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UNDERSTANDING BENEFICIARIES' EXPERIENCES
OF QUALITY IN EARLY LEARNING CENTRES

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my

husband Willie,

for his unconditional

love and ongoing support

Table of contents

List of figures

List of graphs

List of tables

List of photographs

List of terminology and acronyms

In order to clarify exactly what is meant when specific terminology is being used in this study, abbreviations, definitions and explanations of the key terms are provided.

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ASEAN	Association of South-East Asian Nations
BEd	Baccalaureus Educationis
Caregiver	Staff working directly with young children (employee)
CCCF	Canadian Child Care Federation
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (Ireland)
Childcare	A service provided for children from birth to four or five years of age.
CIS	Caregiver Interaction Scale
CLASS	Classroom Assessment Scoring System (Virginia)
CPERS	Children's Physical Environments Rating Scale (Australia)
Crèche	Early childhood development facility, also called a preschool or ECD centre
Curriculum 2005	According to the Department of Education (2002: 61), Curriculum 2005 is the first version of the post-apartheid National Curriculum Statement.
DAP	Developmentally Appropriate Practice
Day care/child care	A service provided for children from birth to four or five years of age. Care of a child during the day by a person other than the child's parents or legal guardians, typically someone outside the child's immediate family.
DBSA	Development Bank of South Africa
DoBE	Department of Basic Education
DoE	Department of Education (South Africa)

ECD	Early Childhood Development is the process of emotional, mental, spiritual, moral, physical and social development of children from birth to nine years.
ECD Programmes	Early Childhood Development Programmes
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECE	Early Childhood Education ECE 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 ECE are early childhood learning, early care and early education. Learning focus is on children learning through play.
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECERS	(Harms, Clifford and Cryer/Harms' *et al.* family of) Early Childhood Environment Rating Scales. Designed in 1998 to assess group programmes for children of preschool through kindergarten age, 2 ½ through 5 years.
ECERS-E	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Extension: Four curricular subscales. This new instrument was developed in 2003 specifically for assessing the curricular aspects of quality, including pedagogy, in preschool centres subject to the English national Early Childhood Curriculum. The ECERS-E is an instrument used for assessing the educational aspects of process quality and is a significant predictor of children's cognitive/linguistic progress.
ECERS-R	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised. Harms *et al.* (1998): A rating scale consisting of seven sub-scales which provide an overview of the preschool environment, covering aspects of the setting from furnishing to individuality of care and the quality of social interactions.
ELC	Early Learning Centre
EPPE	The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (England)
ERS	Harms-Clifford Environmental Rating Scales
EU	European Union

FDCRS	The Family Day Care Rating Scale: defines quality of family day care comprehensively.
Foundation Phase	The first phase of the General Education and Training Band namely grades R, 1, 2 and 3. (South Africa)
Grade R	The Reception Year, the year before grade 1. Learners can be admitted to Grade R the year they turn 6, but Grade R is not compulsory. In some schools it is still known as grade O, but that term was replaced by the term Grade R when the RNCS was published in 2002 in South Africa. These learners can receive their education at an early learning centre (pre-primary school) or at a primary school. The way that they learn is through play and in an informal way.
Grade O	An alternative term for Grade R.
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus that attacks the immune system of the body.
ITERS	Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale: Designed to assess group programs for children from birth to 2 ½ years of age.
ISSA	The International Step by Step Association
Kindergarten	A form of education for young children which serves as a transition from home to the commencement of more formal schooling. In most countries kindergarten is part of the preschool system. In parts of the United States, Canada and Australia (NSW, TAS and the ACT) kindergarten is the word to describe the first year of compulsory education. Children usually attend kindergarten any time between the ages of three and seven, depending on the local system.
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
NCAC	National Childcare Accreditation Council (Australia)
NQS	National Quality Standard
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
ORCE	Observational record of the care giving environment

Preschool	It is defined as "center-based programmes" for four-year olds that are fully or partially funded by state education agencies and that are operated in schools or under the direction of state and local agencies. Preschool, both private and school sponsored, are available for children aged three to five. Many of these programmes follow similar curriculum as pre-kindergarten.
Preschool child	A child under six years of age not yet attending formal school.
Preschool playgroup	In everyday usage just called a playgroup, is an organised group providing care and socialisation for children under five.
Pre-reception year	Programmes for children from birth to four years of age.
QIAS	Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (NCAC, Adelaide, Australia)
QUAL	Qualitative
QUAN	Quantitative
RNCS	The Revised National Curriculum Statement (South Africa). The RNCS is aimed at promoting commitment as well as competence among teachers, who will be responsible for the development of their own learning programmes.
SACERS	The school-age care and environment rating scale. Designed to assess group-care programs for children aged five to twelve.
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund, formerly (1946-53) United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.
UP	University of Pretoria
USA	United States of America

Addenda (Provided on cd)

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the concept of quality in early learning centres which could serve as the groundwork for the development of an early learning quality assurance framework in South Africa. The data used reflects different beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres. The unique contexts of, and situations at early learning centres were considered. A theoretical framework, based on Woodhead's model on quality development, informed the study. The framework consists of input (structural), process and outcome quality indicators.

In this explanatory instrumental case study framed within social constructionism, the researcher partnered with 235 teachers, 235 mothers and 235 teacher students from a middle income group, to generate mixed method data using surveys, as well as interviews and reflective journals in a statistical and thematical analysis.

Beneficiaries' conceptualisations of quality mirrored accepted norms of quality in early learning centres. Beneficiaries indicated the following as indicative of quality: children's social-emotional well-being and holistic development, a normative foundation for values and respect, effective infrastructure and accountable learning. Aspects regarded as quality indicators by beneficiaries were available at early learning centres. In this regard early learning centres provided more indoor than outdoor facilities. The latter were mostly static outdoor structures which could negatively impact on sensory- and motor development. The promovenda developed a draft quality assurance framework based on the following criteria: school climate, infrastructure, curriculum, communication, teacher competence, learning environment, and support services.

The findings show that aspects perceived by beneficiaries as quality indicators in an early learning centre are predominantly process indicators and hard to 'measure' in a quantitative way. A quality school climate enables emotional and social well-being. In this regard, the findings suggest that for the beneficiaries quality concerns were not about that which early learning centres have provided in terms of facilities (input indicators), but rather about centres that promote children's holistic well-being.

Key concepts

Accreditation

Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres

Early childhood education

Early learning centres

Quality in early learning centres

Environmental rating scale

Quality rating system

Quality assurance

Quality assurance frameworks

Teachers

Parents

Certificate of ethical clearance

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27 October 2011

CERTIFICATE OF EDITING

To whom it may concern

This certifies that I have edited the PhD thesis, UNDERSTANDING BENEFICIARIES' EXPERIENCES OF QUALITY IN EARLY LEARNING CENTRES, by Judy van Heerden, being submitted in 2011 to the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

Disclaimers

1. I focused on language issues, including grammar, tenses, subject-verb agreement, consistency with regard to UK spelling.

2. I improved the word order where necessary to improve the logical flow of the story line. I also made suggestions for the improvement of the structure and numbering of sections and consistency with regard to heading styles. Final decisions rest with the student as to which suggestions to implement.

3. I was not asked to edit the References.

Sheyne Ball
Language editor

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 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.

Chapter 2

Quality in early learning centres – investigating the literature

2.1   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of the literature on quality in early learning centres. I start the chapter exploring the demand for high quality service provision in early childhood. Next, I review the discussions and debates on "quality" in early childhood education and then commence by explaining the theoretical framework underpinning this study. I further explain what early learning centres are and who they are for. A discussion on children's learning, the role of play in early learning centres, the curriculum and learning environment is followed by the contentious debate of the play-based approach versus academic direct instruction. The last part of this chapter explores the measurement of quality in early learning centres, specifically how quality assurance frameworks originated, developed and are functioning in different parts of the world. I conclude the chapter by investigating quality in early learning centres in South Africa.

2.2   THE NEED FOR SERVICE PROVISION IN AN EARLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

It has become a fact of modern, industrialized life that many young children spend the majority of their waking hours being taken care of in groups outside their homes by someone who is not their parent (Becker & Becker, 2009: ix).

The statement above expresses the reality of young children's position in society today, world-wide, as well as in South Africa. "Women's increased employment since the last half of the 20th century has been a contributory factor for increased early years provision in terms of demand and availablility" (Papatheodorou, 2010: 1).

Kamara (2008: 103) and Clasquin-Johnson (2009: 18) acknowledge that there is a growing demand for high quality early education and care because of an increasing number of single–parent families as well as households where both parents are working full time. Additionally, parents are constantly reminded by the media of challenges that the formal education system faces. Parents' hopes and expectations are consequently on the early learning centres to provide quality preparation for their children before they enter school. There is thus an urgent need not only for more, but for higher quality early learning centres globally and also in South Africa (Clasquin-Johnson, 2009: 18).

Since the last part of the 20th century, research findings have been increasingly cited to support the expansion of early childhood care and education. In many early childhood professionals' view, the quality of child care impacts on children's performance and behaviour during the time spent in early learning centres, but also potentially for several years afterwards (Bredekamp, 2011: 11; Essa, 2011: 157). There is now indeed, a growing body of evidence which has demonstrated the long term benefits of high quality early services for young children, their families and the wider community (Papatheodorou, 2010: 1). At a global level, numerous studies have indicated that attending a high quality early childhood programme has a range of noteworthy advantages for children, families, and the entire society, including taxpayers. Such quality programmes are not only an investment in young children, but are also beneficial in expanding their physical, cognitive, and social environment (Hirsh-Pasek, Michnick Golinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2009: 22; Lynch, 2007: 6; Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2008: 288; Papatheodorou, 2010: 1).

In their revised project plan, "Encouraging quality in early childhood education and care", the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2009: 3) emphasised that all these positive advantages including social and economic benefits, better child well-being, "more equitable outcomes, poverty reduction and increased intergenerational social mobility" are directly related to the "quality" of early childhood education and care.

The need for child care among working parents makes early childhood education a topic of international and national importance, but this is not the only rationale for its

growing significance. Essa (2002: 5) emphasises that on a parallel, though separate, track there has been extensive debate and research regarding early education for special populations of children and families, in particular children from low-income families, children with disabilities, and children at risk. South Africa has many children that fall into one or more of these categories. Researchers have concluded that good early childhood programmes not only improve the lives of children and families involved but also result in considerable economic advantages for society (Essa, 2002: 5).

The early years in children's lives are of vital importance for the rest of their lives. This statement that is true for all children is also specifically relevant to children growing up in countries with emerging economies. The last few decades were characterised by extensive research that signifies that children's ability to grow up healthy and to learn effectively, to a large extent relies on their experiences and relationships in the earliest years of their lives. Young South African children face tremendous challenges in terms of their survival, development and well-being because of the demands of poverty, unemployment as well as the effects of HIV and AIDS. There is increasing recognition that practical and efficient solutions are urgently required to address the needs of today's and tomorrow's most vulnerable children in South Africa. "Positive early learning experiences will lay the foundation for a lifetime of success... High quality, effective services are needed for those young children who are competent, yet at risk for compromised development" (Rochat, Mitchell & Richter, 2008: 4–5).

2.3   QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In recent years, in many countries with well-developed or developing early childhood education systems, the "quality-issue" has become a matter of considerable apprehension. The past decade offered an assortment of reviews, public policies, investigations and research "into what should constitute quality in early childhood education and care" (Ishimine, Tayler & Bennett, 2010: 67).

2.3.1 Defining "quality" in early childhood education

Kostelnik, Soderman and Whiren (2004: 8) point out that the term "quality" is often used by early childhood professionals for describing their programmes. They argue that regardless of families' background or economic status, the quality of their children's education and care is a big concern for parents (Kostelnik *et al.,* 2004: 8). According to Essa (2011: 156), numerous studies found a connection between high quality child care and learning, intellectual and language development and performance in school. The positive effect of high quality early childhood programmes is even more noticeable in children from lower-income families (Decker & Decker, 2005: 23).

Although the significance of quality in terms of the provision of early childhood education is recognised and well documented, no single definition exists to capture and represent exactly what quality in early childhood education provision means. The idea of a universally agreed-upon standard of quality has been discarded (CECDE, 2004: 19). Various countries and different stakeholders define quality differently, therefore "definitions should be interpreted with caution and sensitivity when comparing cross-country practices" (OECD, 2009: 13). Moss and Pence (1996) state that in defining quality, the relevance of the cultures and contexts that vary to accommodate the wide variations in economic development, resource availability, and cultural beliefs, will be reflected. Any particular society's definitions of quality will be informed by their cultural values and constructions of childhood. The concept of quality therefore "always needs to be contextualised ecologically and temporally to recognise cultural and other forms of diversity" (CECDE, 2004: 19).

Moss and Pence (1996) also emphasise that most perspectives on quality are exclusive to a particular stakeholder group. In their opinion, "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". They further argue that "quality childcare, is to a large extent, in the eye of the beholder who can be anyone or belong to any group, each with an interest in early childhood services" (Moss &

Pence, 1996: 172). Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003:109) add weight to this opinion and provide an even more detailed division of four categories of the stakeholder groups namely the individual (child, parent, professional), organisational (centre, programme, sponsor), community (local, regional, national) and international (cross-cultural, global alliances such as the European Union (EU) and the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN))

For Katz (1993), quality can be determined from five angles, namely top-down (such as equipment and setting), bottom-up (the experience of the child), outside-inside (the experience of the family), inside (the experience of the staff) and outside (the programme in relation to the community). When compared, the two perspectives on quality early childhood education of Katz (1993) and Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003:109) show considerable overlap. See Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1: A comparison of two perspectives on quality

Katz	*Ebbeck and Waniganayake*
Top-down	Organisational
Bottom-up	Individual (Child)
Outside-inside	(Family)
Inside	(Staff/professional)
Outside	Community
	International

It should be noted that the category labelled "outside" by Katz, creates space for the two categories "community" and "international" proposed by Ebbeck and Waniganayake. On the other hand, Ebbeck and Waniganayake's category "individual" (containing child, parent and professional) creates space for three separate categories proposed by Katz, namely "bottom-up", "outside-inside" and "inside".

It is important to note that because of the complexity of quality and the entangled connections between these many variables "… quality cannot be defined by listing its components separately" (Golberg, 1999: 21).

Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (2002: 93) argue that:

> *The concept of quality is primarily about defining, through the specification of criteria, a generalizable standard against which a product can be judged with certainty. The process of specification of criteria, and the systematic and methodological application, is intended to enable us to know whether or not something – be it manufactured or service product – achieves the standard. Central to the construction of quality is the assumption that there is an entity or essence of quality which is a knowable, objective and certain truth waiting 'out there' to be discovered and described.*

I agree with Dahlberg *et al. (2002: 93)* above who say that, to some extent, quality can be judged, but only through a process where the set criteria can be applied to "test" the concept. To achieve this one requires a theoretical framework.

2.4   THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK UNDERPINNING THIS STUDY

In order to understand generated data in terms of quality, I selected the model of Woodhead (1996) on quality development, as a basis to inform a possible framework for the South African context in early learning centres. Martin Woodhead, a developmental psychologist, developed this model in 1996.

In Woodhead's project, four case studies were carried out by local consultants in India, Kenya, Venezuela and France. These studies emphasise the extraordinary diversity in environments for early child development, in contrasting economic and cultural circumstances and focus on different models of early childhood programmes. Woodhead offers a view of quality issues in large-scale programmes for young, disadvantaged children growing up in poverty. The South African context bears resemblances with the contexts of the countries of Woodhead's project. Kenya, for example is also an African, developing country. By opting for Woodhead's framework, I attempt to avoid one of the pitfalls against which Woodhead (1996: 5) warns us:

There is a strong tendency for Euro-American models of quality to dominate research, policy, training, and practice in early childhood development. With a few notable exceptions, this tendency has been fuelled by the universalist aspirations of developmental psychology. I am convinced that universal models of quality are both untenable and unhelpful. At the same time, I am convinced we should not embrace the opposite extreme, an ultimately self-defeating form of relativism. Quality is relative, but not arbitrary.

Woodhead's model on quality development is based on three key questions:

1. Who are the stakeholders in the quality of a programme?
2. Who are the perceived beneficiaries from quality?
3. 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.

Table 2.2 provides a schematic layout of the main features of my theoretical framework based on Woodhead's model for conceptualising quality in early learning centres. When I consulted different sources, I realised tenets of Woodhead's framework (on quality in early learning centres) were mostly included, although using alternative terms or additional indicators. In order to create a more complete understanding of the indicators, I include an extra section (printed in italics) to compare Woodhead's framework with those of three other sources (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002; Goodfellow, 2003; OECD, 2009) that were published later. The similarities between the four sources are evident. The most noticeable difference is that the indicator *curriculum* is not part of Woodhead's framework, but is explicitly stated in all three of the other sources.

Table 2.2: The theoretical framework for indicating quality in early learning centres

1. Stakeholders in the 'quality' of programmes	2. Beneficiaries from 'quality'
• Children • Parents • Employers • Teachers • Programme managers • Community leaders • Child development experts • Politicians • Funding agencies • Research investigators	• Children • Parents • Employers • Teachers in the primary school • ECE workers • Older children (do not have to care for younger siblings)

3. 'Quality' indicators		
INPUT indicators: easy to define and measure	**PROCESS indicators:** reflect relationships and day-to-day interactions	**OUTCOME indicators:** reflect the impact of using services
Building and grounds • floor space • toilets • heating / cooling **Materials and equipment** • toys • furniture • teaching resources **Staff** • qualifications • wages and conditions • child/staff ratios	**Style of care** • adult's responsiveness • consistency **Teaching learning methods** • cater for individual needs • control/support **Experiences offered** • choices • variety • routines and transitions **Control and discipline** • boundaries • rules • management **Relationships among adults** • respect • trust **Relationships between staff, parents and others** • open • welcoming • cooperative	**Children's health** • growth levels • illness **Abilities** • overall skills and development **Adjustment to school** • transition and achievements in school **Family attitudes** • parent competence • support for children's learning at home

(Adapted from Woodhead, 1996: 23-25)

4. Alternative terms and/or additional indicators used by other authors		
Structural variables • adult/child ratios • group size • staff training *(Goodfellow, 2003: 1)*	**Process variables** • sensitive responsive care-giving • the nature of the parent/staff cooperation • implementation of the <u>curriculum</u> *(Goodfellow, 2003: 1)*	
Structural (input) criteria *Resource and organisational dimensions of institutions:* • group size • levels of staff training • adult–to–child ratios • the presence and content of a <u>curriculum</u> *(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002: 98)*	**Process criteria** *What happens in the institution?* • activities of children • behaviour of staff • interactions between children and adults • relationships between the institution and the parents *(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002: 98)*	**Outcome criteria** • child development assumed to be desirable, but also to young children's later school • social & economic performance sometimes stretching as far as adulthood *(Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2002: 98)*
Input indicators *(on programme level)* • duration and intensity of programmes • size and composition of groups • adult-child ratios • indoor and outdoor environments *(OECD, 2009: 13–17)*	**Process indicators** *What is occurring in programmes and to a child?* • health and safety features • interactions between children and adults • partnerships with parents • relationships with children • learning and social opportunities offered (<u>curriculum</u>) *(OECD, 2009: 13–17)*	**Outcome indicators** • well-being • socio-emotional developments • citizenship • preparation for school 1. Goals in specific developmental areas (Physical & socio-emotional development) 2. Subject & learning areas, e.g. communication and language skills, art, emergent literacy. - self regulation - ability to play co-operatively - language outcomes *(OECD, 2009:13–17)*

The framework in Table 2.2 accommodates diverse views on quality. Parents may experience quality as their child's safety and a good meal. That represents the

parent's perspective as beneficiary, concentrating on happiness, social relationships and parental employment as indicators. The politician's view could represent a concern regarding numbers in the programme, cost effectiveness and global indicators of quality and here the community is the beneficiary. The care worker's perspective concentrates on the children as the main beneficiaries and the pressures of staff and adequacy of resources are perceived as the main concerns regarding quality. When children reflect on their own experiences of the programme and their likes and dislikes, their view of quality will also be acknowledged.

In comparison to Woodhead's theoretical framework, Ishimine, Tayler and Bennett (2010: 68) remark that researchers generally acknowledge that addressing quality in early learning centres can be accomplished if the two common types of quality, structure and process, are investigated. In their view *structure quality* usually refers to the facilities and resources, the staff-to-child ratios and staff qualifications at the early learning centres which are, in their opinion, "more easily measurable for cross-sectional observational purposes in determining quality". On the other hand, *process quality* focuses on the nature of human interactions between all the different stakeholders which impact on the everyday character of early learning centres and "directly influence the quality of a child's day-to-day experience. Such components are more constructive in nature and require more in-depth observations than structural quality" (Ishimine *et al.,* 2010: 68). This aspect will be explained in more detail in 2.6.1.

How can Woodhead's model be used? Woodhead explains that the model is intended "as the starting point for appraising a programme and negotiating its development with all the stakeholders who are interested and involved in it". He argues that it is not a top-down perspective, but an inclusionary model that "takes account of other perspectives, which discourages narrow prescriptions about what makes for a good programme, which goals are worth pursuing, and which criteria should be taken as indicators" (Woodhead, 1996: 25-26). I am of the opinion that this model provides an appropriate theoretical framework to explain the relationship and interdependency between the main features of my study.

With Woodhead and others I have argued above that determining the quality of an early learning centre should involve sensitivity to context. Contexts, in turn, are not stable but ever-changing. For this reason, I also take heed of Alcock's (1996: 2) views. He argues that "where pedagogues reflect collaboratively, consciously and critically on early childhood programmes and practices, quality evolves as an implicit part of the process of change."

A meaningful discussion of quality in early learning centres requires a clarification of the term "early learning centres". We also need to attend to issues such as who the learning centres are for, how children develop and learn, the role of play, as well as the curriculum and the learning environment.

2.5   EARLY LEARNING CENTRES

2.5.1 What is an early learning centre?

Throughout history, different professions like psychology, health and social work, education and special education informed the programmes of early learning centres. Various types of settings were used and centres and programmes were created to meet diverse needs of society, for example serving as 'substitute' parents and supporting children's socialisation and learning, offering safety, security and care for children while their parents were working and also supporting children with special needs. Consequently, early learning centres have regularly changed direction to reflect the diverse goals set by societies' needs (Decker & Decker, 2005: 25).

Early learning centres comprise of vibrant interaction of children, teachers, environment, family and curriculum (Sanders, 2002: 17). For Casey (2005: 57), the learning environment is not just a physical setting but is made up of everyone in it, their personalities, the weather, seasons and events in the lives of the children and the community. The learning environment does not just consist of physical features, but of the atmosphere as well, which can influence children's play significantly. Casey (2005: 38) further indicates that the physical environment can portray the message that this is a space for children, for instance by means of soft landscaping,

dimensions, appealing equipment and ample things with which to interact, which will be an implicit invitation to children to use it fully. The environment plays a vital role in children's learning because "the environment we are in affects our moods, ability to form relationships, effectiveness in work and play – even our health" (Bullard, 2010: 3). To summarise, an early learning centre should be exhilarating to children, inspirational in generating enthusiasm and creating an appetite for learning (Drake, 2009 [2010]: 1).

Before discussing learning environments or debating the choice of a curriculum, the uniqueness of young children as well as how they learn have to be investigated and considered.

2.5.2 Who are learning centres for?

One cannot discuss quality in early learning centres without considering our knowledge about children's development and the learning environment. As Goodfellow (2003: 1) emphasises:

> *Increasing knowledge about early development, gleaned through brain imaging techniques, has highlighted the extent of the brain's plasticity and the ways in which hard wiring of the brain occurs during the early years. In any discussion of quality there is, therefore, a need to address tension between observable, quantifiable and objectified measures and the processes associated with relationships that involve responsiveness, reciprocity and engagement.*

The hard wiring of the brain that occurs during the early years is affected by, amongst others, the learning environment. According to Strong-Wilson and Ellis (2007: 43), there are two important reasons why children's development and learning are seriously affected by the learning environment. Firstly, because young children are in the process of rapid brain development and the environments that they are in, can either help to build and form connections or to prune away synapses that are not used. Children's positive experiences will support them in this process. Insufficient

surroundings nevertheless can limit children's experiences and thus vitally influence the way the children's brains develops (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007: 43).

Secondly, the amount of time which children spend in these environments plays a strong role in the children's development. Numerous children attend the same centre year in and year out and spend a large part of their wakeful hours in the same early childhood surroundings. As Bullard (2010: 3) explains:

> *In the past, many teachers believed that play was the only catalyst for learning. However, most teachers now realise that children's learning through play is profoundly affected by the social and physical environments they are in. If we want to prevent boredom and help children meet outcomes primarily through play, we need to intentionally design environments that provide children with the materials, tools, and challenges that allow development to flourish. For children to gain the most from play, we need to be available to scaffold children's learning ... Quality environments are the foundation upon which quality, play-based curriculum is built.*

Even though such learning environments are being planned and designed by adults, it is important to remember that children are not little adults. Children are not capable of, interested in, nor have the same needs as adults. Thus, the environment design should specifically keep children's needs in mind. Furthermore, differences between children themselves, for example the way they learn, need to be taken into consideration in this regard (Sanders, 2002: 8; Walsh, Sproule, McGuiness, Trew, Rafferty & Sheehy, 2006: 202).

2.5.3 How do young children learn and develop?

Wallace (2002: xii) proclaims that the best present parents and teachers can offer children is "the gift of learning how to learn". Learning enables children to use and make "symbolic systems, such as play, language and representation" (Pascal & Bertram, 2001: v). Rivera (2008: 15) additionally reminds parents and teachers that "every moment is an opportunity for children to learn".

Young children's thinking and learning are qualitatively different from that of adults. Children are playful and naturally curious and therefore they learn when they are physically active, involving their senses, exploring and playing, having real direct experiences, hands-on manipulating a broad range of real objects, and working with children as well as adults and also by means of a great deal of repetition (Redleaf, 2009: 1; Santrock, 2008: 301). They learn when they are making meaningful plans and decisions, seeing the result of their actions and building on what they already know. It may be surprising that these results can stem from a single daily programme, there are however overarching lessons that children can learn in an early learning centre that may tie together these seemingly unconnected outcomes (Casey, 2005: 1; Dombro, Colker & Trister Dodge, 2002; Gordon & Browne, 2005: 41; Jones, 1993: 308; Schulman, 2005: 1; Wikipedia, 2007).

The creation of interesting situations and exciting opportunities is needed for direct, hands-on manipulation of the environment, to facilitate experiences, to arouse the children's curiosity and in that way enable them to learn as much as they can. Early learning centres should promote sufficient preparation for learning through a variety of learning activities and explorations (Santrock, 2008: 301).

Wallace (2002: xii) reminds teachers, furthermore, to instil the necessary skills in children which they require for further learning. According to her, "the most important skills revolve around identifying the problem in the first place, solving them as well as possible, then reviewing the whole thinking procedure to refine and crystallise the procedures ready for the next time" (Wallace, 2002: xii).

In the quest for effective practice, various theories emerged that were fundamental to people's understanding of children's growth, development and learning. These theories all enrich our understanding of high-quality early childhood education in various ways. Table 2.3 provides a summary of eight of the most influential theories, their founders and years of origin, the main characteristics of the theories, as well as the key elements of the theories (Bredekamp, 2011; Darragh, 2010; Dolya, 2010; Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 2006; Gordon & Browne, 2004; Mayesky, 2009; Schirrmacher, 2006).

Table 2.3: A comparison of eight developmental and learning theories

Name of theory, founder, year	Main description of the theory	Key elements of the theory
Ecological systems theory Urie Bronfenbrenner 1979	Describes the interrelationship between children and the contexts of their development	*Microsystem*: immediate surroundings and relationships of a child's world *Mesosystem:* connections between different structures of the microsystem *Exosystem:* the larger social system that affects the child, but that the child does not directly participate in
Theory of cognitive development Jean Piaget 1972	Describes children's cognitive development in a series of four stages of which three are relevant to early childhood	*Sensorimotor stage* (0–2 years): rely on senses and reflexes to physically explore environment *Preoperational stage* (2–7 years): interaction with people and objects *Concrete operational stage* (7–11 years): experimenting and creating new meanings based on interaction with environment
Psychosocial theory Erik Erikson 1950	Development occurs based on internal psychological factors and external social factors	*Trust versus mistrust* (0–2 years): the quality of care is essential for forming basic trust *Autonomy versus shame and doubt* (2–3 years): learning to coordinate many new patterns of action and to assert themselves as human beings *Initiative versus guilt* (preschool age): period of interest, active exploration and readiness for learning, expressing creativity and curiosity; need to take risks and freely explore *Industry versus inferiority (primary grades)*: children need to develop a sense of competence and worth (I can do it)
Hierarchy of	Hierarchy of five	*Physiological needs*: food, shelter, water

Name of theory, founder, year	Main description of the theory	Key elements of the theory
needs theory Abraham Maslow 1998	levels of basic needs, culminating with attaining self-actualisation	*Safety and security* *Love and belonging* *Self-esteem and self-competence* *Self-actualisation*
Socio-cultural theory Lev Vygotsky (1920-1930) Not accessible to Westerners before 1962	Children learn from social interaction within a cultural context	*Zone of proximal development:* "the place where the child and the adult meet", the distance between the actual developmental level and potential development *Private (inner) speech:* self-directed language which children engage in to assist in problem solving; this is essential for a child's self-regulation *Collaborative/assisted learning/co-construction (social construction of knowledge):* children learn by solving problems collaboratively with the teacher's support or by working with peers
Attachment theory John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth 1972	The quality of relationships between child and adult(s) (affectional bond) have lifelong impact on all future relationships	Patterns of attachment: *Secure* *Anxious/ambivalent (resistant)* *Anxious/avoidant*
Theory of multiple intelligences Howard Gardner	There are eight types of intelligence that influence how children choose	*Linguistic intelligence:* ability to use words to express ideas and learn new words or other languages *Logical mathematical intelligence:* ability to understand the basic properties of numbers

Name of theory, founder, year	Main description of the theory	Key elements of the theory
1983	to process information and interact with the environment	and principles of cause and effect *Visual spatial intelligence:* ability to visualise and form a mental image of spatial layouts *Bodily kinaesthetic intelligence:* ability to use body to solve problems *Musical intelligence:* ability to produce and respond to music *Naturalistic intelligence:* a passion for and knowledge of nature *Interpersonal intelligence:* ability to successfully interact with others; effective communicators and strong empathisers *Intrapersonal intelligence:* high levels of self awareness and know own emotions
Family systems theory Murray Bowen 1978	A tool for understanding how the family as an emotional unit influences individual development	Family systems: *Have interrelated elements* (individual family members and relationships) *and structure* *Act in patterns* which provide members with information about how they should function *Have boundaries* that range in a continuum from open to closed *Whole family is greater than the sum of its parts* *Families shape behaviour* through messages and rules

Each of the theories summarised in Table 2.3 made a significant contribution in the field of early childhood education. *Ecological systems theory* "supports understanding the complex, bidirectional interactions between a child and their environment, in turn impacting how educational services are designed to encompass and impact child, family and community" (Darragh, 2010: 107). The *theory of cognitive development* explains the development of thinking according to various stages that exist in all

human beings and which inform teachers on the way children view and process the world. The *psychosocial theory* has specific impact on teachers' understanding and support of young children regarding the process of "becoming a separate person" (Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 126). The *hierarchy of needs theory* alerts teachers to children's needs within a hierarchy that starts with fundamental needs and culminates with self-actualisation and which accentuates the significance of meeting the foundational needs first in order for higher needs to develop. The focus of the *socio-cultural theory* is the transmission of values, beliefs, skills and tradition. This theory puts emphasis on the family, social interaction and play as the main influences in children's lives. In the *attachment theory* the quality of relationships is prominent and the importance of quality, stable relationships in early childhood environments is stressed.

The *theory of multiple intelligences* informs teachers about eight types of intelligences which encourage educators to support each child's strengths by creating suitable environments and experiences. The *family systems theory* helps teachers to understand the families' individual components and their intricate interactions and to assist teachers in understanding and partnering with families in early learning centres (Bredekamp, 2011; Darragh, 2010; Dolya, 2010; Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 2006; Gordon & Browne, 2004; Mayesky, 2009; Schirrmacher, 2006).

Child development theories and educators' experiences advise us that the best way for children to learn is when they have direct, hands-on experiences. "Play is the ultimate realisation of the early childhood educator's maxim of learning by doing. Since the field began, early childhood educators have sought to understand and support the most natural of activities" – play (Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 167).

2.5.4 The role of play in early learning centres

It is evident from research that young children learn best by means of play (Casey, 2005; Dombro *et al*., 2002; Gordon & Browne, 2005; Jones, 1993; Trister Dodge *et al*., 2003; Wikipedia, 2007). Play is beneficial for all areas of development in children, to stimulate their senses, exercise their muscles, coordinate their sight with

movement, to gain mastery over their bodies, to make decisions, and to obtain new skills. "Indeed, play is so important to children's development that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (1989) has recognised it (play) as a right of every child" (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2008: 308).

Engelbright Fox (2008: 85) emphasises that "although it is difficult to define the concept play, it is very easy to recognise it". Children that are actively involved in play may be engaged in an assortment of activities. They can play alone, with someone, or in a group. Play is strongly tied to children's intellectual, socio-emotional, and motor development; and hence is an important component of developmentally appropriate early childhood programmes (Connecticut State Board of Education, 2007, Dombro, Colker & Trister Dodge, 2002; Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 2006; Engelbright Fox, 2008; Mayesky, 2009; Schirrmacher, 2006).

The philosophy of early childhood education is largely child-centred education. The focus is therefore on the importance of play. Play can be seen as children's work and is crucial for their sense of accomplishment and feeling competent (Rivera, 2008: 15).

Through play children get the opportunity to actively explore, manipulate and interact with their environment. In Santrock's view (2008: 342), play also has the capacity to release tension, improve the development of cognitive abilities, expand exploration and enhance relationships with peers. Play also encourages children to investigate, create and make discoveries and motivates children to take risks that add to their understanding of the world. Through play and interaction with concrete material, children are challenged to achieve new levels of understanding of people, identities, concepts, elements, dreams, reality and unreality, events and the environment (Casey, 2005: 1; Connecticut State Board of Education, 2007: 10; Stegelin, 2008: 113; Wikipedia, 2007).

For young children play is the vehicle for learning when they actively investigate the world around – for instance by operating objects, performing roles, and experimenting with an assortment of materials and resources. Play provides learning opportunities in circumstances wherein children are generally approachable. For

children play and work are not separate categories; they experience learning and doing as inextricably connected especially in terms of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy and numeracy and obtaining social skills. Play has thus a valid and significant position in early childhood education and can be utilised to advance children's learning in all developmental areas (Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2006: 14).

Early learning environments can contribute through play, but cannot assure that children will be ready for the labour force in the end. However, they will inspire and equip children through learning styles that support lifelong learning and provide them "with strategies that can serve them throughout their school careers and beyond" (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.,* 2009: 64).

Trawick-Smith (2003: 253) argues that a correlation exists "between play and each of the three fundamental areas of development: intelligence, creativity and language". She explains that intelligence, creativity and language facilitate play, "and play, in turn, contributes to development in these areas". There is a strong correlation between the distinctive kinds of free play found in early childhood, and *'high creativity'*. Bronson and Merryman (2010: 2) remark that children spending more time acting out characters during role-play, are more creative: "voicing someone else's point of view helps develop their ability to analyze situations from different perspectives". They note that highly creative children who are playing alone may act out anger, hostility, anguish and other negative emotions. "The hypothesis is that play is a safe harbour to work through forbidden thoughts and emotions" (Bronson & Merryman, 2010: 2).

Drake (2009 [2010]: 5) emphasises that adults play a crucial part in "identifying children's needs, assessing their stage of development and intervening in play to support individuals in moving forward". In Redleaf's (2009: 1) opinion, the most effective way for children to learn is when they are playing and the learning appears as a spin-off of that play.

2.5.5 What should the curriculum offer? The debate between play-based approach versus academic direct instruction

The term curriculum has a rather different connotation in early childhood than in primary, secondary or higher education. In those settings curriculum usually refers to a course of study or a specific topic. In early childhood education, however, the term curriculum has a different meaning. Essa (2011: 237) explains:

> *In early childhood, the curriculum tends to be viewed more holistically, and all aspects of the program are integrated and related. Most early childhood professionals today view the curriculum as integrally tied to a concern for dealing comprehensively with the "whole child," the child's physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development. The foundation for sound program development is based on research and theoretical knowledge that helps us understand how children learn, what makes for a good learning environment, and what curriculum material is suitable for young children.*

Supporters of a constructivist, child-centred, approach, where children are constructing their own knowledge, concur with the above view. They advocate against an academic, direct, teacher-centred instruction approach (Vonta, 2000: 177). Not all scholars and educators share this view. Controversy still characterises global debates on the curriculum used in early childhood centres.

In recent years, there have been many publications on the significance of learning in the early years (Redleaf, 2009: 1). This attention resulted in a tendency towards demands for academic learning that starts sooner and sooner in young children's lives. Redleaf (2009: 1) reports that in response to this trend, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) "has altered its position statement for developmentally appropriate practice in working with young children. This position emphasises the importance of planning opportunities for fostering learning".

Some countries, for example China, expect early learning centres to offer academic programmes in order to prepare young children for formal schooling. Most early learning centres in Western countries however, have a philosophy with a child-

centred focus that accentuates social and emotional growth which corresponds to the developmental needs of young children. Conversely some programmes, for instance those rooted in Piaget's and Montessori's theories, are prominently promoting cognitive aspects (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2008: 288).

A way of combining play with more planned and individualised outcomes for specific children, also known as "intentional interactions/curriculum/teaching practices" have been supported by several early childhood educators in Australia and the United States of America (Klein & Knitzer, 2006; Queensland Studies Authority, 2010). The emphasis of this research based curriculum, which is sensitive to cultural diversity, is on the teacher's active engagement with children and specifically focuses on paying attention to social and regulatory skills. Because teachers recognise that children's learning occurs in social contexts, they therefore deliberately make well-planned decisions to support learning through children's social interactions with a variety of partners.

To achieve success with this approach, the importance of putting strategies in place, supporting teachers to implement the curriculum effectively are equally important (Klein & Knitzer, 2006: 15, 32). Intentional teaching practices are implied in the teachers' decisions on planning and organisation of the physical environment and to engage with children through the context of play and real-life engagements. This pedagogical approach entails far more than merely transmitting facts to the children and put emphasis on opportunities that foster higher-order skills. Teachers use a wide range of interactional strategies as they co-construct learning with children and support them to investigate and explore ideas in order to extend children's thinking, challenge their ideas and expand their interests. Teachers introduce ideas and make links to children's' ideas in order to support children to discover new possibilities and to develop and these hypotheses (Queensland Studies Authority, 2010)

Supporters of the traditional developmental play-based approach insist that young children's strong need for exploration and free play are overlooked by programmes which are academically orientated. They furthermore warn that too much teacher-centred instruction may suppress young children's interest and obstruct self-initiated learning (Papalia *et al.*, 2008: 288). Santrock (2008: 308) suggests that in order to

encourage exploration opportunities, children ought to choose many of the activities that they want to explore themselves. He warns against rigid paper-and-pencil exercises that entail rote learning. Because of their active nature and way of learning, young children "should not be spending lots of time passively sitting, watching and listening". Dolya (2010: 10) proclaims that when children are playing, they engage in a make-believe situation, with "explicit roles and implicit rules". She also notes that when children are absorbed in play, their concentration and task dedication are much better than in academically directed activities arranged by the teacher.

According to Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* (2009: 67), play and playful learning encourage the development of all aspects of early childhood, and thus supply the launch pad for children to thrive academically and socially in their transition to school. They also warn that "early childhood programmes that squeeze out spontaneous and guided play in favour of formalised academic training dampen children's enthusiasm and motivation to learn and fail to equip children with the full range of capacities they need to thrive at school". In addition, curricula that are excessively instructive and where young children are mostly passive beneficiaries do not result in establishing lifelong learners. "Returning play to its evidence-based, rightful place in early education – centre-stage of the curriculum – is a first step towards restoring developmentally appropriate play experiences to children's home lives, as parents look to educators for advice and models of development-enhancing learning activities" (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2009: 67).

The act of playing improves cognitive development. Those who play mostly become intellectually advanced. Strong correlations linking socio-dramatic play and language associated abilities such as reading and problem solving have also been noticed. Socio-dramatic play is an essential step "between the concrete thought processes of early childhood and the more abstract thinking in adulthood" (Trawick-Smith, 2003: 253–254).

Santrock (2008: 301) explains that both direct instruction as well as constructivist approaches are included in many high-quality early learning centres. He notes that numerous early childhood education experts are concerned about "an exclusive direct instruction approach, that places too much pressure on young children to

achieve and do not provide any opportunities to actively construct knowledge". In his view the emphasis of proficient, quality early childhood programmes should not be focused on the cognitive development of children exclusively, but they should also acknowledge the importance of the socio-emotional development (Santrock, 2008: 301). In the same vein, Rivera (2008: 15) proclaims that "children need to know certain phonemes, shapes, colours, counting and some basic facts, but equally important, they need to get along with others, maintain emotional control, form friendships and follow directions. Without these skills upon entering school, the academic part of learning can be significantly delayed", in other words, school readiness requires intellectual, social and emotional preparation.

Hirsh-Pasek *et al.* (2009: 51) argue that "the programmes that offer the best traction for children's achievement and socio-emotional growth take a hybrid approach. That is, within developmentally appropriate education, "there is room for real instruction that is playful." They further state that play and learning are compatible. Mathematical and language content can and should be learned, however, not in unappealing and non-receptive environments in formal academic ways, but in socially rich and meaningful contexts.

One approach to encourage the *whole child* to learn is by means of free play and playful learning which underpin strong academic and social skills, but furthermore "prepare children for the future workplace in which lifelong learning will be rewarded" (Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2009: 65).

In order to decide on an appropriate curriculum, Essa (2011: 238) reminds us to keep in mind that "young children are eager, absorbent learners, curious and interested in learning as much about their world as possible". Children are keen to explore and discover, and they crave stimulating, new, physical, social experiences. Essa further urges us not to force-feed children with what we think they should learn, but alternatively to "plan a curriculum based on the faith that children's innate interest in the world will lead them to appropriate learning, given a suitable learning environment and knowledgeable adult guidance" (Essa, 2011: 238–239).

2.5.6 The learning environment

Early childhood experts agree that children need developmentally appropriate experiences which allow all children to have healthy bodies, capable minds and appropriate social skills (Gordon & Browne, 2005; Jones, 1993; Mayesky, 2009; Trister Dodge *et al.,* 2003. Although every child is unique with an individual temperament, learning style, family background, and pattern and timing of growth, there are predictable sequences of growth and change during childhood. For each learning environment it is very challenging to provide children with conditions and experiences that are in line with all these sequences of development (Myers, 1997: 6).

Berry (2001: 91) states that many playground designs in the past have catered mainly for the physical development of children and says that the importance of children's social, emotional and cognitive developmental needs have often been ignored. Trister Dodge *et al.* (2003: 173) remind us that learning in an early learning centre is full of contradictions. "It is calm, yet dynamic; predictable, but full of surprises; active and hands-on, but sometimes quiet and reflective." Berry (2001: 107) supports this statement by saying that children need the opportunity to be quiet or active, to socialise or to be alone and to be involved in activities appropriate for the age and current interests of both genders. Berry further notes that it is therefore very important that decision-makers are made aware of *all* the developmental needs of children and to ensure that a valuable, quality learning environment is provided indoors, as well as outdoors.

The Connecticut State Board of Education (2007: 34) emphasises that early childhood environments must invite children into learning experiences and must therefore be carefully planned, prepared and maintained. Two important messages must be portrayed through the environment, namely: that the space is for children and that it was purposefully created, based on how young children learn. This statement implies that a learning environment is not just a physical setting with a building and outdoor play area.

When planning an early childhood playground it is important to remember that the play area is an essential part of the educational programme. Berry (2001) and the Connecticut State Board of Education (2007) emphasise that children's developmental needs must be catered for with play features and experiences that suit their wide range of needs, skills and interests. Children need opportunities for discovery, exploration, creation, experimentation, observation and sustained engagement that take place in well-planned early childhood learning areas. Materials must be well chosen with intention and purpose. They also advise that the areas must be arranged to accommodate and support the work of children and adults, and that time must be scheduled to allow children full access (Berry, 2001: vii; Connecticut State Board of Education, 2007: 34).

In their programme planning, teachers should ensure that the learning environment is inclusive, safe and comfortable and that it is one in which learners feel stimulated to learn and explore (Ontario, Ministry of Education, 2006: 22) The learning environment can be enhanced by posing questions, making links between the familiar and unfamiliar, and arousing an awareness and interest through the choice of resources and the activities presented (Redleaf, 2009: 1). Drake (2009 [2010]: 5) notes that planning the physical environment and setting up good-quality areas of provision is simply not enough – the teacher must actually "value these areas as effective learning environments and spend time supporting children's learning in them".

According to Ontario, Ministry of Education (2006: 22), the use of space in the playroom and outdoor area, the use of time during the day, and the appropriateness and variety of the resources that are available including people and materials, are the key components of the learning environment. Redleaf (2009: 1), however notes that a constant stream of new apparatus is not needed, but rather frequent reorganisation of, or additions to, well-known toys and activities to spark renewed interest in them.

Equally important to the structural aspects concerning a learning environment is the atmosphere that the teacher creates that will be crucial for the children's emotional development. Therefore, the environment should encourage empathy, interest in trying new things, and the development of self-confidence (Dombro *et. al.,* 2002;

Mayesky, 2009; Sciara & Dorsey, 2003, Stegelin, 2008: 109). Children also need caring people who love them in order to learn sufficiently. In this regard, relationships of trust between adults and children, and increased parental involvement, are pivotal (Santrock, 2008: 301).

Furthermore, the creators of child care environments need to consider the contexts and what children experience in those contexts (Goodfellow, 2003: 1). Drake (2009 [2010]: 7) suggests that in their planning of the learning environment, teachers should strive for a balance between providing structure to scaffold children's learning, and offering them freedom and opportunities to engage in experimentation, investigation and pursuing of their own personal interests. She further points out that the learning environment should provide opportunities for children to engage in playful activities either as individuals, in pairs or in groups, promoting active and independent learning where children make choices "feeling confident to 'try out' ideas in a supportive and 'safe' setting". Every day should provide opportunities for becoming deeply engaged in learning, frequently by means of self-initiated activities beyond any planned adult focus (Drake, 2009 [2010]: 2, 7).

Sandall and Schwartz (2002: 11) summarise the key requirements of a quality learning environment when they say:

> *Research and experience have uncovered some necessary components of a developmentally appropriate environment, namely, engaging interactions, a responsive and predictable environment, many opportunities for learning, teaching that is matched to the child and the activity, developmentally appropriate materials, activities and interactions, safe and hygienic practices and appropriate levels of child guidance.*

2.6 REGULATING SERVICE PROVISION

Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) emphasise that children's service regulations are issued as a licence to operate a business or service, not as an individual's licence to practice as a professional. The levels of professional training and education are usually the responsibility of authorities who are not responsible for issuing the

licenses to operate early learning centres. In order to reach minimum standards for buildings and equipment, it should be kept in mind that the licensing of early learning centres must reflect related policy areas, such as building standards, health policies and fire safety requirements that are generated by various other local authorities (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003: 118).

A community's perceptions of quality matters reveal disparities across class, gender, cultural and age calibrations (Ebbeck & Wanigananyake, 2003: 113). These differences are not unanticipated, taking into consideration that our perceptions are influenced by aspects like background, experiences and proficiency. They indicate that in countries where governments play a fundamental role in funding systems of quality assurance, they situate themselves as arbitrators that are independent and objective on the one hand and protectors or guardians of children's welfare on the other.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2001: 9), stated in their findings, based on a study with 12 countries, that:

> *Governments promote quality improvement through: framework documents and goals-led steering, voluntary standards and accreditation* [not in the case of South Africa]*; dissemination of research and information; judicious use of special funding; technical support to local management; raising the training and status of staff; encouraging self-evaluation and action-practitioner research; and establishing a system of democratic checks and balances which includes parents.*

Research is increasingly demonstrating that such investment in early childhood development, particularly high-quality early childhood education, provides a wide range of significant benefits to develop children, families and societies as a whole. According to Decker and Decker (2005: 23) the positive effect of high quality programmes for children is substantial in terms of learning, language acquisition, intellectual development and succeeding in school.

Studies show that all children, regardless of whether they are from poor, middle-income or upper-income families, benefit from early childhood education programmes. Decker and Decker (2005: 23) point out that high-quality centres,

offering cognitive stimulation and emotional support, are particularly beneficial for children from stressful homes or where the family's income is low. However, the quality of education and care that children receive, differs considerably. Children, as well as their families, are benefiting from high-quality programmes, but poor quality programmes are harmful to them (Kostelnik *et al.,* 2004: 8). In addition, Papalia, Olds and Feldman (2008: 243) argue that regrettably children from low-income families are likely "to be placed in lower-cost and lower-quality care than children from more affluent families". Bredekamp (2011: 11), who is primarily referring to poverty, states that "the children who are most likely to benefit from high quality programs are the least likely to participate in them".

In their research, Rao, Sun, Zhou and Zhang (2011) found that in developing countries only a few systematic studies were conducted on the effect of the type of early learning experience on child development. However, large-scale studies conducted in Europe and the USA have verified that attending early childhood centres positively impacts on the cognitive outcomes of children from disadvantaged groups, especially in terms of their mathematics and reading achievement. The outcome of these extensive studies resulted in a general acceptance that preschool participation is beneficial for the development of children from families who experience socio-economical hardship. However, the research explicitly clarifies that there is a caveat – the quality of this experience matters.

Service providers have ethical responsibilities towards children. Childhood is an exceptional and precious phase in the life cycle. According to Morrison (2006), the main task is to offer centres for children that are healthy, safe, nurturing and approachable. "We are dedicated in supporting their development, respecting individual differences, helping children learning to live and work together, and to encourage health, self-awareness, proficiency, and resiliency" (Morrison, 2006: 382).

2.6.1 Measuring quality in early childhood education (ECE)

Ishimine *et al.* (2010: 69-70) argue that there are several noteworthy justifications for the measurement of quality in early learning centres. Measuring quality can, in the

first place, ensure that the national standards for children are met and secondly, can assist parents in their choice of an early learning centre. Thirdly, quality measurement can contribute towards consistent quality improvement of early learning centres especially in terms of the ongoing professional development of staff. In the fourth place, quality measurement can contribute towards recognition and acknowledgement of centres, especially in terms of financial or motivational incentives. The last reason offered by Ishimine *et al.* (2010: 70) concerns the children. They conclude from the research evidence that "it is clear that quality is significant in ensuring improvement of children's overall development. Therefore measuring quality is necessary to ensure all children have a good start in life and to maximise their potential".

It is evident from a previous section (2.3.1) that capturing a pure definition of quality is a complex task, however trying to measure quality is even more challenging. There are different perspectives on the measuring of quality which are reflected in different approaches to regulation and quality assurance. For Mooney, Cameron, Candappa, Mcquail, Moss and Petrie (2003), both evaluations and accreditation are important aspects of quality assurance. In his review of quality for early childhood services, Williams (1995) includes a useful diagram (Table 2.4) describing the characteristics of the three most common approaches to the measurement of quality. He suggests that the total quality management approach is the most appropriate one for childhood services. When I compare the total quality management approach with the quality assurance and quality control approaches, I agree with Williams that it is the most appropriate one, because it works through people and the view of quality lies in the opportunities. I associate myself strongly with the purpose that is to improve the outcomes for the users. However, it seems to me that there are also aspects in the other two approaches that have relevance in early childhood education and particularly in my study. One needs to consider the role, place and efficiency of existing quality assurance systems, which is a main feature in the quality assurance approach. The quality control approach views problems and the primary concern is the detection of errors, an area which should also be addressed in some way or another. In Table 2.4, I compare the main characteristics of the three approaches namely, total quality management, quality assurance and quality control.

Table 2.4: A comparison of the characteristics of the three most common approaches to the measurement of quality according to Williams (1995)

Characteristics	Total Quality Management	Quality Assurance	Quality Control
Purpose	Improves outcomes for users	Efficiency of system	Uniformity of standard
Works through	People	Systems	Standards
Responsibility	Improves outcomes for users	Efficiency of system	Uniformity of standard
View of quality	Opportunities	Preventive	Problems
Primary concern	Impact	Coordination	Detection of error
Popular forms of expression	Total quality management, continuous improvement	Quality assurance systems	Inspection, research, assessment

Golberg (1999: 21) argues that measuring quality in terms of the different components of a programme is inappropriate. She nevertheless remarks that children's daily experiences in early learning centres impact on their care and development and therefore the complex combination of all the components can offer enriching experiences to children and their families (Golberg, 1999: 21).

In terms of the measurement of quality in early childhood centres, research literature (CECDE 2004: 32) mainly distinguishes between two approaches. The first, a quantitative approach, comprises "standardised observation scales and external research assessments of effectiveness". In the second, more qualitative, approach to measuring quality, all stakeholders participate in identifying the components that constitute a high quality provision for a particular service. The latter way of measuring quality is used in Scandinavia and in parts of Northern Italy. Mooney *et al.* (2003: 9) indicate that this quality measuring approach is found where "… the structural conditions of quality are already in place …".

Structural criteria/qualities (sometimes referred to as 'input' criteria) refer to resources and organisational measurements of centres incorporating features such as

maximum group sizes, teacher/child ratios, teacher qualifications, and the presence and content of a curriculum. These qualities are relatively straightforward to quantify and measure (Bredekamp, 2011: 14; Dahlberg *et al.,* 2002: 98).

Process criteria/qualities refer to what takes place in the early learning centre, predominantly in terms of sensitive responsive care-giving, staff behaviour and the quality of relationships and interactions among children and adults, the curriculum (children's activities, learning experiences, and teaching strategies) and suitability of materials (Goodfellow, 2003: 1). Process criteria can also be expanded to take account of relationships between the centres and the parents as well as the nature of the parent/staff cooperation. Process criteria describe what life should be like for children in an early learning centre, how they should be treated, and how their learning and development should be supported. Evaluating these process quality features is more complicated, and yet, they are the fundamental elements of children's experiences. (Bredekamp, 2011: 14; Dahlberg *et al.,* 2002: 98; Goodfellow, 2003: 1). Essa (2011: 156) emphasises that "the calibre of child-adult interactions" (indicated by process criteria) is an essential indicator of quality in early learning centres. There is presently a significant interest in the development of quality measurements, and mostly in instruments that can accurately measure process quality (CECDE 2004: 31-32).

Dahlberg *et al.* (2002: 98) define a third grouping/approach, *outcome* criteria, mainly in terms of "certain aspects of child development, assumed to be desirable, but also to young children's later school, social and economic performance sometimes stretching as far as adulthood".

Goodfellow (2003: 1) notes that "the common thread that runs through quality measures is that quality is related to both structural and process variables". Structural quality and process quality are interconnected. Bredekamp (2011: 14) explains with an example:

> *Well-qualified teachers are needed to plan and implement an engaging*
> *curriculum and teach effectively. Similarly, positive relationships between*
> *teachers and children are more likely to be established when the size of*
> *the group and the ratio of adults to children is relatively small. An age-*

appropriate, well-equipped, and organised physical environment is needed to protect children's health and safety to promote active learning.

2.7   QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORKS

The essence of the quality debate is captured by Gormley (1997:32) who states that:

Child care is a labour problem, an administrative problem, a regulatory problem and of course a familial problem.

Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) argue that one needs to be clear about who is going to do the assessment and for what purpose, before selecting the type of measuring instrument(s) that best meet one's objectives for quality assessment. Is the purpose for regulation, research or for programme improvement? The purpose of my study indicates elements of each. Programme improvement is of interest to all role players, the consumers (children and their families) and the service providers (including staff and sponsors). Managing programme quality may therefore be perceived as a joint responsibility concerning parents and staff (Ebbeck & Waniganayake, 2003: 121).

According to CECDE (2004: 36-37) there are a variety of different approaches to support quality. Amongst these are state regulations, which are usually based on the minimum standards for ensuring the health and safety of those involved in the service. They indicate that evaluation and accreditation schemes usually involve standards, which tend to be more rigid and wide-ranging than those included in government regulations. In Golberg's opinion (1999: 41–42), accreditation is a worthy strategy identified by child care providers in the quest to provide services of high quality.

Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003: 116) explain that there are benefits and limitations concerning government regulations in early childhood. According to them, licensing standards tend to focus on structural aspects, such as group size, staff/child ratios and floor space. These prescriptive measures are usually set at minimum compliance standards, visible and easy to measure. Ebbeck and Waniganayake (2003) experience the emphasis on structural input as a weakness, because it does not get

to the heart of the service being provided, namely the education and care programme. They also say that in the long term, the net impact of this type of government regulatory system is the legitimisation and reinforcement of dominant cultural beliefs and behaviours appropriate for children during early childhood.

Research literature (CECDE, 2004) suggests that the adoption of an evaluation or accreditation approach to support quality can positively affect the standard of care and education provided. Some say that in countries where the provision of early childhood education is dependent on the free market, evaluation and accreditation mechanisms are more likely to be adopted in an effort to improve the quality of the service provision (CECDE, 2004: 36-37).

2.7.1 The implementation of quality assurance frameworks

The debate on quality early childhood provision has taken place in many parts of the world, for example the United Kingdom, Europe, New Zealand, Australia and in North America. For Douglas (2004: 9) there are four key factors to be considered in any discussion of quality:

- *First and foremost, any attempt at defining 'quality' is inherently a values-based exercise;*
- *Secondly, any definition of 'quality' is to an extent transitory and arriving at what may be called 'quality indicators' is a dynamic and continual process;*
- *Thirdly, a range of perspectives can be identified when looking at quality namely the views of the children, parents, ECE staff and of the funding agency.*
- *Fourthly, equal opportunities, policies and practices (covering access to services, their content and management and employment practices and procedures within them) are central features of quality in child care services and this means looking at 'quality' at two levels: individual services and service systems* (Douglas, 2004: 191).

In my study, I am keeping these four factors in mind when I try to explain the concept of quality. Firstly, the fact that quality is based on and influenced by values should be considered at all times. Secondly, developing and revising quality indicators will always be an ongoing process because circumstances and conditions in early childhood education keep changing. The third factor is of specific importance to this study because there are many different role-players and all of their perspectives should be viewed and considered. The last factor indicates that one must look at quality on the different levels. In my study, I adhere to that aspect as well.

Perlman, Zellman and Le (2004: 399) point out that there is consensus that quality matters, which implies that there is a need for quality assurance, since it sets quality standards. However, less consensus exists about what quality is or how it can be measured. There are two different approaches to measuring quality that can be distinguished. The first approach attempts to assess overall or global quality by including measures of a range of attributes associated with quality care. These include the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS); Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and an assessment profile for early childhood programmes. These observational instruments measure quality of the physical setting, curriculum, caregiver-child interactions, health, safety, scheduling of time, indoor and outdoor play spaces, teacher qualifications, play materials, centre administration and meeting staff needs.

The second approach to measuring quality is about assessing quality that focuses on specific process indicators. These measures identify one indicator that is associated with quality care and assess that single indicator in some depth. Table 2.5 shows three different rating scales and the indicators on which they focus.

