Like a Key and a Lock": Preschool Teachers' Growth Through Action Research and Professional Development

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QR code

- Background

- Theoretical Framework

- Methodology

- Key Findings

- Conclusion

- References

BACKGROUND

BACKGROUND

- Teaching is complex and requires both **immediate action and reflection.**

- **Governments and parents expect teachers to improve their teaching skills continuously**.

- OECD reports, **2010 and 2023** highlight **quality teaching** and **effective PD, essential** for a **robust educational system.**

- Despite **significant investments**, **not all PD programs are truly effective.**

- In **South Africa,** PD often **follows a one-size-fits-all, top-down approach.** This, among **many other** factors, contributes to **low international scores in literacy and math.**

- Children exposed to **two very different scenarios.** No access to **quality ECE and preschool education,** or **formal reading** and writing at a very young age Formal schooling starts at **6 years.**

- **Play-based learning,** particularly the development of **perceptual motor skills,** is often not prioritised.

- Play-based learning and perceptual motor skills are **critical components** in **early childhood development, supporting literacy growth.**

AIM/FOCUS OF THE STUDY

AIM/FOCUS OF THE STUDY

- Use an **Action Research (**AR) design to develop a **professional development program** for preschool teachers to **strengthen children's pre-reading skills.**

- The center of the study is the cycles of AR:

    - evaluation

    - planning

    - implementation

    - reflection

- **Community of practice/practitioners** (CoP) – A group of people, share **common interest**, **profession, or passion** and come together to learn, exchange knowledge, improve their skills collaboratively.

- **Validate participant's experiences, knowledge**.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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| CRASP Model (Zuber-Skerritt, 1992)	Concerns Based Model of Teacher Development (CBMoTD) (Fuller, 1969)
Aligns with study, **presents AR** as a **framework for promoting staff development and professionalism,** although **it has not yet been applied in preschool settings.** Principles: **Critical attitude, Research into teaching, Accountability, and Self-evaluation, Professionalism.** Key Points: In this model, **AR is a collaborative, reflective inquiry** where teachers critically examine and improve their practices through self-evaluation and problem-solving, supporting ongoing professional development (PD).	Originating in the **1960s,** remains **relevant**, as teachers face **continual fears and challenges** throughout their careers. Levels: **Self:** Teachers' concerns about their ability to teach (e.g., "Am I a good teacher?"). **Task:** Focus on fulfilling teaching duties (e.g., "Do I have the resources to manage the class?"). **Impact:** Concerns about the social, emotional, and academic needs of students (e.g., "Am I helping students reach their potential?"). **Key Points:** Teachers face these concerns throughout their careers. The levels are recurring and can happen simultaneously.

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INTEGRATION OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
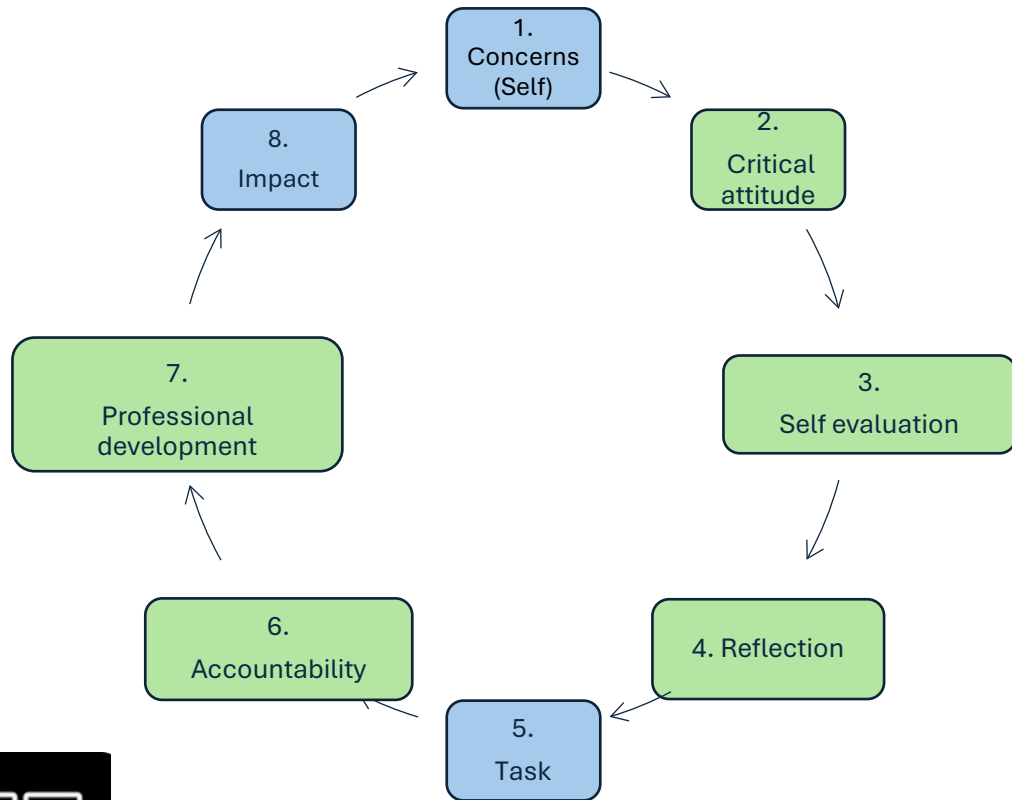
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

New Conceptual Framework:

• Integration of the CRASP model and CBMoDT, tailored for preschool settings. Comprised eight phases.

