Chapter 1

Overview and rationale

1.1   PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to conceptualise quality in early learning centres from the perspective of various beneficiaries in order to inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework. Trying to define quality is, as Myers (2007:3) has said, much like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands. For him, part of the elusive nature of the concept of quality can be understood by examining the tension between a "modern" view that treats quality as something inherent, universal, independent of culture, place and history and a "post modern" view of quality that is constructive, relative, linked to specific values and influenced by culture, place and history.

In the first place, from literature (Golberg, 1999; Myers, 2007; Ogston, 2003; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006), I gauged scholars' understanding of quality in early learning centres. Secondly, in my literature review, I acknowledged that quality is influenced and determined by the institutional context. I agree with Golberg that no single definition of quality is sufficient and all attempts at a definition are context-linked and time specific (CECDE, 2004: 16). The setting of the early learning centre, the policies that must be adhered to and specific circumstances all have an influence on the quality of every early learning centre. Therefore, I studied related knowledge areas in the literature review. A third domain, relevant to understanding how quality in early learning centres is perceived, focuses on the experiences of beneficiaries involved in early learning centres. The experiences of the teachers, parents and students[1] (pre-service teachers) in terms of teaching, learning and the environment were studied in order to explain how all of them perceive quality of early learning centres.

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[1] In this study, the term student refers to an undergraduate student, who is studying to become a teacher.

In this thesis, I identified different factors that contributed to the understanding of quality, and took factors into account in explaining (in Chapter 7) the possible development of a proposed quality assurance framework for the South African context. I also studied existing international quality assurance frameworks (see 2.7), which have already been implemented in other countries, in order to see whether they can be adapted to inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework.

1.2   RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

I wanted to explore the quality of early learning centres in South Africa and also investigate how quality is experienced and perceived by different beneficiaries, in particular parents, teachers and pre-service teachers (teacher–students). The lack of quality measurement instruments in the South African context has been exacerbated by a development in national education policy in South Africa, namely the discontinuation of government preschools in most provinces. Early childhood education has largely become a community driven activity or private endeavour, resulting in a situation where preschool owners run these early learning centres as private for-profit businesses (Clasquin-Johnson, 2010:31; DoE, 2001). This resulted in pressure to appoint the most "affordable" teachers, who often are not (the best) qualified for the job. Furthermore, lack of government involvement implies the absence of a structure that would enable the coordination of efforts to determine whether these centres meet particular quality criteria (Chisholm, 2004: 18).

When I started exploring quality rating scales and quality assurance frameworks in other countries, I was intrigued by the purpose, content and possible relevance of these quality rating scales for the South African situation. This exploration prompted me to consider the need for a quality measurement instrument for early learning centres in the South African context. Furthermore, in my study of quality and various instruments for measuring quality in early learning centres, I discovered a gap in existing knowledge with regard to Africa and South Africa in particular (Halle, Vick Whittaker & Anderson, 2010; Harms, Clifford & Cryer, 2005; Mohamed & Lissaman, 2009; Robertson & Dressler, 2010; Soni & Bristow, 2010; Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford &

Taggart, 2003; 2010; 2011; Talan & Bloom, 2004; 2009). My study is an attempt to address the gap in the available body of research by focusing specifically on the service in early learning centres, international quality assurance frameworks and rating systems, experiences of different beneficiaries (parents, teachers and teacher–students) of quality in early learning centres, and quality assurance factors to be taken into account in the development of a quality assurance framework for the South African context.

Research indicates that the first years are critical for children's development. From birth to seven years is a period of rapid physical, mental, emotional, social and moral growth and development (Essa, 2011: 237; Faust, 2010: 99; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009: 22; Mayesky, 2009). The early years of a child's life are a time when children acquire concepts, skills and attitudes that lay the foundation for lifelong learning. These years have also been recognised as the ideal phase for passing on values like respect for human rights, appreciation of diversity, anti-bias, tolerance and justice that are vital for the building of a peaceful, prosperous and democratic society. The provision of quality early childhood education can also increase educational competence that is necessary for successful learning and development in formal schooling and, therefore, can reduce their chances of failure (UNICEF, 2006: 13).

