A TRAINING FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PRACTITIONERS IN FACILITATING TRANSITION FOM HOME TO SCHOOL

by

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ABSTRACT

The first five years in children's lives lay the foundation for their cognitive and social development and learning prowess over the course of their lives. In terms of global awareness, the field of Early Childhood Development (ECD) has gained prominence and several countries – including South Africa – are now implementing innovative policies, curricula, strategies and parenting programs to advance young children's development and social abilities. The democracy-era government in South Africa has focused increasingly on improvements to ECD and Grade R policies. Although the South African government created a legislative framework to ensure the accessibility of ECD services to all 4–5-years-old children, they failed to prioritise the hiring of qualified practitioners who could employ their skills and knowledge of child development to smoothen children's transitions from home to school life. Consequently, unqualified practitioners are often tasked with managing young children's transitions without adequate skill sets and support systems. Most children in disadvantaged communities are still taught by unqualified practitioners.

The purpose of this research was to formulate a training framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners to increase their competencies in facilitating children's transitions. The study was designed to identify all the key components of a suitable training framework that would enable ECEC practitioners to design high-quality transitioning programmes at their schools. The conceptual framework for the study included Piaget and Erikson's child development theory, Schlossberg's theory on transition and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. The researcher conducted a qualitative study employing purposive sampling to select relevant research sites and participants. The data collection strategies included structured interviews with practitioners, field observations of practitioners' practices and a compilation of children's drawings. The findings, conclusions and recommendations centred on these dominant themes: children's response to a transition, transition processes and teacher-training regime.

KEYWORDS

children
transition
Early Child Development
Early Childhood Education and Care practitioner
Grade R
home
school
training framework

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A TRAINING FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE PRACTITIONERS IN FACILITATING TRANSITION

by Magesveri S. Chetty

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Philosophiae Doctor

at the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria.

Please note:

To preserve the integrity of the raw data, transcribed quotations in Chapter 5 received minimal editing.

Signed ……

Date 30 January 2021

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to:

My beloved husband, Loganathan Chetty, who supported me throughout this challenging journey. Despite your hectic schedules, you always found time to assist me with the structuring and layout of this thesis. Thank you for relieving me from all household tasks so that I could devote the necessary time to my study.

My adorable daughters, Ruvishka and Prishni, this is the legacy I leave for you for your personal advancement, as I believe you have the potential to succeed in your fields of interest and competency. May you, too, commit to lifelong learning.

And

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ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CAPS	Curriculum and Policy Assessment Statement
CSEFEL	Centre on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning
DBE	Department of Basic Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EFA	Education for All
EU	European Union
DH	Departmental Head
HoD	Head of Department
NCS	National Curriculum Statement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSCDC	National Scientific Council on the Developing Child
SABER-ECD	Systems Approach for Better Education Results: Early Childhood Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

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CHAPTER ONE: BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Pre-school education is regarded as among the most important developmental steps in children's lives (Margetts & Phatudi, 2013; Yoleri, 2014a). In this regard, Goodrich, Mudrick and Robinson (2015) list three requisites for positive adaptation: behavioural and emotional control, the ability to engage with adults, and education and communication skills. "These abilities are fundamental for children to understand what is expected of them, to respond to requests prosocially and to express their ideas to teachers and peers in the social environment of the classroom" (Goodrich, Mudrick & Robinson, 2015, p.1035). Denham, Bassett and Zinsser (2012) describe early childhood teachers as protectors of young children's emotional and behavioural competency. An emotionally competent teacher recognises the need to provide consistent support to the young child.

Margetts and Phatudi (2013, p.42) maintain that the "transition from home to pre-school to primary school is imbued with emotion and social adjustments as the child has to leave the parents or caregivers for the first time and become part of a new social setting". Dockett and Perry (2014) consider a transition to be a steady process that encompasses change as children begin their first year at school. However, not all children embrace this dynamic process with ease. A child's transition to school may denote an escalation of unexpected changes for both the family and the child (Welchons & McIntyre, 2017).

Nonetheless, a child and the family can experience successful transitions when opportunities for quality learning and support structures are in place when children arrive at a school (Dockett & Perry, 2014). In the interest of reassuring children, Margetts and Phatudi (2013) further suggest that schools need to create an enriching learning atmosphere that can promote seamless transitions for all first-time school entrants. Peters (2010) and Murray (2012) further indicate that, at this stage, children

are expected to acclimatise to various changes, including having to cope with demanding new relationships with teachers and peers, feeling devalued, and letting go of familiar people in an entirely new setting. In addition, children are expected to behave appropriately, settle into routines and participate in all activities in a more enclosed and structured environment. Subsequently, these challenging demands can quickly become emotionally overwhelming in the absence of a caring adult who may ease this transitional process (Murray, 2012; Dockett & Perry, 2013). Therefore, a child's relationship with the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioner – responsible for guiding the child to benefit from social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive competence – takes prominence during this crucial stage in development (Harper, 2016). This study explored the key frameworks for ECEC practitioners as they facilitate young children's transition into a new and unpredictable environment.

According to Dockett and Perry (2014), children's initial encounters with formal education may either heighten or diminish their competencies. Therefore, young children need to be assigned to attuned adults who can relate to and appreciate them. A child's academic and social outcomes increase when an emotionally consistent teacher demonstrates self-control (Curby, Brock & Hamre, 2013). Chang, Shelleby, Cheong and Shaw (2012) promote the view that, as soon as children begin to show signs of apprehension and emotional instability, established support processes have to be able to prevent unfavourable social outcomes from gaining impetus.

1.2 RATIONALE

Young children's experiences determine later development. This postulation is echoed by Siraj-Blatchford and Woodhead's statement (2009, p.113) that "what happens to children in the first days, months and years of life affects their development, the development of our society and the development of our world". Prominent international agencies like the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Education for All (EFA) acknowledge the importance of children's early years while, simultaneously, raising awareness of the vulnerability of young children, especially in developing countries. The World Bank Group's Systems Approach for Better

Education Results: Early Childhood Development (SABER-ECD) uses three criteria to measure successful early childhood development (ECD) outcomes:

1. Establishment of an "enabling environment"
2. Wide implementation
3. Monitoring and establishment of quality (Vegas et al., 2012, p.2).

This study explicitly emphasises the first issue, which is optimum childhood development through an enabling environment. In this study, an 'enabling environment' refers to a place where young children experience emotional safety and care as well as cognitive stimulation.

Mbebeb (2009, p.9) proposes that it is essential to focus on an environment conducive to the establishment and development of well-balanced citizens who may act as "agents of change with the potential of taking a leading role in tackling Africa's future development". An ECEC practitioner is allocated the most influential role of supporting young children's preliminary academic skills (Zinsser, Bailey, Curby, Denham, Bassett & Morris, 2013). Goodrich, Mudrick and Robinson (2015) agree that the early years can magnify children's abilities to spontaneously express themselves and develop their thinking, reasoning, emotional and physical skills.

