***

The literature outlines a variety of action enquiry models in research, such as action learning (Revons, 1971), reflective practice (Schon, 1983), experiential learning (Kolb, 2014), deliberative practice (McCutcheon, 1988), transformational learning (Marquardt, 1999), and action evaluation (Rothman, 1999). Due to the plethora of action inquiry models documented, it is crucial to outline and differentiate the action enquiry model of AR. The AR enquiry model can be described as an iterative, integrated, and cyclic process proceeding in a systematic spiral of steps of “Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect” as depicted in Figure 4 below (Zuber-Skerrit, 1992, p. 13). The AR model, initially developed by Lewin in 1934, has had numerous variations in practice, expressed in the works of Elliot (1991), Ebbutt (1985), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), McLean (1995), Stringer (1996) and Zuber-Skerrit (1992).

**Figure 4**

*A Cyclical Process of Action Research*



*Note.* From “*Action Research in Higher Education: Examples and Reflections*” (p. 13), by O. Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, Kogan Page. Copyright 1992 by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt.

As shown in Figure 4, the cycles of systematic steps depict that one cycle of “planning, acting, observing and reflecting” (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, p. 13) usually leads to another cycle. The second cycle incorporates the findings and learnings from the initial cycle, demonstrating the four-step self-reflective cycles in motion. The motion indicates the movement from one cycle to the next as progress is made. As the cycle progresses, understanding and practice evolve through the process (Zuber-Skerritt, 1994). The repeated cycles seek to join action and reflection, theory, and practice, to pursue practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to individuals or groups (Heron & Reason, 2009; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

While the AR inquiry model is presented in a structured and procedural manner, in practice, the process is iterative and disjointed (Zuber-Skerritt, 1994). This is reiterated by Ladkin (2004), who states that,

[AR] inquiry cycles are messy and are not necessarily discrete or linear. They can move much more fluidly, double back on themselves, and take unpredictable routes. Moving from fog to clarity, and back to fog can be part of the process (p. 125).

This suggests that recursion is commonplace in AR inquiries. Recursion relates to the changing, iterative, spiralling, and cyclical nature of AR. The cyclical nature, the multiple data collection instruments, and the numerous areas under examination all contribute to a challenging methodology account (Cook, 2009; Mellor, 2001).

The AR enquiry cycle begins with an open-ended research question to allow for an iterative and deep exploration of teaching and learning practices in the classroom. The question needs to be open-ended enough to allow possibilities to emerge (Hubbard & Power, 1999). Responses to the more open-ended research questions often generate multiple enquiry directions and prompt further research questions. The iterative and recursive nature of the research questions requires amendments to what literature is consulted. Thus, the literature review can be considered a dynamic collection of knowledge that is evolving and shifting in a reciprocal relationship with the dynamics of the AR process (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

Furthermore, the AR approach prioritises action and research equally. Thus, as action is being implemented (i.e., an intervention), documenting and collecting data are required (Murray et al., 2004). As data are collected, the analysis may suggest that a significant modification in research questions is required. Modifications in the research questions lead to new literature being consulted (Stainback & Stainback, 1988). McNiff and Whitehead (2005) elucidate that cyclical changes in the research process is integral in AR and the AR enquiry process:

People change all the time, and their social situations change with them. This is one of the delights of working in action research ... because you can see how one research question can transform into another and also how one issue can act as grounds for new issues to emerge. Nothing is ever static. We are constantly changing ourselves and our contexts. This kind of transformation of existing issues and questions into new ones can help your ideas and practices as ongoing cycles of action and reflection (p. 117).



### ***Researcher Positionality***

Within AR studies, importance is placed on the continuum of positions researchers take. The continuum of researcher positionality relates to whether a researcher is an insider or outsider to the setting studied (Chavez, 2008; Hellowell, 2006; Trowler, 2011). Insider research has been described as research undertaken by a researcher who is also a member within an organisation, group, or community, contrasted with research undertaken by an outsider, who is not a member or familiar with the organisation or group in which the research is being conducted (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Mercer, 2007).

Insider–outsider researcher positionality within AR has been represented by Herr and Anderson (2005) as a continuum on a scale of one to six. The researcher's position on the insider-outsider continuum is linked to a particular type of AR approach, ranging from “the insider engaged in self-study” to “the outsider researching the insider” (p. 31). Below, is e Herr and Anderson’s (2005, p.31) positionality continuum summarid:

Scale 1 = Insider (researcher studies own self/practice)

**Scale 2 = Insider in collaboration with other insiders**

Scale 3 = Insider(s) in collaboration with outsider(s)

Scale 4 = Reciprocal collaboration (in-sider/outsider teams)

Scale 5 = Outsider(s) in collaboration with insider(s)

Scale 6 = Outsider studies the insider

While the researcher’s positionality in relation to the setting is important, it is often not as straightforward to define in AR. Researchers in AR often hold multiple roles and positionalities simultaneously. The researcher's position may move along the continuum during their research (Hellowell, 2006). For example, an AR researcher could hold both

insider and outsider positions within a given study. The researcher could be classified as an insider to the environment where the research is conducted but holds an outsider position to where the action and data collection occur, such as a classroom.

Despite the complexity in defining researcher positionality in AR, I consider my position in this study as an insider researcher because I am a permanent staff member with intimate knowledge and familiarity of the organisation. According to Herr and Anderson's (2005) positionality continuum, this CAR study is classified as "Scale 2: Insider in collaboration with other insiders" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 36). Usually, insider research in HEIs involves academic staff who are "immersed, embedded and strongly connected with both the setting and those being 'researched' in a shared setting where they operate together in an ongoing basis" (Smyth & Holian, 2008, p. 34). More specifically, the dual roles of being an academic staff member and insider researcher provides an opportunity for both theoretical and practical contributions to context-specific and relevant issues.

CAR studies that adopt the researcher positionality of an "insider in collaboration with other insiders" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 36) are common practice and have been employed in various settings such as businesses, within communities, and the educational context. CAR studies from this positionality assist individuals working in isolation toward a community of enquiry. The community of enquiry facilitates learning, has a greater influence on organisational change, and personal, professional, and institutional development. However, insider research also gives rise to many ethical concerns and dilemmas that need to be mitigated against (see the Ethical Considerations section below). Clarity about a researcher's position is required, as this position informs the research paradigm chosen and how to frame the related epistemological, methodological, and ethical concerns that arise. For a more generalised overview of the challenges and possible consequences of insider action research in education refer to Atkins and Wallace (2012), Greene (2014), and Holmes (2020).

### ***Research Paradigm***

Each study endeavours to explore knowledge guided by a chosen research paradigm (Galliers, 1991). A research paradigm is a worldview or a shared understanding of reality (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Research paradigms fall along a continuum of objectivity and subjectivity and can be aligned with Herr and Anderson's (2005) insider-outsider positionality continuum. At the one end of the continuum is objectivity, where the positivism paradigm is located and where predominantly outsider researcher positionality is prioritised (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The positivism paradigm has been defined as a scientific methodology that endeavours to reach objective truth, facts, and laws about human behaviour and life (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009).

On the opposite end of the continuum is subjectivity, where the interpretivism paradigm is located and where insider researcher positionality is deemed important (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The interpretivist paradigm aims to understand the meaning of social realities from those experiencing them (Noblit & Eaker, 1987). Knowledge and reality are constructed in and out of the interaction between individuals, where knowledge is created and understood in a social context (Crotty, 1998). Throughout the continuum of objectivity (outsider) and subjectivity (insider), many research methodologies, whether quantitative or qualitative, have been positioned (Creswell, 2008).

A chosen paradigm can be discussed in three related aspects, ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The concept ontology refers to the study of reality (Crotty, 1998), while epistemology is concerned with the nature and study of knowledge (Cohen et al., 2007). The ontological and epistemological assumptions of the chosen paradigm are reflected in differing methodological approaches. The concept of methodology refers to the strategy that informs particular methods. Methods are the specific techniques and procedures used to collect and analyse data (Crotty, 1998). The chosen

research paradigm will influence the research approach, design, and methodology within an enquiry (Al-Saadi, 2014).

The goals of this study informed the insider researcher positionality, aligning to a qualitative, interpretive paradigm (Holmes, 2020). AR is often listed under the qualitative umbrella of research because the nature of qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world (Al-Saadi, 2014).

Ukowitz (2021) elaborates that AR's primary goal is to create a greater understanding to improve practice. Given this goal, the inquiry is interpretive rather than explanatory. In qualitative, interpretive research, practitioners produce meaningful, context-specific information to provide greater understanding (Cohen et al., 2007).

This study is based on certain assumptions, namely given the chosen qualitative, interpretive paradigm that reality and knowledge are a) socially constructed and experienced through interactions between educators and students, b) reality and knowledge are constantly changing as people develop, and c) reality and knowledge are constructed by a multitude of events. Thus, a cause and effect relationship cannot be sought (Burns, 2010). These assumptions can be explained through the interpretive paradigm's ontological and epistemological positions.

The ontological position of interpretivism is relativism. Relativism views reality as subjective and differs from person to person (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). There are as many realities as people constructing these models of reality. Thus, the reality is limited to context, space, time, and individuals or groups in a given situation. Therefore, findings from an interpretive study cannot be generalised in a blanket manner. Instead, attention should be given to the context in which knowledge was created (Cohen et al., 2007). Thus, epistemology views knowledge as subjective, which is consistent with ontology. Therefore, knowledge is subjective because reality is socially constructed (Holmes, 2020).

The ontology and epistemology perspectives dictate the methodology and methods used in the study (Creswell, 2008). The interpretive methodology is directed at understanding phenomena from subjective perspectives, taking historical and cultural contexts into account, with participants being relied on as much as possible (Creswell, 2008). Methodologies include action research, case studies, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ethnography. AR, specifically CAR, has been chosen as the most appropriate methodology for this study. Methods incorporated for data collection, such as open-ended interviews, focus groups, open-ended questionnaires, open-ended observations, and role-plays usually generate qualitative data (Al-Saadi, 2014).

### **Situating the Study**

The following section describes the study's CAR methodology within a qualitative, interpretive paradigm. The CAR methodology is discussed linearly to enhance readability. However, the CAR approach is an iterative process in practice, given the methodology's adaptive, flexible, and evolving nature (Mills, 2011). Herr and Anderson (2005) reiterate that "it is often difficult to think of action research as a linear product with a finite ending, as successful projects can spiral on for years" (p. XVI). Given the complexities of reporting action research linearly, specific literature was consulted to guide how to report on action research for dissertations (Boshoff, 2014; Herr & Anderson, 2005).

Despite the difficulty in providing a linear, logical account of the CAR approach, the following discussion begins with a reflection on the research context. This is followed by data collection methods, the collection procedure, and then the data analysis. After this, strategies to enhance trustworthiness are presented and the section is concluded by considering the ethical concerns of an insider CAR approach.

### ***Research Context***

In discussing the research context, these five aspects are considered: (a) the role of the lead researcher, (b) the co-researchers, (c) the case study sample, (d) the research environment, and (e) the sampling method.

***Role of the Lead Researcher.*** I was the lead researcher of this study. For CAR to be effective, clarity around the lead researcher's role in the study is required. I am in a permanent, full-time, senior academic management position within the research environment. Furthermore, I am an active member of the academic team, responsible for developing, managing, and leading the educator faculty teaching in the research environment. From the initial enrolment of the first cohort of postgraduate psychology students (NQF 8) at the specific private HEI in 2018, I worked collaboratively with the faculty of educators who teach on the programme, hereafter called co-researchers.

Mills (2011) suggests that one should consider the feasibility of the research study to ensure the research is manageable alongside other work responsibilities. To support my work, I turned to Mellor (2001), who states that "the practitioner-researcher is someone who holds down a job in some particular area and at the same time carries out systematic enquiry which is of relevance to the job" (p. 447). Educator development, student outcomes and effective teaching and learning practices are duties I manage and oversee within the research environment. The purpose of the study is aligned with my work duties and responsibilities, ensuring feasibility. Also, as a senior academic staff member within the research environment, I am committed to the continuous improvement of my learning to ensure I can offer explanations for my actions in leading a faculty of educators and overseeing student outcomes. I anticipated that engaging in a CAR study would constructively inform my actions going forward. As described by Zuber-Skerritt (1992), AR in HEIs involves a vested

interest in educator professional development, teaching and learning practices, and student outcomes:

Through systematic, controlled action research, higher education teachers can become more professional, more interested in pedagogical aspects of higher education and more motivated to integrate their research and teaching interests in a holistic way. This, in turn, can lead to greater job satisfaction, better academic programmes, improvement of student learning and practitioners' insights and contributions to the advancement of knowledge in higher education (p. 15).

I had the same vested interests in initiating the CAR approach within the research environment. Moreover, I am responsible for and invested in professionally developing the co-researchers. Within my role, I believe it is vital for the co-researchers to offer explanations for how and why they do and what they do in the classroom. I anticipated that educators involved in the CAR process would explain their teaching and learning practices, embedded in relevant theoretical and context-specific knowledge. I also have a vested interest with the co-researchers in the success of the postgraduate psychology programme (NQF 8). In collaboration with the co-researchers, I have the ethical responsibility to ensure postgraduate psychology students are appropriately prepared within the study programmes.

In developing the research questions for this study, engagement with the co-researchers allowed for an in-depth understanding of the commonplace challenges psychology students encounter, and how best to equip these students for the expected discomforts. There is a paucity in the literature and a lack of consensus on preparing psychology students for expected discomforts. Hence, the research in other contexts,

predominantly internationally, is not necessarily generalisable nor transferrable to the given context. Given the paucity of guidelines available, conducting context-specific research in the research environment seemed necessary. Thus, insider research aligned well with the notion of knowledge being socially constructed and within a specific context (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). As the primary researcher and doctoral student, alongside the faculty of educators as co-researchers, we worked together to address the identified problem and provide context-embedded knowledge (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

The insider researcher positionality dictates the closeness of the researcher to those aspects being researched (Ukowitz, 2021). Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) argue that because the AR process is embedded in practice, the relationship between the researcher and participants is significantly altered, decreasing the distance. Educational AR intentionally attempts to remove the division between researchers and participants (Smith et al., 2021). This is conducive to a shared process of learning. Therefore, I had close and direct relationships with the co-researchers in the research environment. Moreover, the co-researchers had direct relationships with the cohort of postgraduate psychology students (NQF 8) in the research environment. Both the co-researchers and I were well-positioned to monitor what was happening in the research environment (McNiff, 2002).

A key advantage of insider research is the researcher's pre-understandings brought to the study's design (Smith et al., 2021). With insider knowledge, insider researchers can often develop research questions based on rich understandings of the issues needing investigation, deemed significant to the research context, researcher, and co-researchers (Ukowitz, 2021). Battaglia (1995) indicates those involved in the AR process develop a closeness to the research problem identified and questions asked through an "Action Research mentality" (p. 89), a general attitude of enquiry. My insider knowledge enabled me to initiate specific



research questions where the findings could then directly benefit the research environment, the co-researchers, and the postgraduate psychology students.

***Co-Researchers: Psychology Educator Faculty.*** The co-researchers comprised a faculty of ten psychology educators who were appointed in the research environment as adjunct educators to teach postgraduate psychology (NQF 8) students. From the faculty of ten educators, seven opted to participate and contribute to this study and were thus co-researchers. A modest study is initially preferable to a more ambitious undertaking when doing a CAR study (Pine, 2009). Alder and Sandor (1990) consider an initial group of seven people to be of particular advantage. A smaller group enables each member to actively contribute toward group decision-making and feedback, and it enables all participants to feel a part of the team (Pope, 2020). Table 1 provides the characteristics of the co-researchers for this study.

**Table 1**

*Co-Researcher Characteristics*

<b>Population</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
<b>Co-researchers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group size: seven educators</li> <li>• Mean age: 35,75 years old</li> <li>• Gender: six female educators, one male educator</li> <li>• Highest qualification: master's degree</li> <li>• Area of specialisation: Social Sciences qualifications</li> <li>• Occupation: Adjunct educators teaching postgraduate psychology (NQF 8) students in the research environment</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teaching experience: minimum of one year teaching in the research environment</li> </ul>
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The seven co-researchers are considered insider researchers, given their familiarity and investment in the research environment and the postgraduate psychology (NQF 8) students. Not only do they know the research environment but they are well-positioned to affect the environment intentionally and consciously (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Given the co-researchers' considerable influence on the research environment and classroom, an enquiry into student development should involve an investigation into the co-researchers (Holley, 1997). This involves co-researchers interrogating and explaining their contributions to the situation studied (Whitehead, 1989).

***Case Study Sample: Postgraduate Psychology Students.*** In this study, a 2018 psychology honours cohort of students hereafter called the case study sample was invited to be involved. Selecting a specific case study sample to share their experiences provides an opportunity to gain in-depth knowledge and learnings and assists with triangulating and informing the experiences of the co-researchers' initiatives. To claim that a CAR approach in education has made improvements or provided valuable feedback, co-researchers should consult the case study sample about the claimed improvements for verification (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). At minimum, co-researchers should share the nature of the planned improvements so the case study sample can be knowledgeably involved in the CAR process as both participants and collaborators. The case study sample consists of young adults still developing the skills required to persevere despite the many challenges associated with the psychology field (Figley, 1995). The 2018 postgraduate psychology cohort of students

consisted of 18 students; 13 of these students permitted their data and input to be included in this study. Table 2 below provides the characteristics of the case study sample.

**Table 2**

*Case Study Characteristics*

Population	Characteristics
Case study sample	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group size: 13 students</li> <li>• Psychology academic honours programme (NQF 8)</li> <li>• Mean age: 28,28 years old</li> <li>• Gender: 12 females, one male</li> <li>• Students registered for a one-year, full-time, non-professional honours degree</li> </ul>

***The Research Environment: Private Higher Education Institution.*** CAR is context-specific, which involves identifying a specific problem within a particular context and attempting to address this problem (Oliver, 1980). For this study, the research environment was a private HEI in Gauteng, South Africa. The limited contextual scope of a single private HEI was selected to explore in-depth contextual, practical experiences consistent with the qualitative, insider-researcher CAR approach (Ukowitz, 2021). The selected private HEI is a registered and regulated institution in South Africa offering credible and valid qualifications for students (Higher Education and Training, 2018).

***Sampling Method: Total Population Purposeful Sampling.*** Henry and Kemmis (1985) recommend that AR should be started on a small scale. This would mean that groups of participants would also be small (McTaggart, 1991). CAR usually entails a small-scale investigation into the educator's classroom, using the four-step cycle of enquiry (Lesha,

2014). This study consisted of two small groups: the co-researchers (seven educators) and the case study sample (13 psychology honours students). Due to the type of study and the size of the participant groups, safeguarding confidentiality and anonymity was essential. Thus, the research environment, the co-researchers, and the case study sample identities have been anonymised, as seen in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Key Code Summary*

<b>Co-researcher Key Code<sup>14</sup></b>	<b>Case Study Sample Key Code</b>	
Co-researcher 1	S1	Student participant 1
Co-researcher 2	S2	Student participant 2
Co-researcher 3	S3	Student participant 3
Co-researcher 4	S4	Student participant 4
Co-researcher 5	S5	Student participant 5
Co-researcher 6	S6	Student participant 6
Co-researcher 7	S7	Student participant 7
	S8	Student participant 8
	S9	Student participant 9
	S10	Student participant 10
	S11	Student participant 11
	S12	Student participant 12
	S13	Student participant 13

<sup>14</sup>Co-researcher [1]: Using pseudonyms or key codes is the accepted ethical practice for maintaining participants' privacy and confidentiality. However, co-construction of key codes in action research is important to recognise co-researchers' contributions to the study (Brear, 2018). In this study, in agreement with the co-researchers, the key code preference is for the title 'co-researcher', with a numerical identification code

In this study, total population sampling which is a type of purposive sampling technique, was utilised. Total population sampling is a technique where you examine the entire population who share a particular set of common characteristics. In total population sampling, researchers want to study the entire population because the population size, which has the particular set of characteristics being explored, is usually small. Often in a CAR study, the classroom defines the sample as a naturally occurring group (Jupp, 2006).

Within qualitative research, smaller sample sizes are usually considered reasonable, as priority is given to collecting rich information (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). Research participants are generally selected because they can provide rich, context-specific descriptions of their experiences contributing to the researcher's understanding (Zuber-Skerrit, 1992). By including both the co-researchers and case study sample in this study, different perspectives were incorporated, and rich data were generated.

Purposeful sampling is used widely in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Lavrakas, 2008). Thus, purposive sampling was deemed the most appropriate sampling method. Purposive sampling was also possible because I had direct access to the research environment, each of the co-researchers, and the case study sample.

## **Data Collection**

**Data Collection Methods.** Research into ACT and psychological flexibility has predominantly utilised quantitative approaches, investigating the operationalisation or assessment of psychological flexibility (Bond, 2013; Bond et al., 2013; Hayes et al., 1996). The assessment of psychological flexibility is most commonly utilised through a generic self-report measure known as the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ) (Bond & Bunce, 2003; Bond et al., 2008; Hayes et al., 2006). The current form of this instrument is the AAQ-

II (Bond et al., 2008), which evaluates the extent to which an individual exhibits psychological flexibility. The AAQ-II instrument has been used widely and is often cited in ACT and psychological flexibility studies (Frances et al., 2016; Karademas et al., 2017; Lewis & Naugle, 2017; Sung et al., 2018).

Notwithstanding the importance of quantitative research and related data collection methods, there is a need for qualitative studies that highlight the participants' experiences and their understanding of ACT and psychological flexibility. By selecting a qualitative paradigm, I could explore new ideas and experiences about ACT not captured within a standard AAQ-II instrument. Furthermore, research that investigates and explores new ideas provides a platform to consider the experiences of those involved in the research process (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002). With limited guidelines available when exploring new research areas, the experiences of those involved become crucial to explore.

A CAR methodology embedded within an interpretive paradigm centres around documenting the reflective process of participants' experiences. When a study focuses on insider reflections from the researcher, co-researchers, and case study sample, it becomes highly subjective and dependent on personal values, experiences, and beliefs (Pope, 2020). Providing various data collection methods helps broaden the impact and scrutiny of the research investigation and provides a more critical evaluation of the methodology chosen (Edwards, 2018). Thus, it is recommended in CAR studies that several qualitative and quantitative data collection methods are used, even within a qualitative, interpretive paradigm (Pope, 2020).

In this study, there were three data sources (case study sample, co-researchers, and myself) to triangulate the data collected. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were incorporated to triangulate further information gathered. Also, multiple data collection methods were used throughout the year-long data collection period to corroborate

findings further. Table 4 below depicts the data collection methods used to collect data from the case study sample. Table 5 summarises the data collection methods incorporated with the co-researchers. Table 6 summarises the data collection methods I incorporated to document my development and learning as the lead researcher.

**Table 4**

*Case Study Sample: Data Collection Methods and Location*

	<b>Method</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Qualitative Methods</b>	Semi-structured interviews	In-depth descriptions of students' experiences	Appendix 1: Student Interview Schedule
	Student ACT-based Workshop 1 Programme & Reflections	Psychoeducational workshop facilitated by the researcher with the case study sample	Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual
	Student ACT-based Workshop 2 Programme & Reflections	Psychoeducational workshop facilitated by the researcher with the case study sample	Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual
<b>Quantitative Methods</b>	Pre and Post Term Survey	Anonymous SurveyMonkey Survey	Appendix 3: Pre and Post Term Student Survey

**Table 5***Co-Researchers: Data Collection Methods and Location*

	<b>Method</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Qualitative Methods</b>	Educator Post Term Reflections	In-depth descriptions of Educators' experiences	Appendix 4: Educator Post Term Reflections
	ACT-based educator professional development training 1	Psychoeducational workshop facilitated by the researcher with the co-researchers	Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual
	ACT-based educator professional development training 2	Psychoeducational workshop facilitated by the researcher with the co-researchers	Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual
<b>Quantitative Methods</b>	Post Term Survey	Anonymous SurveyMonkey Survey	Appendix 6: Post Term Educator Survey

**Table 6***Lead Researcher: Data Collection Methods and Location*

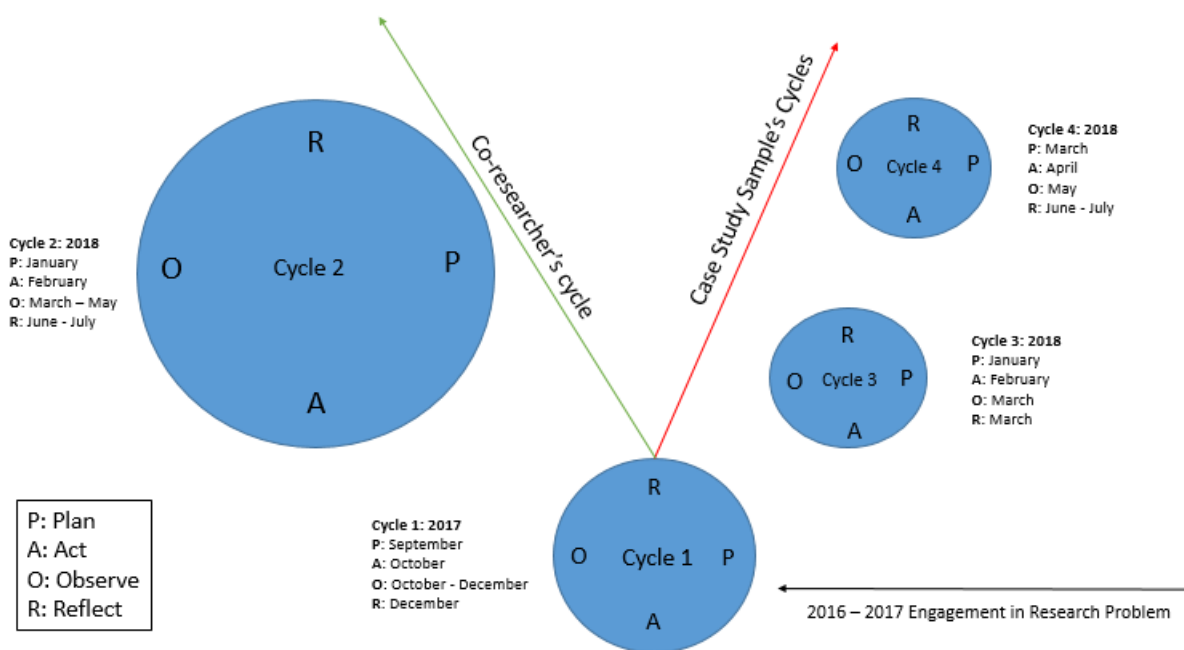
	<b>Method</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Qualitative Methods</b>	Researcher's Reflections	Researcher Meta-Learning of the CAR process	Chapter 5



**Data Collection Process: CAR Cycles.** I compiled Figure 5 below to illustrate the structure of the CAR cycles and the data collection process followed. The CAR approach followed in this study is based on Zuber-Skerritt’s model (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992).

**Figure 4**

*Data Collection Process in this Study*



*Note.* Adapted from “*Action Research in Higher Education: Examples and Reflections*” (p. 13), by O. Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, Kogan Page. Copyright 1992 by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt.

Before starting the first cycle shown in Figure 5, I refined and engaged in the research problem for 18 months (January 2016 – June 2017). This engagement laid the foundation for the start of the initial CAR cycle. The study documents and reports on the first four CAR cycles and represents a year-long process over the 2017 – 2018 period. The red and green arrows in Figure 5 represent the ongoing cycles and continual practical improvements in the

research environment post the study, indicative of CAR studies. The CAR cycles are represented in different sizes, illustrating the differing lengths of time for each cycle. For example, CAR cycle 2 represents a seven-month cycle that included the co-researchers. CAR cycles 3 and 4 are visually represented as smaller circles because these cycles comprise seven months for the case study sample.

CAR studies are characterised by multiple cycles operating concurrently. One cycle need not be complete for the next cycle to be initiated. As represented in Figure 5, the cycles indicate the iterative and increasing spiral effects that reflect the continuous improvement in understanding the problem (Hopkins, 1985). Throughout the cycles, I moved from a position of clarity to confusion; as I learnt and proceeded through the cycles, this process of meaning-making was expected (Ladkin, 2004). The CAR methodology requires written accounts of all the steps in each cycle to legitimise CAR as formal research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Each cycle, with its four phases of “planning, acting, observing, reflecting” (Zuber-Skerrit, 1992, p. 13), will be summarised in the following sections.