Early childhood education is the first step in lifelong learning and is imperative in promoting the well-being of children (Sciara & Dorsey, 2003). In different countries, advancing high quality early childhood education is a strong interest area among researchers and policymakers and, therefore, many countries are actively involved in the process of developing and revising curricula for early childhood education (Lindberg, 2007: 1). Early childhood education is growing worldwide and there are various organisations and initiatives on all continents that try to address this.

Kamerman (in CECDE, 2004: 19) describes quality as a relative, value-based concept and, therefore, emphasises that any definition of quality is subject to change over time and defining quality is an ongoing process. Balageur, Mestres and Penn (1990) agree that a precise definition of quality in early childhood education does not exist, because quality is defined from many different values and perspectives. In the discussion paper, Quality Services for Young Children, the European Commission

Childcare Network, states: "Any definition of quality is to an extent transitory; understanding quality and arriving at quality indicators is a dynamic and continuous process of reconciling the emphases of different interest groups. It is not a prescriptive exercise. On the other hand quality determination needs to be a detailed exercise which is of direct practical use to those working with young children (Balageur, Mestres & Penn, 1990: 5). I can strongly associate myself with their opinion. I feel that this study would serve its purpose if it could contribute and inform literature on quality assurance in early learning centres and on the development of a quality assessment instrument for the early childhood education sector in South Africa to monitor and assure quality service in early learning centres.

I think French's (2000) summary is pertinent. He notes that "…quality is no longer viewed as one standard of excellence identified for all children in all services, but rather a set of core criteria towards which services may progress and against which their progress can be measured" (French, 2000:12). I support Dohert-Derkowski's (1995) view that a high quality programme is one that supports and assists the child's physical, emotional, social, language, and intellectual development and supports and also complements the family in its child-rearing role.

In May 2003, more than 600 delegates from 55 nations attended the fifth World Forum on Early Childhood in Acapulco, Mexico. The forum was hosted and developed by the United States based Child Care Information Exchange. Participants at the World Forum discovered that the early childhood world faces similar challenges worldwide. However major differences exist in the regional (and country wide) resources devoted to young children and their families. Ginsberg (2003) notes that, while the United States may lead the way in early childhood thinking and research, other countries are doing more to make high-quality programmes accessible and affordable.

Similarly, in South Africa, the need and demand for good quality early childhood care is extensive. According to the South African Department of Education (DoE, 2005: 3), governments on the whole have accepted this responsibility for good quality, launching various initiatives aimed at ensuring that all children have both the

opportunity and the means to develop their potential – to their own and society's benefit.

In addition, the South African Department of Education documented that early childhood development programmes have the potential for producing positive and lasting effects on children, but that this will not be achieved unless more attention is paid to ensure that all programmes meet the highest standards of quality: "As the number and type of early childhood programmes increase, the need increases for a shared national vision and agreed-upon standards of professional practice" (DoE, 2004: 33).

From a critical analysis of the current nature, context and status of early childhood development provision in South Africa, manifold challenges emerged (DoE, 2004). The findings indicated a fragmented legislative and policy framework for early childhood development, resulting in uncoordinated service delivery; limited access to early childhood services; inequalities in existing early childhood development provisioning; lack of adequate human resources for the early childhood development sector (both at national and provincial levels); poor resourcing of early childhood development with less than 1% of the Education and Social Budgets respectively going to early childhood development; variable quality of early childhood services; as well as a lack of interdepartmental track record for collaboration to ensure adequate and quality provision for children.