Phase Overview

1. Teachers' Concerns (Self):
   Focus on their practices and skills in teaching preschool children PM skills.

2. Critical Thinking
   Participants developed a more critical perspective on their skills.

3. Self evaluation:
   Teachers evaluated their abilities and practices.

4. Reflection
   Increased reflectiveness regarding what was necessary to perform tasks effectively.

5. Task
   Recognised the importance of executing tasks appropriately.

6. Accountability:
   Acknowledgment of their responsibility towards the children they teach.

7. Professional Development:
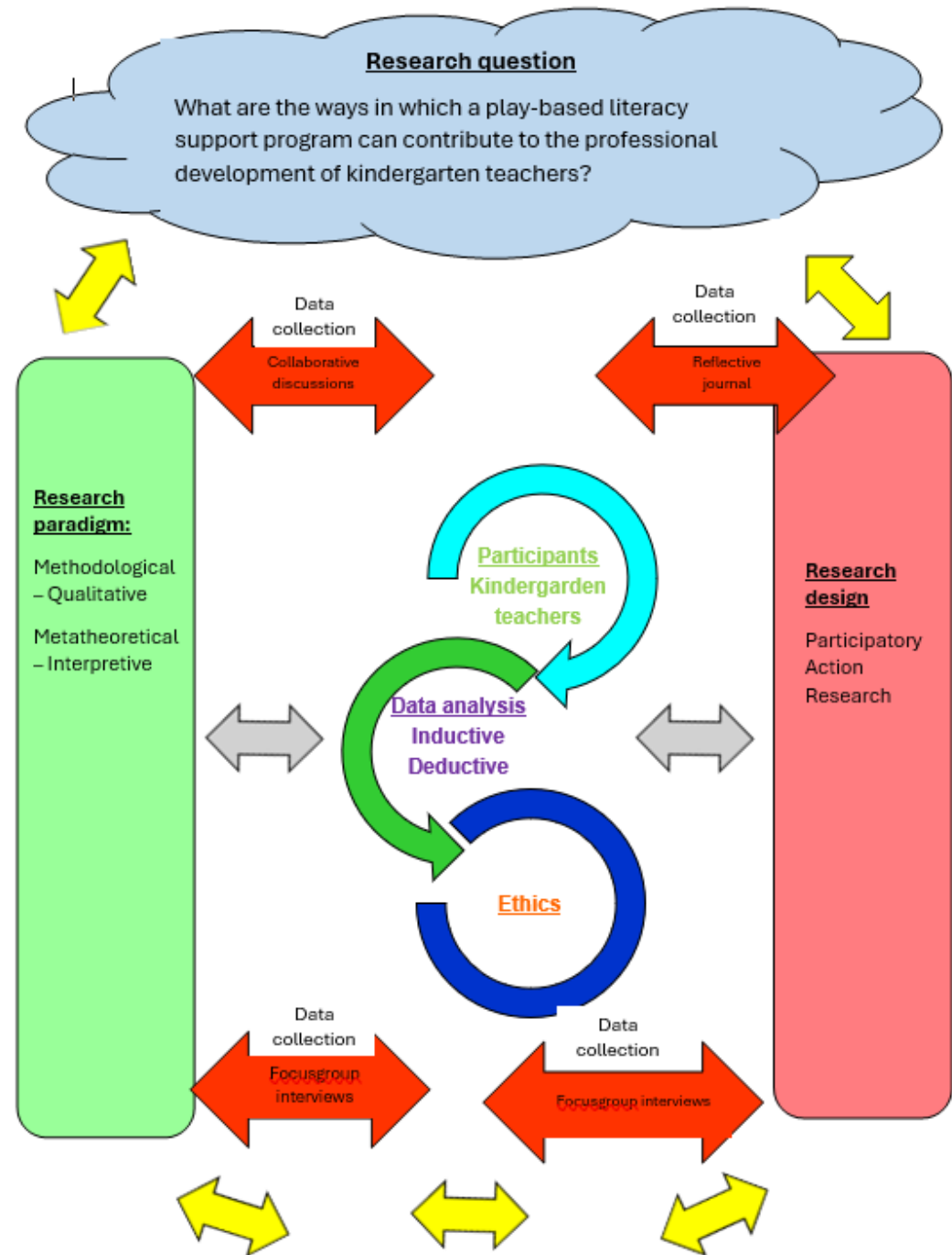   Improved knowledge and confidence positively influenced their PD fostering professionalism.

8. Impact
   The impact of their PD on them and their teaching.

METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

Research question

What are the ways in which a play-based literacy support program can contribute to the professional development of kindergarten teachers?

Research paradigm:

Methodological – Qualitative

Metatheoretical – Interpretive

Data collection
Collaborative discussions

Data collection
Reflective journal

Participants Kindergarden teachers

Data analysis Inductive Deductive

Ethics

Research design

Participatory Action Research

Data collection
Focusgroup interviews

Data collection
Focusgroup interviews

PARTICIPANTS

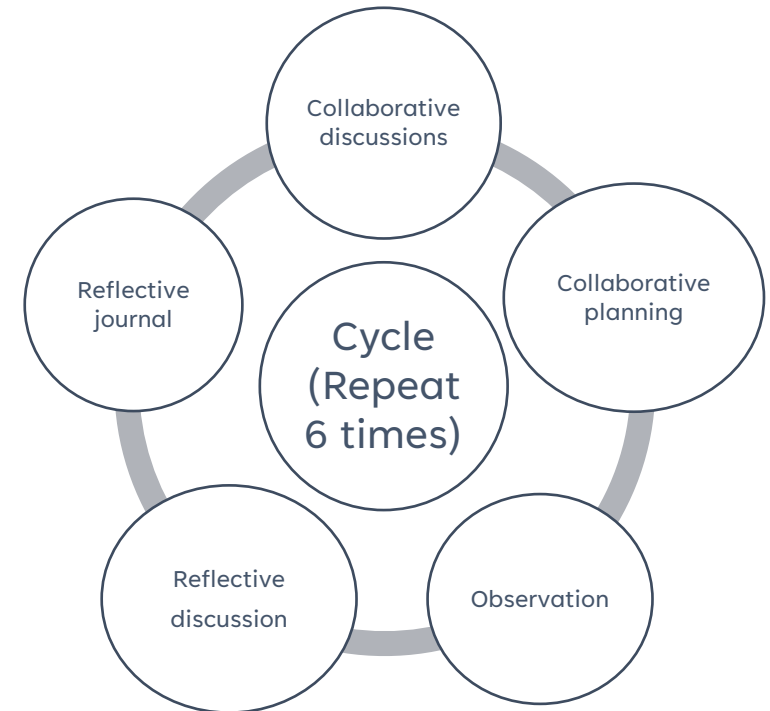**Convenience sampling** and **snowball selection.**

Participant criteria:
- **two or more years** of teaching experience.
- **13** participants from **three preschools** formed part of the study.