Table 2.5: Three specific rating scales and the indicators on which they focus

The caregiver interaction scale (Halle *et al*., 2010: 99–101)	A 26-item observational measure of caregiver sensitivity contains subscales of positive interaction, punitiveness, permissiveness, and detachment.
The adult involvement scale (Howes & Stewart, 1987)	Measures caregiver responsiveness through observations of two children per classroom.
The observational record of the care giving environment (ORCE) (Halle *et al*., 2010: 226–239)	The ORCE targets the caregiver's behaviour with a specific child and consists of four 44–minute observation cycles.

Other specific process quality indicators include: child-caregiver attachment, teacher styles and beliefs and staff competence and parent-teacher interactions (Perlman *et al.,* 2004: 399-400).

A study that was conducted on early childhood development in countries such as Canada, USA, Italy, the Netherlands and Sweden indicated that their municipal early childhood development programmes were of a high quality. In South Africa, however, "early childhood development delivery faces disparate and unequal provision that is exacerbated by a lack of funding from the government" (DBSA, 2007: 20).

Ample ways potentially exist according to which quality of early learning centres can be determined. One specific method that has been implemented in a number of countries is to implement quality assurance frameworks. A number of quality assurance frameworks have been used in different countries for more than two decades (Bredekamp, 2011; Mashburn, Pianta, Hamre, Downer, Barbarin, Bryant, Burchinal, Early & Howes, 2008). 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 utilised are quality assurance frameworks, accreditation frameworks, accreditation systems, rating scales, observation measures, accreditation schemes and child care accreditation.

South Africa currently does not have an accreditation framework or quality assurance mechanism in place for early childhood education. In countries where it has been implemented, many advantages have been reported. Golberg (1999: 39-40), who conducted an extensive study, said:

> *Accreditation provides parents/consumers with a basis of comparison and choice. It sets quality standards and a means for measuring services to children, providing a mechanism through which funders can verify that money invested is being used to deliver quality care. For child care services it provides a means of reflecting on and improving program practice.*

Because a framework is valued-laden, certain criteria for identifying quality must be identified and selected. "… accreditation occurs in and is influenced by social, political and cultural contexts" (Bredenkamp, 1999:61). Golberg (1999:5) argues that when a quality assurance or accreditation framework is developed, it would be ideal to consider the quality criteria established by early childhood researchers, professional bodies, as well as a wide range of stakeholders such as children, parents and the community. In my study, the opinions of the different stakeholders are voiced.

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).

I think Wangmann (1992) is realistic in saying that accreditation builds on the base set by regulations, but that it must however be emphasised that while regulations are necessary they are not sufficient to ensure quality. Quality assurance is necessary to bridge the gap between the minimal level of quality set by the regulations and the level of quality that should be right for all children (Wangmann, 1992: 27).

According to Ogston (2003:1), accreditation recognises professional programmes for a level of performance, integrity and quality that entitle them to the confidence of the profession, educational community and the public they serve. Accreditation status signifies that the programme meets established and nationally acceptable standards of scope, quality and relevance.

Although quality is experienced differently, it seems that there is a need in many countries to try to determine the quality of early learning centres (Ginsberg, 2003; Golberg, 1999; Myers, 2007; Ogston, 2003; Ontario, Ministry of Education. 2006). For more than twenty five years different quality assurance frameworks have been introduced and implemented in developed countries (Golberg, 1999:1; Ogston, 2003:1).

Accreditation or quality assurance frameworks have never been implemented in the South African early childhood development sector. These accreditation frameworks have primarily been designed, used and adapted by first world countries. To get a clearer understanding of the different frameworks, I provide the background to how the quality assurance frameworks started, have developed, have been adapted internationally and what their main characteristics are.

2.7.2 The ECE accreditation and quality assurance situation in the USA

In order to make "consistent ways of measuring quality" available, researchers have developed quality assessment (observation) tools (Bredekamp, 2011: 14). The first rating system was established by the largest early childhood development organisation in the USA, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), "a powerful voice for children, families and teachers" (Essa, 2011: 104). As far back as 1984, NAEYC published the first edition of the "Accreditation Criteria and Procedures". The following year, the *Guide to Accreditation* was published. Both volumes were revised in 1992 and again in 1998 (Dickinson, 2002: 28). Since *NAEYC's Accreditation System* was introduced, efforts to support quality early childhood programmes have expanded, and NAEYC's accreditation has been recognised nationally. By 2008 more than 8 000 programmes had been accredited.

After more than 20 years in operation, in 2008, this voluntary accreditation process, sponsored by NAEYC, has been reinvented, strengthened, and made more consistent. The system "is now a more rigorous process that involves intensive self-study and culminates in a site visit and assessment" (Bauer, 2005: 1, 3; Essa, 2011: 101). Although many of the original system details have changed, the intent is still the same namely, "ensuring the quality of children's daily experiences in early childhood programs". To promote positive child outcomes, is the heart of the new framework, its standards, criteria and procedures" (Bauer, 2005: 1, 3).

The NAEYC early childhood programmes standards and accreditation criteria comprise ten standards that early learning centres must achieve to obtain accreditation. Bredekamp (2011: 13) notes that the intention of these standards is to answer the question "What is high quality?" and that, in order to understand what is meant by quality, "it is important to see the relationships among the standards rather than to see them as a discrete list". She further explains:

> *In the accreditation system the primary focus is on the children as described in the first five standards: relationships, curriculum, teaching, assessment of children's progress, and health. In the other five standards teachers, partnerships with families and communities, administration, including the physical environment, leadership and management are addressed. Meeting these standards establishes a supportive context that makes it possible to achieve and maintain quality of life for children described in the first five standards (Bredekamp, 2011: 13–14).*

Although the NAEYC accreditation system initially "was practically the only show in town" (Neugebauer, 2009: 14), another accreditation framework, namely the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)* gradually gained popularity. The ECERS, which was first presented in 1983 by Harms and Clifford, has become "a tried and tested means of assessing quality" (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2002: 98) for many researchers. The ECERS scale included 37 items grouped into seven subscales on the basis of face validity. These items were drawn from research, from performance indicators of quality child care and early childhood programmes, and from nominations by child-care practitioners. An expert panel was used to determine validity. They rated the importance of the selected items as indicators of the quality of

childhood programmes. In addition, expert and non-expert raters assessed classrooms (Podmore & Meade, 2000: 400).

The ECERS became the best known and most commonly used rating system and has been described by its authors as "a relatively short and efficient means of looking seriously at the quality of the [early years] environment... [covering] the basic aspects of all early childhood facilities" (Harms and Clifford, 1980: iv in Dahlberg *et al.*, 2002: 98).

According to Sheridan and Pramling-Samuelsson (2001:174), the ECERS has the ability, as a tool, to account for a child's perspective and the rating scale identifies different levels of quality concerning children's opportunities to take initiative, to participate and to communicate. In my view, this is an important fact, because I feel that as children are the main characters in the story, their voices must definitely be heard and their views need to be considered.

After the original ECERS was published, other related *specialised rating scales* were also introduced in the USA, namely:
- 1989 the Family Day Care Rating Scale (FDCRS)
- 1990 the Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS)
- 1996 the School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale (SACERS)
- 2004 the Program Administration Scale (Long, 2008:1)

In 1998 the original ECERS was revised, updated and expanded. The *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Revised* (ECERS-R) now had 43 items, to reflect changes in the early childhood field, including items that address issues surrounding children with disabilities and increased cultural sensitivity. "The ECERS-R also incorporated feedback from researchers concerning difficulties with particular items, and added indicator items to help scorers more reliably assign numerical values to items. It replaced the seven original subscales with seven revised ones" (Podmore & Meade, 2000: 400). In the South African context where there is a lot of diversity in terms of cultures and learners with different abilities, this revised scale should be helpful to consult.

The ECERS-R is a widely used instrument for measuring *process* characteristics of the environment. This measure describes the characteristics of the physical environment but, more importantly, it also rates the quality of the social and pedagogical environment which children experience. The word *environment* is taken in its broadest sense to include the quality of social interactions, strategies to promote learning, and relationships between adults and children. For Pugh and Duffy (2006: 168-169) the emphasis in the ECERS-R is very much on a balanced and 'whole child' programme. Despite its title of 'Environment Rating Scale' the ECERS-R describes the process of the educational and care environment even more than the physical space and materials.

In 2008, another observational measure of quality, the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) for preschool (and primary grades) was established. The focus of CLASS is on several dimensions regarding teacher-child instructional strategies and their relationships (Bredekamp, 2011: 14). This instrument assesses different dimensions of social features of interactions namely "positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for student (learner) perspectives, behaviour management, productivity, instructional learning formats, concept development, quality of feedback and language modelling" (Pianta, La Paro & Hamre, 2008; Mashburn *et al.,* 2008).

2.7.3 The ECE quality assurance and accreditation situation in Europe

The ECERS, originally designed in the United States and used in a variety of early childhood settings, was modified and implemented in Europe as well. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education Project (EPPE) is a major European longitudinal study which investigated the effectiveness of preschool education and care in terms of children's development. It is an 'educational effectiveness' study of a national sample of randomly selected children aged 3 to 7 years old throughout England. In the EPPE research the ECERS-R rating scale was supplemented by a new scale called the *ECERS-Extension* (ECERS-E). This new supplementary scale was designed because ECERS-R was thought to be insufficiently 'emergent' in its assessment of curricular provision for literacy and numeracy and thus insensitive to

important curricular activities conducive to children's intellectual and linguistic progress in the run-up to school. The ECERS-E was developed to extend the ECERS-R, especially in emergent literacy and numeracy, and also in science/environment and in 'diversity'. Thus, the ECERS-E is specifically designed to "tap the dimensions of quality" which should lead to more 'academic' learning goals (Pugh & Duffy, 2006: 169-170; Stipek & Byler, 2004: 377-378).

Both of the revised rating scales have advantages. According to the authors of the ECERS-E, Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart (2003: 46), quality is not a universal concept but it depends on national curricula and cultural priorities. The outcomes deemed important in children's development will relate in different ways to the many measures of quality. They say "if academic achievement is valued at the start of school, then the ECERS-E is a good predictor of children's readiness for school". This readiness includes language, numeracy skills and the component skills of early literacy. On the other hand, if social outcomes are valued, then the social interaction scale on the ECERS-R may be a better predictor of a child's good start at school. To summarize, EPPE found that the ECERS-R was a sensitive assessment of those settings' quality which are associated with social progress. The ECERS-E on the other hand, was more related to those aspects of quality which are associated with cognitive progress in young children (Pugh & Duffy, 2006: 170). Clearly, both are important and should be taken into consideration for a proposed South African quality assurance system.

The ECERS has increasingly been used in other countries worldwide by both researchers and practitioners and appears to have become "a global standard and the basis for an increasing body of cross-national comparisons of early childhood institutions" (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2002: 98).

A third observational measurement of quality was applied in the EPPE, namely the *Caregiver Interaction Scale* (CIS) of adult-child interaction (Arnett, 1989). This scale has shown how adult interactions shape children's development; specifically, too much permissiveness is associated with poor outcomes and positive relationships lead to cognitive as well as social progress. The EPPE's findings indicated that all children benefit equally from higher-quality provision, indicating that quality is vital; it

is not something needed just by the poor. Taken together, the three observational measures (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and the CIS) demonstrate conclusively that "the type and amount of developmental progress made by children in the preschool period are positively related to quality" (Pugh & Duffy, 2006: 171). This statement is of great importance for my study.

2.7.4 The ECE quality assurance and accreditation situation in Australia

On the other side of the globe, Australia developed their own framework to suite their specific needs. Accreditation schemes generally aim to encourage providers to raise their standards above the minimal requirements set by national regulations and standards. The *Quality Improvement and Accreditation System in Australia* is one example of an accreditation programme that aims to improve the quality of early childhood care and education (ECCE) by defining quality childcare, providing a way to measure the quality of care made available by the service and identifying areas for ongoing quality improvement (CECDE 2004: 14).

Ishimine *et al.* (2010: 67), however report that rapid growth in the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) as well as a change in government in late 2007, initiated a commitment towards "a higher level of national quality across all types of early childhood education and care serviced". A new *National Quality Standard* (NQS) was established and implemented from July 2010 until 1 January 2012.

> *The new NQS addressed standardised minimum staff-to-child ratios, work force qualifications and includes a rating system that ranks ECEC services according to their quality. Under a more transparent system agenda, the results of ratings are to be publicly available* (Ishimine *et al.,* 2010: 67).

2.7.5 The ECE quality assurance situation in emerging economies and South Africa

Mooney *et al.* (2003) suggest that accreditation schemes are more commonly found in countries with low levels of publicly funded ECCE services. This is an important

fact to consider in the South African context. Accreditation frameworks can be offered by national or local governments or by professional or voluntary organisations. Because accreditation is voluntary, participation rates can be low.

The ECERS is an imaginative and sturdy tool for research, self-audit and inspection. It has been used in more than twenty countries – from Singapore to Germany to Chile. Countries outside the USA who use it, often do little more than translate the instrument into the national language and make minor modifications to vocabulary or to the type of equipment. With reference to several studies, Sylva *et al.* (2003: 7) give examples of such minor adaptations of the ECERS: it was done in developed countries such as Germany (Tietze, 1996), the United Kingdom (Sylva *et al.,* 1999) and in Portugal (Bairrao, 1996). Elsewhere, in an emerging economy, in Tamil Nadu in India, "researchers such as Swaminathan (2000) have used the ECERS as a conceptual template on which to build a very different assessment system to suit environments and practices which are far removed from the American ECE settings in which ECERS was first developed". I think it might be interesting and surely informative and possibly useful or beneficial for South Africa to investigate their adaptation.

In South Africa the institutions offering early learning and care differ enormously. As Marais (2010: 2) indicates, "some are extremely well resourced, while others lack even the most basic needs, such as water and electricity. Overcrowded classrooms, poverty and lack of leadership skills when dealing with crisis situations are part of everyday realities".

In South Africa, since 1994 a "number of policies have been implemented and legislation promulgated to create a framework for transformation in education and training" (Christie, 2008: 159). One of the prominent documents, *The White Paper on Early Childhood Development* (2000), announced that provision will be made "for the expansion and full participation of 5–year–olds in preschool reception grade education by 2010 as well as for an improvement in the quality of programmes, curricula and teacher development for 0 to 4–year–olds, and 6 to 9–year–olds" (Christie, 2008: 159). Unfortunately the anticipated date of implementation did not materialise and the parameters were moved towards 2014.

In 2010, the former Department of Education was divided into two different departments, namely the Department for Basic Education (DoBE) and the Department for Higher Education (DoHE), each with its own minister, different focus and different responsibilities. In the Government Gazette of August 2010 (p17–18) Minister Angie Motshekga announced the *"Action Plan to 2014: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2025"*. Goal 11 of the Action Plan is to "improve the access of children to quality early childhood". In the document the minister raises the question "What is the problem?" and then provides the following explanation:

> *Studies from around the world, including South Africa, have shown that good pre-primary schooling below Grade 1 makes it easier for a child to learn at primary school. Yet not all South African children get to attend pre-primary classes. The situation has improved in recent years. Between 2003 and 2008 the percentage of Grade 1 learners who had received some pre-primary schooling increased from 60% to 80%. But we want that figure to be 100%, and government's target is in fact that all children who will be starting Grade 1 in 2015 should be in Grade R during 2014.*

To answer her next question, "What is government doing?" she provides the following explanation:

> *Spending on pre-primary schooling by government has increased more than spending in any other area in education. By 2011, spending on ECD will be four times what it was in 2006 in real terms (in other words, after inflation has been taken into account) (DoBE, 2011: 17–18).*

Christie (2008: 133) points out that there are many examples of policies that demonstrate the complications of educational change in South Africa. She argues that in reality, "every policy intervention across the system, from early childhood development to higher education, proved to be more complex and contested than anticipated". To change educational practice is not straightforward, especially because opposing views and personal interests on every issue exist: "finance; governance; curriculum; teachers' conditions of work, qualifications and remuneration; assessment and qualification systems; management systems;

provisioning; training; inclusion and special needs education; and so on". Many factors influence a policy process (Christie, 2008: 133).

2.8   CONCLUSION

Evans (2005: 9) proclaims that in the 1960s, with the creation of preschool approaches, "there was an implicit assumption that if we could find one model that worked best it could be implemented everywhere". With time, however, people attempted to transmit models from one setting to another and then learned "that there is no single model of provision that meets the holistic needs of children (i.e. no one model of preschool provision – no matter how well researched – works in all settings)". The same pertains to quality assurance frameworks. Quality-measurement is context-specific; therefore measuring tools are often not suitable to transfer directly from one context to another (CECDE 2004: 31-32).

The above mentioned insight is obviously applicable to the South African early childhood education situation as well. To quote Evans (2005: 9):

> *A vision and set of goals cannot be imposed on systems or people; they need to be part of developing and then implementing them. Necessarily that means that not all people can be involved in all programmes. Different groups of people need to be brought together for different purposes, and all the stakeholders relevant to the situation need to be part of the process. When all stakeholders have a voice and contribute resources accordingly then the state will lead more effective and sustainable programmes.*

In this chapter, I explored the literature to capture what has been researched and documented about quality in early learning centres globally and also in South Africa. I reviewed the literature on quality and quality assurance frameworks and identified a significant gap in the literature in terms of available quality assurance measures and accreditation frameworks for the evaluation of quality in early learning centres in South Africa. In the next chapter, I provide a detailed explanation of the research design and methodology used in my study.

Chapter 3

Research design and methodology

3.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I discussed the literature review and theoretical framework. In this chapter, I will explain the research design and chosen methodology. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the research methodology and research process that I applied in my study. In this chapter, I explain methodological decisions pertaining to Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: An abstract of the research methodology and research process

PARADIGMATIC ASSUMPTIONS	
Methodological paradigm	Concurrent mixed method design
Metatheoretical paradigm	Constructivism, more specifically social constructionism
RESEARCH DESIGN	
Instrumental case study	
Selection of case	Convenience sampling
Selection of participants	Purposeful sampling
DATA COLLECTION	
Quantitative data collection techniques	**Quantitative data documentation techniques**
Questionnaires	Paper-based questionnaires
Questionnaires of facilities and activities in early learning centres by teacher students	Captured in questionnaires
Qualitative data collection techniques	**Qualitative data documentation techniques**
Face to face structured interviews with teachers by students (fieldworkers)	Verbatim written transcripts of answers given to questions in the interviews
Face to face structured interviews with mothers by students (fieldworkers)	Verbatim written transcripts of answers given to questions in the interviews

Observation of relationships, interaction and the atmosphere in the early learning centres	Research journals with field notes, visual documentation (photographs)
DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION	
Quantitative data analysis Statistical analysis of data derived from questionnaires	Qualitative data analysis Constructivist thematic analysis of data derived from interviews, reflective journals and photographs
QUALITY CRITERIA OF THE STUDY	
Quantitative quality criteria	**Qualitative quality criteria**
Internal validity, generalisability, external validity, reliability, objectivity	Credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, authenticity
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS	
Informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity and trust, positional discrepancies, cultural differences, sensitive information obtained, role of the researcher	

3.2   PARADIGMATIC APPROACH

3.2.1   Metatheoretical paradigm

A constructivist — more specifically a social constructionist — metatheoretical paradigm informs my study. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008: 342) explain that constructivism addresses the nature of knowing and rejects the idea of describing an objective reality. They argue that each of us brings different assumptions to the same situation and interprets reality differently, as a result of our own "mental and symbolic processes and meaning-making structure". Constructivism is associated with the writings of Maturana (1978), Varela (1979), Von Foerster (1981) and Von Glasersfeld (1987). These theorists, focusing on the biology of perception and cognition, have argued persuasively that since sensory data go through several transformations as they are received and processed, it is impossible to know what external reality is "really like." They claim that there is no such thing as "direct perception" (Hoffman 1990: 2).

Schwandt (2000: 197) describes constructivism in a less technical way:

> *In a fairly unremarkable sense, we are all constructivists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge. Most of us would agree that knowing is not passive — a simple imprinting of sense data on the mind — but active; mind does something with those impressions, at the very least forms abstractions or concepts. In this sense, constructivism means that human beings do not find or discover knowledge so much as construct or make it.*

Mertens (2004: 9) compares four theoretical paradigms: positivist/postpositivist, constructivist, transformative and pragmatic, functioning in the field of education (see Table 3.2 below).

Table 3.2: A comparison of theoretical paradigms

Basic beliefs	Positivist/ post positivist	Constructivist	Transformative	Pragmatic
Ontology (Nature of reality)	One reality; knowable within probability	Multiple, socially constructed realities	Multiple realities shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, gender, and disability values	What is useful determines what is true; participants perform reality checks by determining increased clarity of understanding
Epistemology (Nature of knowledge; relation between knower and would be known)	Objectivity is important; the researcher manipulates and observes in a dispassionate manner	Interactive link between researcher and participants; values are made explicit; created findings	Interactive link between researcher and participants; knowledge is socially and historically situated	Relationships in research are determined by what researcher deems as appropriate to that particular study
Methodology (Approach to systematic inquiry)	Quantitative (primarily); interventionist; decontextua-lised	Qualitative (primarily); hermeneutical; dialectical; contextual factors are described	Inclusion of qualitative (dialogic), but quantitative methods can be used; contextual and historical	Match methods to specific questions and purposes of research; mixed

Basic beliefs	Positivist/ post positivist	Constructivist	Transformative	Pragmatic
			factors are described, especially as they relate to oppression	methods can be used

According to constructivism's *ontology,* reality is socially constructed, hence the notions of constructivism or social constructionism (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008: 342). Freedman and Combs (1996: 16) explain social constructionism as follows:

> [I]ts main premise is that the beliefs, values, institutions, customs, labels, laws, divisions of labor, and the like that make up our social realities are constructed by the members of a culture as they interact with one another from generation to generation and day to day. That is, societies construct the "lenses" through which their members interpret the world. The realities that each of us take for granted are the realities that our societies have surrounded us with since birth. These realities provide the beliefs, practices, words, and experiences from which we make up our lives.

Therefore, on the basis of a constructivist *ontology*, multiple mental constructions should be expected, some of which may be in conflict with each other. Perceptions of reality may even change throughout the process of the study (Mertens, 2004: 14). The concept "quality", for example, is also a socially constructed phenomenon that could mean different things to different people. My goal was to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge. This view invites a collaborative way of exploring issues in a research context and it is interested in assumptions that underlie societal discourses that are interwoven with people's lived experience. Furthermore, from a constructivist research paradigm I attempted to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those that live it, which means that in research that involves quality in early childhood education, the whole spectrum of stakeholders comes into view (Mertens, 2004: 13).

According to a constructivist *epistemology,* the inquirer and the inquired are interlocked in an interactive process. Each influences the other. The constructivist therefore prefers a more personal, interactive mode of data collection. In my research it is achieved through the involvement of students (fieldworkers) who entered into a relationship with several of the stakeholders at early childhood institutions. The concept of objectivity is replaced by confirmability. It is assumed that data, interpretations, and outcomes are rooted in contexts and persons apart from the researcher. Such data are not fabrications of the imagination. Data can be tracked to their sources, and the logic used to assemble interpretations can be made explicit in narrative (Mertens, 2004: 15). The researcher's *methodology* is guided by these ontological and epistemological assumptions. Methodological considerations will be discussed in more detail in 3.5 that specifically deals with methodological considerations guiding this study.

Mertens (2004: 9) states that a constructivist *methodology* is characterised by at least four considerations. Firstly, it emphasises primarily, but not exclusively, qualitative research. Gergen (2001a: 423–424) agrees that this paradigm can accommodate various methodological approaches, including a mixed method approach. According to him qualitative (QUAL) and quantitative (QUAN) methods are not incompatible due to their supposed association with paradigms that differ epistemologically. He argues that to employ a particular method or mode of research "is not to subscribe to any particular philosophy (metaphysics, ontology, epistemology) that wishes to claim the conventions as their private reserve" (Gergen, 2001a: 423–424). A mixed methods approach, therefore, can be accommodated in a constructivist or social constructionist paradigm. If no claim of objectivity is made in the sense of personal distance from the inquired-into, the validity of the researcher's claims will be supported by the multiple sources of data that are used and the multiple methods that are used to collect the data (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002: 435; Mertens, 2004: 15). Table 3.6 presents an overview of all the multiple sources and methods that I applied in my study. Detailed discussions are provided in 3.6.1 and 3.6.2.

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010: 818–819) state that "mixed method research's most common criticism has been based on the 'incompatibility thesis', indicating that

QUAL and QUAN methods should not be mixed in the same study due to the paradigms that differ epistemologically". However, they argue that "methodological eclecticism" is valuable, because successfully combining QUAN and QUAL methods results in research that is multilayered and different from QUAL or QUAN research alone. They conclude with their own belief in mixed methods "as a humanistic methodology closely mimicking our everyday human problem solving... and as an extension of everyday sense making".

Secondly, a constructivist methodology is characterised by a hermeneutical stance, which means issues of interpretation are addressed. In 3.7 I reflect on matters pertaining to the interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Thirdly, a constructivist methodology can also be described as dialectical, since the interplay between views and experiences that are potentially in tension with each other becomes apparent. In my study, I opted for taking into consideration the experiences and views of a variety of participants that in principle could be in tension with each other, and it therefore requires that my methodology should include a dialectical component. See Chapter 5 where parallel sets of data are dealt with.

Finally, contextual factors are described by constructivist researchers. Qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, and document reviews are predominant in this paradigm. These methods are applied (see 3.6.2) through the interaction between and among investigator and respondents. This interactive process is sometimes described as hermeneutical and dialectical in that efforts are made to obtain and appreciate multiple perspectives that yield richer interpretations of meanings. In a dialectical interchange, (conflicting) interpretations may also be compared and contrasted, forcing reconsideration of previous positions (Mertens, 2004: 15).

Social constructionism shares most of the assumptions of constructivism, but also leans towards a transformative paradigm. The social constructionist, Gergen (2001a: 419), explicitly states that the chief aim of his research is transformative, not informative. The aim of my study is not merely to describe a state of affairs, but to be transformative in the sense that beneficiaries develop new, rich understandings of

quality in the context of early learning centres, and that these centres be transformed in view of such new understandings.

Hoffman also appreciates a constructivist framework, but supplements it with the idea that the realities which are constructed by us are *socially* constructed. According to Hoffman (1990: 3), social constructionism

> ...posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge unendingly from the interactions between people. These meanings are not skull-bound and may not exist inside what we think of as an individual "mind." They are part of a general flow of constantly changing constructions or narratives.

Social constructionists challenge individualist cognitive constructivists such as Piaget who claim that the world acquires meaning as it is filtered through internal, personal cognitive schemata, which are open to developmental process. Social constructionists would suggest that "schemata" (constructions that give meaning to acts) are developed and held *socially* in texts, traditions and practices, and one of these constructions is the personal (Bleakley, 2004: 2).

Social constructionists, in fact, challenge both endogenic (mind-centred, such as Piaget) and exogenic (world-centred) views of knowledge. Both espouse a dualist epistemology of subject-object opposition. According to Gergen (2001b: 127), knowledge is neither "in" the person, nor "in" nature to be experienced, but is produced or constructed through social relations, dialogue and social practices. Such relations and practices are themselves embedded in changing — therefore unstable — historical and cultural traditions. Gergen (2001b: 127) argues that all claims to knowledge grow from culturally and historically situated traditions. Hence, social constructionism attempts to "reduce the powerful tendency for local truth to become universal, and with it the destruction of all traditions save one" (Gergen, 2001a: 423).

According to Gergen (2001b: 132), a social constructionist framework also suggests a particular stance on researching others' texts or practices. As is custom in academic literature, social constructionists quote from texts and textual representations of practices. However, others' views and critique primarily serve as a component of reflexive deliberation within their own texts (Gergen, 2001b: 132).

Hence, the main purpose of quoting "authoritative" sources would not be to bolster the researcher's own arguments, but to allow others to "comment" on the researcher's assumptions, ideas and arguments. Quoting and referring to sources are seen as part of a reflexive posture (Bleakley, 2004: 3). This is part of what has brought social constructionism into a "productive self-consciousness" (Gergen, 2001b:3).

Such self-consciousness calls for *a reflexive posture*. Gergen (2001a: 423) says a reflexive posture toward the often blinding force of tradition is a way of preventing an attitude of "anything goes", for which constructivist approaches have been blamed. Bleakley (2004: 3) lists three dimensions of a reflexive methodology. First, any perspective must acknowledge and learn from effective criticism of its position. A second kind of reflexivity is to recognise where critique has its limits and where (postmodern) pluralism must also include tradition. Social constructionism does not, in principle, abandon longstanding traditions. Social constructionism does not claim to being "a first philosophy, a foundation upon which a new world may be erected" (Gergen, 2001b: 124). A third kind of reflexivity is self-critique. Gergen (2001b: 4) has sensed that social constructionist arguments have too often functioned as a sword, with the elimination of empirical study, ethical foundationalism, realism and so on as its seeming goal, which he regards as nihilistic. In my study, evidence of reflexivity can be found in the reflective journals of my student-participants (discussed in 3.6.2.1), as well as frequent discussions with colleagues and my promoter on the collected data of my research and its interpretation.

In an attempt to practice self-reflexivity myself, I was aware of some of the main criticisms of social constructionism. This framework has been criticised for its views on the referentiality issue, being relativistic, containing internal contradictions, and being anti–science. With regard to the issue of *referentiality,* Hibberd (2001: 301–302) argues that Gergen's socio constructionist view "is that language is nothing more than a set of social conventions and that this precludes the possibility of external reference." Gergen (2001a: 421) responded by quoting from his own writings to show that Hibberd's description of his social constructionist stance is inaccurate, since he, like many other social constructionists, do not deny the possibility that words "can be said to furnish pictures of an independent reality" (Gergen, 1994: 86),

and "[f]ar more than words and actions are required in order to play the game. We typically require objects of various kinds within particular settings" (Gergen, 1999: 36).

Related to this criticism, Liebrucks (2001: 364) claims that since, in social constructionism, "there are no independent criteria to assess research results, any research project must appear to be as legitimate as any other." This claim amounts to ciriticising social constructionism for espousing *a relativist position*. Relativism implies a position from where one can survey the field and declare that all positions are equal. However, Gergen (2001a: 423) explicitly states:

> *We cannot step out of all traditions, for to do so would be to lose all means of generating intelligibility. It is never a matter of "anything goes" in practice, because little goes except within a tradition of social collaboration.*

Maze (2001: 393) criticises social constructionism for contradicting itself:

> *[W]hile it denies that any assertion can be true, and that there are any independent realities to be referred to, it nevertheless treats discourse as having objective existence, and assumes that its own statements about discourse are true. Thus in asserting its own basic premise it contradicts it.*

Maze's criticism is also based on the erroneous assumption that social constructionism espouses anti-realism (there are no external realities to refer to).

A distinction drawn by Edley perhaps clarifies some of the issues raised above. He distinguishes between the *ontological* and *epistemic* senses of social construction (Edley, 2001: 436–439). With reference to the work of Edwards (1997: 47–48) he argues that a concept such as "mind" is socially constructed in the *ontological* sense. Researchers talk about "mind" (or "quality", or "stakeholders"). Our descriptions or accounts of such concepts are social constructs in the *epistemic* sense. "Any attempt to describe the nature of the world is subject to the rules of discourse. It points to the fact that as soon as we begin to think or talk about the world, we necessarily begin to represent. Talk involves the creation or construction of particular accounts or stories

of what the world is like" (Edley, 2001: 436–437). So a mistake that critics of social constructionism often make is to assume that when social constructionists say "there is nothing outside the text", they are making an ontological rather than an epistemological pronouncement (Edley, 2001: 437).

Given my social constructionist paradigm, I do not regard 'quality' as an abstract theoretical principle, but as a concept that has taken shape through the beliefs, practices and experiences of particular communities. Therefore I attempted to consider and respect the different realities of various role players associated with early learning centres in my study.

3.2.2 Methodological paradigm

For the purpose of this study, I chose to work from a constructivist paradigm and I opted for a mixed method design. Nieuwenhuis (2008) explains that researchers who opt for using mixed methods, adhere to the compatibility thesis. The idea is that quantitative and qualitative methods are compatible and that both can be used in a single study. "Mixed method" researchers adhere to the philosophy of pragmatism or functionalism, which implies that researchers use a mixture of approaches that works best in a real world situation regardless of assumptions. The fundamental principle of mixed methods is that the researcher uses a mixture or combination of methods that has complementary strengths and weaknesses that are non-overlapping. Triangulation seeks convergence, corroboration and correspondence of results from different methods (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 374; Nieuwenhuis, 2008). In my opinion mixed methods approach is the appropriate way to work in this study, because one of the strengths of mixed methods research is the provision of a complete picture to the research problem and the incorporation of qualitative and quantitative data in a study.

Gray (2009: 209) argues that mixed methods designs do not have to be interdependent at all times. He aptly states that quantitative and qualitative elements can sometimes "be constructed quite independently and not in any particular order – hence, they could be carried out concurrently, sequentially, with qualitative before

quantitative or vice versa". Different methods can deal with the same research questions or focus on different aspects of the research (Gray, 2009: 209). I opted for a concurrent triangular design. Creswell (2005) explains that the purpose of this design type is to collect both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, to merge the data and to compare and use the results to understand a research problem. He argues that a basic rationale for this design is that "one data collection form supplies strengths to offset the weaknesses of the other form". In this design the researcher values both qualitative and quantitative data and sees them as equal sources of information (Creswell, 2005: 514).

I chose a concurrent triangular mixed method design (as depicted in Figure 3.1) because of its suitability for my specific study (Creswell, 2008: 29; Tashakorri & Teddlie, 2003: 226). I found a mixed method design suitable for my study because it offers a way of comparing and contrasting different findings in the service of well validated conclusions (Creswell, 2008: 557).

Figure 3.1 illustrates how the QUAN and QUAL data collections and analyses take place concurrently. The results of both the QUAN and QUAL data are then compared and interpreted to enable the researcher to draw conclusions.
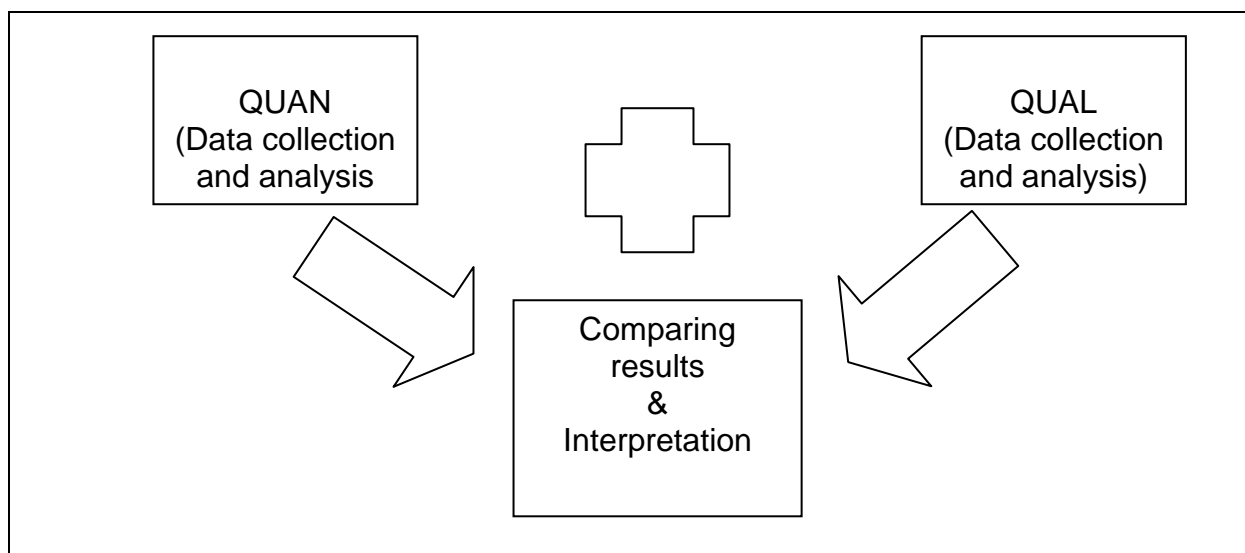
Figure 3.1: Concurrent triangular mixed method design (Creswell, 2008: 557)

3.3 RESEARCH PROCESS

Merriam (2009: 13) argues that qualitative researchers are particularly interested in understanding people's construction and sense–making of their world and experiences in the world. She recommends that researchers should start a research project by considering their own beliefs, views and principles in terms of the "nature of reality" and the research purpose to inform the most suitable way for answering the research question.

The research process is summarised in a visual form in Table 3.3. The table provides a layout of the identification of themes from the literature, indication of the different information sources, the methods that were used for data collection, the different types of data analysis and, lastly, the identification of themes and factors that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 3.3: The research process

Identify themes from literature on quality in early learning centres for questionnaire and structured face to face interviews with parents and teachers. Develop schedules about the quality of early learning centres as experienced and perceived by the different role players: students, teachers and parents

⬇

1st source of information Literature study on quality in early learning centres	**2nd source of information** Literature study on quality assurance framework	**3rd source of information** Literature study on early learning centres

⬇

Quantitative data collection Questionnaires about conditions at early learning centres, completed by 2nd year BEd teacher students after completion of teaching practice in early learning centres	**Qualitative data collection** face to face structured interviews with teachers done by teacher students (fieldworkers)	**Qualitative data collection** face to face structured interviews with parents (mothers) done by teacher students (fieldworkers)	**Qualitative data collection** observations of the atmosphere and interactions between and experiences of the different role players in early learning centres, documented by student-participants in reflective journals

⬇

Data analysis of questionnaires completed by students	**Data analysis** of face to face structured interviews with teachers done by teacher students (fieldworkers)	**Data analysis** of face to face structured interviews with parents done by teacher students (fieldworkers)	**Data analysis** of reflective journals kept by students about their experiences in early learning centres

⬇

Identify themes regarding the quality of early learning centres as experienced by different role players: teacher students, teachers and parents

⬇

Identify factors to be taken into account in the possible development of a quality assurance framework for the South African context

As with most things in life, there are also advantages and disadvantages when mixed methods are being used to do research. According to Nieuwenhuis (2008), the strengths of mixed methods research is to provide a complete picture of a research problem and is a means to incorporate qualitative data into a quantitative study. A disadvantage that Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010: 818) point out is unrealistic expectations concerning an individual researcher's proficiency in both QUAN and QUAL methodology, therefore training in both quantitative and qualitative research methods is necessary (Nieuwenhuis, 2008). A weakness that Maree (ed.) (2007: 278) points out is the challenge to collect and analyse two complete but separate sets of data simultaneously. Many students might be challenged by these weaknesses. For me, the weaknesses mentioned above were also a reality, therefore I had to implement strategies to address these challenges. I attended research support sessions that the University of Pretoria offered to inform me in terms of the different quantitative and qualitative methods. I also read extensively to familiarise myself with the requirements of the different methods. To coordinate collection of the various sets of data and to analyse them simultaneously was a real challenge for me. I set up a proper filing system for data storage of hard copy materials, as well as another electronic filing system for information on the computer. This allowed me to keep the different kinds of data separate from each other and enabled me to organise and compare the analysed data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 377).

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010: 60) explain that in a convergent parallel design (their term for the concurrent triangular mixed method design) where the QUAN and QUAL data are both collected by the researcher, there might be validity threats in terms of the effectiveness and meaningfulness of the conclusions. One would also need to consider whether both forms of data assessed the same questions, "whether the unequal sample sizes pose threats to drawing conclusions", and "whether conclusions drawn from discrepancies in merging the results favour the QUAL or QUAN data results". In my study, both QUAN and QUAL methods are relevant for the study and are supportive of each other in terms of answering the same research question. Two of the three methods are qualitative (interviews and reflective journals), but the extent of the data gathered by means of the quantitative method

(questionnaires) has assured that a balance between quantitative and qualitative approaches was maintained.

Some of the most highly associated and commonly stated criticisms of mixed method research, as argued by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010: 818) and Nieuwenhuis (2008), relate to the expenditure of performing mixed method research. They argue that the mixed methods approach is basically more expensive and probably more time-consuming than the QUAN- or QUAL-alone orientations. For doctoral students working under strict timelines, mixed studies can take longer to conduct. In terms of my study that was true, especially in terms of time constraints.

In spite of the disadvantages revealed by Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010: 818), they are of the opinion that mixed method research should be used to answer the research questions, "if the research questions clearly call for it" or if the researcher "anticipates that mixed methods might present better answers". In my view the mixed method approach is useful because it creates an opportunity for a richer description of the multi-faceted phenomenon of quality. For example, reflective journals can accommodate unforeseen experiences that would not be captured in an already fixed questionnaire. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010: 818) also point out that expenditure and time constrictions are then less important and "if there is a strong possibility that one might get incomplete and unsatisfactory answers, shorter, less expensive paths that provide such answers are not desirable".

In my study, I gave preference to a mixed method approach especially because of factors related to the participants of this study. (i) Attempting to use a single method to generate data where participants include parents, teachers, students and preschool children would be impractical and not a rigorous portrayal of multiple perspectives. Formal questionnaires and interviews, for example, can be used in the case of adults, but not preschool children. (ii) The roles of the students and teachers/parents differed. Students were observer-participants, which explains why the use of reflective journals made sense in their case, but this method would be inappropriate in the case of parents and teachers who did not play an observer role at all. (iii) Using interviews in order to generate data from the inputs of students would be impractical because of the sample size, namely 235 individuals.

Another advantage that contributes to the attractiveness and appeal of mixed method research, is the flexibility aspect. By applying combined QUAL and QUAN techniques, numerous and various research questions are concurrently attended to. Tashakkori and Teddlie's (2010: 699) view is that potentially fresh insights and knowledge of educational effectiveness research topics can be gained and improved "through the combination of both general statistical findings and thick descriptions of specific cases illustrating those findings" which can not be accomplished by QUAN or QUAL methods alone. They proclaim that "knowledge generation that goes beyond the sum of the individual QUAL and QUAN components", permits "mixed method research to add extra value to research studies". In my study, the combination of QUAN and QUAL components contributed to improve explanations, predictions and recognition of the social phenomenon quality (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010: 699).

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.4.1 Instrumental case study

I share Merriam's opinion (1998: 41) that "because of its strengths, case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education". The choice for a case study as research design instead of other research designs, is determined by what I, as researcher, want to know. Yin (2008: 13) believes where "how" and "why" questions are answered, a case study has a distinct advantage. He also points out that the "less control an investigator has over a contemporary set of events, or if the variables are so embedded in the situation as to be impossible to identify ahead of time, case study is likely to be the best choice". In terms of answering the research question of my study, I decided on a case study as the most suitable choice because through case studies researchers "get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires), whereas experiments and surveys often use convenient derivative data, e.g. test results, official records" (Bromley,1986: 23 in Merriam, 2009: 46). He also states that case studies "tend to spread the net for evidence widely, whereas experiments and surveys usually have a narrow focus". In this study, my aim was to

get close to the subject of interest, but to spread the evidence widely by having a substantial number (213) of early learning centres represented.

Silverman (2010: 138) proclaims that "there are an endless variety of possible 'cases'". Although the term 'case', or 'object of study' (Merriam, 1998) has many definitions, in this study, 'cases' refer to beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres.

In my study, early learning centres refer to the relevant locales studied. The setting was not only the physical environment of various early learning centres, but also those aspects that are not necessarily visible to the eye, like the atmosphere and the centres' character (Charles & Mertler, 2002: 267). I selected 213 early learning centres through a non-probability, purposive method. Selection criteria included: (i) that the co-researchers / fieldworkers (students) selected early learning centres that are willing to accommodate students for teaching practice purposes; (ii) that the centres use a play-based curriculum; (iii) that at the early learning centres students be assigned to qualified teachers; and (iv) that the early learning centres are conveniently located in terms of distance, (since the students were responsible for their own transport to and from the early learning centres).

Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit, (2004: 41) say that a case study as design format is exemplified by the focus on a phenomenon with identifiable boundaries. A qualitative case study for Merriam (2009: 38) is "an in-depth analysis or description of a bounded system", where *bounded* means "that the case is separated out for research in terms of time, place, or some physical boundaries" (Creswell, 2008: 476). Merriam (2009: 38) claims that part of the perplexity concerning case studies is that "the process of conducting a case study is conflated with both the unit of study (case) and the product of this type of investigation". Yin (2008: 18), on the other hand, defines a case study in terms of the research process. For him "a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident".

Edwards (2001: 126) explains that case studies can be longitudinal, but more frequently they offer a comprehensive picture of a system in action. The latter is a true description of my study. Edwards (2001: 126) also indicates that there are two broad purposes why case studies are used. He argues that cases can be "of intrinsic interest" as in a study of the introduction of a new way of working, for example implementing a quality assurance system in early learning centres; or they can assist our general understanding of phenomena, for example how beneficiaries experience quality. The second purpose applies, in particular, to my research since the purpose of my study is to conceptualise quality in early learning centres in order to inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance system.

McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 470) indicate that the term 'case study' may refer to a number of different epistemological entities, for example fundamental descriptive material that the observer collected (the observer's data) by whatever available means, about some particular phenomenon or set of events. The case material is then simply the content of the observer's field notes with the explicit goal of drawing theoretical conclusions from it. In this study, the field notes that were done by means of reflective journals and interview schedules, form a part of the case material.

Gay *et al.* (2009: 434) recommend case study research as a suitable choice "when a researcher wants to answer a descriptive question (e.g. what happened) or an explanatory question (e.g. how or why did something happen?)" I chose an instrumental case study as research design, because I opted for a design featuring "an in-depth study of interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system" (Opie, 2004: 74). In my study, I focus on a real situation (people's experiences of early learning centres quality), with real people (children, parents, teachers and students) in an environment familiar to myself (early learning centres). In order to answer my research question, I thus studied interactions of events, human relationships and other factors.

Very often in educational research where case study research is the choice, one phenomenon is investigated but at various sites. These studies are usually called collective case studies, multi-case or multi-site studies, or comparative case studies (Gay *et al.* 2009: 434). Because the students could select the early learning centres

for their teaching practice, there is a wide variety of early learning centres under study. Students participating as co-researchers (fieldworkers) live in different parts of the country and therefore 213 early learning centres were represented in nine provinces. As is apparent in Table 3.4, Gauteng province centres are significantly in the majority, with significantly fewer centres from Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, Free State, Western Cape and North West.

Table 3.4: The number of early learning centres in each province

Province	Number of early learning centres selected in a province
Gauteng	169
Mpumalanga	21
Limpopo	9
KwaZulu-Natal	8
North West	2
Western Cape	1
Free State	1
Eastern Cape	1
Northern Cape	1

3.4.1.1 Advantages and disadvantages of instrumental case studies

(a) Advantages of case studies

There are various possible advantages for using case studies, according to different scholars. In terms of the benefits of a case study it seems that the advantages are mostly related to methodology, interpretation of data, the particular population and the longitudinal effect.

Aubrey *et al.* (2000: 40) proclaim that a *variety of methods* can be applied in a case study, because a case study typically has a multi-method design. Another benefit is accentuated by Merriam (1998: 28). She argues that one of the advantages of an instrumental case study is that, unlike experimental, survey, or historical research, case studies do not require particular methods for collecting or analysing data. *Any*

and all methods, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study to gather data (Merriam, 1998: 28). For me, using an instrumental case study was beneficial because this method opened up the possibility for obtaining information from a variety of sources.

The second group of benefits concerns the interpretation of data. On the one hand, the kinds of information derived from a case study can cause the *familiar* to be seen afresh as a result of thorough examination (Edwards, 2001: 127). On the other hand, the *uniqueness* of the case study can be an asset. Merriam (1998: 33) notes that a case study may be selected "for its very uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to". Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 255) remind us about the benefit, that careful and detailed observation in case studies can initiate the possible appearance of new ideas. A case study can provide a *tremendous amount* of data (Merriam, 2009: 203) that can contribute towards *rich descriptions* (Edwards, 2001: 129). Case studies furthermore have the advantage of promoting *better understanding* of practical issues and facilitating *informed decision making (*McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 333). In my study, making use of 235 cases, a tremendous amount of data was indeed generated and therefore the possibility of obtaining unique data was substantial.

The third group of advantages relates to a particular kind of population. Edwards (2001: 127) claims that cases selected as exemplary, potentially can be more informative about a *large population* than might have been when gathered from a survey. Such exemplary cases can be chosen to represent a particular category from a wider population (Edwards, 2001: 127). Merriam (1998: 41) acknowledges another strength, namely that a case study offers a way of "exploring *complex social units* with numerous variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon". This strength is of value in my study where the complex nature of a phenomenon like quality is examined.

A last benefit of case studies is that they are generally "descriptive in nature and provide rich longitudinal information about individuals or particular situations" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999: 255).

Although there are numerous advantages when case studies are used, there are also a number of disadvantages to consider.

(b)   Disadvantages of case studies

According to Rule and Vaughn (2011: 21), since a researcher cannot generalise the findings of a single-case research study to other cases, there is no comparative dimension within such a study. The two authors therefore suggest a strategy of using a range of cases to allow for comparison and can be chosen to represent the class of cases better.

In my study of different sources (for example, Edwards, 2001; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006; Merriam, 2009; Terre Blanche & Durrheim,1999) discussing the disadvantages of case studies, it became evident that the disadvantages of case studies centre around three focal points, namely boundaries, data and balance.

With reference to case studies, Edwards (2001: 27) acknowledges the difficulty of identifying the boundaries of a case, because of the complexity and interconnectedness of systems, since a case as a system is necessarily also connected to other social systems. Edwards' (2001: 27) advice for dealing with this disadvantage of identifying boundaries is to decide on the foreground and background of the study. In Rule and Vaughn's view (2011: 21) "a multiple case study design allows for some breadth, as well as depth of focus". In my study I tried to be sensitive to boundaries. The number of interviews provided rich feedback amidst the boundaries. I also addressed this issue by using a variety of appropriate data collection methods.

Several of the disadvantages of case studies seem to relate to the nature and interpretation of research data. First, case studies are characterised by a *tremendous amount of* and *complex data*. Although that can be seen as a benefit, as I have explained when I discussed the advantages, the huge amount of data can simultaneously produce a big disadvantage. In this regard Merriam (2009: 203) warns researchers against the extreme challenge of trying to make sense of a lot of data.

In the process of trying to manage the large amount of data, I had to adjust my original plan in terms of the inclusion of all the different beneficiaries' data. My decision not to include the views of children as beneficiaries in my study, was based because I realised that the amount of data was already very much. I therefore had to make a deliberate decision in terms of the exclusions of the certain beneficiaries in order to be able to manage the big volume data. Although data from the children were already collected in the form of drawings, I decided in collaboration with my promoter, to omit the drawings from data analysis for this particular study and rather to use them in a follow-up study.

In my study, I also have a large amount of data and therefore I tried to apply her advice to deal with this challenge by giving attention to data management. The strategy that I applied was to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant data. I reduced the number of reflection journals of the teacher-students from 235 to 60, because I realised that a large number of journals were merely diary inscriptions and they did not provide useful, relevant information. During the process of data management I further established that not all of the 235 questionnaires were completed in full and sufficiently for the purpose of the study. I selected 213 questionnaires that were completed in full to use for the data analysis.

Furthermore, in many case studies the data is *disparate, incompatible* and *contradictory* (Merriam, 2009: 203). Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 256) argue that the complexity of data can complicate the process of distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant data, and therefore could undermine the *validity* of the information.

Secondly, researchers making use of case studies are sometimes tempted to use specialised, contextualised data to make *broad generalisations*. Great care should be taken when generalisations are made from single case studies (Edwards, 2001: 127). Rule and Vaughn (2011: 21-22) warn that researchers might be enticed to find similarities and in the process disregard differences. They further point out that the specific context of each case might be skimmed over while searching for generalities. Edwards also cautions against generalisation because "the 'real' business of case study is particularisation". In this regard McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 18) remind

that "case study designs provide context-bound summaries for understanding education and for future research".

The third group of disadvantages concerns balance. On the one hand the researcher needs to strive towards balance between rigour and flexibility. Disallowing any flexibility for the sake of rigour, can be restrictive, for example with regard to obtaining rich descriptions of experiences. On the other hand, failing to be rigorous for the sake of flexibility can result in confusion and a lack of order (Edwards, 2001: 128).

During the process of data analysis I initially ended up with a huge number of themes. I encountered a challenge to distinguish between possible and suitable themes for data interpretation. The process of data analysis provided a big challenge in terms of striking a balance between rigour and flexibility concerning the identification of suitable themes that emerged from the interviews. In order to interpret the analysed data and to establish themes that were not too generalised but which were also not too particular and specific, I had to repeat the analysis process a number of times in order to look out for regularities and patterns, and to create clarifications and options to enable me to answer the research questions (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 158–159). In consultation with my promoter I identified themes and subthemes that were specific enough to capture the uniqueness of the data, but which simultaneously grouping categories together that were not just related, but which were also manageable in terms of their numbers. During this process the initial number of more than 200 categories was reduced to 60. Table 3.5 shows the different disadvantages of case studies and the possible solutions for addressing each of these disadvantages.

Table 3.5: Disadvantages and possible solutions

Disadvantages	Possible solutions
Difficulty of identifying the **boundaries** of the case because of the complexity and interconnectedness of systems.	Decide on the foreground and background of the study. Using a variety of appropriate data collection methods.
Tremendous amount of and **complex data.**	Giving attention to data management. Excluding children's views (drawings) from the data analysis. Distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant data. I reduced the number of reflection journals from 235 to 60. I selected 213 from 235 questionnaires that were completed in full to use for the data analysis.
Achieving **balance** between rigour and flexibility	Striking a balance between rigour and flexibility. Distinguishing between possible and suitable themes for data. I repeated the analysis process to look out for regularities and patterns. The initial number of more than 200 categories was reduced to 60.

In dealing with the disadvantages of case studies I find the advice of Aubrey *et al*. (2000: 40) valuable. They note that "designing research involves selecting which weaknesses you are prepared to tolerate since weaknesses cannot be eliminated". A potential weakness of case studies that I had to tolerate in my study, relates to the large amount of data collected.

3.5 PARTICIPANTS IN THE STUDY

Researchers, in Merriam's view (2009: 162), often use the term *participants* to portray the individuals that are being studied. This way of portraying the individuals is done with caution to assure that there is inclusion and that the individuals agree to cooperate. Merriam further declares that "this single word captures a number of attitudes about research from the qualitative paradigm. It also serves as a litmus test concerning ethics".

I used non-probability sampling to select all participants, namely parents, teachers and students. I targeted each particular group, with the knowledge that the group does not represent the wider population, but a particular group with the same interest (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001: 103). I used purposive sampling to select students, based on their particular interest in early childhood education and their exposure to early learning centres. Students (fieldworkers) selected teachers and mothers through convenience sampling because they were connected to the early learning centres where the students conducted their teaching practice and were therefore conveniently accessible to obtain data (Maree & Pietersen, 2007: 176–177).

A disadvantage, explained by Gay *et al. (*2009: 136), is that convenience sampling, (also known as accidental sampling), can be complex when providing a description of the people used for the sample. On the other hand, an advantage that they highlight is the straightforwardness of the sample selection that is based on "whoever is available and volunteer participation". The case study I used, did not involve accidental sampling and describing the people used for the sample was quite straightforward. Participants were teachers, parents and students involved in particular early learning centres. Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001: 156) contend that in an instance where groups with specific qualities need to be over-represented, a non-probability sample is a suitable choice. They declare that setting up a non-probability sample is simpler and less expensive, "but these advantages (are) gained at the expense of the representation". The same authors point out another disadvantage, namely that generalisation of findings of a non-probability sample cannot be done outside of the convenience sampling "where the respondents

are selected according to convenience of access" (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 156). Since my study involved 235 parallel case studies, the issue of representation has been addressed.

Table 3.6 provides an outline of participant groups, the way in which they were selected as well as the selection criteria that were applied.

Table 3.6: Participant selection

Participants	n	How selected?	Selection criteria
Students, female	**235**	All 2007 and 2008 second year UP BEd Foundation Phase and Early Childhood Development Studies (FP & ECD) students were enrolled for the teaching practice module (JPO 280)[3] that is a compulsory module for their BEd (FP & ECD) degree at UP. A part of their mark in this module is obtained through a compulsory observation assignment (refer to Appendix D with an extract from the study guide/assignment). Some of the data for the study is derived from questions in the assignment and their reflective journals about their experiences of early learning centres during the teaching practice period (refer to point 3.6.2.1 in this Chapter and Appendices C, H & I).	Non-probability sampling method: purposive sampling
Teachers, female	**235**	Early learning centre principals placed the students in the classes of specific, qualified teachers who volunteered to mentor them and to answer specific questions (see Appendices E & J). Each student interviewed one teacher (the teacher with whom they were placed and with whom they built a relationship during the teaching practice period).	Non-probability sampling method: purposive sampling
Parents, female	**235**	Students conveniently selected mothers of children in the particular schools where the teaching practice took place to conduct interviews (refer to Appendices E & J). Each student interviewed one mother.	Non-probability sampling method: convenience sampling

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[3] JPO 280 is the code for the compulsory second year module, Teaching Practice, in the BEd (Foundation Phase and Early Childhood Studies) programme

3.5.1 Students as participants

In my study, 235 second year, early childhood education students, studying the BEd programme at the University of Pretoria played significant roles. The students were registered in the 2007 and 2008 year groups. All of them were female and between the ages of 19 and 23. The students fulfilled dual roles in my study, because they acted as the main participants, as well as fieldworkers. In order to distinguish between their different roles I refer to them as *students* in their participant roles and as *fieldworkers* in their co-researcher roles.

I selected the students by means of a non-probability purposive sampling (Cohen *et al.*, 2001: 103). As part of the curriculum-based three week teaching practice session for the module Teaching Practice (JPO 280), the students had to complete an observation assignment. After attending the three week teaching practice and on completion of the observation assignment, their observations of the early learning centres were captured through questionnaires with closed and open-ended questions. These questionnaires (see Appendix E) served as documented data of their observations of early learning centres during teaching practice. As stated earlier, the students conducted the teaching practice session at 213 different early learning centres.

3.5.2 Students as co-researchers (fieldworkers)

Other than being participants who completed questionnaires after their exposure to and observations of the early learning centres, students also functioned as fieldworkers in the role of co-researchers. I required them to collect data (by means of interviews) with parents and teachers and to make field notes by means of reflective journals (see Appendix D with assignment). The fieldworkers selected the other participants (teachers and parents) and generated data through interview schedules (see Appendix I) and writing of observations by means of reflective journals (see Appendix O), accumulated throughout the normal course of their teaching and learning during their teaching practice period (Zeni, 2001: 9).

Although the students were expected to complete the observation assignments as a compulsory requirement for passing the teaching practice module as part of their BEd degree, they could choose whether or not voluntarily to submit the reflective journals and interview schedules for my research use. I discuss ethical considerations fully in this regard under a later heading (3.8) in a following section.

The stance that describes the role of the students the best is that of observer as participant (Creswell, 2005: 212; Merriam, 2009). The students carried out some of the everyday activities on location, while observing what the teachers and children did and said as well (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 5). Their observer activities were known to the teachers and parents and their primary role was to gather information. As fieldworkers, the students informed the participants (the teachers and parents) of the purpose of the data collection and obtained their consent that the information could be used (refer to Appendix B). Therefore the participants (teachers and parents) were aware of the students' role as fieldworkers collecting data. The fieldworkers could observe and connect closely enough with the teachers and parents to establish an insider's identity without becoming part of the group membership (Merriam, 2009).