Dockett and Perry (2014) maintain that the biggest step undertaken in young children's lives is when they move from an environment where they feel safe and comfortable to an entirely new, unfamiliar setting such as a pre-school institution. While such a move is embraced by some children, those from impoverished backgrounds – who may already have had direct experiences of poverty, loss of a parent, family problems, abuse and violence – may experience it as uprooting and intimidating. My own experience in a pre-primary and primary school environment in a township has made me aware of the importance of making such children's transition to school safe, secure and stable. An accommodating, trusting pre-school environment promotes positive experiences and sets the scene for developing children's emotional competence and sense of independence (Yoleri, 2014b).

As most practitioners are not equipped to support young children with the emotional impact of transition and support their development in a new environment, I agree with

Margetts and Phatudi (2013) who propose that district officials need to be reskilled on transitioning processes, since these indispensable skills can be communicated to the department heads at schools who in turn can guide and monitor ECEC practitioners. It is imperative that schools reflect on children's cognitive, emotional and social developmental domains when planning and implementing learning programmes and activities. A well-designed educational approach supports children and increases their capacity to handle hostile situations. In turn, children develop confidence and learn to control situations when they realise that their behaviour is unacceptable (Chi, Kim & Kim, 2016).

My interest to investigate the transition from home to school also arises from my passion and enthusiasm as a Foundation Phase-trained teacher to unceasingly provide high quality and purposeful learning experiences to young children, thus bridging the gap between home and pre-school. When appointed as a Grade R teacher early in my career, my instinctive response was to acquire a further qualification in early childhood and become knowledgeable in the new setting. A full qualification in Early Childhood Education enabled me to function as a self-sufficient early childhood educator and apply pedagogic knowledge and skills to practical situations – as indicated by Brock (2013) when he states that a clear understanding of the theoretical frameworks together with a sound knowledge of children's development and their social and cultural backgrounds give an early childhood teacher a comprehensive understanding of how children learn. A qualification in ECEC and commitment to continuous professional development endow teachers with a high level of pedagogic knowledge as well as skills to function successfully in inclusive settings and to collaborate with colleagues more proficiently (Clasquin-Johnson, 2011; Hamre, 2014).

Currently, as the Departmental Head (DH) in the Foundation Phase, I urge young early childhood teachers to obtain a qualification and commit to professional development at school, cluster and district levels. The skills, values and knowledge gained from professional development improve teachers' performances and the children's achievement levels (Steyn, Hartell & Mosia, 2013). My experience as an early childhood teacher has intensified my conviction that children benefit from qualified teachers who engage in professional development activities on an on-going basis, as

these practitioners could commit to the National Curriculum Framework for the zero-to-four-year-old groups presented to them. Presently, the three ECEC practitioners at my school – who have all taught Grade R children including the four-year-old for more than seven years without any qualifications – are busy completing a Level 6 qualification, which is a recognised qualification as stipulated by the Department of Education.

A preliminary investigation of topical literature reveals that, internationally, an abundance of literature that relates to the smoothening of children's transition from home to school, exists. In South Africa, however, only limited studies on transitions that may assist ECEC practitioners in supporting children can be found. Since the NCF has been recently introduced, I hope that this study can help to fill existing gaps in the locally available literature.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Atmore, Van Niekerk and Ashley-Cooper (2012, p.133) state that "quality teaching and learning is essential for effective development to take place". However, when early childhood classes commenced in 2001, a major drawback surfaced as schools – especially in rural and township areas – employed undertrained and unqualified ECEC practitioners. ECEC practitioners do not receive on-site support for the implementation of programmes, and they are required to teach in overcrowded classrooms without basic infrastructure. There are also no prospects for progression or promotion for the practitioners. Consequently, their focus is not set on building positive social-emotional and cognitive outcomes. I further observed, while being involved with early childhood classes at my school, that some of the unqualified ECEC practitioners failed to show interest in the children's well-being; it seemed as if they arrived at school only to earn an income. Qualifications can matter in terms of skill sets and knowledge that are indispensable for young children. Training enhances their understanding of child development and ability to develop children's perspectives. Early experiences can add up to shape child's development. Hence, well qualified practitioners are most suitable for providing a high-quality pedagogic environment. Most children in townships and rural communities in South Africa don't have access to quality early childhood care.

Accordingly, Clasquin-Johnson (2011) comments that this lack of training became evident when most early childhood educators were unable to adopt the implementation of the National Curriculum Statement (NCS) into play-based activities. Margetts and Phatudi (2013) endorse the idea that the Department of Education needs to provide teachers with the necessary support whilst implementing a new curriculum. New knowledge and experiences gained by early childhood educators facilitate children's learning and breed a group of well-adjusted and secure children. During this time, district officials should assist teachers in creating school environments that foster a smooth transition from home to school and minimise related problems.

The majority of early childhood educators have not been equipped to manage the five-year-old's transition from home to school due to the lack of support from the districts (Clasquin-Johnson, 2011). No proper guidelines or frameworks for the practitioners to competently deal with transitions even exist. Presently, practitioners working with the four and five-year-olds use the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) designed for the Grade R group, because no training by district officials on the National Curriculum Framework ever commenced.

This study endeavoured to develop a framework for practitioners who are working with three-to-five-year-olds in facilitating their transition from home to school. The guidelines had been formulated to serve as a basis for training frameworks to be used by district offices, school management teams, ECEC practitioners and parents. The following research questions guided this study:

1.3.1 Primary research question

What are the key components of a training framework for Early Childhood Education and Care practitioners in facilitating transition from home to school?

1.3.2 Sub-questions

The following sub-questions were formulated to assist in providing a comprehensive answer to the primary research question:

1. How do young children experience a transition?

2. What are the requirements for young children's holistic well-being?
3. What qualities should practitioners of young children have to ensure a smooth transition from home to school?
4. What guidelines can practitioners follow in the transitional period?

1.4 CONCEPT CLARIFICATION

The following concepts, namely transition, Early Childhood Education and Care and practitioner are here elucidated to clarify the study's purpose.

1.4.1 Transition

Transition pertains to any stage, phase or time related to progression (Wallace, 2009). UNICEF (2012, p.8) considers transition as "children moving into and adjusting to new learning environments, families learning to work within a sociocultural system (i.e. education), and schools making provisions for admitting new children into the system". However, Dockett and Perry – renowned researchers in transition – define transition as "the broader concept of collections of practices and programmes" (2013, p.11) and explain further that the transition to school can be a time of excitement and eagerness. It can, however, also be characterised by anxiety and concern. Burgon and Walker (2013) assert that children's transition from home to school is not a once-off event but a continual process.