1.3 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

According to the Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education of 2001 (DoE, 2001), education from birth to 6 years is not compulsory in South Africa. The provision of early childhood education is made by a variety of institutions, mostly as unregulated and private initiatives. According to SASIX (2009:2), "the South African government has recently initiated an integrated plan for early childhood development and has begun to allocate resources to it, but the Grade R year[2] of schooling is not

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[2] Grade R year is the official name for the reception year that precedes the first year of formal schooling, Grade 1. Grade R is the equivalent to Kindergarten in the United States of America.

yet compulsory or state-funded". In practice, non-governmental and community-based organisations continue to carry the bulk of the responsibility for early childhood development provision as well as the training of educators.

The South African early childhood education is not an exception. Early childhood education remains the Cinderella of education in many countries; this sibling is neglected in terms of funding, resources and status (Lynch, 2007:3). Myers (1993: 33-34) asks in this regard why (financial) support for early childhood education programmes is so inadequate if there are so many believers in the value of high quality programmes in the world. Regrettably for young children, when it comes to investing in early childhood education, there are advocates, but sadly also many sceptics. "Control over the purse strings and planning processes often falls to sceptics, whose way of viewing the world is conditioned by their job" (Myers, 1993: 34). He further argues that "these people" who consider roads, dams and primary schools as better investments, demand hard evidence, "based on something other than unsubstantiated beliefs, combining both scientific and political arguments".

Pandor (2007) confirms that in most countries there is not much funding available for preschools. She refers to the UNESCO report that found that over half of the United Nations member countries allocate less than 5% of total public education expenditure to early childhood education. With reference to the UNESCO reports, Pandor (2007: 1) says: "Fortunately the different role players in various countries have started to realise and emphasise the important role that early childhood development has to play and therefore this segment has started to receive more attention and more scope". She notes that UNESCO's 2007 Education for All Global Monitoring Report is devoted to early childhood care and learning. That is the first of the six Education for All goals. The report indicates that all the countries involved have committed to achieving the goals by 2015 and that Latin America and the Caribbean lead the developing world in the provision of preschool education. Sub-Saharan Africa is lagging behind all regions of the world. Pandor points out that in 2007 South African provinces allocated 1.1% (just under R1 billion) of provincial education expenditure to early childhood education, signifying a meaningful increase over 2005.

Pandor (2007:1) emphasises that South Africa has several early childhood development -related policies for a range of departments. These policies are aimed at the provision of early childhood education and not for quality assurance by means of accreditation. In 2005, South Africa adopted the integrated early childhood development plan for under four year olds and implemented departments of Health, Education, and Social Development. The key objective of the plan is to ensure that early childhood development sites become core service provision centres for children, and to meet the 2010 target of 1 million children in sites that are registered to offer quality care and support. The plan envisions that 19 000 practitioners will be trained and equipped to be employed or self-employed in this vital sector. As she indicates "few of us need to be convinced of the benefits of early learning and care. The task that we should address is how do we ensure that in every community we have facilities for children's development?"

Chisholm (2004: 18) notes in this regard that:

> *It is difficult to access improvements in the sphere of ECCE* [early childhood care and education] *because of the lack of quality and information available. The information has improved, but it does not focus on quality. Instead it focuses on access and spending. There is extremely limited access to and spending on ECCE. Quality must as a consequence also suffer*

I think that this is a valuable insight and in my study I investigate how quality is experienced and I explain how that insight can inform the development of a proposed quality assurance framework.

Myers (1993) states that when early childhood is made a priority, the financial support for provision is forthcoming, even in situations of relative poverty as is the case in South Africa. Financing for early childhood programmes is not the basic problem. The problem is to recognise the value of such programmes and build the personal and political resolve necessary to carry them out (Myers, 1993: 45). In my study, I emphasise the value of quality early childhood education programmes. In taking an in-depth look into the various beneficiaries' perceptions of what they assume quality in early childhood education to be, I aim to explain how these insights can inform the development of an quality assurance framework. If an appropriate

quality assurance framework is available, it might be useful for different stakeholders to monitor the quality of educational centres for the youngest learners.