As doctoral student, apart from the questionnaires, I did not personally gather data through interviews. This is a potential disadvantage because I had to rely on fieldworkers for the data collection process. Another disadvantage was that I was not involved firsthand and could not do interpretations personally. For me the advantage of partnering with fieldworkers is that many more informants and more early learning centres could be reached and voiced in my study than ever would have been possible to do by myself had I personally tried to collect all the data. According to Bogdan and Knopp Biklen (2003: 89), outsiders like University lecturers (as researchers) are not always the best choice for obtaining 'honest information' from teachers. Teachers "may feel uncomfortable being in the presence of a 'know-it-all', and they might even consider the researcher as a threat who can judge or criticise them". Teachers, therefore, might sometimes withhold information or act in unnatural ways. Students are less threatening to teachers. Since they are usually working side by side with teachers for an extended time, rapport is established and the fieldworker may get many opportunities to observe in a much more natural way (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen 2003: 89). I believe the amount of data collected by the fieldworkers

compensates for the disadvantage that I was not personally involved and that I had to rely on the fieldworkers' interpretations of what they observed and experienced. Furthermore, as a doctoral student, I gained experience in the project management aspect of research.

3.5.3 Teachers as participants

Students purposively selected (Cohen *et al.,* 2001: 103; Creswell, 2008: 214) 235 female teachers at early learning centres. The teachers, all female, were selected by students through a non-probability, purposive sampling method. Principals placed students, upon their arrival at the schools for teaching practice, with qualified and experienced teachers. During the course of their three week teaching practice session at the centres, the students and teachers established relationships as, and because, they worked closely together. The students (fieldworkers) interviewed teachers towards the end of their teaching practice time. (Refer to Appendix J with examples of the interview schedules).

3.5.4 Mothers as participants

In addition to the 235 teachers, 235 mothers (whose children were attending the early learning centres) also participated in the data collection. The fieldworkers could select mothers or fathers of any of the children in the early learning centre classes where they, (the students) were placed (Cannold, 2001: 179). The parents were thus selected through a non-probability, convenience sampling method (Cohen *et al.*, 2001: 102 and McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 125–127). When I started to analyse the interviews conducted by the fieldworkers, I discovered that they had only selected mothers. Their formal instructions did not specify that they should interview both fathers and mothers, only that they had to interview parents. The fact that only mothers were interviewed could perhaps be ascribed to two factors: (i) more mothers than fathers brought their children to the early learning centres, and (ii) all the fieldworkers were young female adults themselves and they possibly felt more at ease in the presence of women. A possible implication of this situation is that I was

not able to distinguish between possible different understandings or experiences of quality by mothers and fathers respectively.

3.5.5 Advantages and disadvantages of involving all the different participants

Dealing with different kinds of participants poses challenges, but is also beneficial to a research study. All the contributions made by the students, teachers and mothers that acted as participants in my study add rigour to my study, because they provided valuable input and fulfilled different roles. The teachers and mothers fulfilled the roles of participants, whereas the students had dual roles as I have explained in 3.5.1 and 3.5.2. On the one end of the spectrum the students were complete observers (which guided them when they completed the questionnaires and also when they wrote their reflective journals). On the other hand they were also observers-as-participants when they interviewed the teachers and mothers (Cohen *et al.,* 2001: 305).

The judgement of the individual researcher is a prominent factor in the case of a non-probability sample (Strydom, 2005: 202). This statement implies that it can be seen as a disadvantage that I had to rely entirely on the choices that the student researchers made in terms of approaching mothers and teachers who could appropriately contribute in data collection. One of the realities experienced by any researcher who depends on fieldworkers, is the necessity for a relationship of trust between the main researcher and the fieldworkers. In my study, I was fortunate to be able to build a relationship of trust with the students even before the research started when I was their lecturer. It was important that the students experienced that I trusted them and that I could rely on their sensitivity and integrity in the research situation, since a lack of sensitivity and integrity can limit the value of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009: 52). For this reason I opted for a mixed methods research approach. Furthermore, by using 235 students, the potential impact of insensitivity and lack of integrity has been softened.

3.6   DATA COLLECTION

In terms of data collection, Silverman (2010: 65) gives the following advice:

> *"Make data collection as easy as possible. There are no 'brownie points' given by most disciplines for having gathered your own data. Indeed, by choosing 'difficult' situations to gather data (because nothing 'relevant' may happen), ... you may condemn yourself to have less time to engage in the much more important activity of data analysis. Beware of complexity. ... keep data gathering simple. Go for material that is easy to collect. Do not worry if it only gives you one 'angle' on your problem. That is a gain as well as a loss!"*

Following a concurrent mixed method design, I used different quantitative and qualitative strategies to generate data. Quantitative data was generated by students as participants completing a questionnaire. Qualitative data was generated by students as fieldworkers conducting face to face interviews with teachers and mothers, and capturing observations in reflective journals. Table 3.7 summarises the method, format, description, participants, way of documenting and type of analysis to provide a global overview of the data collection techniques used in this study.

Table 3.7: Data collection techniques

Method	Format	Description	Participants	Documenting	Analysis
Questionnaire (QUAN & QUAL) By means of closed and open-ended questions regarding aspects in early learning centres (Appendix E)	Paper-based	Convergent and divergent questions regarding early learning centre aspects	Questionnaires completed by 213 BEd Early Childhood Education II *students* from the University of Pretoria	Manually completed. Quantitative (check lists): Explanations and commentary of students' own experiences regarding specific observed early learning centre aspects	Descriptive statistics portrayed in graphs. Qualitative: a thematic analysis of open ended questions.

Method	Format	Description	Participants	Documenting	Analysis
Observation (QUAL) by means of reflective journals with field notes	Paper-based reflective journals	Students were assigned to reflect on quality aspects of early learning centres according to specific guidelines (Appendix O present these guidelines)	60 B Ed Early Childhood Education II *students* from the University of Pretoria generated data (Criteria for selection are discussed in 3.6.2.1)	Reflective journals Field notes Photographs	Field notes: 60 journals were thematically analysed. Photographs were used to verify and extend the written reports
Face to face structured *interviews* with teachers (Appendix I)	Interview schedule and field notes (the same as for the parents)	Students each conveniently selected one teacher from the early learning centre class where they did their teaching practice for one face to face interview	235 B Ed Early Childhood Education II students from the University of Pretoria generated data. 235 *teachers* participated.	Answers documented on interview schedule and field notes	Qualitative: thematic analysis of answered interview schedule
Face to face structured *interviews* with parents (mothers) (Appendix I)	Interview schedule and field notes (the same questions as for the teachers)	Students each conveniently selected one parent (mother) who each had a child(ren) in the early learning centre class where they did their teaching practice for a structured face to face interview	235 B Ed Early Childhood Education II students from the University of Pretoria generated data. 235 *mothers* participated.	Answers documented on interview schedule and field notes	Qualitative: thematic analysis of answered interview schedule

3.6.1. Quantitative data collection by means of a questionnaire

Quantitative data were generated based on students' observations by means of a paper-based questionnaire (Appendix E) that contained convergent and divergent questions. A total of 235 B Ed Early Childhood Education II students from the University of Pretoria completed the questionnaire. After closer scrutiny, it was established that only 213 of the 235 questionnaires were completed in full and suitable for data analysis.

3.6.1.1   Questionnaires of student observations

According to Merriam and Associates (2002: 13), "observational data represents a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest, and is the best technique when a situation can be observed firsthand". In my study, the questionnaires (see Appendix E) are a suitable choice to obtain information of students' firsthand observations of various aspects related to quality in early learning centres. In Edwards' (2001: 129) opinion, collecting data by means of observation is the least interfering mode which permits researchers to gather evidence from the field and to inductively do the analysis as soon as all data have been accumulated. Another reason why I opted for a questionnaire is explained by Thomas (1998: 133). He points out that questionnaires that are distributed to a big group of participants enable a researcher to save time in comparison with individual interviews and, in addition, a large number of people can participate. Hofstee (2006: 133) points out that "questionnaires offer confidentiality to respondents and are easier to analyse and turn into quantitative results". The questionnaires enabled me to obtain as much information about the indoor and outdoor facilities, as well as structured learning activities and free play activities in as many early learning centres as possible in a variety of locations. The questionnaire was a useful way to capture students' observations of the quality of the facilities and activities at early learning centres, because the questions made provision for quantitative as well as qualitative information.

A drawback that Hofstee (2006: 133) points out is that questionnaires do not allow the researcher to interact with the respondents. He further points out that "they are also limited in the depth to which the researcher is able to probe any particular

respondent and do not allow for digression from the set format". Another limitation of questionnaires, according to Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001: 158), is that a huge number of questions of open-ended nature inevitably imply a big volume of data. The researcher is then required to select from amongst the questions in order to be able to manage the data. In my study, I ran the risk of generating a big volume of data since each question was structured in such a way that participants could comment or elaborate on their responses in an open-ended way.

The questionnaire that I designed (Appendix E) contains both convergent and divergent questions. After investigating literature on quality in early learning centres and quality assurance frameworks, I decided on the questions for the questionnaire (Douglas, 2004; Golberg, 1999; Ogston, 2003; Perlman, Zellman & Le 2004; Podmore & Meade, 2000; Sheridan & Pramling-Samuelsson, 2001). Woodhead's model (1996) for conceptualising quality in early learning centres, on which my theoretical framework is based, also contributed a great deal in informing questions for the questionnaire. I used the advice from Hittleman and Simon (2002: 27) who recommend that questionnaires require the respondent to write answers to questions about a topic in a structured form with fixed choices, or the form may be open, in that the respondent can use his or her own words. For Charles and Mertler (2002: 148) descriptions are verbal representations of participants, objects, procedures and settings which may be given in summary form or in great detail. The questionnaire consists of 35 closed and 38 open-ended questions.

When I developed the questionnaire, I applied the advice of Creswell (2008: 401–402) to assure that the questions were not unclear, not too wordy, did not include unnecessary words and jargon, that there were not overlapping responses that could lead to confusion and that the questions did not include overly technical language, but were simplified to ensure that all participants could easily understand the questions. After completion I gave the pilot questionnaire to a few of my final year mentor students[4] to complete and to comment on. I then made adaptations by eliminating or changing some of the questions. Most of the changes involved the

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[4] Most of the lecturers have a number of final year students assigned to them for whom they act as mentors during their final internship period. These students are regularly visited at the schools and mentored by their mentor lecturer.

logical grouping of questions or the changing of terminology into familiar and uniform terminology to eliminate any uncertainties by the respondents. After discussions with colleagues about the changes, I finalised the questionnaire and submitted the questionnaire to the University of Pretoria's Faculty of Education Research Ethics Committee for approval. After completion of their compulsory teaching practice module (JPO 280) the questionnaires were voluntarily completed by 235 students in a University of Pretoria lecture hall under supervision. As mentioned in 3.6.1 only 213 of the 235 questionnaires were completed in full and suitable for data analysis.

3.6.2 Qualitative data collection

In this study, the qualitative data of interest was recorded by the research participants (the students) through their own direct observations by means of open ended-responses in the questionnaire (Appendix E) and with reflective journals (Appendix O) that the student-participants completed to capture the behaviour and interaction of the children and the staff members in the early learning centres. The same 235 B Ed Early Childhood Education II students who completed the questionnaires, were involved in the qualitative data collection methods, namely observation by means of 235 reflective journals with field notes, of which I selected 60 (criteria for selection are discussed in 3.6.2.1) for qualitative thematic analysis. Another qualitative data collection method was face to face structured interviews with 235 teachers, conducted by the 235 fieldworkers. There were also face to face structured interviews with parents (mothers). All of the answered interview schedules of both types of interviews were used in a thematic analysis.

Ary *et al.* (2002: 430–431) state that observation is the most basic method for obtaining data in qualitative research. They argue that the qualitative researcher may be a participant or a non-participant in the situation being observed. Participatory observation is performed when the researcher, an unknown person to the location, joins the scene and to a lesser extent takes part in the activities. He or she stays an outsider and uses field notes to document observations as a method to capture data (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 42).

The role of the students as fieldworkers can be classified as that of participant observers. Merriam (2009: 136) explains that fieldwork (as participant observation is often labelled) entails, going to the field meaning "the site, program or institution, to observe the phenomenon under study". An investigator can carry out observations from various standpoints, namely, from being a complete participant and insider as a group member to being an observer as total outsider who is unfamiliar to the subjects that are being observed. Merriam points out that in both stances of being an outsider or insider, there are benefits as well as shortcomings. In this study, the participants are neither complete outsiders nor outsiders, but outsiders who have become insiders in a part-time capacity.

To compensate substantially for the disadvantage of being time-consuming, the richness of the data attained from direct observation offers meaningful insights. Spending prolonged periods of time and paying continual interest to the significant behaviours taking place "in the ongoing behavioural stream" are both informative and beneficial for the data collection process (Rolfe, 2001: 230). One would assume that the presence of the fieldworkers could be unnatural or a hindrance to the children, however in his research, Rolfe (2001: 238) found that preschool children hardly notice the observers after the observers have been in an early learning centre for an extended time.

Thomas (1998: 12) points out that gathering research data by means of observation involves watching and/or listening to educational events. Rolfe (2001: 224) acknowledges that most students in early childhood education become skilled at proficient observation techniques, because reliable and cautious observation is an essential part of high-quality teaching. He emphasises that classroom practice techniques, consisting of "anecdotal records, checklists, rating scales and time and event sampling", are precisely those used in observational research (Rolfe, 2001: 224). In order to prepare the students (fieldworkers) to be informed in terms of observation, I trained them during a two hour long practical instruction session and provided instructions in their hand-outs. I trained them through a lecture with a PowerPoint presentation that included all the instructions and that was illustrated with numerous photographs. There was also a discussion session that allowed for questions, answers and explanations to clarify any uncertainties. The instructions

regarding the observations that were included in the students' study guides are provided in Appendix O.

3.6.2.1   Document selection of students' observations: reflective journals

As I have stated earlier, in response to my request, many students volunteered to submit their reflective journals for research purposes. However, I did not use all the reflective journals submitted by the students. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 154) remind us that documents like reflective journals are quite extensive and necessitate careful management "if you are not to become swamped by the sheer volume of the material". Ary *et al.,(*2002: 27) point out that in the process of document selection, authenticity and validity of the documents should be determined. When I started to analyse the documents it was clear that some of the journals were actually just diary inscriptions without reflections of the prescribed aspects (as explained in the assignment Appendix D). I purposively selected 60 journals that adhered to the following criteria: (a) The journals had to have detailed descriptions of the student-participants' experiences and not be mere diary inscriptions of events and activities. (b) The inscriptions had to capture the beneficiaries' experiences in terms of the *atmosphere* in the early learning centres. (c) The student-participants had to capture anything that they noticed (behaviour, emotions or body language) that indicated the children's experiences of being at the early learning centres. (d) The student-participants had to reflect on the relationships between the teachers and children and amongst the teachers themselves. (e) The student-participants had to reflect on what they as students had learned in terms of teaching/themselves/the children/the teachers etc.) (f) They had possibly indicated whether there were things that they would have done differently and had explained why they said so.

For this study, the student-participants observed children and teachers in early learning centres (their normal, everyday environments), since it does not make sense, as Rolfe (2001: 229) remarks, "to bring them into a structured setting like a university laboratory". In my study, I wished for the children to be observed doing their normal daily activities in the manner that they usually do every day of the week in their early learning centres. Rolfe (2001: 236) points out "these settings are

'naturalistic' in the sense of business-as-usual, everyday environments over which the observer exercises no control".

Reflexivity is a familiar feature in most qualitative studies. Most of the meanings for the term reflexivity refer to the design of a study. Reflexivity can be introduced from the beginning of the study to increase researchers' understanding of the interest area (Edwards, 2001: 122–123). Case study designs often have the specific aim that the analysed data from one source can inform the way data from a different source is gathered. In Edwards' (2001: 123) opinion, "reflexivity is clearly one of the major advantages of qualitative designs for examining the messy and constantly changing context of early childhood". She furthermore alerts researchers to be mindful of reaching stability between "engaged commitment to the field and the capacity to offer an informed and research-based interpretation".

In Rolfe's (2001: 226) view, depending on the topic area, the object of direct observation is mostly the behaviour of children, parents or early childhood staff. He explains that the purpose of behavioural observations are not at all times aimed at understanding the subjects being observed, but may rather be used in research for instance, to assess curriculum delivery, intervention effectiveness, or as is the case in my study, the quality of early learning centres (Rolfe, 2001: 224).

Merriam (2009: 149) explains that researcher-generated documents, like reflective journals, can either be prepared by the researcher or by the participants with the particular aim to have a better comprehension of the investigated state of affairs, people or experience. In my study, I followed her advice to researchers, to specifically ask participants (students) to capture evidence in a journal about their observations of activities throughout the inquiry period. Machado and Meyer Botnarescue (2001: 19–20) note that many training programmes require student teachers to keep a journal of their experiences and feelings during their teaching practice. In these journals, student-participants get the opportunity to view their personal opinions, insights and expressions regarding a wide range of aspects. The same authors suggest that student-participants can use the journals to reflect on topics like classroom dilemmas, feelings about all aspects of the classroom,

relationships with children and staff, new ideas to improve instruction and how they worked, perceptions on what is going well and what not, why it would be great (or not) to be a child in the centre, special children's needs, children's interests and favourite spots in the centre, planned and unscheduled activities.

There are some aspects that are easy and straightforward to capture through the indication of their presence or absence, for example phenomena like physical structures or types of activities. Early learning centres however are comprised of much more than meet the eye. There is, for example, an ambience or atmosphere in an early learning centre that cannot be determined by, or is not necessarily related to, qualifications, physical space, concrete materials or apparatus. Abstract concepts like atmosphere are often portrayed through feelings, tone of voice, gestures, body language and the expression of various emotions. How does one indicate whether an early learning centre is a welcoming, inviting place with a friendly atmosphere or a centre where there is tension and lack of hospitality? The warmth and caring nature of a teacher can not be measured or captured, but can be noticed and experienced by those that are in her presence. Atmosphere is characterised by warm or tense relationships amongst staff members, or between caregivers and children. Whether children are feeling welcomed and content at the centre and in their classes are also part of the atmosphere of a centre. (Bullard, 2010: 45–46; Krogh & Morehouse, 2008: 45–46, Morrison, 2006: 129; Mayesky, 2009: 93–96; Schirrmacher, 2006: 326–327; Trister-Dodge, Colker & Heroman, 2003: 76–78)

Aspects similar to those explained in the previous paragraph are amongst those that the student-participants were requested to be on the look-out for and to reflect-on every second day in more or less ten sentences in their reflective journals (Appendix O). For the purpose of this study, the student-participants were specifically requested to observe those aspects that are not directly visible to an outsider: aspects like the atmosphere in the centres and relationships between the teachers and children were captured by means of their reflective journals. They were in an ideal situation to be part of the early learning centres for a while, but they were not directly responsible for the above-mentioned aspects. The student-participants were asked to identify what was determining the atmosphere in the early learning centres and to indicate how

they as students, as well as the children, experienced the atmosphere at the early childhood centres.

There are benefits and shortcomings when a researcher chooses to implement reflective journals. A limitation that Merriam (2009: 137) warns about is that regardless of the observers' positions, they cannot prevent affecting and also being influenced by the settings and, therefore, some deformation of the situation as it exists under non-research circumstances might occur. Finally, she alerts observers to make very detailed documentations of the observations as they form the database for analysis. It is apparent that there is a variety of types for field notes, but that they must certainly include "descriptions, direct quotations and observer comments".

Regardless of the disadvantages, documents are valuable for obtaining data for various reasons. As Merriam concurs:

> *... they may be the best source of data on a particular subject, better than observations or interviews. Many documents contain information that would take an investigator enormous time and effort to gather otherwise. Situations where documents are likely to be the best source of data would be studies of intimate personal relationships that cannot be observed or that people would be reluctant to discuss. The data can furnish descriptive information, verifying emerging hypotheses, advance new categories and hypotheses, offer historical understanding, track change and development, and so on (Merriam, 2009:155).*

Rolfe (2001: 226) remarks that observation is the base of all research data. His comment refers to the classification of observation as "one person's perception or measurement of something about someone else". The data obtained from the questionnaires, reflective journals and interviews in my study are then, according to his description, all by some means based on observation (Rolfe, 2001: 226). In this study, the observations made by the students were documented in the questionnaires (explained in 3.6.1.1 a) as well as in their reflective journals.

Merriam (2009: 136) emphasises that when observation is used in combination with interviewing to gather data, a holistic explanation can be made of the investigated phenomenon. She prefers to apply observation as a data generating technique in instances **"**when behaviour can be observed firsthand or when people cannot or will not discuss the research topic". In my study, I therefore chose reflective journals as a quantitative data generating technique together with interview schedules.

3.6.2.2   Interviews with parents (mothers): interview schedule

The purpose of the fieldworkers' interviews with parents (mothers) was to obtain comprehensive and comparable data about parents' experiences of quality in early learning centres (Greeff, 2005: 292). The face to face structured interviews (Appendix I) were organised around areas of particular interest (quality in early learning centres), while still allowing considerable flexibility in scope and depth. After investigating literature on quality in early learning centres (Douglas, 2004: 9; Ebbeck & Waniganayake; 2003: 109; Kostelnik *et al.*, 2004: 8) and on interviewing adults (Cannold, 2001: 178–192; Hoffstee, 2006: 135–136), I formulated the questions for the interview schedule (see Appendix I). I discussed the options of the different questions in my draft interview schedule with colleagues in the Department of Early Childhood Education of the University of Pretoria, for their input and advice before I finalised the interview schedule. These experienced colleagues have been involved in similar research projects and are experts in the field of early childhood education. I included open-ended questions and avoided questions that were judgemental or too personal. I wrote the questions in several different drafts to ensure that I used neutral phrases that would not be intimidating or offensive, because I did not want to harm the interview process by causing the interviewees to get defensive or to shut down (Hofstee, 2006: 135). I piloted the interview schedule (see Appendix I) when I included the questions in an observation assignment for a student group to complete.

Dexter (in Merriam, 2009: 88) states that "interviewing is the preferred tactic of data collection when ... it will get better data or more data or less cost than other tactics!" In Merriam's opinion "interviewing is sometimes the only way to get data", for example in certain instances where it is not possible to observe behaviour, or to

determine how people feel and make sense of the world around them. I chose the method of interviewing for data collection, because interviewing is particularly useful when collecting data from a large number of people representing a broad range of ideas (Merriam, 2009: 88).

Research interviews are frequently structured face to face interviews between the researcher and participant(s) wherein the researcher aims to obtain the participant's personal, subjective opinion on a topic which concerns the researcher. Researchers often use an interview guide to supply the required structure to guarantee that conversational interviews are to the point and useful (Cannold, 2001: 179). Edwards (2001: 131) claims that when case study researchers want to discover how people, for example parents of young children, feel and to try to understand the way that they behave, face to face interviews can provide valuable insight. She argues that "case study researchers often use interviews to explore their interpretations of the data and the tentative links they have been making between elements of the case as part of a process of progressively increasing an understanding of the case".

In my study, the structured interviews were conducted face to face. Seidman (1991: 77) remarks that "interviewing requires interviewers to have enough *distance* to enable them to ask real questions and to explore, not to share assumptions". Then again, according to Thomas (1998: 12), because of the nature of interviews they have the benefit that they permit the researcher to rephrase questions that respondents do not understand, and also allow respondents to elaborate on their ideas. The students visited the early learning centres as outsiders, however due to their participation in the centres' programme during the three weeks, they gained enough understanding and experience of the situation to know when to clarify and explore certain responses of the participants more fully.

(a)   Advantages of structured face to face interviews

Face to face interviews have the advantage that the response rates are usually higher than for telephone interviews (Gray, 2009: 233; McMillan & Schumacher,

2006: 211) and response bias is fairly low "because refusals are usually equally spread across all types of respondents" (Gray, 2009: 233). Non-judgemental questions and responses are a way for the interviewer to establish rapport with participants, and to encourage trust during face to face interviews. When participants, like parents, feel their experiences and views are being heard, understood and responded to non-judgementally, they often feel validated. Usually participants become more forthcoming and honest in their response to questions (Cannold, 2001: 187).

One of the benefits of including face to face interviews as a data collection source, is that interviews can be utilised to compensate for some of the limitations of questionnaires that I discussed in 3.6.1. As Thomas (1998: 12) explains, talking with informants enables researchers to gather diverse types of information, for example the informants' patterns of thought, abilities, moral values, interests, ambitions, plans, judgements of other people, and recall of events. Face to face interviews are further beneficial in that some rapport can be established with the interviewee at the start of the interview that is helpful in discovering a respondent's reasons "for doing something or holding a personal belief" (Gray 2009: 233). Structured face to face interviews are an effective method for asking open questions, to elicit detailed responses and for asking probing questions to clarify answers that are not clear or incomplete (Creswell, 2008: 396; Gray, 2009: 233; Hittleman & Simon, 2002: 27).

Additional strengths that various authors emphasise are the usefulness of face to face interviews to provide in-depth information, to ask sensitive questions and to determine attitudes (McMillan & Schumacher 2006: 211; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009: 239). The advantages that interviews offer that also apply to my study can be summarised as being flexible, adaptable, having the ability to probe and clarify unclear answers, and having a high response rate (Creswell, 2008: 396; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 211).

(b)   Disadvantages of structured face to face interviews

Face to face interviews are non-anonymous (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 211) and not all interviewees feel at ease or are willing to reveal information about

themselves during an interview (Creswell, 2008: 396). A limitation that Greeff (2005: 299) warns about, is that the participant may find in-depth interviewing emotionally troubling. The researcher may ask questions that suggest the desired responses from the participants and responses could be misinterpreted or even be untruthful at times (Greeff, 2005: 299).

Hittleman and Simon (2002: 27) explain that interviews differ from questionnaires in the sense that the researcher can modify the data collection situation to fit the respondent's replies. For example, additional information can be solicited or a question can be rephrased. I feel the option of rephrasing or adding information was also beneficial in the collection of data in my study. It was visible in a few instances that certain fieldworkers added some of their own additional questions, however, the majority of the fieldworkers only asked the prescribed questions.

Structured face to face interviews are furthermore expensive and time-consuming (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 211; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009: 239), since they require large amounts of interviewer time, a considerable percentage of which is often spent travelling to and from interviews (Gray, 2009: 233). With regard to my study, the cost factor and time restriction were eliminated, because I used multiple investigators (students) who were based at the sites for teaching practice purposes and who did not have to travel for the interviews specifically. The data analysis process, however, was very time-consuming for the open-ended items (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009: 239) and I had to deal with this limitation in terms of my time management.

The criticism about interviews, namely that they provide the researcher with the "official account" are in Greeff's opinion (2005: 299) not valid. She asks, what better way is there to inquire about individuals lives, than asking themselves. For her, interviews have particular strengths in terms of obtaining a lot of data quickly and especially obtaining the data in depth.

Each student could approach any parent who had children in the early learning centre where the student was doing her teaching practice session, with a request for an interview. There was no restriction in terms of gender, but all the female students (fieldworkers), approached mothers. The fieldworkers asked the parents the prescribed questions and then wrote the mothers' responses in their field notes. During the information session prior to their teaching practice sessions, I informed the fieldworkers about the methods and procedures of interviewing, for example good communication techniques and listening skills (Greeff, 2005: 288–290). The fieldworkers were encouraged to apply the above-mentioned techniques and to remember that the purpose of interviewing is "to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (Patton, 2005: 341). Patton also reminds us that the qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption "that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" and that we interview to "find out what is in someone else's mind, to gather their stories".

The fieldworkers had to organise interview sessions to conduct the prescribed interview schedules. These interviews occurred during the last part of their teaching practice session when they had more knowledge about the specific early learning centres and its people. The fieldworkers were requested to write down the responses and to make field notes (examples in Appendix J) about their insights, ideas, inspirations and judgements (Patton, 2005: 305; Gay *et al.,* 2009: 410).

3.6.2.3   Interviews with teachers: interview schedule

Cubey and Dalli (cited in Podmore & Meade, 2000: 11) stress the importance of early childhood staff being involved in the evaluation of their own programmes to ensure that inappropriate evaluation methods are not externally imposed. In a literature review relating to quality evaluation of early childhood programmes, they note that evaluation is closely connected to providing a high quality childhood service. I share the same opinion and therefore included interviews with teachers as an important part of my data collection. The purpose of the interviews with the teachers was aimed at creating a platform and giving the teachers opportunities to voice their opinions

and to share their experiences as insiders on the important aspect of quality in the early learning centre work environment.

Interviews are one of various instruments that can be used for collecting data. Interviews are useful for becoming aware of the way that participants give meaning to their lives. Some early childhood researchers explicitly favour the use of interview methodologies to acknowledge teachers' right to be heard, to hear the voices of those that are "habitually marginalised" (Hauser in Cannold, 2001: 179). Towards the end of the teaching practice session each student had to interview the teacher (Appendix I) where she was placed, spent the most time with and with whom she established a close relationship during the three weeks of teaching practice.

Greeff (2005: 298–299) states that both empirical observation as well as interpretations ought to be included in the field notes. Emotions, hunches, questions, expectations, insights, presumptions, and prejudices are captured in the final field note product (Gay *et.al.,* 2001: 370; Greeff, 2005: 298–299). According to Patton (2005: 301), field notes contain the description of what was seen and heard and everything that the observer believes to be significant, should be included. The lack of accuracy of field notes can be a big disadvantage, therefore the field notes must be written as soon as possible after observation because "as the interval between observing and writing becomes longer, the likelihood of distortion from the original observation also increases" (Gay *et al.,* 2009: 367).

Field notes should be written by people with no preconceptions, who recognise and dismiss their own assumptions and biases and who are open to what they see. They must try to see things through the participants' perspectives otherwise the value of the field notes will be seriously limited (Gay *et al.,* 2009: 367). Examples of the field notes that some of the students as fieldworkers wrote, are available in Appendix J.

3.7   DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

As Creswell (2008: 558) explains, "the mixed method researcher compares the results from quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine if the two databases

yield similar or dissimilar results". According to Creswell, triangulated data can illustrate convergence, inconsistency, and complementary results. McMillan and Schumacher (2006) confirm that "the interpretation of results is the key to this method, as it provides a convergence of evidence in which the results of different methods converge and support one another, researchers have triangulated the findings. The use of different methods results in very strong results. Often the strengths of one method offset the weaknesses of the other, which allows for a much stronger overall design and thus more credible conclusions".

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001: 158–159) suggest that the researcher should start right from the initial phases to make a distinction between data which is noteworthy or not in terms of the research question, to look out for regularities and patterns, and to create clarifications and options. They emphasise "these formulations need to be very lightly held to begin with – it is important to be sceptical". The same authors recommend referral to earlier notes and support from documents and to confirmation seeking from other sources as the study progresses. These approaches are utilised "to test the findings for plausibility, to confirm your assumptions and to demonstrate validity". This procedure is known as 'saturation' where fragmentary explanations of events are continually checked against the data "in an attempt to falsify it". Through the continuous testing they may be discarded, adapted or elaborated (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 158–159)

In my study, data analysis was done in the concurrent triangular mixed method where I merged the data by implementing quantitative as well as qualitative analysis methods. The results were then interpreted collectively to offer a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Because of the triangular design, the quantitative and qualitative data were analysed concurrently and in an integrated fashion (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 404–405)

3.7.1. Quantitative data analysis

In my study, the only quantitative data that needed to be analysed, were the questionnaires. Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 98) state that quantitative data

analysis takes place in different stages. The raw data are transformed into computer readable format in the first, preparatory stage. Because this raw data can be unordered, and contain errors and missing values, they must be transformed into an ordered, error-free data set before they can be analysed. The first phase requires coding, entering and cleaning of data (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999: 98). I used statistical procedures to analyse the closed-end questions in the questionnaires (Durrheim, 1999: 96). I first coded the closed-end questions manually by physically calculating the responses (see Appendix F for examples of this phase), and then I grouped the responses in columns (see Appendix G for examples of this phase). In quantitative designs, the aim is to indicate the frequency of the data in terms of how much or how many and the outcomes are typically presented in numerical form (Merriam, 2009: 5).The results in the handwritten columns were then captured electronically in spreadsheets (see Appendix G for examples of this phase) in order to be depicted in graphs and figures. To ensure reliability an information specialist[5] assisted me in capturing the relevant data in pie charts. This visual presentation facilitated the analysis and interpretation process.

According to Burton, Brundett and Jones (2008: 162), it is a weakness that many researchers feel overwhelmed "by a deluge of data". They suggest the drawing of diagrams to help with this dilemma. Depending on the type and quantity of data, the advantages of quantitative data analysis according to Opie, (2004: 151) are that the analysis can be relatively straightforward and quick. Statistics are often used to describe some characteristics of a sample group, and also to test for similarities as well as differences between groups. The results of the analysis are then interpreted and relatable conclusions made. The next step after the analysis process, was to interpret the research results and to look for their significance and implications (Aubrey *et al.*, 2000: 50; Kruger, De Vos, Fouché & Venter, 2005: 218).

3.7.2 Qualitative data analysis

The qualitative data in my study that needed to be analysed, were the written responses on the interview schedules with the parents and teachers, the open-ended

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[5] Marietjie Schutte, Information Science, University of Pretoria

questions of the questionnaires, as well as the reflective journals with field notes and photographs that were captured by the fieldworkers. Creswell (2005: 230) states that for qualitative data to be analysed, one needs to understand how to make sense of text and images so that you can inform answers to your research questions. The words of Ary *et al.,* (2002: 425) describe what I attempted to achieve in my study, specifically through the data analysis:

> *The collected data are in the subjects' experiences and perspectives; the qualitative researcher attempts to arrive at a rich description of the people, objects, events, places, conversations, and so on.*

For Henning *et al.* (2004: 6), data analysis in qualitative research is an "ongoing, emerging and iterative or non-linear process". Analysing qualitative data, according to Seidel (1998: 1), is a process consisting of three parts: noticing, collecting and thinking about interesting things. He says finding the relationships between the parts is a process, not linear and has an iterative and progressive cycle that keeps repeating. The cycle is recursive, meaning that you may start noticing new things during the second step of collecting. Lastly, the cycle is holographic in that each step in the process contains the entire process. Seidel admits that although this is a simple foundation, the process of doing qualitative data analysis, is complex. Patton (2005: 452) is in agreement about the complexity and argues that one requires many underlying abilities, or competencies to do thematic analysis. Boyatzis (1998: 7) refers to *pattern recognition* or the ability to see patterns in seemingly random information. The term *pattern* usually refers to a descriptive finding.

Developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step of analysis (Patton, 2005: 463). Although there are computer programs available which can support qualitative analysis, Edwards (2001: 132) advises that these programs should be chosen carefully and utilised only if they offer the required support. He warns that "analysis should not be led by what the analysis program can do" (Edwards, 2001: 132). After data collection, I started the analysis process by organising the data. I used inductive analysis where categories and patterns started to appear from the data during analysis, rather than being decided on before the data collection process (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 364, 374, 375). Instead of a computer software package, I implemented a common manual data analysis strategy suggested by Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001: 159). I photocopied the

data set (field notes of interview schedules and reflective journal inscriptions and questionnaires), coded each response to differentiate between the sources (see Appendix K, M, P examples), classified the responses into types and sorted all of the responses into categories (see Appendix H for examples).

Patton (2005: 453) notes that no clear-cut or agreed-on terms describe varieties and processes of qualitative analysis. In my study, I used thematic analysis that refers to the "analysis of narrative data using a variety of inductive and iterative techniques, including categorical and contextualising strategies" (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009: 343). Patton refers to thematic analysis as "any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume qualitative material and attempts to try to identify core consistencies and meanings" (Patton, 2005: 453). The process that I followed was to search the texts in the interview transcripts, reflective journals and questionnaires for recurring words or themes. The structured interview responses of teachers and parents were already documented in hard copy format by the fieldworkers when I received them. I analysed these responses electronically and identified themes (Appendices K & M) and topics (Appendices L & N). I grouped themes that emerged from the interviews under broad categories based on my theoretical framework, specifically the quality indicators, namely the input, process and outcome indicators. I organised and coded the inscriptions in broad categories (refer to Appendices L & N for examples) to produce a record of the things that I have noticed (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2003: 258).

I analysed the content of the purposively selected reflective journals by means of thematic analysis in order to identify significant themes as explained in 3.5.1.2a (Patton, 2005: 463). The last qualitative data source was the qualitative open-ended responses of students in terms of a questionnaire. I analysed the written responses from the students according to themes that emerged (Henning *et al.*, 2004: 6; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 374). I used photographs to verify and extend the written reports.

To analyse observational data (as documented in reflective journals) in particular the qualitative variety, can be time-consuming, especially when the analysis involves the transcription of qualitative data into a quantitative structure as was the case in my

study (Rolfe, 2001: 238). I am in agreement with Edwards (2001: 132) who says "to be drowning in data is not a pleasant experience". He states that working in a structured manner is therefore a vital characteristic for the researcher and the "physical sorting of data needs to start as soon as evidence starts to accumulate". For Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 101) the disadvantage of this phase of qualitative analysis is that coding and entering data are labour-intensive and boring tasks, and that errors can easily arise. The human factor should not be overlooked. To address the aspect of possible errors, I repeated the process and compared the responses in my coding system to the original data sources to double check for accuracy. McMillan & Schumacher (2006: 364) alert researchers by saying "making sense of the data depends largely on the researcher's intellectual rigor and tolerance for tentativeness of interpretation, until the entire analysis is completed". There is always the possibility that some of the embedded information could be missed or not correctly understood as it was meant by participants (Patton, 2005). Although I am the primary researcher, I am the third party and therefore the students' meaning is also embedded in the transcriptions of the responses.

The main strength of qualitative data analysis is that it is possible to obtain rich data from different sources that can contribute to valuable findings. Merriam (2009: 16) believes:

> *The product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about the phenomenon. There are likely to be descriptions of the context, the participants involved, and the activities of interest. In addition, data in the form of quotes from documents, field notes, and participant interviews or a combination of these are always included in support of the findings of the study. These quotes and excerpts contribute to the descriptive nature of qualitative research.*

Analysis is more than coding, sorting and sifting (Seidel, 1998: 4). Analysing implies taking apart words, sentences and paragraphs through organising, reducing and describing the data, with the purpose to make sense of and interpret that data (Henning *et al.,* 2004: 6).

Following the coding of separate data sources, I compared all the responses of the different data sources in terms of the interrelated themes (refer to Appendix L for examples) and investigated specific patterns and categories that arose from the data. These patterns and categories were reflected in the interpretation of findings where I looked out for comparisons, causes, consequences and relationships to make sense of the data (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2003: 258; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 374–375; Nieuwenhuis, 2007: 111; Patton, 2005: 465, 478). The results will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

3.8   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

3.8.1 Introduction: what ethics?

In their book *Ethics and politics in early childhood education*, Dahlberg and Moss (2007: 64–85) ask *what ethics* underlie the work of researchers in the field of early childhood education. They distinguish between universal(istic) ethics which is "an expression of the Enlightenment project of refounding morality and social life on universal and rationally compelling principles" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2007: 65) and postmodern ethics which is characterised by a turn away from the universalistic approach. They describe postmodern ethics as follows:

> *This new direction has led to the exploration of a number of connected themes: responsibility, relationships, situatedness, and otherness are particularly important.*

Rather than seeking universal truths or following universal prescriptions, postmodern approaches to ethics foreground wisdom, which involves an active practice to decide what is best in a concrete situation. They are interested in particularities and the emotions associated with particular experiences rather than seeking the dispassionate application of general and abstract principles. Postmodern approaches to ethics also recognise and acknowledge the uncertainty, messiness and provisionality of decision making (Dahlberg & Moss, 2007: 69). The constructivist (in particular social constructionist) theoretical paradigm that informs my study is aligned with such postmodern thinking.

Dahlberg and Moss (2007: 65) argue that "though discussions of ethics do involve theory, they are not just theoretical, but a very practical matter that is the systematic and critical reflection on human action". For this reason my discussion of ethical considerations relevant to my study includes both a brief reflection on the implications of a constructivist (more specifically a social constructionist) theoretical paradigm for the research endeavour in general and how this theoretical paradigm has informed my research practice.

3.8.2 Ethics informed by a social constructionist metatheoretical paradigm

My constructivist (social constructionist) metatheoretical paradigm (explained in 3.2.1) implies a particular ethical focus and stance. For this reason I lean towards the kind of ethical guidelines proposed by researchers that share this paradigm.

Freedman and Combs (1996: 269-272) refer to a number of *ethical postures* described by Karl Tomm. He developed a model that is primarily aimed at understanding ethical postures in therapeutic research and practice, but Tomm's model is also relevant to ethical issues in the field of education. His model offers a thoughtful description of possible ethical stances. He argues that his model describes certain postures through which he wants to constitute himself in relation to others. It also assists him in using and inventing language that will support and remind him to make ethical choices he wants to make in an ongoing way.

The following diagram (Figure 3.2) represents Tomm's model with regard to possible ethical postures.

Decrease options

```
                          MANIPULATION                 CONFRONTATION
                       (based on secret knowledge    (based on shared knowledge
                         and closing down options)      and limited options)
```

Secret knowledge   **Shared knowledge**

```
                          SUCCORANCE                    EMPOWERMENT
                (Support in times of hardship and    (based on shared knowledge
                          distress)                      and many options)
                   (based on professional knowledge
                          and open options)
```
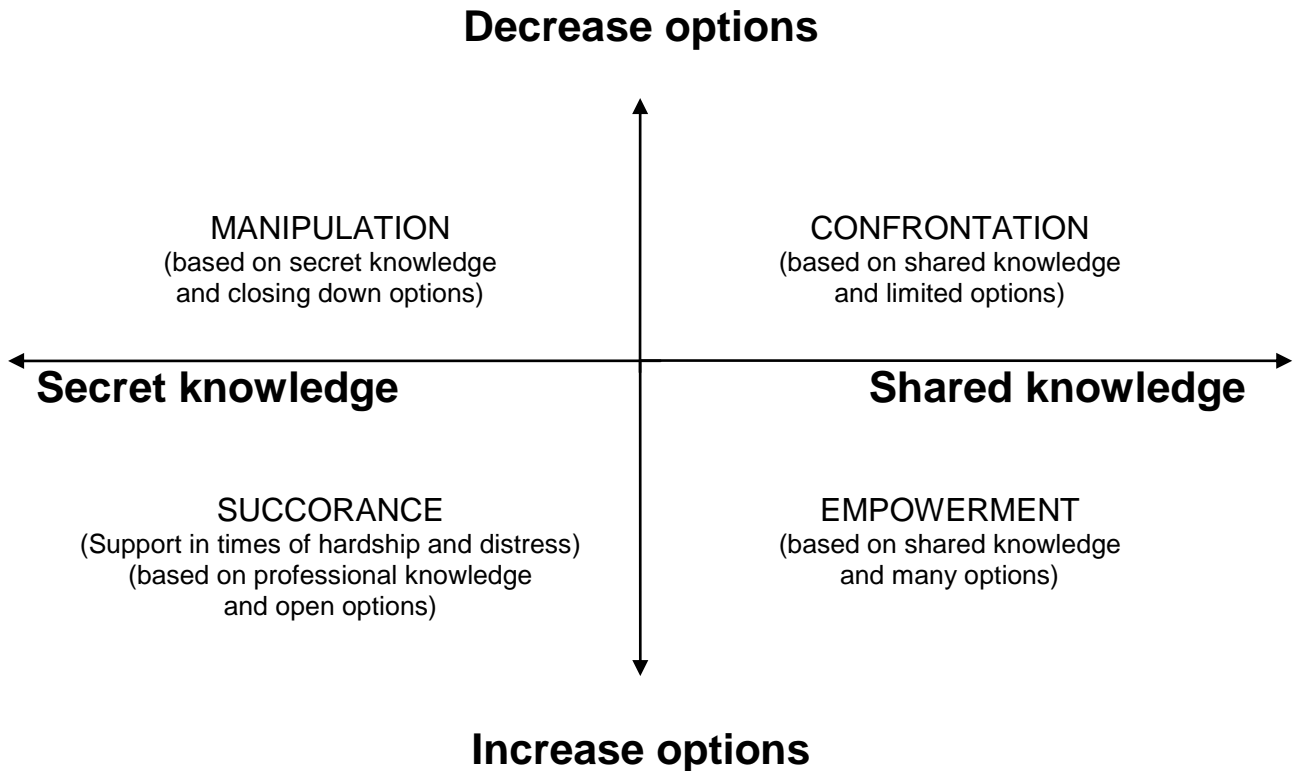
Increase options

Figure 3.2: Diagram of Karl Tomm's model for ethical postures (Freedman & Combs, 1996)

The diagram above suggests that there are four basic ethical postures. The horizontal axis plots the way knowledge is shared in communication between people. The extreme left end of the axis represents communication that is based in "secret" knowledge, such as professional knowledge or knowledge that is accessible to only certain beneficiaries but not others. The extreme right end represents actions that are based in shared knowledge, so that all parties are informed and collaborating in the process. The vertical axis represents the intended means through which actions are performed. This axis consists of a continuum that goes from reducing options or closing space at the top to increasing options or opening space at the bottom. With these two dimensions in mind, Tomm labels the four quadrants *manipulation* (based on secret knowledge and closing down options), *confrontation* (based on shared knowledge and limited options), *succorance* (based on professional knowledge and open options) and *empowerment* (based on shared knowledge and many options).

Tomm's preferred ethical stance involves engaging primarily in *empowering* relationships and also in *succorant* ones (Freedman & Combs 1996: 271). Both the

empowering and succorant stances involve increasing options or opening space. The purpose of my study is aligned with these two ethical stances, first by giving a voice to various beneficiaries, and secondly by making knowledge and insights available that could increase options with regard to quality education.

3.8.3 Ethical guidelines

Freedman and Combs (1996: 271) suggest that, given their postmodern, social constructionist stance, a number of specific guidelines inform their research and actions. While reminding us that ethics is about people and relationships, they offer several guidelines that — in terms of Tomm's model — serve the empowerment of themselves and others: grounding (being sensitive), recursioning (being mindful), coherencing (being congruent), and authenticating (being honest).

With regard to the emphasis on people and relationships, Freedman and Combs (1996: 269–271) argue that Tomm's model particularly questions whose voices are dominant in discourses under investigation (see the discussion on recursioning below). Building relationships of trust are also of paramount importance. My study created space for establishing and nurturing relationships of trust, especially between the student teachers and the children attending early learning centres, between the student teachers and teachers at the early learning centres, and to a lesser extent between the student teachers and the parents — all due to three weeks of exposure to each other at the early learning centres. Space was also created for establishing a relationship of trust between the main researcher and the fieldworkers due to six months of exposure to each other in a lecturer-student relationship.

The first guideline articulated by Freedman and Combs (1996: 271) that they follow in empowering themselves and others, is *grounding,* which includes "attending to the contexts and conditions of others, listening carefully, and sharing descriptions rather than keeping them private" (Freedman & Combs 1996: 271). A number of elements of my research made the above possible. (a) The students as fieldworkers were exposed to the circumstances, programmes and stories of research participants for a period of three weeks, which offered them an opportunity to explore and even

experience the contexts of research participants. (b) During the three week period the teacher students wrote reflective journals that contained information on the contexts of research participants. Reflective journals also contained valuable information on shared descriptions of research participants. (c) Furthermore, the design of my study gives a voice in different ways to various stakeholders in the field of early childhood education, including parents, teachers, student teachers and policy makers.

The second guideline, *recursioning* (being mindful) includes "assuming that one is assuming" (Freedman & Combs 1996: 271). This applies to everybody involved in the research project. In the case of my study, this includes fieldworkers and other participants such as all the beneficiaries of early childhood education who have been interviewed, observed, etc. Student teachers were trained to be mindful of the experiences and opinions of others, not only their own. The voices of children in particular were foregrounded in the reflective journals. The open ended questions included in the questionnaires also created space for sharing such reflective experiences.

The third ethical guideline, *coherencing* (being congruent) involves avoiding inconsistencies between intent and effect and being attuned to emotional dynamics in order to seek intuitive consistency (Freedman & Combs 1996: 271). Thus, what researchers do is not evaluated by how well their actions follow rules, but by the actual effects on people's lives. MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford (2001: 270) also state that ethics in research refers to a consideration of the effects of the research on the rights and well-being of all those who may be affected by the research. With regard to coherencing, I was struck by how prominently the *emotional element* of experiences featured in the reflective journals of student teachers. In order to prevent unrealistic expectations, but also unintended effects of my study on the lives of persons and institutions, I obtained the *informed consent* of participants. All participants were informed about the purpose and methods of my research, and that their inputs would be treated anonymously. Informed consent is a prerequisite within an ethical framework where a focus on people and relationships and sensitivity to the effects of practices serve as overarching guidelines (Freedman & Combs, 1996: 269).

One of the first steps of the journey of my study was to adhere to the ethical criteria of the University of Pretoria and to obtain the necessary permission to conduct research with the participants. Since the early learning centres are not attached to the Department of Education, I did not require consent from the Department. However, I obtained the free consent of the principals of the early learning centres, the teachers and parents and students, which means that they decided to engage in the activities without coercion or pressure (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008: 142). All the participants were informed that their participation in the research project was voluntary and confidential. They were also notified that they would not be requested to provide any information that reveals their identity and that no information would be connected to a specific person or institution and that all information would therefore be handled anonymously. Participants were assured that their trust was appreciated and their privacy respected, and that all individuals and the early learning centres would remain anonymous and none would be identifiable through the study. From the principals, teachers and parents I obtained consent to use the interviews. The students gave consent that I could also use their reflective journals and the questionnaires. I applied for, and was granted, ethical clearance for this project. The relevant letters of consent (Appendix B) and the ethical certificate of proof (Appendix C) are available.

A fiduciary relationship exists between student and lecturer, which means trust and confidence is placed in the institution (in exchange for tertiary education). The institution accepts responsibility to act only in the best interest of the student. A fiduciary relationship also requires knowledge of the requirements necessary for fulfilling the trust and must be understood by both the student and the lecturer (McCleve, 1991: 35). There was a clear understanding between the students and myself as their lecturer that their responsibilities with regard to this research project (questionnaires, interview schedules and reflective journals) would not be confused with their teaching practice assignments; that only the latter would be assessed for the purposes of their academic career; and that their academic standing would in no way be affected by their participation in this project.

The students collaborating as fieldworkers were also doing their teaching practice (as part of their formal academic formation) at the early learning centres on which they reported for the purpose of this study. I had to make sure whether and how my research project would impact on the academic side of their involvement at those early learning centres. Would they be able to distinguish between the two roles they had to assume? Would I be able to handle their involvement in my research project in such a way that it would not impact on the students' academic standing? Before my study commenced, I assured the students that their involvement in my research project as observer participants/fieldworkers would not impact on either our student-lecturer relationship, or their academic standing. However, their involvement might be an opportunity for gaining research experience. In my ethical declaration I clearly stated that I would not abuse or manipulate the students or their information in any manner. Such manipulation would be counter-productive with regard to my study.

Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009: 19) emphasise the two overriding rules of ethics, namely that the participants' consent should be obtained (as explained above) and that participants should in no way be harmed. Gay *et al.* (2009: 19) and Dahlberg and Moss (2007: 73) emphasise that research studies are built on trust between the researcher and the participants and that both parties expect from the other care and responsibility and to behave in a trustworthy manner. In my study, trust played an important part in the relationship between the students and me. A focus on coherencing therefore addresses the issue of whether one's research results in beneficence (doing good and resulting in good) or in maleficence (causing harm, having an unfavourable influence). The overall purpose of my study is to conceptualise quality in an attempt to benefit the development of a quality assurance system for early learning centres which in itself is a way of doing good towards the students and all the other participants in my study.

The fourth ethical guideline, namely *authenticating*, includes "privileging direct experiences over explanations, performing one's own explanations, and being open to seeing oneself through others' eyes" (Freedman & Combs, 2006: 271).

The mixed method approach I followed allows for, inter alia, case study research. According to Gomm, Hammersley and Foster (2000: 6), case study research is advocated on the basis that it can capture the unique character of a person, situation

or group. They argue that here there may be no concern with typicality in relation to a category or generalisability to a population. The aim is to represent the case authentically or as they put it "in its own terms". One aim with my study was to amplify the unique voices of the role-players in terms of their experiences of quality in early learning centres. By selecting a variety of role players, and by using interviews, I therefore enabled previously hidden or silenced voices, or as in my study's case, previously unheard authentic voices, to be heard (Seale, Gobo, Gubrium and Silverman, 2004: 25).

3.9 ENSURING THE QUALITY AND RIGOUR OF THE STUDY

According to Ary, *et al.,* (2002: 457) the main issues related to rigour in research are truth value, generalisability, consistency and neutrality. In Table 3.8 below, they show how qualitative and quantitative research respectively address these issues.

Since my study involves a concurrent mixed method approach that makes use of both qualitative and quantitative methods, all these concepts are relevant to my study.

Table 3.8: Standards of rigour for research (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002: 457)

QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE	ISSUE
Credibility	Internal validity	Truth value
Transferability	External validity	Generalisability
Dependability	Reliability	Consistency
Confirmability	Objectivity	Neutrality

Two assumptions about social constructionism have created the impression that rigour is not considered an important requirement in this framework. The first assumption is that social constructionism, which is associated with postmodernism, is characterised by an "anything goes" mentality. The second assumption maintains that social constructionism implies opposition to quantitative research and therefore the standards of rigour relevant to quantitative research do not apply within this paradigm. With regard to the latter assumption, in 3.2.1 I referred to Gergen's view that a social constructionist paradigm can accommodate both quantitative and

qualitative research (Gergen, 2001a: 423–424). Hence, the standards of rigour for both approaches should be considered when using a concurrent mixed method approach within a social constructionist paradigm. With regard to the former, Gergen (2001a: 423) convincingly demonstrated that social constructionism does not imply a specifically relativist position and that it is never a matter of "anything goes" in practice, because little goes except within a tradition of social collaboration. In this sense, social constructionism invites a reflexive posture toward the sometimes blinding force of tradition.

3.9.1 Trustworthiness of research

MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford, (2001: 274) explain that *trustworthiness* refers to the "judgements about the quality and credibility of the research design, enactment, analysis, findings and conclusions". The trustworthiness of a project has been described as "the extent to which an inquirer can persuade audiences that his or her findings are worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba, in Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009: 296). *Authenticity* as part of trustworthiness considers whether the study provides a reliable reconstruction of the participants' perceptions, perspectives, views, beliefs and values. In other words, "readers can relate to or connect with informants and situations" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 330).

In the literature on rigour and quality in research (e.g. Ferreira, 2006: 153), the concept of trustworthiness is often used as an overarching term that contains elements such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. However, these criteria sometimes require different actions, depending on whether one is doing qualitative or quantitative research. Since I make use of a mixed approach (both quantitative and qualitative research) I need to consider the different emphases of these criteria for each of these types of research.

My social constructionist paradigm requires that the trustworthiness of my study should also include a self-reflexive stance.

> *Researchers are ultimately responsible for the knowledge they produce, and how they produce it, therefore reflexivity contributes to making better knowledge and better research practice* (Thomson & Walker, 2010: 144).

Self-reflexivity enables researchers to become aware of their own positions and interests which impact on all phases of the research process. The contextual grounds for reasoning are very important (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 328). McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 327) argue that "reflexivity is rigorous self-scrutiny by the researcher throughout the entire process". In their opinion the complex questions that researchers ask themselves imply that they cannot be 'neutral, objective, or detached'. Self-reflection by means of self-reflective questions implies discomfort, but is used to recognise and minimise one's own biases and is imperative to ascertain credibility (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh, 2002: 454; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 327)

Patton (2005: 66) suggests the following self-reflective questions: "What do I know? How do I know what I know? What shapes and has shaped my perspective? With what voice do I share my perspective? What do I do with what I have found?" The questions that Bassey (2003: 111–112) proposes are: "Does this mean what it appears to mean? Am I observing what I think I'm looking at? Does my question have the same meaning to the person that I'm interviewing as it has to me, and if so am I getting his or her version of the truth?" Human subjectivity is therefore not denied by researchers, but taken into consideration by way of different strategies (Ary *et al.,* 2002: 454; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006: 327).

Several possible strategies for enhancing reflexivity can be used to monitor and evaluate the impact of a researcher's subjectivity. One strategy suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 328) that I utilised, was to discuss preliminary analysis and strategies with peer debriefers. Those discussions provided some clarity in terms of implicit knowledge that I as the researcher have acquired. Probing questions posed by the peer debriefers also assisted me in understanding my own stance and role in the inquiry. I also applied another strategy described by Ary *et al.,* (2002: 456); McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 329), namely to adhere to audibility criteria which entails "the practice of maintaining a record of data management techniques and decision rules that document the chain of evidence or decision trail". I kept a chain of evidence which consists of the themes, codes and categories that I applied to describe and interpret the data in addition to the drafts and preliminary

diagrams. Lastly, as I have explained in 3.6.2.1, all the student-participants kept reflective journals to capture their observations and considerations.

In my study, I applied various strategies to ensure rigour and quality in order to convince research audiences that the findings of this study are worthy of their attention. I addressed the aspects related to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability and their quantitative analogues, internal and external validity, reliability and objectivity.

3.9.1.1   Credibility and internal validity

Credibility, with the quantitative analogue, internal validity (and another word for truth according to Silverman, 2010: 275), asks whether or not the reconstructions of the inquirer are "credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities" (Lincoln & Guba in Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009: 296). McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 471) define credibility as "the extent to which the results of a study approximate reality and are thus judged to be trustworthy and reasonable". *Internal validity* "seeks to demonstrate that the explanation of a particular event, issue or set of data which a piece of research provides can actually be sustained by the data. The findings must accurately describe the phenomena being researched" (Cohen *et al.*, 2001: 107).

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 63) advocate that credibility can be achieved by means of employing many different research methodologies (e.g. quantitative and qualitative) to find out whether there are discrepant findings. I applied different research methodologies (quantitative and qualitative) to check for discrepant findings. The application of a mixed method approach with both quantitative and qualitative sources therefore contributed towards the credibility of my study. In order to further test my study's credibility, I also applied the guidelines suggested by Sturman (1999) by thoroughly explaining the data-gathering procedures, presenting the data transparently and explaining exactly how the analyses obtained from all the different sources, were done.

In my study, I aimed to structure credible tools (questionnaires, interview schedules and reflective journals) that represent the phenomenon of interest (MacNaughton,

Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 271). Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009: 296) also suggest techniques for enhancement of the credibility of a study. Regarding the first technique of *prolonged engagement*, I regard the three weeks of interaction that the participant observers spent with the participants, as credibility strength. There was, secondly, also *persistent observation* during the three weeks in order to establish the relevance of the characteristics for the focus and I, thirdly, implemented the *use of reflective journals* and extensive field notes. Lastly, I applied *triangulation* techniques (of methods, sources, investigators) to strengthen the credibility of my study. As suggested by McMillan and Schumacher (2006: 374), as well as by Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, (2001: 160), I utilised triangulation as a validation process where I compared and contrasted the responses of the parents and the teachers with each other and with documentary and observational information. The fieldworkers, who I trained during a training session, carried out the interviews with the parents and the teachers. It was my task as the researcher to do the analysis and to accumulate the manifold sources of data. Another way in which I applied validation through triangulation, was to use more than one data collection technique. I could do valuation of observational data of the interviews that the students had with the parents and the teachers (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2003: 262; Henning *et al.*, 2004: 53).