For this study, I recognise transition as the complicated process for children who are leaving home for the first time to attend pre-school, whilst most of them have not been prepared for this change. This process can make children feel less competent in the presence of strangers, which causes concern for their futures. Importantly, caregivers must lessen their emotional strains during this stage of their lives (Kennedy, Cameron & Greene, 2012).

1.4.2 Early Childhood Education and Care Education (ECEC) practitioner

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2015, p.11) describes a practitioner as "a person who provides early childhood development services through formal early childhood programmes and family services". Farah, Fauzee and Daud (2016) assert

that the attainment of a country's education system hinges on the competency of its teachers who play a dynamic role in the mounding of young children's character and personality. Since "childhood lies in the core of a good early childhood teacher", a practitioner is obliged to cultivate healthy relationships to enhance their skills and appreciate the world around them (Feeney, Moravcik, Nolte & Christensen, 2009, p.8). However, an individual's decision to become a practitioner extends further than gathering degrees and experience; it requires an individual to apply knowledge, demonstrate responsible behaviour, and show dedication and commitment to duty (Brock, 2013). Such educators need to commit to children's well-being by speaking a language understood by the children and relieving any discomfort (Feeney et al., 2009; Marion, 2011).

In this study, I maintain that all children in the three-to-five-year age bracket need to be taught by well-trained practitioners who can fluently identify their strengths and guide them in a safe environment. Through reliable training, practitioners can gather skills and knowledge to aid supervision, delivery of early childhood programmes, and children's adjustment to the school environment (Fourie, 2013), and also gain an understanding of the children's developmental needs so they can, accordingly, respond to their innate nature (Brock, 2013). Biersteker and Picken (2013) confirm that many practitioners appointed at pre-schools have no qualification to teach the zero-to-four-year-olds and that there is a need exists to upgrade the qualifications of the present educators, and to retrain and commit them to professional development activities for this expanding sector.

1.4.3 Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The European Commission (2011, p.11) describes Early Childhood Education and Care as the foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employment". By implication, the focus in education should be on an approach that incorporates the aspect of 'care'. Children should be placed at the centre of the educational setting that supports their emotional well-being, activates a sense of identity and enhance their relationships. Play-based learning can maintain their interest during this phase (Lazzari & Vandenbroeck, 2012). In this study, the

concept of ECEC focused on the creation of an all-inclusive support structure and a comprehensive programme aimed at children in the three-to-four-year-old age group.

1.5 LITERATURE REVIEW

To contextualise the study, a discussion of the importance of the early years in children's development, children's transitioning experiences from home to school and the role of the ECEC practitioner now follows.

1.5.1 The importance of the early years

Wallace (2009, p.82) refers to the early years of a child as "a critical stage of life in terms of children's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development and well-being", which confirms that this is the optimal stage of children's development and learning abilities. Wallace adds that children need high-quality care and exposure to learning experiences – as created by capable adults and a favourable environment – during this period in their lives.

UNESCO (2008) affirms that this stage is a vital period for nurturing the values, attitudes, skills and behaviour necessary to sustain children's development. In agreement, Aidoo (2008) declares that African children's early years determine sustainable human development, economic growth, social change and transformation in the continent.

UNICEF (2014) notes that brain growth soars during the early childhood stage. Every positive input from the environment and good experience can stimulate a young child's social, cognitive and emotional growth.

The first five years form the basis upon which prosperous lives are created for young children. Three pertinent aspects of childcare that secure a solid foundation for positive development are security, safety and support (UNICEF, 2014). During this sensitive period, the brain matures at a considerable rate and relies on continual input from the environment to sustain developmental progress. Good experiences, nutrition, health, and responsive care from adults can alter brain functions for life – especially for the children facing hardships (Cypel, 2014; UNICEF, 2014). The early years also

constitute a significant stage for childrearing. Parents need sound advice from school personnel on ways of boosting their children's cerebral development in the pursuit of forming fully integrated and complete human beings who may reach their full potential in later years (Shonkoff & Richter, 2013).

The intensity of care given during these years opens a "window of opportunities" for children as they effortlessly discover specific skills or cognitive function (UNICEF, 2014, p.4). This window of opportunity during the formative years ought to overflow with inspiring experiences once it opens to allow healthy practices to have a lasting effect on their behaviour and characters. Communities ultimately benefit from having stable and secure individuals in their midst (UNESCO, 2012). Playing also allows young children to acknowledge their emotions and act out some anger, frustrations or fears in proper manners. Their acquired vocabularies will enable them to resolve certain challenges. In this way, children begin to appreciate themselves and their environment while developing a measure of self-control necessary to sustain collaborative relationships with other individuals (Feeney et al., 2009). Marion (2011) concedes that play increases children's ability to become aware of others and share items and take turns during activities, thereby exhibiting virtuous behaviour and attitudes during this critical period of development. Proper care and education guide children to discover their sense of self and individual identity.

Many South African children grow up in unprotected environments that unsettle their long-term physical and mental abilities and diminishes their chances to develop fully (Tok, 2011). A well-designed pre-primary programme can compensate for disadvantaged children's initial deficiencies and hence improve their lives (Fourie, 2013). Steyn, Harris and Hartell (2011) proclaim that a considerable number of children in South Africa endure early deprivation of pre-primary education to prepare them for formal education. Early childhood care reduces the behavioural problems associated with children from underprivileged backgrounds (UNESCO, 2008).

Globally, countries nowadays acknowledge the importance of children's early years and strive towards the delivery of high-quality education and care for children, as it is also perceived to provide an inexpensive way for a country to sustain growth on all levels. Proper education and care increase children's rate of learning and thus

enhance their later earning potential. In this way, general productivity soars and burdens concerning health and social protection are lessened (Chan, 2014).

1.5.2 Children's transition from home to school

Transition, as a process, should not be restricted to a series of activities; instead, it should embrace a combination of good planning, sustainment of authentic relationships, clear communication, parental engagement and shared understanding of resources. Therefore, positive experiences can be planned as they become indicators of a successful transition (Peters, 2010; Fabian, 2012). Initially, an educational transition can overwhelm a young child, yet it can also transform into fruitful opportunities or challenges. Practitioners can create opportunities by improving the learning context in which the transition takes place. It must be kept in mind that children generally have plentiful needs and that they have inquiring minds that need to be developed during the period of transition (Mirkhil, 2010; O'Kane, 2015). Rouse (2012) recognises the need for children to learn in a physically and emotionally stable schooling environment where they can connect with. A competent and experienced practitioner with specialised skills and exposure to continuous professional learning must be considered as the key figure in helping children to adapt, develop a sense of belonging at school and lay a strong foundation for ongoing learning.