1.4   CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

My theoretical framework, based on Woodhead's (1996) model on quality development, is a basis to inform a possible framework for the South African context in early learning centres. This model (which I discuss in Chapter 2) on quality development is based on three key questions: Who are the stakeholders in the 'quality' of a programme? Who are the perceived beneficiaries from 'quality'? and What are taken to be indicators of 'quality'? The framework consists of quality indicators grouped under three broad categories consisting of input, process and outcome indicators.

In my inquiry, three key theoretical concepts form the building blocks of relevant literature. The interwoven concepts are: quality, early learning centres and quality assurance frameworks. The various perspectives and interrelatedness of bodies of knowledge connected to these constructs in defining quality are core in constructing a theoretical framework for my study. In the theoretical framework, I explain the relationship and interdependency between these main features of the study.

Early childhood education (ECE): Early childhood education is a pedagogical approach to cover the education of children from the period from birth to six years of age. Other terms that are often used interchangeably with early childhood education are early childhood learning, early care and early education. Learning focus in this phase is on children learning through play (Morrison, 2006: 4).

Early learning centres (ELC): Early learning centres are the places that offer early childhood education to young learners before entering formal schooling in the primary school (Morrison, 2006: 4).

Quality in early learning centres: The term quality is often used by early childhood professionals to describe their programmes. Quality is a process of continuous

improvement, where pedagogues reflect collaboratively, consciously and critically on early childhood programmes and practices. Quality evolves as an implicit part of the process of change. Quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interest, rather than an objective and universal reality (Kostelnik, Soderman & Whiren, 2004: 8).

Quality assurance frameworks: Different terminology is used to describe the systems that educational organisations put in place in order to classify and determine the quality of early learning centres. Terms that are being used are quality assurance framework, accreditation framework, accreditation systems, rating scales, observation measure, accreditation schemes and child care accreditation (Sciara & Dorsey, 2003: 59).

Quality rating system (QRS): A quality rating and improvement system increases quality in programmes, the final standard of which is accreditation (Neugebauer, 2009: 16).

Accreditation: According to Sullivan in Neugebauer (2009:16-17), accreditation is seen as the 'stamp of approval' that lets parents know that a programme meets certain standards. It is seen as monitoring quality at the highest level to provide the truest, in- depth assurance of quality for parents, regulators and funders. Child care accreditation is defined by Doherty-Derkowski as "a process by which a representative body, recognised by both the community and the service community in general, establishes standards for services. The standards are above the minimum regulatory requirements of the government. Programmes can apply on a voluntary basis for evaluation against the standards and if found to meet or surpass them, are granted a certificate which recognizes this fact" (Doherty-Derkowski, 1994: 113).

Beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres: In this study, one of the goals is to explore and describe how the quality of early learning centres is experienced and perceived by different beneficiaries, namely teachers, parents and teacher students (pre-service teachers). The different facets of subjective experience are viewed in terms of physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and normative as well as social aspects (Mayesky, 2009 : 23).

Children:

The best way for children to learn is when they deal with the real world – people, natural materials, problems to solve and their own creations. In other words, they learn best through active play, which is personally meaningful (Crowther & Wellhousen, 2004: 23). As preschool children between the ages of three and six are the main characters in the early childhood education story, I foreground their needs and abilities in my understanding of what quality in early learning centres constitutes.

Teachers:

Early childhood teachers perform a complex and multidimensional role. It is the teachers' responsibility to implement a thoughtfully planned daily programme which is challenging, engaging, integrated, developmentally appropriate, and culturally and linguistically responsive, and that promotes positive outcomes for all children. Teachers have a key role as they communicate with families, gleaning information which can bring an easy transition for the child to the school environment (Ontario, Ministry of Education. 2006: 1).