***Collaborative Action Research: Cycle 1.*** CAR Cycle 1 involves the co-researchers and spans four months. Table 7 below documents the four steps in CAR Cycle 1.

**Table 7**

*Collaborative Action Research Cycle 1*

Cycle 1 Steps	Timeline	Implementation
<p><b>Plan</b></p> <p>What needs improvement?</p>	<p>Sept 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formal educator meeting</li> <li>• A discussion regarding challenges</li> <li>• Collaborative thinking</li> <li>• Literature search</li> </ul>

During the planning stage in September 2017, the co-researchers and I discussed challenges presented in the teaching and learning environment during a routine, formal educator meeting. Consistently, challenges around effective student development were raised for the postgraduate psychology students (NQF 8). A further concern emerged around the lack of attendance to available resources offered by the student support centre. In addition, the educators identified the need for students to develop the skills to embrace discomfort, as the discomfort was commonplace in the psychology field. This meeting began the investigation of how educators could promote student development during class time. As the lead researcher, I was tasked with identifying the theoretical framework needed to address the identified research problem. Given my prior knowledge in ACT training and research, this provided the initial area of focus. Given the relevance of ACT in addressing the research problem, ACT was selected as the theoretical framework.

<p><b>Act</b></p> <p>What must be done to achieve the improvement?</p>	<p>Oct 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature search</li> <li>• Implement Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual</li> </ul>
<p>Two 'actions' were implemented to address the identified and shared problem.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First, the educators and I discussed and formalised the CAR process. This was done by explaining the approach and creating a shared responsibility in addressing the identified problem.</li> <li>• Second, I developed and facilitated a 6-hour ACT-based professional development training. I provided educators with a hard copy manual, which I had developed to guide the training. The training introduced the educators to the theory of ACT and provided a collaborative platform for further discussion.</li> </ul>		
<p><b>Observe</b></p> <p>How will I capture improvements made?</p>	<p>Oct-Dec 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual</li> </ul>

After the ACT-based professional development training, educators were given the opportunity to experience psychological flexibility for themselves, in both a personal and professional capacity, through the three-month teaching term. The educators captured their reflections and thoughts in the ACT-based professional development training manual to facilitate personal and professional development throughout the term. The educators provided feedback on their learning and captured thoughts around their development.

<p><b>Reflect</b></p> <p>What have I learnt?</p> <p>What re-planning is necessary?</p>	<p>Dec 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educator meeting</li> <li>• Collaborative thinking</li> <li>• Member checking</li> </ul>
<p>In an educator meeting at the end of the 2017 academic year, there was a discussion around educators' learnings and reflections throughout the first CAR cycle. Two challenges were raised.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First, educators understood and experienced ACT but required assistance with the practical application of ACT to incorporate elements into their teaching and learning practices. This initiated Cycle 2.</li> <li>• Second, educators believed students should also understand the importance of ACT development and how ACT could assist students in developing the skills to thrive despite discomfort. This initiated Cycle 3, which ran concurrently with Cycle 2.</li> </ul>		

***Collaborative Action Research: Cycle 2.*** CAR Cycle 2 involved the co-researchers and spanned seven months. Table 8 documents the four steps in CAR Cycle 2.

**Table 8***Collaborative Action Research Cycle 2*

Cycle 2 Steps	Timeline	Implementation
<p><b>Plan</b></p> <p>What needs improvement?</p>	Jan 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature search</li> <li>• Implement Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual</li> <li>• Collaborative thinking</li> </ul>
<p>Based on the learnings from Cycle 1, Cycle 2 was initiated. Cycle 2 involved a second ACT-based educator professional development training, which focused on the practical applications of ACT. I developed and facilitated another 6-hour ACT-based professional development training. I provided educators with a hard copy manual, which I had developed to guide the training. The training focused on the applied and practical applications of ACT and provided a collaborative platform for further discussion. ACT literature is not prescriptive of how ACT should be facilitated, giving facilitators autonomy in finding methods best suited to the context. Given the lack of research and literature on incorporating ACT into teaching and learning practices, the workshop involved collaborative thinking and brainstorming with the co-researchers.</p>		
<p><b>Act</b></p> <p>What must be done to achieve the improvement?</p>	Feb 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educator meeting</li> <li>• Implement Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual</li> <li>• Collaborative thinking</li> </ul>
<p>After the ACT-based professional development training, educators were given the opportunity to incorporate ACT into their teaching and learning practices through the next three-month teaching term. The educators captured their reflections and thoughts in the ACT-based professional development training manual to facilitate and capture their implementation of ACT-based teaching and learning throughout the term.</p>		

<p><b>Observe</b></p> <p>How will I capture improvements made?</p>	<p>March-May 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Appendix 4: Educator Post Term Reflections</li> <li>• Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual</li> <li>• Appendix 6: Post term educator survey</li> </ul>
<p>The ‘Act’ and ‘Observe’ steps within this Cycle happen concurrently. As educators applied ACT-based teaching and learning practices, they simultaneously captured their reflections throughout the three-month term. At the end of the three-month term, educators provided feedback through Post Term Reflections to summarise their learnings. Furthermore, educators partook in an anonymous, quantitative Post Term survey. The survey allowed for educators to express their learnings about their students and the ACT-based professional development process facilitated through CAR in confidence.</p>		
<p><b>Reflect</b></p> <p>What have I learnt? What re-planning is necessary?</p>	<p>June 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educator meeting</li> <li>• Collaborative thinking</li> <li>• Researcher reflections</li> <li>• Member checking</li> </ul>
<p>At the end of the term, the educators and I met during our scheduled educator meeting to reflect on the term and discuss our learnings from the ACT-based professional development training and the CAR process. The learnings from this cycle initiated another cycle, which is not documented for this study. The preceding cycle involved incorporating ACT professional development training for new educators in the private HEI. The CAR cycles need to have practical and sustainable changes in practice, regardless of whether there is a formalised study or not.</p>		

***Collaborative Action Research: Cycle 3.*** CAR Cycle 3 involved the psychology honours students, the case study sample, and spanned three months. Table 9 documents the four steps in CAR Cycle 3.

**Table 9***Collaborative Action Research Cycle 3*

Cycle 3 Steps	Timeline	Implementation
<p><b>Plan</b></p> <p>What needs improvement?</p>	Jan 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature search</li> <li>• Development of Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual</li> </ul>
<p>This CAR cycle was initiated from Cycle 1, where educators identified the need for students to be made aware of ACT and the importance of skill development. Cycle 3 involved introducing postgraduate psychology students (case study sample) to ACT. During this step, a review of the literature led to developing an ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual.</p>		
<p><b>Act</b></p> <p><i>What must be done to achieve the improvement?</i></p>	Feb 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student orientation</li> <li>• Implement Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual</li> <li>• Appendix 3: Pre and Post Term Student Survey</li> </ul>
<p>At the start of the 2018 academic year, a new cohort of psychology honours students entered the postgraduate psychology NQF 8 programme. During a scheduled orientation session, an introduction to this study, its purpose and what it entailed were presented. Students were invited to participate in the ACT-based postgraduate psychology training as part of their development. Students who chose to participate were invited and asked to contribute to the study. However, students could participate in the training and choose not to contribute to the study. No student would be excluded from participating and attending the ACT-based postgraduate psychology training, as the training was developed as a support resource. Student vulnerability has been acknowledged and unpacked within the ethics section.</p> <p>If students wanted to be involved in the three-hour ACT-based postgraduate psychology training, they were invited to stay after their orientation session that same day, where the CAR study was</p>		

<p>explained. Students were also made aware of the ACT-based teaching and learning approach the educators were implementing. Students were informed about the intended changes they could experience in class as the programme progressed. After the ACT-based postgraduate psychology training, students were invited to document their own learnings throughout the term in the training manual provided. Students were also invited to complete an anonymous, quantitative Pre Term Survey.</p>		
<p><b>Observe</b></p> <p>How will I capture improvements made?</p>	<p>Feb 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual</li> </ul>
<p>To facilitate and capture the students' experiences of the ACT-based teaching and learning approach throughout the term, they captured their reflections and thoughts in the ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual.</p>		
<p><b>Reflect</b></p> <p>What have I learnt?</p> <p>What re-planning is necessary?</p>	<p>March 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Midterm student meeting</li> </ul>
<p>During a midterm student meeting, students expressed the need for another ACT-based training emphasising the practical applications of ACT. This recommendation initiated Cycle 4.</p>		

***Collaborative Action Research: Cycle 4.*** CAR Cycle 4 involved the case study sample and spanned four months. Table 10 documents the four steps in CAR Cycle 4.



**Table 10***Collaborative Action Research Cycle 4*

<b>Cycle 4 Steps</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Implementation</b>
<p><b>Plan</b></p> <p>What needs improvement?</p>	<p>March 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature search</li> <li>Development of Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual</li> </ul>
<p>Based on the feedback generated from CAR cycle 3, CAR cycle 4 was initiated. Cycle 4 involved developing a second ACT-based postgraduate psychology training, which focused on the practical applications of ACT.</p>		
<p><b>Act</b></p> <p>What must be done to achieve the improvement?</p>	<p>April 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implement Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual</li> </ul>
<p>I developed and facilitated another 3-hour training. I provided students with a hard copy manual which I had developed to guide the training. The training focused on the applied and practical applications of ACT and provided a collaborative platform for further discussion.</p>		
<p><b>Observe</b></p> <p>How will I capture improvements made?</p>	<p>May 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual</li> </ul>
<p>To facilitate and capture the students' experiences of the ACT-based teaching and learning approach throughout the term, the students captured their reflections and thoughts in the ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual.</p>		
<p><b>Reflect</b></p> <p>What have I learnt? What re-planning is necessary?</p>	<p>June 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appendix 1: Student interview schedule</li> <li>Appendix 3: Pre and Post Term Student Survey</li> </ul>

The end of term initiated the end of the CAR cycle with students. Students were invited to a reflection meeting to collaborate and discuss their experiences as a group. Students were also invited to an individual interview to provide in-depth experiences. Furthermore, students were invited to complete the Post Term survey.

The learnings and findings from the CAR Cycle 3 and 4 initiated another Cycle for the private HEI. The learnings and experience gained through engaging with students have helped the private HEI understand the resources required for postgraduate students. Consequently, various support resources were developed to assist in skill development for students.

## Data Analysis

Stainback and Stainback (1988), Baumann and Duffy (2001) and Pine (2009) recommend several ways to analyse data using AR. Table 11 summarises the data analysis process selected for this study.

**Table 11**

*Data Analysis: Steps, Description and Justification*

Steps	Description	Justification
Identifying themes in the data	<p>This process involves skimming the data and finding themes, issues, or ideas that repeatedly emerge or seem noteworthy.</p> <p>This process also allows the researcher to make assumptions and be intuitive about the research process.</p>	<p>This process helps to immerse the researcher in the data. It allows the researcher to engage with the data subjectively.</p>

Interrogating the data	<p>This process is systematic. It looks at the themes from the initial step and then identifies (a) how many data collection sources support the theme and (b) how many respondents supported the theme.</p> <p>The more support for each theme, the more credible a theme is, which allows for assumptions and summaries to be made.</p> <p>Often direct quotes from interviews, journals, feedback notes, and questionnaires would ensure the validity and reliability of themes.</p>	<p>This process is scientific, allowing the data to confirm theories or provide evidence of alternative findings reliably.</p>
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Furthermore, part of the data analysis process is the triangulation of data which involves studying the research questions from at least three data methods and two or more points of view (Sagor, 2005). Also, at least one qualitative or quantitative data method is included to triangulate the remaining data collection methods (Creswell, 2008). Table 12 provides an overview of the triangulation method used in analysing data for this study.

**Table 12**

*Triangulation of Data Sources*

<b>Data Collection</b>	<b>Research Question 1</b>	<b>Research Question 2</b>	<b>Research Question 3</b>
<b>Methods</b>	What are educators' experiences of the	What are educators' experiences of	What are psychology honours students'

	ACT-based professional development training?	embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices for psychology honours students?	experiences of their ACT-based development?
Semi-structured interviews with students		✓	✓
Student ACT-based workshop 1 programme & reflections			✓
Student ACT-based workshop 2 programme & reflections			✓
Pre and Post Term survey with students			✓
Educator Post Term reflections	✓	✓	✓
ACT-based educator professional development training 1	✓		
ACT-based educator	✓	✓	

professional development training 2			
Post Term survey with educators	✓	✓	
Researcher's reflections	✓	✓	✓

*Note.* Adapted from *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* (p. 45), by R, Sagor, 1992, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) publications. Copyright 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

### ***Trustworthiness.***

As the lead researcher and an insider researcher, data collected and analysed in this study could have been influenced by my position (Holmes, 2020). Thus, what data are included or discarded, the choice of data collection methods, and the framing of the interview questions are all subject to the possibility of bias (Anders, 1966; Elliot, 1993). Table 13 below describes the strategies used in this study to enhance trustworthiness.

While every caution was taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, it must be stated that some bias is an inevitable part of any investigation (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). The interpretive paradigm acknowledges the inevitability of the researcher's views and values (Creswell, 2008). Also, subjectivity is not regarded unfavourably, as explicating subjective worldviews improves transparency and accountability within the research process (Walsh & Downe, 2006). I endeavoured to guard against my personal bias and investment in the project from grossly distorting any part of the research process.

**Table 13***Strategies to Enhance Trustworthiness*

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>This Study</b>
Prolonged and persistent fieldwork	One year of CAR cycles allowed for corroboration to ensure the match between findings and participant reality
Multi-method strategies	Triangulation in data collection from multiple sources and methods.
Participant language; verbatim accounts	From the data collection methods, literal statements and quotations were used in the reporting of data.
Low-inference descriptors	In 2017 and 2018, during the one year of CAR cycles, precise and detailed prescriptions of people and situations were recorded.
Multiple researchers	Data collected by a research team: The lead researcher and seven co-researchers (educators).
Member checking	Informally checking with students and educators during the data collection process.
Negative cases or discrepant data	An active search for, recording and analysis of, and reporting of, negative cases or discrepant data that are an exemption to patterns or that modify patterns in the data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data collected, analysed, and reported on, Lincoln and Guba (2000) provide a set of criteria that can judge the rigour of interpretive research. These include dependability, credibility, and transferability. These three criteria will be discussed next and will link the strategies discussed in Table 13.

**Dependability.** Interpretive research can be viewed as dependable or authentic when different researchers or a group of researchers arrive at similar conclusions or findings. Dependability is similar to that of inter-rater reliability (Creswell, 2008). To ensure dependability, interpretive researchers ought to explain their phenomenon of interest and the social context in which it is embedded to allow readers to authenticate their interpretive inferences independently (Foster, 1972; Kemmis, 1993; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). Table 14 summarises the strategies applicable for dependability.

**Table 14**

*Strategies for Dependability*

Strategy	This Study
Prolonged and persistent fieldwork	A 10-month data collection process, which allowed for corroboration to ensure the match between findings and participant reality.
Participant language; verbatim accounts	From the data collection methods, literal statements and quotations were used in the reporting of data.
Low-inference descriptors	In 2017 and 2018, during the 10-month CAR cycles, precise and detailed prescriptions of people and situations were recorded.

- Prolonged and persistent fieldwork: the interpretive research paradigm attempts to interpret social reality through the subjective viewpoints of the embedded case study sample and co-researchers within the classroom context, where the reality is co-constructed. As I am employed and embedded in the research context, I can make interpretations that are contextualised (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

- Participant language, verbatim accounts, and low-interference accounts: I endeavoured to use verbatim accounts and low-interference in data reporting to represent the subjective realities and allow readers to interpret confirmability (Noffke, 1994; Oberg, 1990). Confirmability refers to the extent to which others can independently confirm the findings reported in interpretive research (typically, participants).
- Heron and Reason (1997; 2009) suggest producing a process for challenging collusion within the group and throughout the study (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). I took the responsibility in challenging the group's thinking to find negative or alternative cases.

**Credibility.** Interpretive research can be considered credible if readers find its inferences to be believable, akin to that of internal validity (Creswell, 2008). I enhanced credibility in the research through (a) providing evidence of extended engagement in the field, (b) by demonstrating data triangulation of data collection techniques and through multiple viewpoints, and (c) by ensuring representation through verbatim transcription of interviews, extracts from written accounts and accurate records (Somekh & Davies, 1991; Zuber-Skerrit, 1992; 1996). Table 15 summarises the strategies applicable for credibility in this study.

**Table 15**

*Strategies for Credibility*

Strategy	This Study
Prolonged and persistent field work	A 10-month data collection process, which allowed for corroboration to ensure the match between findings and participant reality.
Multi-method strategies	Triangulation in data collection.



Participant language; verbatim accounts	From the data collection methods, literal statements and quotations were used in the reporting of data.
Low-inference descriptors	In 2017 and 2018, precise and detailed prescriptions of people and situations were recorded.
Multiple researchers	Data collected by a research team. The lead researcher and seven co-researchers (educators).
Member checking	An informal check with students and educators during the data collection process.

- Prolonged and persistent field work: Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that the lead researcher in a CAR study determine what length of time is required for prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field to ensure good themes or categories will emerge from the data. The longer a researcher can stay in the field, the better contextual understanding of participant views can be generated (Creswell & Miller, 2000).
- Low interference descriptors and verbatim accounts: By spending prolonged periods in the field, a researcher can provide rich, thick descriptions that include “abundant concrete detail” about the setting and environment where the study is taking place (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). Thick descriptions allow for the reader to contextually understand the data and feel connected to the participants or research environment (Creswell & Miller, 2000).
- Member checking and multiple researchers: the act of collaboration is in itself a form of credibility. Creswell and Miller (2000) maintain that having participants become co-researchers that are involved in all aspects of the study adds, provides a level of member checking, and contributes to the “credibility of [final] narrative accounts” of the study (p. 128).
- Multi-method strategies: including multiple sources of data collection (triangulation) in a study increases the credibility of the data (Mouton, 2001). Triangulation involves

collecting multiple data sources for each research question or phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2008). Triangulation should involve three or more sources of data collection to understand a phenomenon. Consequently, when multiple data sources produce the same results, it increases the consistency and credibility of the data. When sources produce differing results, this provides an opportunity to reflect, question and understand. Thus, relying on multiple sources of information for emerging themes enhances credibility in data analysis (Creswell, 2008).

- McMillan (2008) suggests that researcher bias in an AR study should include identifying the researcher's motivation for conducting the study and the anticipated level of researcher involvement. To enhance credibility an audit trail should be evident (Creswell & Miller, 2000). "An audit trail is established by researchers documenting the inquiry process through journaling and memoing, keeping a research log of all activities, developing a data collection chronology, and recording data analysis procedures" (p. 128). I created and maintained a research log throughout the ten months of the study, further contributing to the trustworthiness of the study.

***Transferability.*** A criticism about CAR in education is that a study is typically conducted to change or advance a small group of educators' practices. Data produced is contextualised and ahistorical, looking only at present conditions. Therefore, data is not likely to be generalisable (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). However, data could be transferable (Elliott, 2001; Jackson, 2009). Transferability is "achieved when readers feel as though the story of the research overlaps with their own situation, and they intuitively transfer the research to their action" (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). Researchers can create transferability by using deep, rich descriptions and by writing so it is accessible and inviting to the reader. Table 16 below summarises the strategies applicable for transferability.

**Table 16***Strategies for Transferability*

Strategy	The Study
Low-inference descriptors	In 2017 and 2018, precise and detailed prescriptions of people and situations were recorded.
Negative cases or discrepant data	An active search was conducted, and an analysis was done to report negative cases or discrepant data that are an exemption to patterns or that modify patterns in the data.

- Low-interference descriptors and negative cases: data described fully, inclusive of negative cases, provide a rich, detailed description of the research context. This allows readers to assess to what extent the reported findings are transferable to other settings. The reader is the one who “transfers” the knowledge they have gained from the study. The thicker and richer the descriptions of the study are, the easier it is for a reader to determine if the study is similar to other contexts or not (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Noffke, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Therefore, the goal is to provide a rich and thick description of the actions taken during the study and of the subsequent data findings.

- Generalisability is not the primary aim with CAR and interpretive research. The data in this study are not seeking to define or understand the singular truth of ACT theory. In CAR, the goal is to understand what is happening within a specific context and determine what might improve current practices (Hammersley, 1993; 2004; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

## **Ethical Considerations**

Codes of ethical conduct are articulated as sets of principles aimed at safeguarding the participants' rights and ensuring findings from research remain accountable and credible (Locke et al., 2013; Mouton, 2001). This study was conducted according to internationally accepted ethical principles outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki (Schroeder & Gefenas, 2009). Ethical guidelines were adhered to as stated by Unisa's Policy on Research Ethics and Guidelines for Ethics Review (Unisa, 2007a; 2007b). Ethical clearance was obtained from Unisa (see Annexure A). Additional ethical approval was obtained from the Research Environment, the private HEI, through the appropriate research committee (see Annexure B). Assistance provided with data analysis was done confidentially (see Annexure C).

Furthermore, each co-researcher and case study sample participant was invited to sign an informed consent letter (see Annexure D and Annexure E). The consent letter provided permission to include the co-researchers and case study sample's information in this study whilst preserving their anonymity. The research ethics approval process is just the beginning of ongoing ethical considerations. My responsibility was always to proceed with the best interests of the co-researchers and case study sample participants in mind.

I could not identify all possible or potential ethical challenges. However, I could be sensitive and provide "good enough" (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2011, p. 12) ethical decision-making throughout the study (Cohen et al., 2007). Groundwater-Smith et al. (2011) state that,

Good enough should not be seen as 'merely good' or some kind of mediocrity. It has to do with making rational and defensible choices. The good enough approach is a way to drive ongoing improvement and achieve excellence by progressively meeting, challenging, and raising

our responses to difficult ethical problems in practitioner inquiry as opposed to driving toward an illusion of perfection (p. 12).

I used professional judgment in anticipating and minimising risks that might have occurred within this study. Tisdale (2003) points out that as researchers, we could never plan for all the possibilities that might occur, yet, we are responsible for all the possibilities. Ethical challenges in conducting AR studies in education have been extensively investigated (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014; Locke et al., 2013). Many of the ethical challenges investigated involve negotiating the relationships between people in a given study (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015; Floyd & Arthur, 2012). To address the ethical challenges between the multiple relationships in this study, the following sections discuss the ethical principle of vulnerability in relationships, confidentiality, anonymity, and the ethical principles of benefits and harm.

### ***Vulnerability***

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) assert the centrality of collaboration in CAR:

Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out... The approach is only action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that the action research of the group is achieved through the critically examined action of individual group members (p. 5).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) posit that one of the most significant ethical challenges stems from the collaborative nature of CAR. Educators generate shared knowledge about their teaching and learning practices, raising ethical challenges of insider researchers, dual roles of responsibility, and related power imbalances (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015). Locke et al. (2013) reiterate that framing research as collaborative may help reduce the power imbalance between members of the study. Still, it does not hide the fact that "...one party is investigating the other" (p. 256).

Similarly, those not in power are vulnerable. Vulnerability refers to the restriction of exercising autonomy or making free choices (Mouton, 2001). Collaboration and participation need to be voluntary, and participants must be autonomous and free to withdraw at any time with no consequences (Mockler, 2014). Informed consent requires the absence of coercive pressure to participate and thus dictates voluntariness (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). Voluntariness means that individuals have chosen to participate in research according to their values, preferences, and wishes (Creswell, 2008). An important consideration for promoting and protecting participant's voluntariness is consideration around the recruitment process (Mockler, 2014). Researchers need to be cognizant of situations where undue influence and coercion may restrict or undermine the voluntariness of a participant's consent to participate in research.

However, informed consent is a largely unworkable process in CAR, given the iterative, cyclical, and collaborative process of the research. In other words, researchers are unable to foresee all the possible outcomes of participation, as this would undermine the CAR process (Zeni, 2001). Tisdale (2003) points out that informed consent has been critiqued as a meaningless ritual rather than addressing and improving the ethics of research in research such as AR. Smyth and Holian (2008) argue that a possible solution to this issue

is process consent (consent as ongoing and negotiated), allowing participants to decide whether to remain involved throughout the study (Gill & Bhattacharjee, 2009). Throughout this study, process consent was applied and negotiated with co-researchers and the case study sample.

It is vital to discuss co-option and coercion to avoid or minimise their presence (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015). In acknowledging the ethical dilemmas of CAR, Behnke and Jones (2012) pose the thought around whether AR is a democratic undertaking or more of a web of collusion and compliance. Within this study, there was the risk of power or hierarchical imbalances that could exploit co-researchers and the case study sample. Power is linked to the pre-established roles, positions, and relationships within an established research environment (Clark, 2006). The power imbalance was recognised in two relationships in this study: the case study sample in relation to the co-researchers and the relationship between the co-researchers and me.

**Vulnerability of the Case Study Sample.** Sustainable educational change may start from inside the classroom, and this entails the involvement of students and educators, creating a context that promotes collaboration and participation (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2011; 2015). CAR seeks to establish participation, creating symmetry and democratic relationships (Postholm & Skrovset, 2013). However, it is essential to acknowledge that hierarchical and power imbalances remain due to the lead researcher, co-researchers and case study sample having differently assigned roles.

The issue of subtle coercion or unduly influencing the case study sample into consenting to participate in research is acknowledged. Subtle coercion comes into play when the researcher is an insider and in a position of power in relation to the case study sample. The researcher's status as an authority may impinge on the voluntary nature of freely

consenting, with the case study sample fearing repercussions should they not participate. Alternatively, the researcher may have a captive audience with ease of access.

As Pritchard (2002) points out, just because researchers are interested in research at their own sites, they do not have the right to “demand the cooperation of others” or the right “to compel people—including their students—to cooperate in their research” (p. 5). Banegas and Villacañas de Castro (2015) observe that while the research may be part of the teacher's professional development, the children are not. The opposite is the case, rather, the children are there for development. Thus, the co-researcher holds dual roles in the CAR study, both as a co-researcher and an educator.

Consideration for the case study sample's perception of the voluntary or involuntary nature of their participation in the study needs to be acknowledged (Nolen & VanderPutten, 2007). The case study sample depends on the co-researchers for their grades and may feel coerced into participating and providing feedback in a favourable light so as not to be penalised. The case study sample's fear of consequence due to the dual roles of the co-researcher restricts the case study sample from their right to autonomy. Furthermore, the case study sample has restricted autonomy in choosing to participate in the study. The research is conducted within their classroom and forms part of their standard education activities (Nolen & VanderPutten, 2007).

To increase the case study sample's autonomy and reduce potential coercion and vulnerability, these steps were included in this study:

- Fear of the consequences of not participating or any other constraints surrounding the decision to participate in the research must be removed, so participation is freely made (Hammack, 1997). Tanke and Tanke (1982) suggested those persons in roles to influence potential research participants, for example, educators, should avoid being the primary persons who seek the subjects' consent; they suggest this as a precaution to “divorce research



from treatment or education in the subject's mind" (p. 136). Offering third-party management of consent and data is a possible strategy for addressing the potential for coercion (Locke et al., 2013). In this study, co-researchers were not directly involved in data collection with the case study sample. This separation provided a clear distinction between the dual roles of educator and co-researcher and normal classroom activities and the study. Instead, as the lead researcher, I was responsible for data collection with the case study sample. I invited the case study sample to participate in the study and to provide their experiences. I was not involved in teaching the students, and therefore, I had no influence on their performance or grades.

- Co-researchers were not informed regarding which of their students opted to participate in the study to ensure the protection of students from perceived coercion and the fear of being discriminated against or penalised. The data collected were utilised for research only and not for any disciplinary, performance evaluation, or related purposes (Creswell, 2008). Students who participated were not rewarded or unfairly advantaged because this implies a penalty for those who chose not to participate.

- The educator is regarded as a professional by students, colleagues, and the public as consistently undergoing professional development to improve practice to benefit the student (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Thus, there is an expectation for continual educator professional development, and these improvements in practice do not require informed consent from students. However, in a CAR study, given its democratic and collaborative nature, participants are brought alongside the researchers. In this study, the case study sample was informed of the study by the lead researcher upfront at the beginning of the academic year.