The ECEC practitioner is, therefore, considered as the most valuable resource in making this process work (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012). Transition practices have also revealed the numerous shifts and tensions that children must overcome. Most schools aspire to promote stress-free transitions but they sometimes disregard the varying contexts, experiences and diversity associated with children (Dockett & Perry, 2013). O'Farrelly and Hennessy (2013) outline strategies – proposed by early childhood managers – that may guarantee smoother transitions. It is necessary to plan for this event and it would benefit the children if they could visit the new environment alongside their parents a few times to enhance their psychological readiness for transition. Other aspects like a child-centred approach, consistent application and flexibility also work well for children in this age group.

The process of transition starts well for some children when they arrive at school enthusiastically awaiting their new challenges, while others appear to be withdrawn

and petrified (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Numerous contextual factors affect young children's transitions and many four-year-old children from poorer socio-economic backgrounds have already been victims of poverty, trauma, death of parents and domestic violence. The agonising recollections of loss, rejection, grief and trauma may disrupt the transition process (UNICEF, 2014). These children usually experience problematic transitions (Dockett & Perry, 2014).

It is imperative for schools to acknowledge that an untimely transition may have a devastating effect on a vulnerable four-year-old whose needs for affection with caring adults were never fulfilled (Dockett & Perry, 2014). Dockett, Perry and Kearney (2012, p.13) state that children establish new identities as they enter school and that these "new identities bring new challenges in relation to expectations and experiences". Furthermore, schools need to acknowledge the uniqueness of every child and their families in supporting healthy relationships. Aspects like race, ethnicity, culture and language hurdles may disconnect families from the new environment. These factors will receive more attention in Chapter 2.

1.5.3 Factors that may contribute to a smooth transition from home to school

Schools may employ several approaches to smoothen children's transition from home to school. The pre-school staff needs to value the home context to avoid discontinuity.

1.5.3.1 Home-school collaboration

Peters (2010) suggests that, when young children enter formal education for the first time, then it is a perfect time for schools to strive towards the consolidation of home and pre-school partnerships. Mirkhil (2010) agrees when arguing that pre-school staff needs to spearhead the process and convince parents that transition is like any other conventional process at school that calls for parental engagement. Dockett and Perry (2014) recommend practices like conducting short meetings prior to the children's first day at school to equip families with some basic knowledge and skills to facilitate a favourable start to school life. Dockett, Perry, Kearney, Hamsphire, Mason and Schmied (2011) support the idea that school programmes value the involvement of families, especially in situations when children become despondent. Pre-school staff must be able to recognise disruptions that occur outside the school environment, as

in the case of children who reside in violent neighbourhoods, for instance. Families need to be assisted with enrolment procedures. Access to information empowers parents as they develop more confidence and develop a sense of connectedness with the child's new school (Dockett, Perry & Kearney, 2012).

Burgon and Walker (2013) believe that, once children start to interact with their new surroundings, teachers should ensure that the activities stimulate and support them adequately. A loving and caring relationship between teacher and child can have a profound and lasting effect on a child's ability to learn. Strong relationships are an indispensable foundation for children and their families once they settle in at the new setting (pre-school). Still, a teacher's healthy relationship with a child is not the only option for an ideal transition to school; continual contact among families, school authorities and teachers help to create practices based on teamwork. For instance, parents need to have access to relevant information about the school and its programmes. A culture of collaboration strengthens this complicated process (Skouteris, Watson & Lum, 2012).

1.5.3.2 The role of the ECEC practitioner

When the ECEC practitioners have diverse backgrounds, then each introduces their own typical qualities, attitudes, values, habits and behaviours that are inclined to merge into the school environment (Feeney et al., 2009). Nevertheless, Harper (2016) suggests that all practitioners can implement good practices to help children along on their emotional journeys during a transition, like getting them acquainted to the new environment. Such activities can build trust between the teacher and the children, thereby establishing a sense of security for the children. Familiarising children in a new environment helps to negate some erroneous beliefs that new arrivals may have about school life. Parents can also benefit from meeting the new teachers (Kennedy, Cameron & Greene, 2012; Eskelä-Haapanen, Lerkkanen, Rasku-Puttonen & Poikkeus, 2017). Kennedy, Cameron and Greene's study (2012) established that a typical transition crisis for a five-year-old may involve a loss of attachment to their few close friends, which lowers their sense of acceptance and increases feelings of anguish.

Harper's study of transition (2016) suggests, therefore, that teachers devise a plan to tone down feelings of first-day blues among the new arrivals. They can, for example, take the children on a tour of the school grounds and introduce them to other children at the school. Children get to know their teachers through such activities which increase their sense of security. Subsequently, it is the responsibility of the ECEC practitioner to display self-awareness in embracing cultural distinctions and the developing personalities within the new group of children. This acknowledgement settles children and allows them to develop skills and increase their knowledge through appropriate interaction with their peers and teachers (Feeney et al., 2009).

Other roles of practitioners are to enhance children's learning experiences and acknowledge their interests, desires and curiosities. These experiences can raise children's senses of self-esteem and belonging to a community, and help them to regulate their own behaviour (Palaiologou, 2010).

The following section outlines the theoretical framework used in this study.

1.6 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Miles and Huberman (1994) define a conceptual framework as a graphic or written account that is inclined to describe the main attributes and assumed relationships of a study in a narrative form. The conceptual framework for this study incorporated a collection of interlinked concepts, processes, assumptions, expectations and theories combined with a collection of my own beliefs, values and ideas about the topic. These integrated concepts collectively provide a complete understanding of a phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Jabareen, 2009). Researchers who investigate transitions from home to school often cite children's environments, relationships, cultural diversities and developmental prowess – especially concerning language – and the joint responsibilities of all partners as the dominant factors that activate the transitioning process (Fabian & Dunlop, 2002; Dunlop, 2007).

This framework incorporates Bronfenbrenner's renowned ecological systems theory (1979). I also included child development theories as a starting point for theorising transitions in combination with Erikson's psychosocial theory and Piaget's theory. The

objective of the theoretical framework in this study was to guide and resonate all aspects of the research process starting with the definition of the problem, literature review, methodology and discussion of the main findings. The conceptual framework served as a structure to explain the natural progression of the phenomenon and why the main research question was worth studying.

1.6.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory

The prominent theoretical framework that guided this study is the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986), which proposes that an individual's task in an ecological environment can unexpectedly change in a completely new setting. It is important to examine the diverse contexts in which children live and the relationships that occur at the crossroads of these contexts. The other implication for implementing a bio-ecological view in terms of a transition is to conclude whether or not a child has accomplished a fruitful transition (Dunlop, 2007).