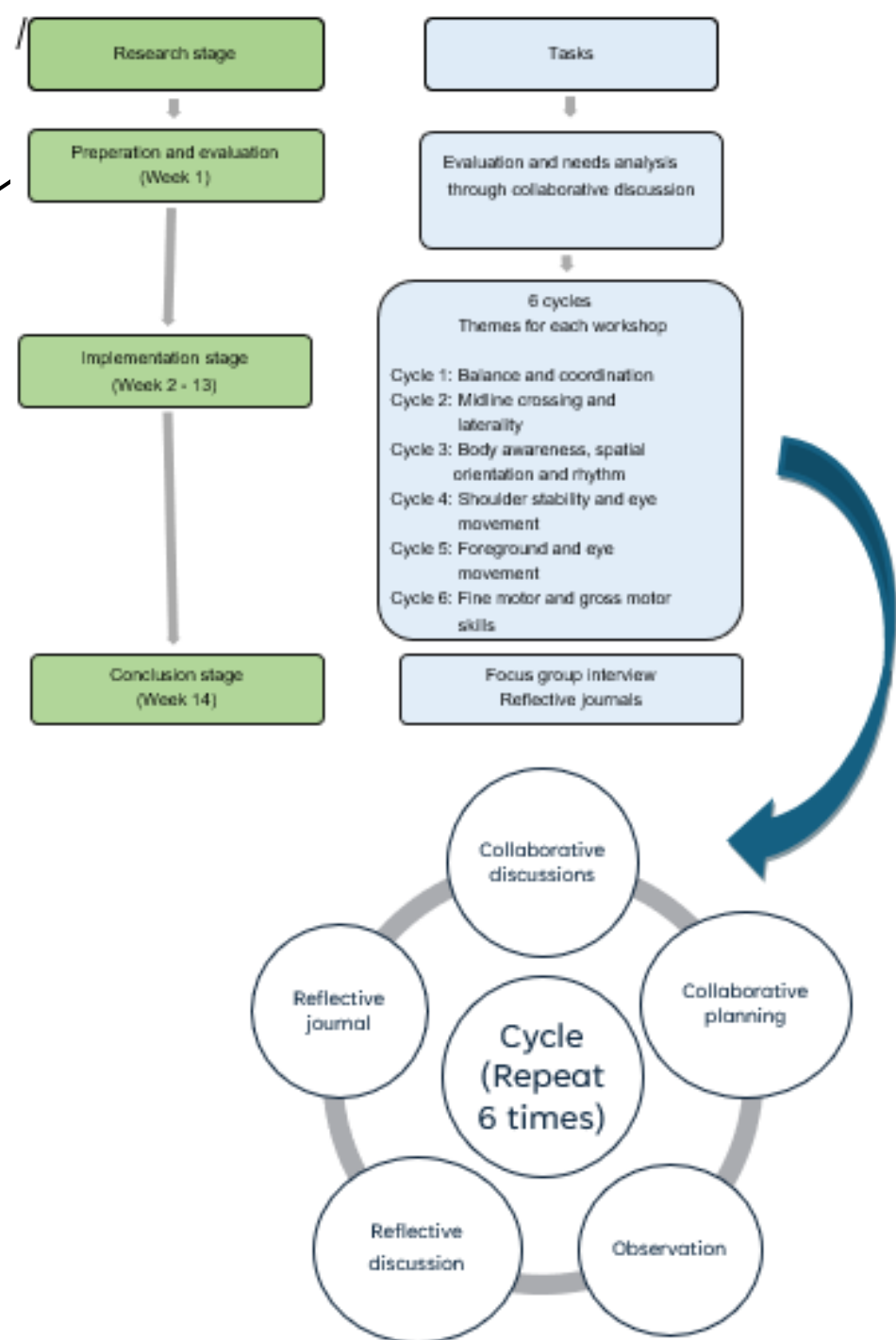| Preschool Centre	Participant code	Teaching experience
A	A1	34
A	A2	3
A	A3	6
A	A4	3
A	A5	6
A	A6	4
B	B1	17
B	B2	10
B	B3	11
B	B4	15
C	C1	10
C	C2	11
C	C3	25

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

- **Qualitative data collection**
- Way of **understanding** the participant's empirical **world** and **frame of reference through their words, actions.**
- A flexible design as participants constantly adapt to the research (Taylor, 2015).
- **14 weeks**

Cycle (Repeat 6 times)
- Collaborative discussions
- Collaborative planning
- Observation
- Reflective discussion
- Reflective journal

METHODOLOGY

THE RESEARCH PROCESS (PREPARATION AND EVALUATION, WEEK 1)

- **60-minute collaborative discussion** (CD) about play-based learning and perceptual motor skills to evaluate participants' "knowledge", experience, practices and needs.
- Discussions in **pairs or small groups** (pairs or small groups **were known** to each other) then shared with whole group.
- Data gathered used as **baseline data.** Baseline data important for AR (Hendricks, 2016).
- The challenges mentioned were displayed on the board
    - One – most significant
    - Ten – fewest difficulties
- **Collaboratively decided** on an action plan for the implementation phase and themes with six cycles over 14 weeks.

Research stage

Preparation and evaluation (Week 1)

Implementation stage (Week 2 - 13)

Conclusion stage (Week 14)

Tasks

Evaluation and needs analysis through collaborative discussion

6 cycles
Themes for each workshop

Cycle 1: Balance and coordination
Cycle 2: Midline crossing and laterality
Cycle 3: Body awareness, spatial orientation and rhythm
Cycle 4: Shoulder stability and eye movement
Cycle 5: Foreground and eye movement
Cycle 6: Fine motor and gross motor skills

Focus group interview
Reflective journals

Collaborative discussions

Collaborative planning

Cycle (Repeat 6 times)

Observation

Reflective discussion

Reflective journal

THE RESEARCH PROCESS (IMPLEMENTATION STAGE, WEEK 2 – 13 **REPEATED 6 TIMES)**

Collaborative Discussions (CD)
- Structure & Process
  Despite **different topics** in cycles, each CD followed a **similar pattern** discussed specific PM themes for the week, what entail, why essential for preschool children and literacy.
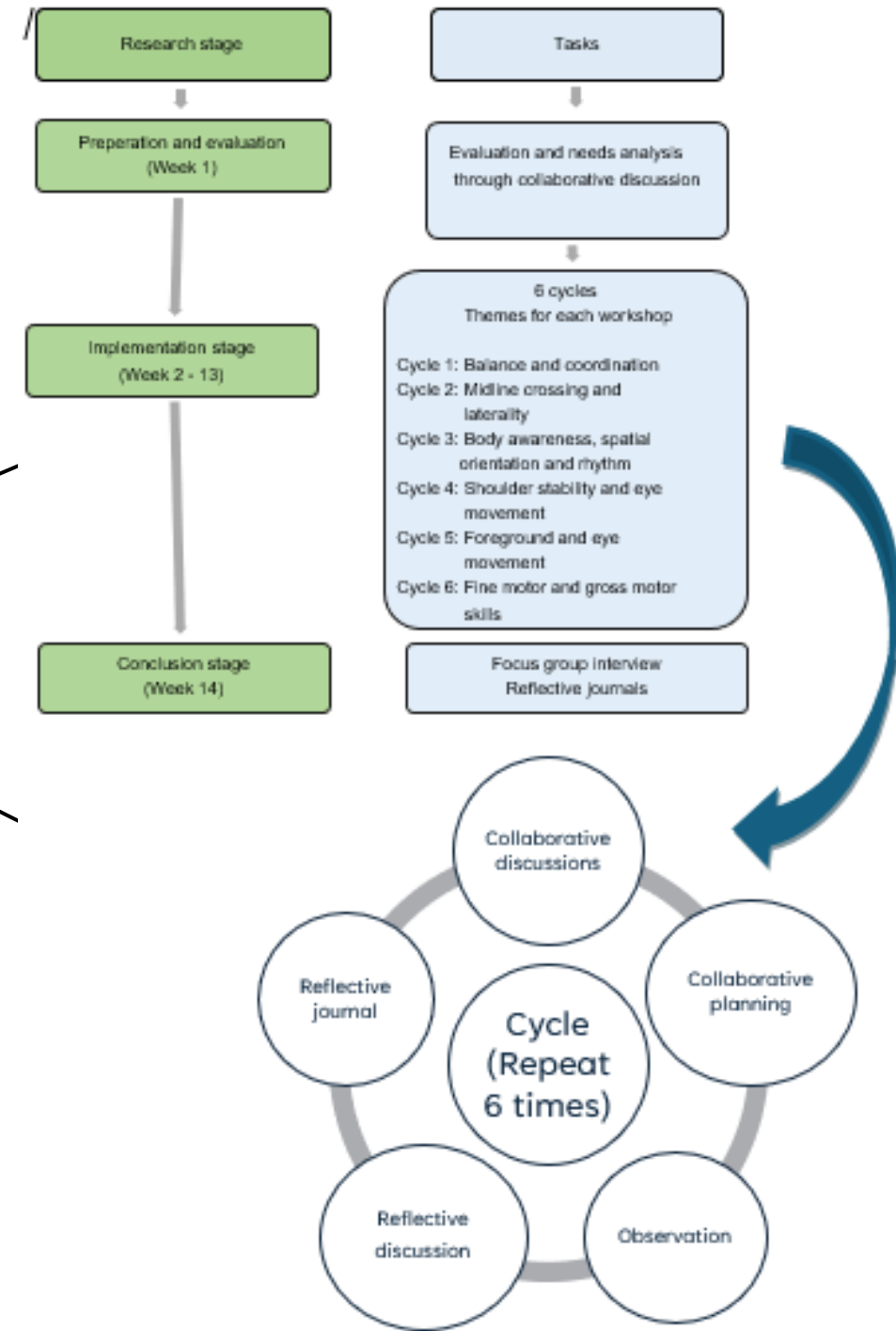 **Initial hesitation to share experiences.**
- Engagement Strategy
  Participants **not comfortable** sharing with group wrote down ideas.
  I shared with the group after breaks.
- Duration & Data Collection
  45–60-minute sessions.