- Banegas (2013) recommends that anonymous surveys or questionnaires be carried out post-study to triangulate qualitative information collected. Divergent opinions could emerge when participants are anonymous. In this study, an anonymous post term survey was conducted.

- There is growing literature in education advocating for marginalised groups and the voices of young individuals to contribute to curriculum and pedagogical decision-making (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2011). This study gave voice to young people, postgraduate psychology students, in informing teaching and learning practices.
- The educator profession stipulates appropriate ethical behaviours in ensuring the rights of students are upheld. As such, educators are already framing their actions in terms of ethics appropriate within their profession and protecting the rights of their students (Locke et al., 2013). Educators within this research environment also sign a commitment to their ethical duties and responsibilities as educators.
- Alternatives to participating in the research for the same credit or remuneration, or benefit must be provided so those who choose not to participate in the research process are not unfairly disadvantaged. Participants in this study were invited to attend the ACT-based workshops even if they decided not to participate in the study itself (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). The workshop was non-credit bearing and had no relation to grades. The workshop was provided as a support resource.

**Vulnerability of the Co-Researchers.** The co-researchers' relationship with me, the lead researcher, automatically produced a power imbalance in this study, as I had hierarchical status within the research environment. The power imbalance was further exacerbated because I was responsible for the management of the co-researchers in the research environment. Moreover, I managed performance and evaluation, providing support and appraisal, assigning teaching responsibilities and engaging co-researchers in forward planning. Also, I facilitated two ACT-based professional development workshops as part of the CAR cycles, which may have given the impression I am an 'expert', further reaffirming

the power imbalance in the relationship. In addition, I was a doctoral student, which may have given an additional impression I am the ‘expert’.

There is a further issue around the trustworthiness of data gathered in a CAR study. In this study, questions arose as to whether staff would be free to express reservations to me as I determined their professional advancement. When co-researchers (educators) investigate their practices within a culture of performativity, data and adverse results may be precluded or favourable results may be overvalued, to protect job stability (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015). Another concern is around co-researchers’ autonomy to freely participate or not in the study without coercion (Locke et al., 2013).

Given the collaborative nature of this study, tensions and power imbalances could have arisen, between the co-researchers and me around the study’s questions and direction. Tensions could also have arisen because my reasons for engaging in the CAR study could not be aligned with the co-researchers, as I had a secondary motivation of producing a doctoral study (Rowell & Feldman, 2019). Even though co-researchers were given an equal voice, I usually decided on the study’s direction, the final interpretation of the data, and which information was made public given the doctoral requirements (Cohen et al., 2007). There were numerous factors considered to reduce the power imbalance and prevent vulnerability. These steps were included to empower co-researchers:

- The Belmont Report (1979) proposed a standard of “the reasonable volunteer,” one where the participant knows that the research is not such that it is necessary for their care or their benefit, but they “can decide whether they wish to participate in the furthering of knowledge” (p. 10). In line with this, in this study the co-researchers were consulted regarding how to alleviate a sense of coercion and what conditions could allow them freely to consent to the research. This immediately shifted the working relationship to a collaborative

relationship. This imbalance was discussed with the co-researchers who provided written consent to participate (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

- Within a more collaborative study, the research process is a shared process where individuals are part of the process in assessing their vulnerability. Ebbs (1996) and Wolf (2020) term it empowering, when those who have traditionally been thought of as research subjects become involved in a more participatory research model; where the research process is jointly negotiated. Ironically, where some see risk, others see the very process of bringing the data back into the community from which it was generated to benefit both the researched and the community. Lincoln and Guba (2000) make the case that through joint decision-making about data collection, analysis, and writing, the researched will become empowered and the agents and instruments of their change processes. The very nature of the CAR process facilitates the empowerment of the co-researchers and reduces vulnerability. In this study, I monitored biases and subjective viewpoints through supervision and member-checking with co-researchers (Creswell, 2008).

- Educators are responsible for their own personal and professional development. Therefore, being part of a CAR study where educators co-construct their own personal and professional development through individual and collective efforts enhances their autonomy (Benson, 2010). Furthermore, in this study co-researchers were invited to the professional development workshops but could choose whether or not to provide feedback for this study (Mouton, 2001).

- Collaboration and the start of any CAR study must lie in the hands of those who wish to research their own classrooms and identify their own problems. It was vital that as the lead researcher in this study, I did not impose my agenda for change and improvement if educators did not recognise a need for change or improvement themselves (Banegas & Villacañas de,

2015). The power imbalance was reduced as the co-researchers identified the need for the study and the change in practice.

- This study gathered continual consent from co-researchers. Consent is not regarded as a one-off task but a constant ongoing process, ensuring participants remain informed and willing to participate (Richards & Schwartz, 2002). Discussions around consent throughout the process give transparency and integrity to the research findings. In this study, consent was obtained at all meetings, interviews, workshops, and surveys, whether implied, verbally, or written.

### ***Confidentiality and Anonymity***

In a small-scale and intimate CAR project, participants' privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity are challenging and can be compromised as interpretive research are small-scale, more intimate and open-ended than scientific research (Howe & Moses, 1999). Additionally, the more information co-researchers and case study samples give when constructing a thick description, the higher the risk of identification and exposure. Thus, if AR is supposed to be local and context-responsive, is anonymity possible? (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015). Taking the above into consideration, this study took care as follows:

- The data collected were de-identified to ensure anonymity. Descriptive and biographical details of the co-researchers and case study participants were limited as the potential for identity exposure was too great.
- The participants' identities were not linked to their responses during the analysis process or the writing of this thesis.
- All information gathered has been stored on a password-protected computer to ensure the material would be kept confidential and safe.

- Professionals who assisted with the research process signed a confidentiality agreement to ensure that data were not released (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).
- Privacy was upheld by respecting participants' right to withhold information.

Therefore, participants in this study were not obliged to disclose any information they were uncomfortable sharing (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

### ***Benefits and Harm***

“Researchers are to adhere to two general rules: (a) do no harm and (b) maximise possible benefits” (The Belmont Report, 1979, p. 6). The benefits and harm ethical principle refers to conducting research where the potential benefits to participants are maximised, while possible harm and risk are minimised (Mouton, 2001). Potential harm was discussed in the previous points; below is the consideration for possible benefits.

- Discussing benefits depend on principles of honesty and transparency (Banegas, 2013). In this study, while I endeavoured to empower educators and students, I acknowledged that I would be the only one who would benefit from a doctoral degree. Thus, this was disclosed upfront with co-researchers and case study participants. This gave co-researchers and case study participants the opportunity to ascertain their motivations for participating in the study and the potential benefits. Benefits are to be discussed as the research unfolds allowing the researcher, co-researchers and the case study sample opportunities to acknowledge their different motivations for involvement (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015).
- This study aimed to empower the co-researchers, the respective educator body, to modify their teaching and learning practices to enhance student development. Modifying teaching and learning practices is a process of professional development, and literature supports the many benefits educators experience through this process (Campbell, 2003).

Thus, through their collaboration and involvement in this study, the co-researchers may experience benefits associated with their own personal and professional development.

- Case-study participants in this study may have a positive experience of developing the soft skill of psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility is the skill of learning to persist despite discomfort. This skill can be applied to personal, academic, and professional contexts. The experience of enhancing psychological flexibility can often lead to positive feelings and thoughts about oneself and others. Furthermore, the development of psychological flexibility can aid in professionally developing students for preparation for further studies and the working environment.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the methodology utilised in this study. The interpretive paradigm was explained and justified the CAR methodology adopted. The research context was discussed in detail, providing an understanding of the study's role players. The data collection, analysis and trustworthiness were also considered. The chapter concluded with ethical considerations. In Chapter Five the data collected and analysed from the four CAR cycles will be detailed while answering the three research questions.

## Chapter 5 Findings and Discussion

“Most research done in education fails to have any impact simply because the problems selected are not seen as problems by those who presumably would benefit from their solution.” - Regelski (1994)

### Introduction

The primary argument propounded in this study is that ACT, which aims to enhance psychological flexibility, can assist psychology honours students to respond effectively in discomfort (Hayes, 2015). Psychological flexibility has a role in enhancing students’ ability to act despite commonplace discomforts. This study investigated how educators incorporated ACT into their teaching and learning practices to promote psychological flexibility skill development in psychology honours students.

This chapter is organised around three guiding research questions to achieve the aims of the study, namely:

- Research Question 1: What are educators’ experiences of the ACT-based professional development training?
- Research Question 2: What are educators’ experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching, and learning practices for psychology honours students?
- Research Question 3: What are psychology honours students’ experiences of their ACT-based development?

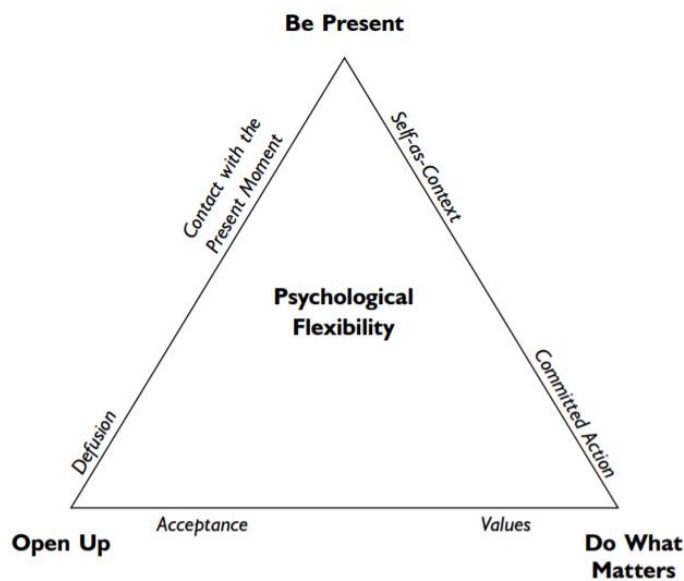
This chapter presents the data gathered and analysed in the four CAR cycles to answer the three guiding research questions. The ACT Triflex model served as the conceptual lens adopted to interpret the empirical data in this chapter. The ACT Triflex model, which describes psychological flexibility as three interlocking phases (opening up, being present,



doing what matters), work together to enhance psychological flexibility (see Figure 6 below). In answering the three research questions, the ACT Triflex model is the organising structure to interpret the data presented for each research question.

### Figure 5

*The ACT Triflex: The Six Psychological Flexibility Processes*



*Note.* From “*ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*” (p. 13), by R. Harris, 2009, New Harbinger. Copyright 2009 by Russ Harris.

To begin, Research Question 1 will be addressed hence will focus on the co-researchers’ experiences of their professional development in ACT. The co-researchers’ experiences are structured within the ACT Triflex model of opening up, being present and doing what matters.

Then, Research Question 2 will be addressed. This section documents how co-researchers applied the ACT processes into their teaching and learning practices. Again, the ACT Triflex model of opening up, being present and doing what matters provides the

organising structure of the data presented. Applying ACT to teaching and learning practices is a crucial aspect of the study being reported on.

Last, Research Question 3 will be addressed, looking at the experiences of the case study sample who experienced the ACT-based teaching and learning practices. The case study sample's experiences are similarly structured within the ACT Triflex model of opening up, being present and doing what matters. Student development is a cornerstone of this study; thus, data are needed to prove whether ACT-based teaching and learning practices effectively prepare postgraduate psychology students with psychological flexibility skills.

### **Findings and Discussion: Answering Research Question 1**

The effectiveness of incorporating ACT-based skills into the classroom and teaching and learning practices depends on educators' professional development (Cornelison & van der den Berg, 2013). Research suggests that educators embodying ACT-based skills in a personal capacity prior to embedding them in their professional capacity is helpful, although not a requirement (McCown et al., 2010; Zeichner, 2003). Bennett-Levy et al. (2001) demonstrated that with self-practise and self-reflection in ACT, individuals could develop a deeper understanding of ACT-based skills and are better prepared to use ACT-based skills in a professional capacity. Thus, personally experiencing ACT-based skills is an apt way of modelling these skills for others, such as students in the classroom (Bennett-Levy et al., 2001; Varra et al., 2008).

However, there is a scarcity of research documenting related requirements or protocols for professionally developing educators in ACT-based skills (Burgin, 2017; Pakenham & Stafford-Brown, 2012; Rosenberg, 2018). Given the paucity of research guidelines, flexible and creative applications are encouraged (Öst, 2014). In response, I implemented a CAR methodology to guide the ACT-based professional development of the

co-researchers. The CAR process allowed the co-researchers to undergo professional development in ACT-based skills and then apply the ACT-based skills to their teaching and learning practices. As summarised by Onwuegbuzie and Dickinson (2006), CAR is an effective process for professional development:

CAR engagement improves instructional effectiveness, empowers educators by giving them greater confidence in their ability to promote change, increases reflection about teaching practice, heightens educators' curiosity about teaching practice, encourages educators to be active learners themselves, increases appreciation for theory and provides an avenue for informing theory, increases knowledge and skills in research methodology and facilitates the defence of pedagogic choices (p. 2).

Documenting the co-researchers' experiences of the ACT-based professional development training, facilitated through a CAR methodology, was essential in answering Research Question 1. To answer this question and provide trustworthy data generated from the CAR process, three recommendations from Sagor (2005) were used as a guideline: (a) data need to be collected from three data sources, (b) at least one quantitative data source to further verify qualitative data needs to be included, and (c) the data sources should include at least two perspectives. Table 17 presents the four data sources consulted: Educator Post Term Reflections, ACT-based educator professional development training 1, ACT-based educator professional development training 2, and Post Term Survey with Educators. The table indicates the inclusion of a quantitative data source, the Post Term Survey with Educators.

**Table 17***Research Question 1: Trustworthy Data Sources*

<b>Research Question 1</b>	<b>Data Source 1</b>	<b>Data Source 2</b>	<b>Data Source 3</b>	<b>Data Source 4</b>
<b>What are educators' experiences of the ACT-based professional development training?</b>	Qualitative Data	Qualitative Data	Qualitative Data	Quantitative Data
	Co-researcher Data	Co-researcher Data	Co-researcher Data	Co-researcher Data
	Educator Post Term Reflections	ACT-based educator professional development training 1	ACT-based educator professional development training 2	Post Term Survey with Educators

*Note.* Adapted from *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* (p. 45), by R. Sagor, 1992, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) publications. Copyright 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Regarding Research Question 1, data show the co-researchers' experiences of their ACT-based professional development training have been captured according to the ACT Triflex model of opening up, being present and doing what matters. And the co-researchers' experiences of the CAR process and the research environment have been documented to understand the professional development process further.

### ***The Co-researchers' Experiences of their ACT-based Professional Development Training***

To explore co-researchers' experience of psychological flexibility from the ACT-based professional development training, as indicated, the co-researchers' experiences have

been recorded according to the ACT Triflex Model (see Figure 6). Data derived from the co-researchers' experiences of the ACT-based professional development training uncovered three prominent themes, namely resilience, empathy, and authenticity. All co-researchers mentioned these three themes in all three data sources (see Table 18).

**Table 18**

*Summary of Findings: ACT Triflex Themes*

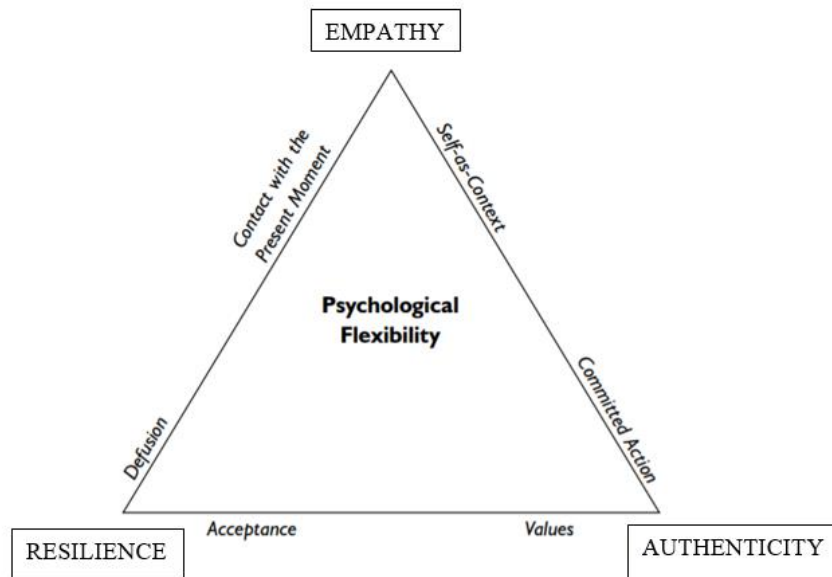
<b>ACT Triflex Processes</b>	<b>Co-researchers' professional development themes</b>	<b>How many data sources confirmed this theme &lt; 3</b>	<b>How many co-researchers confirmed this theme &lt; 7</b>
Opening Up	Resilience	3	7
Being Present	Empathy	3	7
Doing what matters	Authenticity	3	7

*Note.* Adapted from *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* (p. 45), by R. Sagor, 1992, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) publications. Copyright 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

As shown in Table 18, the co-researchers' experienced increased resilience, empathy and authenticity from their ACT-based professional development training. To facilitate the development of psychological flexibility, the ACT Triflex model focuses on the three main processes. The co-researchers' experiences of the three main ACT Triflex processes facilitated their professional development in resilience, empathy, and authenticity, as expressed in Figure 7 below.

**Figure 6**

*Summary of the Co-researchers' ACT-based Professional Development: ACT Triflex Model*



*Note.* Adapted from “*ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*” (p. 13), by R. Harris, 2009, New Harbinger. Copyright 2009 by Russ Harris.

To share the co-researchers’ experiences of resilience, empathy and authenticity from their ACT-based professional development training, the following sections are structured according to the ACT Triflex Model processes. First, data regarding the co-researchers’ personal experiences of opening up are presented with the common theme of resilience; second, the focus is on the co-researchers’ experiences of being present’, which revealed a common theme of increased empathy; third, the co-researchers’ experiences of doing what matters is documented, describing the common theme of increased authenticity. The data produced evidence to support the notion that co-researchers’ were able to professionally develop and embody the ACT-based processes of opening up, being present, doing what

matters, thus enhancing psychological flexibility. Last, negative cases that emerged from the ACT-based professional development training are summarised.

*Co-researchers' Experiences of Opening Up.* From the ACT Triflex model, the co-researchers' experiences of opening up are derived from the ACT processes of cognitive defusion and acceptance. Cognitive defusion assists an individual to witness their internal language (thoughts, feelings, labels, judgements, and comparisons) as experiences and not facts that require reactions (Hayes et al., 1999). Acceptance is about being conscious and mindfully accepting internal language and being present without judgement or over-identification (Hayes et al., 1999). The ACT Triflex process of opening up involves allowing pleasant and unpleasant internal language to come and go without becoming infused or constricted by them. Thus, allowing internal language to come and go of its own accord (Biglan et al., 2008). Through the ACT-based professional development training, the co-researchers' professional development of opening up in their own lives revealed the shared experience of resilience.

Resilience was closely linked to the co-researchers' experiences of the ACT process of opening up. The ability not to respond impulsively to reduce discomfort or unpleasant internal language improves the ability to adapt emotionally and socially to situations (Sahdra et al., 2011). Co-researcher 3 explained that opening up enables them to remain resilient:

I think that I approach things from a curious stance and knowing that life is a work in progress of continuously learning new things, even if it pushes me out of my comfort zone. Because of that, I am continuously learning, pushing the limits of my understanding or what I am comfortable with (ACT-based educator professional development training 1).

Co-researcher 6, who attended the ACT-based educator professional development training 2, explained that *“Being flexible and willing allows me to accommodate for the unexpected that may come up... and deal with this effectively.”* The literature suggests that opening up is closely linked to professional growth, as it facilitates a sense of cognitive and emotional resilience (Zhang & Zhang, 2017). As the co-researchers experience opening up, they often express the related professional growth of resilience that occurs through the process. Co-researcher 3 explained that opening up enables them to *“push myself to further my own knowledge, my own skills and learn to embrace challenges as part of the process”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 2). Co-researcher 7 agreed, stating how opening up *“...allows for the development of different areas of different people, challenge and growth to develop appropriate flexibility”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 1). Co-researcher 4 concurred, stating how allowing internal language to come and go of its own accord (opening up) enhances their ability *“To expand on my knowledge, expertise and experience and therefore respond more thoughtfully to difficulties experienced”* (Post Term Reflections).

Much of human behaviour appears to involve the conflict between short-term alleviation of distress and long-term healthy functioning (Bond & Bunce, 2003). Learning to remain in discomfort while pursuing valued goals is a valuable skill for personal and professional development (Moran, 2011). Co-researcher 4 mused that learning to remain in discomfort requires resilience: *“[opening up] has helped me with pushing forward in my career and doing things despite the fear associated with them”* (Post Term Reflections). Co-researcher 2 agreed, *“[opening up] allows me to develop risk-taking and the ability to think more out of the box”* (Post Term Reflections). Within the theme of resilience, learning to adjust behaviour, when identified as necessary, was acknowledged as essential for co-



researchers. In the Post Term Reflections, co-researcher 1 stated that when things do not go to plan, resilience is expressed through how one chooses to behave,

... when we plan things, we can anticipate challenges coming along, but I think in this case the class dynamic was something that we did not consider in our planning. I got side-tracked from the development plan to a new plan of creating a safe place for development in the class.

Co-researcher 4 expressed a similar experience:

I learnt that I am a very flexible person in terms of adapting to changing circumstances. I managed to change my approach to teaching in the classroom, especially for the honours class. I had an unstructured approach tailored for higher-level critical thinking. They were struggling with it and I adopted a more structured approach and yet managed to maintain the high level of critical engagement (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

Research indicates that the ability to choose one's behaviours based on the situation and personal values while staying in contact with the present moment demonstrates opening up (Moore & Malinowski, 2009; Siegel, 2010). Co-researcher 5 demonstrated their ability to choose the behaviour:

I express resilience through the way I handle class discussions that are very difficult. The classroom teaches us two things (a) how to engage with others in a non-emotional but rational manner, and (b) how to deal with people who

react in an emotional and irrational manner (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

Studies have shown that soft skill development, such as ACT, may promote the benefits of resilience and well-being, providing a protective barrier toward emotional exhaustion that precedes burnout (Flaxman & Bond, 2010; Walker, 2015). Higher levels of reported psychological flexibility are associated with improvements in psychological functioning, enhancing self-regulatory processes that buffer against psychological distress and promote general well-being (Meiklejohn et al., 2013). Research indicates that teaching can be an emotionally demanding profession (Tuxford & Bradley, 2015). Opening up may help educators manage the emotional stress of teaching and aid in more effective teaching and learning practices (Tuxford & Bradley, 2015). ACT may promote the enjoyment of teaching and help educators maintain their commitment to the profession and their care for their students (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). Co-researcher 7, through their professional development of opening up, expressed their commitment to the teaching profession:

I realised that I both enjoy teaching in higher education and I am good at it. I have started to think about being at [the institution] more as a career than just a positive experience. I also started to think more of my involvement with [the institution] as a long-term commitment as opposed to experience on my CV. This is also challenging me to think in terms of my future and my career (Post Term Reflections).

Thus, the professional development in ACT-based skills promotes resilience and aids in experiencing well-being (Pülschen & Pülschen, 2015). Co-researcher 3 expressed their

enjoyment of teaching: “*There is personal satisfaction and enjoyment in teaching and applying ACT demonstrates to me how I gain career satisfaction*” (ACT-based educator professional development training 1). Co-researcher 3, in the Post Term Reflections, reiterated the benefits of opening up for them: “*Flexibility and awareness in my work creates calm and happiness outside of work*”.

**Co-researchers’ Experiences of Being Present.** From the ACT Triflex model, the co-researchers’ experiences of being present are derived from the ACT processes of self-as-context and contacting the present moment. Self-as-context points to a heightened sense of self-awareness where the person is aware of personal flow experiences while remaining detached from outcomes (Daks et al., 2020; Harris, 2009). Contacting the present moment is often called being mindful and is intimately linked to being task-focused and engaged in the present moment (Gardner & Moore, 2012). The ACT Triflex process of being present involves making contact with verbal and non-verbal aspects of the here-and-now experience (Harris, 2009). Through their co-researchers’ ACT-based professional development, the co-researchers’ professional development of being present in their own lives revealed the shared experience of increased empathy.

Empathy, also regarded as compassion, acceptance and adopting multiple perspectives (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Shapiro & Izett, 2008), was a common experience that emerged for co-researchers in their professional development of being present. Thus, the co-researchers’ increased awareness of self and others facilitated increased empathy (Shapiro & Walsh, 2006). Co-researcher 1 described, in the Post Term Reflections, the increase in empathy for their students:

I think that what I have learned about myself as an educator is that in many ways, my journey as an educator parallels my students' journeys. While we have differences in life experiences, education levels etc., we all try and do the best we can in the academic field. I find that keeping this in mind has increased my empathy and patience when working with students who often have very different skills and levels of understanding.

The co-researchers' ability to be present and aware of their internal processes and surroundings helps them understand themselves and their environment (Shapiro & Walsh, 2006). Co-researcher 4 expressed their awareness, stating,

I have learnt that I am more comfortable with smaller groups because the quality of interaction and engagement is of a higher and more personalised standard. I also learned that there is a fine line between being congruent yet cognisant of professional boundaries (Post Term Reflections).

Co-researcher 3, in the ACT-based educator professional development training 2, expressed their increased self-awareness: *"Interesting how my contact with the students... has opened norms and values in me that I had buried a long time ago. I find myself in an uncomfortable space, but this is a good thing."* It is crucial that co-researchers are aware of their viewpoints, biases, worldviews and how these are expressed in the classroom, as these experiences could have a direct influence on students' development (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Co-researcher 6 stated,

I learnt that I am more person-centred than I thought, I am very aware of my students. I not only want students to be impacted and changed by the work we do but also by myself as an educator and by one another in the classroom. I didn't initially realise how important this is for me; how meaningful it would be (ACT-based educator professional development training 1).

Co-researcher 7, in the Post Term Reflections, also reflected on the necessity of their own development in awareness for the development of their students: “[*being present*] encourages you to expose yourself to think about who you are and challenge your own long-held beliefs. The more aware I am of myself, the more conscious I am of my influence on students.” Educators directly influence students’ development thus, educators should also reflect high levels of self-awareness (Wood et al., 2008). For example, co-researcher 5, in the Post Term Reflections, reiterated,

The workshop in which I participated prior to the term starting really allowed me to begin to think about the kind of educator that I want to be. The result of this is that I learned that I should share that with my class in our first session, to give them a bit of insight into the kind of person and educator that I am so that their learning environment can be more predictable.

Co-researcher 2 agreed, stating “*the ability to make complex aspects accessible to all students without compromising the quality of education comes through the flexibility, reflexivity and empathy of the educator*” (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

*Co-researchers' Experiences of Doing What Matters.* From the ACT Triflex model, the co-researchers' experiences of doing what matters are derived from the ACT processes of values and committed action. Values refer to a life direction that assists individuals to engage in behaviour aligned with chosen life directions (Salande & Hawkins, 2017). Committed action refers to doing what is necessary to live by values even if that solicits discomfort (Hayes, 1998). The ACT Triflex process of doing what matters involves committing to valued behaviour despite discomfort (Hayes et al., 2012). Through the co-researchers' ACT-based professional development training, the process of doing what matters revealed the common experience of authenticity.

The ACT Triflex process of doing what matters enables an individual to live a life of consistency between values and behaviours (Moran, 2011). As Co-researcher 1 pointed out, when values and behaviour align, "*It feels congruent and authentic*" (Post Term Reflections). Co-researcher 6 further reflected on authenticity, stating,

I have found that I have become more comfortable in my own skin and really embraced the idea of authenticity. It has been an interesting transition from being involved in private practice where although you are authentic, we do so in a way that is guarded. I have found that this term I am more comfortable sharing more of myself with the students and really stepping into the educator role, where I am able to encourage, motivate and mentor (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

When values and behaviour at work are aligned, it is not uncommon for individuals to recognise that they can express an authentic version of themselves (O'Hora & Maglieri,

2006). Co-researcher 7 reiterated alignment of values and behaviour produces feelings of integrity:

Being in an environment where you can express your values, yourself and be authentic would increase my feelings of integrity, feeling comfortable within my own skin. When I am allowed to be authentic and myself, I feel I am able to truly give everything in a work environment which allows me to increase productivity and feelings of satisfaction (Post Term Reflections).