The overriding concepts and impressions that encompassed this study were founded on interpretations from a review of the literature on transition. Fabian (2006) insists that any research that relates to transition must apply an ecological model as, firstly, the underlying elements exemplifies home, school and a commitment to society; and secondly, as it allows the researcher to observe interactions and collaborations between families, children, communities and time, all of which are significant forces that invariably influence children's transition from home to pre-school (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Vogler, Crivello and Woodhead (2008) and Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, Sojo and Cavanagh (2011) suggest that the idea of accepting new responsibilities can be unbearable for some children and a daunting task for some parents. Hence, the attributes of an ecological theory were chosen for this study which included the young children's environment as the foundation for all further undertakings.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) distinguishes between five environmental systems, situating the child at the centre of those five systems or layers, as the child is influenced by experiences associated with each of the five layers. Children are active participants and a reciprocal relationship between children and their environment exists (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The five fundamental environmental systems applied to this study are discussed below.

1.6.1.1 Microsystem

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), the microsystem is the first level of the ecological system and is described as having a marked influence on a child. When Bronfenbrenner's ecological model is applied to transition research, it directs interest to a range of activities, roles and relationships experienced in a specific setting – which is the microsystem. To illustrate the microsystem in relation to this study, I reflected on the fundamental role that the early childhood teacher plays during a child's transition from home to school. Hence the microsystem focused on the young child as well as the child's relationship with the ECEC practitioner and peers at the research site. The environment is also a pertinent microsystem when deliberating on a child's transition to an early learning centre and, therefore, children's interactions in their new environment were examined. However, a child's position in the ecological environment may be distorted during a transition because of their move to a new microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

1.6.1.2 Mesosystem

The second proximate layer consists of the mesosystem that fortifies the bonds in the microsystem and the wider environment. The mesosystem encompasses connections and processes that occur between two or more backdrops involving the developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem in this study comprised the relationships between a) the parent and school, and b) the child and teacher.

1.6.1.3 Exosystem

The exosystem is listed as the third level of the ecological system as an addition to the mesosystem, which includes solid social structures that influence the greater social background – including the local community – as well as the child, on account of the parents (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). In this study, the exosystem involved social systems, such as health and housing systems, that indirectly influence a child.

1.6.1.4 Macrosystem

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998), the macrosystem involves dominant socio-economic structures as well as beliefs, values, culture and ideologies that

influence and may be influenced by all other levels of the system. This system refers to the culture and policies that influence children's interactions in the microsystems. In this study, the macrosystem embraced the broader social and cultural interactions that influence the child as well as the various policies that are instituted for ECEC.

1.6.1.5 Chronosystem

A chronosystem is the closing systems parameter that covers the environment while integrating the component of time – not only as a characteristic of the growing person but as a significant part of their immediate environment. A chronosystem incorporates changes in the environment, family structures, the socio-economic status and individuals' competencies in daily activities (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

1.6.2 Erikson's psychosocial theory

I used Erikson's psychosocial theory as the second theory, which is a modified version of the structures of the id, ego and superego of the stages of development authored by Freud. Erikson's development theory, centred on the epigenetic principle, considers personality development as a lifetime progression and is influenced by emotions that arise due to an individual's growth that intersects with their different experiences of the outside world and those who reside in it (Erikson, 1963). Erikson proposed that the psychosocial stages of development emphasise the social and interpersonal worlds of the individual. During each stage, the individual experiences considerable challenges within the environment, needing conflicts to be resolved. Each conflict is resolved within a positive-to-negative range. In each case a positive resolution is preferred but preferably with some caution as one cannot completely trust the world. Each resolution has an implication for a future encounter and crisis, which also influences earlier resolutions. Poorly resolved conflicts can be resolved positively later through interactions. Development within an individual is partially seen as the adaptation of the individual to the demands of their culture. In this study, I examined the first three of the eight stages of psychosocial development.

1.6.3 Piaget's theory of cognitive development

I selected Piaget's theory of cognitive development as the third theory to guide this study. Piaget's theory focuses on the developmental characteristics of the child. Emphasis is placed on the developmental stages in which learning occurs in this study.

The cognitive development theory explains changes in a child's reasoning levels. According to Piaget, children go through the same sequence of development but at different rates. Piaget suggests the use of schemes by individuals that comprise mental and physical actions that are repeated so that goals can be accomplished and problems solved (Piaget, 1973). Piaget argues that learning takes place in stages during which an individual confronts discrepant ideas – specifically those ideas that do not match an individual's scheme yet become indispensable sources for growth (Piaget, 1983). Piaget believes that a person senses which ideas tally with their recognised and preferred interpretations.

The key to understanding Piaget's theory is knowing how the individual continually adapts to the changing world (Woolfolk, 2007). Piaget considers intellectual development as a procedure for constructing a series of actions with each becoming more adaptable than the preceding one (Johnson, 2006). Piaget presumed that all children proceed through four stages in the same order. Johnson (2006) state that distinguished levels of analysis, inner composition and understanding of environmental issues exist in each stage of cognitive development. The theory indicates that a child's insight is dependent on the stage that they have mastered.

In this study, I focused only on the two stages of development. The sensory motor stage lasts from birth to two years when priority is given to a child's physical growth and development. During this stage they have an emergent grasp of things around them as their scheme is simple. This is an ideal time for them to construct thought. During the pre-operational stage, the child becomes proficient in reasoning and giving logical accounts. They develop symbiotic functions that speed up linguistic usage.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The next section illustrates the research methodology used in this study.

1.7.1 Research design

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, p.115) maintain that there is no particular design for planning any research and that a research design is generally guided by the concept of "fitness for the purpose". The main aim of a research design is to establish the methodology and design of the research and to help the researcher plan all stages of the study in advance. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) alert us that the choice of the main question should not confirm an investigation, but that the researcher's energies should rather be diverted to the supporting questions that must be considered early in the study, the purpose of the study, research principles and the paradigm from which the researcher chooses to work from.

1.7.1.1 Research paradigm

Creswell (2014) defines a paradigm as a set of broad beliefs and presumptions about reality together with an individual's own practices, perceptions and experiences that influence their choice of a paradigm. Creswell (2014) further distinguishes between three paradigms namely positivism, interpretivism and critical theory that impact on a researcher's choice of assumption. This study was situated within the interpretive paradigm as multiple participant responses were employed to answer the main research question. Additionally, interpretivism favours qualitative research because historical situations are distinctive and therefore requires the analyses of a particular context in which it is rooted in. Human life can only be appreciated from inside.

An interpretative researcher usually functions within the assumption that people appropriate an understanding of the world in which they reside (Creswell, 2014). Morgan and Sklar (2013) agree that people develop subjective meanings of their knowledge and understanding of particular objects and contexts. Those meanings become multiple and varied, which instructs the researcher to rely on the intricacy of views instead of reducing invaluable and unique meanings into limited classifications or viewpoints. Therefore, it is recommended that a researcher uses comprehensive methods of questioning to construct hidden meanings of a particular situation.