Parents:

Douglas (2004: 191) argues that parents should have the right not only to access services but also to choose between early childhood services. Essa (2002) is convinced that parents can be active participants in matters related to the early learning centre. "They can contribute in a variety of ways to selecting, modifying, or maintaining various aspects of the environment. Some programmes have advisory or policy-making parent councils that may be involved in decisions about major purchases or construction. Parents can be a tremendous resource in matters related to the environment" (Essa, 2002: 200-201).

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.5.1 The aim of the study

In this study, my aim was to explain quality in the context of the early learning centres from beneficiaries' perspectives in order to inform the development of an early learning centre quality assurance framework in South Africa. In terms of the explanatory purpose (Babbie, 1995: 84), I studied the early learning centre situation in South Africa, considering unique contexts and conditions. In Chapters 5 and 6, I used the data to sketch pictures of how different beneficiaries experience quality in early learning centres. Although the focus of my study was mainly explanatory, it also has descriptive and exploratory elements (Charles & Mertler, 2002). Findings regarding the beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres, inform my explanation of the development of a proposed quality measurement instrument for South Africa which I present in Chapter 7.

1.5.2 Objectives of this study therefore were to:

- determine what is offered by early learning centres;
- explore and describe how the quality of early learning centres is experienced by different beneficiaries, i.e. parents, teachers and teacher-students;
- compare beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early childhood education with what is offered at early learning centres;
- identify how early learning centre quality assurance factors can be taken into account in the development of a quality assurance framework for the South African context; and
- explain how the understanding of international quality assurance frameworks in early childhood education can inform the development of a quality assurance framework in South Africa.

1.5.3 Main research question

The primary research question is:

How can an understanding of beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres inform the development of a quality assurance framework in South Africa?

1.5.4 Secondary research questions

The following are secondary (specific) research questions:
1. What is offered by early learning centres?
2. What do beneficiaries experience as quality in early learning centres?
3. How do beneficaries' experiences of quality compare with what is offered by early learning centres?
4. How can identified early learning centre quality factors be utilised to develop a quality assurance framework for the South African context?
5. How can existing international quality assurance frameworks inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework?

1.6   PRELUDE TO METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 3, I present a detailed account of the research design and methodology used in the study. In order to answer my research question, I studied interactions of events, human relationships and other factors and therefore chose an instrumental case study (Merriam, 1998: 41) as the research design. In this case study, I focus on the experiences of parents, teachers and teacher-students regarding the quality in early learning centres.

To provide a bird's eye-view of the research design and methodology that I used in this study, I summarise the research process in Table 1.1. I provide the introduction, rationale and purpose of the study, as well as the main and secondary research questions. I also refer to the five main focus areas of the literature review. Next, I summarise the research design and methodology followed by the paradigmatic

assumptions, research design and sampling, and ethical considerations. I indicate how the quantitative and qualitative data were collected, documented, analysed and interpreted. In the last instance, I summarise the results of the study with the themes that emerged, as well as the literature control that locates the results within current literature.

Table 1.1: The research process used in the study

INTRODUCTION, RATIONALE & PURPOSE OF THE STUDY (Chapter 1)	
Main research question	**Research sub questions**
How can an understanding of beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres inform the development of a quality assurance framework in South Africa?	1. What is offered by early learning centres? 2. What do beneficiaries experience as quality in early learning centres? 3. How do beneficiaries' experiences of quality compare with what is offered by early learning centres? 4. How can identified early learning centre quality factors be utilised to develop a quality assurance framework for the South African context? 5. How can existing international quality assurance frameworks inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework?