Effective for AR, facilitates knowledge sharing, contribute to community of practitioners (Castro et al., 2016).

THE RESEARCH PROCESS (IMPLEMENTATION STAGE, WEEK 2 – 13)

**Collaborative planning (CP)**
- Participants worked in **pairs or groups of their choice.**
- Focused on **planning activities related to the topic**.
- Benefits of CP

  Enhances professional skills, facilitates sharing of expertise and best practices (Giles & Yazan, 2022).
- Session Structure

  20-30 minutes per planning session.

  Group demonstrations **recorded on video.**
- Interactive discussions

  Participants could **ask questions** for clarity.

  Justification for activities discussed.
- Data sharing

  Quality assurance: activities typed and projected during demonstration ensure accurate interpretation.

  Videos and activities emailed to participants next day for implementing.
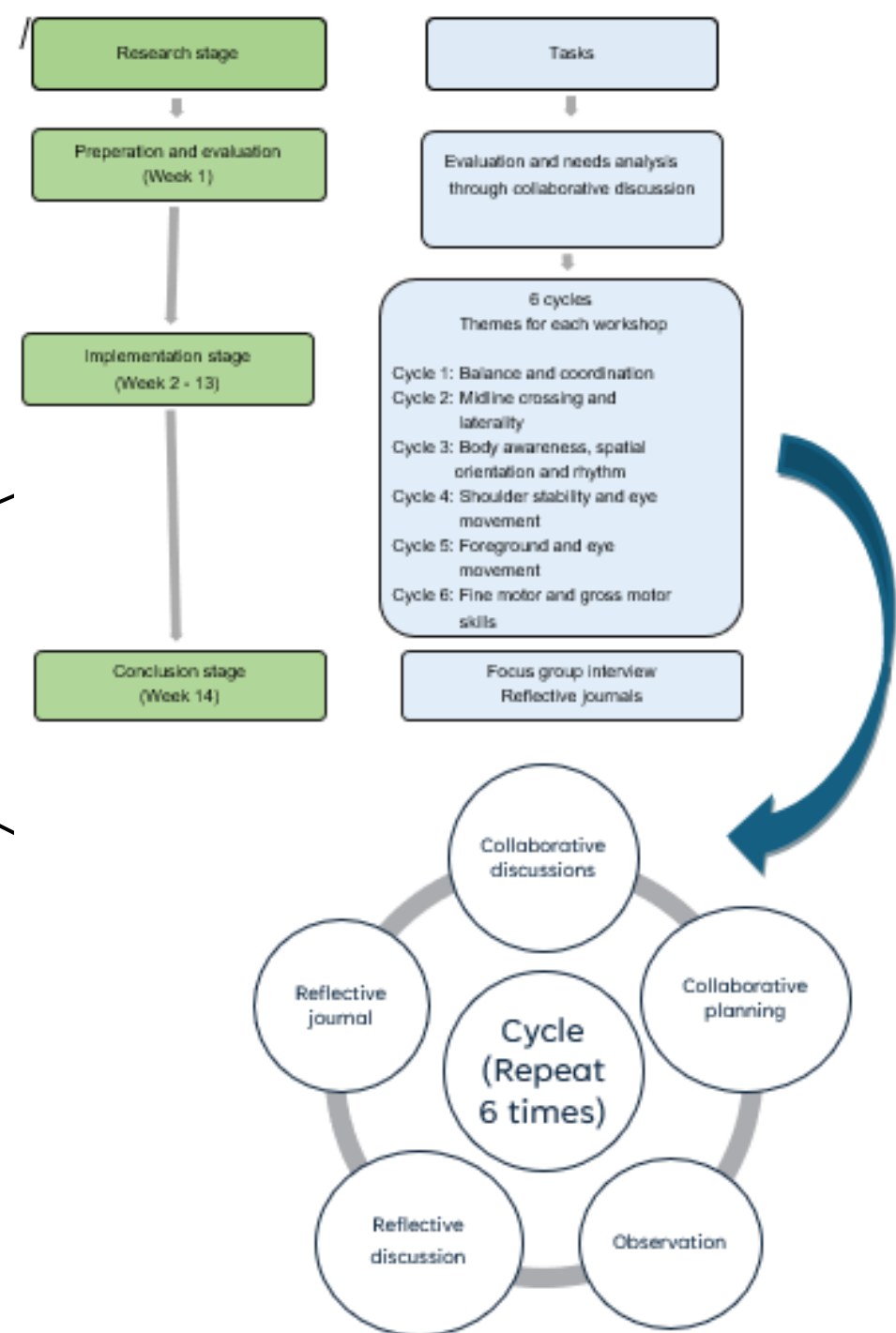
THE RESEARCH PROCESS (IMPLEMENTATION STAGE, WEEK 2 – 13)
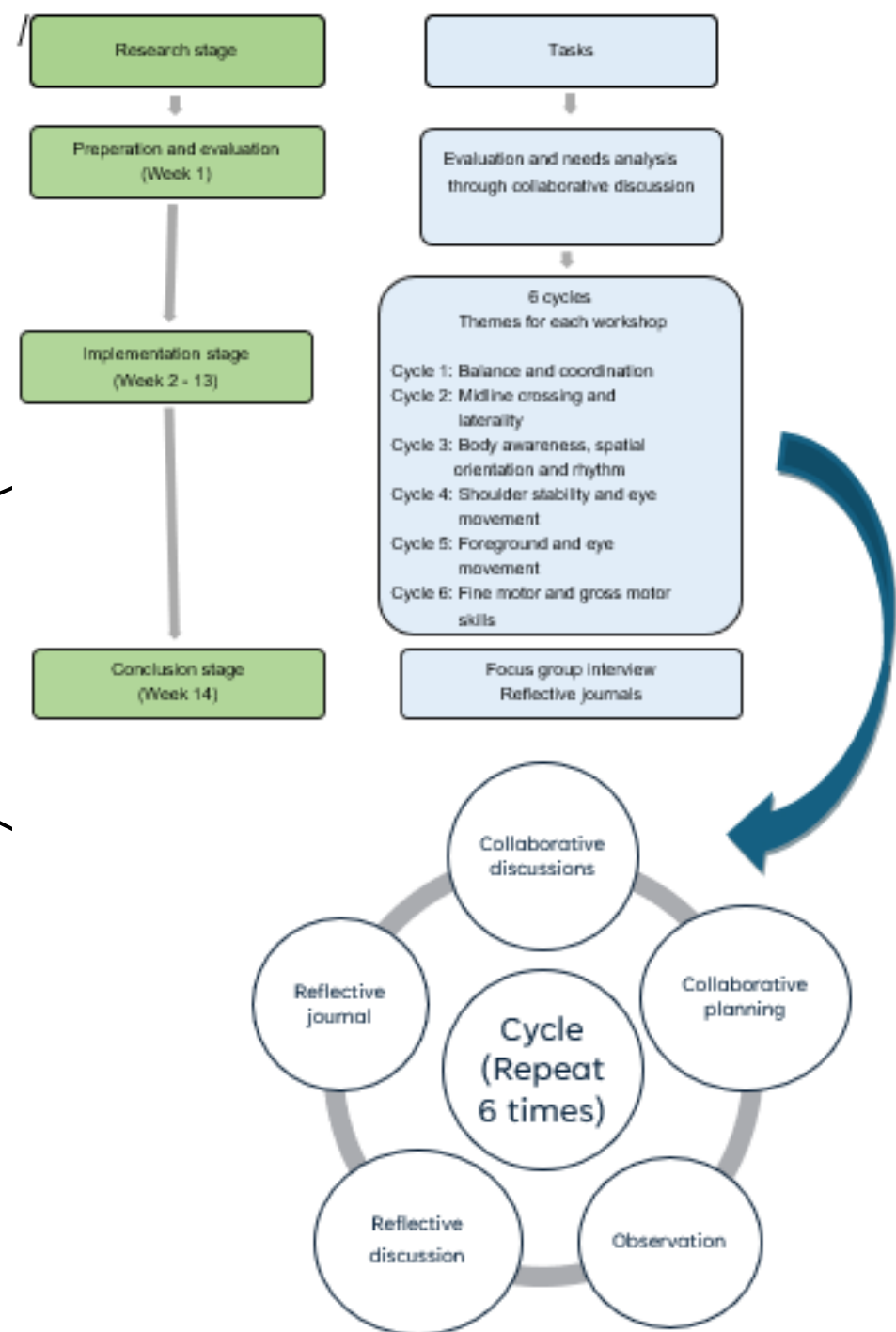
Observation