My focus in this study was to investigate essential components for a framework that practitioners could use in alleviating children's transitioning challenges from home to

school. An interpretivist paradigm gave me the freedom to study the phenomenon in a natural setting.

1.7.1.2 A qualitative research approach

This study followed a qualitative research approach with the intent to examine some elements that could be incorporated into a framework that practitioners may use to enrich children's transition from home to school. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) inform researchers about the advantages that emerge when electing to work from a qualitative perspective. Firstly, a researcher can explore the intricacies of a phenomenon specifically where little research has been conducted. The descriptive nature of a qualitative approach can help uncover the complex nature of processes, relationships and systems. Secondly, the underlying principle of corroboration helps the researcher to examine the logic surrounding certain beliefs, ideas and theories that exist in real-life settings.

In this study, I focused on 'transition' as a process taking place at a pre-school institution to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) add that, in a qualitative study, the researcher must avoid streamlining what they observe and promptly acknowledge the nature of the problem being studied. The researcher must plan to include multi-faceted approaches as well, thereby gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Such an approach allows the researcher to awaken the voices of the participants and investigate issues that lie underneath the surface.

1.7.1.3 Case study research design

This study employed a qualitative case study research design. Yin (2014, p.4) asserts that a case study can extend the researchers' knowledge of a group or individual in their actual location, but it also compels a researcher to "focus on in-depth enquiry". I employed a multiple case study for this research, which consisted of three cases. Three government schools from the Pretoria region in Gauteng Province were selected as the potential cases. A rural school, a township school and an inner-city school were selected as cases for this study. Six practitioners were selected from the three schools, including drawings made by six children. A substantial amount of data

was extracted through observations, interviews and drawings. These cases enabled me to evaluate underlying similarities, differences and links from each case (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

Leedy and Ormrod (2015) suggest that the most distinguishing feature of a case study is that a researcher is granted the freedom to amass extensive data on how individuals act and conduct themselves while the investigation is conducted. This study hence included observations, interviews, drawings by children and analyses of documents. I spent sufficient time at the selected schools while engaging with the educators and parents to get to know the contexts and intricacies of each case.

1.7.2 Research methods

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) inform researchers about appropriate approaches to adopt when collecting and analysing data.

1.7.2.1 The role of the researcher

Creswell (2014) emphasises that, in a qualitative study, the researcher inescapably becomes personally immersed in all the processes. I needed to become part of the 'real world' of the participants and become accountable for all the major activities including interviews, data collection, management and data analysis. When the study commenced, I determined which of my personal values, assumptions and biases could merge with the study, as any assumptions could have influenced the way I interpreted the data, even if I intended to remain impartial. McMillan and Schumacher (2014) advise the researcher to conduct self-analysis throughout the research process to warrant reflexibility. Therefore, I continually reflected on my role to avoid having my own experiences, background and culture affect any procedures. I vigilantly reviewed my collaborations with participants and the neutrality of my actions as the researcher.

I employed the following processes during the data collection and analysis stages.

1.7.2.2 Participants and research sites

The participants for this study comprised six practitioners: two from each of the three selected sites, as well as drawings made by six children. I observed the six

practitioners in practice at their schools and conducted in-depth interviews with them on their perceptions and understanding of children's transition from home to school. I also observed the children's behaviour and asked them to make a drawing of their teacher.

The research sites comprised three public schools in Gauteng: an impoverished rural school situated to the east of Pretoria city, a disadvantaged township school in Mamelodi and an inner-city school in central Pretoria with children from varying backgrounds, including immigrant children.

1.7.2.3 Data collection

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) suggest that a qualitative researcher must be able to employ a variety of techniques to gather information. There are no prescribed instructions in terms of instruments to be used while conducting research. In this study, I utilised participant observations, interviews, children's drawings and field notes as methods and instruments for data gathering and analysis.

1.7.2.3.1 Observations

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) state that the most distinct feature of observation – as a research process – is that it allows the researcher to gather live data from environments in a conventional manner as they unfold. The researcher gets the opportunity to scrutinise what is taking place at the site, thereby generating reliable data. Maree (2016) describes field observations as a methodical and logical process of recording behavioural practices and relationships that participants share with others without requiring them to share thoughts about their preferences. This method of data collection allows a researcher to gain a profound awareness of the phenomenon being observed. However, researchers need to be conscious of their own biases and be willing to appreciate reality as the participants do.

I utilised 'observation' as a data collection technique in this study, as I needed to observe the practitioners in practice during their guidance of young children through the event of a transition. I spent two weeks at each school where I observed the practitioners' qualities, their interactions with the children, their understanding of children's emotional, social and cognitive needs as well as their knowledge of the

curriculum. Short descriptions of key aspects were noted without including any self-reflective notes.

1.7.2.3.2 Children's drawings

Hall (2010) notes that children's drawings can serve as insightful means of communication since young children subconsciously reveal their real identities, power and purpose in the process. Their drawings are influenced by their experiences at home and school. While the children make their drawings, the researcher can listen to a child's perception of related aspects that are critical and pertinent to them (Einarsdottir, Dockett & Perry, 2009). For young children, art is an effective means of creating *their* reality on paper. When they have been given the correct tools and necessary freedom, they spontaneously opt for their preferences (Quaglia, Longobardi, Iotti & Prino, 2015). Children also prefer to draw things that they are interested in, like family members or people at their school. Their drawings usually depict a range of emotions that include joy, anger or contentment (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

In this study, I asked children to draw a picture of their teacher, since most young children attach much importance to their teachers. I then asked them to explain those drawings.

Steele and Kuban (2013, p.81) advise that drawings can assist children to "elaborate on elements of their experiences", adding that drawings can act as safe mechanisms for children to express emotions that are often more difficult for them to express through language. For this research, I purposely gave the children the task of drawing their teachers to help me understand their perspectives on their teachers as a new influence on their lives.

1.7.2.3.3 Field notes

My field notes reflected exact accounts of what I witnessed at each site. I recorded everything that I saw, heard and encountered as events unfolded. The teachers' verbal as well as non-verbal behaviours were documented. All those notes were later transcribed. I naturally harnessed my instincts and situational experiences to accurately gauge the significance of every event that I observed.

1.7.2.3.4 Interviews

Maree (2016, p.92) confirms that the purpose of an interview is to "see the world through the eyes of the participant", which becomes an invaluable source of information if acquired appropriately. In this way, vital descriptive data enable an understanding of the participant's interpretation of knowledge. Leedy and Ormrod (2015) agree that, in the absence of stringently stipulated requirements, qualitative interviews provide a more approachable and natural way of collecting data. Participants are inclined to believe that they are simply participating in a casual discussion with the researcher. Yet, the researcher perceives the interview as one of the most important means of learning more about a participant's thoughts, opinions, perspectives, sentiments and behaviours (Maree, 2016).