3.9.1.2   Transferability and external validity

Inference *transferability* refers to "the degree to which conclusions may be applied to other similar settings, people, time periods, contexts and theoretical representations of the constructs". Transferability in qualitative research matches *generalisability* and *external validity* in quantitative research (Teddlie & Tashakori, 2009: 287). Cohen *et al.* (2001: 137) say "that it is possible to assess the typicality of a situation – the participants and settings, to identify possible comparison groups, and to indicate how data might translate into different settings and cultures". Bogdan and Knopp Biklen, (2003: 259) and MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford, (2001: 270) see generalisability as the extent to which results from a research study can be applied to and/or can explain the phenomenon in general, for the population as a whole, and under real world conditions. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009: 286), state that inference

transferability is relative, but that "every inference has a degree of transferability to a context, to a group of people or entities, or to the alternative ways of conceptualizing the behaviours and phenomena under investigation". I believe that all of my data collection instruments can be used, or at least be adapted, to do a similar study in other settings like early learning centres. Such a study would however require "attention to sample representativeness, replication of test conditions, replication of results, sample sensitisation to the research procedures, and bias in the sample of the research process" (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 270).

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009: 286) recommend the use of *thick descriptions* to enhance transferability. A thick description involves making detailed descriptions of everything needed for the reader to understand what is happening and of the context and other aspects of the research setting to allow comparisons with other contexts (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 274, Cohen, 2001: 109) I believe the thick descriptions in my study make the option of transferability possible.

3.9.1.3   Dependability and reliability

The terms *dependability* and *reliability* are sometimes used interchangeably. However, preference is often given to the term reliability by those who work within a positivistic paradigm. In this paradigm reliability usually refers to the consistency, accuracy and stability of the measurements used or observations collected in the study. The more reliable the measurement or observation the more 'error-free' it is considered to be. Reliability can be assessed by calculation of so-called 'reliable coefficients' (MacNaughton, Rolfe & Siraj-Blatchford, 2001: 273).

One is tempted to use the terms dependability and reliability as criteria for the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of research respectively. Reliability in quantitative research would then be regarded as a synonym for consistency and replicability over time, over instruments and over groups of respondents. It is concerned with precision and accuracy. For research to be reliable it must demonstrate that if it were to be carried out by a similar group of respondents in a similar context, then similar results would be found (Cohen *et al.,* 2001: 129).

However, in particular research projects, such as mine, the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of research are too intertwined to justify such a use of the terms dependability and reliability.

The term *dependability* fits a social constructionist paradigm better. Dependability could serve as an alternative to reliability, especially in cases when the researcher attempts to account for changing conditions (De Vos, 2005: 346). Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 64) refer to dependability in terms of "the degree to which the reader can be convinced that the findings did indeed occur as the researcher says they did".

Terre Blanche and Durrheim (1999: 64) argue that dependability is achieved through rich and detailed descriptions. These descriptions must show how certain actions and opinions are derived from and developed out of interaction that is contextual. According to Morgan (2000: 15), rich and thick descriptions are achieved when they are generated by the persons whose lives are being talked about. Rich description involves the articulation in fine detail of the story-lines of a person's experiences. Morgan explains:

> *If you imagine reading a novel, sometimes a story is richly described —* *the motives of the characters, their histories, and own understandings* *are finely articulated. The stories of the characters' lives are interwoven* *with the stories of other people and events* (Morgan, 2000: 15)

Similarly, the criterion of dependability requires that researchers be interested in finding ways for accounts of people's experiences to be richly described and interwoven with the accounts of others.

Thin descriptions, on the other hand, allow little space for the complexities and contradictions of life. It allows little space for people to articulate their own particular meanings of their actions and the context within which they occurred. Often, thin descriptions of people's actions or experiences are created by others — those with the power of definition in particular circumstances (Morgan, 2000: 13).

My study allows beneficiaries of early childhood education to tell their own stories, which is particularly important in the case of the children themselves. Students were

encouraged to elicit and capture such stories in their reflective journals. Furthermore, students observed and interacted with the children and teachers in the context of early learning centres. These descriptions must show how certain actions and opinions are derived from and developed out of interaction that is contextual. The questionnaire that I used, allowed to some extent for rich descriptions in the form of the open ended questions. Participants were free to share information and experiences in the way they saw fit.

In addition, in my study, a sizeable body of data was generated and interpreted through the careful application of a mixed method approach that involved comprehensive field notes, especially in the form of reflective journals written by student-participants, transcripts of interviews, and questionnaires. In terms of the research design, all research partners (beneficiaries of early childhood education) were involved.

3.9.1.4   Confirmability and objectivity

The qualitative criterion of *confirmability* (or neutrality) that is related to the quantitative criterion of *objectivity*, addresses whether the findings of a study could be confirmed by another and whether researcher bias can be ruled out with regard to the findings of the study (Ferreira 2006: 159). Ary *et al.,* (2002: 456) explain that "neutrality is the extent to which the research is free of bias in the procedures and the interpretations of results". They point out that the "focus shifts from the neutrality of the researcher to the confirmability of the data and interpretations". In quantitative research objectivity refers to the extent to which researcher bias has been ruled out or at least minimised (MacNaughton *et al.,* 2001: 272).

Social-constructionist qualitative researchers ask whether, with regard to research findings, the researcher context and its potential impact on the findings have been reflected upon. For this purpose they employ strategies such as *self-reflexivity* (Bleakley 2004: 2-6). Self-reflexivity is not primarily about overcoming or minimising bias, but rather about juxtaposing one's findings with those of others in order to become aware of the impact of the researcher's contextuality, values, and so forth.

Jankowski *et al.* (2001: 246) suggest that social constructionist researchers take a conscious *"not-knowing" stance* with regard to both data collection and data analysis. They explain:

> *The influence of a researcher's prior knowledge on the coding process is conceptually similar to its influence within the interview process. The primary difference is that in data analysis the researcher is not constructing new understanding from his or her interaction with the participants, but rather from his or her interaction with a text... We contend that the adoption of a "not-knowing" stance may mediate the likelihood that a researcher may unintentionally force the text into pre-existing constructions (Jankowski et al., 2001: 246).*

Researcher bias is a given in any qualitative study, as our values inevitable influence the way in which we interpret data during data analysis (Ferreira 2006: 159). In an attempt to meet the requirement of the confirmability of my findings, I involved others during the stages of data collection and data analysis. During the data collection phase I made use of students as co-researchers (fieldworkers). I also consulted experienced researchers during the data analysis phase. I made a conscious effort to adopt a "not-knowing" stance with regard to both data collection and data analysis. In the questionnaire I used, as well as interviews conducted by the students, open questions were used, which was a way of minimising the impact of preset ideas of the researcher. Such questions resonate well with a "not-knowing" stance. Furthermore, by researching others' texts and using them for "reflexive deliberation" within my own research, I developed an awareness of potential critiques of my findings.

3.10 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I discussed the paradigmatic approach, research design and methodology, instruments and data capturing. I also explained my ethical strategies with the practical guidelines that informed my decisions. Lastly, I discussed how I ensured quality and rigour in my study. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the quantitative data analysis and the results of the study.

Chapter 4

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

4.1   INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 3, I described and explained the research design and chosen methodology for this study. I justified the research design and choice of methods in terms of my research questions and the purpose of my study. In this chapter, I report on the results of the study by explaining the themes that emerged from analysis of the raw data obtained from questionnaires. This report includes figures and photos to enhance the discussion of the themes, sub-themes and categories. I present quantitative and visual data results focused on facilities and learning activities available in early learning centres. In this regard, I look into the availability of learning areas, learning activities and outdoor facilities.

4.2   PRESENTING THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY BY PROCESSING THE QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

Completed questionnaires from 213 students served as the quantitative data source to investigate available facilities and types of learning activities that were offered at the different early learning centres in the case study. After completion of the questionnaires, a research assistant numbered each questionnaire for analysis and anonymity purposes (see Appendix F). To convert the responses in a meaningful numerical format, she manually indicated on paper all the information that was captured on the questionnaires. The research assistant then created columns in order to categorise the pre-coded answers (see Appendix F). As I discussed in Chapter 3, when constructing the questionnaire, I chose to group similar items that address the same issues into clusters and I developed total scores across item clusters (Gay *et al.,* 2009: 185).The answer categories were thus known in advance and therefore a coding frame was printed onto the questionnaire (Cohen *et al.,* 2001: 265). The scores for all the items of each scale of the questionnaire were added

together to give a combined score for the total questionnaire (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999: 98) (refer to Appendix M). After completion of this manual process on paper, the research assistant captured the data electronically.

I used the raw electronic data to make summaries of responses to the questions in columns in Excel (see Appendix G). With the help of an information specialist[6], I captured the relevant data in pie charts. This visual presentation facilitated the analysis and interpretation process.

Figures in section 4.2.1 are based on the results of the questionnaires and illustrate the presence or absence of facilities and apparatus or learning areas (also called learning centres) that are part of early learning centres' indoor and outdoor play environments. In addition, these figures also indicate whether centres present or neglect to offer specific learning activities.

4.2.1 Questionnaire results

(a) Learning areas (learning centres)

Early childhood environments are organised into separate learning areas. These defined areas of the playroom have a particular purpose and contain relevant furnishings and resources. Learning areas enable children to focus their attention, small-group interaction is promoted, and the areas require children to make choices and experience the consequences of those choices (Bredekamp, 2011: 240). Graph 4.1 provides a visual summary of the number of indoor learning areas found in the early learning centres ranging from the most to the least.

In summary, Graph 4.1 indicates that in nearly *all* the early learning centres, book corners and display tables for theme discussions, as well as areas for art and cognitive activities were present. *Most* of the early learning centres had fantasy and block play areas. However, discovery and mathematics corners were visible in *less than half* of the early learning centres. In most cases (more than 70%) sensopathic, music or technology areas were *not available.*

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[6] Marietjie Schutte, Information Science, University of Pretoria

Table 4.1 provides a layout of the availability of the different kinds of indoor learning areas in the early learning centres.

Table 4.1: The frequency of availability in terms of the indoor learning areas

Frequency of availability	Learning area
All (92%)	Book corner
	Display table
	Art area
	Cognitive area
Most (86%)	Fantasy play area
	Block play area
Few (35%)	Discovery corner
	Mathematic corner
Absent (‹ 22%)	Sensopathic area
	Music corner
	Technology corner
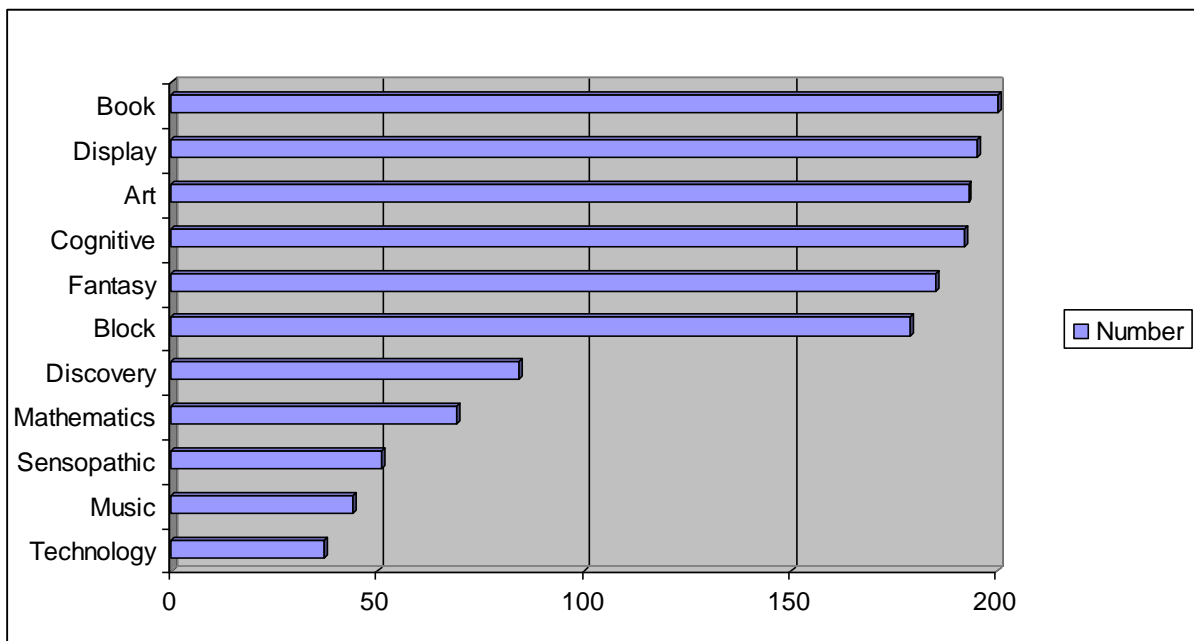
Graph 4.1: A summary of the indoor learning areas ranging from the most to the least

Each questionnaire item required participants to indicate whether a specific indoor learning area was present in the early learning centre or not. Analysis of the questionnaires includes pie charts that visually depict responses. For every area and

activity addressed in the questionnaire, I also present a photograph documented by the student researchers at early centres as additional visual evidence of the areas or activities in question. Each photograph also cites which early learning centre (ELC) is featured.

As I explained in Chapter 3, the open ended items included in the questionnaires created space for student-participants to share reflective experiences in terms of the facilities and activities they encountered at the early learning centres. The open-ended items in the questionnaire, allowed for rich descriptions. After analysing each question, I present some of the answers or comments given by the student-participants in the open-ended section of the questions. These quotes present a perspective on the variation of facilities encountered by student-participants at the different early learning centres.
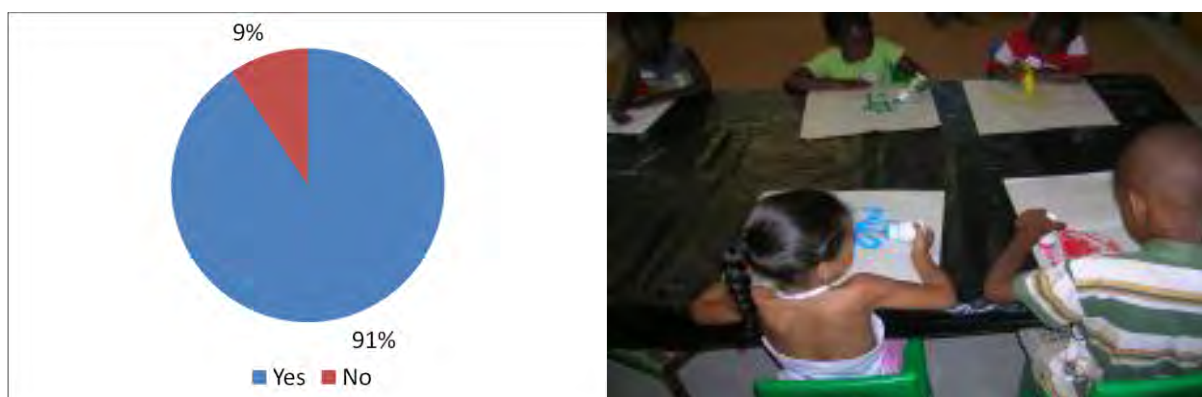
Question 1: Art area

Figure 4.1: Art area

Photograph 4.1: Children painting in the art area, ELC 13

Photograph 4.1 depicts children engaged in a painting activity in an art area. Figure 4.1 shows that the majority of the centres, namely 91% had an art area indoors where children can engage in art activities.

An art area enables children to investigate and create while using a rich variety of materials that invite creative expression, exploration, experimentation, problem solving, and connections to real life (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2010: 248-249). In an art area there is a wide range of two- and three-dimensional materials that can be used by the children as part of the daily programme to paint, paste, construct, cut, thread, model and draw (Schirrmacher, 2006: 303; Solomon, 2005: 142).

From the following quotes by student-participants in open-ended items, it is evident that although art activities are offered at most of the centres, variation exists in terms of creativity and the variety of art apparatus that are available to the children.

> Q6: "There is a wide spectrum of art and handwork".
>
> Q48: "Not very creative, everybody had to do the same thing".
>
> Q73: "There is an art and handwork area in each class with a wide variety of objects".
>
> Q98: "Well equipped and learner friendly".
>
> Q104: "Very neat and well managed with a variation of resources for example paint, crayons etc."
>
> Q204: "Brilliant, children had endless amounts of open ended materials, paint and crayons etc."
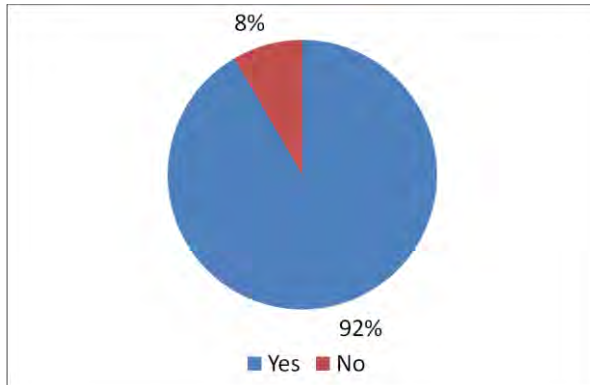
Question 2: Discussion/display table

Figure 4.2: Discussion table

Photograph 4.2: A discussion table on insects, ELC 130

Photograph 4.2 documents a representative discussion/display table. A synonym for this area is an interest table because it is a visual resource used to teach children about themes that are appropriate and of interest to them developmentally (Davin & Van Staden, 2005: 250; Crowther & Wellhousen, 2004: 24). Pictures, word cards, books, real objects and models are usually part of a typical discussion table. Photograph 4.2 illustrates a display on the theme insects.

As is the case with art areas, Figure 4.2 illustrates that most of the centres (92%) had some kind of discussion table where materials and resources about the weekly theme are displayed.

From the student-participant responses in the open-ended item section, it seems that space, or the lack of space, often determines the size and quality of discussion tables. To address this, some centres provided a combined discussion table for all the age groups.

Q7: "There is one for each of the playrooms. They put in a lot of effort".

Q14: "It is not very big. The playrooms are very small".

Q15: "There is only a board".

Q33: "A bit too small".

Q59: "There was a very small table in each class".

Q61: "It is there, but there is not much information on display".

Q72: "It is next to the discovery area, with the same theme".

Q73: "The display table is set up in such a way that the children can see it every day".

Q74: "There is one for the whole school".

Q109: "In the entrance hall, being changed every week".

Q142: "There was a table but nothing was on it. Maybe it was just while I was there?"

Q153: "The Grade 00's discussion table is a do not touch table. In the Grade 0's it is a touching table and is phonic based. There is another table which is theme based".
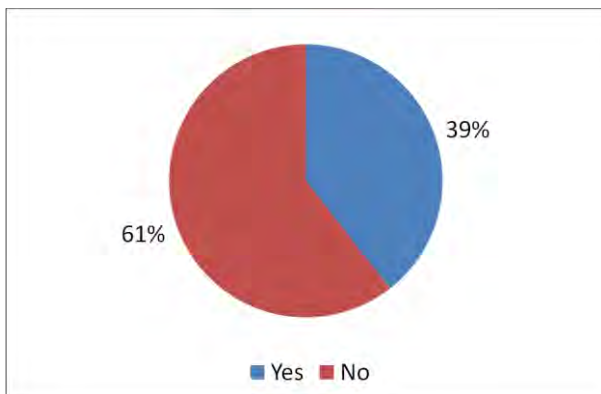
Question 3: Discovery area

Figure 4.3: Discovery area

Photograph 4.3: Herbs in the discovery area, ELC 148

In Photograph 4.3 a young girl explores different herbs through the sense of smell in a discovery area. Figure 4.3 reveals that only 39% of the centres had a discovery area where children can practise their discovery skills in an informal way.

A discovery area invites children to explore and investigate if it is stocked with interesting materials and objects, including objects from the natural world. Open-ended materials that can be used in a variety of ways are usually the best choice for a discovery area (Dodge *et al.,* 2003: 384). Young children learn through their senses and in informal ways. A discovery area where children can both look at objects and which invites interaction, provides many learning opportunities. "Please touch! is the implied invitation of an interesting, ever-changing discovery area" (Mayesky, 2009: 428). The theme at a discovery area is often related to science and provides opportunities for children to engage with new knowledge in an informal, hands-on way.

The open-ended responses provided by the student-participants revealed that in schools that had discovery areas the available items and children's access to these items varied, including whether a hands-on or hands-off approach was followed.

Q33: No discovery area, it is part of the discussion table".

Q73: "The discovery area is next to the discussion table, therefore the children can play there freely."

Q75: "Not too great. Not a lot of effort put into".

Q95: "The children get the opportunity to experiment".

Q104: "A big variety and learners were encouraged to bring things from home".

Q137: "There is a corner with chickens and dead bugs and containers to smell".

Q139: "Many things that they can play with and discover".

Q142: "There was one but it was not hands-on".

Q204: "Real life section with magnets and other discovery apparatus".
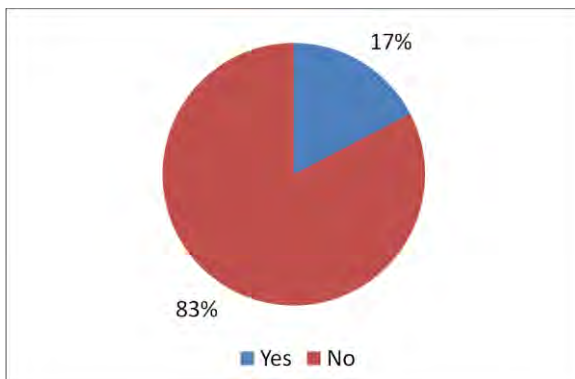
Question 4: The technology area

Figure 4.4: Technology corner

Photograph 4.4: Disassembling appliances in the technology corner, ELC 130

In Photograph 4.4 a girl and a boy can be seen exploring and investigating in a technology area. With the use of pliers they disassemble the insides of old discarded computers and other household appliances. In the process they learn what is inside the apparatus and that tools are required to extract parts. Figure 4.4 informs us that only 17% of centres had technology areas.

Dodge, Colker & Heroman (2003: 513) suggest that children's awareness of technology can be increased by talking about and exposing them to different tools

and machines that we see and use in everyday life for example, pulleys, pipes and elbows, magnifying glasses and magnets. A technology area provides many opportunities for children to do informal investigation in their own time and to solve problems through exploration and discovery (Charlesworth & Lind, 2003: 529).

Student-participants' open-ended item responses indicate that only a few centres had technology corners, and that such areas usually contained appropriate apparatus.

Q24: "There is not enough space in the playrooms for everything".

Q44: "There were only construction builder toys (plastic)".

Q104: "A variety of activities where the children may participate daily. Also computers".

Q137: "There were kettles, hair driers, toasters that the learners could dismantle and build with".

Q151: "Computers, telephones, type writers for use by the children".

Q200: "Never saw it, but saw the planning for it".
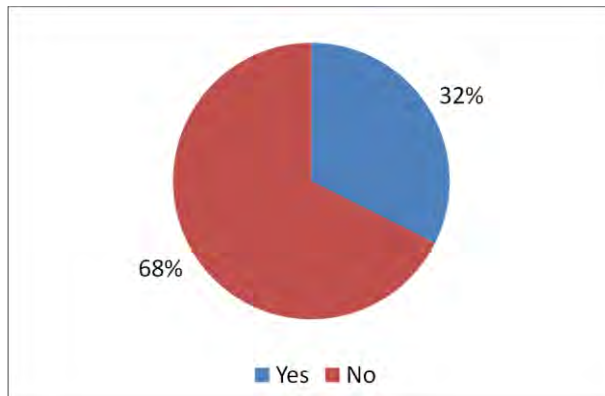
Question 5: The mathematics corner

Figure 4.5: Mathematics corner

Photograph 4.5: Informal weighing in the mathematics corner, ELC 148

In Photograph 4.5 a child is seen experimenting with a scale and learning about objects, weight and balance. About a third of the centres had specific mathematics corners for the stimulation of numeracy in their classes as is shown in Figure 4.5.

According to Charlesworth and Lind (2003: 529), the mathematics corner can be set up for many mathematical skills and concepts and should be available to every child, every day. Materials in this area must be displayed in containers on low shelves that are readily available to the children.

The descriptions of the mathematics corners in the student-participants' open-ended item responses, indicate that those centres which had them, provided a variety of apparatus and the children eagerly play there.

Q44: "There were Uni-fix cubes, shapes and peg boards".

Q73: "The maths corner has a wide variety of apparatus that the children can play with".

Q91: "No maths corner. Maths were done at tables".

Q98: "No specific area, but activities are done".

Q104: "Learners may participate daily. Good exposure".

Q137: "There is a measurement table where they could measure their bodies and posters with numbers on".

Q186: "It is well organised with mathematical apparatus. The children enjoy it a lot".
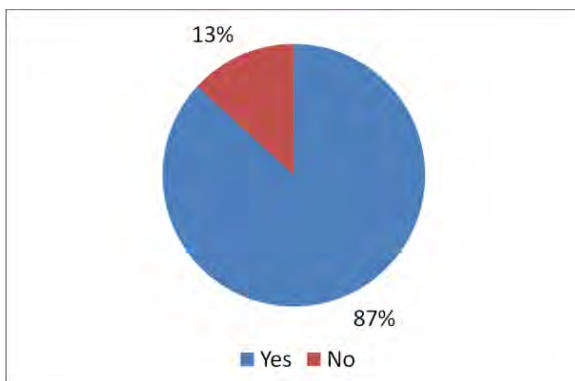
Question 6: Fantasy corner

Figure 4.6: Fantasy corner

Photograph 4.6: Playing in a shop in the fantasy corner, ELC 148

Photograph 4.6 is an illustration of four girls who are engaged in fantasy play in a pretend grocery shop. Figure 4.6 shows that an indoor fantasy corner was present in the majority of the centres, namely 87% .

The fantasy corner (Moyles, 2008) is also known as an area for make-believe play (Hereford & Schall, 1991: 8; Van der Merwe, 1990a), pretend play (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2008), role play (Davy & Gallager, 2006), dramatic play (Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 2006; Mayesky, 2009) representational play (Schirrmacher, 2006), imaginary play (Papalia *et al.*, 2008) and imaginative play (Davy & Gallager, 2006). Dramatic play happens when a child takes on a pretend role alone. When the child interacts and communicates with another person who is also in a pretend role

the activity becomes socio-dramatic play (Robson, 2006: 121). The children establish the rules of play and their play is a reflection of children's understanding of how different people act (Hereford & Schall, 1991: 8).

It seems from the open-ended responses that the fantasy areas that are available at the centres, usually cater for boys and girls and that variety is visible.

Q17: "Very nice, appropriate for boys and girls".

Q31: "Two fantasy areas, a hospital area for girls and a gym for boys".

Q37: "There is one, but it can be improved".

Q62: "There are fantasy clothes in a box, but the learners did not play with it".

Q79: "Was an all boys school but there was a baby and pram available".

Q98: "One fantasy area that is changed often to suite both boys and girls".

Question 7: Book corner

Figure 4.7: Book corner

Photograph 4.7: A display of books in the corner, ELC 34

In Photograph 4.7 a book corner with different kinds of children's books is visible. The books are displayed at the children's eye level and are easily accessible to them. As can be seen in Figure 4.7, almost all of the centres, namely 94%, had book corners for the stimulation of early literacy in learners. A book corner (Van der Merwe, 1990b) also known as a reading corner (Edwards, 2010) or literacy centre (Isenberg & Jalonga, 2010) must be a comfortable, attractive and enticing place where children can browse through books. This area should be located away from the more active areas. In book corners a selection of books should be available to children including books with stories, books with pictures, fiction and non-fiction books (Edwards, 2010: 269-270).

It is evident from the open-ended responses that although most of the centres had book corners, they varied a lot in terms of the number and quality of books that were available to the children.

Q10: "There are many books, but the majority are old".

Q27: "There is a book shelf with a variety of age appropriate books, yet no quite area to sit".

Q40: "There are Afrikaans, English, educational and fantasy books. They are in a good condition".

Q50: "Variety, good and bad condition".

Q53: "Each week the books would match the theme".

Q59: "They had old magazines that fell apart".

Q62: "No books that they could page through".

Q64: "Loads of books. Good condition. Age appropriate".

Q84: "Wide variety and in 'okay' condition".

Q86: "Parents bring a book for each child and it stays there for the whole year".

Q90: "Wide variety of books. Well looked after. Well stocked library".

Q125: "Children can' work with books yet – damage them. Get magazines after lunch to page through".

Q142: "No books. Posters on the wall of the letters they learnt that week, Aa; Bb".

Q159: "There were too few books, but the atmosphere was peaceful".

Q189: "There was a variety of books, but some were placed on the windowsill and the children could not reach them".

Q204: "Ranging from feel books to big books. Suited all age groups. Good condition".
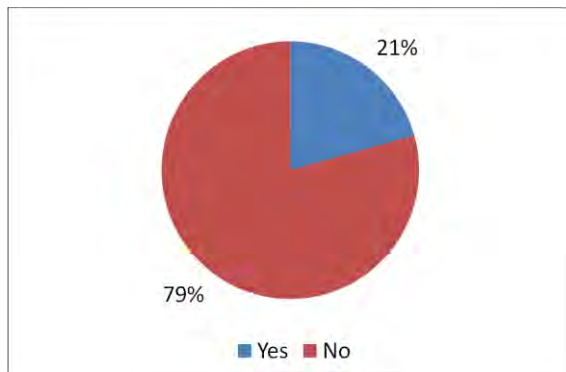
Question 8: Music corner

Figure 4.8: Music corner

Photograph 4.8: Shaking instruments in the music corner, ELC 148

Photograph 4.8 illustrates different musical instruments used by learners in a music corner. The centres that possessed music corners are by far in the minority. Figure 4.8 shows that in only 21% of the centres music corners were available.

Edwards, Bayless and Ramsey, (2009: 153) explain that a listening-to-music corner/area that is carefully prepared and regulated for children, is a definite asset for any playroom. They declare that a well-organised music corner creates an environment where children are free to make choices and where they are in charge of their own learning as they explore independently and make their own decisions about the activities in which they engage. A music corner should give children the freedom to explore rhythm, melody, form and expressive music qualities (Edwards *et al.,* 2009: 153).

The data from the questionnaires conveyed that music corners are not often part of early learning centres. The open-ended responses furthermore confirms that in instances where musical instruments are available, instruments usually are kept in a cupboard or container.

> Q9: "No music corner, but they have enough instruments and often do music activities".
>
> Q59: "There isn't time for music".
>
> Q124: "No separate corner, but they do music activities".
>
> Q125: "No music corner, but they do music activities each day for 15 minutes".
>
> Q137: "There were always a cd player and bongo drum".
>
> Q141: "The garage is adapted into a movement and music area".

Q145: "There is a radio and they often listen to music".

Q147: "The instruments are in drawers in the store room".

Q204: "They have a music corner with posters of all the different instruments".

Q211: "There is a music classroom with a piano and wall with mirrors and cd player".

Q213: "They have a music corner where they sing and dance".

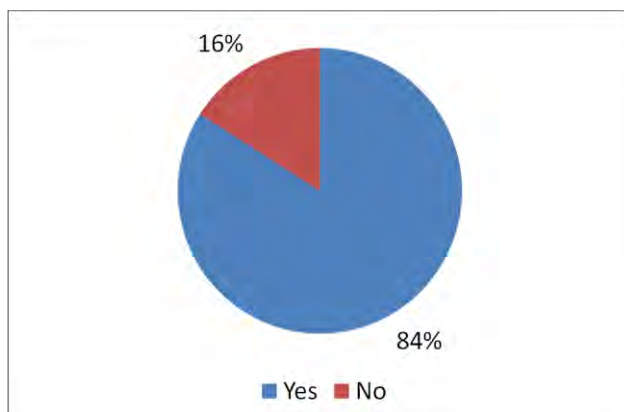**Question 9: Block corner**

Figure 4.9: Block play area

Photograph 4.9: A construction in the block play area, ELC 148

Photograph 4.9 illustrates a complex structure built by learners with unit blocks in a block corner. As apparent from the photograph, learners used all the available blocks to erect the structure. Figure 4.9 reveals that more than 80% of the centres had block corners for block play in their playrooms.

Dodge, Colker and Heroman (2003: 255) indicate that children go through a series of predictable stages and progress through these stages at different rates when they are playing with blocks. A block area should be well equipped with enough good quality blocks and plenty of accessories to encourage the children to participate in block play. Charlesworth and Lind (2003: 540) are of the opinion that young children's block play performance during preschool is a predictor of their future mathematics achievement in primary and secondary school.

It seems from the open-ended descriptions that the number and quality of available blocks vary and that there is also much variation regarding the availability of accessories to add to blocks.

Q25: "A big variety of sizes and colours, as well as plastic toys".

Q27: "There is no specific block play area, children play on the carpet".

Q29: "There were more that 50 blocks. There were also cars".

Q40: "It is different every week".

Q48: "A big variety. A popular area".

Q50: "Lots!!!"

Q90: "Fully stocked block corner. Wide variety of blocks and accessories".

Q113: "Blocks are being taken from the store room when used".

Q142: "No accessories. Enough blocks to go around. Blocks were very old".

Q149: "The block area is very popular, specifically with the four to five year olds".
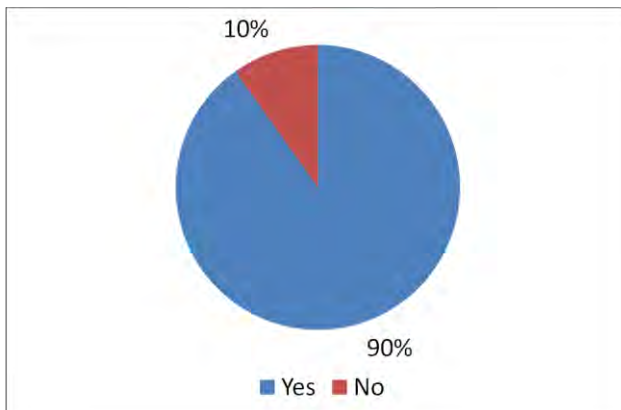
Question 10: Cognitive area

Figure 4.10: Cognitive area

Photograph 4.10: Building puzzles in the cognitive area, ELC 15

The girl in Photograph 4.10 is building a puzzle and practising her critical thinking skills in the cognitive area. It seems that cognitive stimulation is definitely a priority in most of the centres as Figure 4.10 indicates that only 10% of the centres did not have cognitive play areas.

A cognitive area provides children with the opportunity to learn basic concepts and to develop their thinking and fine motor skills (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2010: 281).

Apparatus in this area offers important development opportunities for literacy and numeracy and provides concrete experiences for problem solving, creating and cooperation. Manipulative materials, construction and educational toys and jigsaw puzzles can be found in a cognitive area (Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 240).

Student-participants' open-ended item responses indicate that the cognitive areas seems to be mostly well stocked and was a popular choice amongst the children.

Q24: "There is not a cognitive area, but a cupboard with cognitive games".

Q29: "It was well controlled and children could choose what they wanted to do".

Q61: "Has been used a lot, sometimes the whole day. The teacher assists the children a lot".

Q76: "Very well equipped in this area. Frequently changed. Puzzles".

Q79: "Puzzles were changed regularly and pieces increased. Lots of fine motor toys: i.e. Opening locks, plastic ants etc."

Q94: "Many of everything and in excellent condition".

Q103: "It is the most used area and the learners were enjoying the area".
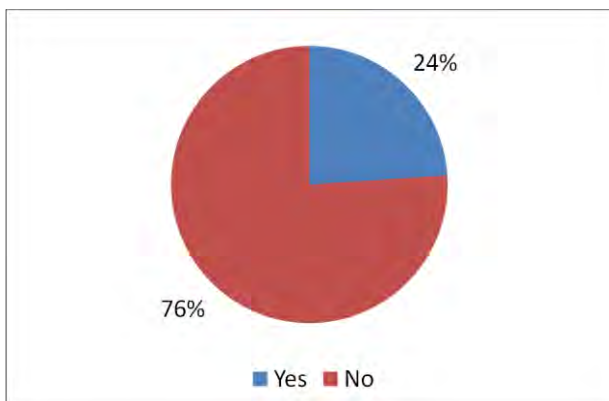
Question 11: Sensopathic table

Figure 4.11: Sensopathic table

Photograph 4.11: Dry woodshavings in the sensopathic table, ELC 43

In Photograph 4.11 children are exploring dry woodshavings with their hands and different kinds of scoops and small containers at the sensopathic table. From the responses in the questionnaires (Figure 4.11), it is evident that not many centres have sensopathic tables indoors. Sensopathic tables were only present in 24% of the centres.

Human beings receive information from the outside world for mental/neurological processing and storage through the five senses and through movement. Before young children are able to identify, discriminate, understand, remember and label sensory experiences, they need many sensory experiences (Entz, 2009: 149; Essa, 2011: 316). A sensopathic or sensory area is a place where children particularly use their senses of touch and sight. Experiences in this area contribute towards childrens'

observation skills and are also emotionally satisfying experiences. A sensopathic table usually is a container that is filled with sand, birdseed, rice, seeds, etc. and sometimes there are other items that are hidden in the fill (Good, 2009: 133).

According to student-participants' open-ended item responses, the sensopathic area seems to be absent in most of the early learning centres. Only a few schools had indoor sensopathic areas and there were just a few remarks about them.

> Q64: "Wonderful toys and sensopathic material to fill up three trays per grade".
>
> Q95: "A bowl with wood shavings and animals and toy soldiers that were inside the wood shavings".

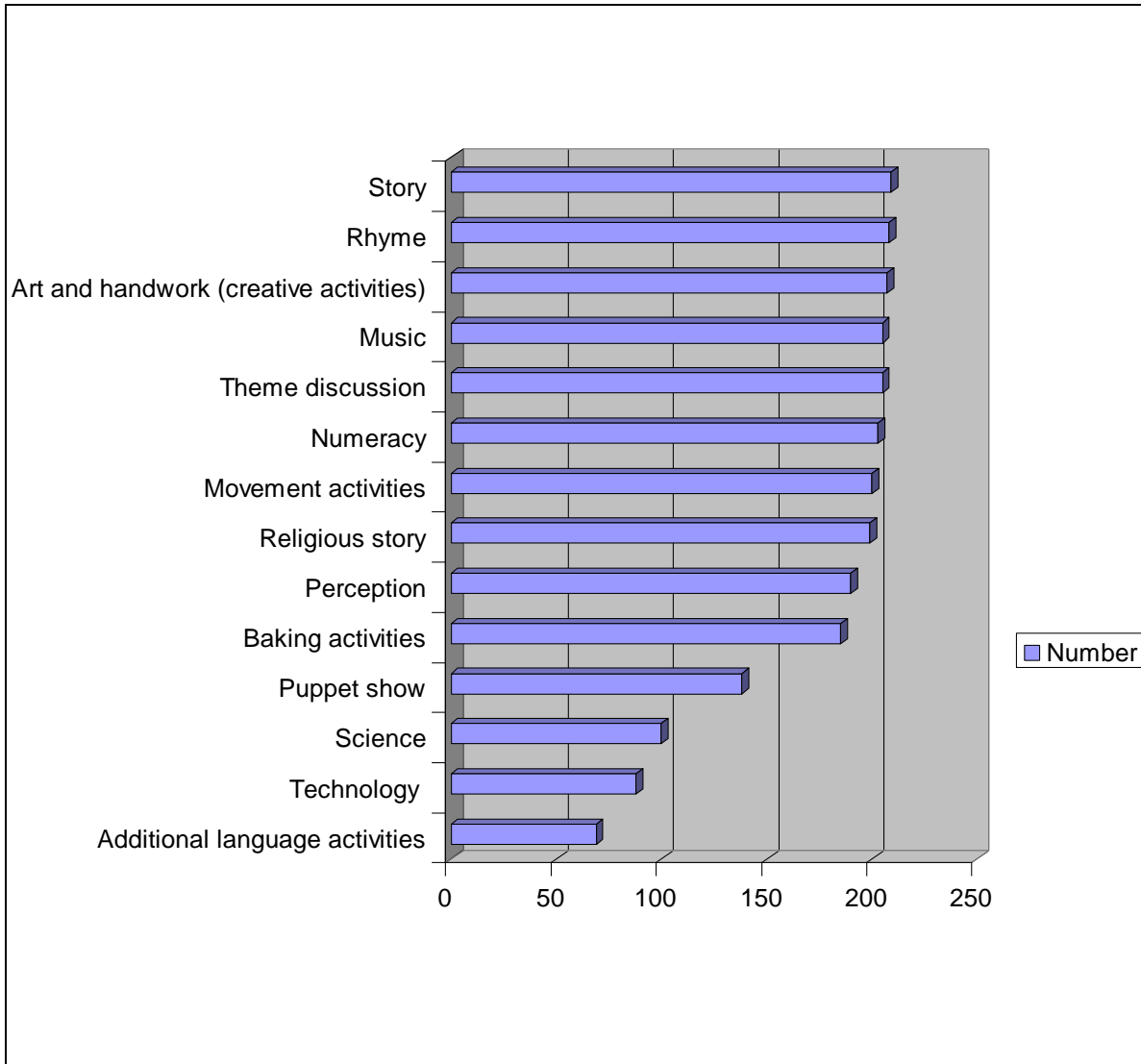## (b)   Structured learning activities

The purpose of the next part of the questionnaire was to determine types of structured learning activities in the daily early learning centre programmes. Teacher-directed/guided/structured learning activities indicate planned experiences that are directed by the teacher to help children learn and to develop particular skills (Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 299; Mayesky, 2006: 390; Coates & Thomson, 2010: 71). Graph 4.2 provides an overview of the frequency of structured learning activities presented indoors in the early learning centres.

In summary, Graph 4.2 informs us that *almost all* (95%) of the early learning centres presented stories, rhymes, art, music, theme discussions and numeracy activities as part of the structured learning activities of their daily programmes. *Most* early learning centres (90%) offered movement activities, religious stories, perception and baking activities. *About two thirds* of the early learning centres had puppet shows. Science, technology and additional language activities were only offered in 30% *or fewer* of the early learning centres.

Table 4.2 visually summarizes the level of availability of the different structured learning activities being offered in the early learning centres.

Table 4.2: The frequency of availability in terms of the presentation of structured learning activities

Frequency of availability	Structured learning activities
± 95%	Story Rhyme Art Music Theme discussion Numeracy
± 90%	Movement Religious story Perception Baking activity
66%	Puppet show
‹ 33%	Science Technology Additional language

Graph 4.2: An overview of structured learning activities

Question 1: Art and handwork

Figure 4.12: Art and handwork

Photograph 4.12: Making pictures with glue and sand, ELC 10

Photograph 4.12 presents children actively involved in a pasting activity in the art and handwork area. The children practise their fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination while they are "painting" a picture with glue and sprinkling sand over it, carefully pouring the excess sand from the paper into a provided container. Figure 4.12 shows that with the exception of 3% of the centres, art and handwork activities are part of almost all of the centres.

Jackman (2005: 211) considers art to be "visual communication through the elements of colour, line, shape and texture". She notes that sensory awareness, aesthetic appreciation, self-expression and the improvement of visual and motor coordination occurs when children make two- and three-dimensional projects through a variety of media in art activities (Jackman, 2005: 220).

The remarks in student-participants' open-ended responses about art activities, provide valuable insight regarding the structuring, variety and quality of these important activities. There was much variation in terms of the number of main and side activities offered per week. From the responses it seems that some centres offer activities that are very creative whereas others are teacher-directed and non-creative.

Q27: "Art activities are done approximately three times a week".

Q44: "Art is done twice a week. The school does not do side activities, the whole class does the same thing".

Q59: "Art was not done. They said there was not time in the curriculum".

Q72: "Presented three to four times per week. Anything from collage to paint".

Q76: "Every day very interesting art activities".

Q77: "It is sad that they didn't have it".

Q79: "Every day an art lesson was presented, mostly a worksheet that they had to complete and the rest played with play dough".

Q91: "Five times a week. Worked in groups and rotated".

Q94: "The teacher tells exactly how they must paint. Colouring book type!!"

Q98: "Five times a week. Lots of variation and fresh ideas. Usually work in small groups. Cycle of groups work well".

Q186: "They always do it in groups with a main and side activities".

Q205: "Three times a week. Sometimes only colouring pictures. It could have been more challenging".
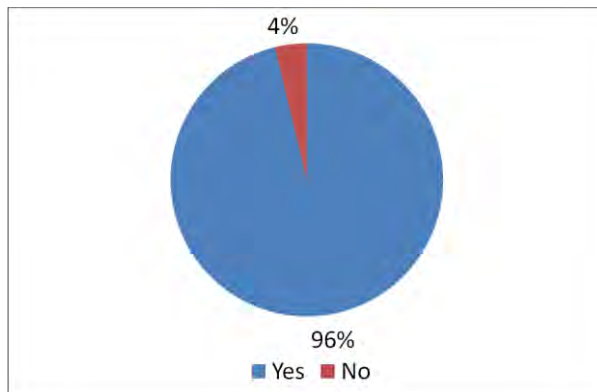
Question 2: Theme discussion

Figure 4.13: Theme discussion

Photograph 4.13: Learning about hats during the theme discussion, ELC 149

Photograph 4.13 shows children actively participating in a theme discussion about hats. All the learners are wearing different hats and inform the rest of the class about the characteristics of their hats. From Figure 4.13 it is clear that the picture for theme discussion mirrors the art activities' graph, in that 96% of centres have theme discussion as part of their daily programme.

Content directing learning and play in an early learning centre is usually based on themes appropriate, relevant and of interest to the children (Faber, in Faber & Van Staden, 2005: 23). It is the opinion of Jackman (2005: 57) that the thematic approach enables teachers to tie in the observations, interests and abilities of the children to language and literacy, dramatic play, art, music, movement, numeracy, perception and science with curriculum direction and expansion initiated by the children. The content of the theme is discussed during theme discussion sessions where the learners get the chance to contribute and share their experiences with the rest of the group.

The open-ended remarks revealed a difference in the number and length of discussions offered at the centres.

Q25: "Every day a short discussion".

Q40: "Once every two weeks".

Q44: " It is done once a week, at the beginning of the week when the new theme starts".

Q58: "Done daily because the teacher adds on to the previous knowledge".

Q61: "It has been done, but not in depth".

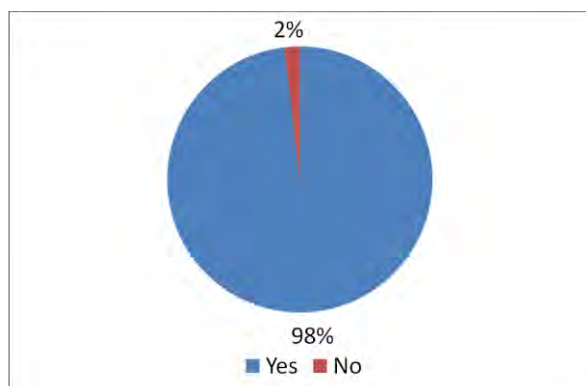Q101: "Learners talk/work very well together".

Question 3: Story

Figure 4.14: Story

Photograph 4.14: Children listening to a story, ELC 64

Photograph 4.14 presents a teacher telling a story to children. In this case two-dimensional pictures are used to enhance the story. Story telling is part of almost every centre's daily programme. Figure 4.14 shows that only 2% of the respondents indicated that stories were not included at their early learning centres as part of the daily programme.

According to Entz (2009: 59), "story telling is the age old process of relating a tale based on a real-life event, fantasy, or fable". Telling stories is also a method for teachers to engage children linguistically – embedding concepts, vocabulary and values. Story telling is furthermore a valuable tool through which a teacher can model rich language (Entz, 2009: 59).

It is evident from the open-ended responses that story time seemed to be very common in early learning centres and there was uniformity in terms of the number of stories being told per week. Most centres had a story as part of their everyday daily programme.

> Q28: "Specific time for story every day from 12:00 –12:15".
>
> Q124: "Stories are being told every day. Nice stories".
>
> Q137: "Four times a week, after lunch, before sleeping time".
>
> Q141: "Before lunch a story is told".
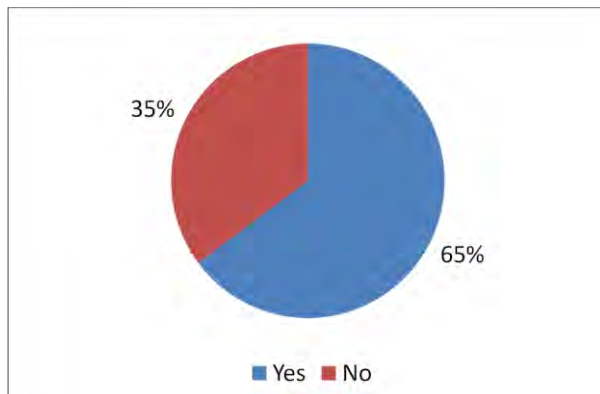
Question 4: Puppet show

Figure 4.15: Puppet show

Photograph 4.15: A boy telling his own puppet show story, ELC 149

Almost two thirds of the centres (65%) present puppet shows in their daily programme as apparent in Figure 4.15. In Photograph 4.15 a boy uses puppets to set up his own puppet show.

Mayesky (2006: 129) remarks that an excellent medium for enhancing children's dramatic play is through the use of puppets, because puppets develop creativity and imagination in young children and a puppet show is also an important medium for language development.

Although puppet shows were amongst children's favourite activities, it is evident from the open-ended responses that they were not presented often. In many early learning centres puppet show presentations occured on rare occasions and in some instances outsiders (not teachers) presented puppet shows.

Q28: "At least once a quarter and it is being done by external people".

Q80: "Was never presented. There was no puppet theatre and other apparatus".

Q124: "Not while I was there".

Q125: "Once a week. Very nice! The teachers do it themselves".

Q204: "Once a month. Some children scared".

Q211: "They get someone once a year to present it. It is becoming too expensive. They don't realise that they can do it themselves".
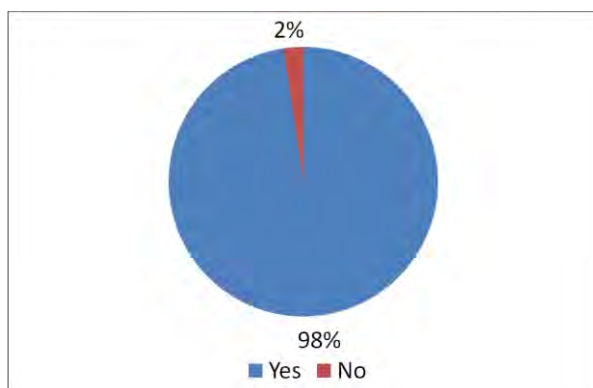
Question 5: Rhyme

Figure 4.16: Rhyme

Photograph 4.16: Children learning a rhyme with masks as resources, ELC 15

The children in Photograph 4.16 are learning a new rhyme. The teacher uses masks as a resource to capture the children's attention. Just as with art activities, theme discussions and stories, rhymes are presented in almost every centre. Figure 4.16 points out that rhymes are part of the curricula of 98% of centres.

Faber (in Grobler, Faber, Orr, Calitz & Van Staden, 1996: 118) remarks that rhymes are not just pleasurable activities for children, but play an important role in their language development because they serve as examples of good language and sentence construction and encourage children to use language creatively.

Although almost all of the centres had rhymes as part of their language activities, there were not many open-ended responses in this regard. The few remarks about the rhymes indicated that they were done on a regular (mostly weekly) basis.

> Q8: "Usually once a week and repeated throughout the week".
>
> Q128: "Every day. Many in the Grade R class".
>
> Q132: "They know many cute rhymes".

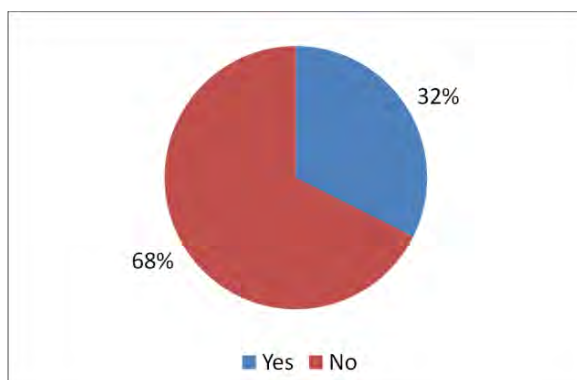**Question 6: Additional language activities**

Figure 4.17: Additional language activities

Photograph 4.17: Building blocks are being used to build Afrikaans and English words, ELC 143

In Photograph 4.17 an illustration of a language game can be seen where learners can build basic words with letter blocks aided by pictures and word cards in both Afrikaans and English. This game is one way to expose learners to an additional language through incidental reading. Figure 4.17 informs us that only 32% of centres introduce their learners to an additional language.

Davin (in Davin & Van Staden, 2005: 91) points out that songs, rhymes and chants are useful when acquiring an additional language. She also emphasises the importance of visual resources like puppets, pictures and magazines to enhance concrete experiences in an additional language.

Many different open-ended comments were captured about additional language activities. It seems that many centres offering additional language activities, do this in an incidental way.

Q23: "English is the children's second language and the language of teaching. Additional language activities are done every day".

Q27: "Very seldom done".

Q58: "Daily, sometimes it is incidental".

Q61: "They do the days, months and weeks in English".

Q72: "Presented by outside people".

Q91: "It was done three times a week. Done in English, Afrikaans and Tswana".

Q95: "Presented five times a week. The children talk to their English friends and learn new words in English".

Q137: "Every morning spelling and words in other languages".

Q154: "During art and baking activities language is done with shapes etc."
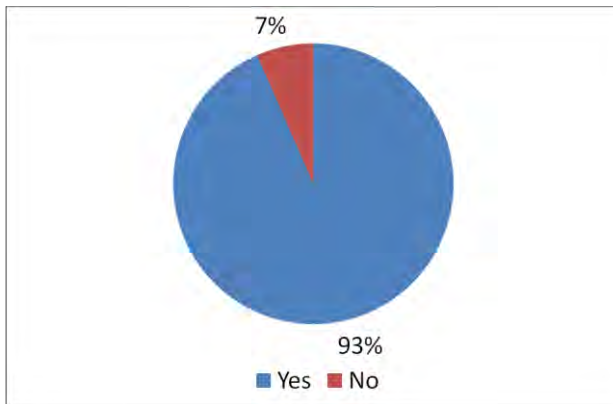
Question 7: Religious story

Figure 4.18: Religious story

Photograph 4.18: Children listening to the story of Noah, ELC 43

Many programmes include a special time for religious stories, music, activities and prayers that help children learn more about religious beliefs. When teachers choose to tell children religious stories, they must keep the social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual needs and development of the children in mind. There should be links with the children's everyday lives and the effect and emotional impact should be considered when appropriate religious stories are chosen (Theunissen, 1981: iv; Van der Merwe 1990b: 248). Photograph 4.18 is an illustration of a teacher telling a religious story to children as part of a daily programme. In this instance the story of Noah and the great flood is being told. From the answers in the questionnaires (Figure 4.18), it seems that religious stories are told in the majority of centres, namely 93%.

Religious stories are part of the daily programmes of most centres. The open-ended responses indicated that in most instances religious activities occured every day.

> Q28: "Every day in the morning".
>
> Q50: "Daily, most of the time".
>
> Q81: "A dramatised Bible story was done on Friday by children".
>
> Q104: "There is a big variety of religions, therefore Bible stories are avoided".
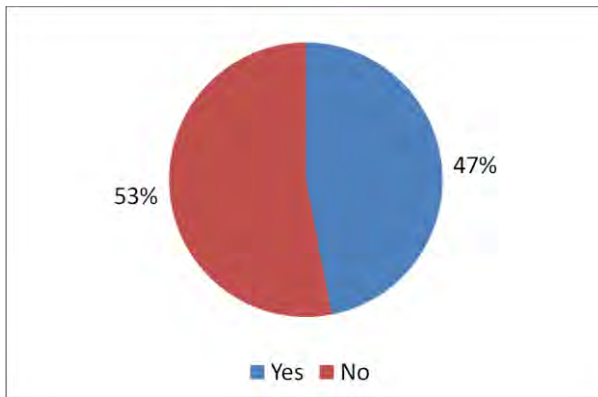
Question 8: Science

Figure 4.19: Science

Photograph 4.19: Children learn about the colours in the colour wheel during a science activity, ELC 143

Photograph 4.19 illustrates a formal planned science activity where the teacher aims to develop particular scientific skills in children. In this instance the activity aims to teach about mixing colours and the colour wheel. Although only 39% of centres indicated the presence of discovery (science) corners (Figure 4.3), Figure 4.19 shows that almost half of the centres, namely 47%, present science activities in their daily programmes.

Mayesky (2006: 167) explains that science activities, where children learn through active investigation, provide children with knowledge about the world around them. She emphasises the fact that the investigating process is more important than the knowledge that the children gain. For Entz (2009: 167), science education is an important tool to encourage children to think, to ask questions and to seek answers to the questions that they have formulated.

According to the open-ended response, science forms part of less than half of the centres' daily programmes. Those centres that do offer science activities, usually have them once a week.

Q44: "Science is done once a week".

Q52: "There is a science ring every Friday".

Q98: "Once a week there is a lady who comes in and does science with them".

Q105: "Once a week. Very interesting science activities".

Q163: "Does occur, but not that frequently".

Q199: "Sometimes replaces theme discussion".
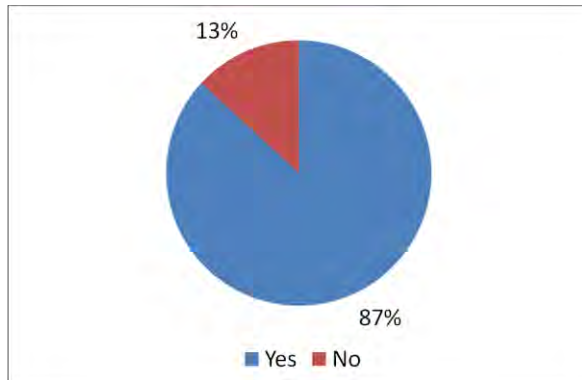
Question 9: Baking activity

Figure 4.20: Baking activity

Photograph 4.20: Children are decorating gingerbread men, ELC 13

The children in Photograph 4.20 are engaged in a baking activity where they are decorating gingerbread men they made. Baking is an activity that is presented in early learning centres in 87% of the cases, as is shown in Figure 4.20.

Food is part of every child's experience and involves all of the senses. Through baking activities children learn new information and skills and develop concepts such as size, taste, colour, texture and shape. Baking activities are also beneficial for the development of children's hand-eye coordination and small muscle skills (Mayesky, 2006: 191).

It seems from the open-ended responses, that baking activities are often neglected in early centres, seemingly because of a presumed cost factor, or because of a lack of facilities.

Q10: "There were no baking activities – what a shame!"

Q11: "Baking is done once every three weeks, on a Friday".

Q80: "There were no facilities for baking activities".

Q81: "Savoury and sweet baking done twice a week".

Q137: "Sometimes when they have ingredients".