- **Five days** after CD and CP.
- Each cycle included **observation with field notes and visual data (photos).**
- Essential for capturing perspective, group dynamics, participant behaviour in their environment (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).
- Preparation & Focus
  Pre-determined observation criteria (Engelbrecht, 2016).
  Key aspects observed: teacher adjustments,
  program understanding, activities, engagement,
  learner enjoyment.
- Data Collection
  45 - 60-minute observations at each centre.
  Photos and field notes supported recall and accuracy.
- Reflective Practice
  Researcher's journal captured personal interpretations, thoughts,
  and impressions.
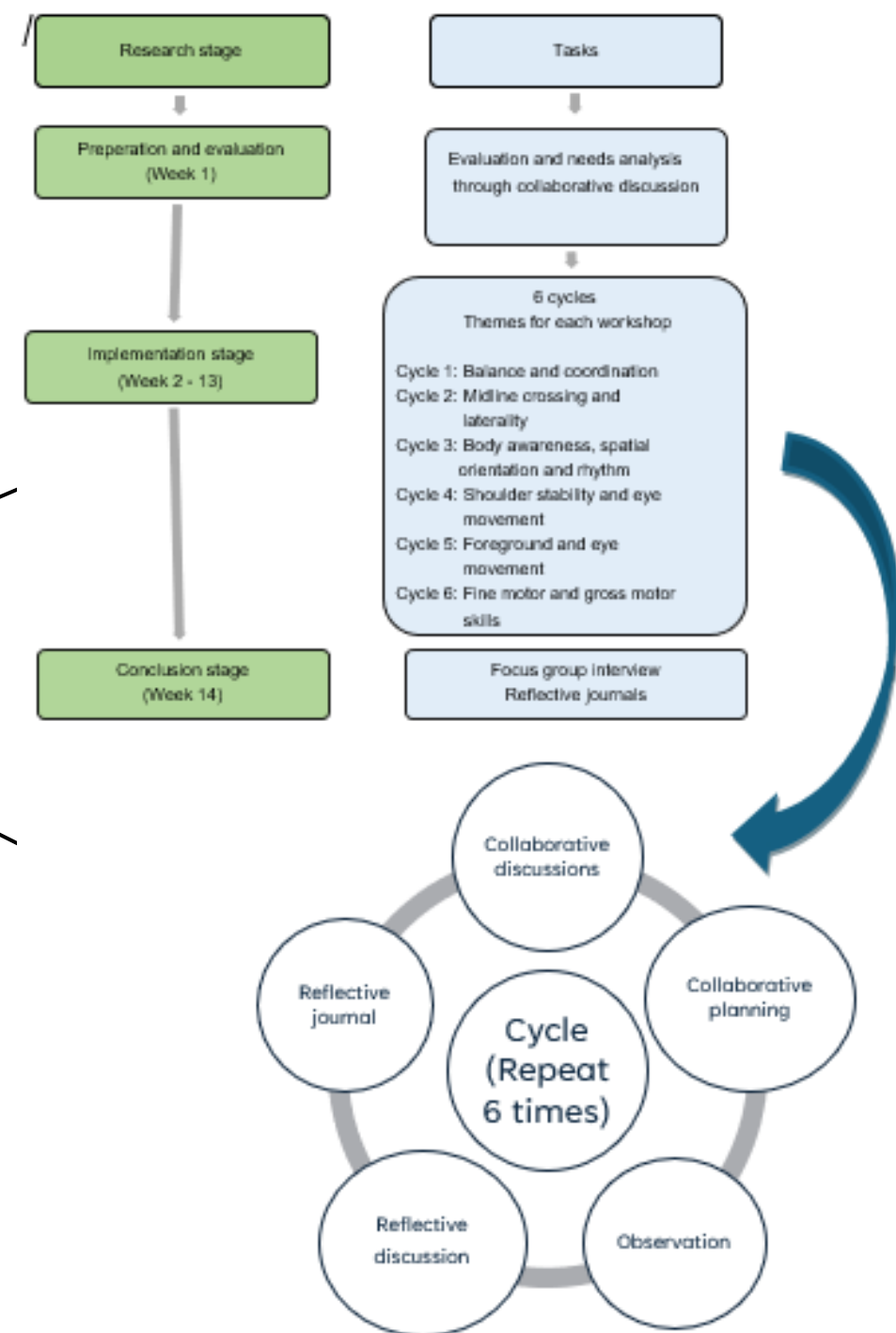
THE RESEARCH PROCESS (IMPLEMENTATION STAGE, WEEK 2 – 13)

Reflective Discussions (RD)
- Following observation met for RD.
- **Evaluated the activities**
- **Key in AR and teachers' PD** (Hendricks, 2016; McNiff, 2016; Sancar et al., 2021)
- RD included: **content application, influence on teaching practices, activity adaptations, and anything related to topic**.
- Collaborative Learning
  Visual evidence of observations enhanced recall and fostered deeper understanding during discussions.
  Reflection on observations led to shared insights and peer learning.
- Action-Oriented Reflection
  Reflection followed by actions to improve practice (McNiff, 2016).
 Challenges identified and changes made to better meet participants' PD needs.