I conducted face-to-face interviews with practitioners as well as parents of the children in this study. They were all asked open-ended questions to ascertain their relevant views, beliefs and attitudes.

1.7.2.4 Data analysis

Maree (2016) explains that qualitative data analysis is founded on an interpretative philosophy that leans towards a probing of the significance and representational value of the content in qualitative data. It thus becomes the researcher's responsibility to reveal how the study participants make meaning of a particular phenomenon – through analysis of their perceptions, experiences and knowledge – so that their understanding of the phenomenon is acknowledged. I agree with McMillan and Schumacher (2014) who suggest that, although numerous software packages exist to minimise the tedious tasks related to data sets, no computer programme can yet substitute a researchers' inductive exploration of raw data. The primary purpose of an inductive procedure is to allow preliminary research findings to surface from categories or themes that repeat themselves in the raw data, as well as prospective relationships that may exist between those categories (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

In this study, I followed Creswell's method (2013) that specifies how to organise qualitative data. The figure below, adapted from Creswell (2013), indicates the four

relevant steps that a researcher can meticulously follow, with a short description of each step.

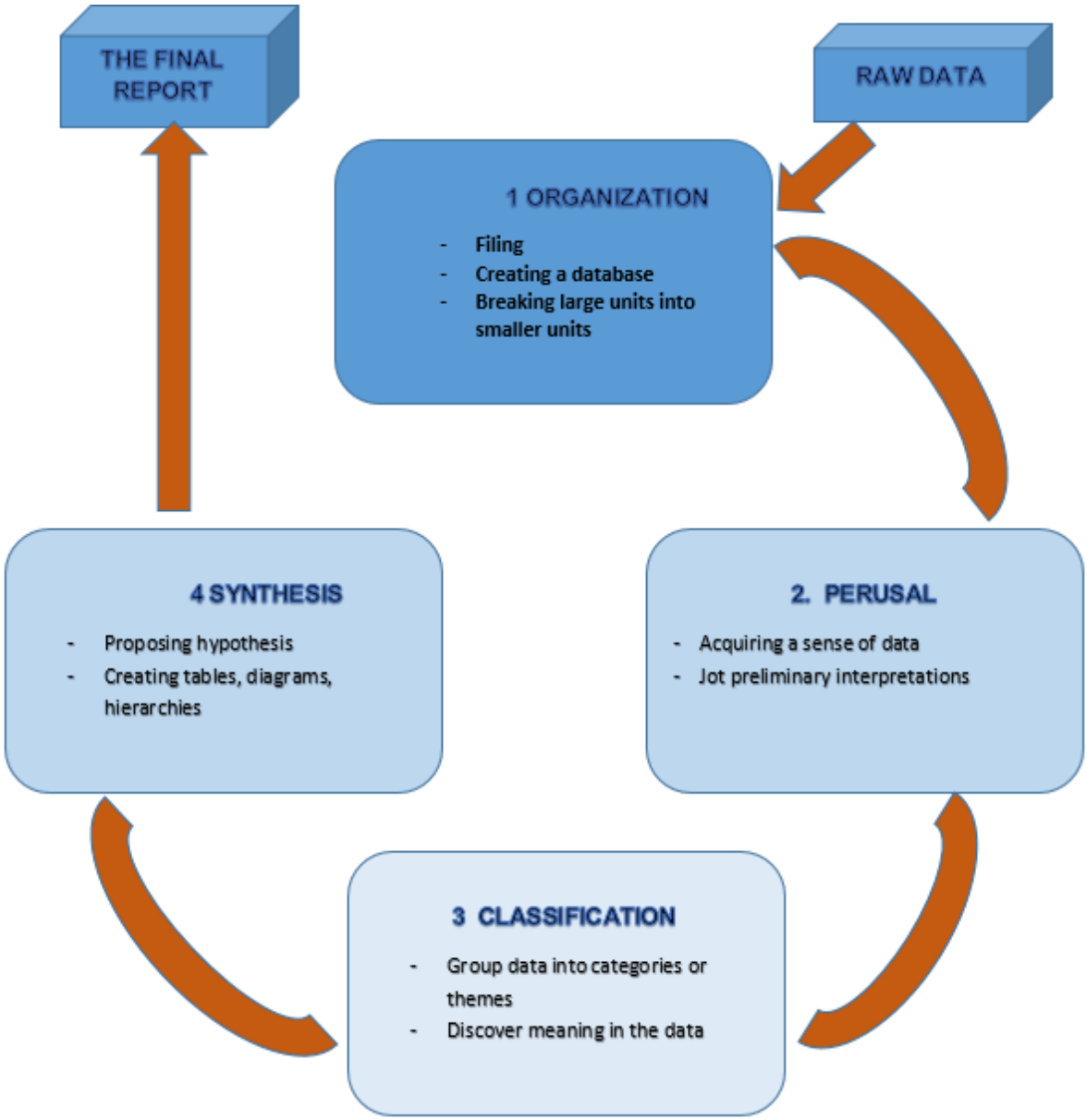

Figure 1.1 Data analysis spiral

Step 1: Data is organised and stored in a computer database. Extensive data gets divided into manageable units.

Step 2: Gathered data is scanned to obtain an overall impression. Some notes may be compiled to indicate possible categories.

Step 3: Emerging categories are identified to illuminate the meaning of the data set.

Step 4: Data is assimilated, condensed and explained for readers.

1.7.3 Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers seldom use the term validity when explaining their research; instead, they prefer using these terms: trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). These are practices that need to be implemented to ensure accuracy in the findings (Creswell, 2013). The aspects of dependability, confirmability, credibility and transferability were used to substantiate trustworthiness of data in this study.

1.7.3.1 Dependability

Maree (2016) describes the close links between credibility and dependability in research and explain that credibility justifies dependability. Dependability is established through the research design and its application. In pursuing these ideals, I recorded all my actions in a journal where I also detailed critical decisions related to data collection and the subsequent analysis thereof. I noted the category labels that emerged and any revisions made to those categories. I further recorded my analytical processes that explain my decisions and to assist readers in understanding the implications of this study.

1.7.3.2 Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that confirmability should include elements of impartiality, objectivity and fairness. All research conclusions should be sculpted by participants and not include any of the prejudices conveyed by the researcher. In this study, I followed the suggestions of Leedy and Ormrod (2015) who suggest strategies to enhance confirmability and reduce prejudices.

From the onset, I needed to recognise my own predispositions and guard against misrepresenting the collected data and reasonable interpretations thereof. I hence requested confirmation from participants that my captured data represented their views accurately. I further elicited feedback from my supervisor to ensure that my interpretations were appropriate and that my findings were valid.