LITERATURE REVIEW (Chapter 2)				
The need for service provision in a learning environment	Quality early childhood education	The theoretical framework underpinning this study	Early learning centres	Regulating service provision

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY (Chapter 3)		
Paradigmatic assumptions	**Research design and sampling**	**Ethical considerations**
Methodological paradigm: Concurrent mixed method design **Metatheoretical paradigm**: Constructivism, more specifically social constructionism	• instrumental case study • convenience sampling • purposeful sampling	• informed consent • confidentiality • anonymity and trust • positional discrepancies • cultural differences • sensitive information obtained • role of the researcher
Quantitative data collection techniques	**Quantitative data documentation techniques**	**Quantitative data analysis & interpretation**
questionnaires	paper-based questionnaires	statistical analysis
Qualitative data collection techniques	**Qualitative data documentation techniques**	**Qualitative data analysis & interpretation**
• face to face interviews with parents • face to face interviews with teachers • observation	• verbatim transcripts • reflective journals • visual documentation (photographs)	Social constructionist thematic analysis of data derived from: • interviews • reflective journals • open-ended questionnaire questions • photographs

RESULTS OF THE STUDY (Chapters 4 and 5)	
Themes that emerged and authentication of results • Learning areas • Structured learning activities • Outdoor facilities	Insight related to each of the identified themes • The daily programme in the early learning centre • Context of learning • Learners' requirements and expectations • Requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities

LITERATURE CONTROL (Chapter 6)			
Locate results within current literature			
supportive	contradictive	absences & silences	new insights

CONCLUSIONS (Chapter 7)

1.7   OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1:   Overview and rationale

In Chapter 1, the rationale and purpose of this study, as well as the background and context are presented. The main and secondary research questions are also introduced. In the last instance, the research approach is explained followed by an outline of the chapters in the study.

Chapter 2:   Quality in early learning centres – investigating the literature

Chapter 2 is devoted to an investigation of existing literature. The focus areas in this chapter are the need for service provision in an early learning environment; quality early childhood education; an explanation of the theoretical framework underpinning this study; early learning centres and the regulation of service provision.

Chapter 3:   Research design and methodology

In Chapter 3, a detailed account of the research design and methodology used in the study is provided. The methodological and metatheoretical paradigms are justified, the choice of research design and participants explained and ethical considerations clarified. Furthermore the different data collection, documentation, analysis and interpretation techniques are described.

Chapter 4:   Analysis of the responses in the questionnaires: Learning areas, learning activities and outdoor facilities available at early learning centres

In the fourth chapter, the analysis of the responses in the questionnaires is clarified. In this chapter, I present the results of the study with an explanation of the themes that emerged from analysis of the raw data obtained from the questionnaires. I also present qualitative results obtained from the open-ended responses in the questionnaires and visual data results which focus on the availability of indoor learning areas, structured learning activities and outdoor facilities.

Chapter 5:   Analysis of the responses in the interviews and reflective journals

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the qualitative data, namely the interview responses from parents (mothers) and teachers, as well as the reflective journals kept by the student-participants. The data (interviews and reflective journals) focus

on the experiences of quality in the early learning centres of the case study as understood by the beneficiaries (parents, teachers and students).

Chapter 6:   Findings

In this chapter, an interpretation of the results is given and the findings in terms of existing literature are portrayed. I report on supportive and contradictive evidence with regard to by the literature, as well as on absences and silences and new insights that emerged from this study.

Chapter 7:   Conclusions

Chapter 7 provides a summary of the main findings of the study with regard to the research questions and purpose of the study as was formulated in Chapter 1.

1.8   CONCLUSION

In Chapter 1, I explained the purpose and rationale of the study. I also clarified the concepts and provided the research questions. Lastly, I gave an overview of all the chapters in the study.

In the next chapter, I provide a review of the literature on quality in early learning centres. I explain the demand for high quality service provision in early childhood, review the discussions and debates on "quality" in early childhood education and explain the theoretical framework underpinning this study. I further explain what early learning centres are and who they are for. Children's learning, the role of play in early learning centres, the curriculum and learning environment and the contentious debate of the play-based approach versus academic direct instruction, is also discussed. The last part of this chapter explores the measurement of quality in early learning centres in different parts of the world. The chapter is concluded by investigating quality in early learning centres in South Africa.