This was confirmed by Co-researcher 2, who stated, *“I envision an environment where I am able to be authentic and true to myself so that I am able to express my values”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 1). Alignment in values and committed action assists individuals to persist in valued life directions despite discomfort (Hayes, 2017). The co-researchers expressed how values allowed them to focus on what is important, despite the discomfort: *“Values allows me to focus on what is important. By focusing on personal areas of importance I am able to express myself in my work”* (co-researcher 2, Post Term Reflections). Co-researcher 4 agreed, stating, *“There is less time wasted on things and activities that are not in line with my values”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 1). In addition, Co-researcher 5 added, *“Your values help you to align your behaviour to accomplish your goal”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

Research suggests that committing to chosen values in the presence of pleasant or unpleasant internal language enables individuals to create meaningful work experiences (Hayes, 2005). As Co-researcher 3 expressed, *“The ability to use my strengths and values in work, really makes my work more meaningful”* (Post Term Reflections). *“The opportunity to use my values at work makes work meaningful because I will know that I had an impact and*

*made a difference in someone's life [satisfaction]. That's why I am doing what I am doing,"*

Co-researcher 1 added (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

Meaningful work creates engaged individuals who are purposeful even when feelings fluctuate (Mitmansgruber et al., 2008). Co-researcher 1 pointed out that "*[doing what matters] contributes to job satisfaction, which in turn contributes to a meaningful career. This, in turn, makes me want to be more involved*" (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

***Co-researchers' Experiences of Negative Cases.*** Data fully described and inclusive of negative cases, provide a rich, detailed description of the research context (Creswell & Creswell, 2007; Creswell, 2014). As reported in Chapter Four, to enhance the trustworthiness of the data, it was essential that I actively searched for, recorded, analysed, and reported negative cases or discrepant data that were an exception to patterns or that modified the patterns in the data. The co-researchers' data indicated that the theme, values misalignment, could hinder professional development, and is therefore classified as a negative case.

The ACT-based professional development training enhances self-awareness (Hayes, 2016). Individuals become more aware of their values and what is required to pursue valued life directions. When there is alignment between chosen values and committed action, the individual experiences personal satisfaction (Mitmansgruber et al., 2008). However, when there is an awareness that chosen values and behaviour are not aligned, stress, dissatisfaction, and disengagement are caused (Atkins & Parker, 2012). For example, Co-researcher 7, in the Post Term Reflections, pointed to the change in their chosen values as a hindrance for professional development. They explained how their value of family has taken more of a priority compared to work-based values, stating, "*However, with a young child, my life has*



*changed and meaning is created differently, with my career taking less of a priority.*” Co-researcher 3 supported the notion of values misalignment, stating,

... although I joined the organisation because I felt their values aligned with mine, it has become clear that I am unable to express my values within the organisation, thus feel quite stuck. As a result, I have made changes to my career in order to ensure that I am working towards my desired career (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

When viewed through a theoretical lens, it appears that awareness of values being misaligned in a personal or professional capacity can create a hindrance toward an engaged and satisfied workforce (Klapper et al., 2020). Consequently, an organisation that is aware of the workforce’s personal and professional values may be enabled to create work environments considerate of these differences (Nieuwsma et al., 2016). Co-researcher 1 emphasised the importance of personal values aligning within their work context: *“If the institution creates a space for me [my values] to flourish, then this will absolutely enable me to realise my vision and this is the most important thing to me”* (Post Term Reflections). However, suppose individuals might have been clear on their values and priorities but feel that the organisation does not provide them with the independence and trust to implement, then resentment or disengagement can fester, reiterated Co-researcher 2 who shared, *“... it is more than using my values at work. It is having [the HEI] have confidence in me for this to be realised”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 1).

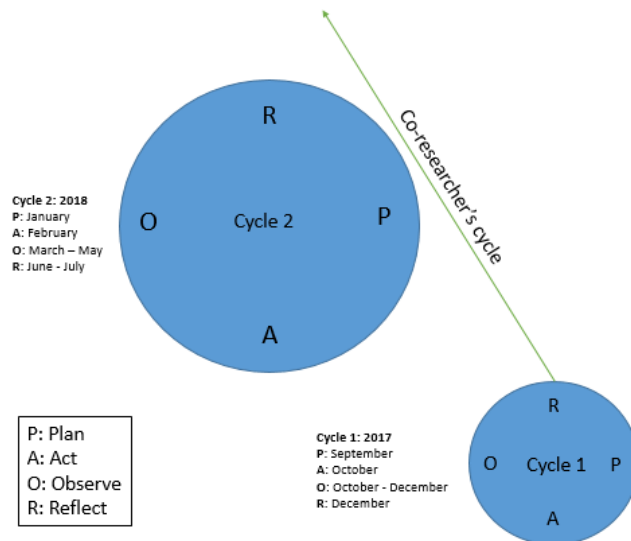
Organisations that implement ACT-based professional development training should be cognisant that an outcome of such training may create awareness around the misalignment of values for individuals. An awareness of misaligned values could cause an increased

workforce turnover, as individuals leave the organisation to find work that aligns with their values. For individuals who choose to remain in an organisation despite misaligned values, it could cause decreased work engagement and satisfaction (Smith & Lazarus, 1990).

Organisations that provide ACT-based professional development training should have tailored support and resources to assist individuals who realise there is a misalignment in their values at work. The organisation would need to determine whether ACT-based professional development training has benefits that outweigh the potential risks.

### ***Co-researchers' Experiences of the CAR Process to Aid in Professional Development***

CAR methodology was selected as the process to facilitate the ACT-based professional development with the co-researchers. Figure 8 illustrates the two CAR Cycles (Cycles 1 and 2) that the co-researchers were involved in to facilitate professional ACT development. Figure 8 shows data collection points within the CAR Cycles, providing a timeline of data consulted to answer Research Question 1. See Chapter 4, for a detailed explanation of CAR Cycles 1 and 2.

**Figure 7***Collaborative Action Research Cycles: Co-researchers' Professional Development Cycles*

*Note.* Adapted from “*Action Research in Higher Education: Examples and Reflections*” (p. 13), by O. Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, Kogan Page. Copyright 1992 by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt.

The co-researchers' experiences in engaging in the CAR process are also essential to document in answering Research Question 1. Therefore, the following section provides data on the co-researchers' experiences of engaging in the CAR process and the research environment where the CAR process was implemented.

***Data on the CAR Process and Research Environment: Post Term Survey.*** The co-researchers' experiences of their professional development through the CAR process were assessed by a voluntary, confidential, quantitative Post Term Survey. This survey allowed co-researchers to provide feedback in two areas: the CAR process and the research environment where the CAR process was implemented. The Post Term Survey posed eight questions about the co-researchers' experiences of engaging in the CAR process and six questions about the research environment. To ascertain numerical data, the questions utilised a five-point Likert

scale ranging from 1-5 or 'excellent' to 'poor'. The questions also allowed for additional comments or qualitative feedback should the co-researchers want to clarify their answers further. Data from the Post Term Survey provide insights for consideration when implementing a CAR process for professional development.

The literature supports the CAR methodology in promoting professional development by aiding in an individual's ability to connect theory with practice to improve educational practice (Mertler, 2014). Sagor (1992) provides two guidelines for implementing a CAR process in the educational context, stating that (a) the phenomena chosen for study must concern the teaching and learning process, and (b) those phenomena must also be within the educator's scope of influence. The CAR process allowed the co-researchers to learn about their instructional practices (knowledge production) and to adapt practices to improve student development (action) (Rawlinson & Little, 2004).

CAR is an effective way of helping co-researchers and those involved in education to understand and improve their work simultaneously (Falk & Blumenreich, 2005). The CAR process has a dual focus on generating knowledge and implementing action, narrowing the gap between knowledge and action within a given context (Guskey, 2014). As a result, the Post Term Survey asked eight questions on the dual focus of the CAR process, namely the co-researchers' generation of knowledge and their implementation of action. The data within these two focal areas provide evidence of whether the CAR process was an effective method for professionally developing the co-researchers.

Focusing firstly on knowledge generation, the Post Term Survey included four questions focused on the co-researchers' engagement with research, literature and knowledge. According to Guskey (2014), by integrating research and knowledge production into settings with those actively engaging in the research problem, findings can be applied immediately, and problems solved more quickly. The co-researchers were asked to rate their knowledge

production generated through the CAR process; all the co-researchers found that the CAR process allowed them to review literature relevant to the identified problem. Over half (57.14%) selected 'above average' for the CAR process, enabling a sense of life-long learning (a weighted average of 4.14 out of 5) and believed their engagement in the CAR process had kept them abreast of the latest knowledge within the area (42.86% rated 'excellent', a weighted average of 4.14). Over seventy per cent (71.43%) of co-researchers believed the CAR process provided an 'above average' experience in remaining cognisant of knowledge to be utilised in an applied aspect (a weighted average of 4 out of 5). As a result, the Post Term Survey indicated that the co-researchers' weighted average was 3.96 (out of 5) for their professional development in knowledge generation, from the four questions asked.

Next, the Post Term Survey posed four questions focusing on the co-researchers' experiences of the CAR process facilitating action. CAR seeks to answer questions and solve problems that arise from the daily life of the classroom and to put findings into immediate practice (McKay, 1992; Twine & Martiner, 1992). All co-researchers indicated that the CAR process allowed them to upskill themselves (a weighted average of 4.43%), with the majority of co-researchers indicating that the CAR process was 'above average' in assisting them to develop new skills (a weighted average of 42.86 out of 5). Over half of the co-researchers (57.14%) indicated that the CAR process was 'excellent' in allowing them to discover the alignment between theory and action. In the spread of scores, the majority of co-researchers indicated that the CAR process was 'average' in allowing them to evaluate their own strengths and limitations in the process. As a result, the Post Term Survey indicated that from the four questions asked, the co-researchers' weighted average was 4.18 (out of 5) for their professional development in implementing action.

The Post Term Survey also posed six questions related to the research environment where the CAR process was facilitated. Mertler (2014) reiterates the importance of

establishing an environment that empowers those involved to promote professional development. Empowerment involves the equal, democratic, and active role of co-researchers in the CAR process. Due to this empowerment, CAR is not imposed on co-researchers in a top-down manner but instead is considered horizontally (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Thus, the Post Term Survey posed six questions to ascertain whether the research environment empowered the co-researchers. Gaining insights from co-researchers around whether the research environment enhanced or hindered their involvement and professional development in the CAR process has essential considerations for those who wish to implement these processes.

CAR is democratic because it encourages communication and interaction between colleagues, inviting active collaboration to improve teaching (Mertler, 2014). All co-researchers indicated that the research environment was ‘excellent’ in providing a context conducive for forming a sense of a team. Moreover, 85,71% of the co-researchers found the research environment ‘excellent’ in ensuring they felt like valued team members. Ebbutt et al. (1990) add that collaborative projects, peer groups, and mentor relationships enable educators to grow both personally and professionally, even if this was not the intended outcome of the CAR study. CAR creates a democratic, social space where collaboration can occur between collaborators (Heron & Reason, 2009; Moore & Armstrong, 2003; Pine, 2009).

Winter (2009) states that “the source of the potential creativity of collaborative inquiry lies in the differences between individuals. This is why the need for skilful communication is so crucial ...” (p. 339). Skilful communication in integrating co-researchers into the CAR process was vital. All the co-researchers indicated ‘excellent’ for three questions, namely, feeling respected as a co-researcher, for being adequately integrated into the CAR process, and that clear goals were communicated for the CAR process. Part of feeling empowered is being equipped or trained to carry out a task properly; thus, the co-

researchers were asked about their support and training in the CAR process. Over eighty-five per cent (85.71%) indicated 'excellent' for the training provided in the CAR process in the research environment. Pine (2009) acknowledges that collaborating with colleagues allowed for open dialogue and reflection about a common practice.

Pine (2009) adds that CAR creates a democratic process enabling equitability for co-researchers. Equitability can result in participants feeling empowered and liberated in their pedagogic practice thus enhancing professional development. The Post Term Survey indicated that from the six questions asked, the co-researchers' weighted average was 4.95 (out of 5), showing that the research environment afforded the co-researchers the opportunity to engage in the CAR process to develop professionally.

### **Findings and Discussion: Answering Research Question 2**

Educators cannot separate that they influence and are invested in their students' development (Cain & Milovic, 2010). Not surprisingly, research explores various approaches to student development that incorporate educator involvement. For example, one proposed the manner of enhancing student development is to embed ACT into the teaching and learning of the curriculum (Bush, 2011; Sarath, 2003). In this way, no changes to a programme's curriculum are necessary; instead, the change will be reflected in the educators' teaching and learning practices (Ngang & Chan, 2015). Thus, the educators' facilitation, guidance, and mentoring skills will strongly promote ACT-based teaching and learning practices.

However, there is a lack of protocol to guide the implementation of ACT, or similar approaches, in teaching and learning practices. Steven Hayes, the founder of ACT, provides reassurance by stating that if the overall purpose of implementing ACT is achieved, a strict protocol need not be followed (Hayes, 2016). Through educators experiencing ACT

themselves, as reported in Chapter Five, they learn to embody ACT and then refer to ACT in their unique teaching practices (Gingerich et al., 2012). The educators' experiences of ACT can then be translated into the classroom from personal experience instead of an outside expert. This allows educators to bring innovation that best suits their context, as ACT allows for versatile applications (Harris, 2009; Hayes, 2009; Moran, 2011).

This section will report on data to answer Research Question 2: What are educators' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices for psychology honours students? Table 19 below presents the three data sources consulted to triangulate the data collected: Educator Post Term Reflections ACT-based educator professional development training 2, and semi-structured interviews with students. Data incorporate a second perspective, the perspectives of psychology honours students (case study sample), who experienced the ACT-based teaching and learning practices. Experiences from the case study sample are drawn to triangulate further and verify educators' (co-researchers) experiences.

**Table 19**

*Research Question 2: Trustworthy Data Sources*

<b>Research Question 2</b>	<b>Data Source 1</b>	<b>Data Source 2</b>	<b>Data Source 3</b>
What are educators' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices for psychology honours students?	Qualitative Data	Qualitative Data	Qualitative Data
	Co-researcher Data	Co-researcher Data	Case Study Sample Data
	Educator Post Term Reflections	ACT-based educator professional development training 2	Semi-structured interviews with students

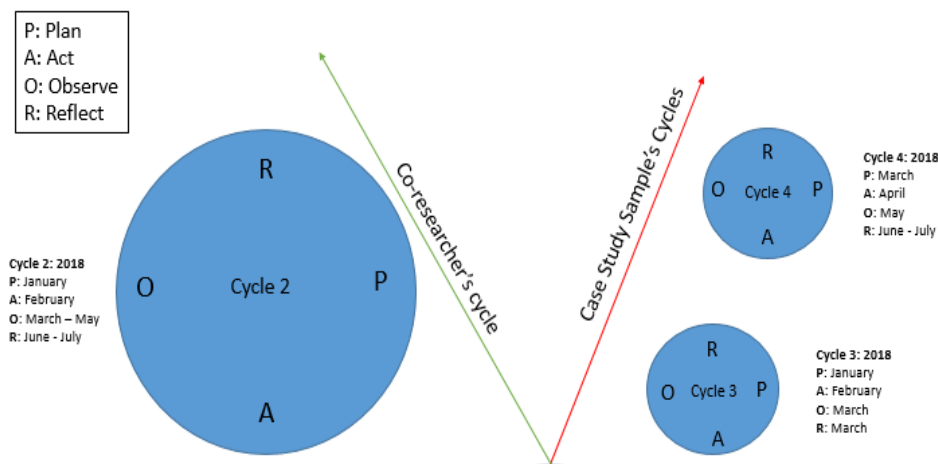


*Note.* Adapted from *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* (p. 45), by R. Sagor, 1992, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) publications. Copyright 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Below, Figure 9 depicts the CAR cycles where the co-researchers and the case study sample were engaged in ACT-based teaching and learning practices implemented in the classroom. Figure 9 illustrates data collection points through the ‘plan, action, observe, reflect’ CAR cycles, providing a timeline of data consulted to answer Research Question 2. For a detailed description of CAR Cycles 2, 3 and 4 refer to the relevant sections in Chapter Four.

## Figure 8

*Collaborative Action Research Cycles: Researchers and Case Study Sample CAR Engagement*



*Note.* Adapted from “*Action Research in Higher Education: Examples and Reflections*” (p. 13), by O. Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, Kogan Page. Copyright 1992 by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt.

This section presents data on the co-researchers' professional development in ACT. The findings indicate that the ACT Triflex model of opening up, being present, doing what matters was embodied by co-researchers as resilience, empathy, authenticity (see Figure 7). The co-researchers' professional development in ACT could embed their learnings of resilience, empathy, authenticity into their teaching and learning practices. Thus, the section below provides data to answer Research Question 2: What are educators' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices for psychology honours students?

### *Co-researchers' Experiences of Operationalising ACT-based Teaching and Learning Practices*

Regarding Research Question 2, Table 20 below depicts the common themes that emerged according to the personalised ACT Triflex model of resilience, empathy, authenticity. The data indicated that the co-researchers' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices involved five processes (themes): (1) a developmental classroom environment, (2) student empowerment, (3) educator-student relationship, (4) being student-centred, and (5) transferability.

**Table 20**

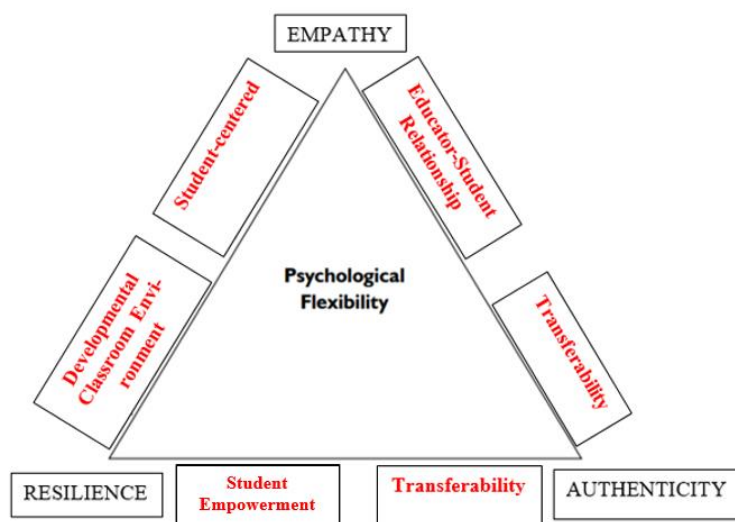
*Summary of Findings: ACT Triflex Themes*

<b>ACT Triflex Model Process</b>	<b>Personalised ACT Triflex Model Process</b>	<b>Common Themes to Operationalise ACT Teaching and Learning Practices</b>
Opening Up	Resilience	Development Classroom Environment
		Student Empowerment
Being Present	Empathy	Student-Centred
		Educator-Student Relationship
Doing What Matters	Authenticity	Transferability

The empirical data indicated that to operationalise resilience or being open in the classroom, two standard practices were needed: (a) a developmental classroom environment and (b) student empowerment. Next, to operationalise being present, the data suggested two common practices were needed: (a) being student-centred and (b) the educator-student relationship. Last, to operationalise doing what matters, the data indicated that the common experience of transferability is needed. Figure 10 below represents the operationalisation of the ACT-based teaching and learning practices in the personalised ACT Triflex model of resilience, empathy, authenticity. Figure 10 depicts the five common themes of (a) developmental classroom environment, (b) student-centred, (c) educator-student relationship, (d) student empowerment, and (d) transferability, that enabled ACT-based teaching and learning practices to work interchangeably to foster psychological flexibility within the classroom environment.

**Figure 9**

*ACT-Based Teaching and Learning Practices: Personalised ACT Triflex Model*



*Note.* Adapted from “*ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*” (p. 13), by R. Harris, 2009, New Harbinger. Copyright 2009 by Russ Harris.

Table 21 summarises five themes and the related sub-themes identified in operationalising ACT-based teaching and learning practices. Within the five themes identified, 11 sub-themes emerged. The sub-themes further describe how the co-researchers incorporated ACT within their teaching and learning practices. All the themes and sub-themes were verified and triangulated with the case study sample and answered Research Question 2.

**Table 21**

*ACT-based Teaching and Learning Practices: Themes and sub-themes*

	<b>Operationalising ACT-based Teaching and Learning Practices</b>	
<b>ACT Triflex Model</b>	<b>5 THEMES</b>	<b>11 SUB-THEMES</b>
Opening up or Resilience	Developmental Classroom Environment	Safe but challenging
		Clear expectations
		Respect among peers
	Student Empowerment	Student's voice
		Self-awareness
Being Present or Empathy	Student-educator relationship	Authentic
		Caring
	Student-centred	Individualised attention
		Valuing diversity
Doing What Matters or Authenticity	Transferability	Connecting theory and practice
		Value-life directions

The section below is organised to learn about the co-researchers’ experiences of ACT-based teaching and learning practices. First, the data presented looks at the co-researchers’

personal experiences of operationalising opening up or resilience within their teaching and learning practices. This section focuses specifically on the common themes of (a) a developmental classroom environment and (b) student empowerment. Next, the co-researchers' experiences of being present or empathy are discussed. The co-researchers' experiences of (a) educator-student relationship and (b) being student-centred are explored. Last, the co-researchers' experiences of doing what matters or authenticity are discussed, focusing on the common theme of transferability. The co-researchers' experiences and related data were triangulated and verified with the case study sample. The data produced evidence to support the notion that co-researchers could embed ACT within their teaching and learning practices.

***Operationalising Opening up: ACT Triflex Model.*** Resilience was closely linked to the co-researchers' experiences of the ACT process of opening up. Not responding impulsively to reduce discomfort or unpleasant internal language improves their ability to adapt emotionally and socially to situations (Sahdra et al., 2011). The co-researchers' ability to apply resilience in their lives enabled them to operationalise this experience into their teaching and learning practices through two processes, namely a developmental classroom environment and student empowerment, as summarised in Table 21.

To facilitate an environment where resilience is fostered in the classroom environment, the data suggest there needs to be a balance between (a) a developmental classroom environment, and (b) student empowerment. The co-researchers explained that priority needs to be placed on creating a safe but challenging classroom environment, with clear expectations and respect among peers to create a developmental classroom environment where discomfort would naturally occur. Co-researcher 1, through the ACT-based educator professional development training 2, reiterated the importance of respect among peers:

“*Creating a type of atmosphere where there is mutual respect and confidentiality.*” Co-researcher 2 agreed, “*I want to bring more mindfulness activities in and start to spend even more time on reflection. Creating a type of atmosphere where there is mutual respect and confidentiality*” (Post Term Reflections). S8 validated the co-researchers’ experiences, confirming the respect among peers within the classroom:

Verbalising things. Saying things out loud. I am scared of saying something in case it does offend, even though you know it’s not offensive. You need to be careful with your words. But the educator helps push things out of us. You can ask and answer freely. It feels very equal; we push each other (interviews).

Once respect among peers has been established, creating structure and clear classroom expectations is crucial, as Co-researcher 4 remarked, “... *it is essential that students and educators are in communication regarding expectations*” (ACT-based educator professional development training 2). Co-researcher 7 explained the process of establishing expectations through “*Contracting in the first session: norms, expectations and standards for the class*” (ACT-based educator professional development training 2). Co-researcher 3 stated that structure and expectations around the module and assignments are also needed so students are not worried about this and can focus on the learning and discussions in class:

I take my time to provide a summary of the module, assessments, learning outcomes in class. I want students to feel safe knowing that there is a structure, boundaries, and a clear learning path. I believe this allows students to then focus on what is happening in class and engage more fully in discussions (Post Term Reflections).

The case study sample validated their experiences of clear expectations communicated in the classroom environment. S2, expressed that “*Classes were structured and clear. Knowing exactly what’s needed*” (interview). Comments by S13 confirmed this: “*She [educator] has an outline, a structure, she achieves outcomes*” (Interview). Additionally, S5 explained the detailed expectations in class: “*Going through instructions of assessments upfront. Streamlining expectations, even in the details of word count; a number of references/resources required*” (interview). The co-researchers explained that once there is established respect among peers and clear expectations for interactions and the course, facilitating safe but challenging classroom engagement is enabled. Co-researcher 6 explained the importance of creating a classroom environment that allows students to take risks, make mistakes and normalise failing at tasks, stating,

One does not need to create discomfort in class. Rather allow students to problem solve, debate, and engage in discussions that could result in a difference of opinion, or uncovering of biases or challenging of opinions. Creating classroom environments that are safe is important because then students are willing to take risks and sit in the discomfort associated with that risk (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

Co-researcher 2 added that sometimes students need to build their confidence in taking risks, and explained how they approached this: “*Students are actively participating in class and engaging in the material and small group activities are allowing students who are uncomfortable sharing ideas in front of a large group to feel comfortable and to participate*” (ACT-based educator professional development training 2). Co-researcher 7 added,

*“Highlighting that there is no such thing as wrong - all ideas can be built on. Allowing space for students to make mistakes”* (Post Term Reflections). Co-researcher 1 agreed, *“Allowing space for students to make mistakes”* (Post Term Reflections). *“I insisted that their [students] role matters and that they should be free to explore any idea regardless of how different and unconventional it may be”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 2). S3 validated these findings by indicating that the teaching and learning practices facilitated discussions and activities that promoted reflection and self-awareness, resulting in discomfort: *“Lecturers ask your opinion and gets you to a place where you think outside the box, where you feel challenged, where it’s uncomfortable because you need to think”* (interviews). S13 added,

I feel like the educators at [this private HEI] have a teaching style that allows for a lot of free expression. Yes, we deal with theory and facts, however, there are always critical discussions and questions addressed in class. I find these discussions and questions to be very interesting because they allow for critical thinking as well as an opportunity to address both sides of a topic/issue as opposed to one (interviews).

Thus, educators do not intentionally create discomfort or make students uncomfortable, instead the focus is on creating an environment where students feel safe enough to be willing to experience discomfort (Cranton, 2002). Educators support students to explore outside of what is comfortable (Hayes et al., 2012). Co-researchers can shelter students from experiencing discomfort in the classroom in various ways. For example, co-researchers can protect students from ideas that may make them feel uncomfortable; or by ensuring that discussions and viewpoints remain within what is comfortable; or by making



certain topics off-limits by not teaching specific work in the classroom and giving portions of work as self-study; or by downplaying experiences, interactions, and theory in class (Cornell, 2012). However, if co-researchers are unable to experience discomfort in the classroom, they hinder their students' development of learning to engage within discomfort willingly. Co-researcher 5 echoed these sentiments when stating "*It allows me to push myself into areas that might not feel comfortable but are required for student development*". This was confirmed by Co-researcher 3, "*by stretching myself, I engage with students on a level that makes them feel comfortable and contained while challenging them at the same time*" (post-term reflections).

Part of facilitating opening up or developing resilience within the classroom is the co-researchers' deliberate focus on student empowerment in the classroom. Student empowerment was fostered through student voice and self-awareness. Co-researcher 2 stated the importance of encouraging student voice in the classroom: "*The workshop and teaching in term one have highlighted the importance of authenticity and self-awareness for me. I have realised the importance of building up students as individuals and developing their unique voice*" (ACT-based educator professional development training 2). Co-researcher 1 agreed,

While content is important, we place special emphasis on the voice of the student coming through their writing - forming an argument, further elaborating on concepts, applying to examples from their own lives, giving their opinion, backing writing up with research. The marking memo is very important, but the students' individual thinking and voice is also very important (ACT-based educator professional development training 2).

Co-researcher 5 confirmed the importance of the student voice: *“I have tried to give everyone a voice and create a truly developmental space in the classroom where any idea can be built upon and developed to increase knowledge”* (ACT-based educator professional development training 2). And Co-researcher 2 explained their approach by *“Providing a space free from judgment with openness and authenticity.”* The co-researchers indicated that self-awareness is necessary for student empowerment as it relates to having a voice. As Co-researcher 1 explained,

Students need to be able to get into the culture of formulating their own ideas and standing by them. This is a great exercise in critical thinking because independent thought, if nurtured, will lead to explorations into deeper avenues of thought – all of this requires self-awareness (Post Term Reflections).