Research stage

Preperation and evaluation (Week 1)

Implementation stage (Week 2 - 13)

Conclusion stage (Week 14)

Tasks

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Cycle 6: Fine motor and gross motor skills

Focus group interview
Reflective journals

Collaborative discussions
Collaborative planning
Cycle (Repeat 6 times)
Reflective journal
Reflective discussion
Observation

THE RESEARCH PROCESS (IMPLEMENTATION STAGE, WEEK 2 – 13)

Reflective Journal (RJ)

- **Critical reflection** on ideas, research processes, observations, challenges, and successes.
- Participants submitted RN after each cycle, documenting weekly/daily reflections
- Regarded as a rich source of data in PD and AR (Simmons et al., 2021).

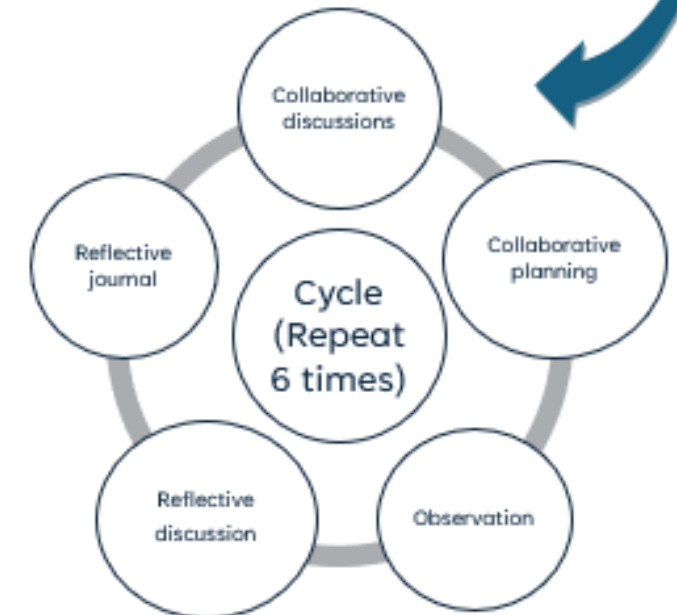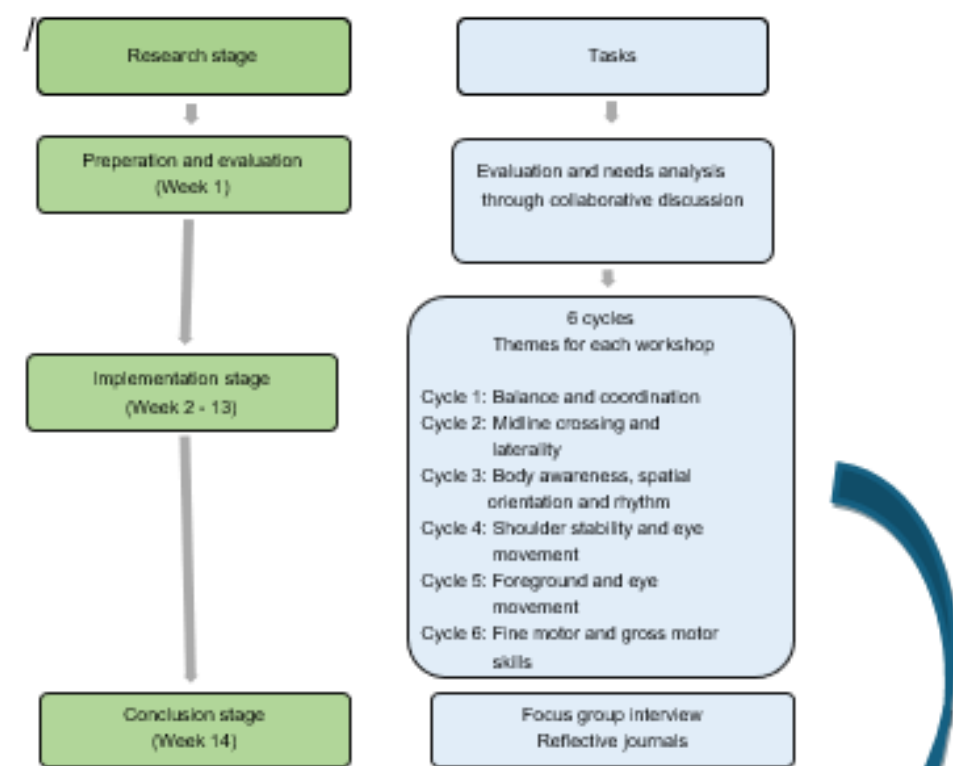| Type of reflection	Application to the study
Reflection-for-action	Initial phase of the study to determine the participant's needs (Week 1)
Reflection-in-action	Cycles 1 - 6 • Collaborative discussions • Collaborative planning • Reflective discussions • Reflective narratives (Week 2 – 13)
Reflection-to-action	During focus group interview and reflective narratives. Further research identified (Week 14)