Q176: "Because baking is so expensive to present it is not done in the school".
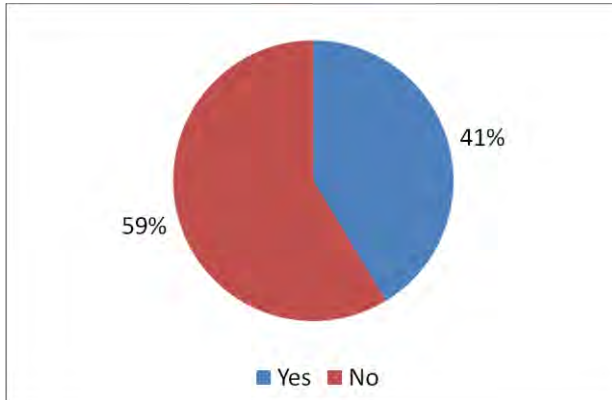
Question 10: Technology activity

Figure 4.21: Technology activity

Photograph 4.21: Two boys are showing the artefact that they made in technology, ELC 92

In Photograph 4.21 two boys display an artefact, namely a musical instrument (from recycled materials) they made during a technology activity. Although only 17% of the centres have technology corners (Figure 4.4), technology activities are presented in 41% of the centres, as illustrated in Figure 4.21.

The inclusion of technology activities in the daily programme helps to meet the cognitive, psychomotor, social and emotional needs of learners (Harpine, Hickey & Whiting, 2004: 29). Ter-Morshuizen (1994: 3) maintains that technology activities provide a vehicle for problem solving, discovery-type learning, logical thinking, high learner interest, as well as involvement, imagining, planning, making and reviewing.

Only a few open-ended comments were made about the technology activities.

Q98: "Technology is done occasionally".

Q101: "Technology is being done in class, but there is no technology corner".
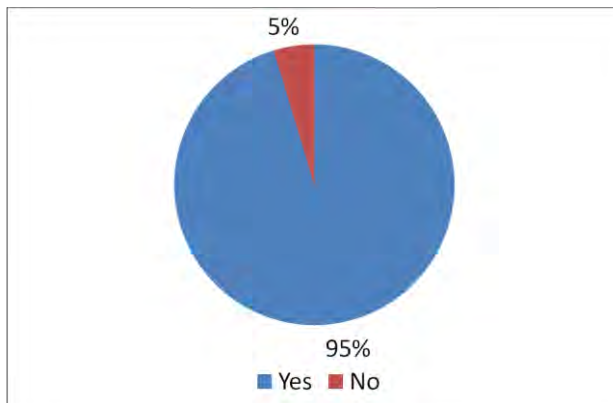
Question 11: Numeracy

Figure 4.22: Numeracy

Photograph 4.22: Counting marbles during numeracy, ELC 15

The girl in Photograph 4.22 is using marbles in a numeracy activity involving counting and numbers. Figure 4.22 illustrates that numeracy activities are presented in 95% of the cases.

Entz (2009: 133) indicates that numeracy is more than just numbers, counting and rules. Numeracy occurs from an attempt to solve problems with space, shapes, time, size, patterns, quantities and relationships and is a "way of thinking that enables children to begin to organise and understand their world" (Entz, 2009: 133). Mayesky (2006: 179) uses a synonym for numeracy, namely early maths. She points out that early maths experiences must be hands-on and filled with play and exploration. For her the emphasis needs to be on "active exploration of mathematical concepts as a natural part of the early childhood program".

From the open-ended responses on numeracy activities, it seems that numeracy is important to early centres and is offered regularly on a daily base. The responses indicate that in some instances numeracy is presented in a formal way in special books, and in other instances it is integrated in other activities.

Q12: "Numeracy is being done every morning".

Q73: "They have to do numeracy every day with each activity".

Q95: "Three to four times per week, after the Bible story".

Q134: "Twice a week. Every morning they count".

Q141: "Three times a week basic maths and counting is done".

Q143: "Every day, they have a special book".

Q157: "Numeracy is constantly intertwined into activities".

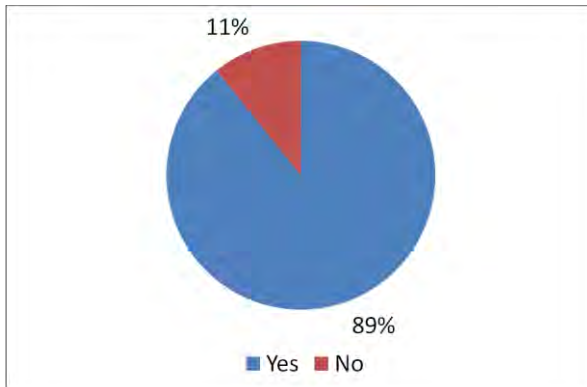**Question 12: Perception/perceptual activity**

Figure 4.23: Perception activity

Photograph 4.23: Children learning
about position in space, ELC 143

Photograph 4.23 illustrates a perception activity where children learn about spatial orientation in a kinaesthetic way by holding bean bags in various places in relation to their bodies (above, behind and in front of their bodies) and thus experiencing abstract concepts concretely. The majority of respondents, 89%, have perception activities included in their daily programmes as is depicted in Figure 4.23.

Jackman (2005: 210) indicates that perceptual development occurs when children "use their senses to learn about the nature of objects, actions and events". Dolya, (2010: 31) explains that perception is the foundation for memory, thinking and imagination. She notes that perception starts when young children engage in playful learning like building, drawing or pretend play where they focus on the external properties of objects. With this focus they develop intensively as they embark on the long process of transforming perception through the active acquisition of sensory standards. Perceptual-motor skills are complex interactions between perceptual, motor and cognitive processes. Sensory stimuli need to be integrated with data that has already been processed in order to form specific perceptions (De Witt & Booysen, 1994: 91).

The open-ended responses on perception activities are similar to those on numeracy activities. It seems as if perception activities in many cases occur in a formal way where work books are used.

> Q73: "Each day children have perception activities that they have to do, but there is a big variety".
>
> Q83: "Perception was done on a regular basis".
>
> Q104: "Learners work in work books every day".
>
> Q143: "Every day, they have a book".
>
> Q144: "Three times a week. Flash cards".
>
> Q152: "The perceptual activities are being presented every day in a formal manner".
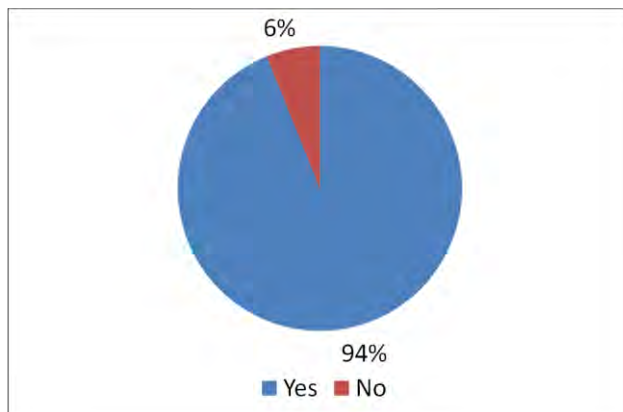
Question 13: Movement activity

Figure 4.24: Movement activity

Photograph 4.24: Children playing with hoops, ELC 143

The children in Photograph 4.24 are exploring their balancing skills with hoola hoops during a movement activity. Figure 4.24 indicates that including movement activities in the daily programme is a high priority for most of the centres. In only 6% of the cases, movement activities are omitted from centres' daily activities.

Children learn by doing, and a natural avenue for children's learning is through creative movement activities that involve the whole child (Mayesky, 2006: 137). Children explore their world through movement. Entz (2009: 115) points out that physical competence is achieved when children are able to control and care for their bodies and can perform tasks at the desired level of proficiency through movement activities.

Although the questionnaires indicated that almost all of the centres presented movement activities, the open ended responses revealed that such activities were often delegated to outsiders who offered extramural activities (like Playball or Monkeynastix).

Q12: "Movement activities are being done every Friday (sport development)".

Q27: "Movement activites are being done four times a week".

Q29: "Twice a week. The two classes, 4 – 5 year olds, do it together".

Q44: "Once a week. Playball comes in every Wednesday".

Q73: "Twice a week. It includes movements as part of rhymes and dances with songs".

Q106: "Twice a week. The children enjoy it very much".

Q115: "Once a week. Usually being done outside on the grass with balls, bean bags etc."

Q136: "They have monkey nastics and ballet".

Q137: "Every day. Bean bags, ropes and ball activities".

Q141: "Three times a week. Obstacle courses".

Q205: "Every second day sport and horse riding".
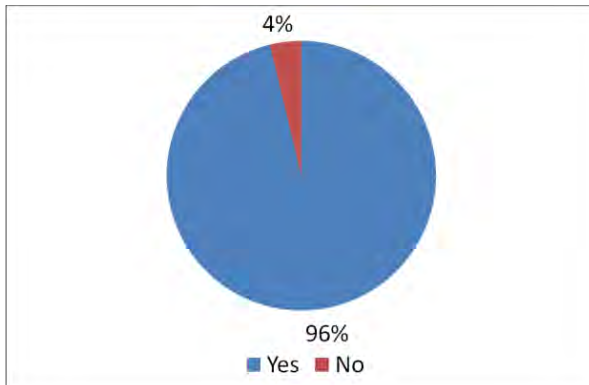
Question 14: Music activity

Figure 4.25: Music activities

Photograph 4.25: Children making music with shakers, ELC 13

Music creates opportunities for varied experiences: singing, responding physically to different rhythms, creative expressions, playing instruments and quiet listening. Music helps children understand other people and their cultures and gives increased opportunities for social and emotional development. Music also provides a means for the aesthetic enrichment and growth of every child (Edwards *et al.,* 2009:xxi).

Photograph 4.25 shows children playing in a percussion band with home-made shakers during a music activity. From Figure 4.8 it is evident that only 21% of the centres had music corners. However, music as an activity is presented in 96% of the centres.

Although most of the centres did not have separate music corners, music seems to be an important activity in almost all of the centres. The open-ended remarks however reveal that music in many instances is mostly singing and in many cases it is the responsibility of outsiders to offer extra mural music activities to certain children.

> Q29: "The whole school did music together".
>
> Q44: "The Kindermusik teacher came in three times a week to teach music".
>
> Q72: "Twice a week for 15 minutes".
>
> Q79: "Done twice a week. Children loved it especially when playing with instruments".
>
> Q81: "They did singing once a week and sometimes singing in the class".
>
> Q114: "Only occasionally. Minimal".
>
> Q115: "They only play music while they are working, that's all".

(c) Outdoor facilities

The purpose of the last part of the questionnaire was to determine the presence of facilities in outdoor learning areas. Graph 4.3 provides a visual summary of outdoor learning areas found in the early learning centres ranging from the most to the least.

Synoptically Graph 4.3 informs that swings, climbing apparatus and slides were *usually* present in 95% of the early learning centres. An average of 64% of the early learning centres had a sandpit, blocks, fantasy, wheel toys and water play areas available. A dollhouse and outside art activities were present in *half* of the early learning centres. A sensopathic area, animals, vegetable or herb garden and woodwork were *usually absent* and *only present* in 22% of the early learning centres.

Table 4.3 provides a visual summary of the level of availability of the different outdoor facilities at the Early Learning Centres.

Table 4.3: The frequency of availability in terms of outdoor facilities

Frequency of availability	Outdoor facilities
± 95%	Swings Climbing apparatus Slide
± 66%	Sandpit Blocks Fantasy play Wheel toys Water play
± 50%	Dollhouse Outside art
‹ 22%	Sensopathic area Animals Woodwork Vegetable and/or herb garden
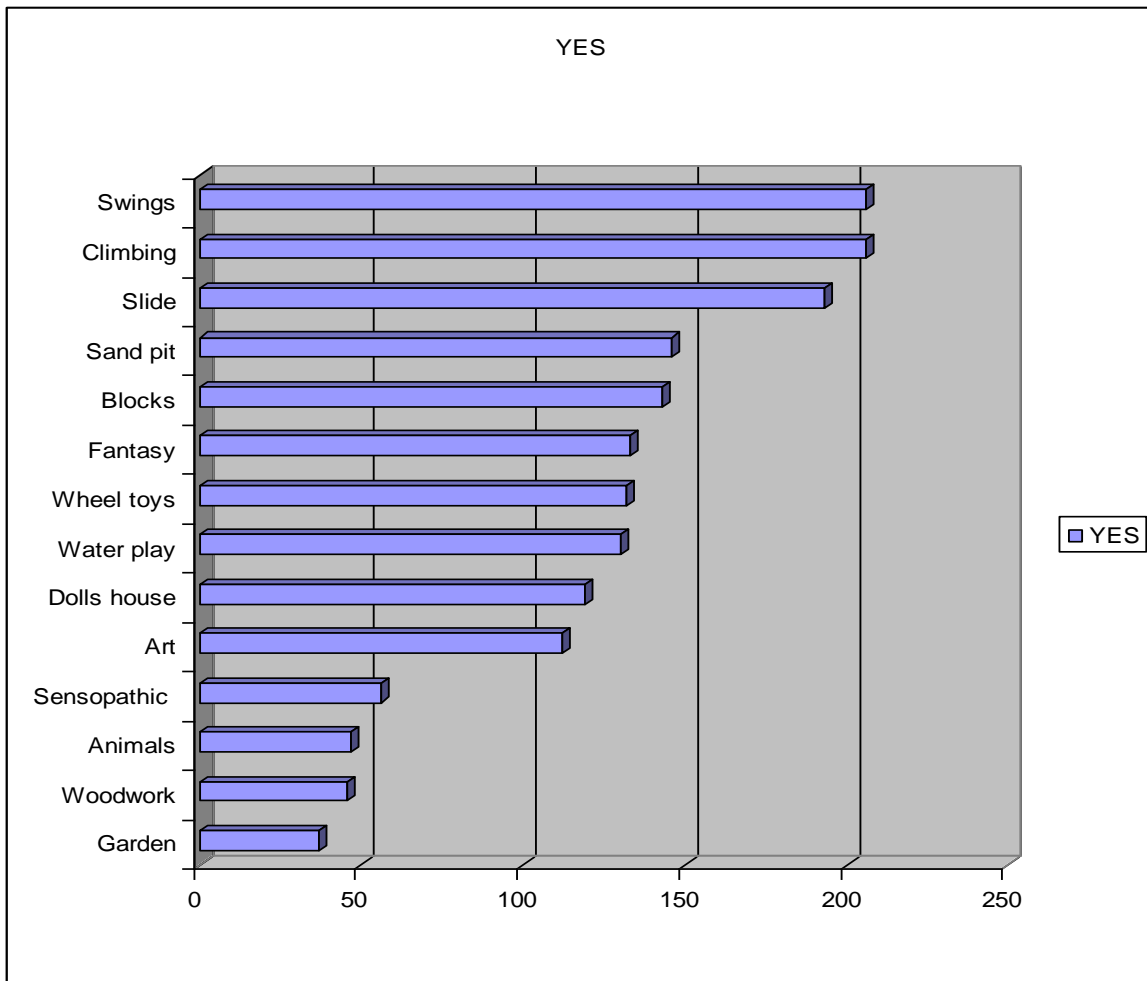
Graph 4.3: An overview of the outdoor learning areas

Question 1: Art area outside

Figure 4.26: Art area outside

Photograph 4.26: Painting boxes, Outside, ELC 13

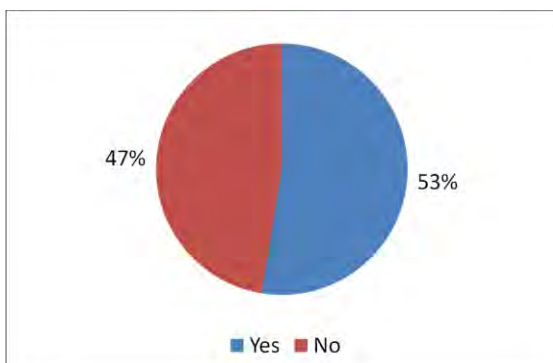Children enjoy the space and freedom of art activities that are offered outdoors (Jackman, 2005: 218). Wellhousen (2002: 83) suggests that an outdoor art centre

allows more opportunities for children to extend themselves through art. In her view, the outdoors is the perfect place for experimenting with messier art materials like finger painting and natural clay. New challenges and opportunities for problem solving are created through outdoor art and also offer children a natural setting for working with organic materials (Wellhousen, 2002: 84).

Photograph 4.26 illustrates a painting activity presented as part of an outdoor play programme. In this photograph the children are working three dimensionally when they paint patterns on cardboard boxes. According to Figure 4.26, just more than half of the centres, 53%, present art activities as part of free play outside.

The open-ended responses revealed that art activities presented outside were mostly painting or drawing activities.

Q61: "Sometimes they are drawing outside".

Q73: "There is something to do for each age group".

Q78: "Play dough and baking were done outside".

Q79: "Outside so children could mess and paintings could dry".

Q96: "They write with chalk on chalk boards outside and paint with water on walls".

Q205; "We painted on the fence".

Question 2: Woodwork

Figure 4.27: Woodwork
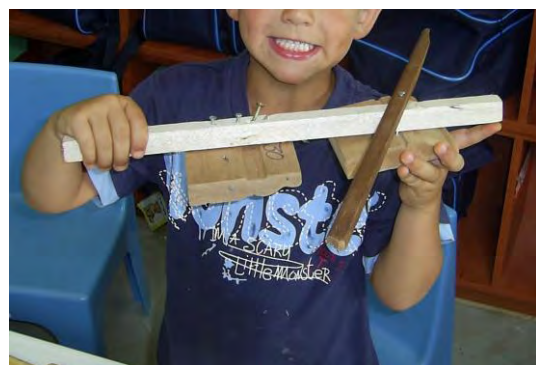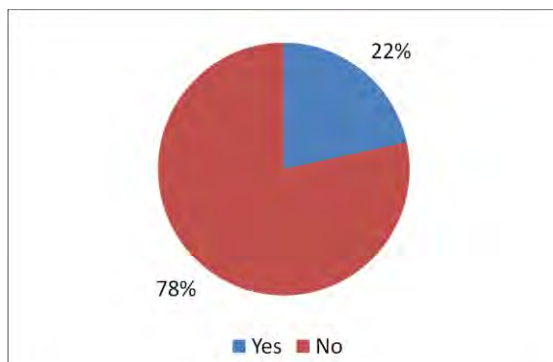

Photograph 4.27: Showing an article made during woodwork, ELC 130

Just like sand and water, wood is also an example of open-ended material. When children are doing woodwork, they get hands-on experiences with measurement, balance, power and spatial relationships (Charlesworth & Lind, 2003: 545). Schirrmacher (2006: 47) points out that along with the obvious physical challenge,

woodworking fosters children's verbal and social interaction and also develops their skills in observation, problem solving and hypothesising.

A boy is showing the creation that he made during a woodwork activity in Photograph 4.27. It seems that woodwork is not often presented as part of outdoor activities. Figure 4.27 shows that only 22% of the centres have woodwork as an activity.

The open-ended responses on woodwork revealed that this activity was often neglected. In one instance a reason was given (lack of materials and equipment).

Q26: "Woodwork is presented when the theme is wood or something related to it".

Q94: "Woodwork was never done".

Q95: "The children do woodwork by hitting nails in wood. Enough space for the activity".

Q137: "Built helicopters. Brought own nails and hammers".

Q152: "There were no planks or any woodwork materials in the school".

Q200: "While I was there three children brought woodwork materials for one week".

Question 3: Climbing apparatus

Figure 4.28: Climbing apparatus

Photograph 4.28: Climbing and balancing on a jungle gym, ELC 10

Playground equipment such as climbing apparatus provides opportunities for children to learn while they are engaged in play (Wellhousen, 2002: 254). A climbing frame (like a jungle gym) allows children to develop their gross motor skills, to challenge themselves by experimenting and taking risks and it should therefore be safe and age- and stage-appropriate for its users (Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 193). According to Berry (2001: 93) climbing equipment, that is flexible and can be changed according

to the children's needs and interests, is the best option. She suggests that movable boards and ladders can add interest to static equipment like a climbing frame.

In Photograph 4.28 a wooden climbing structure can be seen where children are engaged in a variety of physical activities. According to Figure 4.28 almost all of the centres have climbing apparatus as part of their outdoor facilities. In only 3% of the cases climbing apparatus was absent.

According to the open-ended responses, almost all of the centres had some kind of climbing apparatus which were well used by the children.

Q17: "There is a variety and they are safe".

Q37: "Too little space".

Q61: "The children are very active and are often climbing".

Q96: "Very stable and colourful. Inviting to children".

Question 4: Swings

Figure 4.29: Swings

Photograph 4.29: Swings in a secluded area outside, ELC 149

Wellhousen (2002: 253) points out that swings improve balance, stimulate vestibular sense and promote language and cooperative play. Swings ideally must be placed in a remote part of the play area, far enough apart to avoid collisions and away from the other play areas' traffic to allow sufficient space for movement (Berry, 2001: 93).

A swing area that provides swinging opportunities for five children at a time can be seen in Photograph 4.29. Figure 4.29 mirrors that for the climbing apparatus; 97% of the centres have swings for the children to swing on.

The open-ended remarks about swings were similar to those presented about the climbing apparatus, namely the availablity of a sufficient number of swings that varied in terms of size.

Q8: "The swings are in a separate area".

Q37: "Too little space".

Q73: "There are five individual swings, each with it's own height".

Q81: "Cordened off as not to hurt any children walking by".

Q88: "Four different swings in different places".

Q99: "There are only two swings for the whole school".

Question 5: Slide
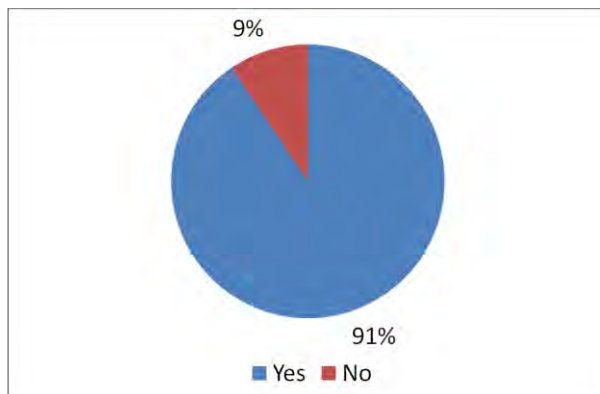
Figure 4.30: Slide

Photograph 4.30: A slide with a safe landing, ELC 43

Berry (2001: 93) states that an appropriate slide in an early learning centre is one "with a slow finish, so that the body is almost stationary when the child reaches the bottom". A safe landing is crucial and soft sand or wood chips can be used. The slide in Photograph 4.30 is attached to a climbing frame and a sand box helps to soften the landing. According to Figure 4.30 most of the centres, namely 91%, had slides available in their outdoor play areas.

The open-ended responses revealed that slides are part of the majority of early learning centres. In most instances the centres had more than one slide that varied in terms of size and height.

Question 6: Dollhouse / Fantasy playhouse
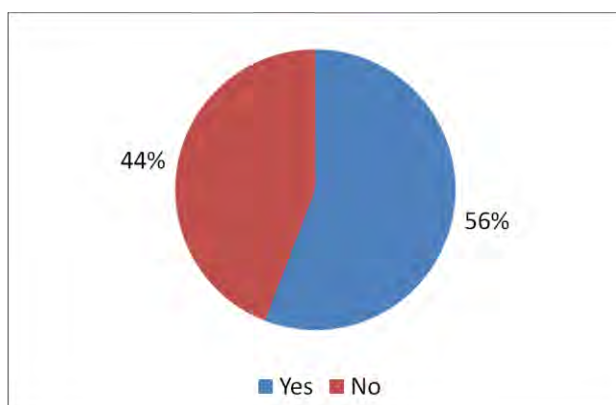
Figure 4.31: Dollhouse

Photograph 4.31: Two girls are entering an outside dollhouse, ELC 43

Wellhousen (2002: 86-87) claims that pretending dominates play in early learning centres. She suggests that props should be made available outdoors, for example in an outdoor dramatic play centre like a dollhouse to facilitate children's understanding of symbols and symbolic play. "When children engage in role-play they deepen their understanding of the world and develop skills that will serve them throughout their lives" (Dodge *et al.,* 2003: 271).

In Photograph 4.31 two girls entering a typical dollhouse can be seen. Figure 4.31 tells us that in just over half of the centres, namely 56%, there is a dollhouse where children can practise dramatisation.

From the open-ended remarks it is evident that in centres where dollhouses were available and in a good condition, they were popular choices amongst the children.

Q8: "The dollhouse is very nice, it is a double story!"

Q48: "The girls enjoy it very much".

Q59: "The dollhouse is currently being locked because it is broken".

Q73: "There is a big dollhouse at the sandpit".

Q94: "Very few accessories in the dollhouse".

Q98: "The girls and boys love to play there".

Q157: "Stunning mini house with brick walls and a little roof".

Question 7: Fantasy corner(s) outside
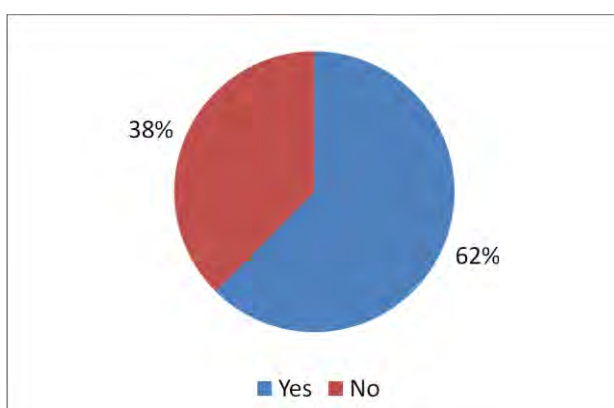
Figure 4.32: Fantasy corner outside

Photograph 4.32: A fire station for dramatic play outside, ELC 43

Mayesky (2009: 330) points out that provision should be made for fantasy play that occurs in the outdoor area. With more space and fewer boundaries outside, outdoor dramatic play is often robust and highly mobile. Children will use any available equipment and materials in their role play (Mayesky, 2009: 330).

Photograph 4.32 provides an example of an outside fantasy corner that resembles a fire station. Figure 4.32 reveals that 62% of the centres make provision for fantasy corners in the outdoor play area.

The open-ended comments on outside fantasy areas revealed a variety of options available in early learning centres.

Q7: "There is a fairy garden".

Q48. "Five areas. The classes rotate, once a week".

Q72: "There are crates with old fantasy clothes".

Q93: "They had a little town. Very nice!!!"

Q99: "There is a 'Holiday Inn' available".

Question 8: Area for wheel toys
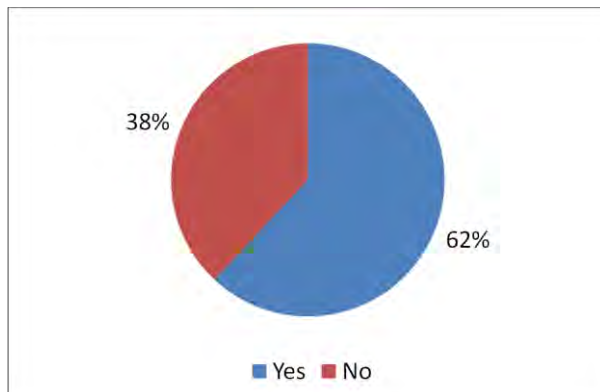
Figure 4.33: Area for wheel toys

Photograph 4.33: An area for wheel toys with roads and a petrol pump, ELC 158

Wellhousen (2002: 91) claims that an essential component of the outdoor play area is a place for riding tricycles, scooters, pedal and push cars. She explains that children feel autonomous, develop their gross motor skills, learn to follow rules, and role play when they ride on wheel toys under their own power.

Photograph 4.33 is an illustration of a spacious purpose-built wheel toy area with a play petrol pump,;different tricycles and concrete roads where children develop their gross motor skills, and ability to balance,;and where they can dramatise in pretend play in their roles as 'motorists'. In 69% of the centres there are areas where children can practise how to balance and ride on wheel toys, as is evident from Figure 4.33.

It is clear from the open-ended responses that some centres have interesting areas for wheel toys. It appears that variety and sufficient space seem to be important considerations.

Q48: "Very popular".

Q73: "There is a big wheel toy area with a variety of bicycles for boys and girls and there are tricycles as well".

Q84: "Motor track with rubberised road to make falling less painful".

Q103: "I think they could add enough toys because the children were fighting over them".

Q105: "A big area with different wheel toys".

Q116: "Mini traffic road".

Q118: "Big area with different kinds of wheel toys that are being rotated daily".

Q140: "They have a 'road' for bicycles, tricycles and scooters".

Question 9: Block play
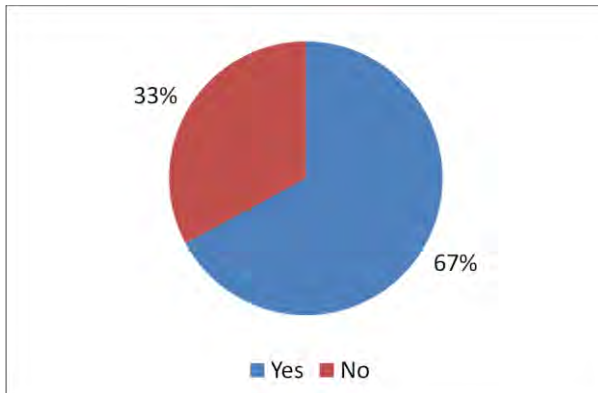
Figure 4.34: Block play

Photograph 4.34: Children are building a block structure outside, ELC 158

"Block play and outdoor explorations give children many opportunities to investigate, test and change objects and it is from these interactions that children build their own model of the world" (Charlesworth & Lind, 2003: 540). Bullard (2010: 255) and Feeney *et al.,* (2006: 238) point out that children need adequate space and sufficient time for block play, therefore it is advisable to present block play as an outdoor activity.

Photograph 4.34 is an illustration of children who are cooperatively building a simple structure with blocks in the outside play area. In 84% of the centres there are indoor block play facilities (Figure 4.9) and 67% of the centres have an outside area for children to explore their block building skills, as Figure 4.34 shows.

The open-ended responses about outside block play indicated that block play was present in some centres, however no remarks about any accessories or the condition of the blocks were made.

Q8: "Not used often".

Q39: "There is a big mobile cupboard with all kinds of blocks".

Q73: "There is a big area for the children for block play".

Q84: "In the sandpit".

Q153: "They use different blocks every day".

Question 10: Sandpit
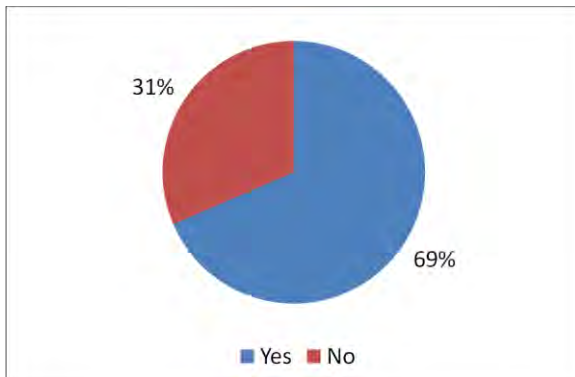
Figure 4.35: Sandpit

Photograph 4.35: Boys are digging in the sandpit with plastic spades, ELC 46

Natural materials, like sand and water, provide opportunities for activities that are sensory rich, soothing and therapeutic. Sand (an open-ended material) provides unlimited creative possibilities, while it also supports physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language development (Schirrmacher, 2006: 46-47).

Photograph 4.35 shows three boys playing with plastic shovels and buckets in a sandpit outside. Figure 4.35 demonstrates that 69% of the centres have sandpits for learners to play in.

In their open-ended remarks about the sandpit, the student-participants indicated that in most instances, enough space, shade and accessories were available.

Q48: "Well-cared for sand".

Q78: "Shaded and big enough for all children".

Q79: "Under cover, most children played in the sand".

Q84: "Lots of apparatus".

Q103: "It was huge but not that interesting because of the unchanged toys being displayed".

Q116: "Learners play once a week".

Q125: "Children enjoy sandpit most of all".

Q152: "Enough toys, but unorganised and most of them were broken".

Q186: "The sandpit is very clean and in the shade to prevent the children from sunburn".

Q205: "Sandpit with many sandpit toys under the tree house".

Question 11: Water play
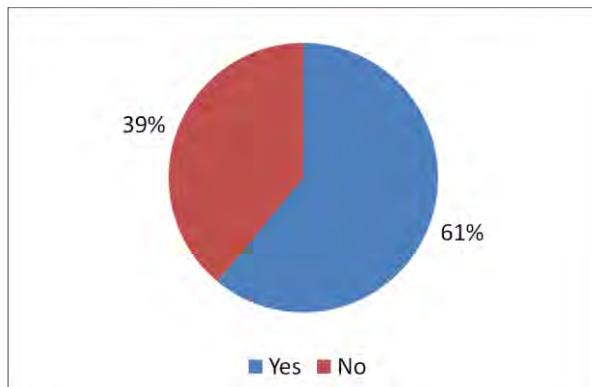
Figure 4.36: Water play

Photograph 4.36: Children are playing and experimenting at the water table outside, ELC 46

Jackman (2005: 237) states that water play can be lively and relaxing at the same time. She further points out that children are naturally drawn to water which can be seen when they are running through a sprinkler, playing at a water table, bathing dolls in a plastic tub, filling and emptying water containers or watering plants.

Photograph 4.36 shows a group of children actively participating in water play in the outdoor play area. They are pouring water to and fro from a variety of plastic containers. Figure 4.36 tells us that 61% of the centres present water play activities for their learners.

From the open-ended responses it is clear that centres offering water play, had various types of water areas and interesting activities and apparatus available for the children.

> Q29: "Not every day, only on special occasions".
>
> Q61: "Sometimes when it is hot outside".
>
> Q81: "A water tray table was available to all learners outside".
>
> Q84: "Two water stations".
>
> Q97: "Changes every day: bubbles, sea animals etc."
>
> Q104: "A water track and big bath that is being filled up daily with soapy water".
>
> Q119: "Water play changes every day: colour of the water, warm/cold; bubbles in".
>
> Q125: "They have a fountain that gets a lot of attention".
>
> Q137: "Big rock dam with tap and gravel on the bottom".
>
> Q157: "Four troughs of water with toys available for children".

Question 12: Sensopathic table
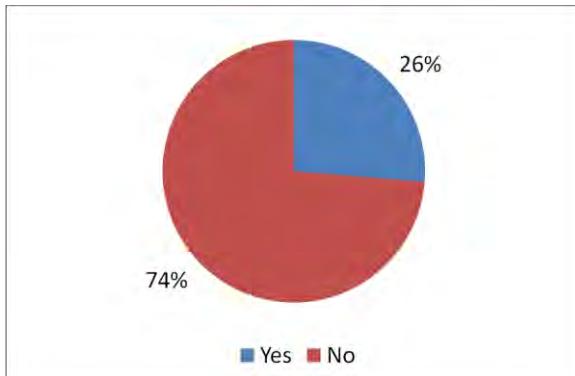
Figure 4.37: Sensopathic table

Photograph 4.37: Dried lentils for tactile learning at a sensopathic table, ELC 46

Using the senses for learning helps children make sense out of their world. A primary mode of learning for young children is through the tactile sense that provides information on shape, texture and temperature (Entz, 2009: 149 -150; Essa, 2011: 316). Feeney *et al.,* (2006: 241) remind us that mud, sand, water, dough and clay are traditionally the materials used for the sensory development of children. They propose dry alternatives like rice, beans, macaroni, oatmeal, sawdust and aquarium gravel that can be used for pouring and feeling. Mixtures of wet and dry materials can also be used and are ideally played with at sensopathic/sensory tables outdoors (Feeny *et al.,* 2006: 241).

The children in Photograph 4.37 are experimenting with dried lentils and yoghurt glasses at a sensopathic table in the outdoor play area. Figure 4.37 shows that in only 26% of the cases learners had access to sensopathic tables outside for the development of their tactile abilities.

The open-ended responses to this area are similar to those about the indoor sensopathic areas. It seems that centres who did have these areas were using them well and exposed the children to a variety of materials.

> Q30: "It is only being used during summer".
> Q122: "Being used a lot".
> Q125: "Powder table".
> Q140: "Discovery table with shells, wood cuttings, seeds etc."
> Q143: "They have a sensopathic road".
> Q153: "Apparatus changed daily. They combined two different materials (pebbles and dinosaurs)".
> Q193: "Several sensopathic trays".

Question 13: Vegetable/herb garden
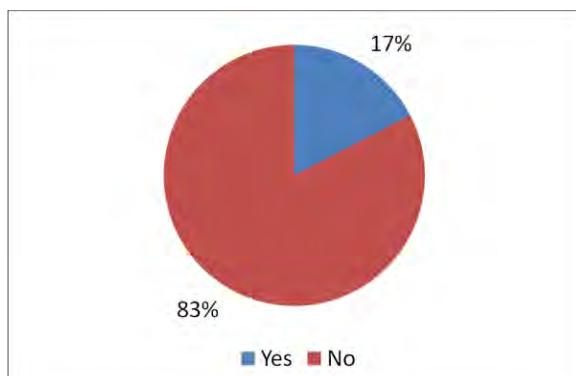
Figure 4.38: Vegetable/herb garden

Photograph 4.38: A garden made and kept by children, ELC 43

Experiences with the natural world are vitally important for young children who spend most of their time indoors. An outdoor environment should have plants, dirt, trees, grass as well as the creatures that inhabit them. A small garden or garden box where children share in the responsibility of caring for plants, is one way to provide first hand experiences with nature and offer meaningful opportunities to dig, sow, water, observe and harvest plants (Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 229; Wellhousen, 2002: 92)*.*

Photograph 4.38 is an illustration of a garden box with herbs, vegetables and flowers cared for by one class in an early learning centre. The children are actively involved in the various stages of sprouting of seeds and planting of seedlings, and with the facilitation of their teacher, they care for the small garden. Vegetable or herb gardens seem to be part of preschools only in a few instances. Figure 4.38 informs us that only 17% of the centres had herb or vegetable gardens.

Very few centres had gardens for the children. The open-ended responses mostly indicate what were present in the gardens, but did not really reveal much about the children's involvement.

> Q64: "Herb garden / fairy garden".
> Q94: "The children's vegetables are also coming from the garden".
> Q104: "Learners are being encouraged to work in the garden and water the plants".
> Q125: "The whole garden has been laid out in a sensory way. Each class has a little space to plant herbs/vegetables".

Q135: "There is a plant, that when a learner cuts himself they are told to put the plant on the wound".

Q153: "They have a trail in the garden so they feel like they are on a hike".

Q192: "They had mint, lavender and cabbage".

Q205: "Every learner has an area where he/she plants different herbs and then learns about the uses".

Question 14: Animals
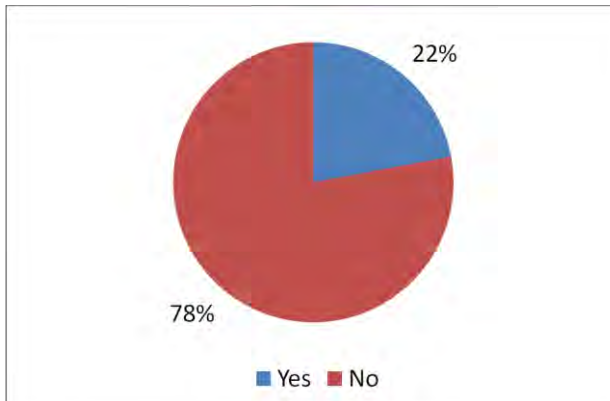
Figure 4.39: Animals

Photograph 4.39: Bunnies and tortoises housed at an early learning centre, ELC 149

In Photograph 4.39 two rabbits and two tortoises living in an enclosure at an early learning centre are visible. The children can observe, touch and feed them and in a hands-on way learn about the animals' characteristics and their way of living. Not many centres had animals living in their outdoor play areas. As seen in Figure 4.39 in about a fifth of the cases, namely 22%, children had exposure to animals at the preschools.

Calitz (in Grobler, Faber, Orr, Calitz and Van Staden, 1996: 46–47) explains that animals living in an early childhood centre must be animals that can be petted and handled by children. Calitz suggests rabbits and guinea-pigs as suitable choices. She reminds us that for a tortoise a permit is needed. Bantam fowls and fantail pigeons are easy to keep outdoors. Indoor animals may include mice, hamsters, small cage birds and gold fish in an aquarium (Essa, 2011: 345; Grobler *et al.,* 1996: 46–47).

The open-ended responses revealed that only a few early learning centres kept animals on the premises. Chickens and rabbits seem to be the most popular choice.

Q30: "There are chickens and ducks".

Q47: "There are chickens, guinea fowls, a pony and rabbits".

Q88: "Animals visit the school".

Q93: "An animal cage with tortoises, rabbits and chickens".

Q135: "There was a rabbit cage where the children could go sit".

Q152: "Unfortunately it was too small for the number of animals".

Q205: "Dogs, rabbits, donkeys, goats, chickens, horses, pigs and ducks".

4.3   Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the quantitative results derived from the questionnaires from the perspective of student-participants regarding the availability of indoor and outdoor facilities, as well as the structured learning activities being offered in the early learning centres. In the next chapter, the results from the qualitative data sources are being explained.

Chapter 5

Analysis of the responses in the interviews and reflective journals

5.1   INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4, I reported on the results of the study by explaining the themes that emerged from quantitative analysis of the raw data obtained from questionnaires as answered by the students after completion of their three weeks teaching practice session at early learning centres. In this chapter, I give an account of the results from the qualitative data, namely the interviews with 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).

Following the thematic analysis of interview transcriptions, themes, sub-themes and categories emerged as reflected in Appendices L and M (Examples of data analysis phases). Aspects of quality, that emerged as themes from the data, are grouped in four themes (see Table 5.1), namely the daily programme; the context of learning; learners' requirements and expectations; and the requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities in the early learning centres. This report also includes figures depicting results to enhance the discussion of the themes, sub-themes and categories that emerged from the analysis.

In addition to the interviews, results of the analyses of the student-participants' reflective journals (see Appendix R) (capturing their experiences of the *atmosphere* [see 3.6.2.1] in the early learning centres) are also presented in this chapter. The purpose of the reflective journals was to capture aspects that are not directly visible to outsiders like the atmosphere in the centres and relationships between the teachers and children. The student-participants were asked to identify what determined the atmosphere in the early learning centres and to indicate how they (as students)

experienced the atmosphere while at the early childhood centres by observing and reflecting on the behaviour, emotions and body language of the different beneficiaries. The student-participants were also asked to reflect on the relationships between the teachers and children and amongst the teachers themselves as well as on insights gained in terms of teaching/themselves/the children/the teachers. The student-participants furthermore had to point out things that they would have done differently and to clarify why they said so. For authenticity, I used verbatim quotations from these journals that provided the fieldworkers' experiences and insights on the relevant themes, sub-themes and categories. To distinguish reflective journal inscriptions from the interview quotations, I present each journal quotation in a block, in green and in a different font. Every reflective journal quotation` is indicated with an R and the student-participant's number.

Table 5.1: An overview of the themes, sub-themes and categories

Theme 1:			**The daily programme in the early learning centre**	

Sub-theme	*1.1:*	*Curriculum*		
	(a)	Category	1.1.1	Current curriculum
	(b)	Category	1.1.2	Preparation for Grade 1
Sub-theme	*1.2:*	*Implementation of the curriculum in the daily programme*		
	(a)	Category	1.2.1	Organisational components
			(a)(i)	Structured time management
			(a)(ii)	Care and discipline
	(b)	Category	1.2.2	Learning opportunities

Theme 2:	**Context of learning**			
Sub-theme	*2.1*	*Central and pleasant locality*		
Sub-theme	*2.2*	*Environment: healthy and safe*		
	(a)	Category:	2.2.1	Security, safety and supervision
	(b)	Category	2.2.2	Hygienic environment
Sub-theme	*2.3*	*Language of teaching and learning*		
Sub-theme	*2.4*	*Non-discriminatory and accepting atmosphere*		
	(a)	Category	2.4.1	Non-discriminatory and respectful
	(b)	Category	2.4.2	Accepting and accommodating atmosphere
Sub-theme	*2.5*	*Centre's reputation*		
Sub-theme	*2.6*	*Centre management and leadership*		

Theme 3:	**Learners' requirements and expectations**			
Sub-theme 3.1		*Teachers' qualifications, relationships & conduct*		
	(a)	Category 3.1.1	Learner-teacher ratio	
	(b)	Category 3.1.2	Teachers' qualifications, abilities and attributes	
	(c)	Category 3.1.3	Teachers' conduct	
	(d)	Category 3.1.4	Relationships between teachers, parents and children	
Sub-theme	*3.2*	*Optimising learner development*		

Theme 4:	**Requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities**			
Sub-theme	*4.1*	*Available services*		
	(a)	Category	4.1.1	Core services: time and food
	(b)	Category	4.1.2	Additional services, extramural activities, extras, occupational therapists, outings.
Sub-theme	*4.2*	*Facilities that are child-friendly and conducive to development*		

When I started to analyse the data, I realised that it would be challenging to find exact themes for the different responses given by the participants. Many of the responses touch on more than one aspect, for example the child as well as the equipment that is being used, or the curriculum and the teacher. Therefore, during analysis, a particular response could theoretically be grouped into more than one category. I opted to incorporate each response only once in a single category during analysis using inclusion and exclusion criteria (as indicated before each of the categories). I started to group together answers that were the same or very similar and I tried to find commonalities between the answers. Finally, informed by the literature review and the number (frequency) of responses, I decided to organise the data according to four main themes identified in an earlier paragraph.

The question: "What do you perceive as quality in an early learning centre?" posed to the teacher- and parent-participants during the interview schedule, was an open-ended, non-biased question (see 3.6.2.2). Teacher- and parent-participants were not led or limited in terms of the length or comprehensiveness of the coverage in response to the question. The interviews were a rich source of information about the views and experiences of the parents (mothers) of children in the early learning centres, as well as those of the teachers (as beneficiaries) teaching children in the early learning centres.

5.2 CROSS-CASE COMPARISON OF TEACHER- AND MOTHER-PARTICIPANTS' INTERVIEW RESPONSES AND THE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL RESPONSES OF STUDENT-PARTICIPANTS

Table 5.2 provides a visual summary of the categories of the different participants' responses with a high frequency. The coloured blocks in the table show which participant groups (teachers, mothers and students) gave preference to the different responses regarding quality, as well as the frequency of those responses. All the responses are grouped according to the four main themes that emerged by analysing the interviews and reflective journals. The responses of the teachers are indicated in red, the mothers' responses are in blue and the students' in green. These blocks help to indicate which responses were the focus of any, some, or all of the different

groups of participants. From these data it was apparent that the majority of quality indicators were valued by all three of the groups.

Table 5.2: A visual summary of responses indicating beneficiaries' most frequent responses

Theme 1: The daily programme in the early learning centre	Teachers	Mothers	Students
There are discipline, rules and regulations in the centre	11	30	30
The educational programme has a high quality/good standard	18	30	0
The daily programme provides good/sufficient, different learning opportunities for children's holistic development	32	21	0
The programme encourages learner participation	15	10	0
The programme has high religious and moral values	19	30	0
There is balance between love and discipline	0	14	21
The correct curriculum is being used	7	0	0
Children are exposed to group work	10	0	0
The programme equips children to be ready for Grade 1	0	23	0
Life skills are addressed through the programme	0	13	0
The programme provides enough time for play	0	12	0
The programme is challenging and stimulating	0	17	0
Theme 2: Context of learning	Teachers	Mothers	Students
Children are treated with respect and taught to be respectful	7	13	15
There is a caring, loving and peaceful atmosphere	15	8	23
There is a friendly, safe atmosphere	16	8	11
The centre is clean, neat and hygienic	11	21	0
The centre is safe and offers security	47	47	0
The centre is central	10	0	0
The centre is close to the primary school	7	0	0
The environment is in a friendly, pleasant location	10	0	0
There is no discrimination, the centre is multicultural	0	8	0
Neat boys' and girls' bathrooms	0	0	13
Atmosphere: relaxed and comfortable	0	0	10

Theme 3: Learners' requirements and expectations	Teachers	Mothers	Students
Every child is important and receives (full) individual attention	17	17	10
Teachers love children, are caring and warm (children are well cared for)	32	34	37
The children are happy and content and they enjoy school	16	48	17
Teachers are always prepared to be helpful and supportive	0	40	32
Teachers are professional	9	0	11
Teachers are well prepared	12	0	12
Teachers are friendly	17	0	35
Good cooperation exists between the staff and parents	11	0	10
The staff work well together (there is synergy)	17	0	18
There is a small number of learners in the classes	38	7	0
Children are the number one priority	17	15	0
Teachers are dedicated and motivated	12	7	0
Teachers are qualified	40	34	0
Children can develop to their full potential	7	0	0
Teachers are excellent	8	0	0
Children's identities are developed at the centre	0	13	0
There are enough opportunities for social interaction	0	35	0
Teachers build good relationships of trust with children	0	9	0
There is good communication between the staff and parents	0	14	0
Teachers are fair	0	15	0
Good relationships amongst staff members	0	0	13
Teachers have good relationships with parents	0	0	21

Theme 4: Requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities	Teachers	Mothers	Students
The classrooms are spacious	31	18	0
The centre provides extramural or extra activities	16	0	0
The playground is interesting and well-designed	9	0	0
The centre is fully equipped	7	0	0
There is sufficient and a variety of apparatus and toys	27	0	0
The playground is big and spacious	19	0	0
There is an aftercare service (after school hours)	0	11	0
Occupational and speech therapists are available	0	10	0

5.2.1 Comparing responses according to themes

Theme 1: The daily programme in the early learning centre

All three groups of participants put a high price on discipline, rules and regulations in the centre. For mothers and teachers, quality in early learning centres is comprised of a high quality educational programme that provides sufficient learning opportunities to enhance children's holistic development, and also encourages learner participation in a faith-based manner. Whereas teachers focused on the type of curriculum, relationships and facilities, mothers focused on school readiness, a challenging and stimulating programme, life skills being addressed and sufficient playtime. For mothers and students, achieving a balance between love and discipline was important, whereas the importance of using the 'correct'[7] curriculum and children being exposed to group work, were primarily stated by the teachers.

Theme 2: Context of learning

A loving, caring, peaceful, friendly and safe atmosphere in the early learning centre was highly valued by teachers, mothers and students. All three groups of participants agreed that children should be treated with respect and should also be taught to be

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[7] From the interview quotes it is not clear what is meant by "correct". My assumption is that "correct" curriculum refers to a curriculum which reflects the centre's philosophy, for example a play-based or academically orientated curriculum.

respectful. A clean, neat and hygienic early learning centre was important to mothers and teachers. Safety and security was extremely important for teachers and mothers. Mothers, furthermore, valued non-discriminatory, multicultural centres, whereas teachers valued the central setting of the centre (near a primary school and situated in a pleasant area). Students indicated that they value a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere and also accentuated the importance of neat bathroom facilities for boys and girls.

Theme 3: Learners' requirements and expectations

Mothers, teachers and students placed a high priority on the happiness and best interests of the children. All the groups valued warm and caring teachers who loved the children and provided individual attention to them. Children's happiness and their enjoyment of the school were deemed necessary by mothers, teachers and students. Supportive, helpful teachers were extremely important for mothers and students. Teachers and students focused on optimising the potential of teachers characterised as professional, friendly, well prepared and cooperative with parents and peers. Both the teachers and mothers signified the importance of a small number of learners per classroom where the children receive individual attention and are considered the priority. Qualified, dedicated and motivated teachers are also rated highly by teachers as well as mothers. In addition, mothers considered a centre with sufficient opportunities for social interaction and the development of the children's identities as important. Mothers valued interpersonal relationships of trust between the teachers and children, good communication between the staff and parents, and fair teachers. Teachers valued excellent teachers who can develop children to their full potential and students highlighted the importance of good relationships amongst staff members and between teachers and parents.

Theme 4: Requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities

Spacious classrooms were specifically important for mothers and teachers. Teachers also considered the following in a quality early learning centre: providing extramural/extra activities, spacious and interesting playgrounds and well-equipped centres. In terms of additional services, a centre with an aftercare service and the availability of occupational and speech therapists were quality indicators for mothers.

5.2.2 Comparing responses according to the participants

All the groups prioritised the children's happiness and best interests. Everybody said the atmosphere must be caring, loving, peaceful, friendly and safe, and respect towards children was valued highly. Children's happiness and their enjoyment of the school were deemed important by mothers, teachers and students. Discipline, rules and regulations in the centre, as well individual attention and warm and caring teachers who love and respect the children, were valued by all the groups.

A clean, neat and hygienic early learning centre was important to *mothers and teachers* and safety and security were of great importance to these groups. Apart from the curriculum and context of learning, mothers and teachers particularly valued a small number of learners per class. It was evident that children should be regarded as important and be seen by both of these groups as a first priority. For teachers and mothers the teachers' qualifications, relationships and conduct were considered an important part of quality in early learning centres. Teachers and mothers agreed that teachers must be qualified, dedicated and motivated.

Teachers and mothers (not students) thought that safety and security and faith-based values were very important. These two groups valued a high quality programme which offers different learning opportunities and develops children holistically and encourages learner participation. A clean, neat, hygienic centre with spacious rooms that houses a small number of learners; a place where children are considered a priority and where they can receive individual attention, was significant for both groups. Both mothers and teachers regarded qualified, loving, caring and warm teachers as very important.

For *teachers and students* friendly, professional teachers who are well prepared, were considered important. *Mothers and students* focused on a balance between love and discipline and helpful and supportive teachers. Aspects of significance to *students* were good relationships amongst staff members and parents, neat bathrooms and a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere in the early learning centre.

Aspects that were important for *teachers* (but not mothers or students) were the 'correct' curriculum, group work, as well as the location of the centre. Teachers also focused on the development of children according to their potential. For their part teachers expected early childhood education teachers to be professional (friendly, prepared) and to cooperate with parents and peers. In terms of services and facilities, teachers valued the availability of extramural activities, a well-designed playground and a fully equipped centre with a variety of apparatus and toys sufficient for their needs.

Whereas teachers focused on the type of curriculum, relationships and facilities, *mothers* focused on a challenging and stimulating programme, life skills being addressed, sufficient playtime and achieving a balance between love and discipline. Mothers furthermore valued non-discrimination, multicultural centres and the development of children's identities. Social interaction and supportive, helpful teachers were extremely important for mothers. Mothers also placed a high premium on trust and fairness towards children, as well as good communication between staff and parents. Mothers also ranked aftercare services and the availability of speech and occupational therapists as important.

Mothers furthermore placed a high premium on school readiness, whereas only a few (three) *teachers* focused on getting children ready for Grade 1. Teachers also did not emphasise that children should be learning something new everyday. This fact does not prove that both former aspects were unimportant for teachers, since it could have been implied by the high number of responses for a high quality, good standard educational programme. Other aspects that teachers did not focus on were the provision of enough playtime and having a balanced and varied daily programme.

Teachers additionally did not accentuate a balance between love and discipline, offering a challenging and stimulating daily programme, discovery opportunities, or group work exposure. In terms of teachers' conduct, the teachers concentrated on a few characteristics, for example care, warmth, love, support, help and friendliness. The following descriptions were not part of the teachers' responses: fairness, patience, passion, trust, reliability, responsibility and loyalty. In addition, teachers did not focus on teachers' abilities to address problems immediately, to be in control and

to listen to children. Another disparity was that many mothers (35) placed a high price on children having social interaction opportunities, whereas only one teacher mentioned it.

Mothers did not focus on the curriculum in terms of being 'correct', well structured and organised or reflecting the newest tendencies, neither were they concerned whether the centre is involved in the activities of the primary school. Mothers also did not focus on learner-centred learning activities being on the correct level for the children. The location of the centre was not important for mothers at all and apart from two remarks about bilingual centres, the language of teaching and learning was not mentioned by the mothers. The atmosphere seemed to be important to mothers and teachers, but they used different descriptive words in their interviews. Mothers did not mention an atmosphere that is warm and homely, family like, family orientated, relaxed and comfortable, small and personal, and welcoming to parents, at any time. Exclusivity, a good reputation, and being a private school, were not important for mothers, neither did they focus on the good organisation and management of the centre, having an adequate number of staff or whether teachers can express themselves in their work. Mothers, furthermore, did not focus on the requirement of teachers to have realistic expectations of children or whether teachers were approachable and were able to work well together. Core services like the provision of food, hours of the centre and fees were not on mothers' priority lists. In terms of additional services, mothers did not focus on the provision of a transport service or on outings. Lastly, apart from sufficient space and apparatus, mothers did not consider facilities like the media centre and gardens as important quality indicators.

There were certain aspects that were mentioned by *individual participants*, but which were not the focus of either the teachers or the mothers. These aspects were: creative content in the curriculum, providing a flexible programme, having a dynamic principal, having assistants and a low staff turnover. Having capable and experienced teachers was not the focus of any of the groups, however, it could have been implied by the teachers and mothers when they said the teachers must be qualified. Furthermore, neither of the groups focused on the teachers' abilities to observe well

or on core services like affordable fees, a transport service, having big trees and gardens or having an outstanding infrastructure.

5.3 THEMATIC RESULTS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

5.3.1 Theme 1: Daily Programme

In this section I report on the most important quality aspects as perceived by the mothers and teachers concerning the daily programme in the early learning centres. The sub-themes supporting the main theme (daily programme) include the content as well as implementation of the curriculum in the daily programme in early learning centres. I begin this section by presenting the mothers' (indicated with an M and the number of the participant in blue) and teachers' (indicated with a T and the number of the participant in red) perceptions about quality regarding the content of the curriculum and the implementation of the curriculum in the daily programme.

5.3.1.1 Sub-theme 1.1 Curriculum (content)

From the data, two categories emerged under this sub-theme. The first category deals with the type of curriculum and the nature of the content addressed by the curriculum. The second category focuses on preparation for school readiness in Grade 1.

(a) Category 1.1.1 Current curriculum

| Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to high quality and good standard educational programmes; using the 'correct' curriculum, being up to date and reflecting the latest tendencies in the curriculum; creative content; expanding children's knowledge; addressing life skills and basic skills; learning good manners.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to high quality programmes and current, up to date, appropriate curricula.
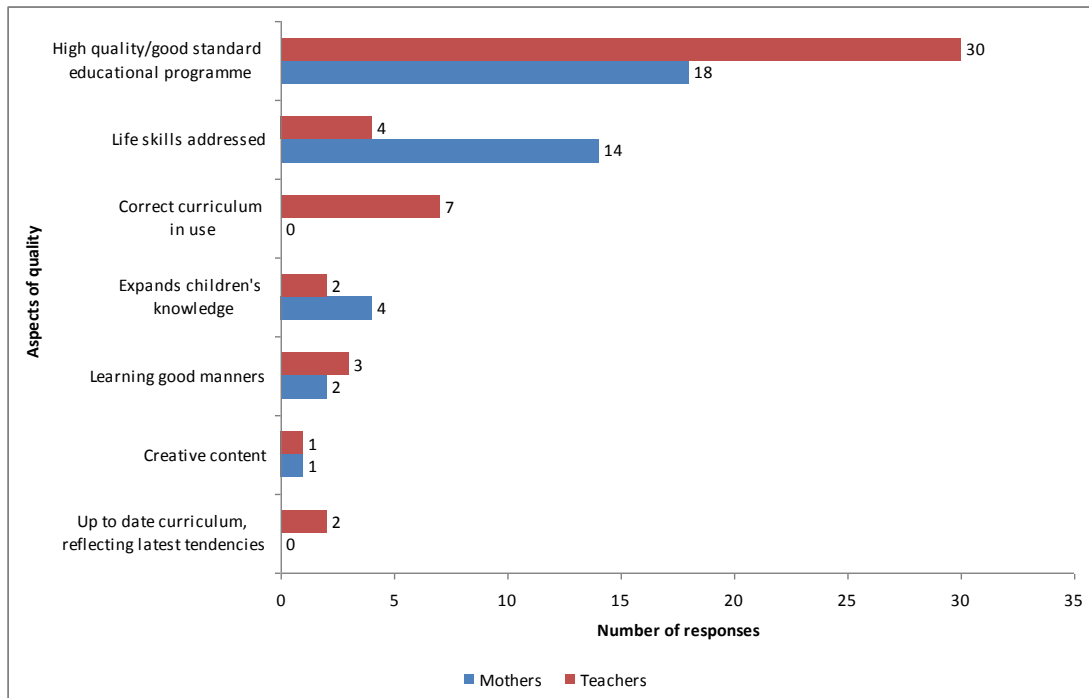
Figure 5.1: Current curriculum content

The seven items displayed in Figure 5.1 are concerned with the content and nature of the curriculum. The most important aspect for both the teachers (30) and mothers (18) was that the educational programme should be of high quality. A significant number of mothers (14 mothers versus 4 teachers) specified the importance of life skills[8] being addressed in a quality curriculum.