Co-researcher 3 reiterated the importance of self-awareness in the classroom:

Students have been encouraged to engage critically on topics involving culture, equality, equity, and justice within the classroom. Students were challenged and required to think at a deeper level regarding these and many other topics, fostering self-awareness on challenging topics.

Co-researcher 2 added, *“An approach that encourages students to explore their thoughts and have confidence in their thought processes have been an emphasis for me this term”*. Co-researcher 6 stated that their approach has focused on *“Building a greater understanding of self”*. Co-researcher 1 concluded, *“I gave students reflective tasks to*

*complete for homework to promote reflection, self-awareness further and to develop their voice.”*

Students expressed that their educators would foster self-reflection in class to promote student empowerment, validating the co-researchers' reflections. S10 stated, *“They constantly urge us to take time for reflection and personal growth, especially in psychopathology.”* S8 added, *“[Educator’s] class has helped with growth. It feels like every 20 minutes we have reflection time. She will go to you and ask [student] what do you think about this?”* S1 added that educators ask questions in class that further enhance self-reflection and awareness, *“educators asking your opinion puts you on your toes. It makes you realise you need to research this stuff. It makes you more aware. It is almost like the educator is doing the master’s interviews in class”*. The result of this type of teaching was expressed by S9: *“In class, I now put up my hand and share my views. I feel a lot more confident in sharing my views and a lot more certain in my identity”*. S10 confirmed,

Coming from a large university to [a private higher education institution] was a shock to my system. I knew who I was to a certain degree... but constantly being part of debates, the constant interaction and group discussions have forced me to look internally to a much larger degree.

Graduates who have not had the opportunity to be self-reflective by developing their self-awareness skills may perpetuate their insecurities, biases, and injustices in the world. Thus, it is vital to provide classroom environments that encourage self-awareness and facilitate vulnerable discussions. This enables students to question their worldviews, unexamined beliefs, assumptions, faulty perceptions, and biases about themselves, psychology, and the South African context. Educators equally should be aware of their

worldviews, preferences, and faulty perceptions. Educators can influence students in their thought processes and perpetuate these in the classroom. Thus, educators should consider their influence in student development (Ngang & Chan, 2015) and remain purposeful in their teaching methods to enable specific development in students (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

***Operationalising Being Present: ACT Triflex Model.*** Empathy was closely linked to the co-researchers' experiences of the ACT process being present. Co-researchers' increased awareness of self and others facilitated increased empathy (Shapiro & Walsh, 2006). Moreover, co-researchers' ability to apply empathy personally in their lives enabled them to operationalise this experience into their teaching and learning practices through two processes: the student-educator relationship and being student-centred, as summarised in Table 21 above.

Co-researchers' experiences of empathy are expressed through being student-centred. The term student-centred relates to providing individualised attention to students in class and valuing the diversity of students in the classroom. The co-researchers described their actions of attending to each student in the classroom: *"I try to meet each student at their level of understanding and respond to them in a way that is easier for them to relate to the content, their experiences and their critical reflections"* (co-researcher 4). Co-researcher 1 added that students' needs are different, requiring a flexible approach to meeting students where they are: *"Ability to pick up students' needs and adapting to accommodate them because every student has different developmental needs and support required"*. Co-researcher 3 added, *"Having the awareness and responsiveness to accommodate for different needs that various students have."*

Co-researcher 5 recognised that providing individualised attention to each student requires more work from the educator: *"To challenge myself and work harder but also to*

*make sure that I reach all students at some point*". While Co-researcher 6 provided an example of how they co-construct individualised attention in the classroom with students:

*"Introducing the idea of comfort zone, panic zone and stretch zone. Every student is different and they need to know we are aware of this and want to accommodate for this in the classroom."*

The case study sample validated the theme of being student-centred and co-researchers, providing individualised attention in the classroom. The case study sample consistently expressed feeling heard, understood, and recognised through the co-researchers asking for their opinions in the classroom. S4 stated, *"This is the one area that I have loved the most! By putting you on the spot! Asking my opinion! AND listening to my opinion!"* S7 agreed: *"Both of these lecturers ask your opinion..."*. S1 added, *"Constant self-reflections, opinion sharing and general discussions help me feel like the lecturer cares about me and what I have to say"*. S2 recognised that the co-researchers need to create space in the classroom for opinion sharing to be possible: *"The educators have allowed us to provide a lot of feedback and allow us to give our opinions in class. Educators are deliberately making room in the class for us to share and express our individuality"*. S6 concluded,

Educator asked what we didn't enjoy from the last term, that I loved. She wrote down things on a board that we would focus on. Someone said YouTube video, some of this, some of that. And she has literally included all of the suggestions that have been given.

According to the co-researchers, operationalising empathy in the classroom through being student-centred also relates to valuing diversity within the classroom environment. Co-researcher 7 actively demonstrated their empathy by *"Being accepting of diverse students and*

*making them feel comfortable, heard and not judged*". Co-researcher 3 agreed, *"Respect and sensitivity to different values and beliefs. Allows you to meet all students where they are"*.

The case study sample validates these findings through their own experiences and learnings in the classroom. S7 added, *"We need to be careful of what we say and how we say it because we don't know people's stories. Don't label people"*. S1 expressed their development in valuing diversity: *"Classes are very interactive. You get to really know the people in your class, how diverse we are, how we react"*. S8 acknowledged their growth in valuing diversity: *"I have discovered more about myself by partaking in class discussions, and seeing what my standpoint is in comparison to others"*.

Co-researchers' experiences of empathy are also expressed through the student-educator relationship. The sub-themes of being authentic and caring have been identified as vital in the student-educator connection. The co-researchers express the importance of being personal, authentic, and true to themselves within the classroom environment to connect with students congruently; as Co-researcher 5 stated, *"I am aware to adhere to professional boundaries while at the same time being congruent and transparent"*. Co-researchers 7 and 1 concurred, *"I endeavour to engage with students that is authentic and true to myself"* and *"I engaged with the smaller classes on a more reflective and personal level. I shared some of my own experiences, reflections and opinions"*. Co-researcher 4 added that while being authentic in the classroom, they encourage students to reciprocate, *"I encouraged sharing personal experiences, reflections and opinions so that students and I are building real relationships of trust and honesty"*. S1 recognised the co-researchers' personal storytelling within the classroom environment stating,

So for example, if I had a client like this I would... examples like this have been helpful. I relate a lot more to that kind of teaching. And I only realised that this

year. So even the educator spoke about their [personal] story and even that now sticks in my mind.

Co-researcher 2 added that caring about students further builds a conducive student-educator relationship:

I have tried to include ALL students in discussions, by trying to draw more reserved students out. I have done this through caring, encouragement, direct questions, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. I take the time to build relationships with my students and let them know that I care about them and their development.

Co-researcher 3 agreed with the importance of caring for students: *“I am a compassionate educator, taking other people into consideration, caring, and building relationships with them. It is important to let students know that you care”*. S10 recognised the care shown by the co-researchers in the classroom environment: *“Amazing lecturer, asking our opinions, and actually engaging in what we think and feel. She keeps us engaged at all times. You can see she actually cares about you as a person”* and S13 further confirmed that co-researchers have demonstrated caring within the educator-student relationship: *“I love her [educator], she feels like a mom. I know she cares about me as a person”*.

**Operationalising Doing What Matters: ACT Triflex Model.** Authenticity was closely linked to the co-researchers' experiences of the ACT process doing what matters. Co-researchers increased awareness of their values and ensured their behaviours aligned with valued life directions and promoted the experience of living authentically. Co-researchers' ability to apply authenticity personally in their lives enabled them to operationalise this experience into their teaching and learning practices through the process of transferability, as summarised in Table 21 above. From the data, transferability relates to having valued life directions and connecting theory and practice.

For the co-researchers, the experience of authenticity is expressed in the classroom setting through the consistency of their values and behaviours. Their values are varied, freely chosen and meaningful to them. Values assist in constructing valued life directions and promoting value-driven, committed behaviours. Table 22 summarises the co-researchers' educational values and how these are operationalised in the classroom environment.

**Table 22**

*Co-researchers' Educational Values*

<b>Co-researcher Group Key</b>	<b>Co-researchers' Educational Values</b>	<b>Co-researchers' Value-driven Behaviours</b>
1	<i>"Determination, authenticity, challenging views, balanced thinking, sensitivity"</i>	<i>"Practically through having and facilitating open discussions, encouraging different points of view."</i>
2	<i>"Commitment, Enjoyment, Interest, Curiosity, Growth"</i>	<i>"I am curious and I would like my students to develop that."</i>
3	<i>"Knowledge, Passion, Critical thinking, Ethics, Experience"</i>	<i>"Encouraging and modelling sensitivity, congruence and determination."</i>



4	<i>“Authenticity, Integrity, Curiosity, Equality Inspiring”</i>	<i>“In my class, through the experiential and practical manner in which I structure my class.”</i>
5	<i>“Honesty, Integrity, Flexibility, Innovation, Excellence, Critical thinking”</i>	<i>“Scholarship and integrity is expressed in my encouragement of reading through quizzes.”</i>
6	<i>“Creativity, Knowledge, Hardworking, Planning, Connection”</i>	<i>“I allowed my humour and creativity to come forward in my classes and I feel that this enabled me to connect well with my students.”</i>
7	<i>“Open-mindedness, Creativity, Diligence, Self-awareness, Person-centredness, Integrity”</i>	<i>“Integrity is expressed through preparation for class to ensure students get quality lectures.”</i>

The co-researchers expressed that classes are authentic because they are value-driven; as Co-researcher 1 explained: *“Classes are true to me – engaging, creative and interactive”*. Co-researcher 5 added *“I need to focus on my strengths and values and bring them across daily to students”*. Co-researcher 4 confirmed, *“We are encouraged to tap into our values and strengths and plan lessons in such a way that highlights our values.”* Authenticity further promotes authentic educator-student relationships and student-centred practices, as expressed in the related section of Chapter Five. Furthermore, the co-researchers’ personal experiences of valued-based behaviours allow them to encourage their students to recognise their values and promote consistency in their behaviours.

Valued-based behaviours relate to transferability, as authentic behaviours in one context are transferrable to other contexts (Zhang & Zhang, 2017). Co-researchers encourage their students to reflect and think about what their values are and how these could be

transferred to work contexts, creating valued life directions. S9 reflected on their value of honesty and how this translates to more than the educational environment, stating, *“Most importantly I will be true to myself and that I will ensure my goals will always be meaningful and therefore achieved, both in my academics but also as a psychologist.”* S11 also expressed their value of honesty and how their values are transferrable to different contexts:

I have been open in the classes, sharing my experiences and in some instances, students did come to me asking more about how certain things have shaped me into who I am today. I believe that we live in a broken world full of ‘fakeness’ and it is time for people to start being real again. Be honest, share and by doing this, others too can grow. I want my actions to show my honesty in all I do, even one day as a psychologist.

Table 23 below summarises the case study sample’s educational values, which could be transferred to work contexts.

**Table 23**

*Case Study Sample's Educational Values*

<b>Case Study Sample Group Key</b>	<b>Chosen Values</b>	<b>Value-driven behaviour in academics</b>
S1	Love Adventure	<i>“Love: will improve relationships with lecturers and other students, improving the academic environment.”</i>  <i>“Adventure: could be applied in academics by being interested in new knowledge.”</i>
S2	Integrity Passion	<i>“Integrity: to share in class, speak the truth and value others’ opinions.”</i>

		<i>“Passion: To bring enthusiasm, inquisitiveness and creativity.”</i>
S3	Openness Creativity	<i>“Openness: to be honest, think outside the box, share my story.”</i> <i>“Creativity: contribute towards group discussions and interactions.”</i>
S4	Hard-working	<i>“Hard-working: being determined to reach my goals, I will be able to keep myself motivated to study and learn.”</i>
S5	Loyalty Punctuality	<i>“Loyalty: Will help me to be motivated to work hard towards my goals and be loyal to myself, my classmates and the college as well.”</i> <i>“Punctuality: Assist me to set short term goals in my academic career to keep me on track and help me not fall behind.”</i>
S6	Reliable	<i>“Reliable: I always get things done. I work well under pressure and like a challenge. I have good work ethic, a standard I would like to achieve.”</i>
S7	Peace Responsible	<i>“Peace: I believe in creating peace and comfort in a context and with individuals. This will help me be mindful.”</i> <i>“Responsible: Will ensure that I am up to date with my work and completed all the tasks.”</i>
S8	Respect	<i>“Respect: treat others as you would like to be treated. Respect for me has to come unconditionally. I respect someone because they are human beings first and foremost.”</i>
S9	Loyalty Honesty	<i>“Loyalty: being genuine and transparent in my work ethic.”</i> <i>“Honesty: allow academic staff to support me where I may struggle.”</i>
S10	Understanding	<i>“Understanding: get along well with others and understand there are other opinions that aren’t always the same as mine.”</i>

S11	Honesty	<i>“Honesty: openly admitting one is wrong or confused can be scary but receiving help or information is worth the vulnerability. This also allows for open communication between educators and myself, allowing me to ask for help and carefully listen to constructive criticism.”</i>
S12	Dedication	<i>“Dedication: Being dedicated will ensure I place all my focus on my studies and doing so will allow me to remain determined to succeed.”</i>
S13	Humility	<i>“Humility: knowing that I am not alone. What others have to say is just as important. This also ties in with being open to learning and change.”</i>

Authenticity is further expressed in the classroom environment through co-researchers helping students connect theory and practice. As Co-researcher 5 stated, *“Students’ development in class, their understanding of theory, their awareness, their sensitivity, their resilience, is embodied and then expressed as a graduate or within their profession.”* They highlighted the importance of student development in class, as this development is transferrable to other contexts, such as the work environment. Co-researchers expressed their deliberate actions in helping students connect theory with practice to aid in student development and preparation for graduation. Co-researcher 1 stated, *“I aim to challenge students on issues of diversity and ethics. In doing so I hope to inspire students to be citizens that value difference and successfully engage with psychology in the SA Context”*. Co-researcher 2 added, *“Reflection, not necessarily about the content, but about what they have learned about themselves about the content”*. Co-researcher 7 remarked, *“My vision is sharing the psychology profession with the students so that they are inspired and committed to persevere through the long and difficult journey to becoming a psychologist”*.

Co-researcher 4 and Co-researcher 6 both commented on how the classroom environment enables individualised attention with students, assisting students to make connections between theory and practices: *“We are giving the students more individualised attention which enables them to understand concepts beyond how they interact in the classroom. Grounding in the intersection between theory and practice”* and

Students are afforded the opportunity of individualised attention in class, allowing them to connect with the theory and understand how the theory is applied in practice. Students are given the opportunity to develop skills in the classroom that can be transferred to the work contexts.

Co-researcher 3 commented that when students can connect theory and practice in the classroom, they can reflect on where their developmental areas are: *“I realise this will bring a more holistic learning experience to my students. It gives students the opportunity to also work on their weaker areas”*. Co-researcher 1 concluded in recognising that classroom development can extend beyond the classroom environment: *“I have valued the opportunity to explore and engage with students, to begin to develop a critical stance and the ability to think on different logical levels, while developing understanding and compassion for themselves and others”*.

The case study sample validated the data presented by recognising that authenticity is expressed through transferability of behaviours, S2 stated, *“I am more prepared for my future career because I am more confident to express myself. I can go out there and make a difference by thinking outside of the box”*. S10 also recognised their own development adding,

[HEI] context has provided me with a better self-understanding, and I believe I will continue to grow and my self-understanding will continue to improve as I move onto other contexts, such as my career in psychology and working with patients.

S7 has confidence in expressing their development: *“Firstly, by connecting who I am and what is important for me with my career and day by day activities I will reach my goals. Expressing myself daily in everyday life will be fulfilling and keep me motivated.”* Co-researcher 6 described the psychology working environment as: *“Complex, struggles, constraints, diverse, chaotic, fragmented, challenging, and ever-changing”*. Living authentically aligned with values enables graduates to persist in discomfort (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005). Values and value-driven behaviour become relevant and perhaps necessary when considering the challenging psychology working environment. Thus, developing values within the classroom enhances students’ ability to transfer these practised valued-behaviours to the working context. As summarised by S5:

I... think about what my strengths and values are and how I want to use these as a psychologist in order to ensure I am helping others while staying true to myself. So, while I am engaging in different themes and topics in different subjects, it all comes together in the end to form me as an individual. A skill that I will use hopefully as a psychologist one day. When you are true to yourself, no challenge or obstacle will throw you off, you are able to persevere.

### **Findings and Discussion: Answering Research Question 3**

Understanding the working environment that postgraduate psychology graduates will enter, helps educators think thoughtfully about preparing and empowering these students (Beges, 2015; Rock & Hamber, 1996). Teaching and learning practices can equip and empower graduates with hope (Zorn & Boler, 2007), public good (Leibowitz, 2012), leadership (Coughlin, 2021), and confidence (Loizou, 2017). While many personal characteristics, attributes, and skills can contribute to preparing and equipping graduates for the complex working environment, the ability to respond effectively to discomfort remains crucial (Zhang et al., 2018).

ACT, embedded in teaching and learning practices, could promote psychological flexibility among students, promoting the capacity to respond effectively in the face of discomfort (Hayes et al., 2004). When students can be flexible about how they feel, think, and behave, they are likely better equipped to adapt to stress-laden situations (Peterson, 2016). Nevertheless, for many students, willingly embracing and remaining in discomfort is difficult and requires practise (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Students who struggle to embrace discomfort often respond to adverse events with resistance or avoidance, which further exacerbates distress (Hayes, 2015). At the heart of these varied responses is the need to develop psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2006). Thus, educators have the opportunity to contribute to developing their students' psychological flexibility skills in their classrooms.

This section will address Research Question 3: What are psychology honours students' experiences of their ACT-based development? Table 24 below presents the three data sources consulted to triangulate the data: Semi-Structured Interviews with students; Student ACT-based Workshop 2 Programme & Reflections; and Pre and Post Term Survey with students.

**Table 24***Research Question 3: Trustworthy Data Sources*

<b>Research Question 3</b>	<b>Data Source 1</b>	<b>Data Source 2</b>	<b>Data Source 3</b>
What are psychology honours students' experiences of their ACT-based development?	Qualitative Data	Qualitative Data	Quantitative Data
	Case Study	Case Study	Case Study
	Sample Data	Sample Data	Sample Data
	Semi-structured interviews with students	Student ACT-based Workshop 2 Programme & Reflections	Pre and Post Term Survey with Students

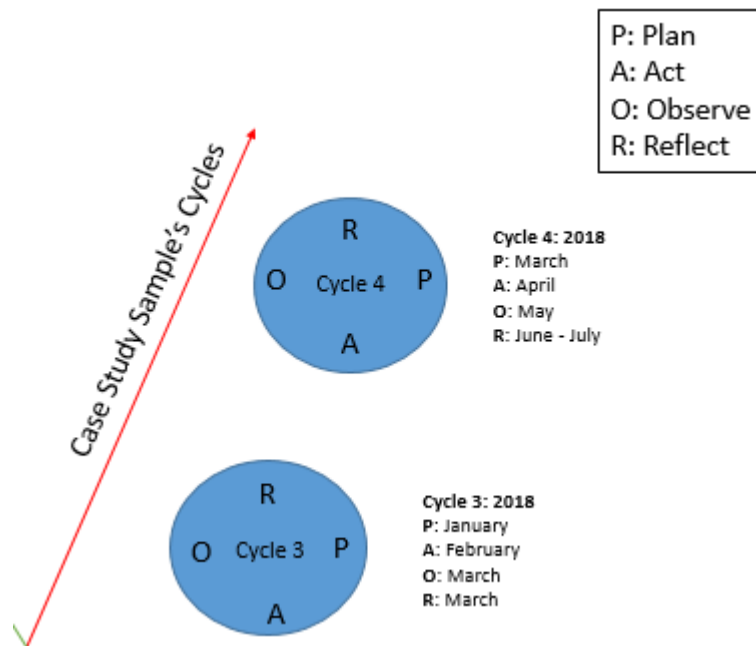
*Note.* Adapted from *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* (p. 45), by R. Sagor, 1992, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) publications. Copyright 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Figure 11 below depicts the CAR cycles documenting the process and timeline of the ACT-based teaching and learning practices. In addition, it illustrates data collection points within the CAR cycles, providing a timeline of data consulted to answer Research Question 3. For a detailed description of CAR Cycles 3 and 4 refer to the relevant sections in Chapter Four.



**Figure 10**

*Collaborative Action Research Cycles: Case Study Sample CAR Engagement*



*Note.* Adapted from “*Action Research in Higher Education: Examples and Reflections*” (p. 13), by O. Zuber-Skerritt, 1992, Kogan Page. Copyright 1992 by Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt.

To answer Research Question 3 on psychology honours students’ experiences of their ACT-based development, the remainder of this section is as follows: First, the case study sample’s experiences of their ACT-based development have been captured according to the ACT Triflex model of opening up, being present, doing what matters. Then, the case study sample’s quantitative data captured in the Pre and Post Term survey have been documented to understand their experiences further.

### ***Case Study Sample’s Experiences of ACT-based Development***

The ACT Triflex model of opening up, being present, doing what matters was embodied by co-researchers as resilience, empathy, authenticity. The co-researchers

embedded their learnings of resilience, empathy, authenticity into their teaching and learning practices of psychology honours students. This section sets out to provide data to answer Research Question 3: What are psychology honours students' experiences of their ACT-based development? Table 25 depicts the common themes that emerged according to the ACT Triflex model. The data indicate that the case study sample's ACT-based development was experienced as resilience, mindfulness, authenticity.

**Table 25**

*Summary Case Study Sample Data Themes*

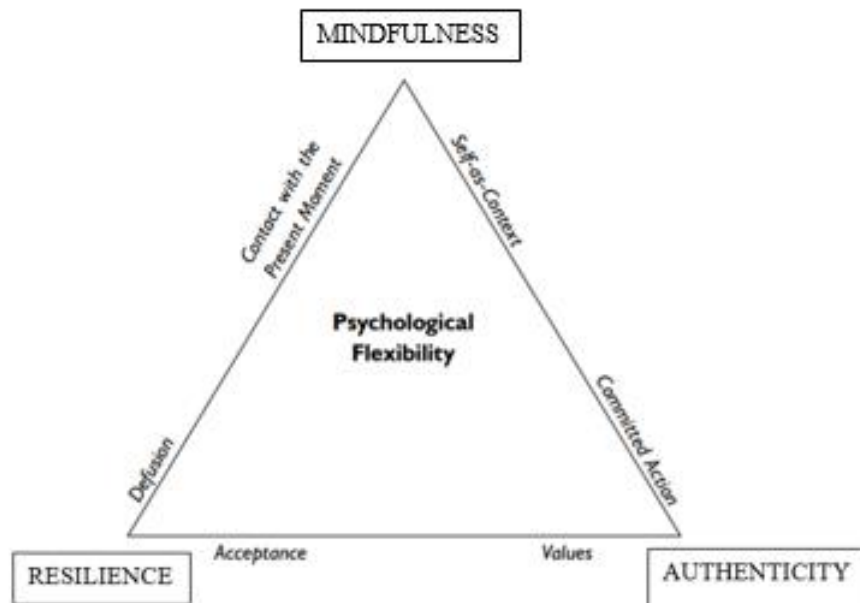
<b>ACT Triflex Model Processes</b>	<b>How many data sources confirmed this theme &lt; 3 data sources</b>	<b>How many case study sample participants confirmed this theme &lt; 13 case study sample</b>
Opening Up or Resilience	3	13
	3	13
	3	13
Being Present or Mindfulness	3	13
	3	13
Doing what matters or Authenticity	3	13
	3	13
	3	13

*Note.* Adapted from *How to Conduct Collaborative Action Research* (p. 45), by R. Sagor, 1992, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) publications. Copyright 1992 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Figure 12 below illustrates the case study sample's psychological flexibility through their experiences of resilience, mindfulness, authenticity within the ACT Triflex model in the classroom environment.

## Figure 11

*Summary of the Case Study Sample's ACT-based Development: ACT Triflex Model*



*Note.* Adapted from “*ACT Made Simple: An Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy*” (p. 13), by R. Harris, 2009, New Harbinger. Copyright 2009 by Russ Harris.

The data below are organised in the Triflex model structure to ascertain the case study sample’s experiences of their ACT-based development. The following sections present data related to opening up or resilience; thereafter, data are analysed on the case study sample’s status of being present or mindful, then data on doing what matters or authenticity are presented. These sections summarise the case study sample’s ACT-based development of resilience, mindfulness, authenticity. The data produced evidence to support the notion that the case study sample developed and embodied the ACT-based processes of opening up,

being present, doing what matters. The final section offers a summary of negative cases that emerged from the ACT-based development.

**Case Study Samples' Experiences of Opening up.** The opening up practise in the ACT Triflex Model entails the two processes of cognitive fusion and acceptance. Opening up refers to the skills of noticing discomforts without judgement and the willingness to accept the discomforts for what they are (Dykema, 2013). ACT does not seek to change the content, frequency, or intensity of discomforts experienced, rather, it aims to change the way individuals fundamentally relate to their internal events (Hayes et al., 2006). Helping students understand that discomfort is part of the educational process and requires training to prepare them to be more willing to experience discomfort and engage with discomfort in more adaptive ways (Bandura, 1994). Through the case study sample's ACT-based development, their experience in the ACT process of opening up has revealed the common theme of resilience.

When a student pursues a valued life goal, such as studying towards a qualification, there is an expectation that a student will be confronted with a myriad discomfort (Cardaciotto et al., 2008). A student studying towards a qualification who experiences discomfort may try to control this experience through undesirable behaviours to bring short-term relief, such as procrastinating or avoiding study-related tasks (Kashdan et al., 2006). Paradoxically, the more a student tries to control the discomfort, the more likely the student will exacerbate the discomfort while also engaging in behaviours not in the service of their values (Hayes, 2004; Hayes & Smith, 2005). The opposite of attempting to control discomfort is the skill of acceptance.

Acceptance is a method of increasing a student's willingness to experience discomfort when doing so is in the service of values-based goals (Heppner & Heppner, 2003). S12 pointed out their acceptance of discomfort: *"first term there was more discomfort but I would*

*not say I am struggling in discomfort now. Like, it's still challenging and its definitely not easy... but it's going well.*" S8 reiterated that discomfort is part of the process:

Even though the term has been challenging, I feel as though I am coping, and so far receiving marks I'm incredibly happy with. There is no point in trying to get rid of the discomfort, its part and parcel of studying and preparing for my future.

Harris (2009) explains that cognitive defusion means detaching from thoughts and enabling oneself to view thoughts for what they are. Thus, cognitive defusion allows the thoughts the freedom to come and go, without holding or fixating on the meaning of what the thoughts represent. S6 explained, *"You get to a place where you challenge your own thoughts and beliefs"*. S13 affirmed that thoughts and beliefs can be challenged, *"What I have learnt is, I have a voice, I have to use it, I can make a difference and I have to get to a point where I challenge myself more often. Nothing is set in stone."* Assisting students to consciously notice and challenge their thoughts, rather than become entangled and fused with them, may be an alternative to help them thrive in the academic context (Biglan et al., 2008). Students also learn to challenge others' views, thoughts, and opinions, creating a classroom environment where they can safely develop cognitive defusion together; as S11 noted, *"I think outside of the box and challenge others' views. Together we are challenging each other. Together we are learning and becoming more aware of how we think"*. S10 also recognised that their educators assist in this process: *"Educators have helped me push my boundaries. Educators ask questions, ask for your opinion and help you think about your thinking and views."*

Cognitive defusion assists students in adjusting their behaviour or how they respond to situations to get a different outcome (Martin et al., 2013). Postgraduate students often come into a psychology programme fused or entangled with the thought that they should apply for entry into a professional master's programme (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016; Connolly et al., 2021). S1 reflected on the ability to apply cognitive defusion in their lives: "*Either way, whether I get accepted into master's or not, it will be fine. It is very unique for me to actually think that way. It's a lot more calming*". Students' learned ability to apply cognitive defusion in their lives reduces impulsive and emotional reactions to situations or discomforts (Sahdra, et al., 2011). As S7 pointed out, "*I just try to stay as objective as possible and open to opinions of others. It is okay to be challenged, to be uncomfortable. Not every emotion means I must react to it...*". While S5 reiterated that you can still get the task done while experiencing uncomfortable emotions:

I have also learnt that when time is short and I am under a lot of pressure, I am still able to get through the work and do it to the best of my abilities. You don't need to feel a certain way to still do what is required or what's important. Remember your emotions change all the time.