HENDRICKS, 2016
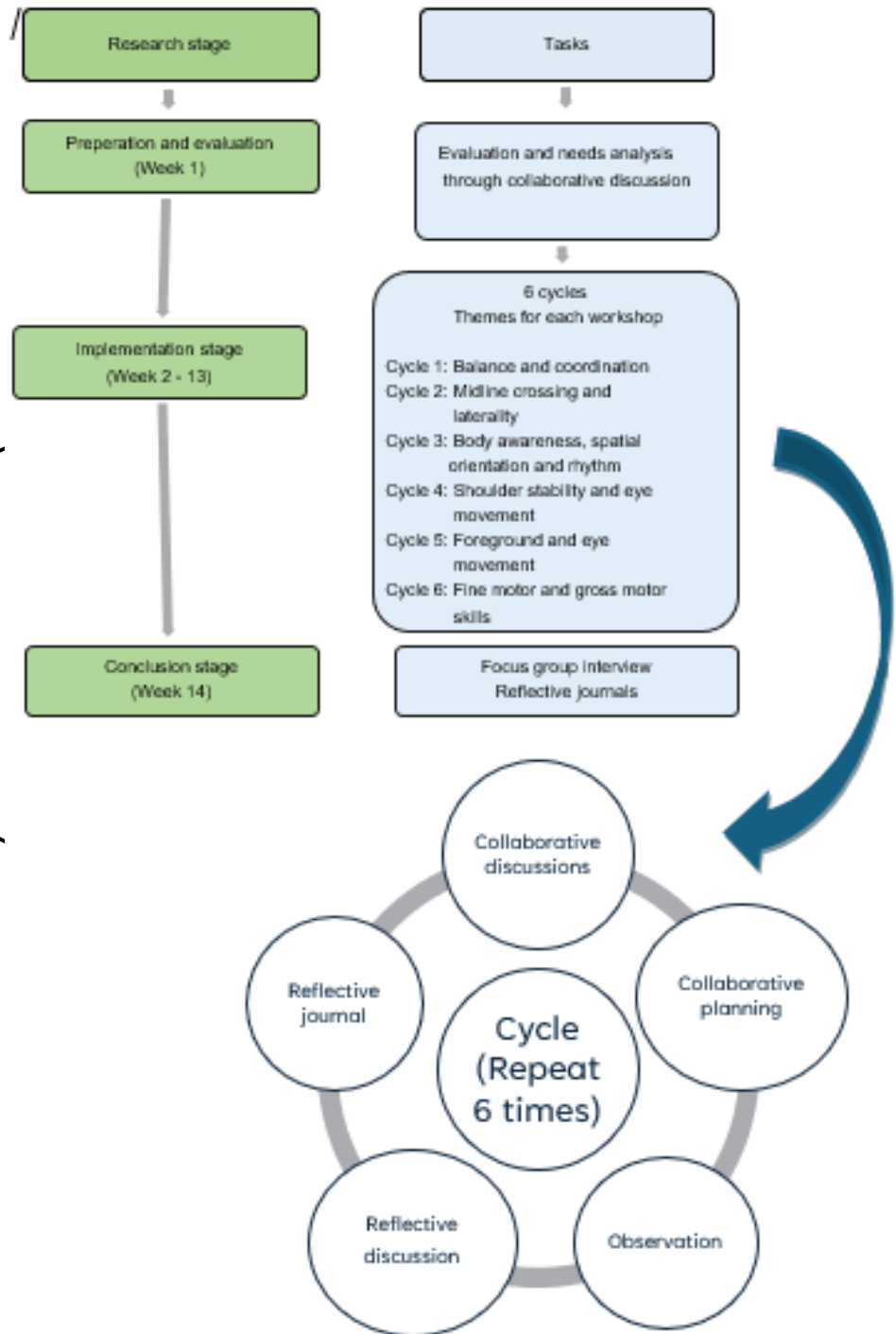
THE RESEARCH PROCESS (CONCLUSION STAGE, WEEK 14)

Focus group interview (FGI)

- <u>Benefits of FGI in this study:</u>
  Participants help each other remember events by sharing experiences (Hendricks, 2016).
  Collaborative dialogue.
- <u>**Validation:**</u>
  Responses were cross-checked with participants' reflective narratives for accuracy and depth.
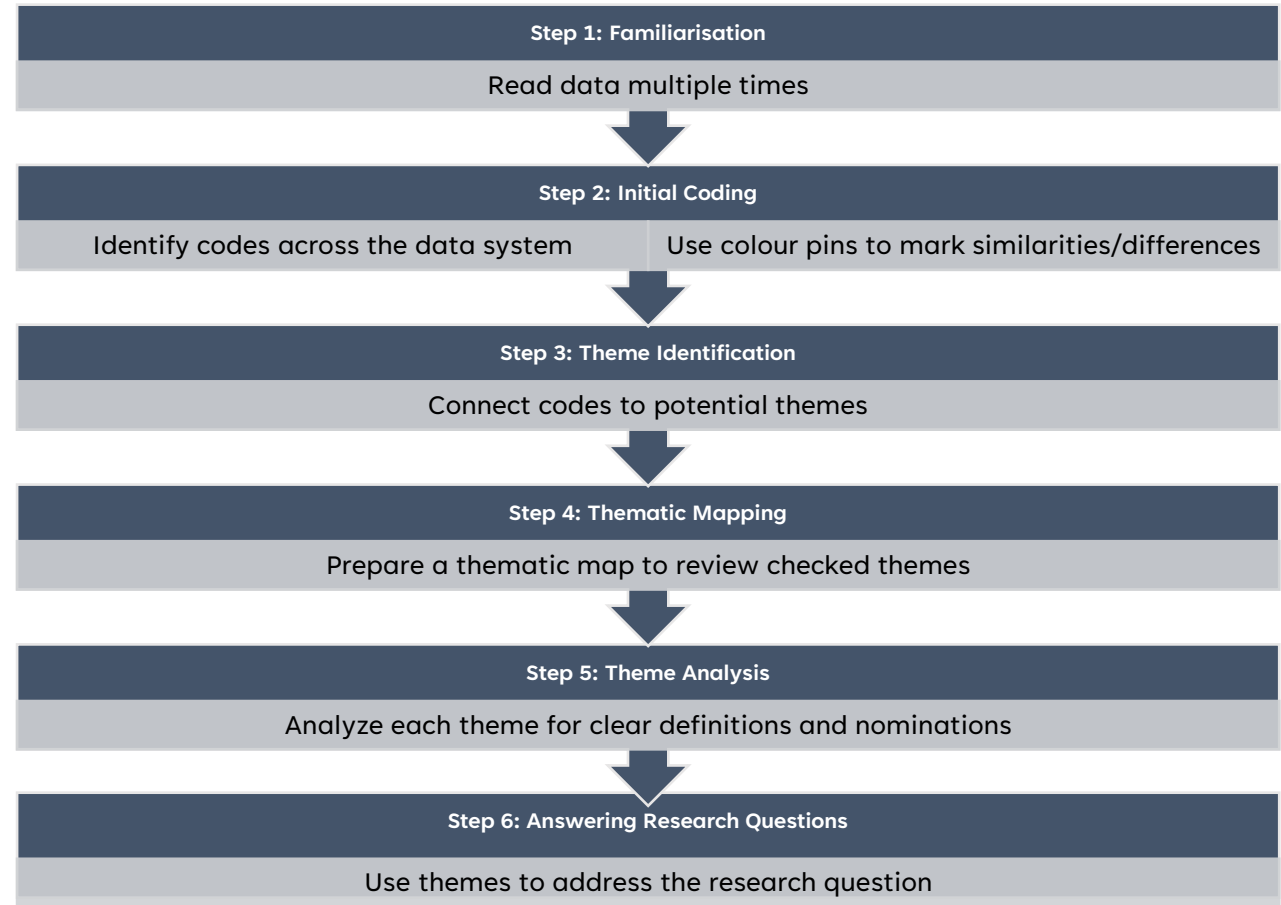
DATA ANALYSIS
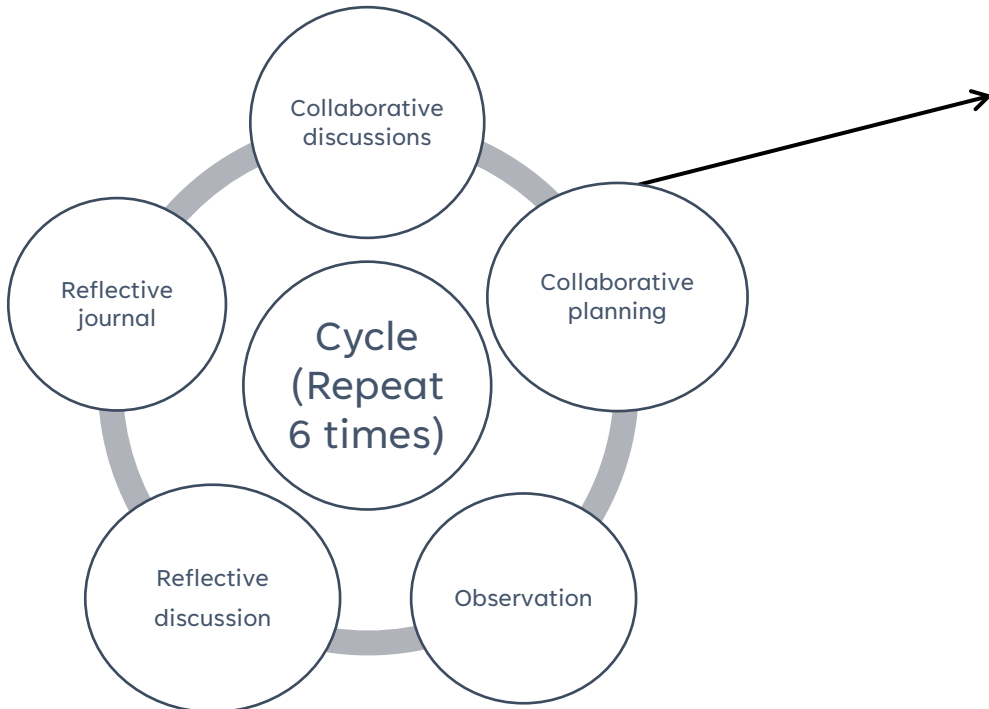
DATA ANALYSIS