> *M175: "My child must be able to play – and acquire life skills that will equip him to adapt when he enters the bigger world and school. Skills like listening skills, social readiness, emotional readiness, intellectual readiness, speech readiness, language skills and mathematical readiness".*

The quotes below give evidence that the student-participants witnessed life skills being taught,

R40: "Teacher C's class has a really good bond/relationship with her learners and teaches them values and skills with a good attitude. Her goal is to help and benefit the child, to grow and learn in a fun way".

but that there also was the realisation that teachers need the parents' support in this matter.

R44: "I found that children enjoy working together, but that they find it difficult to share and to take turns. I also realised that education must start at home and that it cannot be expected of the teachers at school to take the sole responsibility".

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[8] Life skills refer to all the different intellectual, social, physical, emotional and creative skills that children need to cope and succeed in school and in life in general.

Some teachers (7) commented that the curriculum must be 'correct'.

> *T20: "Using the correct curriculum and having high educational standards"*

Quotes from the student-participants' reflective journals provide insight into their views of certain aspects concerning the curriculum.

R10: "I believe the teacher in my class gives the children too many colouring-in pages. I find that the children do not have a lot of confidence to draw their own pictures. I asked three children in my class (age 5) to draw a bird for me and they said they couldn't draw it".

R16: "Today they did Letterland and learnt the letter 'c'. I think it was maybe a little developmentally inappropriate for the three year old group as they did not seem to understand and lost interest very quickly and moved on to doing their own thing. This caused a distraction to the older children, as they were more worried about what the younger children were doing. During the activity I thought it was very clever that the children drew cats and around the cat they drew the letter c".

R9: "The one thing I frown upon was the amount of TV time that occurred to keep the children busy at some stages of the day".

R31: "At times I noticed that the children get exhausted and bored very quickly by the structured lessons. I would want the lessons in my class to be enthusiastic at all times. Therefore I would firstly create a fun; exciting atmosphere by surprising them by having a puppet talk to them first and then I would have them do a fun activity which will be a learning lesson at the same time".

A small number of teachers (2) mentioned that the curriculum must reflect the latest tendencies.

> *T56: "Strive to always be informed of the newest tendencies in education."*

Two teachers and four mothers signified that the curriculum must expand the children's knowledge. Three teachers and two mothers noted that a quality programme teaches children to have good manners. Only one teacher and one mother indicated that a curriculum with a creative content indicates quality. One of the student-participants commented on the lack of creativity in art activities.

R13: "If I were to do something differently, I might present more artwork activities to the learners. They don't get many chances to be creative and express themselves in an artistic way".

(b)   Category 1.1.2   Preparation for school readiness in Grade 1

| Inclusion criteria	This category focuses on Grade 1 readiness; programmes that provide good routine and stability; children learning something new every day; the involvement of the early learning centre in the primary school's activities
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to skills and knowledge aimed at preparing children for Grade 1.
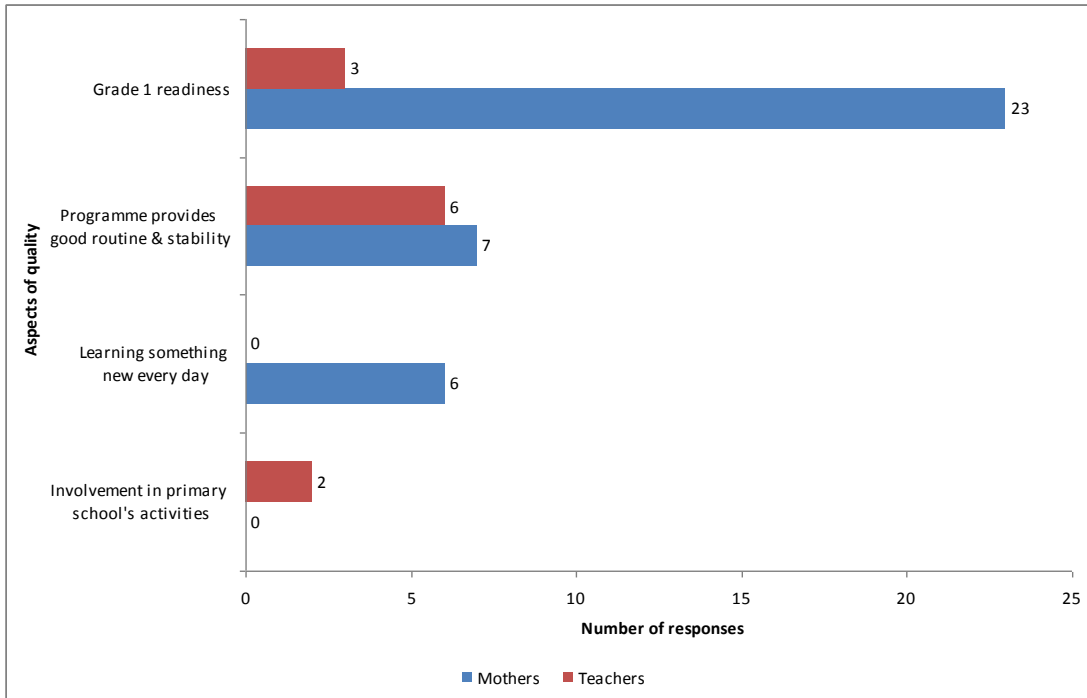
Figure 5.2: Preparation for school readiness in Grade 1

Figure 5.2 depicts the second category under the sub-theme *Content of the curriculum* and deals with the curriculum's focus on preparing children to be school ready[9] when they enter Grade 1. The fact that the children must be school ready when they enter Grade 1, seemed to be of greater importance to mothers than teachers. Only three teachers in comparison with twenty-three mothers valued this factor.

> M146: *"I want my child to attend a preschool with high morals and an educational standard that will develop my child to the standard required for grade one".*

> T145: *"To prepare the children to develop emotionally, physically and socially in order to be ready for grade one. Children must learn while they are playing and enjoy it".*

Seven mothers and six teachers valued routine and stability in the curriculum. Comments by two student-participants regarding routine and stability give an understanding of their insight into this topic.

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[9] In order to be school ready, children need a readiness to learn which can be described as "a stage of maturity when an individual is able to understand and grasp those concepts and skills that have been deemed necessary for a child at a specific age to retain" (Davin & Van Staden, 2005: 5).

R37: "Today I learned how important the toilet routine is. I feel the teacher I am with does not insist on the learners going to the toilet enough and so accidents occur".

R25: "Today I was reminded how important it is to have structure and routine in the classroom environment because the children need this to feel secure as well as to control their behaviour and so that the day can be productive. I also learnt that thorough planning is essential to having a relatively structured routine. I also felt that the routines could have been communicated clearer".

Although six mothers specifically said that their children must learn something new every day, this was not mentioned by any teachers. A minority of teachers (2) had the view that quality is implied in the curriculum if the early learning centre is involved in the primary school's activities[10].

5.3.1.2   Sub-theme 1.2   Implementation of the curriculum in the daily programme

(a)   Category 1.2.1 Organisational aspects: structured time management

Inclusion criteria	This category includes organisational aspects such as structured time management in the daily programme and focuses on programmes that are balanced and varied; well structured and organised; flexible; allow enough time for play and create a balance between play, learning and discipline.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to structured time management and balance in the daily programme.

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[10] Some early learning centres are located on the premises of a primary school and are therefore seen as a part of the primary school and are often included in some of the activities of the primary school, for example concerts and sport days.
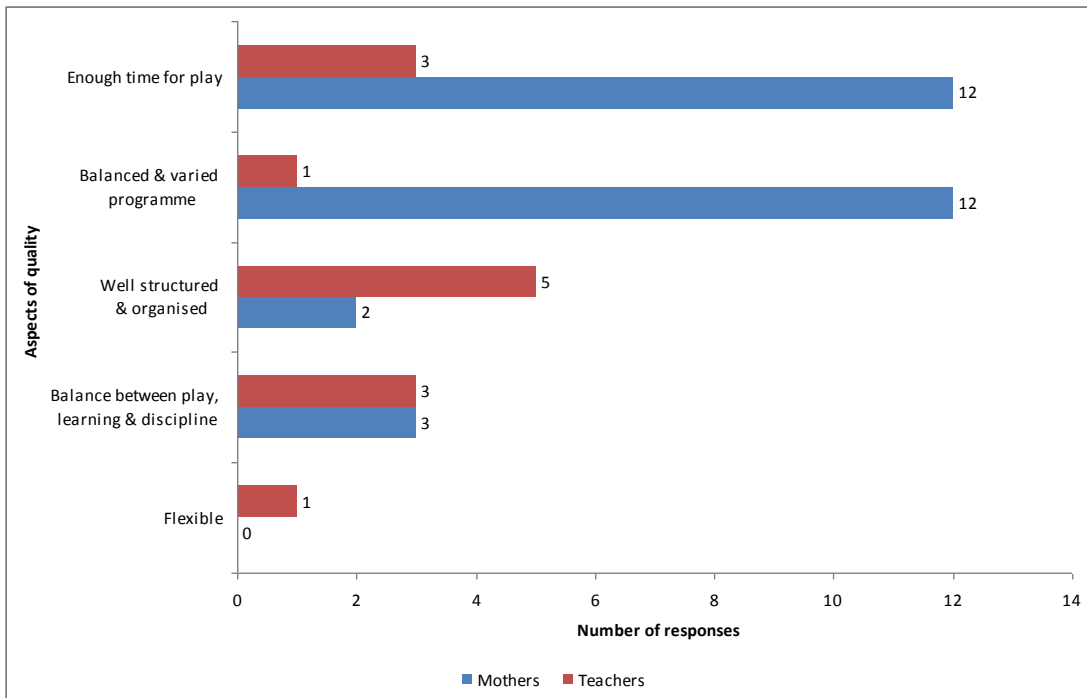
Figure 5.3: Structured time management in the daily programme

Figure 5.3 illustrates the responses in the category dealing with the organisational component in and, more specifically, the structuring of time management during the implementation of the curriculum in the daily programme. It is interesting to note that four times more mothers (12) than teachers (3) regarded enough play time as important in the programme.

> *M187: "He must play at school, so that he will be tired in the evening and won't keep his mother and father awake during the whole night".*

> *M194: "She needs to learn the basic concepts like counting and the alphabet. I also want her to experience artistic activities. However I do feel that since they are still so young, they also need a large amount of playtime, where they are allowed to use their imaginations and play on their own".*

An equal, small number of participants from both groups, namely three each, signified the importance of a good balance between playing, learning and discipline.

> *M197: "The teacher must be able to teach my child and she must enjoy her class, but she must also be able to use discipline where necessary. My child must enjoy it in her class and it is important for me that he likes her".*

Student-participants' views on playing, learning and discipline can be seen in the following two quotes.

> R40: "The atmosphere is set on happy children wanting to play and learn (operative word being play)".
>
> R18: "I have learned that I must not say 'do not do this' constantly when the child learns through play and experimentation".

A small number of teachers (5) and mothers (2) stipulated that a well structured and organised programme is of importance. Only one teacher emphasised that the programme should be flexible.

(b)   Category 1.2.1   Organisational aspects: care and discipline

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to aspects concerning care and discipline and focuses on getting a balance between love and discipline and the application of rules and regulations in a centre.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to rules, regulations and balance in terms of care and discipline in early learning centres.
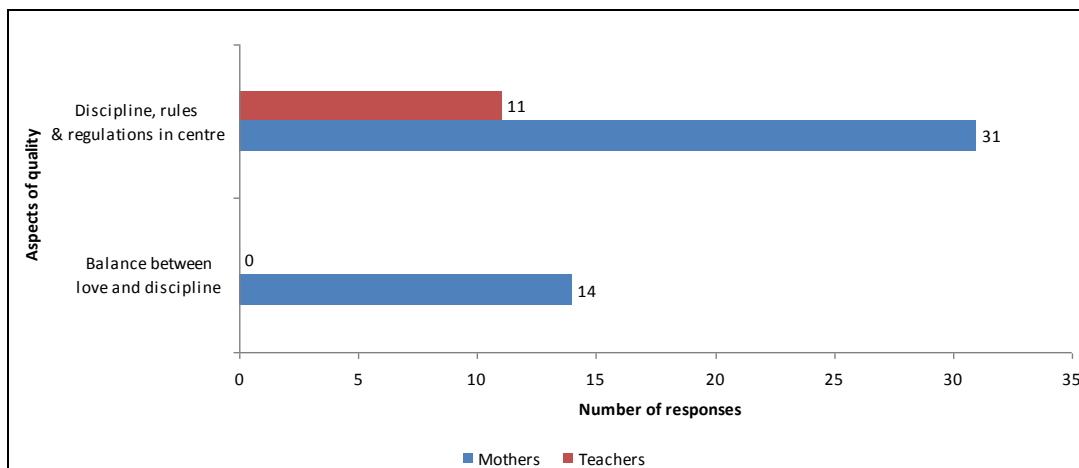
Figure 5.4: Care and discipline displayed during the implementation of the curriculum

Figure 5.4 shows that care and discipline, as an aspect of quality, was more valued by mothers than teachers. Many mothers (31) and fewer teachers (11) indicated that rules, regulations and discipline in a centre imply quality.

> T234: "The discipline must be good and well structured."
>
> M 169: "A school that still focuses on discipline, not just in the classroom area, but outside as well."
>
> M194: "I expect my child's teacher to have a certain amount of compassion and understanding, while at the same time being able to discipline when it is necessary".

Discipline, or lack of it, is an aspect most student-participants reflected on in their reflective journals.

R37: "I also became aware of how every single teacher is different and has a different way of teaching and there is not one way of teaching. Mrs. L is much stricter than Mrs. J, but the children still love her and know their boundaries".

R37: "Mrs. C is the teacher of the Grade R class and the children enjoy her class as she is very funny, but takes no nonsense. Mrs. C explained to me that she is quite firm with the children in the beginning of the year and as they learn and understand more, she becomes less firm, 'lets out some slack'. This makes sense because the children learn their boundaries and take chances. I noticed most of the teachers are like this and the children learn their limits".

R18: "Some days the children are mostly disobedient, backchat etc. – it is not always pleasant. There are many challenges, but how you handle them will determine the consequences."

R23: "Mrs X has a calmer personality than Mrs Y and therefore calmness seems to fall over the class".

R47: "In this class there is not much discipline and routine. The children are therefore uncertain because they are not clear on what is expected of them. The children then become restless".

R18: "When the teachers are firm the children actually take them seriously".

R45: "The teacher does not instil enough discipline. The children are rude and arrogant. The teacher flicks the children's ears when they are naughty".

R16: "I noticed after the grade Rs got a lecture on their behaviour and their responsibility towards the school that maybe too much is expected from them in terms of good behaviour and they are still young and cannot be expected to police all the younger children as they get up to mischief themselves. However, some of the children's mischievous behaviour did calm down. I also noticed that more attention is given to the slower children as well as to the brighter children and the middle children get left to do their own thing. I think attention should be given to everyone on an individual basis depending on the activity so that a more accurate assessment can be made".

R40: "I learnt that being friendly and helpful is a lot easier than being over strict and mean to the children. And that although children do not like rules, they are necessary to implement and apply in a nice and fun way".

Although none of the teachers stipulated the need for balance between love and discipline, a large number of mothers (14) regarded it is very important. This noticeable difference between the beneficiaries depicts that discipline is valued more by mothers than teachers. The student-participants' opinions on love and discipline are noticeable from the quotes that follow.

R17: "As I walked towards the classroom, I noticed parents dropping off their children, some running to hug their teachers, others were a bit tearful and the teacher was there to comfort the child and tell the parents to rest assured, your child is happy and needs to be at school. Either way, the teacher was around and giving 100% to the 'job'. I feel that this was a huge factor in the atmosphere of the school, the teacher's ability to control and love at the same time".

(b) Category 1.2.2 Learning opportunities (daily programme)

| Inclusion criteria	This category focuses on the following aspects of learning opportunities: learner centred; on children's level; provide good/sufficient, varied opportunities aimed at holistic development; challenging and stimulating; strong religious, traditional and moral values; encourage learner participation; group work exposure; discovery opportunities.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to varied, appropriate learner-centred learning opportunities aimed at the holistic development of children.
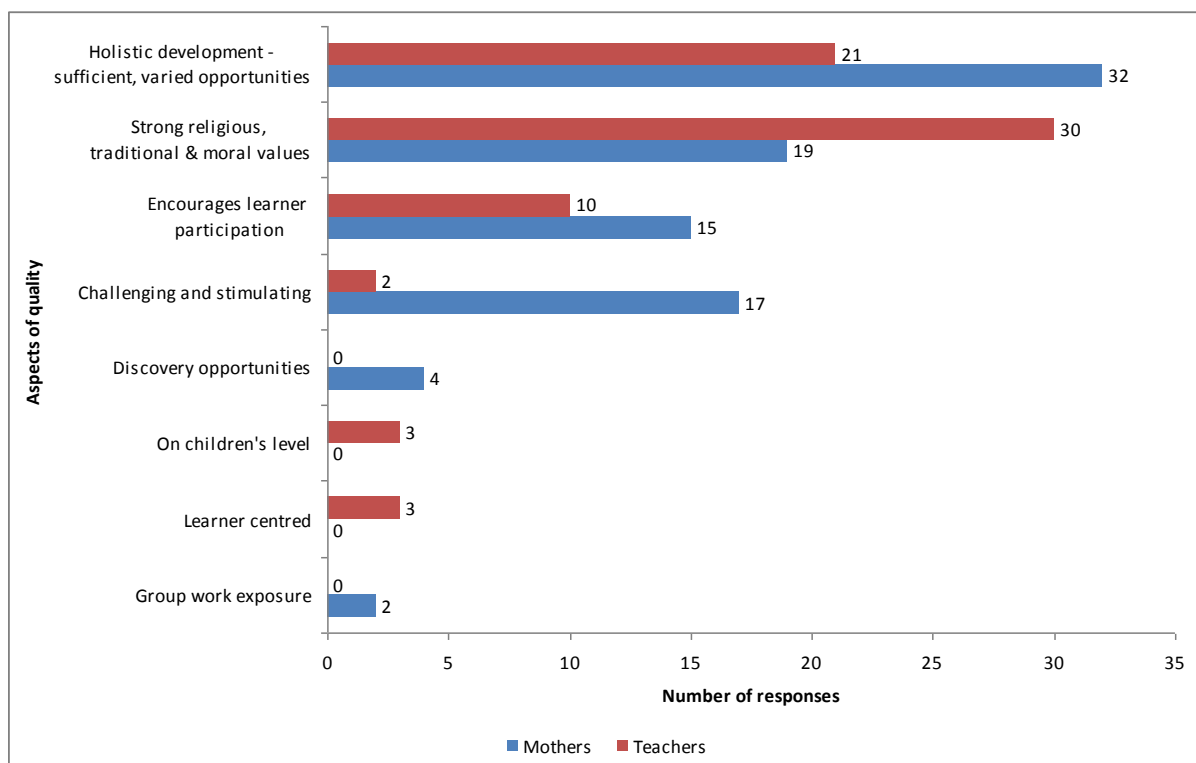
Figure 5.5: Learning opportunities offered by the daily programme

The part of the responses as shown in Figure 5.5 focuses on aspects concerning the learning opportunities in the curriculum of the daily programme. One factor in this category seems to be of very high importance to both mothers and teachers. Many

mothers (32) and twenty-one teachers mentioned the importance of a daily programme providing good and sufficient learning opportunities that are varied and can develop children holistically.

> *M187: "A good pre-primary school is one that helps my child to develop completely in all kinds of areas, for example socially, spiritually and physically. The school must help my child to become part of the community without forcing her to grow up too quickly."*

One of the student-participants noted that a relaxed environment and appropriate activities can enhance children's development.

R14: "The preschool is a relaxed environment but the teachers ensure that children are continuously busy with activities that develop learning".

One of the most noticeable responses in the interviews relates to strong religious, moral and traditional values. It is evident that this aspect was very important to mothers and teachers. A significant number of participants, namely 33 teachers and 19 mothers considered it important for strong values to underpin the nature of the daily programme.

> *T 45: "The strong religious factor is an advantage and keeps the school together".*
>
> *T 238: "I believe discipline, good quality teaching, Christianity and the upholding of moral standards are important".*

It is evident from the responses that many mothers (15) and teachers (10) felt that learner participation is a crucial component of learning opportunities and should be encouraged by the daily programme. For seventeen of the mothers, but for only two of the teachers, a challenging and stimulating programme was significant. Two reflective journal inscriptions highlighted the realisation that children need stimulation and the potential of children should be kept in mind.

R16: "I learnt that if you have busy children in the class you have to give them work that will stimulate them intellectually".

R35: "I have learnt never to underestimate children as all of them have great potential".

Four mothers, but no teachers stated that a quality centre should provide opportunities for discovery. A student-participant had the same opinion and noted the teacher's responsibility to ensure learning.

R10: "Children love to learn and discover new things and it is the teacher's responsibility to make sure these things happen".

None of the mothers, but three teachers mentioned that the daily programme should be on the children's level. The quotes below from the reflective journals project the student-participants' views and experiences on the same issue.

> R18: "Teachers 'lower' themselves to the children's level of interest, but remain mature enough to handle situations fairly, firmly and with love."
>
> R18: "The school is child centred, teachers are excited to see the children and the children's interests are a high priority".
>
> R10: "The children were very restless today. When the teacher saw the children getting bored she quickly changed her lesson".

Only three teachers noted that the programme should be learner centred and none of the teachers, but two mothers felt that exposure to group work is important for the children.

5.3.2 Theme 2: Context of learning

The second theme contains responses that deal with the context of learning. Six sub-themes surfaced under this theme, namely the locality of the centre; health and safety aspects of the environment; the language of instruction; atmosphere conducive to quality learning; the centre's reputation; as well as management and leadership in the centres.

5.3.2.1   Sub-theme 2.1   Central and pleasant locality

Inclusion criteria	This category focuses on the early learning centres' location in terms of being central; friendly and pleasant; close to a primary school; close to the church; close to a park; outside the city; in a quiet/good neighbourhood; on a farm; or in a small town.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to central and pleasant locations of early learning centres.
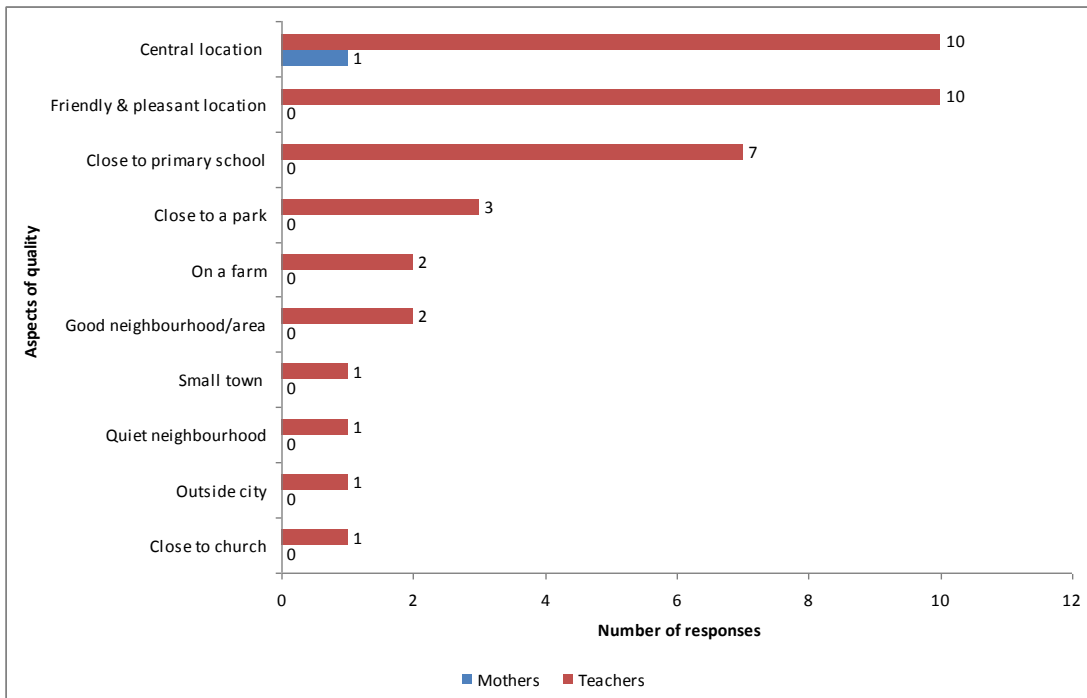
Figure 5.6: Locality of the centre

From the participants' responses, as evident in Figure 5.6, it appears that the location of the centre is not an important consideration for mothers since only one mother has commented on the importance of the centre being in a central location. All the other responses in this regard were the opinions of the teachers. The teachers indicated various aspects in connection with the location as important considerations in terms of a quality centre. For instance, ten teachers pointed out that it is an advantage if the location of the centre is central or if the centre is in a friendly and peaceful location.

T118: "A well located school on the parents' travelling route is important"

Seven teachers stipulated that a location close to the primary school indicates quality, three said "close to a park", two teachers valued a centre in a good neighbourhood or on a farm respectively and in each of the following cases, one preferred that the centre should either be in a quiet neighbourhood, outside of the city, in a small town "where everybody knows everybody", or close to the church.

5.3.2.2   Sub-theme 2.2   Environment: healthy and safe

(a)   Category 2.2.1   Security, safety and supervision

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to safety and security measures; teachers being trained in first aid; full-time supervision.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to safety and security aspects, first aid and supervision.
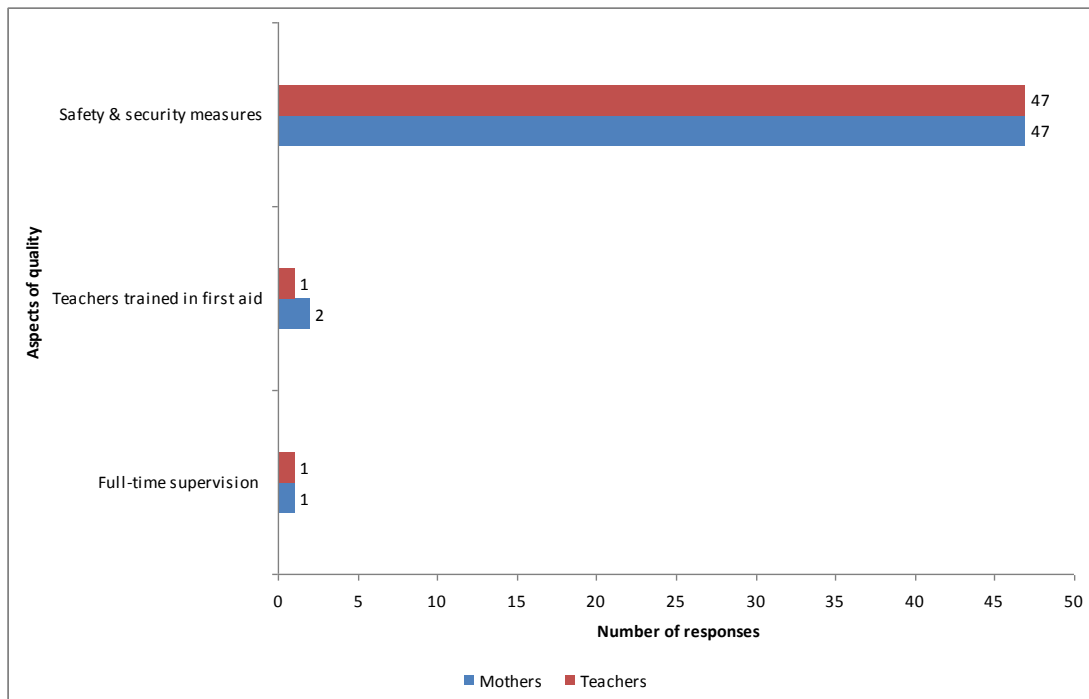
Figure 5.7: Security, safety and supervision in the centre

According to the responses captured in Figure 5.7, safety and security in early learning centres is the one aspect that was not only ranked the highest of all factors, but was equally important to mothers and teachers. Forty-seven mothers and forty-seven teachers mentioned the presence of safety and security in their responses. In South Africa, where the crime rate is very high and every citizen is concerned about safety issues, it is not surprising that this aspect scored the highest number of responses.

> *T204: "A quality centre offers safety and security, and has the best possible staff."*

> *M174: "I expect the centre to be a safe place where there is full-time and constant supervision of the outside play area, as well as in the classrooms".*

> *M175: "The infrastructure and staff is extremely important. Good entrance control at the gates, so that the children will be safe, it must be a safe place".*

Student-participants, too, reflected on security aspects and shared their insights on the teachers' role in ensuring security for the children.

> R14: "Children need an environment where they are stable and secure. I have learnt that you have to create this environment in your classroom and it's a lot of work if the learners come from difficult homes. I have found that many children have problems at home, I feel sorry for them but I still have to reprimand them if they behave badly. I found that speaking and spending extra time with the children calms them down, and I have a better understanding of their actions in their group of friends. If a child acts out of the ordinary you have to observe the child more closely and decide whether it is a once off action or the child might have a problem. The teachers create a caring and trusting environment where the children with problems can feel safe and secure".

Two mothers and one teacher referred to the teachers' abilities to perform first aid as a requirement for a quality centre. One student-participant explained how health issues were dealt with in the early learning centres where she was located, and another referred to the question of allergies.

> R36: *"There is always one teacher on "eina"[11] duty. She sits on a specific chair inside, always in the same place, Teachers are rotated daily. Every injury, no matter how small, is treated with antiseptic and mercurochrome. Each injury is documented, what happened, where it happened, to be shown to the parents when learners are picked up from school. For any injury that appears more serious than the average scrape or bruise, the learner's parents or guardians are phoned and informed. This helps to keep parents informed and helps them to feel more in control of what happens to their children at the school. It also offers the educators, principal and school some security against lawsuits or negligence".*
>
> R23: "I did observe that there were no posters on the wall with the children's allergies and this I find is very important in case of an emergency."

Only one teacher and one mother specifically indicated that there should be sufficient fulltime supervision by the teachers.

(b) Category 2.2.2 Hygienic environment

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to clean, neat and hygienic environments as well as neat boys' and girls' bathrooms.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to clean, neat and hygienic environments and separate bathrooms for boys and girls.

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[11] "Eina" is an Afrikaans word similar to "ouch" indicating that something is sore and that someone is experiencing pain
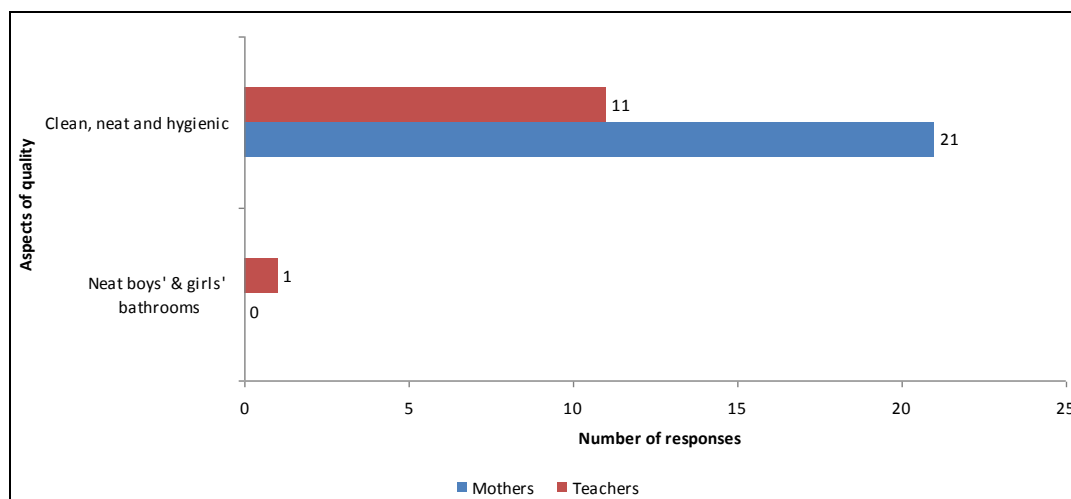
Figure 5.8 Hygienic environment

It is apparent from Figure 5.8 that it was more important for mothers than for teachers that there is proper hygiene and that the centre is clean and neat. Many mothers (21) and fewer teachers (11) regarded hygiene, cleanliness and neatness to be important.

> M158: *"My child must be safe and happy. The classroom must be clean, neat and conducive to learning".*

> T 229: *"Discipline and hygiene are the most important aspects."*

Only one teacher specified that a quality early learning centre should have separate neat bathrooms for boys and girls.

5.3.2.3   Sub-theme 2.3   Language of teaching and learning

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to the language of teaching and learning: specifically home language; English; Afrikaans; bilingual centres.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to language of teaching and learning.

Figure 5.9: Language of teaching and learning

From the number of responses depicted in Figure 5.9 it seems that language of teaching and learning was not considered by many participants to be a measurement for quality. The hig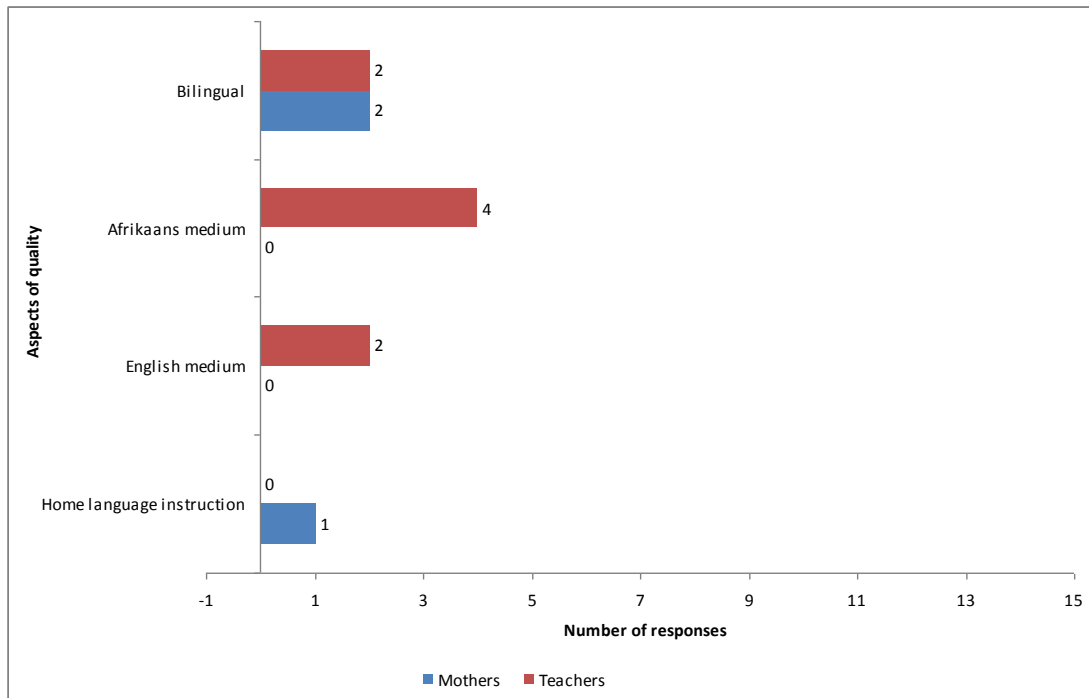hest number of responses concerning language issues is four. It was of significance for four teachers that Afrikaans is the medium of instruction in the centre. Two teachers felt the same about English.

> *T68: "A learner-centred school that teaches the children in English to prepare them for the near future, although it is their second language".*

Regarding language issues, a student-participant wrote the following in her reflective journal:

R44: "There are children who are very sad and refuse to leave their parents. I think the reason for that is that they are being educated in a language other than their home language which complicates communication with their teachers and friends".

Only one mother noted that the centre should offer home language instruction, and an equal number of mothers and teachers (2 each) considered a bilingual centre to be a quality aspect.

> *T42: "A centre that is well-situated, fully bilingual, has well-qualified educators and that is committed to the well-being of the child".*

> *M 169: "A school that still has religion and that is bilingual is important for me".*

5.3.2.4   Sub-theme 2.4   Non-discriminatory and accepting atmosphere

From the data obtained through the interviews, two categories became apparent under this sub-theme. The first category deals with the non-discrimination and respect and the second category with an atmosphere in the early learning centre that is accepting and accommodating.

(a)   Category 2.4.1 Non discriminatory and respectful atmosphere

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to non-discriminatory and multicultural centres; respectful treatment of children and children being taught to be respectful.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to non-discriminatory and multicultural centres and a respectful atmosphere.
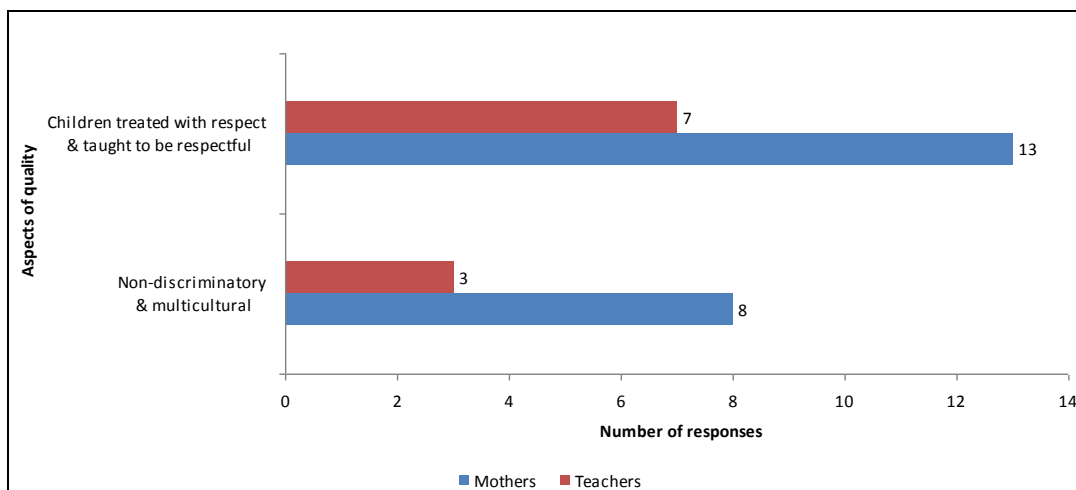
Figure 5.10: Non-discriminatory and respectful atmosphere

From the responses illustrated in Figure 5.10 it is noticeable that respect was highly valued by mothers and teachers. It is evident because thirteen mothers and seven teachers considered treating children with respect and teaching them how to be respectful to others as very important considerations.

> M175: *"My child must be at a school where honesty, integrity and loyalty are instilled and where he is taught how to respect differences".*

Student-participants captured their experiences about respect in the quotes below.

R38: "The teacher is very passionate and I've learnt that all these children just want to be loved. You show them respect and they will show you respect".

R37: "Mrs. Z is a lovely teacher and the children enjoy her class, there is also a good level of respect and the discipline is also very fair".

For eight mothers and three teachers multicultural centres that are non-discriminatory indicated quality.

T30: "A school where everybody is friendly, helpful, a Christian school where there is no discrimination and where children with special needs are welcome and can receive therapy."

(b)   Category 2.4.2   Accepting and accommodating atmosphere

Inclusion criteria	This category focuses on an accepting and accommodating atmosphere in early learning centres: being small and personal; caring, loving and peaceful; friendly and safe; relaxed and comfortable; positive and lively; warm and homely; family-like; family orientated; welcoming to parents at any time; generating happy parents.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to an accepting and accommodating atmosphere in early learning centres.

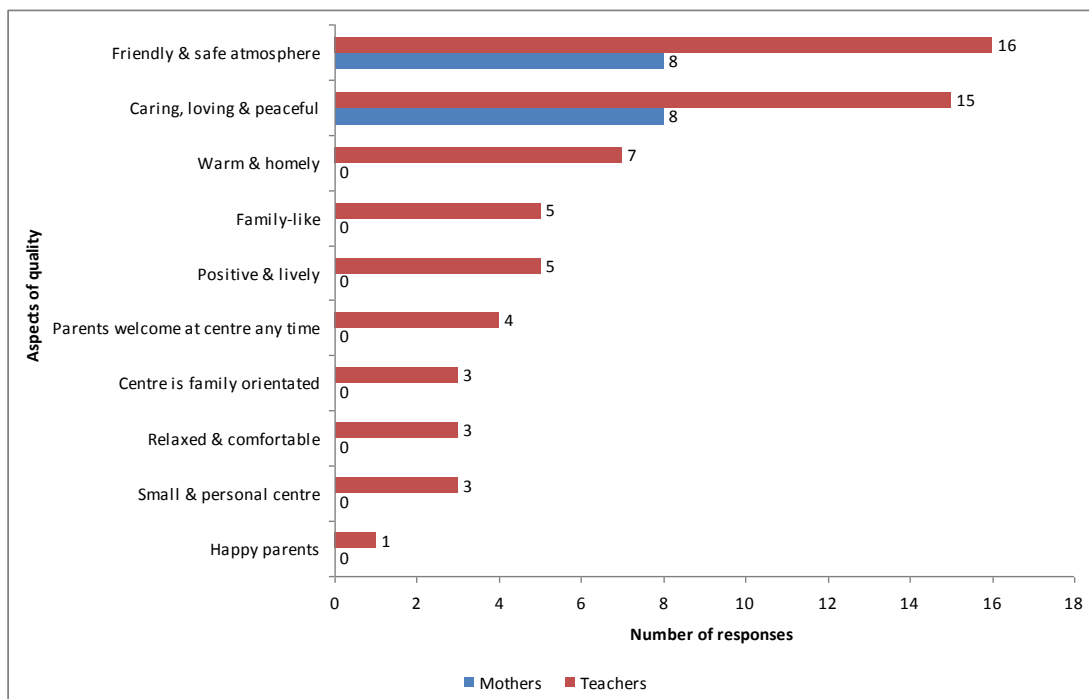

Figure 5.11: Accepting and accommodating atmosphere

From the number and variety of responses illustrated in Figure 5.11, atmosphere as an indicator of quality appears to be an aspect of importance to both mothers and teachers. Participants used a wide variety of words to specify the atmosphere they

consider to be conducive to learning. Eight mothers and double the number, sixteen teachers, said that the atmosphere must be friendly and safe. For fifteen teachers and eight mothers a caring, loving and peaceful atmosphere signifies quality.

> M174: "The most important aspect is that my child will experience love, acceptance, uniqueness, care and security".

Since the student-participants were specifically requested to comment on the atmosphere in the centres, they used many different ways to explain their experiences in this regard.

R6: "The atmosphere in the school was a very happy one. This was created by energetic and enthusiastic educators. I found all the educators very welcoming. I noticed that all the children were happy on arrival and eager to start their day which indicated that school was an enjoyable place for them. Children and educators seem to have very good relationships with a healthy balance between respect and affection for each other".

R18: "The school feels and becomes the 'second home'."

R7: "The children always seem to want to be at the school and don't ever seem to have a problem with saying goodbye to their parents".

R28: "These teachers are just amazing. I have learnt so much in the past weeks. Their wisdom in handling children with problems has taught me that although a child may seem past all hope, you can never give up. You need to strive to make sure that each child is safe and protected and that they are able to grow and be nurtured in your care".

R47: "I can see that the teacher loves the children. She focused on emotional intelligence. I think it is good because that is something that one sometimes neglects and actually it is so important, but there must also be balance".

The rest of the responses captured in Figure 5.11 reflect the teachers' and student-participants' opinions. Seven teachers regarded "warm and homely" as the ideal atmosphere. A student-participant described her experience as follows:

R14: "The moment you step into the school you feel welcome and special. I thought the teachers only treated me this way because I am a student. They treat the parents, children and other people the same, and most importantly they aren't fake, their warmth towards others is genuine".

Five teachers each valued atmosphere that is family-like, positive and lively.

> T10: "Every child must be treated as an individual and the school must be like a big family".

The student-participants explained their experiences as follows:

R32: "The teachers treat the children like family, everyone knows everyone. The children don't ask when they will be going home, for them school is where they want to be".

R46: "Today the atmosphere in the classroom was very positive. This is achieved by playing soft background music in the background".

Four teachers pointed out that a quality centre is one where parents are welcome at any time. There were three teacher responses for each of the following: family orientated; a small and personal early learning centre, and one with a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. A student-participant gave the following explanation:

R25: "Today I have learnt that it is very important to make children feel at ease in their school environment".

One teacher suggested that a quality centre has an atmosphere that ensures that the parents are happy.

A factor that came forward clearly in the reflective journals, but not from any of the interviews, was that the atmosphere of a centre can also be influenced by the weather. The reflective journals were kept in a particularly rainy January and therefore most of the student-participants commented on the weather, especially the inconveniences caused by the rain and the adaptations that had to be made. The student-participants concluded that in terms of quality, centres need to be able to be adaptable in terms of the activities offered in the programme and they should also have facilities in place to deal with challenges posed by the weather. According to the student-participants, teachers need to be flexible and creative, especially when the weather complicates planned activities.

R9: "Because of constant rain the children were unable to go outside and this resulted in a lot of tension and restlessness".

R12: "The teachers' welcoming and positive attitudes, despite the weather, seemed to set an uplifting atmosphere for the children. The children seemed quite happy and comfortable at the school".

R48: "The weather plays an important role in determining the atmosphere in the school. If it is too hot the children are not eager to do activities".

R39: "Today the weather is cold and rainy, this made the children restless because the routine would change slightly and they would have to be kept indoors most of the day. The teachers handled the children very well in keeping them busy with all sorts of activities. One the teachers set up a little mini obstacle course in the main hall to ensure that the children did some exercise to get rid of some energy. I thought it was going to be chaos but it was handled very well by the teacher".

5.3.2.5 Sub-theme 2.5 Centre's reputation

Inclusion criteria	This category focuses on centres that are well established; exclusive and/or private schools; have a good reputation; promote the motto that "only the best is good enough for your child".
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to an early learning centre's reputation.
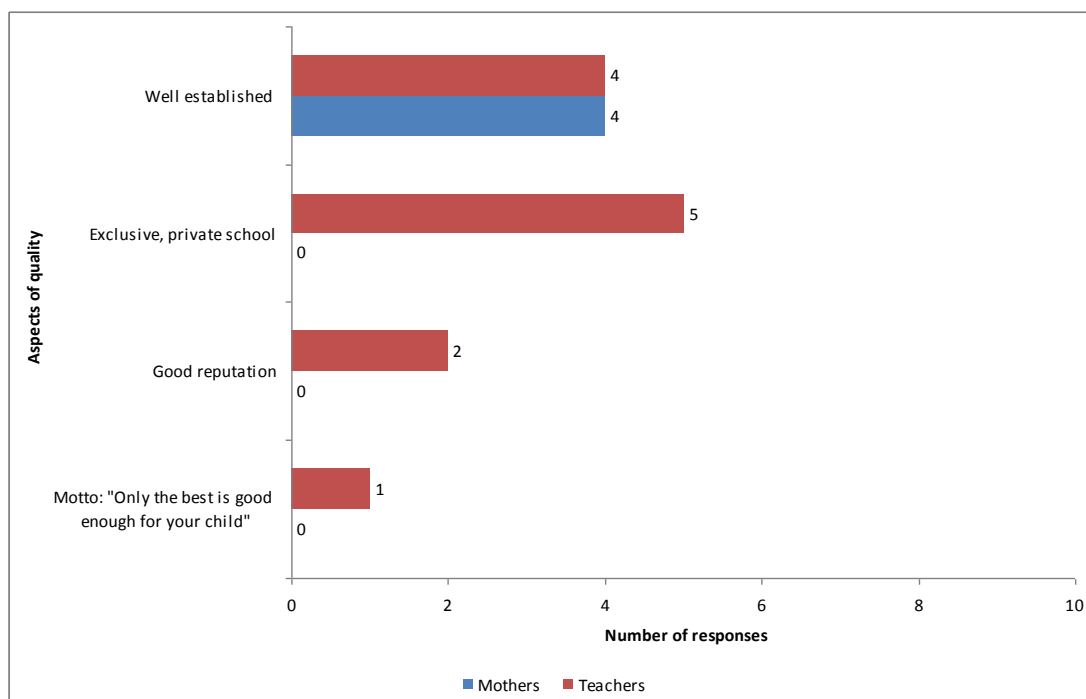
Figure 5.12: Centre's reputation

Figure 5.12 reveals the responses referring to the reputation of early learning centres. Only a few mothers (4) and teachers (4) remarked on the fact that a well-established centre that has existed for many years can be regarded as a quality institution. The rest of the responses were the opinions of teachers only. For five teachers, but no mothers, an exclusive or private school indicated quality.

T45: "A private school with small classes [indicated quality]. In small classes learners are able to receive individual attention".

Only two of the teachers referred to the good reputation of the centre to indicate good quality and for one teacher it was portrayed in the centre's motto that "only the best is good enough for your child".

5.3.2.6   **Sub-theme 2.6**   **Centre management and leadership**

Inclusion criteria	This category focuses on centres that have a vision for the future; are organised and well managed; have a dynamic principal; managed by the SAVF[12].
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to the management and leadership of early learning centres.
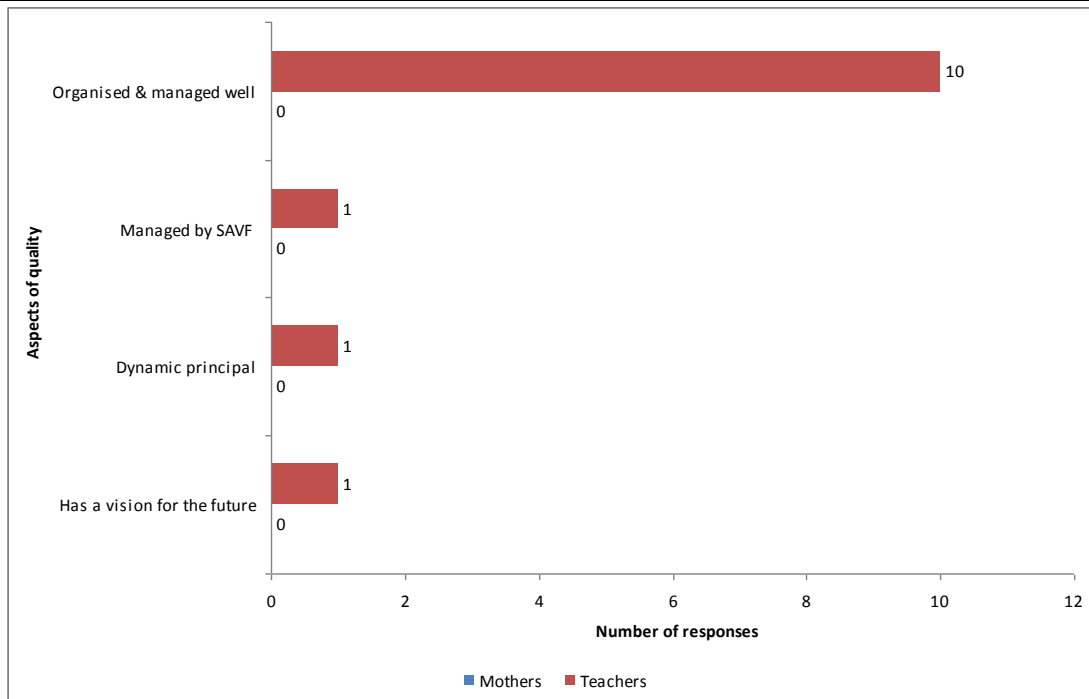
Figure 5.13: Centre management and leadership

In Figure 5.13, the responses about management and organisation are revealed. It is interesting to note that the responses concerning management and leadership in early learning centres were all made by teachers. Only a few teachers referred to these matters in connection with quality. However, ten teachers valued a quality centre as one that is well organised and managed.

> *T200: "It is important to have a preschool that is well organised and that has a very strong and dynamic person that is in charge".*

The following responses give an indication of the student-participants' perceptions about the organisation and management in early learning centres:

> R35: "I would want the teachers to be a bit more organised as it helps with the smooth running of the day".
>
> R1: "The head teacher was indicating to me that the school sometimes makes it difficult for her to do her job because the children can enrol into the school at any level and she always has to start from the beginning with the child and that sometimes happens very late in the year".

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[12] SAVF is the "Suid-Afrikaanse Vrouefederasie", a South African women's society.

> R41: "I came to realise by the end of the day that children up to the age of compulsory schooling also desperately need to be in a structured environment and once without their parents, cope better than any mommy would ever realise".

The following statements were made by individual teachers and are considered to be aspects of quality: "the centre is run by the SAVF", "the centre has a dynamic principal" and "the centre has a vision for the future".

A fieldworker reflected on the role of the principal as follows:

> R41: "Perhaps it is the headmistress that determines the general atmosphere of the school, which is welcoming and friendly despite the first tears".

5.3.3 Theme 3: Learners' requirements and expectations

Theme 3 deals with learners' requirements and expectations. This theme is sub-divided into two sub-themes namely teachers' qualifications, relationships and conduct; and optimising learner development. The first sub-theme is further sub-divided into categories.

5.3.3.1 Sub-theme 3.1 Teachers' qualifications, relationships and conduct

The first category to be discussed under the sub-theme: *Teachers' qualifications, relationships and conduct,* deals with the learner-teacher ratio.

(a) Category 3.1.1 Learner-teacher ratio

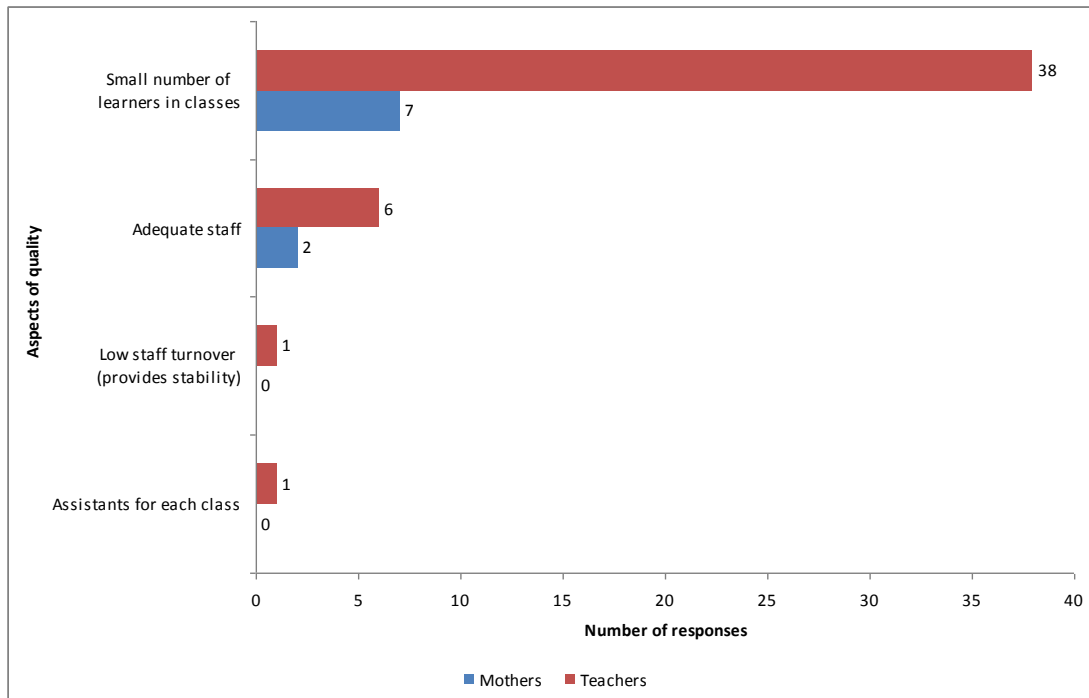| Inclusion criteria	In this category the focus is on aspects related to the learner-teacher ratio, for example having a small number of learners in the class; adequate staff; assistants for each class; a low staff turnover that provides stability.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to a learner-teacher ratio.

Figure 5.14: Learner-teacher ratio

In Figure 5.14 the most outstanding aspect is the large number of responses from teachers (38) who expressed that a small number of learners in a class is an indication of quality. In contrast, only seven mothers shared the same opinion. Since the teachers are physically present in the playrooms every day, the number of children vastly influences the available space (or lack of space) and influences the provision of individual attention to children. These factors might explain why this aspect seems to be much more important to teachers than to mothers.

T64: "A preschool with only a small number of learners in a class and where the children are treated as individuals and get a lot of attention is important".

M195: "Small classes to allow for individual attention".

M194: "The size of the class is very important to me because I want my children to get attention at school and there must not be too many children to the teacher, as she will feel overwhelmed".

A student-participant had a similar understanding of the number of children in a class:

R48: "The atmosphere is being determined by the number of children in the class. The fewer children there are in the class, the easier you get to work with the class. Each one then gets equal individual attention".

Six teachers and two mothers stated that enough staff members signifies quality. One teacher referred to the following as quality criteria: having an assistant for each class and having a low turn-over by keeping the same staff members in the centre and thereby providing stability.

T6: "There is a low turnover of staff, support for colleagues and the principal and assistants in each class".