The process of opening up through acceptance and cognitive defusion has been summarised by the case study sample as the resilience skill. S5 expressed their development in resilience: "*I have learnt to be persistent and that I know not to give up even when it gets challenging*". S9 agreed, stating, "*I am an avid believer in taking broken wings and flying. No matter what, I try as hard as I can to push through situations and not give up*". S2 reflected, "*I have learnt that I am more resilient than I thought I was*". Resilience is the ability to persist and persevere, despite discomfort (Flaxman & Bond, 2010). S5 stated, "*it's the ability*

*to push through difficulties. Minor setbacks create a will to perform better*". S9 agreed, stating, *"I am far more capable than I give myself credit for, when there are difficulties I can push through them and still do what is needed"*. S3 concluded, *"I have learnt about what I am capable of, despite being in challenging situations I am able to get things done... I am resilient, I have learnt to be resilient"*.

**Case Study Samples' Experiences of Being Present.** Being present utilises the ACT processes of present moment awareness and self-as-context, which relate to the ability to notice one's inner and outer world (Harris, 2009). Being present involves being mindful of the present moment with a willingness to be receptive to all private events that may emerge without judgement or evaluation (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005). The case study sample's experience of being present has been summarised in the common theme of mindfulness, defined as bring aware of the present moment, accepting and acknowledging one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

In an academic context, mindful students notice their own thinking, feelings and behaviours, empowering students to know themselves intimately. S7 reiterated their self-knowledge: *"As you become more familiar with your values, you start becoming more in tune with what avenues may or may not be appropriate for you."* S4 added, *"Just knowing your values gives me an understanding of who I am and what I am capable of achieving."* Being mindful allows students to recognise their thoughts and behaviours and identify where further development is required (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). S7 pointed out: *"I feel more equipped to reflect on myself and knowing where I need to develop"*. S13 added, *"Class has allowed me to understand myself better, as well as allowed me to grow as an individual"*. As such, mindful students engage in thinking about their thinking and behaviour (Nelson & Low, 2003).

Being mindful enables students to recognise when they are experiencing discomfort and how they deal with discomfort (Harris, 2009). S12 recognised that their chosen career path inculcates discomfort and challenge, stating,

I feel my strengths and values have assisted me in reminding me of where I want to be. I ultimately know that what I want to do one day requires hard work. That the path is filled with challenge and that the work environment is difficult. I am okay to work towards this career and experience discomfort at the same time. I am okay with discomfort.

S8 reflected on their discomfort, stating,

I believe that it's always possible to put in more conscious effort to make sure that I am applying my values to my studies, but I feel that I definitely embrace difficulties as opportunities like assessments and discussions in class.

Furthermore, as students self-monitor and self-regulate, their awareness enables them to adjust as needed (Pintrich, 1995). S1 reflected on their adjustment: “*[being mindful] provides great insight into how I should set goals and when those goals would require adjustment.*” Understandably, being present assists students with stress management, well-being, and enhanced performance (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014; Caldwell et al., 2010). Being mindful also entails flexible perspective taking, also known as deictic framing in relational frame theory (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005). Flexible perspective-taking is the ability of students to look at their actions from multiple viewpoints to ensure actions are aligned with their values (Atkins & Parker, 2012). S13 reflected on their values, stating, “*These values help me*



*be focused and vigilant in planning and ensuring my behaviours are aligned with my values*". Flexible perspective-taking prevents students from stagnating or becoming stuck in unhelpful cognitive and behavioural patterns and allows one to pursue valued outcomes (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014). S2 referred to their consistent valued-led behaviour: *"If you know your values, you can focus on utilising these in the process of reaching your goals. Values is a foundation or road toward reaching your goal."* S6 agreed, *"I constantly reflect on my values and consistently perform in line with them"*. S8 added, *"I constantly have to reflect on my values during the year which assists in reaching my goal."*

***Case Study Sample's Experiences of Doing What Matters.*** Doing what matters entails committed action toward valued goals while anticipating and making room for discomfort (Hayes et al., 2003). Students' unique value set should assist them to value education as it relates to their own life goals (Foxall et al., 2007; Haigh, 2005; Jackson, 2004). Students are encouraged to gradually develop larger and larger patterns of committed action in line with values, empowering students to persist towards valued goals despite discomfort experienced (Hayes et al., 2004). The case study sample's experience of doing what matters has been summarised in the common theme of authenticity. For the case study sample, authenticity refers to clarity in chosen values and alignment between values and behaviour.

The case study sample mentioned that clarity in chosen values reflects an understanding of who they are as individuals. S3 explained that *"My values will help me reach my goals in a way that is parallel with who I am – value drive, goal-orientated process."* S6 noted, *"Values are the foundation of who I am."* S1 added that clarity in chosen values differentiates individuals from each other:

I want to stay true to who I am. My values are different to those of other people; hence people differ. They make me who I am and make me stand out. Staying true to my values means staying true to myself and using the values I have to my advantage in life and in my career. I feel like there is no need to ‘apply’ my values... as I feel they come across naturally because they are embedded within me as a person. My values include honesty, compassion towards others, passion for what I do and respect.

For students, value-driven behaviours may include particular actions such as committed studying time, or study groups, or committing to family gatherings, or engaging in self-care routines, or devoting time to community empowerment events (Jackson, 2004). However, value-consistent action or behaviour is dependent on what is personally identified as important by a student. S7 pointed out their value-consistent behaviour:

By me consistently expressing my values and strengths prepares me well for my future because I constantly look back to my values especially and learn not to give up, to take up challenges, to strive to my fullest potential to reach the goal I want to achieve. Being persistent is a value of mine.

However, S8 pointed out different values which take priority in their life: “*My values include valuing learning. My value of learning will drive my hunger to learn and to engage in activities that help me to learn. This will aid me in reaching my goal*”. Their values inform all student behaviour; thus more awareness of values in the decision-making process is warranted (Fullan, 1993). Authenticity promotes alignment between values and behaviour,

which entails being aware of behaviours and either persisting or changing behaviour to meet valued-ends (Foxall et al., 2007). S4 voiced their value-driven behaviour:

My unique values could help me perform in my academic journey because I see my values as core to my success. My values guide me to the path I want to follow. Without values one would not be able to focus, be determined and strive.

S1 added,

My values will assist by guiding me towards my goals. My values reflect me as an individual, these values have to be applied every day. These values work as a guide that I will use to strive towards my goals.

Values are important, meaningful life directions. When students are able to align their behaviour with their values, they can move toward valued goals (Haigh, 2005). S10 pointed out: *“See that my words and actions align (integrity is one of my core values, but it does not help if this is not visible in my life). I think this skill is essential to any successful career.”* S9 added, *“I truly believe in my values, I strive to live by them whether in family, socially or work related and therefore assist me in reaching my goal.”* S8 added, *“My values help me to be clear and consciously aware of my goals as it will motivate me to reach them.”*

Furthermore, students recognise that values are not context specific but form a basis for all actions. S13 stated, *“Being consistent with my values in every aspect of my life such as studies, social, relationships.”* Also, awareness of values enables students to commit to action despite challenges or discomforts experienced. S2 pointed out that *“Values enable me to follow through on decisions made, even when I don’t feel like it or when things get hard.”*

When things are challenging, postgraduate students rely on their values and value-driven behaviour to assist them to persevere, despite the difficulties faced. Using their values to help navigate discomfort, S4 noted, “*Values allows me to be introspective and open. This allows me to work well with others, deal with work pressure and challenge*”. S1 stated, “*My values, such as determination, helps me know where I want go or what I am working for and continuously reminding myself of that, I will always have a clear goal in mind*”. S10 added, “*Values create focus and drive required to accomplish tasks despite facing problems or difficulties.*”

***Case Study Sample’s Experiences of Negative Cases (Psychological Inflexibility).*** I actively searched for, recorded, analysed, and reported negative cases or discrepant data that were an exemption to patterns or that modified patterns in the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). Table 26 records negative cases, specifically, the case study sample’s experience of psychological inflexibility and resistance of ACT-based development. The table documents the case study sample’s experiences from their ACT-based development in the classroom and depicts the case study sample’s resistance to exploring outside of what is comfortable for them, which is unsettling and often called psychological inflexibility (Hayes, 2012).

**Table 26***Case Study Sample's Psychological Inflexibility (Negative Cases)*

Student Code	Students' Experiences of Act-based Teaching and Learning
S1	<i>"I am not entirely sure on what path to take next..."</i>
S2	<i>"Underestimated what is expected..."</i>
S3	<i>"Sometimes the class is overwhelming."</i>
S4	<i>"I doubt the quality of my work even though it is probably above par." "Sometimes the class is overwhelming and there is not enough time for the discussion already taking place in the class."</i>
S5	<i>"I always feel as though I am not doing the correct thing that is required of me"</i>
S6	<i>"Yet some days I find this hard work tiring, draining and frustrating."</i>
S7	<i>"There is a constant flow of dialogue... at first it made me incredibly uncomfortable because it meant I had to look within myself every day to discover how I felt."</i>
S8	<i>"Realising my priorities need to change..."</i>
S9	<i>"I have some insecurities."</i>
S10	<i>"I have learnt how much more time I need to give up to put towards studying, I have learnt that I need to say no to people (socially/family) and that I usually don't do that enough. I spend too much time trying to make sure others are okay and don't spend enough time on my own priorities. I have learnt that priorities need to change a bit."</i>
S11	<i>"I am overwhelmed and it is challenging and it has been hard..."</i>
S12	<i>"I am overwhelmed at times with the amount of work required."</i>
S13	<i>"I feel challenged. I feel exhausted. Classes are hard."</i>

Natural human instinct is to avoid, control, minimise or resist discomfort, known as psychological inflexibility (Finger et al., 2020). For example, some students may avoid the discomfort of critically engaging in the classroom by distracting themselves on their cell phones. S3 expressed their psychological inflexibility: *"In the beginning I withdrew and*

*didn't interact in class. I was uncomfortable*". Developing psychological flexibility is met with resistance and struggle; this is expected and necessary as students' grapple with disorientating information (Illeris, 2010).

Within HEIs, there is a responsibility to facilitate self-awareness in students (Urdang, 2010). Often this process is unsettling for students. Students may reasonably be reluctant and resistant to alter what they believe has been an effective way to think, create, and solve problems. S10 reflected on their experiences in the classroom and their peers' rigid thinking, "*...training students to go out into the field to work within mental health but students themselves are perpetuating biases and stereotypes. I don't feel safe telling people my personal story. It is hard*". Challenging and changing perspectives is a complicated process, and often, students' express psychological inflexibility as they resist this change.

Our educational system has trained students to think that grades or hard skill acquisition are more important than personal and professional development. Students often value grades over personal development; as S13 described, "*I want to get my degree with distinction, distinction in all my modules*". S7 added, "*I think the competition in class is unnecessary. Everyone asking, what did you get for an assessment. It is really unnecessary*". Research suggests that self-awareness in the learning experience may lead to discomfort (Rashed, 2013; Thwala & Pillay, 2012). S3 stated, "*I have actually done another honours before, but the jump into this [psychology] honours has been difficult.... From a personal development perspective*".

### ***Summary of Pre and Post Term Survey Findings***

To ascertain the case study sample's experiences of their ACT-based development, a voluntary, confidential, quantitative Pre and Post Term Survey was administered. The survey allowed the case study sample to provide input in two areas: their perception of psychological

flexibility development and their perception of psychological flexibility development in assisting in the preparation for the working environment. All 13 case study sample participants opted to complete the Pre and Post Term Survey as seen in Figure 13.

The survey posed ten questions, five of which related to their perception of psychological flexibility development, and five about their perceptions of career preparedness. To ascertain numerical data, the questions utilised a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 -5 or 'poor' to 'excellent'. The questions also allowed students to clarify their answers. Data from the survey provide another data source to verify the qualitative data provided.

**Figure 12**

*Pre and Post Term Survey Comparison: Perception of PDF Development*

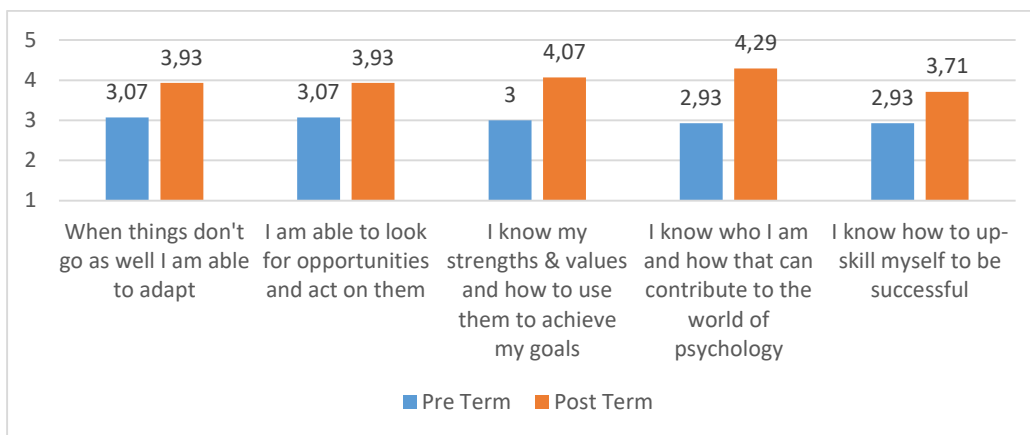


Figure 12 is a comparison of findings from the Pre and Post Term Survey regarding the case study sample's perception of their psychological flexibility skills. The Pre Term Survey findings indicated a weighted average of 3 (out of 5) or 'average' perception of psychological flexibility skills from the five questions asked. The Post Term Survey findings indicated a weighted average of 3.99 (out of 5) or 'above average' perception of psychological flexibility skill development. Interestingly, the case study sample rated their psychological flexibility development as 'average' for all five questions asked in the Pre

Term Survey. Post Term, the case studies rated their psychological flexibility skill development as ‘above average’ on all five questions, showing a general perception of overall improvement.

**Figure 13**

*Pre and Post Term Survey Comparison: Perception of Career Preparedness*

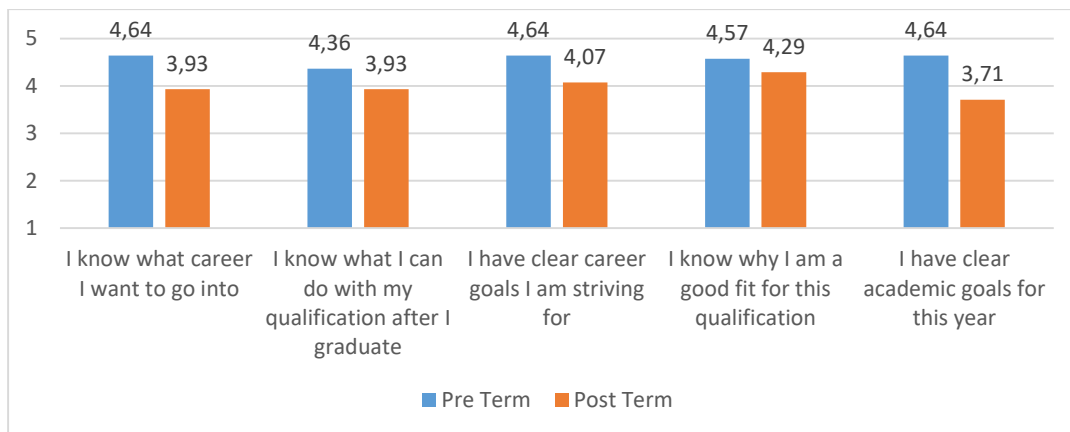


Figure 13 is a comparison of findings from the Pre and Post Term Survey regarding the case study sample’s perception of their career preparedness. From the five questions asked, the Pre Term Survey findings indicated a weighted average of 4.57 (out of 5) or ‘above average’ to ‘excellent’ perception of career preparedness. Given the competitive nature of psychology training, most postgraduate psychology students graduate as non-professionals (DHET, 2012). Therefore, students enter a postgraduate psychology programme with specific academic and career goals as they work towards being one of the select few eligible to enter a professional master’s programme.

The Pre Term Survey findings reflected this focused, somewhat rigid stance toward career preparedness. The Post Term Survey findings indicated a decreased weighted average of 3.99 (out of 5) or ‘above average’ perception of career preparedness. Booysen and Naidoo (2016) state that the uncertainty of being admitted into a professional psychology master’s degree creates anxious and doubtful psychology honours students. Learning to cope with this



discomfort and often redefine what your career path may be, requires psychological flexibility (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016; Siegel, 2010; Tinto, 2014). The Post Term Survey findings indicate some flexibility and openness toward alternative career paths.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented empirical data to answer the three research questions. Concerning the first research question, the data indicated that the educators who participated in the ACT-based professional development training reported the common experiences of resilience, empathy, and authenticity as the processes that facilitated the development of psychological flexibility. Furthermore, quantitative data suggested that the CAR process, used to guide the ACT-based professional development training, was an effective strategy for educator professional development.

Regarding the second research question, the data indicated that the educators' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices involved five processes, namely, a developmental classroom environment, student empowerment, educator-student relationship, student-centred and transferability.

Finally, the case study participants' responses to the third research question, suggested that the shared experiences of resilience, mindfulness, and authenticity processes facilitated the development of psychological flexibility. The quantitative data further suggested that the case study participants' psychological flexibility development reduced psychological inflexibility around career certainty.

The findings from the empirical study indicated that ACT, which promotes the development of psychological flexibility, offers numerous benefits to psychology honours students. This specifically enhances students' ability to act despite commonplace discomforts. Furthermore, the evidence further concludes that ACT can be embedded into teaching and

learning practices to promote psychological flexibility skill development in students. The last chapter, Chapter Six, provides a meta-perspective of the study conducted, focusing on the summary, conclusion, and recommendations.

## Chapter 6 Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

“[Educators] will change the educational environment by understanding it.” -

Stenhouse et al. (1985)

### Introduction

This chapter summarises the various components of empirical study which aimed to embed the mindfulness-based, psychotherapeutic model, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) into the teaching and learning practices of psychology honours students to promote greater psychological flexibility. Furthermore, as the process of reflection is integral in Collaborative Action Research (CAR), I reflect on my learnings in response to the theoretical, methodological and research findings. The thesis is concluded by reflecting on the major contributions offered by the study, outlining limitations, and making recommendations for further research. The summary begins with the literature review.

### Summary of Findings: Literature Review

The literature review underscored the need for effective teaching and learning practices, which aid in soft skill development, to prepare psychology students for the commonplace discomforts in the professional and academic domains (Slaski & Cartwright, 2003). Postgraduate psychology students who can develop the skills to manage discomfort effectively are more likely to view stressors as challenges and aim to deal with obstacles in growth-enhancing ways (Siegel, 2010). Some argued that mindfulness-based soft skills, such as psychological flexibility, apply and are necessary when training postgraduate psychology students. However, a consistent challenge raised in the literature was the lack of an

operational framework or model to guide the implementation of mindfulness-based practices in education (Burgin, 2017).

The need for a mindfulness-based framework and the growing evidence base of the effectiveness of mindfulness-based practices in assisting individuals to interpret stressors as growth-enhancing opportunities provided the rationale for exploring mindfulness-based models, such as ACT (Araiba, 2020; Schoeberlein et al., 2009). ACT aims to enhance psychological flexibility, the skill to manage discomfort and challenge effectively, by operationalising six iterative processes: contacting the present moment, cognitive defusion, acceptance, self-as-context, values, and committed action (Harris, 2009). The ACT Triflex Model provides a framework to guide the implementation of ACT, by categorising the six ACT processes into three interlocking phases (opening up, being present, doing what matters), which work together to enhance psychological flexibility (Hayes et al., 2006).

Based on the literature, I argued that embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices integrates programme-specific hard and soft skill development for students (Danitz & Orsillo, 2014; Kidney, 2018). An integrated teaching and learning approach enables educators to enhance specific soft skill development relevant to postgraduate psychology students (Ngang & Chan, 2015). Furthermore, I contended that the ACT-based skills developed in the academic context would be transferrable to other life contexts, appropriately preparing psychology graduates to engage meaningfully with discomfort (Levin et al., 2014). While limited literature has pointed to instances where ACT was embedded in teaching and learning practices, the specific approach (ACT) has proven to be appropriate and effective for developing postgraduate psychology students (Moyer et al., 2017; Pakenham, 2015).

Because of the dearth of research focusing on ACT embedded in teaching and learning practices, the generalised framework of the ACT Triflex model was utilised to guide the incorporation of ACT into teaching and learning practices (Bush, 2011; Sarath, 2003;

Shapiro et al., 2008). The ACT Triflex model is versatile in its application, providing an opportunity for flexible application in teaching and learning practices within HEIs in South Africa (Harris, 2009; Hayes, 1993; Moran, 2011). Furthermore, ACT has a large body of empirical data to support its effectiveness. This literature density offers guidance to embed ACT within teaching and learning practices (Harris, 2009; Hayes, 1993; Moran, 2015).

Despite the limited research of ACT embedded in teaching and learning practices, ACT was selected as the theoretical framework for this study. ACT utilises creative pedagogical devices such as metaphors, paradoxes, and experiential exercises (Hayes, 1993). Moreover, ACT's pedagogical devices make it relevant within teaching and learning practices (Moran, 2011). These devices can be translated into creative teaching and learning practices and confirm ACT's relevance in the classroom (Hayes, 2016). Also, the development of ACT-based skills is effective when students are guided along a process instead of a one-off intervention (Hayes, 2016; Pülschen & Pülschen, 2015). Therefore, ACT embedded in teaching and learning practices provides a guided developmental process for students.

Hayes (2016) states that if the overall goal and purpose of ACT training are achieved, a strict protocol need not be followed. However, applying ACT principles to one's own life is considered a prerequisite to training others in ACT (Pakenham & Stafford-Brown 2012). Consequently, the literature necessitated educator professional development in ACT as a priority for the effectiveness of embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices (Ragoonaden, 2017). Given the paucity of research available to guide the professional development of educators in embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices, the experiences of educators are important to understand. In this study, CAR was selected as an effective educator professional development strategy and formed part of this study's methodology.

### **Summary of Findings: Research Methodology**

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) describe the CAR approach as a systematic process where a community of educators can collaborate and engage in professional development practices to enhance student outcomes. The CAR approach prioritises student development by giving educators a dual role of educator and researcher, bridging the gap between research and practice (Rowell et al., 2017). There is no separation of professionally developing educators and developing students, nor is there a need to separate the development of interventions for students and researching these activities (Cain, 2008).

Educators are empowered to collect and use data to make informed decisions about their teaching and learning practices through a CAR process, providing context-specific knowledge and practice (Johnson, 2012). Within the classroom, empowered educators can implement practices that best meet the needs of their students, tailoring practices for specific student development (Hoy et al., 2002; Rowell et al., 2017). Therefore, CAR involves a community of educators identifying a challenge within their educational context and then attempting to solve these challenges by improving their practices (Mills, 2011; Somekh, 2006).

The literature necessitates involving the student's voice to create a fuller understanding of teaching and learning practices and initiatives (Guskey, 2014; Zambo & Isai, 2012). CAR involves obtaining feedback from students, the recipients of the educators' professional development, providing an opportunity for students to validate or dispute outcomes (Banerjee et al., 2010). Students hold a crucial role in improving teaching and learning practices and contribute to professionally developing educators (Gibbs et al., 2017). Given this study's focus on professionally developing educators to enhance postgraduate

psychology student development, the CAR approach was identified as an appropriate methodological process in addressing the study's focus.

Owing to the importance of understanding experiences to inform practice and knowledge, the CAR approach was embedded in an interpretive paradigm, centring on educator and student experience (Pope, 2020). The CAR approach, which involved four cycles over ten months, allowed for a small-scale investigation into the classrooms of seven postgraduate psychology educators, with a single cohort of 13 postgraduate psychology students, within a selected private HEI (Lesha, 2014; Richards & Lockhart, 1992). Given the subjective nature of experiences, various data collection methods were utilised at various points throughout the ten-month CAR process, to help scrutinise and validate the data to answer the three research questions of this study (Edwards, 2018). The data analysis involved answering the research questions by triangulating the data through three or more data methods or through two or more points of view (Sagor, 2005). The inclusion of one quantitative method scrutinised qualitative data further (Creswell, 2008).

The ethical challenges and considerations of the CAR process were explicitly integrated in the conceptualisation, planning, and conducting of this study, strengthening the trustworthiness of the research findings (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Common ethical challenges in CAR studies involve navigating the complexities of multiple roles, multiple relationships, and insider positionality (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015; Floyd & Arthur, 2012). The principles of vulnerability, confidentiality, benefits, and harm needed to be negotiated between the multiple relationships in this study, safeguarding the integrity of the research findings (Locke et al., 2013).

## **Summary of Findings: Research Questions and Discussion**

This section provides a summary of the research findings concerning each of the three research questions.

### ***Summary of Findings: Research Question 1***

Despite the recognised need for and importance of the professional development of educators, particularly in soft skill development, this remains a neglected area of research (Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). There are no available local or international ACT protocols to guide ACT-based professional development of higher education educators. Consequently, Research Question 1 read, what are educators' experiences of the ACT-based professional development training? The findings indicated that professionally developing educators in ACT, through the CAR approach, has contributed to their development of psychological flexibility, the skill required to manage discomfort effectively.

The findings from the educators' ACT-based professional development training was conceptualised using the ACT Triflex model, which utilises the three processes of opening up, being present, doing what matters to facilitate the development of psychological flexibility (Hayes, 2016). The educators' professional development of ACT through the three processes revealed three overarching themes of resilience, empathy, authenticity.

The ACT Triflex process of opening up involves willingly allowing discomfort to come and go without attempting to control or minimise the experience (Biglan et al., 2008). Through the ACT-based professional development training, the educators' professional development of opening up in their own lives has revealed the shared experience of resilience. Resilience was experienced as the ability not to respond impulsively to reduce discomfort (Sahdra et al., 2011).



The ACT Triflex process of being present involves being mindful and aware of discomfort in the here-and-now experience (Harris, 2009). Through the educators' ACT-based professional development training, their professional development of being present in their own lives has revealed the common experience of increased empathy. Empathy was experienced by the co-researchers as compassion, acceptance, and multiple perspective-taking, enhancing educators' awareness of their discomfort experienced (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Shapiro & Izett, 2008).

The ACT Triflex process of doing what matters involves committing to valued behaviour despite discomfort (Hayes et al., 2004). Through the educators' ACT-based professional development training, the educators' professional development of doing what matters in their own lives has revealed the common experience of authenticity. Educators experienced authenticity as living a life of consistency between values and behaviours, enabling educators to persist in valued life directions despite discomfort experienced (Moran, 2011).

The ACT-based professional development of educators resulted in educators experiencing resilience, empathy, and authenticity, which facilitated their development of psychological flexibility. The educators' development of psychological flexibility, which is their ability to manage discomfort, was achieved through their common experiences of resilience, empathy, and authenticity. Thus, Research Question 1 was answered.

Further, an important negative case was highlighted in the research findings, where educators expressed the possibility of values misalignment, specifically within the doing what matters ACT Triflex process (Creswell & Creswell, 2007). The educators reported that through the ACT-based professional development training, they become acutely aware of their values and whether there is value alignment within their work and the organisation they work for. Educators expressed that they found value alignment, personal satisfaction, and

engagement in their work (Mitmansgruber et al., 2008). However, where perceived misalignment is experienced, this could cause dissatisfaction and disengagement in their work (Atkins & Parker, 2012). The negative case is an important consideration for other organisations contemplating the implementation of ACT-based professional development practices.

Given that the ACT-based professional development training was facilitated through the CAR approach, it is important to provide educators' experiences of the process, which facilitated their professional development. ACT-based professional development is most commonly facilitated in a workshop format (Kidney, 2018) and has not been facilitated through a CAR process. The CAR process has a dual focus on generating knowledge and implementing action (Guskey, 2014). In this study, a quantitative, anonymised Post Term Survey posed eight questions on the dual focus of the CAR process, namely the educators' generation of ACT-based knowledge and their implementation of ACT-based action. The findings indicated that the educators weighted average for ACT-based knowledge generation was 3.96 (out of 5). The findings also indicated that the educators weighted average for their ACT-based action was 4.18 (out of 5). Thus, the educators reported that their professional development in ACT was effectively facilitated through the CAR process.