- **Inductive and Deductive** Thematic Data Analysis.
- Deductive Analysis: Theoretical Framework: Zuber-Skerritt (1992) & Fuller (1969).
- Inductive Analysis

Cycle (Repeat 6 times)

- Collaborative discussions
- Collaborative planning
- Observation
- Reflective discussion
- Reflective journal

Step 1: Familiarisation
Read data multiple times

Step 2: Initial Coding
Identify codes across the data system | Use colour pins to mark similarities/differences

Step 3: Theme Identification
Connect codes to potential themes

Step 4: Thematic Mapping
Prepare a thematic map to review checked themes

Step 5: Theme Analysis
Analyze each theme for clear definitions and nominations

Step 6: Answering Research Questions
Use themes to address the research question

CRESWELL (2020) THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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KEY FINDINGS

KEY FINDINGS

Theme 1: "From being strangers to a community of trust"	Subtheme 1.1 Participants' initial emotional uncertainty
	Subtheme 1.2 Participants' sense of empowerment as a social member of a community of practitioners
Theme 2: "This was an eye opener."	Subtheme 2.1 Change from before and after the program
	Subtheme 2.2 The benefits of professional development though action research

Theme 1:	Subtheme 1.1
"From being strangers to a community of trust"	Participants' initial emotional uncertainty
	Subtheme 1.2
	Participants' sense of empowerment as a social member of a community of practitioners

Initial Hesitance**:**

- Most participants **hesitant** to collaborate and share knowledge with those from other centres.
- Preschool centres competitive
- **Lack of trust, leading to reluctance in speaking and interacting** (e.g., "unsure if I can trust the other participants" (B1, RJ, Cycle 1; B3, FGI; C3, RJ, Cycle 2).

Facilitated Introductions:

- **Initial sessions** aimed to create a **supportive environment** through conversations.

Change in Emotional States:

- Start of the second cycle, participants **showed improved emotional states**.
- Appeared happy to see each other, engaged in collaborative discussions and, more confident in sharing ideas.

Supportive Environment, Trust:

- **Trust, relationships** crucial for a successful CoP, develops gradually (Hermita, 2021).
- The CoP evolved into a **"safe and supported"** space for sharing thoughts, fears, and practices.
- *I'm feeling comfortable sharing ideas; I have no fear of being judged for my lack of knowledge"* (C2, FGI).

Active Participation Action Research :

- Participants valued **being actively involved in their PD** through AR (bottom up).
- **Preparation and evaluation in week 1, baseline date,** essential for identifying their needs, described as "**laying the foundation of our PD**" (C4, FGI). Appreciated being asked about **their support and needs and how PD could be tailored accordingly.**

Theme 2:	Subtheme 2.1
"This was an eye opener."	Change from before and after the program
	Subtheme 2.2
	The benefits of professional development though action research

- *Very few things about this PD and the process we followed were static; whenever needs arose, we could make changes [change in content, time spent on collaborative planning, etc." (C4, RJ, Cycle 5).*
- **Bottom-up model** places teachers, their concerns, knowledge and practices central with **open-ended** and flexible approach
- *In this PD, as the researcher, you were the neck, and we, as participants, are the head. You (the neck) guided us (the head) towards our own PD. The neck gave the direction [to our PD] and provided the relevant support. One could not achieve success without the other." (A4, RJ, Cycle 5)*

Collaborative Learning:

- Gratitude expressed for the CP sessions, which included sharing and modelling activities.
- **As preschool teachers the practical demonstrations** were key to actively engaging in their professional learning.

Engagement and Reflective practices:

- Most significant contribution to PD. Align with theoretical framework (Zuber-Skerritt, 1912)

Knowledge Implementation:

- PD positively affected participants' knowledge and teaching practices. PD aligned with day-to-day teaching, enhancing its relevance and authenticity (Cavazos et al., 2018; Coggshall et al., 2012).
- **Active involvement in the programme correlated with increased knowledge and confidence** (Sobolweski et al., 2021).

"Initially, we were **hesitant,** but after a while, we waited in **anticipation** for the PD sessions to learn from each other" (B3, FGI).

"Like a Key and Lock. The one relied on the other" (**trust, CoP, AR)** (C2, CR, Cycle 6).

I felt supported by the participants, which gave me the *courage to try* new things, propose activities, and ask others for help if I was uncertain" (B4, RJ, Cycle 6).

"If I reflect on my initial behaviour, I now realise that I was **hesitant to trust** and work with the participants from the other two schools" (A1, CD, Cycle 4).

"*I have been a teacher for many years, and I always hoped someone would ask me what I would like to learn and what I need*"(C2, FGI).

"*I appreciate the trust and relationship that were built through the CoP and AR*" (C3, RJ, Cycle 5).

"*You were the head and we as participants were the neck*" (A4, RJ, Cycle 5).

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