(b)   Category 3.1.2   Teachers' qualifications, abilities and attributes

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to the teachers' qualifications, abilities and attributes and focuses on teachers that are qualified; informed and regularly attend staff courses; well prepared; capable; experienced; excellent; dedicated and motivated and professional.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to teachers' qualifications, abilities and attributes.
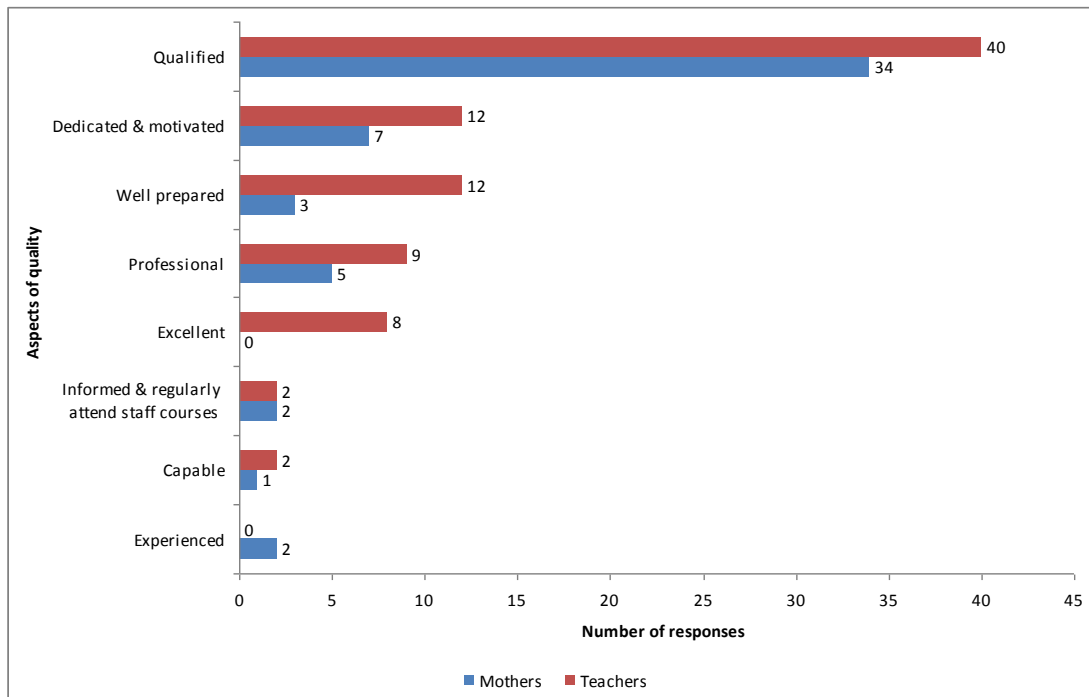
Figure 5.15: Teachers' qualifications, abilities & attributes

In Figure 5.15, teachers' qualifications, abilities and attributes are illustrated. Having qualified teachers in an early learning centre seemed to be a priority in terms of quality for teachers as well as mothers. Many teachers (40) and mothers (34) specifically indicated the importance of having qualified teachers.

T8: "Excellent, well trained teachers with a broad field of knowledge about education is essential".

M175: "The teachers must preferably be qualified and have a good curriculum vitae".

Student-participants' experiences of well trained teachers are captured in these quotes:

> R44: "Because all the teachers are trained they are capable of attending to the children and supporting and helping each other".
>
> R28: "The atmosphere is so positive and uplifting that you cannot help enjoy being around these teachers. They are all such a wellspring of knowledge and more than happy to share it with me".

Twelve teachers and seven mothers rated dedication and motivation in teachers as a quality trademark.

> *M194: "I believe that the teacher must be happy and motivated and there must be a good support system within the school for the teachers and the principal must be willing to back up her/his staff".*

Eleven teachers and three mothers remarked that teachers that are well prepared indicate quality. The student-participants reported in their reflective journals on the importance and value of being prepared:

> *R15: "I have learnt that preparation is the most important thing a teacher can do. A well prepared learning activity helps the teacher and learners achieve the learning outcomes. It also makes it easier for the teacher to adapt the activities to suit the children's needs".*
>
> *R32: "I realised that being prepared does not only benefit myself but also the learners as I am more relaxed when things are in order. I discovered that things don't always go the way you wanted but you have to be prepared to be flexible and open to variety and change".*
>
> *R46: "The atmosphere and cooperation of the children are being determined by an effective daily programme and the attitude of the teacher towards the children. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the teacher must be well prepared for each day".*

For nine teachers and five mothers, professional teachers are symbols of quality. One student-participant had the same perception:

> R7: "My teacher has a lot of experience and is so flexible and very good at her job, so there is seldom something I would change".

Another student-participant noticed how a lack of professionalism can convey a negative message to outsiders.

> R35: "I would not allow the teachers to have cell phones during school time. I find the fact that some of the teachers are answering their phones during class time rude and frustrating".

Two participants of each group indicated that teachers must be well informed and attend staff courses regularly. The last few responses in this category were mostly singled out by the teachers. Eight teachers specifically considered excellent teachers to be a mark of quality whereas two mothers referred to the importance of teachers having experience. Lastly, two teachers and one mother said that a capable teacher is a quality asset. In terms of capability, two student-participants noted:

> R35: "I have learnt that you should be enthusiastic when teaching and put lots of effort into your lesson and it should go well".
>
> R18: "Teachers must be able to think on their feet, improvise and solve problems as soon as they arise. Sometimes you must be firm".

(c)   Category 3.1.3   Teachers' conduct

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to teachers' conduct and focuses on teachers who are positive role models; caring, warm and loving towards children; supportive and helpful; passionate; listen to children; address problems immediately; observe well; have realistic expectations of children; are friendly; loyal; honest; fair; patient; trustworthy, reliable and responsible; in control; do not shout at children; can express themselves in their work.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to the positive conduct of teachers.
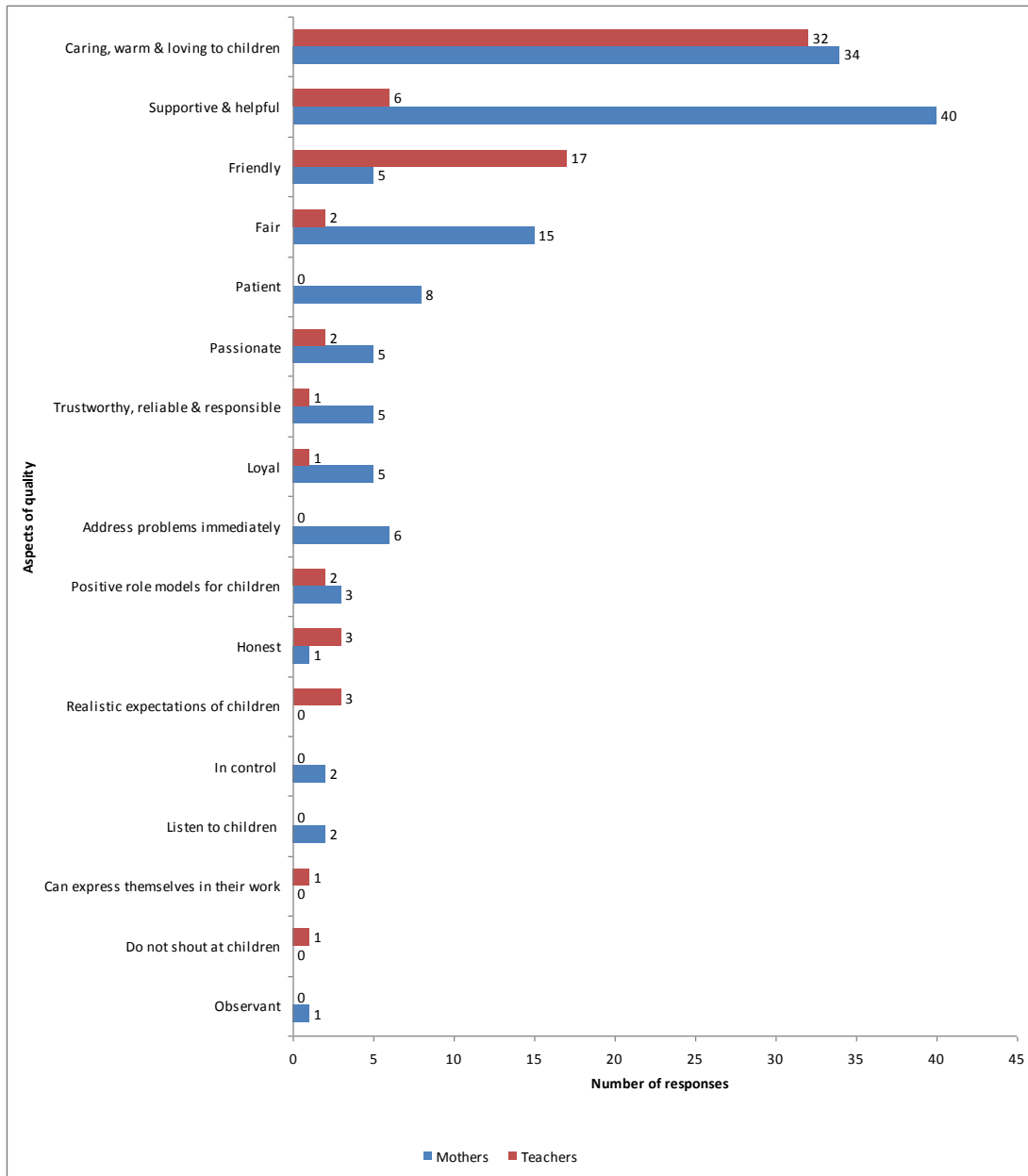
Figure 5.16: Teachers' conduct

In the third category, as depicted in Figure 5.16, it is evident that the majority of teachers (32) and mothers (34) all shared the opinion that the love of the teachers and their care and warmth towards the children are essential ingredients for good quality in early learning centres.

> *M154: "For me an early learning centre is only successful if I can see that my children are really happy. This is not determined by the appearance of the centre or the reputation that it has. Only honest, loving and dedicated staff for me carry out the image of a good preschool".*

The role that teachers play is evident from these reflective journals quotes:

> R15: "Teachers play a huge role with the atmosphere of the school and their attitude affects the attitude of the learners in their class".
>
> R7: "The relationship between the teacher and children was friendly, stern but motherly. In my class I would be a little less stern and talk to them slightly differently, I felt sorry for them because they are still very young".

In this section, there was one determining factor for quality of extreme importance for many mothers (40), namely that teachers must always be prepared to be helpful and supportive. Six teachers had the same opinion.

> *M139: "She must look after my child when I am at work, she must be her parent during the time when I am not there and she must comfort her if she does not feel well".*

Student-participants also reflected on teachers' helpfulness and support:

> R13: "The teacher is very helpful, but also critical in order to maintain a high standard of education".
>
> R15: "Teachers have to be constantly aware of the children's needs and how to support them".

Seventeen teachers and five mothers confirmed that teachers' friendliness contributes towards the atmosphere and quality experienced in an early learning centre. A fieldworker agreed with them.

> R37: "I would definitely say the friendliness of the teachers in the school determines the atmosphere".

Many mothers (15) specified that teachers must be fair, and two teachers agreed with them. It is interesting to note that only mothers (8) regarded teachers' patience as an aspect of quality. Patience was perceived as vital by student-participants.

> R33: "Patience is definitely the key to teaching. I realised that I need to learn how to gain the children's respect as well as be their friend".
>
> R31: "I learned that a teacher's patience is of the utmost importance. One has to be stern but friendly at the same time. Therefore it is a balance of both the aspects".
>
> R16: "The teacher's attitude towards the children determines the children's attitude. If they were enthusiastic the children would want to do things. I noticed the teachers were friendly, encouraging and patient with the children".

For five mothers and two teachers a fundamental characteristic of quality is teachers being passionate.

T178: "Passionate teachers with a vision for the future to help children to cope with modern society and very strong values based education".

Student-participants also experienced passion and enthusiasm as pivotal for quality education.

R25: " Through this experience the most important things I have learnt about teaching is that one has to be well prepared, open-minded and above all to be passionate – passionate about the children and about teaching".

R16: "The teachers' attitude towards the children determines the children's attitude if they were enthusiastic the children would want to do things. I noticed the teachers were friendly, encouraging and patient with the children".

A few mothers (5) in comparison with a single teacher, remarked on the trustworthiness, reliability and responsibility of teachers. Student-participants noticed the value of trust between teachers and children as well.

R15: "Children will only trust people if they prove their trust to them and are able to keep it".

R14: "I have learnt a lot, and see now that it is my responsibility as a future teacher to give children my best, so that they can benefit and grow".

Loyalty seems to be more important to mothers (5) than to teachers (1). A few mothers (6) pointed out that problems should be addressed immediately, but none of the teachers commented on this. Three mothers and two teachers agreed that in quality centres the teachers should be positive role models for children. A student-participant confirmed that view.

R18: "The teacher comes across as loving, caring and someone to look up to".

Honesty and openness in the teachers were noted as quality characteristics by a few teachers (3) and one mother.

M147: "I expect the teacher to be honest with my child. She must build him, not break him down. She must also be open with the parents – good or bad. This will build a good child from all different sides".

Only three teachers, but no mothers regarded a quality centre as a place where teachers have realistic expectations of the children. On this matter the following reflections were made by the student-participants:

> R39: "Today I assisted with a lesson in the Grade R classroom. I was amazed how short an attention span the children actually have and they very quickly get rowdy. I thought the teacher handled her class very well in keeping them interested and occupied. I can feel that she sets a very strong atmosphere of 'you are here to learn' and is very attentive to the children's needs. I can see that they trust her and respect her by the way they behaved when asked to do so".
>
> R35: "I would not lose my temper so much when the children are naughty because they are still children".
>
> R25: "I learnt that it is important to keep lessons and discussions brief as the children become distracted and restless very quickly. I did however pick up some good techniques for capturing the children's attention and calming them down. The teacher uses little rhymes and songs as well as short movement activities".

Only two mothers highlighted that teachers should be in control, whereas none of the teachers specifically emphasised that. In a school situation children are always expected to listen to the teachers, however, two mothers stipulated the opposite, namely that teachers must also listen to children. This statement was also considered as important for two of the student-participants.

> R47: "I have learnt that discipline and routine are very important for children, even though they rebel against it. I also learnt that one must listen to what children say".
>
> R48: "You, as the teacher, must really listen carefully to what the children are telling you, because there might be a message for you as teacher about the situation at the home of the child".

For one teacher it was an indication of quality if teachers can express themselves in their work and another one, valued teachers who do not shout at children. The views of three student-participants' concerns about shouting are evident in the following quotes.

> R16: "Today I watched the reprimanding of a child I thought was a little harsh and unnecessary as the child was actually only playing, yes he was being disruptive but I would have maybe only moved him away from his friend instead of causing a huge fuss and putting him on the sad chair".
>
> R1: "The teacher retains discipline by shouting but the children respect her because they know not to cross the line".
>
> R47: "I got a fright when the teacher shouted at the children. Today the teacher was not ready for her class and therefore the children were very rowdy".

Lastly, one mother regarded teachers who are very observant as an aspect of quality.

(d) Category 3.1.4 Relationships between teachers, parents and children

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to the different relationships in early learning centres and is focused on teachers building trusting relationships with children; good relationships; good cooperation and communication between staff and parents; and having approachable teachers.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to the relationships and communication between teachers with other staff members, parents and children.
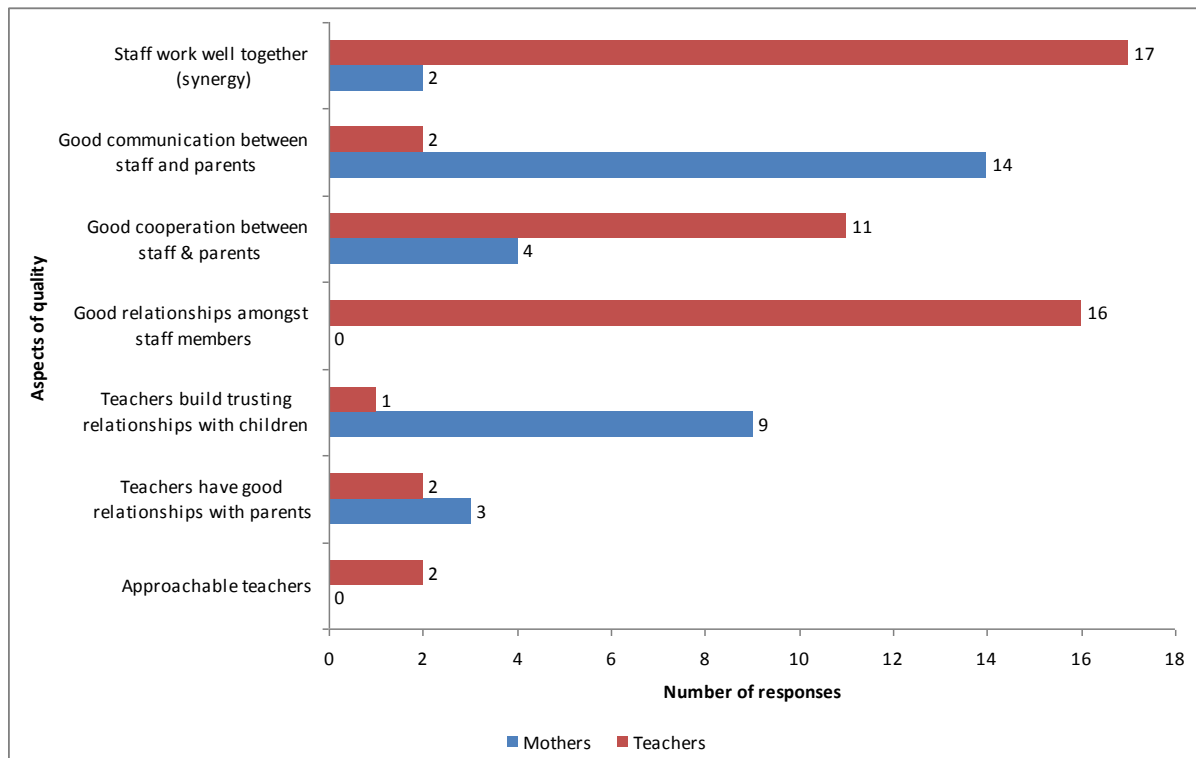
Figure 5.17: Relationships between teachers, parents and children

The fourth category, illustrated in Figure 5.17, deals with relationships amongst the teachers themselves, as well as with the mothers and with the children. In this category the fact that staff can work well together and create synergy was the most prominent response and was given by many teachers (17) but only by two mothers. This seems logical considering the reality that the teachers speak from first-hand experience and because they personally are in relationships with peers every day.

For many (16) teachers good relationships amongst staff members represent quality in a centre. Many of the student-participants, who dealt with various teachers during their three weeks teaching practice experience at the centres, commented on the

contribution (positive or negative) that such staff relationships had on the atmosphere in the centres.

> R6: "The atmosphere at the school is very warm and all the teachers get on very well with each other. They spend time chatting and laughing while watching the children during free play. It is a very warm and happy place to be".
>
> R7: "The relationship between the teachers was one of friendliness and fondness".
>
> R3: "The relationship between the teachers is very good, they chat and also share jokes".
>
> R12: "The teachers appeared to have a good relationship with each other and the teachers were friendly towards each other".
>
> R13: "The teachers interact very positively with each other and are extremely flexible".
>
> R14: "The teachers in the school are professional and they treat each other with respect. There is no rivalry between the teachers and they work together as a team".
>
> R1: "The relationship between the teachers is always very good and there is good communication. There is no tension between the teachers".
>
> R38: "I get along well with some of the teachers, but there are two of the teachers who I don't know where I stand with and they just make no effort to be friendly".
>
> R33: "The teacher of this class did not interact with the other teachers at all, creating a tense atmosphere during break time".
>
> R34: "Watching the children's behaviour at school indicated to me that they enjoy being at school. The teachers all have a happy and helpful relationship with one another and their relationship with the children is very caring and encouraging".

The following quotes from the student-participants' journals particularly emphasise the importance of good communication amongst staff members and specifically highlight the value in terms of the discussion and solving of problems.

> R7: "There is a good sense of communication and understanding between the teachers and other members of staff".
>
> R18: "There is an open communication amongst the teachers and they consult each other for advice".
>
> R13: "Teachers confide in each other about problems they face and therefore work towards a solution together".
>
> R16: "The teachers mainly only discussed problematic children with each other, and work, so the relationship was on a professional basis".

For many mothers (14), good communication between staff and parents was also an indication of quality. In comparison, only two teachers shared that opinion.

M179: "I like good communication between parent and teacher because that prevents many problems. I also expect of the teacher to understand the child's circumstances at home and keep them in mind when she handles him/her. The teacher must know that I leave my 'little piece of gold' in her care".

M194. "I expect my child's teacher to advise me if anything out of the ordinary happens at school that directly affects my child".

A student-participant's experience about the importance of communication with a parent is evident in the next quote:

R33: "I learnt that one child can actually affect the whole class. One little girl disrupted the entire class. A meeting was set with her mom for the next day as she was hurting and bullying all the little girls that were smaller than her. I learnt that you have to cope with these difficult situations and not take your frustrations out on the other children".

Another student-participant also remarked on the involvement of parents in the school.

R14: "It is important to have parents involved in the school and education of their child".

Nine mothers stated that good relationships of trust built by teachers with children, reveal quality in early childhood centres. Only one teacher shared the same view. The reflections on the relationships between the children and the teachers are apparent in the student-participants' words below.

R13: "The teacher-learner relationship is becoming much stronger and learners are beginning to trust their teachers more and more every day".

R7: "The teachers have a very good relationship with all the children and the children just adore their teacher".

R18: "In the learners' eyes the teacher means everything to them. When they get hurt, they want to know something or share news, they turn to their teachers".

R14: "The children love coming to school. The children trust their teachers completely and insecure children find security next to their teacher's side. I think these teachers are great examples of what preschool teachers should be and I hope I will be like them".

A few mothers (3) and teachers (2) felt that teachers must have good relationships with parents, whilst two teachers also stressed the fact that approachable teachers are of importance in a quality centre. Student-participants also noted the value of good communication with parents.

> R11: "The parents are involved and daily want to know how their child's behaviour was and what they have learnt through the day".
> R2: "I have learnt that parents are often more difficult to communicate with than the children and that issues have to be dealt with firmly yet also with sensitivity towards the child and the situation as a whole".

5.3.3.2 Sub-theme 3.2 Optimising learner development

Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to aspects focused on optimising learner development and includes evidence of every child being important and receiving individual attention; children being the number one priority; developing children's identities; children having the opportunity to develop to their full potential and learning independence; creating social interaction opportunities; and generating happy and contented children who are enjoying school.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to aspects related to optimising learner development.
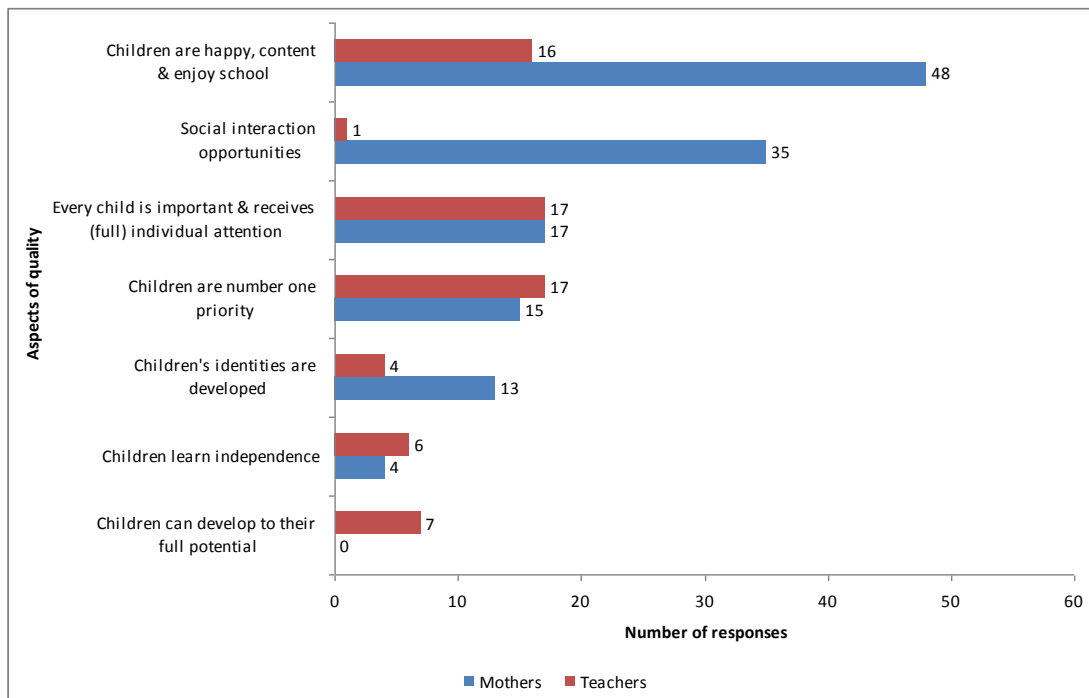
Figure 5.18: Optimising learner development

Figure 5.18 illustrates that the one response that received the most votes from beneficiaries about any aspect, is that forty-eight parents, as well as sixteen teachers, pointed out that children in a quality centre are happy and content and that they enjoy school.

> *M145: "My child must learn through play, her small world must be expanded and she must do activities that she enjoys and which are not forced upon her".*

M239: "My child's well-being must be considered at all times and the most important aspect of everything is that the school is a place that he can enjoy".

M194: "My children must be happy and feel at home. They must be excited to go back to school for longer than two weeks. If they learn something at school the learning process must be fun and not a chore, which will put them off learning for life".

The importance of happy, contented children is also evident from student-participants' reflections:

R3: "The children clearly enjoy being at the school, this is evident through the running around and playing".

R18: "Teaching is a great deal of fun! You must have the right mind set, be prepared and have fun. There is no point in attempting an activity that you won't enjoy – then the class won't enjoy it either".

R45: "I found it interesting to see how little it takes to make children happy, for example my discovery table".

R44: "The fact that children immediately start to play when they have been dropped off at school indicates to me that they enjoy being at school".

Also very high, with thirty-five responses from mothers, was the opinion that enough opportunities for social interaction must be available to children. This fact was only important for one teacher, but four student-participants commented on the children's social needs and behaviour:

R10: "The teacher and the children share a very special bond. The children often cry when their parents drop them off at school but the teacher comforts them and soon they are happy and start playing with the other children".

R5: "The learners enjoy going to school and learning and being able to have social interactions. The learners were happy and full of energy".

R48: "Many children play alone when they are at home and don't want to mingle with other children when they are at school, that is why I think you have to play one or two games in groups where everybody can participate".

R41: "The children are happy to follow routine but enjoy free play just as much. I anticipated the children to be rowdy and naughty but they are surprisingly very calm, relaxed and happy. The children on a whole play well with one another and mostly interact in a positive light".

An equal number of participants, seventeen teachers and seventeen mothers felt that in a quality centre every child is important and must receive full, individual attention. The same observation was made by a fieldworker:

> R2: "The little ones are very close to their teacher and are constantly asking her questions and competing for her attention. The teacher is very patient with them and soothes them easily if they become upset".

Seventeen teachers and fifteen mothers stated that children should be considered as the number one priority in an early learning centre.

> T202: "The child's happiness and well-being must always be considered as the most important aspect".

A student-participant confirmed the importance of the children's needs.

> R14: "The needs of the learners in the school are the priority".

It seems to be much more important to mothers (13) than to teachers (4) that children's identities are developed at the centre. The view of one student-participant in this regard was:

> R18: "The group enjoys school and it is clear that they feel they have the freedom to be who they are".

For six teachers and four parents it was essential that children learn to become independent. A student-participant observed independence personally.

> R18: "The children seemed content and satisfied. They take control of situations. I can see independence (fight their own battles), yet obedience (tidy up)".

Only teachers (7) commented that a quality centre will give children the opportunity to develop to their potential.

5.3.4 Theme 4: Requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities

In Theme 4, the focus is on requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities. This theme is sub-divided into two sub-themes namely *Available services* and *Facilities that are child-friendly and conducive to development.* The first sub-theme is further sub-divided into two categories, *Core services (time and food)* and *Additional services (extramural activities, therapists and outings).*

5.3.4.1   Sub-theme 4.1   Available services

(a)   Category 4.1.1 Core services: time and food

| Inclusion criteria	The focus of this category is on core services and includes data related to affordable fees; centres providing a good service to the community; centres being open for long hours and many days; the provision of good food: and centres offering services for babies to Grade R.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes data that do not refer to the provision of core services like food and available hours.
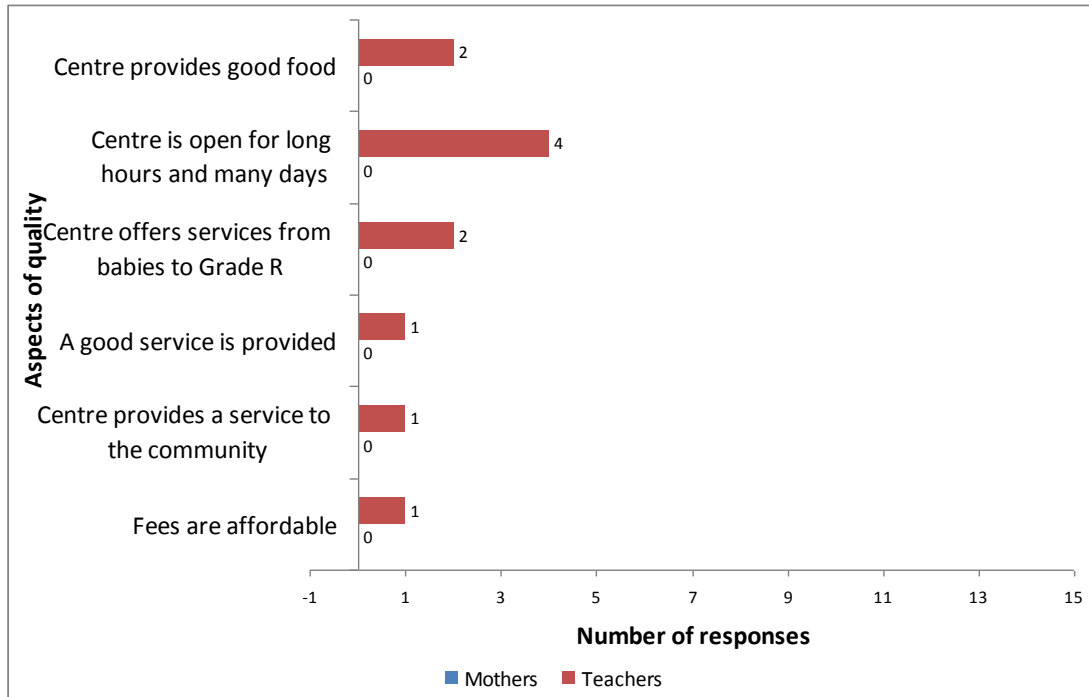
Figure 5.19: Core services: time and food

Figure 5.19 points out that all the responses about core services, surprisingly, were only made by teachers and not by mothers. Two emphasised that if good food is provided, quality is indicated. In terms of food, the student-participants remarked as follows:

R25: "The learners ate their lunch on the mat and not at the tables which I think would have been better".

R1: "Eating for the children is very stressful and a very emotional matter even for the senior group who also find it difficult to sit and eat their food instead of running around. The teachers themselves are so drained that they see this time as a time to relax a bit, so to supervise the children becomes a bit of a chore, but they have decided to take turns".

R38: "The school is very strict about the meals that the learners bring to school. They are very health conscious and encourage the learners to be active".

The following responses were also only made by a few teachers: Four teachers emphasised the accessibility of a centre for long hours and many days as important, however, none of the mothers specifically mentioned that. Two teachers indicated that a quality centre offers services for babies up to Grade R. One teacher said that a quality centre provides a service and another said it provides a good service to the community. Contrary to my expectations only one person, a teacher and not even one mother, commented on the costs of the centre and explained that affordable fees are an indication of a quality centre.

T57: "A centre that is cost effective and has well trained people is very important".

(b)   Category 4.1.2   Additional services, extra mural activities, occupational therapists, outings

| Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to the availability of aftercare service the provision of extramural/extra activities; outings; occupational and speech therapists; provision for individual/special/unique needs; provision of additional attention if needed: transport service
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to the provision of additional services in early learning centres.
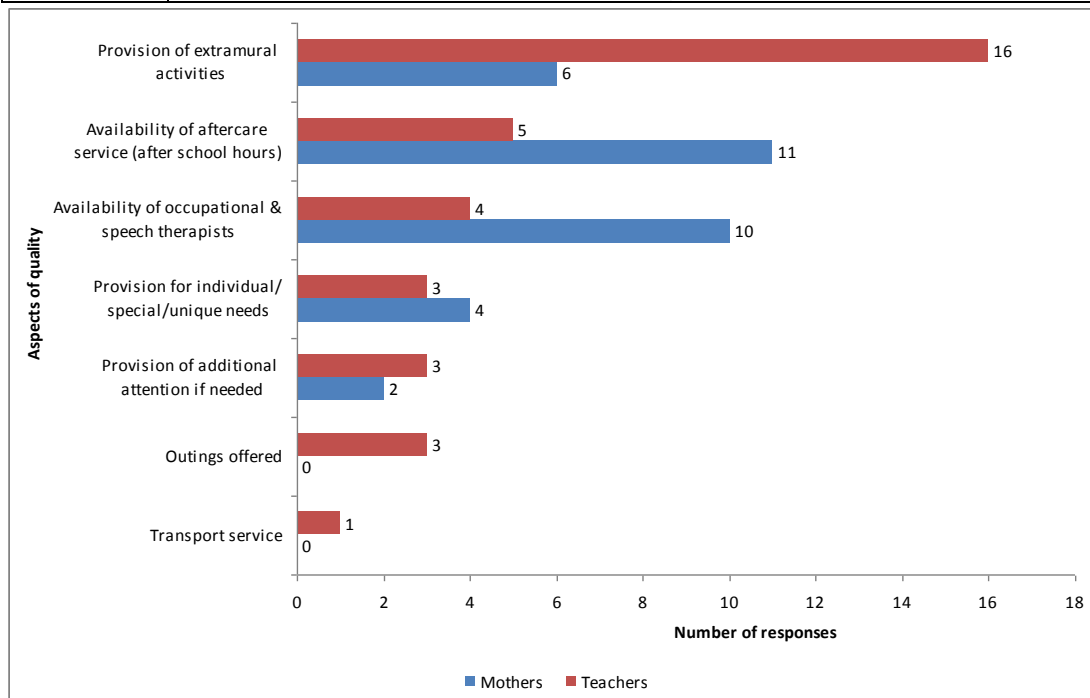
Figure 5.20: Additional services, extramural/extra activities, occupational therapists and outings

When additional services are portrayed in Figure 5.20, it is significant to note how the different beneficiaries vary in their opinions. Many teachers (16), for instance, pointed

out that the extramural/extra activities determine quality in the centre. This view is shared by six mothers.

> *T 60: "A spacious school that offers many extra activities for the children like music, Playball and ballet".*

From one of the student-participant's comments it seems that some of the extramural activities that are offered during structured learning activities cause disruption to the daily programme.

R35: "I would work the daily programme out in such a way that the extramural activities do not disrupt the classes or that they fall in free-play".

Regarding another aspect, eleven mothers singled out the provision of an aftercare service as a quality trait, with five teachers having the same response. Ten mothers and four teachers remarked on the availability of occupational and speech therapists as a service determining quality centres. A few mothers (4) and teachers (3) mentioned that quality centres should make provision for individual, special or unique needs. Four student-participants reflected on children with special needs:

R28: "The atmosphere on the last day was a little stressful as one of the learners with behavioural problems had become overwhelmed and had struck out against other children. He had started his day angry and violent and had to be sent home early. The other learners were extremely tense and so the teachers allowed an extended play time just so that they could move past their fear. But the day was a wonderful success and everyone enjoyed spending time talking and enjoying this last day together".

R14: "Teachers work together to form plans to incorporate children with special needs into the program, and plans to cope with children with behaviour problems. Teachers carry a great responsibility, they have to ensure that the children in their classes receive the best education and possible special needs are recognised easily".

R32: A new boy joined the school today, a Down syndrome child, he is four turning five. I was surprised to see how the older children reacted and I was even more surprised to see that the other children tried to help him if he couldn't do anything and they didn't mock or were mean to him. They seemed quite happy and content to have him in their class".

R15: "I have found that I am very good with helping children with learning and behavioural disabilities, I have a lot of patience and I can encourage and compliment children in an honest and positive way".

A few teachers (3) and mothers (2) indicated that additional attention must be provided to children if needed. Two student-participants gave their opinions about additional attention, even about including other children in the process.

> R35: "Give learners individual attention when they are feeling lonely or upset".
>
> R14: "Children who attend this school love the school and teachers. They are always kept busy and teachers encourage children to play with lonely children until they find their feet".

Only a few teachers (3) remarked on outings that the centres offer as a quality characteristic. One person, a teacher, mentioned that a centre with a bus service for the transportation of children emphasises a quality service.

5.3.4.2   Sub-theme 4.2   Facilities that are child-friendly and conducive to development

| Inclusion criteria	This category includes data related to child-friendly facilities with well-maintained equipment; environments that promote development; spacious classrooms and playgrounds; interesting and well-designed playgrounds; fully equipped centres; various and sufficient apparatus and toys; outstanding infrastructure; centres with a big media centre; many trees; garden and pond.
Exclusion criteria	This category excludes references that do not refer to child-friendly facilities that are conducive to children's development.
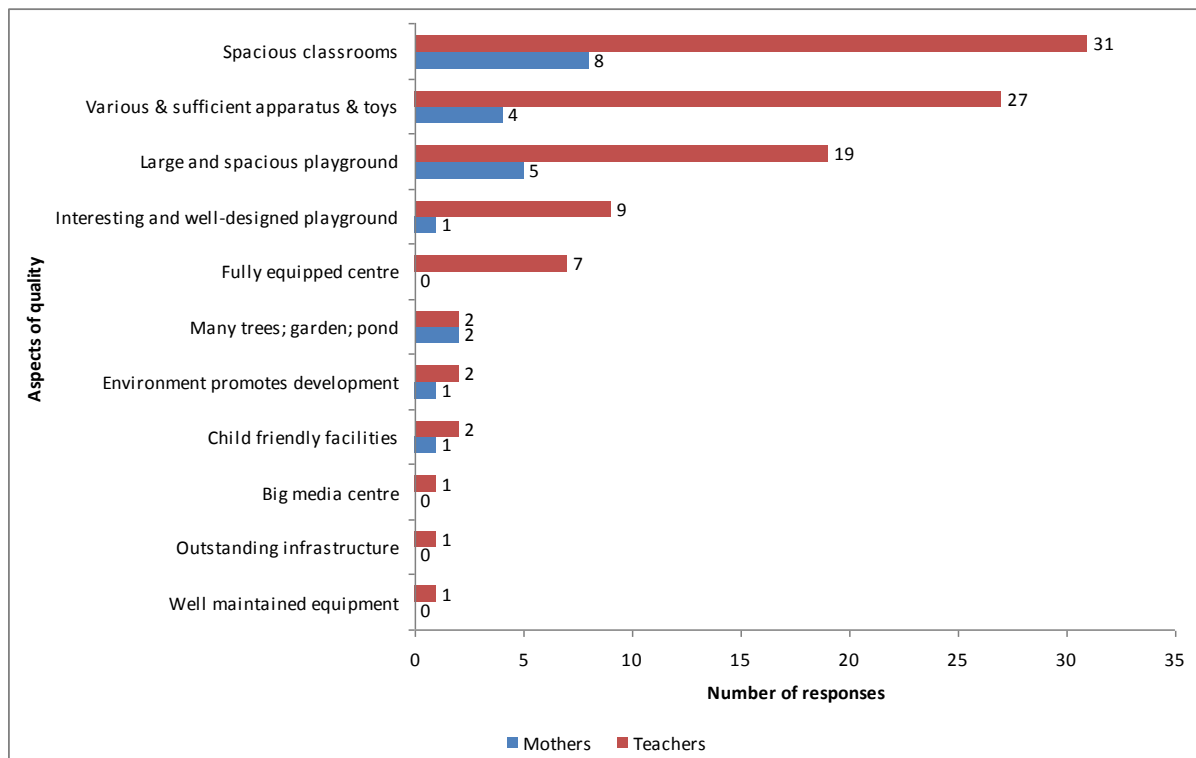
Figure 5.21: Facilities that are child-friendly and conducive to development

In this category regarding facilities, Figure 5.21 illustrates that the aspect with the most responses indicates that quality centres have spacious playrooms (classrooms).

A large number of teachers (31) commented on this although only eight mothers had the same opinion. The fact that the teachers themselves are physically present in the playrooms every day might be the reason why this factor seems to be so much more important to teachers than to mothers.

Student-participants' experiences of the space or the lack of space in playrooms are evident in the quotes below.

R5: "The classrooms are all very welcoming and are filled with interesting areas for the children to play in. The classrooms are child-centred".

R17: "As I entered the centre I was welcomed by an environment, which was bright and inviting".

R28: "It is very hard to do side activities when there are 25 boys in the class as there is little space and even the simplest activities need supervision. So I've had to limit the amount of activities that need to be done at one time".

"A quality centre has sufficient and a variety of apparatus and toys". This opinion of many teachers (17) was shared by only four mothers. The following quotes explain how the student-participants experienced the place and role of apparatus in terms of creating atmosphere.

R18: "The environment was inviting with a big variety of apparatus and toys that are stimulating on many levels, a very positive atmosphere, excellent facilities, great teachers and the children have a sense of belonging".

R37: "Everyone is very welcoming and the amazing condition of the school is also very inviting. The children love coming to school. They are enthusiastic and are all encouraged to make friends with each other. The variety of equipment also encourages the learners to participate".

R25: "I felt that the teacher could have made more of an effort to make her classroom attractive so as to make it more interesting for the children".

Spacious playgrounds were more important for teachers (19) than mothers (5).

> T144: "The classrooms are big and spacious and the playground outside can be seen in one glance. This enables the teachers to have control over the children at all times".

One can assume that these responses are more common amongst teachers than mothers because the teachers are physically working in those environments every day. An interesting, well designed playground was singled out by ten teachers, whereas only one mother signified it as an important quality determinant. For seven

teachers a quality centre is one that is fully equipped. One of the student-participants acknowledged the value of a well equipped outside area.

R43: "The outside play area is full of toys and it is colourful which creates a friendly, welcoming atmosphere".

The last categories concerning the facilities are responses made by only a few beneficiaries. For two mothers and two teachers a quality centre has many trees, a beautiful garden and a pond that provides opportunities for science and biology. Two teachers respectively mentioned that a quality environment promotes development and that the facilities are child friendly. These opinions were shared by individual mothers. One student-participant felt that user-friendly facilities contributed to a happy atmosphere.

R34: "Generally there is a happy atmosphere about this school as the facilities are user friendly and the staff is all very helpful and involved".

The rest of the responses concerning the facilities were only rendered by teachers. Single responses from teachers indicated a big media centre, an outstanding infrastructure or well-maintained equipment as quality characteristics.

5.4   CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the results derived from the data sources were analysed according to themes, sub-themes and categories in a thematic analysis, as well as cross-case comparisons between the different participants. In the next chapter, I give an interpretation of the results and I present the findings related to the theoretical framework and existing literature.

Chapter 6

Findings

6.1   INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4, I reported on the results from the quantitative data, namely the questionnaires with open-ended responses which were completed by the student-participants. The data from these questionnaires focused on facilities and learning activities which were available in early learning centres. In this regard, I specifically looked into the availability of indoor learning areas, learning activities and outdoor facilities.

In Chapter 5, I gave an account of the results from the qualitative data, namely the interviews with parents (mothers) and teachers, as well as the reflective journals kept by the student-participants. This data from the interviews and reflective journals focused on the understanding of the beneficiaries' (parents, teachers and students) experiences of quality in the early learning centres of the case study. The results derived from the data sources were analysed according to themes, sub-themes and categories in a thematic analysis.

In this chapter, I provide an interpretation of the results and portray the findings in terms of existing literature. I report on supportive and contradictive evidence from the literature, as well as on silences and new insights that emerged from this study.

In the first part of the chapter, I report on findings from the *quantitative data* (questionnaires) of this study with reference to the availability of indoor areas, structured learning activities and outdoor facilities in early learning centres.

6.2   WHAT IS OFFERED BY EARLY LEARNING CENTRES?

In this section I answer the secondary research question, "What is offered by early learning centres?" (refer to 1.5.4).

6.2.1 Learning areas

Quantitative results indicated that nearly all the early learning centres had *book corners, display tables for theme discussions* and *areas for art and cognitive activities.* In line with the results of the current study, existing literature generally highlights the inclusion of these areas in quality early learning centres. As Segal, Bardige, Bardige, Breffni and Woika (2012: 64) point out, high-quality playrooms are likely to offer between five and ten interest centres. Various sources support the inclusion of these indoor areas in early learning centres (Bredekamp, 2011; Bullard, 2010; Seefeldt, 2002).

In the current study, most of the early learning centres had *fantasy* and *block play areas.* In my review of the literature, I found that both these areas are seen as very important to support and enhance dramatic play and creativity in children (Bayley, Broadbent & Featherstone, 2009c; Curtis & Carter, 2003; Mayesky, 2009).

Numeracy seems to be a priority in most of the early learning centres. However, *mathematics corners* and *discovery areas* were visible in less than half of the early learning centres in the current study. Existing literature shows that both these areas can effectively promote the cognitive and explorational abilities of children (Charlesworth & Lind, 2003; Trister-Dodge *et al.,* 2003).

In most cases (more than 70%) *sensopathic, music* or *technology areas* were not available. Existing literature indicates that *music areas* in early learning centres not only provide informal opportunities for children to gain music skills and an appreciation for music but also enhance physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and language development (Bullard, 2010: 273–274). The same author advocates the inclusion of *technology* and *sensopathic areas* which, apart from enhancing cognitive

and physical development, also foster curiosity, experimentation and imagination in young children (Bullard, 2010: 152, 291). Only 17% of centres had *technology areas*. My Master's thesis titled "The implementation of the Learning Area Technology in the primary schools in Gauteng and Free State Provinces" supports this finding and points out that the technology is a relatively new, unfamiliar area and activity in early learning centres. Most of the current teachers were not trained in, or exposed to technology-related activities. Those who did receive training in this area are relatively young and inexperienced and encountered difficulties in introducing such activities where they started their teaching careers (Van Heerden, 2005: 76).

6.2.2 Structured learning activities

The questionnaires revealed that the majority (95%) of early learning centres presented *stories, rhymes, art, music, theme discussions* and *numeracy activities* as part of the structured learning activities of their daily programmes. These results are supported by existing literature regarding the value and importance of these activities to enhance quality in the daily programme of an early learning centre (Davin & Van Staden, 2005; Edwards, 2010; Edwards *et al.*, 2009; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2010; Wallace, 2002). According to Becker and Becker (2009: 5), quality in early childhood programmes should not be confused with formal schooling. They argue that there is a tendency to rush children to prepare them academically for school (see 2.5.5), but in doing so, major "factors" are being left out in some early learning centres regarding the daily programme. Becker and Becker (2009: 5) advise teachers, instead of formal inappropriate work, to read to children and to tell them stories. They maintain that asking them questions, encouraging the children to tell stories or participating in alphabet games "will prepare them far better than drills on letters of the alphabet and phonics".

Most of the early learning centres (90%) offered *movement activities, perception* and *baking activities.* In line with the results of the current study, existing literature generally highlights that these activities are also considered important to enhance the quality of the holistic development of children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Davin & Van Staden, 2005; Edwards *et al.*, 2009; Gordon & Browne, 2004; Mayesky, 2009).

These findings indicate that South African early learning centres offer the majority of important structured learning activities which are aimed at the holistic development of children as part of their daily programmes.

I encountered a silence in the early childhood education literature regarding faith-based activities in early learning centres. The high frequency (93%) of the use of *religious stories,* in the current study, corresponds with the responses from the interviews where morals and faith-based values were deemed significant by mothers as well as teachers. However, the literature on early childhood programmes that I consulted, is silent on this matter. This silence could be ascribed to the fact that most of the literature on quality in early learning centres originates from countries where the law either forbids, or restricts religious education in public schools, for example the United States of America, Canada and Australia. In the United States of America religious education is forbidden in public schools, except if it is taught from a neutral, academic perspective, which does not suit the developmental stage of children at early learning centres (Pew Forum, 2007).

In Canada, religion is also largely avoided in public schools. Publicly funded schools for Roman Catholics and Protestant Christians are allowed in some provinces. However, in provinces such as Quebec, a growing level of multiculturalism resulted in the religious education in public schools being abolished in 1998 (Wikipedia, 2011).

The current South African National Policy on Religion and Education, introduced in 2003, makes provision for the teaching of religion in schools. The policy explains why matters related to religion need to be included in public education (DoE, 2003:5). This policy links religion and education with new initiatives in cultural rebirth (the African Renaissance), moral regeneration, and the promotion of values in schools. Religion can play a significant role in preserving our heritage, respecting our diversity, and building a future based on progressive values. South African mothers and teachers seem to regard such values as important.

About *two-thirds* of the early learning centres had *puppet shows.* Existing literature support the value of the inclusion of puppet sh/ows in early learning centres. Puppet shows are specifically valuable with regard to language acquisition; learning of new

vocabulary; as well as acquiring new knowledge; social and life skills; and values (Bullard, 2010; Herr, Larson & Tennyson-Grimm, 2004; Isenberg & Jalongo, 2010; Mayesky, 2009).

Science and technology activities were offered in less than a third of the early learning centres. Existing local research supports the results of the current study. In South Africa, science and technology activities are not frequently being presented in early learning centres (Bosman, 2006; Van Heerden, 2005). From the literature it is evident that the inclusion of both science and technology activities is very beneficial for developing a range of skills, specifically higher order thinking skills like critical and creative thinking and problem-solving skills (Charlesworth & Lind, 2003; Eshach & Fried 2005; Fleer & Hardy 2001; Wallace, 2002). Clarckson, Groenewald, Luke and Ncapai (1998: 4) advocate the inclusion of science and technology in early learning centres, because young children are concrete thinkers who learn best by making, dismantling, examining and experimenting. In their opinion, teachers will be astounded at children's capacity for creative problem-solving and decision-making, which are crucial skills for succeeding in formal education and in life.

Additional language activities were also only offered in less than a third of the early learning centres. In the South African national curriculum, a first additional language is only officially introduced as a subject in Grade 1 (DoBE, 2011:8). Children's literacy experiences preceding Grade 1 are crucial for their learning to read and write (McGee & Richgels, 2003:1). According to Phatudi (2011: 2), more and more schools adopt English as the medium of instruction as early as Grade R. She also argues that these transitions "happen too abruptly without the learners having developed necessary cognitive skills in their first language". The consequences thereof are poor academic performance because learning the new language is a 'battle' for the children (Phatudi, 2011: 2). Deiner (2010: 294) adds weight to Phatudi's statement by saying that to be skilled in using English as a tool for learning, calls for in-depth knowledge, not just for talking and comprehension, but for reading and writing as well.

Robb (1995: 16) argues that the "participatory, interactive, democratic, activity-based, experiential education" found in early learning centres, initiate the ideal environment

for learning a language, especially because fostering the development of language is one of the main aims of early learning education. She is, however, convinced that although these conditions can be utilised to support the acquisition of an additional language, the significance of the child's home language should never be forgotten, whether that home language is going to be the language of instruction in formal education or not. Robb (1995: 16) also suggests that every early learning centre, even monolingual ones, should try to introduce the children to other locally-spoken languages. In South Africa, where there are eleven official languages, one would assume that children would be exposed to an additional language early on in a very informal and incidental way in early learning centres. However, from the data derived from the questionnaires, only 32% of centres introduced learners to an additional language.

6.2.3 Outdoor facilities

Swings, climbing apparatus and slides were present in almost all (95%) of the early learning centres. Existing literature agrees on the significance of having appropriate equipment to enhance the physical development of children and particularly to develop their gross motor skills while challenging them to experiment and take risks (Berry, 2001: 93; Edwards, *et al.,* 2009; Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 193).

An average of 64% of the early learning centres had a *sandpit, blocks, fantasy and wheel toys* available for outdoor play*.* Results from the current study thus supports insights from existing literature that such areas and apparatus are valuable for the development of numerous skills (Bayley, Broadbent & Featherstone, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2009d; Bullard, 2010; Casey, 2010; Curtis & Carter, 2003).

Only 61% of the centres had *water play areas* available. Although the questionnaires were completed by the respondents in mid-summer, less than a third of the centres presented water play activities. From existing literature, it is clear that water play is perceived by many as very versatile and useful in advancing knowledge and an array of skills in children (Bayley, Broadbent & Featherstone, 2009e; Evans, 2007).

According to the results of the questionnaires, art activities are presented indoors as part of the daily programme in 97% of the cases. Conversely, art activities are not as often part of the outdoor programme compared to the art activities indoors. *Outdoor art activities* and *dollhouses* were present in *half* of the early learning centres. Literature indicates that outdoor art activities and dollhouses encourage children to develop their creativity and social skills (Bayley & Featherstone 2009; Bayley, Broadbent & Featherstone, 2009b; Curtis & Carter, 2003).

A *sensopathic area, animals, vegetable or herb garden* and *woodwork* were usually absent. These areas are present in only 15% of the early learning centres. According to existing literature all these areas can contribute in various ways to children's holistic development (Entz, 2009: 149–150; Essa, 2011: 345; Feeney *et al.,* 2006: 229, 241; Grobler *et al.,* 1996: 46–47; Schirrmacher, 2006: 47; Wellhousen: 2002: 92), they are however sometimes seen as non-essentials and often, based on lack of space and funds, deemed by teachers as 'nice to haves'.

6.2.4 Integrating insights on services provided at early learning centres

It is apparent from the quantitative findings that the most important indoor facilities were available and structured indoor activities presented in the daily programmes in the majority of early learning centres that were part of this study. The availability of the basic indoor facilities and structured learning activities reflects that children will experience the opportunity to develop in a holistic and appropriate way. The unavailability of mathematics, discovery, sensopathic, music and technology areas and lack of science and technology activities, could slow down the development of various perceptual and cognitive abilities in those children who are not exposed to these areas and activities.

In terms of outdoor facilities, big static outdoor structures like climbing frames, swings and slides were available in most centres. Having these structures allow for the development of gross motor skills and movement. A third of preschools lacked other important areas and open-ended materials for sand, water, block and fantasy play and did not possess wheel toys. The absence of these areas and resources may

delay the development of certain important fine and gross motor skills and reduce sensory experiences in the children who are not exposed to these facilities.

6.3 WHAT DO BENEFICIARIES EXPERIENCE AS QUALITY IN EARLY LEARNING CENTRES?

In this section, I answer the secondary question, "What do beneficiaries experience as quality in early learning centres?" (refer to 1.5.4).

In Chapter 2, I explained the theoretical framework which I adapted from Woodhead (1996). Table 6.1 provides a visual layout of how I integrated results from the interviews and reflective journals (explained in Chapter 5) with indicators of the theoretical framework. Under each indicator, I indicated which (and how many) of the participants used that particular aspect as an indicator of quality in early learning centres. In the case of indicators where there were no responses, I indicated such absences in brown.

One generally accepted way of defining and indicating quality in early learning centres is to arrange quality indicators into three groups namely *input (system or structural)* indicators, *process* indicators and *outcome* indicators (see 2.4). In order to 'measure' quality outcomes, the latter need to be framed and linked to input and process indicators (OECD, 2009: 13). Pianta, Barnett, Burchinall and Thornburg (2009: 67) point out that in addition to the identification of the direct effects of quality on children's outcomes, 'structural and process quality work together to influence children's development'. They further emphasise the general understanding among researchers that 'structural' features affect the process quality that children directly experience in classes that in turn influences their development" (Pianta *et al.,* 2009: 66).

Table 6.1: Integrating results on quality indicators (derived from the data) within the Woodhead (1996) theoretical framework

'Quality' indicators								
INPUT (structural) indicators:			**PROCESS indicators:**			**OUTCOME indicators:**		

INPUT (structural) indicators:

Building and grounds
(indoor- and outdoor environments)
- floor space,

Classrooms: spacious	31	8	0
Playground big & spacious	19	0	0
Playground: interesting & well-designed	9	0	0

- toilets

Neat bathrooms	0	0	13

- heating / cooling **ABSENCE**

Materials and equipment
- toys,

Sufficient & variety of apparatus & toys	27	0	0

- furniture

The centre is fully equipped	7	0	0

- teaching resources **ABSENCE**

PROCESS indicators:

Style of care
- adults' responsiveness *& sensitive care-giving*

Children are the number one priority	17	15	0
Children treated with respect & taught respect	7	13	15
Teachers love children, are caring & warm (children well cared for)	32	34	37
Caring, loving & peaceful atmosphere	15	8	23
Teachers are friendly	17	0	35
Friendly, safe atmosphere	16	8	11
Relaxed & comfortable atmosphere	0	0	10
Teachers are fair	0	15	0
Teachers build relationships of trust with children	0	9	0
Teachers act professionally	9	0	11
Teachers are well prepared	12	0	12
Teachers are dedicated & motivated	12	7	0

OUTCOME indicators:

Children's health
- growth levels **ABSENCE**
- illness **ABSENCE**

Abilities
- overall skills and development

Children can develop to their full potential	7	0	0
Children's identities are developed at the centre	0	13	0

Adjustment to school
- transition and achievements in school

The programme equips children to be ready for grade 1	0	23	0

Family attitudes
- parental competence **ABSENCE**
- support for children's learning at home **ABSENCE**

Children's well-being

Children are happy & content and enjoy school	16	48	17

x

x

x

x

- management (a few responses were given)

Relationships among adults
- respect & trust

Good relationships amongst staff members	0	0	13

Relationships between staff, parents and others
- open, welcoming

Teachers have good relationships with parents	0	0	21
Good communication between staff & parents	0	14	0

- cooperative

Good cooperation between staff & parents	11	0	10
Staff work well together	17	0	18

In this part of the chapter, I interpret results in terms of what groups of participants held in high regard concerning the research question 'What are beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres in South Africa?'

6.3.1 Confirmation of existing knowledge with regard to quality indicators

The only *outcome indicator* that was regarded as extremely important by mothers and important, but not to the same extent, by teachers and students, is children's well-being and more specifically whether children are *happy and content and enjoying school*. Two different studies done in Australia support these findings (Noble, 2005: 110; O'Gorman, 2007: 57). The same outcome was derived from a study about the perceptions of parents from Hong Kong (Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009: 270). This finding is furthermore supported by the results of an extensive study done in the United States of America on the similarities and differences between Chinese-immigrant and European American parents' views of high quality preschool education (Yamamoto & Li, 2011). Their study also shows that the positive psychological state of children, such as enjoyment, being happy, and loving the school are deemed very important by parents. Yamamoto and Li (2011: 5) created the category *positive affect* for such positive psychological states.

None of the *input* indicators were indicated as important quality indicators by *all three groups of participants (teachers, mothers and students)*. However, the quality indicators that were valued by these three groups, were all *process* indicators.

6.3.1.1 Socio-emotional well-being

The style of care seems to be very important to teachers and mothers as well as to students. In support of this finding, Becker and Becker (2009: 35) state that young children cannot learn without a solid underpinning of *love and care*. They furthermore say "if the early childhood teacher, who sees the child for the better part of most days, carries forward the work of the parents and provides this solid foundation, the child will go on and learn for the rest of his life". In the same way, Howes (2010: 15) explains that from an attachment theory perspective, children's relationships with

adults contribute significantly to their experiences of being in early learning centres. *Warm, caring and trusting relationships* with teachers, enable children "to explore other interpersonal relationships and learning opportunities" (Howes, 2010: 15).

In correlation with the current study's results, various studies agree on parents' (and researchers') concern regarding the *well-being and best interest of children* as an indication of the quality in early learning centres. According to Howes (2010: 33), the following questions are often asked: "Are they safe and healthy? Do they feel secure and sure that the teachers will keep them safe? Are they learning the skills that they will need to be successful in school? In short, does the early childhood education environment enhance children's development in various ways and provide them with a good start for the rest of their lives?" The results of the current study further support Becker and Becker (2009: 5, 35) who accentuate that children cannot learn anything, cognitively, emotionally or socially without a loving, trusting relationship with a reliable adult caregiver, who actually substitutes the parent for the majority of the day.