The success of the CAR process relies on the environment or organisation to be receptive and supportive of the process (Mertler, 2014). The Post Term Survey indicated that from the six questions asked, the co-researchers weighted average was 4.95 (out of 5) showing that the research environment afforded the educators the opportunity to engage in the CAR process to develop professionally. Consequently, the research environment enhanced the success of the CAR process and the resultant ACT-based professional development of educators.

### ***Summary of Findings: Research Question 2***

Because educators have considerable influence on their students' development, any enquiry into student development should also include an investigation into the educators' teaching and learning strategies (Ngang & Chan, 2015). However, there are no local or international ACT-based teaching and learning protocols to use as reference points to embed ACT into teaching and learning practices. Thus, most recommendations regarding ACT-based teaching and learning practices are theory-driven (Burgin, 2017). There is a need to augment theoretical perspectives and guidelines with empirical data. Consequently, this study endeavoured to contribute to the literature by investigating Research Question 2: What are educators' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices for psychology honours students?

The empirical data were interpreted through the ACT Triflex model to operationalise the ACT-based teaching and learning practices. The findings indicated that ACT-based teaching and learning promoted two standard practices, namely, (a) a developmental classroom environment and (b) student empowerment to operationalise opening up or the ability to not respond impulsively to discomfort (Sahdra et al., 2011). A developmental classroom environment entails the three subthemes of (a) educators creating a safe but challenging environment, (b) educators emphasising respect among peers in the classroom environment, and (c) where clear expectations of the classroom environment are provided. Student empowerment entails the two sub-themes of (a) teaching and learning practices which promote self-awareness and (b) teaching and learning practices which promote the student's voice. The findings indicated that educators assisted students to experience opening up to discomfort by creating a developmental classroom environment where student empowerment was prioritised.

Next, to operationalise being present, which is the ability to be mindful and aware of discomfort, the findings indicated that two common teaching and learning practices were needed, (a) being student-centred and (b) the educator-student relationship. Being student-centred relates to two common sub-themes of (a) providing individualised attention to students in class and (b) valuing the diversity of students. The educator-student relationship relates to two sub-themes of (a) being authentic and (b) caring. The findings suggested that to guide students in being present, educators need to meet students where they are in their individual development and build a relationship with each student to facilitate a mindful learning experience.

Last, to operationalise doing what matters, which is the alignment between values and action, despite the discomfort, the findings indicated that the common teaching and learning practices needed was transferability. Transferability relates to the two common sub-themes of (a) having valued-life directions and (b) connecting theory and practice. Living authentically, where there is value alignment, enables graduates to persist in discomfort (Fletcher & Hayes, 2005).

To answer Research Question 2, the data indicated that the educators' experiences of embedding ACT into their teaching and learning practices involved the five shared experiences of (a) a developmental classroom environment, (b) student empowerment, (c) educator-student relationship, (d) being student-centred, and (e) transferability. Educators embedded ACT in their teaching and learning practices through the five common experiences, enabling the development of psychological flexibility. Further to the five shared experiences, the data revealed 11 related sub-themes or experiences which educators utilised in operationalising their ACT-based teaching and learning practices. The five themes and 11 related sub-themes summarise how educators practically incorporated ACT within their

teaching and learning practices, answering Research Question 2. Data from students corroborated and validated these findings.

### ***Summary of Findings: Research Question 3***

While it is well documented that psychology students need to be trained to manage commonplace discomforts, less is known about how to train these students accordingly (Beges, 2015). The purported argument is that if students are given the opportunity to learn how to manage discomfort during their academic training, they may be better prepared as graduates to manage commonplace discomforts in the work environment. Against this backdrop innovative ways of supporting postgraduate psychology students to enhance psychological flexibility are necessary (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016; Rosenberg, 2018).

Psychological flexibility is a transferrable life skill that enables individuals to respond effectively to discomfort (Hayes et al., 2004; Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Some argue that postgraduate psychology students who can develop psychological flexibility in HEIs will be better equipped to manage discomfort in all life contexts (Peterson, 2016). This study aimed to ascertain whether ACT, embedded in teaching and learning practices, could promote the development of psychological flexibility for postgraduate psychology students. The findings indicated that the postgraduate psychology students' experience of ACT-based teaching and learning practices has contributed to their perceived development of psychological flexibility.

Through the conceptual lens of the ACT Triflex model, the three processes of opening up, being present and doing what matters to facilitate the development of psychological flexibility resulted in the three shared experiences of, namely, resilience, mindfulness, and authenticity. The data indicated that these lived experiences are important components in promoting a sense of psychological flexibility among students. The ACT Triflex process of opening up involves the willingness to accept discomforts for what they are (Dykema, 2013).

The postgraduate psychology students' development of opening up has revealed the shared experience of resilience, the willingness to experience discomfort (Heppner & Heppner, 2003).

The ACT Triflex process of being present involves being aware (Harris, 2009). The students' development of being present has been summarised in the common theme of mindfulness. Being mindful enables students to recognise or be aware of when they are experiencing discomfort (Harris, 2009). The ACT Triflex process of doing what matters entails committing to valued action, even when confronted with discomfort (Hayes et al., 2004). The students' development of doing what matters has been summarised in the common theme of authenticity. An authentic life enables students to rely on their values and value-driven behaviour to assist them to persevere, despite difficulties faced.

The ACT-based teaching and learning practices facilitated psychological flexibility development for psychology honours students through facilitating the experiences of resilience, mindfulness, and authenticity. The data indicated that psychology honours students reported the perceived development of psychological flexibility, which is their ability to manage discomfort effectively. Consequently, Research Question 3 was answered.

All students reported psychological inflexibility at the onset of the ACT-based teaching and learning experiences in the classroom. A negative case highlighted in the research findings was that students reported resistance toward developing a different relationship with discomfort. Students' natural manner in managing discomfort was through psychological inflexibility, avoiding or suppressing discomfort (Hayes, 2012). The process for students learning psychological flexibility was not solely cognitive or behavioural. The findings indicated that developing psychological flexibility skills is also an emotional process of skill development (Hassel & Ridout, 2018). ACT-based teaching and learning practices

provide a reinforced, guided learning process for students to practise and develop psychological flexibility.

A voluntary, confidential, quantitative Pre and Post Term Survey was administered to triangulate and validate the qualitative data. The survey findings provided input in two areas, namely (a) students' perception of psychological flexibility development and (b) students' perception of psychological flexibility preparing them for the working environment. The Pre and Post Term Survey posed five questions related to their perception of psychological flexibility development. The Pre Term Survey findings indicate a weighted average of 3 (out of 5) or 'average' perception of psychological flexibility skills. The Post Term Survey findings indicate a weighted average of 3.99 (out of 5) or 'above average' perception of psychological flexibility skill development. The quantitative findings validate the qualitative findings, confirming students' perception that ACT-based teaching and learning practices promoted their psychological flexibility development.

The Pre and Post Term Survey also posed five questions about students' perceptions of career preparedness. The Pre Term Survey findings indicate a weighted average of 4.57 (out of 5) or 'above average' to 'excellent' perception of career preparedness, with students sure about what career and further studies were required. The Pre Term Survey findings reflect this focused, somewhat rigid stance toward career preparedness in the postgraduate psychology programme. The Post Term Survey findings indicate a decreased weighted average of 3.99 (out of 5) or 'above average' perception of career preparedness. The findings indicate that students' increased career uncertainty requires psychological flexibility (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016; Siegel, 2010; Tinto, 2014).

## Lead Researcher's Reflections and Learnings

Reflective practice is a core element of CAR (Baskerville & Myers, 2004; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The concept of reflective practice refers to the thoughtful, retrospective consideration of actions to gather further knowledge or learnings (Leitch & Day, 2000). Therefore, besides learning about the theoretical content in the research process, priority should be given to the reflections and subsequent learnings about the process of inquiry (Braa & Vidgen, 1999). As I engaged in this study in the capacity of the lead researcher, seven reflective points emerged. I now discuss these to offer insight into the role of reflective practice in completing this thesis:

- I found ACT, facilitated through the CAR process, to be an effective method for professional development with educators in HEI. If we accept this idea, I propose that educators be empowered to be involved in CAR projects as part of annual educator evaluations (Mertler, 2013). Educators would set specific annual professional development goals for themselves, which they could pursue through a systematic yet iterative CAR approach. Thus, educators would be empowered and involved in examining their teaching and learning practices and the subsequent impact on student development. Incorporating CAR into educator evaluation would add to educators' sense of empowerment and ownership over their evaluation processes.

- My learnings indicate that to have someone responsible for leading the ACT-based professional development CAR process is beneficial (Andrews & Grogan, 2005). The responsible person can initiate regular moments for educators to reflect and think about ACT, about themselves and other contexts. Without the regular reinforcement and reminders to reflect and think about ACT, educators may not have sufficient opportunity to embody and apply ACT (McCown et al., 2010). In addition, individuals who derive personal experience from ACT are more likely to incorporate their learnings in other contexts, such as work.



Thus, HEIs need to ensure that the ACT professional development training is facilitated to promote a lifestyle change and embodiment. One method that worked for this study was the inclusion of educators in the CAR process.

- ACT is a personalised life skill, and how it manifests and is expressed is unique to each person (Hayes, 2016). However, creating space for uniqueness, with unique expressions or implementations from learnings, may discomfort an organisation that values tried and tested methods or uniformity. Therefore, I recommend providing feedback loops to the organisations' management and stakeholders to create awareness of the potential benefits and consequences of the ACT-based professional development process. The concept of a feedback loop refers to tracking data-to-document progress to keep stakeholders abreast of findings continuously.

- ACT-based teaching and learning practices promote personal development among students. Whereas personal development may traditionally be regarded as a positive experience, it does create change, which may be experienced as unsettling and psychologically uncomfortable for some students. As ACT is a lifestyle approach, the unsettling sense of discomfort in the academic space can be transferred into other life domains. While ACT can promote empowerment, it can, at first, be challenging and met with resistance. In a private HEI, where students are often referred to as customers, unsettled or dissatisfied customers can concern management and stakeholders. ACT teaching and learning practices could stretch and create discomfort for both students and educators. This may be frowned upon initially by the private HEI, even when presented with evidence of its benefit. Ensuring that students and the private HEI stakeholders know what to expect upfront may assist with meeting expectations and providing transparency in possible discomfort that could be experienced.

- Responsible teaching and learning practices require educators and the HEIs to reflect on the ethical implications of trying innovative approaches, such as ACT-based teaching and learning practices. Questions that arise and need consideration include discussions around when ACT-based teaching and learning practices are empowering and when they are possibly destructive.

- As the lead researcher responsible for ensuring the professional development of the educators through the CAR process, I found the process labour intensive, requiring time, resources, and personal investment. Furthermore, the educators were adjunct staff which necessitated additional time and investment from their side. The realities and challenges of conducting CAR for professional development within our given context allow us to consider whether the process is sustainable, scalable, and feasible. The organisation would need to consider whether there are resources, time, and space to invest into a process like this to ensure the success of a CAR professional development process.

- ACT-based professional development, facilitated through CAR, is a process of development for educators. Educators require support as they learn to apply ACT within their teaching and learning practices. Furthermore, learning about ACT theoretically within a workshop setting has different conditions than when educators apply their learning to the classroom environment. Thus, educators will need time to adapt and mould their ACT-based teaching and learning practices. The HEIs will need to evaluate sufficient support structures to allow educators to adapt and experiment with their teaching and learning practices responsibly.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This section concludes the chapter by (1) summarising the contributions offered by this study, (2) discussing the limitations of the study, and (3) making recommendations for further research.

### ***Research Contribution***

The findings and insights from the action research process offer theoretical and practical contributions as follows:

***Research Contributions: Research Question 1.*** Despite the recognised importance of educator professional development to promote student outcomes, educator professional development remains a neglected area of research and practice in HEI and South Africa (CHE, 2017; Zawacki-Richter & Naidu, 2016). There is also a recognised need for incorporating educator professional development in soft skills, such as mindfulness-based skills, to promote soft skill development in students (Dixon et al., 2010). However, there is a lack of local and international educator professional development guidelines to draw from and even fewer guidelines that focus on soft skill development. Given the scarcity of research, there is a need to provide theoretical and empirical contributions in this area (CHE, 2017).

Data in response to Research Question 1 provided theoretical and practical contributions for soft skill educator professional development in HEIs in South Africa. The findings contributed towards an ACT-based educator professional development protocol (Appendix 5), a novel contribution to the dense ACT literature base. Thus, including the ACT-based educator professional development training (Appendix 5) provides transparency

in the research process and serves as a practical contribution and resource for those who may include ACT professional development training in their own HEI contexts.

Furthermore, this study facilitated the ACT-based professional development of educators through the CAR process. To date, ACT facilitated through a CAR process is an original undertaking and a further contribution to the dense ACT theoretical base. On a practical level, the research findings for Research Question 1 confirmed the suitability of the CAR process for the ACT-based educator professional development. Given the lack of guidelines, the research findings further guide institutions in determining whether the environment is conducive to the CAR process in facilitating the ACT-based professional development.

***Research Contributions: Research Question 2.*** The growing interest and application of mindfulness-based practices in healthcare programmes are promising (Bohecker et al., 2014; Fulton & Cashwell, 2015). However, a consistent challenge raised in the literature around mindfulness-based approaches is the lack of a framework to guide implementation (Felton et al., 2015). In addition, educators are challenged to align mindfulness-based practices in their teaching and learning practices. Therefore, educators are raising the necessity for a theoretical and application framework that guides implementation (Keane, 2014).

One specific area of research proposed to assist with a mindfulness-based application framework is incorporating the ACT model. The generic application models of ACT, such as the Triflex model, provide the application framework utilised in guiding and embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices (Rosenberg, 2018). There is limited research available to guide embedding ACT in teaching and learning practices, and there is no ACT-based teaching and learning protocol available.

Data presented in response to Research Question 2 contributes towards an ACT-based teaching and learning protocol, a unique contribution to the dense ACT literature base. The research findings documented five themes and 11 related subthemes which guide the practical implementation of ACT into teaching and learning practices. The findings further contribute to the validity of the ACT model as an appropriate application framework for HEI.

***Research Contributions: Research Question 3.*** Despite the difficulty in gathering mental health statistics in South Africa (WHO, 2017), training healthcare students and graduates who can embrace and thrive in challenging conditions seem to be a non-negotiable skill required for effective practice in the South African healthcare environment (Kashdan & Rottenberg, 2010). Furthermore, both psychology healthcare professionals and non-professionals need training and skill development to work in the challenging work environment effectively (Booyesen & Naidoo, 2016; Siegel, 2010; Tinto, 2014).

Understanding the challenges psychology graduates face in the mental healthcare working environment in South Africa is necessary for stakeholders, such as HEIs, to investigate proactive ways to prepare better and equip psychology students to meet the needs of society (Abu et al., 2020). With a lack of consensus in the literature around how best to prepare psychology students with the skills for the challenging career-specific environment, exploration and investigations into this area are warranted (Halpern, 2010). While there may be no consensus on what soft skills should be prioritised, developing soft skills that enable postgraduate psychology students to cope and persist in discomfort is needed (Goleman, 2014; Hayes, 1993; Nelson & Low, 2011).

Data in response to Research Question 3 confirmed that postgraduate psychology students can develop specific soft skills, such as psychological flexibility, in unison with the hard skills required in the programme. The findings validated that embedding soft skills in

teaching and learning practices of a specific programme may prove to be an effective, scalable, and proactive method in preparing students with the soft skills required in their programme. The findings have important implications for HEIs in considering alternative methods of preparing healthcare students. Readers interested in working with postgraduate psychology students can ascertain from the data whether ACT-based teaching and learning practices can be used in their context for student development.

Originality is expressed through the ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual (Appendix 2). The ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual and associated workshops were important to guide students in their understanding of psychological flexibility. They contributed to their development of psychological flexibility skills. The manual has been included for transparency and is a practical contribution of this study, inviting readers to review and utilise it within their own contexts. The manual provides a basis for reinterpretation, providing an additional ACT-based support resource for students.

### **Limitations**

Creswell (2008) states that limitations of a study can be expected and thus should be discussed. Below are six overall limitations in this study, providing opportunities for further related undertakings.

- The CAR methodology is context-specific, which involves identifying a specific problem within a particular context and attempting to address this problem (Oliver, 1980).

Consistent with interpretive CAR research, including a few co-researchers (7) and case study sample participants (13) allowed for the in-depth exploration of context-specific experiences (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015). While small-scale, contextual, localised problem solving is akin to CAR studies, this study could have found additional methods to improve the findings' transferability. The study could have utilised multiple

student cohorts or conducted research at multiple campus sites, drawing findings from a larger area to inform ACT-based teaching and learning practices and increasing the transferability of the findings and learnings.

- This study was conducted within a South African context and, therefore, did not consider aspects related to internationalisation and globalisation. Consequently, the focus was limited to students' experiences within a fairly limited setting. Amidst a context characterised by ongoing change, globalisation and internationalisation, greater attention should be focused on preparing students for maximum mobility with continental and global consciousness. Future research could build on this study and focus on how ACT-based teaching and learning practices could contribute to preparing psychology students for global citizenship.
- The findings suggest that educators' ACT-based teaching and learning practices contribute to postgraduate psychology students' development. However, the findings do not suggest that educators are the sole influence on student development. A possible limitation of this study is that a causal relationship between ACT-based teaching and learning practices and student development was not investigated. Therefore, findings cannot confirm the relationship between teaching practices and student outcomes. Instead, this study collated and triangulated various data sources and perspectives to provide a rich and detailed picture of both educators' and postgraduate psychology students' experiences of the ACT-based teaching and learning practices.
- All data gathering measures chosen for this study were self-report measures based on subjective experiences and viewpoints. Subjective accounts rely heavily on personal reflection and experience. Although this is an integral part of the interpretive CAR process, a more mixed-methods approach or including the standard quantitative AAQ-II survey could have widened the transferability and scrutiny of the research findings. As

there is no valid interpretation of subjective experiences, I increased the trustworthiness of the data by triangulating three or more data methods to answer each research question (Sagor, 2005). Furthermore, I endeavoured to provide transparent and detailed findings and processes by including all data collection methods as appendices to help the reader reinterpret and understand the findings.

- Part of the rationale for implementing a CAR process is the practical improvements to address a problem within a particular setting. CAR seeks to turn small-scale, context-specific initiatives into sustainable improvements and practices by ensuring the implemented cycles trigger new cycles, new questions, and other topics for inquiry (Banegas & Villacañas de Castro, 2015). Therefore, care should be taken to ensure that action will continue after the research is completed. A challenge and limitation I experienced was with adjunct staff as co-researchers. A different sample of full-time, permanent staff members may have produced different findings. The adjunct staff members, who are not employed on a full-time basis, found it challenging to utilise and operationalise the CAR cycles due to their time-based and seasonal employment contracts. A possible solution to this challenge could be to create partnerships between full-time staff members and adjunct staff. Through such partnerships, the full-time staff members could ensure the continuation of CAR cycles.
- While ACT and CAR both independently have extensive research to draw from, there was a paucity of research to guide a theoretical and practical level for the focus of this study. Based on the literature searches, there is no documented ACT protocol for educator professional development, nor a protocol for ACT-based teaching and learning practices. Furthermore, ACT has not been facilitated through a CAR process, and therefore there are limited guidelines from which to draw. Given the scarcity of local and international studies or protocols available, the findings of this study have limited reference points to



evaluate the research findings critically. The research findings should be viewed cautiously and provide an opportunity for future studies to contribute to this area.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The study's findings provide an opportunity for others to build on these findings in at least these four ways:

- There is a recognised need for a greater focus on transferrable soft skill development to prepare graduates appropriately for all life contexts (Kuh, 2018; Quinlan, 2014).  
Transferrable skills promote a student's personal, professional, and academic growth (Harland & Pickering, 2011; Jones & Abes, 2004). ACT is a lifestyle approach that promotes the transferability of skills across all life domains (Hayes, 2006). A quantitative, longitudinal study that documents and assesses the transferability of psychological flexibility skills developed within HEIs to the work context would further explain ACT-based student development initiatives in HEIs.
- Including ACT in the teaching and learning facilitation process provides promising opportunities to explore embedding ACT in other facilitation processes. An argument could be purported that embedding ACT in the research supervision facilitation process may help foster the development of psychological flexibility and could be beneficial in enhancing how students respond to discomfort in the research process (Levecque et al., 2017). Further investigations of how ACT can be embedded in other academic facilitation processes are warranted.
- Despite a steady increase in the complement of adjunct teaching staff within HEIs globally, there is a paucity of research that investigates the professional development of adjunct educators (Ambrose et al., 2010). In addition, adjunct educators often have multiple jobs and face competing priorities, resulting in a detachment from the

institution's vision (Peters & Boylston, 2006; Saunders et al., 2011). This study adds to the literature body by exploring the experiences and perceived benefits of ACT-based professional development with adjunct educators. One of the perceived benefits is the alignment of personal values with the teaching commitments of an institution. This has promising implications for further research, both nationally and internationally, and warrants further investigation.

- One goal in action research is not to make generalisable claims, but to share findings to create further learnings with others who may (a) want to develop a similar study or (b) use the findings to improve their own teaching and learning practices in a similar context. The findings and the ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual (Appendix 2) and the ACT-based educator professional development training manual (Appendix 5) have been provided for reinterpretation and utilisation in other contexts, providing opportunities for further research.

### **In Closing**

Throughout history, humanity has proven its capabilities for adapting to challenging circumstances. Within life lies the potential for flexibility and effective management of discomfort. However, cultivating the skill of flexibility and thriving in discomfort is a deliberate practice that needs to be learned and nurtured. Thus, to prepare postgraduate psychology students appropriately for challenging circumstances, soft skill development needs to be prioritised in HEIs' training.

While HEIs and educators recognise the need to do more to train psychology students for the discomforts associated with the profession, there is no consensus on what should be prioritised or how this should be achieved. Despite the lack of consensus, equipping psychology students with the skills to manage discomfort in the South African environment is

a priority for all stakeholders invested in the well-being of society. As a contribution to research, this study adds to the narrative around training postgraduate psychology students to manage discomfort effectively.

In summary, Hayes (2019) reiterates that the effective management of discomfort, according to ACT is

.... learning to step back from what you are thinking, notice it, and open up to what you are experiencing. These steps keep us from doing the damage to ourselves that efforts to avoid or control our thoughts or feelings inflict, allowing us to focus our energies on taking the positive actions that can alleviate our suffering (p. 25).

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*Achieving Quality Learn*

### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Higher education institutions (HEIs) refers to a private or public tertiary educational institution, that is registered and regulated by law in terms of the Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act No 101 of 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Hard Skills, often referred to as technical skills, refer to a person's cognitive ability in areas such as literacy and numeracy, which are measurable by academic tests (Azim, et al., 2010). Soft skills refer to a set of attitudes, behaviours, and strategies such as motivation, perseverance, and self-control, which are more challenging to teach and measure (Geber, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Non-professional healthcare worker is a graduate from a qualification not registered or recognised by the HPCSA; however, the qualification still enables graduates to work within the healthcare environment, such as psychology graduates who work as lay counsellors.

<sup>4</sup> Healthcare professional is a graduate with a health professional education qualification who has registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) as a pre-requisite for professional practice, such as a registered psychologist.

<sup>5</sup> Within South African Education policy, 'educator' is defined as "an inclusive term referring to teachers, lecturers, facilitators, assessors, moderators and other teaching, educating, training, facilitating, assessing, or enabling learning in learning contexts" (SAQA, 2014, p.4).

<sup>6</sup> The term 'teaching and learning practices' is an umbrella term, which infers the study of how best to teach (Wyse et al., 2015).

<sup>7</sup> An academic psychology honours programme is a one-year, postgraduate programme aimed at providing students with a range of theoretically-based skills and knowledge which does not lead to professional registration with the HPCSA. In comparison,



a professional psychology honours programme is an 18-month, postgraduate programme incorporating an internship, designed to lead to professional registration with the HPCSA.

<sup>8</sup> The HPCSA is established to provide for control over the education, training, and registration for practising of health professions registered under the Health Professions Act. As a statutory body, the HPCSA is guided by a formal regulatory framework, namely, the Health Professions Act 56 of 1974 and the Constitution of the Professional Board for Psychology, Regulation No. R1249 of 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment (Kabat-Zinn, 2003)—one of the six core processes in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) referred to as present moment awareness (Harris, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Psychotherapeutic models are theoretical models, applied in the treatment of psychological challenges and used predominantly in psychotherapeutic settings (Hill et al., 2017).

<sup>11</sup> In its broadest sense professional development refers to the development of a person within his or her professional role i.e., educator training (Villegas-Reimers, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Hereafter, the primary researcher is referred to in the first person narration “I” as is consistent with the insider-researcher positionality within this study’s qualitative, interpretivism, and action research methodology (Trowler, 2011).

<sup>13</sup>For a detailed list of professional categories recognised under the HPCSA, refer to <https://www.hpcsa.co.za/>.

<sup>14</sup>Co-researcher [1]: Using pseudonyms or key codes is the accepted ethical practical for maintaining participants’ privacy and confidentiality. However, co-construction of key codes in action research is important to recognise co-researchers’ contributions to the study

(Brear, 2018). In this study, in agreement with the co-researchers, the key code preference is for the title 'co-researcher', with numerical identification code.

## Annexures

### Annexure A: Unisa Ethical Clearance

Ref. No: PERC-16084



#### Ethical Clearance for M/D students: Research on human participants

*The Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at Unisa has evaluated this research proposal for a Higher Degree in Psychology in light of appropriate ethical requirements, with special reference to the requirements of the Code of Conduct for Psychologists of the HPCSA and the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics.*

**Student Name:** Mrs Lauren Margaret Leon **Student no.** 472 039 43

**Supervisor:** Prof Juan Nel **Affiliation:** Dept. of Psychology, Unisa

**Co-Supervisor:** Dr Henry Mason **Affiliation:** TUT

#### Title of project:

The development of psychological flexibility in students towards increased academic success at postgraduate level.

The proposal was evaluated for adherence to appropriate ethical standards as required by the Psychology Department of Unisa. The application was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology on the understanding that –

- All ethical requirements regarding informed consent, the right to withdraw from the study, the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the information will be met to the satisfaction of the supervisor.
- Clearance is to be obtained from the universities from which the participants are to be drawn, and all conditions and procedures regarding access to staff for research purposes that may be required by these institutions are to be met.

Signed:

**Prof. M Papaikononou**


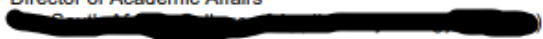
Date: 2016-12-02

[For the Ethics Committee ]  
[ Department of Psychology, Unisa ]

## Annexure B: Organisational Research Permission






27 September 2017

  
Director of Academic Affairs  




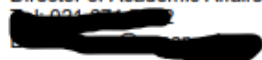
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### PERMISSION GRANTED TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

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The  grants permission for Mrs Lauren Martin (Leon) to conduct her PhD research study at , with  students and educators.

Ethical clearance number: PERC-16084 UNISA.  
Student number: 47203943  
Research project title: The development of psychological flexibility in students towards increased academic commitment.


  
  
Director of Academic Affairs  


## Annexure C: Non-Disclosure Agreement

22 February 2018


Research project: Ref. No: PERC-16084


### FIELDWORKER AND/OR RESEARCH ASSISTANT CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I, , hereby agree to:

1. Abide by the confidentiality requirements of this study, as approved by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of UNISA, by ensuring that the identities and information of the participants are not revealed during and after the course of the study;
2. Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not disclosing or discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format with anyone other than Ms Lauren Martin (principal researcher);
3. Keep all research information in any form or format securely stored while it is in my possession;
4. Return all research information in any form or format to the principal researcher when I have completed the research tasks;
5. After consulting with the principle researcher, erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the principle researcher (eg information stored on a computer hard drive).

#### Research Assistant or Fieldworker:


Print name: 

Signature: 

Date: 22 February 2018

#### Principal Researcher:

Print name: Lauren Martin

Signature: 

Date: 22 Feb 2018.