In my study, the provision of *individual attention* to children in a *loving, caring, peaceful, friendly and safe atmosphere* featured prominently as a special concern to all the different groups of participants. In my review of the literature, I found various researchers who supported this view. Howes (2010: 18–19) confirms that warm and sensitive interactions encourage children to trust the teacher, not only to take care of them, but also to experience that they are worthy of being taken care of. Howes further points out that children who enjoy emotional support from sensitive and emotionally available teachers, will be eager to approach peers in a friendly way and build friendships, make complex play sequences and to take part in various learning activities, partially because of self-confidence and partially "because they can rely on the teacher for help if they need it". Feeney *et al.* (2006: 275) further point out that "physical environments send strong messages to children about how they are expected to act and whether they are welcome and accepted".

In my study, all groups of participants expressed the need for children to *experience love* in the early learning centre. Literature within this context supports the importance of safety and security as a prerequisite for the feeling of being loved. In

Katz's view (2010: 5), young children need a deep sense of safety. She refers to safety on a psychological level, meaning feeling secure, as a subjective feeling of "being strongly connected and deeply attached to one or more others". This feeling of attachment, connectedness and feeling safe, she explains, "comes not just from being loved, but from feeling loved, wanted, feeling significant, to an optimum (not maximum) degree". Of importance is that the emphasis is on "*feeling loved and wanted*" rather than on being loved and wanted. In Katz's words:

> *There are, no doubt, many children who are loved, but for a wide variety of reasons do not necessarily feel loved. As I understand early development, feeling strongly attached comes not just from the warmth and kindness of parents and caregivers. The feelings are a consequence of children perceiving that what they do or do not do really matters to others – matters so much that others will pick them up, comfort them, get angry and even scold them. Safety, then, grows out of being able to trust people to respond not just warmly but authentically, intensely and honestly (Katz, 2010: 5).*

Good communication between the staff and parents and an interpersonal *relationship of trust between the teachers and children*, are also mentioned by mothers as indicators of quality early learning centres. In correlation with these results, existing literature agrees on the importance of communication, not only for the children's welfare, but to notify parents and to assist them in understanding the aims and programme of the centre (Howes & Richie, 2002: 23). In this regard, Howes and Richie (2002: 23) say:

> *Nowadays, when so much stress is being placed upon teaching children academics beginning with the earliest groups, there is great fear among some child care educators that parents will not understand a developmentally appropriate approach and will demand that the school teach their children reading, maths, and science. The best way to address parents' concerns is through ongoing communication. Most parents want what is best for their child, and the majority of their questions and concerns can be addressed by providing information, inviting their involvement and helping to empower them.*

6.3.1.2 Learning

For mothers and teachers, quality in early learning centres comprises *a high quality educational programme* that provides *sufficient learning opportunities* to enhance children's *holistic development*, Within the context of holistic development, Essa (2011: 237) and Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, (2009: 22) refer to a substantial body of research verifying that preschool children's maturity predict later school success. These researchers also specify that *school readiness* will best be achieved when focusing on the *whole active child* instead of focusing predominantly on the intellectual or the social aspects of children. In order to acknowledge the whole child, Faust (2010: 99) underlines the importance of good observation, support and expanding of children's play and exploration, as well as the introduction of experiences which are based on children's needs and interests.

In the current study, teachers and mothers indicated that they value a quality programme that encourages *learner participation.* Likewise, Bertram and Pascal [s.a]: 2) indicate that "*involvement* is a measure for quality applicable to an endless list of situations and observable at all ages". In their view, children who participate and are actively involved, have good concentration, a specific focus, "want to continue the activity and to persist in it, and are rarely, if ever distracted". Involved children usually are motivated, remarkably observant and responsive to relevant stimuli. Involvement does not occur when the activities are too easy or when the task is too demanding. Bertram and Pascal refer to evidence that children gain deep, motivated, intense and long-term learning experiences from their involvement and participation.

In the current study, teachers and mothers strongly indicated the value they place on *qualified, dedicated and motivated teachers.* Similarly, literature confirms that the most significant factor indicating quality in early learning centres, is the quality of the staff. According to researchers, the level of teachers' formal education is "related to positive outcomes for children such as increased social interaction with adults, development of pro-social behaviours, and improved language and cognitive development" (Golberg, 1999: 31). Jaeckle (2010: 3) also supports this statement in saying that high quality practices in early learning centres impact on children,

specifically those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Jaeckle research has identified some specific quality provision indicators including highly-qualified, well-trained teachers. In the aformentioned study of Yamamoto and Li (2011: 6), parents of all the different participating groups in their study identified *teacher qualities,* referring to qualifications, experience, responsibility and teachers being loving, as the most important element of a high-quality early learning centre.

In the same way in which teacher participants in the current study particularly focused on the *type of curriculum* being offered in early learning centres, Howard (2010: 51) reports that education in early learning centres, "needs to be far more creative than it has been in the past, as it needs to equip children with the skills and processes required for an unknown tomorrow." She further emphasises the necessity for shifting from a curriculum that is content–driven to one that applies content as a vehicle "to tantalise and provide an overt awareness of 'effective thinking' and problem solving strategies". Howard explains that to do this efficiently, teachers need to understand developmental theories and curriculum pedagogy, particularly in core areas such as "communication, language, literacy, problem solving and reasoning, knowledge and understanding of the world, and creative development, as well as a sound knowledge of normal child development". This will help teachers to observe children effectively, with the aim to plan and bring about "an appropriate degree of cognitive and physical challenges building on the unique nature of each child, to move learning forward" (Howard, 2010: 51).

Using the *correct curriculum* and exposing children to *group work* was regarded by teachers as important. Literature supports this view by explaining that the most appropriate curriculum for children is one "based on theoretically sound early-childhood practices and principles of development" (Carnahan & Terorde-Doyle, 2007).

In the current study, mothers focused on *school readiness* and a *challenging and stimulating programme* that addresses *life skills* as quality indicators. Existing literature, such as Gilliam (2009: i), confirms that school readiness is the goal of early education, but specifically states that "the goal of school and education itself should be to develop healthy, happy and productive citizens". International literature also

shows that children who are ready for school have a combination of resilience promoting qualities such as self-confidence, the ability to anticipate consequences and to cooperate with others, which are most important (Kamel, 2006: 12).

6.3.1.3 Holistic development

Although mothers clearly emphasised the necessity for *school readiness* they simultaneously stated the need for sufficient playtime. This view is supported by the literature. Research shows that emphasis on play does not detract from academic learning, but actually enables children to learn. Becker and Becker (2009: 114) explain that play does not compete with foundational skills: "Through mature play, children learn the very foundational skills that will prepare them for the academic challenges that lie ahead". Entz (2009: 2) points out that in the course of exploring the world and interaction with people and materials, children learn about who they are and what they can do. Play is regarded as the work of childhood, and for children, the primary focus of life.

In the current study, (only) mothers regarded sufficient opportunities for *social interaction* as an extremely important aspect of quality early learning centres. Similarly several studies confirmed that *positive interactions between teachers and children*, influence children's social and emotional development. Furthermore, studies indicate that a *positive teaching style* results in more pro-social and socially competent children (Essa, 2011: 156). They will later display positive interactions and relationships with teachers and peers in the primary school and show "lower levels of challenging behaviours and higher levels of competence in school" (Ostrosky & Jung, 2008: 142).

Lastly, in the current study nothing was reported on the process quality indicators *routine and transitions.* Although not directly mentioned in the study, they are implied in other indicators, for example opportunities for holistic development and life skills being addressed through the programme.

6.3.1.4 Values and respect

Teachers, mothers and students all emphasised the importance of having *discipline, rules and regulations* in early learning centres. Literature supports these results by referring to teachers' important role when facilitating play and dealing with children, to provide boundaries with clear rules and agreements for safe play indoors and outdoors and to give clear structure to the children (Laevers, 2005: 18). Englebright Fox (2008: 83) explains that frequent and ongoing conversations between the teachers and children are needed on aspects like the proper use of equipment and toys, the safe number of participants on each piece of apparatus, sharing and taking turns, as well as cleaning and taking care of equipment.

Mothers and students deemed a *balance between love and discipline* as well as *supportive, helpful teachers* as key factors for quality early learning centres. These findings are supported by the literature. According to Howes and Richie (2002: 39), teachers who are available and responsive to children, usually are capable of communicating with children about emotions. They found that children with secure attachment organisation histories perform better than children with insecure attachment histories in tasks that assess emotional understanding – being able to recognise and talk about emotions and their effects. For Drake (2009 [2010]: 5), the adult's responsibility is vital regarding recognising, identifying and assessing children's needs and to be able to intervene in play to support individuals. The timing and nature of such interventions will greatly influence the quality of learning experiences that take place within the environment. Teachers need to plan to observe and engage in play, "either supporting a planned focus or responding spontaneously to children's learning interests" (Drake, 2009 [2010]: 5).

Teachers, mothers, as well as students felt that children must be treated with *respect* and should also be *taught to be respectful* in early learning centres. In correlation with these results, existing literature, for example Katz (2010: 7), agrees that young children have to be in the presence of adults and to acknowledge their authority by merit of their advanced knowledge, wisdom and experience. She further remarks that young children need to be near authoritative adults who apply their extensive power "over the lives of young children with warmth, support, encouragement and adequate

explanations of the limits they impose upon them". In her view, authoritativeness also implies *respectful treatment* of children's "opinions, feelings, wishes and ideas as valid, even when we disagree with them". In this regard Katz (2010: 7) conclude by saying "to respect people we agree with, is not a problem; respecting those whose ideas, wishes and feelings are different from ours or troubling to us, may be a mark of wisdom in parents and of genuine professionalism in teachers" .

In confirmation of the results of the study, literature agrees that the significance of teachers acknowledging the importance of each child and altering strategies to provide *individual attention* and meet the unique needs of the children in their care, cannot be overemphasized. When teachers develop relationships with young children, they should specifically be aware of the cultural, linguistic, and individual needs of the children (Ostrosky & Jung, 2008: 142).

For mothers, *non-discrimination* and *multicultural* early learning centres, as well as the *development of children's identities* are important. Within this context, Falk (2009: 87–88) refers to the importance of relationships especially where young children's identities "are still newly in the making". Falk, in addition, explains that such relationships can help to nurture children's well-being and sense of self-efficacy or alternatively undermine the self-confidence which is needed to take control of their own learning and life. Literature also indicates that practices for supporting children on an emotional level are not culturally specific, but universal and reliant on adults being sensitive to children and their consciousness of discrimination, bias, and exclusion (Howes, 2010: 1–2).

6.3.1.5   Infrastructure

In the current study, it was evident that *safety and security* was seen as an extremely important quality indicator by teachers as well as mothers. In South Africa, where the crime rate is high and citizens are concerned about safety issues (Altbeker, 2011), it follows that this aspect scored the highest number of responses. In support of these results, existing literature indicates that safety is also no longer perceived merely as sheltering the child (Elliott, 2010: 57). Environmental care, health, being prepared for

emergencies, protecting children, and safety consciousness are also included in safety. Safety, support and supervision therefore are fundamental components of the daily early childhood programme (Decker & Decker, 2005: 302; Howes, 2010: 33, Needham, 2010: 162).

The need for a *clean, neat and hygienic* early learning centre with *spacious class rooms*, specified as quality indicators by many teachers and mothers, is supported by the literature. In this regard, Palaiologou (2010: 133) emphasises that young children's emotional, social and personal development are influenced to a large extent by the space and the quality and quantity of play materials. In early learning centres where children are constrained to a relatively small play area, and where there is not an adequate amount of toys to share, there is an increase in fights and disruptions (Palaiologou 2010: 133). According to Bullard, (2010) children's health and physical well-being are more frequently affected by the quality of the physical environment than adults.

Where mothers and teachers considered spacious classrooms as important, only teachers indicated that spacious, interesting and well-equipped playgrounds that are well-designed are indicators of quality in early learning centres. In this regard literature agrees that social interaction is promoted by planning for outdoor activities. Palaiologou (2010: 133) points out that children will develop social skills such as respect for their friends, when they participate in games that require space and free movement and where they are waiting to take turns or have to play in pairs. Bredekamp (2011: 285) notes that teaching and learning can occur in a variety of contexts such as individual interactions, but also within small and whole groups in intellectually engaging environments that provide space and opportunities to play.

6.3.1.6   Integrating insights on beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres

In conclusion, it seems that those aspects perceived by beneficiaries as indicators of a good quality early learning centre are predominantly process indicators and hard to 'measure' in a quantitative way. The following aspects were foregrounded by all

groups of beneficiaries: the children's emotional and social well-being as well as a just and normative environment. How the children are treated and the way they feel whilst being at the centre, were thus considered as foundational to 'quality' in early learning centres by all beneficiaries. All beneficiaries valued the fundamental cornerstones: love, care, morals, trust, discipline, respect and security to set the scene for quality education.

Mothers, different to other beneficiaries, also valued effective communication, individual attention and non-discrimination. In addition, mothers wanted their children to be prepared for formal schooling by means of a challenging and stimulating programme inclusive of life skills. Additionally, mothers wanted their children to have sufficient time for playing and social interaction.

For teachers, quality denoted an accountable curriculum, which allows for group work. Teachers furthermore valued the setting of the school in terms of a friendly, pleasant environment and conveniently located near a primary school. These factors did not feature in the responses of the other groups of beneficiaries.

In terms of infrastructure, mothers and teachers considered spacious, clean, neat and hygienic playrooms as evidence of quality. Teachers also valued enough outside space.

By drawing on Fromm's work (1993), I argue that focus for all the beneficiaries is placed on 'being' needs rather than on 'having' needs. According to Fromm, having and being are two fundamental modes of experiences, to different kinds of orientations towards self and the world. In the having mode of existence, one's relationship to the world is one of possession and owning which, for the purpose of this study would refer to matters such as facilities and equipment for the sake of having. In the being mode of existence, the focus is on aliveness, authentic relatedness to the world and well-being. The idea is that being also implies change – being is becoming (Fromm, 1993: 33-34).

For the beneficiaries in this study, quality apparently does not primarily concern what early learning centres *have* at their disposal in terms of funds or facilities (as

discussed in 6.2) but whether the centres promote children's well-being. This finding is noteworthy given the emphasis put on 'having' needs by a current consumer culture.

6.3.2 Results contradicting existing knowledge on quality indicators in early learning centres

In the current study, teachers (but not mothers) viewed the provision of extra and/or *extramural activities* as an indication of quality in early learning centres. In this regard, Hirsch-Pasek *et al.* (2009: 13–14) refer to "another way in which the preschool academic emphasis manifests itself in [the USA] society", namely the increase of specialised classes devoted to teaching a specific skill, for example computer science, formal reading instruction, music, and acrobatics. These classes are advertised to parents as a way to 'enrich' their children's learning and "pave the way for their academic success". These authors however do not see these activities as indicators of quality. They criticise this view which contradicts playful learning (see 2.5.5) when they say "what is needed are preschools that impact necessary content through playful learning and provide time for the spontaneous free play that is so crucial to social-emotional and academic growth" (Hirsch-Pasek *et al.*, 2009: 13–14).

6.3.3 Silences or absences in the data with regard to existing knowledge on quality in early learning centres

In this part, I refer to the absence in my data of prominent existing knowledge on early learning centres as documented in the literature (discussed in Chapter 2). I refer to those indicators that are part of the theoretical framework but which were not reported in the current study and which hence neither confirm nor contradict the results of the current study.

In terms of input indicators, the factors *heating and cooling* were not mentioned by any of the participants. South Africa is a country with mild weather without severe, long winter seasons with extensive rain or snow. In addition, the data were collected in areas known for mild temperatures during the month of January, which was a pleasant summer month and the aspects of heating and cooling were not relevant at

that time. Although heating and cooling specifications are important and relevant quality factors in many buildings located in countries known for their severe temperature conditions, most schools and other buildings in South Africa are not primarily designed and built with that in mind. In countries like Australia where extreme temperatures are experienced, the education policies require the provision of heating and cooling equipment to maintain a comfortable temperature for children (Department of Education & Children Services, 2009).

After an intensive international study, which involved empirical investigations in the United States of America, Canada and Australia, and the inputs from experts from Scandinavia, Great Britain and throughout Europe, the Children's Physical Environmental Rating Scale (CPERS) for the evaluation of *physical* environments was developed in 2003 by Australian architect, Professor Gary Moore. It was found, in this study, that only 8.8% of indicators in well-known and widely used rating scales including ECERS–R, and ITERS, pertain to the physical designed environment (Moore, Sugiyama & O'Donnell, 2003). In this CPERS, the only indicator related to heating and cooling is the indicator for air *circulation*. Another rating scale, the Go Green Rating Scale, specifically aimed at the assessment of environmental health and safe sustainable and functional early learning settings, devotes one indicator related to heating and cooling, namely *ventilation* (Boise, 2010: 51).

Another input indicator mentioned in Woodhead's framework, is *teaching resources*. In my study, although the importance of toys and equipment was emphasised by teachers, nothing was reported on resources for teachers. Literature confirms that teaching resources can enhance the quality of learning (Edwards, 2010; Entz, 2009; Good, 2009; Jackman, 2005; Redleaf, 2009; Seefeldt, 2002; Snyder Kaltman, 2009). In Davin, Orr, Marais and Meier's (2010: 224) view resources for learning and teaching ought to be used and dealt with in an appropriate way, and can then contribute towards quality in terms of the "planning, teaching, learning and assessment processes of the curriculum".

Other quality indicators from the theoretical framework that were not reported in the current study, are *wages and conditions.* Local and international literature report on early childhood teachers being ranked among the most poorly paid professionals,

together with challenging working conditions. These are the main reasons for a high turnover of staff which in turn negatively impacts on the quality of early childhood education (Awopegba, 2007: 4; Clasquin Johnson, 2011: 56; Gilliam, 2009: iii; Segal, Bardige, Bardige, Breffni & Woika, 2012: 80).

6.3.4 New insights regarding quality in early learning centres

Table 6.2 illustrates those aspects that served as quality indicators for the participants, but which were not part of my adaptation of Woodhead's framework. These aspects provide new insights regarding beneficiaries' experiences of indicators of quality in early learning centres.

Table 6.2: Additional quality indicators (New insights)

Theme 1: The daily programme in the early learning centre	Teachers	Mothers	Students
The programme has high religious and moral values (faith-based)	19	30	
Theme 2: Context of learning	Teachers	Mothers	Students
The centre is central	10		
The centre is close to the primary school	7		
The environment is in a friendly, pleasant location	10		
Theme 4: Requirements and expectations in terms of services and facilities	Teachers	Mothers	Students
There is an aftercare service (after school hours)		11	

One of the findings of my study is that both mothers and teachers value *faith-based activities* highly in early learning centres. Earlier, I argued that although existing international early childhood education literature is silent on this matter, South African literature foregrounds the importance of religious education to inform parents when choosing schools. According to Bray and Tladi (2010: 65), the right to freedom of religion, School Act (section 15) embodies parents' freedom to choose a religion at a public or independent school. This choice is accommodated by the establishment of educational institutions, for example private religious institutions, that make provision for such a choice (Bray & Tladi 2010: 65).

Another new insight indicated by teachers, is the setting (demographic location) of the early learning centre. In my study, the physical location, whether central, close to the primary school or situated in a friendly, pleasant area, was an indication of quality early learning centres for teachers. Studies done in Australia (Noble, 2005: 51; O'Gorman, 2007: 191–192;) found that location appeared to override educational and learning criteria when parents choose educational centres for their children. However, although mothers in my study were silent on this matter, they did indicate the availability of an aftercare service for children as significant. This finding complies with the findings in the aforementioned studies (Noble, 2005: 51;O'Gorman, 2007: 191–192)

6.4   CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I interpreted results by comparing the findings with existing literature. I reported on supportive and contradictory evidence in the literature, as well as on silences and new insights that emerged from this study in terms of the quantitative and the qualitative data in order to answer the secondary research questions *"What is offered by early learning centres?"* and *"What do beneficiaries experience as quality in early learning centres?"* .

In Chapter 7, I address the other secondary questions, "*How do beneficiaries' experiences of quality compare to what is offered at early learning centres?; "How can identified early learning centre quality factors be utilised to develop a quality assurance framework for the South African context? and "How can existing international quality assurance frameworks inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework?"* in order to formulate an argument for my primary research question *"How can an understanding of beneficiaries' experiences of quality in early learning centres inform the development of a quality assurance framework in South Africa?*"

Chapter 7

Conclusions

7.1   INTRODUCTION

In this last thesis chapter, I present final conclusions by reflecting on the findings in terms of research questions. I also reflect on the limitations and delimitations of the study and discuss possible contributions that this study can make to knowledge on quality in early learning centres. According to ISSA (2005: 3), ensuring consistent high quality in early learning centres, "is one of the greatest challenges in early childhood educational systems worldwide". The same comment applies to South Africa (Department of Education, 2001). Thus to conclude the study, I present guidelines for a possible quality assurance framework for early learning centres, ensuing from the beneficiaries' understanding of quality in early learning centres.

7.2   REFLECTIONS ON LIMITATIONS IN MY STUDY

As I explained in Chapter 3, I chose an instrumental case study as research design where I focused on a real situation (peoples' experiences of quality in early learning centres), with real people (parents, teachers and students) in an environment familiar to myself (early learning centres). In order to answer my research question, I studied interactions of events, human relationships and other factors. I generated quantitative data (a survey with 213 pre-service early childhood education students as participants). Qualitative data (reflective journals and interviews with 235 teachers and 235 mothers) were generated by students as fieldworkers.

Although I personally collected the quantitative data (the questionnaires) with students, not collecting the raw data for the qualitative part of the research at early learning centres myself, is a limitation. In retrospect it would have been beneficial if I have collected the data myself at early learning centres with teachers and mothers. If I personally collected the data, there would have been consistency in terms of the person collecting the data, how the questions have been formulated, and how the

participants could have been invited to elaborate on their answers in the same way. If the responses were not "deep enough" immediate follow-up questions could have been asked to encourage clarification of their answers. Another advantage would be that I personally would have experienced the atmosphere in the early learning centres.

A delimitation of this instrumental case study is that the teachers and mothers who were selected by the student-researchers for interviews, were not representative of the South African population. As I explained in 3.5, I used non-probability sampling to select all participants, with the knowledge that the group did not represent the wider population, but a particular group with the same interest (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2001: 103). Teachers and mothers were selected by students (fieldworkers) through convenience sampling because they were connected to the early learning centres where the students conducted their teaching practice, and were therefore conveniently accessible to obtain data (Maree & Pietersen, 2007: 176–177).

The students completed their fieldwork in early learning centres which had to adhere to certain criteria (see Appendix D). The teachers who were interviewed were all educated, and qualified as early childhood teachers. The interviewed mothers were literate and from middle income groups (DoE, 2001). There were more urban than rural early learning centres and although all nine of the provinces of the country were presented, one province, (Gauteng, an urban area), represented the majority of the participants (see Table 3.4). All mothers and teachers were interviewed either in English or Afrikaans, which were also the languages used for teaching and learning by the students and by the children in the early learning centres.

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001: 156) contend that generalisation of findings of a non-probability sample cannot be done outside of the convenience sampling where the participants were selected "according to convenience of access". Consequently findings from this study could be generalised to early learning centres of middle income, educated, English- or Afrikaans-speaking groups of teachers and parents, in urban or rural areas. However, a major delimitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalised to the majority population in South Africa which are low socio-economic, with low educational levels, and having teachers without

relevant education qualifications (DoE, 2001). I recommend that my data collection instruments in this study could be used, or adapted, for replication in other early learning centres, in more demographically representative sectors of the population and/or in other geographical areas. Such a study would however require "attention to sample representativeness, replication of test conditions, replication of results, sample sensitisation to the research procedures, and bias in the sample of the research process" (MacNaughton *et al.,* 2001: 270).

A limitation of this study, is that I did not specify beforehand that the student-participants should interview mothers and fathers. In the assignment (Appendix D) I only stated that the student-participants had to interview parents. In 3.5.4, I explained possible reasons why the student-participants selected only mothers and not fathers for this case study. By implication findings cannot be generalised to understanding of experiences of quality in early learning centres by fathers.

Another limitation refers to the reflexive posture that is suggested by my study's metatheoretical paradigm, social constructionism (explained in 3.2.1). For Gergen (2001b:3) a reflexive posture is part of "productive self-consciousness". Although the fieldworkers' reflective journals contributed substantially to the study, the absence of my own researcher journal is a limitation, because my personal experience of the research journey has not been captured.

7.3 ADDRESSING MY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In Chapter 6, I addressed the first two secondary research questions namely *"What is offered by early learning centres?"* (see 6.2) and *"What do beneficiaries experience as quality in early learning centres?"* (see 6.3). In this section I address the remaining research questions, namely: "*How do beneficiaries' experiences of quality compare with what is offered by early learning centres?"*, "*How can identified early learning centre quality factors be utilised to develop a quality assurance framework for the South African context?"* and "*How can existing international assurance frameworks inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework?*

7.3.1 How do beneficiaries' experiences of quality compare to what is offered by early learning centres?

It seems from answers to the first two research questions that those aspects regarded as quality in early learning centres by beneficiaries, are available in early learning centres.

The findings generated from the quantitative data (surveys) (see Chapter 4 and 6.2) indicated that most important indoor- and outdoor facilities were available and that most structured learning activities were present in the early learning centres. The findings from the qualitative data (interviews) (see Chapter 5 and 6.3) revealed that the quality indicators regarded as important by the beneficiaries can be categorised as: children's socio-emotional well-being, holistic development, normative foundation of values and respect, effective infrastructure and accountable learning.

In comparison to literature on beneficiaries' expectations about quality in early learning centres (Yuen & Griehaber, 2009) it seems from the qualitative data that the beneficiaries in my study were well-informed. Mothers and teachers were able to convey their expectations about quality in preschools. Yuen and Griehaber (2009: 263) found in their study about early learning centres in Hong Kong, that "what parents looked for in their choice of service" closely matched how they defined quality. In O'Gorman's (2007) study concerning Australian parents, there was however much discrepancy and variation in the parents' perceptions about what they regarded as important in early learning centres.

In terms of my theoretical framework, the majority of factors (captured from the *qualitative data*, the interviews) and indicated by the beneficiaries as quality factors, are process indicators. These process indicators concern children's socio-emotional well-being, holistic development, values and respect. The other two groups of quality indicators in early learning centres, infrastructure and learning (which also emerged from the *qualitative data*), are input (structural) indicators. These input indicators are evident from the *quantitative* data (What is offered by early learning centres? see 6.2).

In Table 7.1, I provide a visual comparison of the types of quality indicators captured in the different data sources.

Table 7.1: Comparing the types of quality indicators captured in the different data sources

Quantitative data (derived from questionnaires) **What the early learning centres have**	Quality indicators	Qualitative data (derived from interviews) **What beneficiaries want**	Quality indicators
Indoor areas	Input (structural)	Infrastructure	Input (structural)
Outdoor areas	Input (structural)		
Structured learning activities (Curriculum)	Input (structural)	Learning (Curriculum)	Input (structural)
		Holistic development	Process
		Socio-emotional well-being	Process
		Values and respect	Process

I can only answer the question *"How do beneficaries' experiences of quality compare to what is offered by early learning centres?"* by focusing on the input (structural) indicators. I can only compare the results concerning input or structural quality indicators as the questionnaire, a qualitative instrument was designed to capture structural facets (learning areas and learning activities) not for capturing process or outcome indicators. This aspect should be considered when the questionnaire is being adapted for the purpose of replicating the study.

In terms of the infrastructure, during interviews the beneficiaries did not focus on detailed features of indoor- or outdoor areas as quality indicators. However, all beneficiaries regarded safety and security, hygiene, neatness and cleanliness,

sufficient space, well-equipped playgrounds and qualified teachers as important quality factors. The open-ended responses in the questionnaires however, revealed that although facilities were available at centres, they varied in terms of variety and condition.

According to the *quantitative* findings (see Chapter 4), the centres had a larger variety of indoor than outdoor facilities. In terms of the facilities outside, the majority of centres had large static *outdoor structures* such as climbing frames, swings and slides available to promote the development of the children's gross motor skills and enhance movement opportunities. In a third of early learning centres, other important outdoor areas and open-ended materials for sand, water, block and fantasy play, as well as wheel toys, were not available (see Table 4.3). With regard to quality in early learning centres, the implication of this finding is that these other absent areas and unavailable resources may delay the development of important fine and gross motor skills and decrease sensory experiences in children.

The *quantitative* data in my study, derived from the questionnaires, also revealed information regarding other structural quality indicators, namely which *indoor learning areas* were available at early learning centres (see Table 4.1). From those findings it seems apparent the early learning centres provided the fundamental and most important indoor areas, namely book corners, display tables, art and cognitive areas, as well as fantasy play- and block play areas. Regarding quality in early learning centres, the availability of these basic indoor facilities implies that children are provided with learning experiences to develop holistically and appropriately. To an extent the better equipped indoor areas compensate for the absent outdoor facilities.

The *qualitative* data, the interviews, (see 6.3.1.2), show that beneficiaries regarded *learning* as a significant indicator of quality. The findings of the *quantitative* data revealed that the most important structured learning activities, namely stories, rhymes, art, music, theme discussion, numeracy, movement, religious stories, perception and baking activities were offered by 90% or more of the early learning centres. With regard to beneficiaries' expectations about quality in early learning centres, these activities also provide opportunities for children to develop in a holistic and appropriate way. Children's holistic development clearly manifested as an

important indicator of quality by all beneficiaries. These findings correlate with general accepted standards of quality revealed in the literature worldwide (Bullard, 2010: 3; Darragh, 2010: 107; Dombro, et al., 2002; Mayesky, 2009; Santrock, 2008: 301; Sciara & Dorsey, 2003; Stegelin, 2008: 109).

The implication of these findings for the development of a quality assurance framework is that indicators regarding facilities and learning should be included in a framework. In Tables 7.2 and 7.3, I present visual representations of the beneficiaries' understanding of quality early learning centres and also what their expectations for quality learning centres are. Table 7.2 provides the mothers' point of view, whereas Table 7.3 explains what teachers expect from quality early learning centres. I used these findings to develop an initial quality assurance framework for early learning centres in South Africa (see 7.3.3).

Table 7.2: Beneficiaries' understanding of, and expectations regarding quality early learning centres: Mothers' point of view

QUALITY CRITERIA	INDICATOR	Number of responses	Emotional & social well-being	Learning	Holistic development	Values and respect	Infra structure
WHAT DO MOTHERS WANT?	**How do the mothers see that in the early learning centre?**						
PROCESS INDICATORS							
Holistic development in terms of socio-emotional well-being	• Teachers are helpful and supportive • Teachers love children, are caring & warm	40 34	●			●	
Holistic development in terms of social aspects	• There are enough opportunities for social interaction provided	35	●		●		
A faith-based programme	• The programme has religious and normative values (faith-based)	30	●			●	
Discipline and rules	• There are discipline, rules and regulations at the centre	30				●	
Children develop holistically	• There are opportunities for holistic development	21	●	●	●	●	●
Children are valued	• Every child is important and receives full individual attention • Teachers are fair • Children are the number one priority	17 15 15	●				
Love as well as discipline	• There is balance between love and discipline	14	●			●	
Parents are informed	• Good communication between staff and parents exists	14	●			●	
A respectful atmosphere	• Children are treated with respect and taught respect	13				●	
Children must be able to play	• The programme provides for enough time for play	12	●	●	●		
Children's involvement in activities	• Programme encourages learner participation	10		●			

QUALITY CRITERIA	INDICATOR	Number of responses	Emotional & social well-being	Learning	Holistic develop ment	Values and respect	Infra structure
Learning needs and challenges will be addressed	• Occupational and speech therapists available at the centre	10		●			
Positive relationships and atmosphere	• Teachers build relationships of trust with children • Caring, loving and peaceful atmosphere • Friendly and safe atmosphere	9 8 8	●			●	
Capable teachers	• Teachers are dedicated and motivated	7		●			
OUTCOME INDICATORS							
Holistic development in terms of socio-emotional well-being	• Children are happy and content and enjoy school	48	●				
Holistic development in terms of cognitive aspects (learning)	• The programme equips children to be ready for Grade 1	23		●	●		
Holistic development in terms of socio-emotional well-being	• Children's identities are developed at the centre	13	●		●	●	
INPUT (STRUCTURAL) INDICATORS							
A safe and secure environment	• The centre is safe and offers security	47					●
Capable teachers	• Teachers are qualified	34		●			
Holistic development in terms of cognitive aspects (learning)	• The educational programme has a high standard	30		●			

QUALITY CRITERIA	INDICATOR	Number of responses	Emotional & social well-being	Learning	Holistic development	Values and respect	Infra structure
A clean and hygienic environment	• The centre is clean, neat and hygienic	21					●
A spacious environment	• The classrooms are spacious	18					●
Holistic development in terms of cognitive and social aspects (learning)	• The programme is challenging and stimulating	17		●			
Holistic development in terms of cognitive and social aspects (learning)	• Life skills are addressed through the programme	13		●			
A safe and secure environment, also after hours	• There is an aftercare service	11					●
Holistic development in terms of cognitive and social aspects (learning)	• There is a small number of learners in the classes	7	●	●	●		●

Table 7.3: Beneficiaries' understanding of, and expectations regarding quality early learning centres: Teachers' point of view

QUALITY CRITERIA	INDICATOR	Number of responses	Emotional & social well-being	Learning	Holistic development	Values and respect	Infrastructure
WHAT DO TEACHERS WANT?	**How do the teachers see that in the early learning centre?**						
PROCESS INDICATORS							
That children develop holistically	• There are opportunities for holistic development	32	●	●	●	●	●
Holistic development in terms of socio-emotional well-being	• Teachers love children, are caring & warm	32	●			●	

QUALITY CRITERIA	INDICATOR	Number of responses	Emotional & social well-being	Learning	Holistic development	Values and respect	Infrastructure
A faith-based programme	• The programme has religious and normative values (faith-based)	19				●	
That children are valued	• Every child is important and receives full individual attention • Children are the number one priority	17 17	●				
Positive relationships and atmosphere	• Teachers are friendly • Friendly and safe atmosphere • Caring, loving and peaceful atmosphere	17 16 15	●			●	
Children's involvement in activities	• Programme encourages learner participation	15		●			
Discipline and rules	• There are discipline, rules and regulations at the centre	11	●			●	
That parents are informed	• Good communication between staff and parents exists	11	●				
Children's involvement in activities	• Children are exposed to group work	10		●			
Capable teachers	• Teachers act professionally	9	●			●	
A respectful atmosphere	• Children are treated with respect and taught respect	7				●	
OUTCOME INDICATORS							
Holistic development in terms of socio-emotional well-being	• Children are happy and content and enjoy school • Children can develop to their full potential	16 7	●		●		
INPUT (STRUCTURAL) INDICATORS							
A safe and secure environment	• The centre is safe and offers security	47	●				●

QUALITY CRITERIA	INDICATOR	Number of responses	Emotional & social well-being	Learning	Holistic development	Values and respect	Infrastructure
Capable teachers	• The teachers are qualified	40		●			
Holistic development in terms of cognitive and social aspects (learning)	• There is a small number of learners in the classes	38	●	●	●		●
A spacious environment	• The classrooms are spacious • The playground is big and spacious	31	●				●
A well-equipped environment	• There are sufficient and a variety of apparatus and toys	27	●	●	●	●	●
Holistic development in terms of cognitive aspects (learning)	• The educational programme has a high standard	18		●	●		
Holistic development in terms of cognitive and social aspects (learning)	• The centre provides extra (mural) activities	16	●	●	●		
A clean and hygienic environment	• The centre is clean, neat and hygienic	11					●
Convenient and positive physical location (setting)	• The centre is centrally located • The centre is located in a friendly, pleasant environment	10 10	●				●
Holistic development in terms of cognitive and social aspects (learning)	• The playground is interesting and well-designed	9	●	●	●		●
Convenient and positive physical location (setting)	• The centre is located near the primary school	9					●
Capable teachers	• The teachers are excellent	8		●			
Holistic development in terms of cognitive aspects (learning)	• The correct curriculum is being used	7		●	●		
A well-equipped environment	• The centre is fully equipped	7		●			●

7.3.2 How can identified early learning centre quality factors be utilised to develop a quality assurance framework for the South African context?

In Chapter 2, I explored the literature to capture what has been researched and documented about quality in early learning centres globally and also in South Africa. I reviewed the literature on quality and quality assurance frameworks and identified a significant gap in the literature in terms of available quality assurance measures and accreditation frameworks for the evaluation of quality in early learning centres in South Africa.

Through the literature review in Chapter 2, I identified that those factors that are considered by researchers worldwide to be the cornerstones of quality in early learning centres are namely development and learning; the necessity/centrality of play; a play-based, developmentally appropriate curriculum; and the learning environment. It is evident from the literature that these aforementioned factors should be taken into consideration when a quality assurance framework for early learning centres is developed (Casey, 2005; Dombro *et al.*, 2002; Essa, 2011: 238–239; Feeny *et al.,* 2006; Gordon & Browne, 2005: 41; Hirsh-Pasek *et al.,* 2009: 67; Redleaf, 2009: 1; Rivera, 2008: 15; Santrock, 2008: 301; Schirrmacher, 2006; Trister Dodge *et al.,* 2003.

When developing a quality assurance framework, the complexity of quality needs to be considered, thus keeping in mind that an abundance of relationships of variables are connected. As a result, quality cannot be defined by only listing the components of the variables separately (Bredekamp in Golberg, 1999: 21), but by considering the interdependence and effects of the factors on each other.

In Table 7.3, I present a summary of the key characteristics and implementation strategies of the main factors contributing towards quality early childhood centres (see Chapter 2) which should inform a quality assurance framework.

Table 7.4: The key characteristics, and implementation strategies of the main factors contributing to quality in early learning centres

FACTORS	DENOTES	IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES	REFERENCES
Development and learning in children	• Children are: • Playful and naturally curious • Learning by doing • Needing exploration and free play • Eager, absorbent learners, curious and interested in the world • Keen to explore and discover • Craving stimulating, new, physical and social experiences	Children learn when they: • are physically active; • involve their senses; • exploring and playing; • having real direct experiences, • are having hands-on manipulating of a broad range of real objects	Essa, 2011: 238–239 Feeny *et al.,* 2006 Gordon & Browne, 2005: 41 Redleaf, 2009: 1 Santrock, 2008: 301
Playful learning	Playful learning: • Is the vehicle for learning in terms of problem solving, language acquisition, literacy, numeracy and social skills • Play is beneficial for all areas of development in children. • Play is important for children's sense of accomplishment and feeling competent • Is the launch pad for children to thrive academically and socially Play: • stimulates the senses • exercises the muscles • coordinates sight with movement • gains mastery over bodies • encourages children to make decisions and	Children experience playful learning when they: • are actively involved in play • get opportunities to play alone • get opportunities to play with someone • get opportunities to play in groups • explore, investigate, manipulate and interact with the environment • get opportunities to investigate, create and make discoveries • get opportunities to play and experiment and have interaction with an assortment of concrete materials and resources	Casey, 2005 Dombro *et al.*, 2002 Gordon & Browne, 2005 Hirsh-Pasek *et al.,* 2009: 67 Rivera, 2008: 15 Schirrmacher, 2006 Trister Dodge *et al.,* 2003

FACTORS	DENOTES	IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES	REFERENCES
	• develops new skills • releases tension • enhances relationships with peers • motivates children to take risks • challenges children to achieve new levels of understanding of people, identities, concepts and the environment		
Developmentally appropriate curriculum	There are opportunities for: • hands-on experiences • a variety of learning activities • explorations • problem solving • using the multiple intelligences to build on children's strengths • developing cognitive as well as social, emotional and physical skills	The creation of interesting situations and opportunities for: • hands-on experiences • a variety of learning activities and explorations • problem solving • supporting learning by including the multiple intelligences to build on children's strengths • learning in socially rich and meaningful contexts • discovery, creation, experimentation, observation and sustained engagement	Feeny *et al.,* 2006 Mayesky, 2009 Santrock, 2008: 301 Wallace, 202: xiii
Developmentally appropriate learning environment	Affects the beneficiaries': • moods; • ability to form relationships; • effectiveness in work play, learning and • health The environment should: • be safe, inclusive, comfortable	Should: • be exhilarating to children, • be inspirational in generating and creating an appetite for learning • be able to arouse curiosity in children • enable children to learn as much as they can	Bullard, 2010: 3 Darragh, 2010: 107 Dombro *et al.*, 2002 Mayesky, 2009 Santrock, 2008: 301 Sciara & Dorsey, 2003 Stegelin, 2008: 109

FACTORS	DENOTES	IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES	REFERENCES
	- arouse awareness and interest in the choice of resources and activities presented - be carefully planned, prepared and maintained - be purposefully created, based on how young children learn - have materials that are well-chosen with intention and purpose to enhance playful learning - offer a variety and appropriateness - encourage empathy, interest in trying new things and the development of self-confidence	- offer a variety of learning activities and explorations - encourage interaction with the environment and other children Should offer opportunities for: - hands-on manipulation of the environment	

In the development of a quality assurance framework, the principles of holistic care and development, enjoyable learning experiences for children (Myers,1997: 3) and playful learning, a stimulating learning environment, as well as a developmentally appropriate curriculum have to be considered and addressed. Learning is most effective when the curriculum is based on "theoretically sound early-childhood practices and principles of development" (explained in Chapter 2) (Carnahan & Terorde-Doyle, 2007). While the environment has a crucial role in supporting play in general, inspiring environments create opportunities for children to develop holistically through their explorations and discoveries of open-ended destinations (Casey, 2005). These components discussed are thus reflected as cornerstones of quality in both existing literature and findings in my study, therefore I will use these to inform me in developing a quality assurance framework. (see 7.3.3 and Table 7.5).

7.3.3 How can existing international assurance frameworks inform the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework?

Ishmine *et al.*, (2010) indicate that the development of an instrument for measuring quality is not a quick, straightforward or easy job that can be accomplished by one person. The contribution of this study is thus not to put on the table a ready-made quality tool, suitable for all early learning centres, but to provide some guidelines (in the form of a draft quality assurance framework) gained from the insight of the beneficiaries in this study, in conjunction with a sound theoretical base (see Table 7.4) and lessons learned from existing frameworks.

In 2.7, I explained that the majority of quality assurance frameworks were developed in the United States (Golberg, 1999; Halle *et al.*, 2010), but that there are also several instruments available in Australia (Ishmine *et al.,* 2010); New Zealand (Podmore & Meade, 2000); Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2006); the United Kingdom (Pugh & Duffy, 2006) and Europe (ISSA, 2005). As explained in Chapter 2, the Harms-Clifford ECERS rating scales (ERS) seem to be the most popular tools and have been translated and/or adapted in different countries all over the world (Sylva *et al.,* 2003: 7), which implies that the rating scales are useful for many early learning centres in various circumstances worldwide.

Although there is no consensus on exactly what quality in early learning centres entails (see 2.3.1), the San Mateo County childcare partnership council (2006: 1) is convinced that the different Harms-Clifford Environmental Rating Scales [(ERS), the ECERS, ECERS–E and ECERS–R] played a significant role in this matter. They argue that the ERS and other related specialised rating scales (addressed in 2.7.2), have contributed internationally to establishing elements of 'high quality early care and education environments' (San Mateo County childcare partnership council, 2006: 1) for research, and for assessing quality in early learning centres. However, the council points out that these ERS rating scales, are not the sole tools with which to assess quality, because of some shortfalls. Despite the high status of the ERS, the San Mateo County childcare partnership council (2006: 1) argues that the ERS does not measure children's social-emotional well-being, or the teachers' skill levels to facilitate interaction between children and adults and between children and their peers, sufficiently. These authors suggest that supplementary observation instruments should be used in conjunction with the ERS to get a full picture of quality (San Mateo County childcare partnership council, 2006: 1–2).

The aforementioned shortfalls imply that the ERS would also not be an adequate framework based on beneficiaries' views in my study. Significantly I found (see 6.3.1.1) that all beneficiaries experienced/conceptualised quality in terms of children's social and emotional well-being in early learning centres. The implication for the development of a quality assurance framework would be that the principles of the ECERS could be considered, but that they should be supplemented by insights from other quality assurance framework which address the shortfalls of the ECERS. The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) developed by Pianta, La Paro and Hamre (2008), can be useful to complement the ECERS, especially because this instrument was developed to assess process indicators like school climate, teacher sensitivity, behaviour management, quality of feedback, productivity, instructional learning formats, concept development, language modelling, emotional support and instructional support, which are not measured by ECERS and which correspond with most of the process indicators identified by the beneficiaries in my study to be important quality indicators. In Table 7.5, I compare the CLASS with the main categories of quality indicators indicated by beneficiaries in my study.

Table 7.5: A comparison between the Classroom Assessment Scoring System and the findings of my study

Cornerstones of CLASS (Dimensions overview)	The main categories of quality indicators indicated by beneficiaries in my study
Classroom climate (Relationships, affect, communication, respect)	Socio-emotional well-being (Children are the number one priority and receive individual attention)
Productivity (Maximum learning time, routines, transitions, preparation)	Learning (Children are well cared for; challenging and stimulating programme)
Teacher sensitivity (Awareness, responsiveness, addresses problems, student (child) comfort)	Values and respect (Good communication between staff and parents)
Concept development (Analysing and reasoning, creating, integration, connections to the real world)	Learning and holistic development (Challenging and stimulating programme, programme encourages learner participation)
Instructional learning formats (Effective facilitation, variety of modalities and materials, student interest)	Learning (Each child is important and receives individual attention)
Quality of feedback (Scaffolding, feedback loops, prompting thought processes, providing information, encouragement and affirmation)	Values and respect (Good communication between staff and parents)
Language modelling (frequent conversations, open-ended questions, repetition and extension, self and parallel talk, advanced language)	Learning (Challenging and stimulating programme, programme encourages learner participation)
Behaviour management (Clear behaviour expectations, proactive, redirection of misbehaviour, student (child) behaviour	Values and respect (Rules and regulations, norms and values)
Regard for students' (children's) perspectives (Flexibility and student (child) focus, support for autonomy and leadership, student (child) expression, restriction of movement)	Values and respect & socio-emotional well-being (Children are the number one priority and receive individual attention

Valuable insight on the provision of quality guidelines and assurance of quality in early learning centres can also be gained from the work done by the International Step by Step Association (ISSA), a non-governmental membership organisation which combined the strengths of early childhood experts in 30 countries. This organisation operated within the context of the 'new' united Europe, transitioning to democracy (similar as South Africa), and provides an example of how core indicators for quality early childhood teaching, allowing for contextual variations have been identified and agreed upon by experts from many countries.

The intention of the ISSA Pedagogical Standards, developed by ISSA, is to provide quality guidelines for early childhood teachers "working towards providing an exemplary experience for children and their families" (ISSA, 2005: 3, 14). The seven core fields identified by ISSA as pedagogical standards and cornerstones of quality, correspond to a great extent with the findings of my study (see 6.3): Individualisation (each child is unique and important); learning environment (caring, stimulating and inclusive); family participation; teaching strategies for meaningful learning (to encourage innovation, creativity, independent inquiry, social cooperation and exploration); planning and assessment (for individual needs of children); professional development (regular evaluation of quality of effectiveness to improve programmes and practices) and social inclusion (to promote values and behaviours that support children's rights) (ISSA, 2005: 13). In Table 7.7, I compare the quality categories in my study with the seven cornerstones of the ISSA pedagogical standards.

Table 7.6: A comparison between the ISSA pedagogical standards and the findings of my study

Cornerstones in the ISSA Pedagogical Standards	The main categories of quality indicators indicated by beneficiaries in my study
Individualisation (Each child is unique and important)	Socio-emotional well-being (Children are the number one priority and receive individual attention)
Learning environment (Caring, stimulating and inclusive)	Learning (Children are well cared for; challenging and stimulating programme)
Family participation	Values and respect (Good communication between staff and parents)
Teaching strategies for meaningful learning (To encourage innovation, creativity, independent inquiry, social cooperation and exploration);	Learning and holistic development (Challenging and stimulating programme) (programme encourages learner participation)
Planning and assessment (For individual needs of children)	Learning (Each child is important and receives individual attention)
Professional development (Regular evaluation of quality of effectiveness to improve programmes and practices)	In my study, there was an absence on this matter
Social inclusion (To promote values and behaviours that support children's rights)	Values and respect (Children treated with respect and taught to be respectful)

Quality assurance frameworks and rating scales were developed over the past decade for a variety of reasons; for example, to assess quality in various fields of interest such as environmental factors, language development and interpersonal relationships in early learning centres (Halle *et al.,* 2010; Sylva *et al.*, 2006). Depending on the focus of interest (environmental factors, language development, interpersonal relationships), apart from ISSA and CLASS explained above, several other existing quality assurance frameworks; for example, CIS, AIS or ORCE (see 2.7) could also inform the development of a quality assurance framework(s) for the South African context. The mere existence of such a wide spectrum and variety of instruments, confirms that one single framework probably is not the best solution to determine quality in early learning centres and that using only one instrument also is not a realistic option. In South Africa, where a large variety of early learning centres in a variety of contexts exists (Clasquin-Johnson, 2010), a single quality assurance framework will not be sufficient.

I think this secondary research question could only really be answered when a representative sample of South African early learning centres have been explored. The contributions which my study can make, will be limited to a small percentage of middle class South Africans as I have explained in 7.2.

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

7.3.4.1 Linking findings related to secondary questions

As I indicated in the rationale for doing this study (see 1.2), I identified a gap in the knowledge on quality in early learning centres. I wanted to explore quality of early learning centres in South Africa and I also wanted to investigate how quality is experienced by the different beneficiaries, particularly parents, teachers and pre-service teachers.

Definitions of quality are dependent on particular societies' cultural values and constructions of childhood. The definition of high quality that a society holds, will be

framed within a view of childhood as a process of becoming involved in the preparation of children for their roles as future citizens. Quality as a concept, always "needs to be contextualised ecologically and temporally to recognise cultural and other forms of diversity" (CECDE, 2004: 19). For this reason, I included mothers, teachers and teacher-students in my study to capture their voices, opinions, experiences and understanding of quality in early learning centres in order to be able to reflect on their cultural values and constructions of childhood.

As explained earlier (see 7.3.3), a single instrument is not sufficient to satisfy the needs of all the different types of beneficiaries and different contexts for example socio-economic status, culture and level of education. My recommendation would therefore be, first to develop a draft quality assurance framework including the key characteristics and implementation strategies of the main factors contributing towards quality early childhood centres (explained in Table 7.3), and then to make alternative adaptations while keeping in mind the needs and wants of the various prospective users in terms of the instrument.

According to Yamamoto and Li (2011: 1), parents' views of high quality in early learning centres have received little attention, despite researchers' and educators' attempts to identify the critical components for high quality early learning centres. I addressed this gap by including the views of mothers in my study. From the findings in my study, it appears that mothers, teachers and student-teachers are concerned, not so much with what the centres have, but that the centres can provide a safe and secure place with a loving, trusting, caring, respectful atmosphere for children to promote learning and holistic development and to adhere to the children's emotional and social well-being. This finding is confirmed by Denham and Brown (2010: 653) who found that academic success depends on social-emotional learning. Douglas (2004: 185–186) explains that an essential quality in early childhood education is "that a focus on values and beliefs prompts recognition" of the existence of other beneficiaries "who also have a legitimate interest in quality". The knowledge gained from mothers' responses in this study is valuable to the service providers of early childhood education, because it provides insight into parents' demands for quality early learning centres (Gilliam, 2009).

Gilliam (2009: iii) further explains that early learning centres serve two primary interests in society. The first aim of early learning centres is the provision of *quality education* to develop successful learners and contributing citizens (see 6.3.1.2), and secondly the early learning centres strive to offer *safe and reliable childcare* for parents (see 6.3.1.5). As explained above, both these factors also surfaced clearly as expectations of quality by the beneficiaries in my study. Both teachers and mothers equally voiced their opinions regarding the importance of safety and security. This specific indicator received the most responses of any indicators accentuating the significance of safety in early learning centres for beneficiaries.

I posit that the quality factors, socio-emotional well-being, holistic development, normative foundation of values and respect, infrastructure and accountable learning, concerning quality factors, derived by the beneficiaries can be used to develop a quality assurance framework for South Africa. In the previous chapter (see 6.1), I integrated the results of the quality indicators (derived from the data) within the (Woodhead, 1996) theoretical framework. In this regard, I found new insights, regarding the importance of normative values and faith-based education, location (setting) of the centre and aftercare services. I also noted that features from existing international quality assurance frameworks namely social and emotional aspects (see Table 7.5 and 7.6), can contribute towards the development of a South African early learning centre quality assurance framework.

7.3.4.2 Proposing guidelines for the development of a quality assurance framework for early learning centres in South Africa

Various beneficiaries in the early childhood arena will have different reasons for requiring or using a quality measurement tool. In the case of parents, choosing a centre of quality for their children's development may be the reason (Moss & Pence, 2004: 46; O'Gorman, 2007). Teachers could use the instrument for self-evaluation, to monitor their service provision, for planning (ISSA, 2005) and even possibly to establish a system for quality assurance in early learning centres (Golberg, 1999: 41-42). Student-teachers and their trainers might find a rating scale useful when they need to find suitable early learning centres to serve as a standard of quality for teaching practice purposes as part of pre-service teacher training (ISSA, 2005).

In Table 7.7, I present a quality assurance framework based on the principles of quality early childhood education, the findings from this study in terms of beneficiaries understanding of quality in early learning centres and also input from existing quality assurance frameworks.

7.4 INTEGRATED BENEFICIARY-BASED QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY LEARNING CENTRES

In Table 7.7 below, the inputs of parents and teachers involved with early learning centres have been integrated. The quantification of inputs is based on data presented in Tables 7.2 and 7.3 above. I decided on seven main quality criteria from the data, each presented in terms of quality indicators. The quality indicators suggest how a particular quality criterion could be observable by an intended user (beneficiary). The framework also states whether a particular quality indicator is a process indicator, outcome indicator, or input indicator in order to reflect the theoretical framework on which my study was based.

In order to determine and quantify the weight assigned to a particular quality indicator, I added the number of responses of teachers to the number of responses of mothers that are relevant to that indicator. The number of responses relevant to a particular quality indicator was expressed in terms of a percentage of the total number of responses relevant to all the quality indicators. For example: 7 mothers and 38 teachers (n = 45) deem a small teacher-child ratio important. A total of 1167 responses was given by beneficiaries with regard to all the quality indicators. Expressed in terms of a percentage, 45 responses represent 3.9% of the total number of responses. With regard to scoring the proposed instrument, a scale of 1 to 5 is suggested where the number 1 represents a situation where the centre does not meet minimum standards with regard to a particular quality indicator, whereas the number 5 indicates that performance is outstanding. The scoring system can be presented as follows:

1 = Poor

2 = Below expectation

3 = According to expectation

4 = Above expectation

5 = Excellent

The proposed framework presented in Table 7.7 could serve as a draft quality measurement instrument. For example, this framework includes a quality criterion that concerns communication. This criterion is accompanied by a quality indicator called "Caring, respectful, fair and trustful relationship between teacher and child". Pianta, La Paro and Hamre (2008: 23) suggest that respectful communication is characterised by eye contact, a warm, calm voice, respectful language, as well as cooperation and/or sharing. Such detail would be a requirement of a quality measurement instrument that emanates from my proposed integrated beneficiary-based quality assurance framework.

Table 7.7: Integrated beneficiary-based quality assurance framework for Early Learning Centres

Quality criteria	Quality indicator (How is criterion observable?)	Process indicator	Outcome indicator	Input indicator	Weight (Percentage)	Score (1-5[13])	Total
School climate (330)[14]	Warm, friendly, loving, peaceful (50+80=130)	●			11		
	Child-centred (32+34=66)	●			6		
	Happy children (engaged, smiling) (48+16=64)		●		5		
	Helpful and supportive (40+0=40)	●			3		
	Discipline and rules valued (30+0=30)	●			2		
Sub-total for criterion					28		
Infrastructure (266)	Safe and secure school — security systems (47+47=94)			●	8		
	Spacious classrooms (18+31=49)			●	5		
	Range of required apparatus and toys (0+34=34)			●	3		
	Safe and secure school — hygienic, neat, clean (21+11=32)			●	3		
	In a safe neighbourhood within close proximity to a primary school (0+29=29)			●	2		
	Spacious, well-designed and inviting playgrounds (0+28=28)			●	2		
Sub-total for criterion					23		
Curriculum (152)	Accountable curriculum aligned with DoBE policy frameworks for early child education (30+25=55)			●	5		
	Includes faith-based norms and values (33+19=52)			●	4		
	Challenging and stimulating curriculum to invite participation and optimise development (17+15=32)			●	3		
	Includes life skills development (13+0=13)			●	1		
Sub-total for criterion					13		

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[13] 1 = Poor, 2 = Below expectation, 3 = According to expectation, 4 = Above expectation, 5 = Excellent

[14] The number 330 is the sum total of the applicable categories in the specific quality criteria indicator

Quality criteria	Quality indicator (How is criterion observable?)	Process indicator	Outcome indicator	Input indicator	Weight	Score (1-5)	Total
Communication (139)	Small teacher-child ratio (7+38=45)			●	4		
	Caring, respectful, fair and trustful relationship between teacher and child (37+7=44)	●			4		
	Communication between teacher and child balances discipline and care (14+11=25)	●			2		
	Frequent feedback between teachers and parents (14+11=25)	●			2		
Sub-total for criterion					12		
Teacher competence (122)	Teacher qualifications (34+40=74)			●	6		
	Teachers are dedicated and motivated (hours at work, creativity, and initiative) (7+20=27)	●			2		
	Teachers prepare for teaching (0+12=12)	●			1		
	Teachers act professionally (0+9=9)	●			1		
Sub-total for criterion					10		
Learning and development (121)	Holistic development to optimise potential of children (21+32=53)	●			5		
	Learning and development leads to school readiness 23+0=23)		●		2		
	Children's identities are developed (13+0=13)		●		1		
	Play time is integrated into the daily programme (12+0=12)	●			1		
	Curriculum includes group work (0+10=10)			●	1		
	Activities encourage participation, engagement (10+0=10)	●			1		
Sub-total for criterion					11		
Support services (37)	Extramural activities (0+16=16)			●	1		
	After-school care (11+0=11)			●	1		
	Paramedical services (occupational- and speech therapy) (10+0=10)			●	1		
Sub-total for criterion					3		
CUMULATIVE TOTAL					**100**		

7.5 FINAL THOUGHTS

Globally, teachers, parents and researchers acknowledge the importance of the early childhood years and the need for improved early childhood services for young children and families. There is general agreement that children have the right to quality education and care (Golberg, 1999: 41-42). In South Africa there is a growing demand for high-quality early learning centres (Clasquin-Johnson, 2009: 18). When choosing an early learning centre for their children, more and more parents are asking about the quality of early learning centres (O'Gorman, 2007) and "parents want assurances that their individual child's experiences will be safe, pleasant, and developmentally sound. The critical difference between the parent and professional perspectives on child care is that parents are seeking a child care arrangement that will meet the needs of their own child and family…" (Larner & Phillips, in Moss and Pence, 2004: 46)

In South Africa no formal way exists to indicate the quality of a particular early learning centre. The main purpose of my study was to explore conceptualisations of beneficiaries about quality in early learning centres which could serve as the groundwork for the development of an early learning centre quality assurance framework in South Africa. I concluded my study by presenting a quality assurance framework ensuing from the findings of my study, as well as the knowledge about quality early childhood education, and existing quality assurance frameworks gained during the research endeavour. This framework can be used for quality assurance purposes in early learning centres in South Africa.

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