## Annexure D: Educator Informed Consent Form



### CONSENT FORM

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#### The development of psychological flexibility in students towards increased academic success at the postgraduate level

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Ethical clearance number: PERC-16084 Unisa.

Student number: 47203943

Dear Educator Faculty,

Date:

**NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** This research project forms part of a doctoral study at UNISA. This project aims to explore the experiences of an educator faculty who teach postgraduate psychology students. The project entails the professional development of educators in psychological flexibility to enhance students' psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility relates to an individual's ability to effectively manage challenges. The information collected could further improve resources and support provided to postgraduate students in higher education and those teaching these students.

**RESEARCH PROCESS:** Your participation involves being professionally developed in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which aims to enhance psychological flexibility. The educator faculty is then encouraged to incorporate psychological flexibility within their teachings of the postgraduate psychology degree. You will be invited to provide your

experiences of psychological flexibility throughout the year through written reflections, surveys, and discussions. At each data collection point, you can choose to partake or not, with no consequences to you. The research process is collaborative, and your input and engagement will help provide an understanding of the teaching and learning context. Thus, throughout the project, we will engage in procedural consent. This means there will be discussions about the research project, what is needed and whether you would like to participate or not.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Information you provide through participating in the research process will be treated as confidential. The postgraduate psychology students will not be informed of your decision to partake in the research project or not, further protecting your identity. No data published will contain any information that is identifiable to you and therefore your anonymity is ensured. All data collected in the research process will be stored electronically on the researcher's password protected computer, for a minimum of 5 years as per HPCSA guidelines. The researcher, the supervisors and the research assistant will have limited access to portions of the data collected. They will sign confidentiality agreements to protect you and the data.

**WITHDRAWAL CLAUSE:** Should you decide you do not want to participate; I would not view your stored data. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND HARM OF THE STUDY:** This research project entails the professional development of educators to enhance postgraduate psychology student's psychological flexibility. The research process aims to enhance psychological flexibility for

educators, which is the skill to effectively manage challenges. As an active contributor to the research project, you may experience the benefits of professional and personal development.

Although the research project is psychoeducational in nature and does not include psychotherapy, there is the potential of experiencing psychological harm. The research project encourages self-awareness and this may elicit a variety of unpleasant emotions, and may further highlight unresolved concerns and personal difficulties. Therefore, should you wish to discuss what you have experienced and learnt with a professional on an individual level, free counselling support can be arranged with [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges a conflict of interest and possible researcher bias, as the researcher is invested in the outcome of this research project. The researcher also acknowledges that dual roles exist. However, data collected will be utilised for research purposes only and not for any disciplinary, performance evaluation or related purposes. The researcher will monitor biases and subjective viewpoints through supervision and research journaling.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The results of this study will be disseminated through the publication of a thesis for qualification purposes. Furthermore, journal articles regarding the study and outcomes will be written and submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. The dissemination of the results will be relevant to a relatively broad audience, but more specifically to individuals within an academic context. Furthermore, the results may be presented to relevant role-players within the higher education institution for providing



feedback and further development of support services for postgraduate students. The researcher may also present this study at the annual Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACDHE) conference. SAACDHE is a forum for engaging with other professionals in higher education who contribute to counselling and development of students in higher education.

The research results will only refer to anonymised data, meaning no identifying participant information will be made available. Furthermore, reference to [REDACTED] will not be included in the research results but rather reference will be made to a Private South African University.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have any questions concerning the study, you may contact the following persons:

- The researcher, Mrs Lauren Leon, at the [REDACTED]
- The promoter, Prof Nel, at the Department of Psychology, Unisa, Nelja@unisa.ac.za.
- The co-promoter, Dr Mason, Directorate of Higher Education Development and Support, TUT, MasonH@tut.ac.za.

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and potential harm of participation.

- I give informed consent to participate in the study.

Participant Name & Surname..... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

**Your participation in the study is greatly appreciated.**

**Annexure E: Student Informed Consent Form****CONSENT FORM**

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**The development of psychological flexibility in students towards  
increased academic success at postgraduate level**

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Ethical clearance number: PERC-16084 Unisa

Student number: 47203943

Dear postgraduate psychology student,

Date:

**NATURE AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:** This research project forms part of a doctoral study at UNISA. This project aims to explore postgraduate psychology students' experiences of psychological flexibility. Psychological flexibility relates to an individual's ability to effectively manage challenges. The information collected could further improve resources and support provided to postgraduate students in higher education.

**RESEARCH PROCESS:** The postgraduate psychology educator faculty is being professionally developed in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which aims to enhance psychological flexibility. The educator faculty will incorporate psychological flexibility within their teachings of the postgraduate psychology degree. Furthermore, support resources in psychological flexibility will be developed for you. You will be invited to provide your

experiences of psychological flexibility throughout the year through written reflections, surveys, and discussions. At each data collection point, you can choose to partake or not, with no consequences to you.

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** Information you provide through participating in the research process will be treated as confidential. Your educators will not be informed of your decision to partake in the research project or not, further protecting your identity. No data published will contain any information that is identifiable to you and therefore your anonymity is ensured. All data collected in the research process will be stored electronically on the researcher's password protected computer, for a minimum of 5 years as per HPCSA guidelines. The researcher, the supervisors and the research assistant will have limited access to portions of the data collected. They will sign confidentiality agreements to protect you and the data.

**WITHDRAWAL CLAUSE:** Should you decide you do not want to participate; I would not view your stored data. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

**POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND HARM OF THE STUDY:** This research project serves as an academic support resource for postgraduate students. As such, the support should provide useful, practical information that could be applied to promote personal and professional development during your postgraduate studies. Furthermore, as a participant, you may experience a sense of altruism as the academic support resource assists in the development of psychological flexibility, which is the skill to effectively manage challenges.

Although the research project is psychoeducational in nature and does not include psychotherapy, there is the potential of participants experiencing psychological harm. The research project encourages participants to be self-aware and this may elicit a variety of unpleasant emotions, and may further highlight unresolved concerns and personal difficulties experienced in the postgraduate journey. Therefore, should you wish to discuss what you have experienced and learnt with a professional on an individual level, free counselling support can be arranged with [REDACTED]

Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges a conflict of interest and possible researcher bias, as the researcher is invested in the outcome of this research project. The researcher also acknowledges that dual roles exist between the participants and the researcher, as the researcher will be presenting the support resource and collecting data. However, data collected will be utilised for research purposes only and not for any disciplinary, performance evaluation or related purposes. The researcher will monitor biases and subjective viewpoints through supervision and research journaling.

**RESEARCH RESULTS:** The results of this study will be disseminated through the publication of a thesis for qualification purposes. Furthermore, journal articles regarding the study and outcomes will be written and submitted to a peer-reviewed journal. The dissemination of the results will be relevant to a relatively broad audience, but more specifically to individuals within an academic context. Furthermore, the results may be presented to relevant role-players within the higher education institution for providing feedback and further development of support services for postgraduate students. The

researcher may also present this study at the annual Southern African Association for Counselling and Development in Higher Education (SAACDHE) conference. SAACDHE is a forum for engaging with other professionals in higher education who contribute to counselling and development of students in higher education.

The research results will only refer to anonymised data, meaning no identifying participant information will be made available. Furthermore, reference to [REDACTED] will not be included in the research results but rather reference will be made to a Private South African University.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:** If you have any questions concerning the study, you may contact the following persons:

[REDACTED] The researcher, Mrs Lauren Leon, at the [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

- The promoter, Prof Nel, at the Department of Psychology, Unisa, Nelja@unisa.ac.za.
- The co-promoter, Dr Mason, Directorate of Higher Education Development and Support, TUT, MasonH@tut.ac.za.

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY**

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and potential harm of participation.

- I give informed consent to participate in the study.

Participant Name & Surname..... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

**Your participation in the study is greatly appreciated.**

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Student Interview Schedule

1. What have you learnt about who you are this year?
2. How has your educator assisted you in learning about who you are?
  - How does this assist in your academic journey?
  - How does this assist in your career trajectory?
  - How does this assist in your personal lives?
3. What have you learnt about your psychological flexibility (managing discomfort) this year?
4. How has your educator assisted you in learning about your psychological flexibility this year?
  - How does this assist in your academic journey?
  - How does this assist in your career trajectory?
  - How does this assist in your personal lives?



Appendix 2: ACT-based postgraduate psychology training manual

**Achieve Purposefully & Consistently**

WELCOME TO THE

[Institutions Name]

# ACT RESOURCE

An Acceptance and Commitment  
Therapy (ACT) Support Resource for  
**STUDENTS**



## 1. Making Value-based, Goal-focused Choices



**PERFORMANCE**

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of this section you will be able to:

- Identify and describe your values and goals in the academic context
- Identify and describe your observable, value-driven behaviours
- Reflect on your learning regarding **performance**
- Reflect on your application of **performance** to **academics**
- Reflect on your application of **performance** to **life and your future career**



## ACTIVITIES

### VALUES BULL'S EYE ACTIVITY

The values bull's eye activity (BEVS, 2012) is a tool that can be used for assessing values, values-action discrepancies, barriers to value-based living.

The activity has three parts to it:

- Identifying your own values
- Identifying your obstacles that prevent value-driven behaviour
- Developing a value action plan to achieve goals

### QUESTIONNAIRE

The Valued Living Questionnaire (VLQ) assesses your valued living behaviours. The more aligned your values and your behaviour, the more consistent and purposeful your performance will be.

Wilson, K. G., Sandoz, E. K., Kitchens, J., & Roberts, M. E. (2010). The Valued Living Questionnaire: Defining and measuring valued action within a behavioral framework. *The Psychological Record*, 60, 249-272.

### MEANINGFUL COLLAGE

- List your core values.
- Then make a collage of the type of career you want that fits with your values.
- Thereafter you are asked to tear off a piece of your collage, representing a challenge in your planning process. Reflect on what it feels like.
- Next, you are to re-attach the torn-off piece back on your collage, representing your ability to be flexible and to persist despite challenges. Reflect on what it feels like.

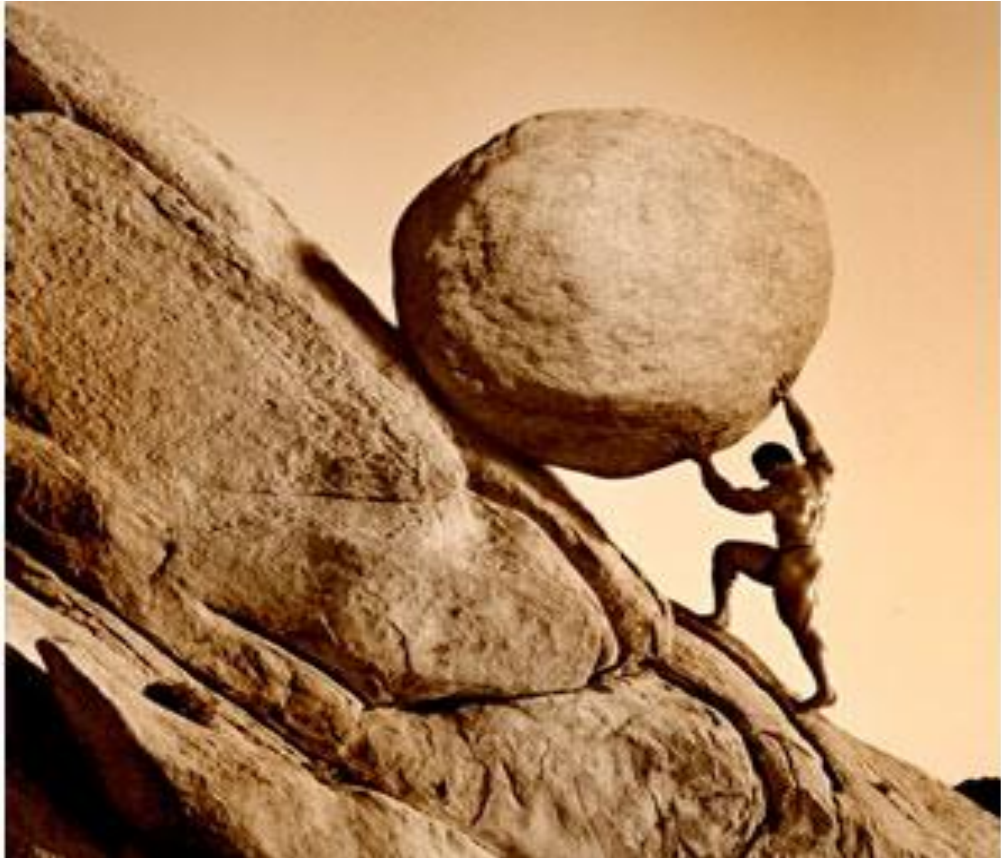
**REFLECTION****APPLICATION REFLECTION**

Q: Based on this term's focus, **Performance**, what did you learn about your own **Performance** (values, goals, and value-driven behaviour)?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **Performance**, how do you anticipate applying this to your **academic journey**?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **Performance**, how do you anticipate applying this to your **life or future career**?

## 2. Facing up to it all



**PERSISTENCE**

---

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of this section you will be able to

- Identify and describe your obstacles to **persistence** in the academic context
- Identify and describe your value-driven, **persistent** behaviours
- Reflect on your learning regarding **persistence**
- Reflect on your application of **persistence** to **academics**
- Reflect on your application of **persistence** to **life and your future career**



Options

## ACTIVITIES

### SELF-CRITICISM THOUGHT BALLOON ACTIVITY

It is important to be aware of our harsh, self-critical inner voice that often derails us from persisting to achieve our goals. Once we get tangled with and consumed by our thoughts, we lose focus and often, performance decreases. Being mindful of our thoughts without getting tangled in them allows for persistence.

The activity focuses on identifying self-critical thoughts about academic performance.

### AVOIDANCE

Once you are aware of the self-critical thoughts, often we engage in behaviour to try to control or suppress (avoid) the thoughts and associated feelings in the hopes to feel better. Watch the video to identify your own internal thoughts <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z29ptSuoWRc>.

Reflect on which of your behaviours do not promote value-driven, persistent behaviour.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire focuses on your behaviour, noting that sometimes *persisting* in behaviour is helpful, while at other times *changing* it is helpful: it depends upon the value- and goal-related opportunities that are available in a given context. Knowing when to persist and when to change behaviour promotes goal achievement. The questionnaire will be administered at the beginning and end of term.

Bond, F. W., Hayes, S. C., Baer, R. A., Carpenter, K. M., Guenole, N., Orcutt, H. K., Waltz, T., & Zettle, R. D. (2011). Preliminary psychometric properties of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire - II: A revised measure of psychological flexibility and experiential avoidance. *Behavior Therapy, 42*, 676-688.



**REFLECTION****APPLICATION REFLECTION**

Q: Based on this term's focus, **persistence**, what did you learn about your own **persistence**?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **persistence**; how do you anticipate applying this to your **academic journey**?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **persistence**, how do you anticipate applying this to your **life or future career**?

### 3. Bringing it all together. I CAN DO THIS!



**MEANING**

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of this section you will

- Understand the concept of creating **meaning**
- Practise **meaning** through activities
- Reflect on your learning regarding **meaning**
- Reflect on your application of **meaning** to **academics**
- Reflect on your application of **meaning** to **life and your career**



## ACTIVITIES

### BUILDING YOUR LIFE COMPASS

This activity is a tool that can be used for assessing values, values-action discrepancies, barriers to value-based living and creating a meaningful life.

The activity focuses on

- Identifying and developing awareness around our current life and aligning this to our valued goals.
- Awareness around our current behaviour and whether this helps create a meaningful life or not.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

A student engagement questionnaire that looks at your satisfaction at university will be administered, seeing whether your academic journey and career focus is meaningful to you, despite all the challenges. If your journey is meaningful, then you are more likely to persist and perform, despite the challenges presented at University.

**REFLECTION****APPLICATION REFLECTION**

Q: Based on this term's focus, **meaning**, what did you learn about your own **meaning**?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **meaning**; how do you anticipate applying this to your **academic journey**?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **meaning**, how do you anticipate applying this to your **life or future career**?

### Appendix 3: Pre and Post Term Student Survey

<b>PRE AND POST TERM QUESTIONS</b>	<b>POOR</b>	<b>BELOW AVERAGE</b>	<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>ABOVE AVERAGE</b>	<b>EXCELLENT</b>
1. When things don't go as well I am able to adapt					
2. I am able to look for opportunities and act on them					
3. I know my strengths and values and how to use them to achieve my goals					
4. I know who I am and how that can contribute to the world of psychology					
5. I know how to upskill myself to be successful					
6. I know what I can do with my qualification					
7. I know what career I want to go into					
8. I have clear career goals I am striving for					
9. I have clear academic goals I am striving for this year					

### Appendix 4: Educator Post Term Reflections

1. What have been some of the biggest challenges this year for the honours students?
2. Being in this honours course is challenging – academic enhancement, professional specialisation, and personal growth all happen in this year. What kind of person would thrive in this environment?
3. What additional resources or support would help the honours students to thrive?
4. As an educator, how do you assist honours students in your class to discover who they are?
  - How does this assist in their academic journey?
  - How does this assist in their career trajectory?
  - How does this assist in their personal lives?
5. As an educator, how do you assist honours students in your class to be psychologically flexible (resilient)?
  - How does this assist in their academic journey?
  - How does this assist in their career trajectory?
  - How does this assist in their personal lives?
6. As an educator, how do you assist honours students in your class to find meaning?
  - In their academic journey
  - In their career trajectory
  - In their personal lives

Appendix 5: ACT-based educator professional development training manual

**Achieve Purposefully & Consistently**

WELCOME TO THE

*[INSTITUTIONS NAME]*

# ACT PROGRAMME

An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)  
Professional Development for  
**EDUCATORS**





## 1. Making Value-based, Goal-focused Choices



**PERFORMANCE**

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of this section you will be able to

- Identify and describe your values and goals in the academic context
- Identify and describe your observable, value-driven behaviours
- Reflect on your learning regarding **performance**
- Reflect on your application of **performance** to **the classroom as an educator**
- Reflect on your application of **performance** to **building a desired career**



## ACTIVITIES

### TOP 5 VALUES

The top 5 values activity (BEVS, 2012) is a tool that can be used for assessing values and value-based living. The activity has three parts to it:

- Identifying your own values
- Identifying what each value means personally and why it is important
- Observable behaviour associated with each value

### TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Spend some time reflecting on your values:

- Highlighting the type of educator you are
- What behaviours you demonstrate in class
- Is there room for improvement?

### QUESTIONNAIRE

The Valued Living Questionnaire (VLQ) assesses your valued living behaviours. The more aligned your values and your behaviour, the more consistent and purposeful your performance will be. [Wilson, K. G., Andoz, E. K., Kitchens, J., & Roberts, M. E. \(2010\). The Valued Living Questionnaire: Defining and measuring valued action within a behavioral framework. \*The Psychological Record\*, 60, 249-272.](#)

### BUILDING YOUR LIFE COMPASS

This activity is a tool that can be used for assessing values, values-action discrepancies, barriers to value-based living and creating a meaningful life.

The activity focuses on:

- Identifying and developing awareness around our current life and aligning this to our valued goals.
- Awareness around our current behaviour and whether this helps create a meaningful life or not.

## REFLECTIONS

1. What are your top 5 values as an Educator?
2. What is your teaching philosophy and how does it reflect your values?
3. How does your educator identity (values) and your teaching philosophy fit with the [institutions] vision?
4. How do you express “who I am (my values)” at work and in the classroom?
  - How do I teach and why?
  - How do I know that I am teaching in a way that will help students to learn?
  - How are my values expressed in my teaching?
  - How am I building my career and reaching my goals?

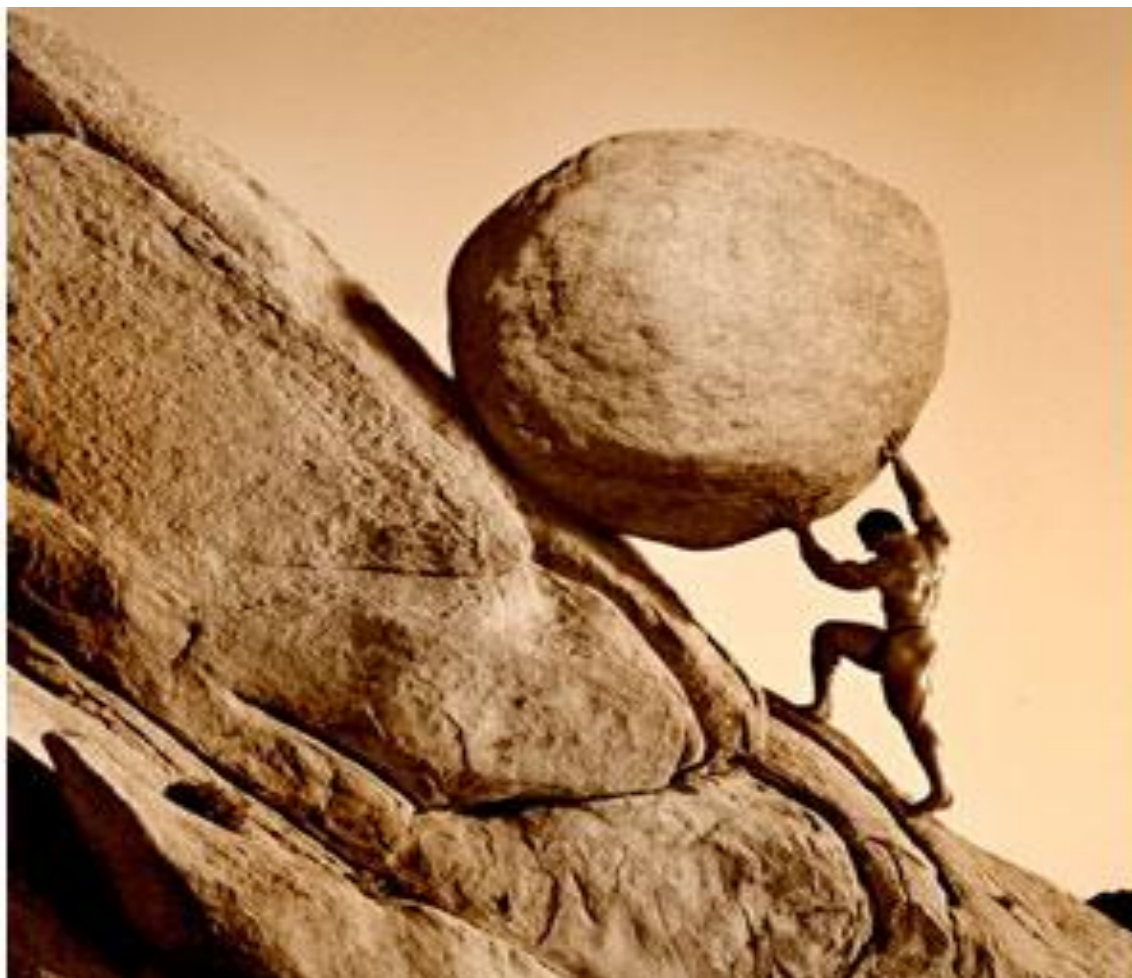
### APPLICATION REFLECTION

Q: Based on this term’s focus, ‘**Who are you?**’, what did you learn about who you are as an educator?

Q: Based on what you learnt about who you are, how did you apply this **in the classroom as an educator?**

Q: Based on what you learnt about who you are, how did you apply this to **building your desired career?**

## 2. Facing up to it all



**FLEXIBLE THINKING**

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of this section you will be able to

- Identify and describe your obstacles to **flexible thinking** in the academic context
- Identify and describe your **flexible thinking** behaviours
- Reflect on your learning regarding **flexible thinking**
- Reflect on your application of **flexible thinking** in **the classroom as an educator**
- Reflect on your application of **flexible thinking** to **building a desired career**



Options

## ACTIVITIES

### DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

It is important to be aware of our viewpoints, teaching styles and how these are expressed. It is also important to be aware of how others do it and how that differs from us. This activity looks at one scenario from different viewpoints to practise seeing a scenario from many angles.

### AVOIDANCE

The Bus Metaphor describes the ways internal experiences (i.e., thoughts, emotions, urges, memories, etc.) seem to drive our lives. Watch the video clip and reflect on your own internal experiences. Identify how your internal experiences prevent value driven, persistent behaviour.

Watch the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z29ptSuoWRc>

### VALUE DRIVEN, PERSISTENT BEHAVIOUR

Considering life events from different viewpoints can help you see all events in a more balanced manner, not black and white. The exercise helps you to see that there is no need to avoid difficult thoughts or feelings but rather by allowing these to come and go, there is more space to remain task-focused. Difficulties are normal life experiences, therefore, learning to identify our own value driven, persistent behaviours assist us to cope in difficulties while allowing us to still achieve our goals. The activity focuses on identifying and describing value driven, persistent behaviour in the academic context.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire focuses on your behaviour, knowing when to persist and when to change behaviour promotes goal achievement. Bond, F. W., Hayes, S. C., Baer, R. A., Carpenter, K. M., Guenole, N., Orcutt, H. K., Waltz, T., & Zettle, R. D. 2011). Preliminary psychometric properties of the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire - II: A revised measure of psychological flexibility and experiential avoidance. *Behavior Therapy*, 42, 676-688.

## REFLECTIONS

- 1 How could students in your class benefit from you facilitating from different viewpoints?
- 2 Why would we step outside of our comfort zone to teach from different viewpoints?
- 3 Stepping outside of your comfort zones and thinking flexibly – how does that help you in the classroom?
- 4 Stepping outside of your comfort zones and thinking - how does that help you in building your career?
- 5 How are you expressing flexible thinking at work and in the classroom?
  - How do I teach and why?
  - How do I know that I am teaching in a way that will help students to learn?
  - How is flexible thinking assisting in building my career and reaching my goals?

### APPLICATION REFLECTION

Q: Based on this term's focus, **flexible thinking**, what did you learn about your own **flexible thinking** as an educator?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **flexible thinking**; how did you apply this to the **classroom as an educator**?

Q: Based on what you learnt about your **flexible thinking**; how did you apply this to **building a desired career**?



### 3. Bringing it all together. I CAN DO THIS!



**MEANING**

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

On successful completion of this section you will

- Understand the concept of creating **meaning**
- Practice **meaning** through activities
- Reflect on your learning regarding **meaning**
- Reflect on your application of **meaning** to **the classroom as an educator**
- Reflect on your application of **meaning** to **building a desired career**



## ACTIVITIES

### BUILDING YOUR LIFE COMPASS

This activity is a tool that can be used for assessing values, values-action discrepancies, barriers to value-based living and creating a meaningful life.

The activity focuses on:

- Identifying and developing awareness around our current life and aligning this to our valued goals.
- Awareness around our current behaviour and whether this helps create a meaningful life or not.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

An engagement questionnaire which looks at your satisfaction will be administered, seeing whether your career focus and journey is meaningful for you, despite all the challenges.

If your journey is meaningful then you are more likely to persist and perform despite the challenges presented in the work environment.

## REFLECTION

1. How am I expressing who I am (my values) at work and in the classroom?
  - How do I teach and why?
  - How do I know that I am teaching in a way that will help students to learn?
  - How are my values expressed in my teaching?
  
2. How am I building my career and reaching my goals?

APPLICATION REFLECTION
<p>Q: Based on this term's focus, <b>meaning</b>, what did you learn about your own <b>meaning</b>?</p>
<p>Q: Based on what you learnt about your <b>meaning</b>; how did you apply this to the <b>classroom as an educator</b>?</p>
<p>Q: Based on what you learnt about your <b>meaning</b>; how did you apply this to <b>building a desired career</b>?</p>

### Appendix 6: Educator Post Term Survey

Questions regarding being involved in the CAR process	POOR	BELOW AVERAGE	AVERAGE	ABOVE AVERAGE	EXCELLENT
1. My project allows me to engage in reviewing current research / articles					
2. My engagement in these projects allows me to evaluate my own strengths and limitations					
3. My engagement in these projects promotes life-long learning and growth					
4. My engagement in these projects keeps me informed with the latest knowledge in the area					
5. My engagement in these projects challenges me to develop new skills					
6. My engagement in these projects enhances my knowledge of ethical thinking and practices					
7. My engagement in these projects contribute to upskilling myself					
8. I am able to align my values and interests (who I am) in my project					