1.7.3.3 Credibility

Atkins and Wallace (2012) define credibility in terms of how realistic or acceptable the findings are. Credibility, therefore, pertains to whether a study's findings match reality and whether all the readers will accept my findings. I conducted a qualitative study suited to the research question upon a sound theoretical foundation that validated my methods in finding answers to the research questions. My supervisor and I held regular debriefing sessions. I allowed participants to review transcripts of the recorded interviews and thoroughly described situations during observations. These methods are designed to help readers trust the study's conclusions (Creswell, 2013).

1.7.3.4 Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (2003) define transferability in qualitative research as a series to which results can be exported and generalised. In contrast to generalisability, transferability does not include generalised claims but allows readers to link the study's fundamentals with their own experiences. I hence provided a comprehensive description of this study's context, which assists the reader to determine if the research is transferable to another context (Maree, 2016).

1.7.4 Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the terms and conditions of ethical regulations agreed upon by the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. I obtained ethical clearance prior to commencing the fieldwork. I also obtained permission from the Gauteng Department of Education, the schools' principals and the School Governing Bodies (SGB) to conduct research at the identified schools. I then sent invitational letters to the ECEC practitioners and the parents of the children. Ethical approaches were retained throughout data collection procedures (Ferreira, 2012).

1.7.4.1 Informed consent

Leedy and Ormrod (2015, p.121) confirm that "research with human beings require informed consent", which means that the practitioners, parents or guardians of children must be notified of the nature of the study and their written permission must first be

obtained. I reassured each prospective participant that their privacy would always be protected and that only they can decide about their participation. I gave each participant a concise explanation of the study and the planned research activities. I also notified the participants about benefits to the field of education as well as our society that may arise from their participation in the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The agreeing participants read and signed the prepared consent forms, while they also had ready access to me through my contact details if they developed any qualms or questions about the study.

1.7.4.2 Anonymity and confidentiality

As the researcher, I took all necessary precautions to ensure that I was the only person who had access to the data and participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). I used pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants as well as the schools. The participants were assured that all gathered data remain anonymous and confidential (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

1.8 CONCLUSION

To overcome the notion that an educational transition is a challenging experience, most developed countries – including Australia, New-Zealand, Canada and Scotland – have invested in transition policies, framework programmes and continuous on-site training to provide holistic insights into the possibilities of successful transitions for young children. Central to these policies are effective transition resources and support structures provided to teachers, enabling them to bridge the gaps between policy and practice. Their teachers have also been trained to view transition as a critical stage in children's lives, and they hence prepare in advance for this process in collaboration with the children's parents.

In South Africa, not much attention has yet been given to promoting successful transitions for children who leave their known environment (home) for a new and unknown setting (school). The practice of keeping untrained practitioners in the education system until they qualify undermines the prospects of successful transitions for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

This study investigated how transitional frameworks can be initiated to clarify this critical concept to teachers and help them to prepare children for continuity and adaptability to change. Successful implementation of transition frameworks could help to end many inequalities that still exist at early learning institutions.

1.9 LAYOUT OF THE STUDY

This document comprises seven chapters according to the following layout.

Chapter 1: Orientation

This chapter contains information about the study's background, rationale, problem statement, research questions, clarification of concepts, a preliminary review of literature, the theoretical framework, research methodology and ethical issues.

Chapter 2: Conceptual and contextual perspectives on transition

This chapter reviews literature that relates to the conceptual and contextual perspectives of transition from the home to early childhood centres. A comprehensive account of children's, families' and practitioners' roles during a transition is given.

Chapter 3: Theoretical framework

Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical framework and child development theories that underpin this study.

Chapter 4: Research methodology

This chapter scrutinises aspects that relate to the research methodology in terms of the research design, approach and methods used to select sites and participants. Data collection methods are also explained.

Chapter 5: Data analysis

This chapter presents an analysis of each case included in this study and contains accurate accounts of observations and interviews. A table reflects the main themes that emerged.

Chapter 6: Data interpretation

This chapter provides interpretations and discussions that emerged during the analysis of results. Data interpretation included meanings assigned by participants to their experiences.

Chapter 7: Summary, conclusions and recommendations

This chapter consists of synopses of the six preceding chapters. Empirical findings are presented. The extent to which key findings managed to provide answers to the research questions is explained. The limitations of the study, suggestions for further research and my thoughts about the study are included. The chapter ends with recommendations as supported by this study.

CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL AND CONTEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE TRANSITION BETWEEN HOME AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE CENTRES

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an empirical review of published literature that relates to the impact of a transitioning experience – in specific, from home to early childhood care and education (ECEC) centres – on a child's state of being. Graham (2012, p.3) maintains that the most important educational transition that children ever experience is between these two environments. Ideally, when a child adapts to a new facility, the child should have "a service that is able, like a loving parent, to unfold each and every child". Welchons and McIntyre (2017, p.84) stress the importance of a smooth transition as it may have profound implications on a child's future well-being. In terms of this perspective, the competent management of a transitioning process is essential for the child's successful adjustment to a new and controlled environment and his ability to feel content within the less-familiar setting.

Gordon and Browne (2014) concur that the transition from home to the ECCE centre is a significant milestone and pivotal to a young child's personal development. Bono, Sy and Kopp (2016) postulate that children who manage to transition effortlessly from home to ECCE centres are more inclined to acquire the needed social-emotional skills that enable them to adjust to the demands of a new environment. Bell-Booth, Staton and Thorpe (2014), however, warn that, for many children, leaving home for the first time becomes an emotionally fraught journey that places significant demands on their developing psyches. This situation can potentially become stressful for the child, family, ECCE centre as well as the wider community. Wong (2016) explains the associated stress on children who are often expected to adapt quickly to unprecedented changes in an entirely new environment where they must comply with unfamiliar rules, routines, expectations and relationships. In this respect, Kalkman and

Clark (2017) agree that a changeover to a new setting for young children implies embedded changes and a need to familiarise themselves with new rules and higher teacher expectations. Some children experience a loss of control within the new confined learning environment. These abrupt changes can temporarily disturb the child's identity and sense of belonging. Ackesjö (2013) believes that transition management should, therefore, include concern for a young child's sense of belonging. Children should be assisted in understanding and negotiating both the old and new playing fields while they shape their identities in the new setting. Care centres and practitioners are both responsible for ensuring that emotional obstacles are minimised during this transitioning process.

Several studies (Fabian, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2013; Miller, 2014; Wong, 2015; Bono, Sy & Kopp, 2016) further illustrate that a child's transition from home to school is not an instinctive process; it is instead filled with uncertainty, trepidation, stress and change. Children do not always willingly accept the move to a new context. Some tend to become nervous or hostile toward others in the new environment. They need assistance to cope with social pressure. Practitioners, therefore, need to apply certain skills and acquire relevant mindsets to smooth this process and minimise the emotional stress for children. Among the suggestions by the authors listed above is the implementation of transition programmes to ease the stresses of the transitioning process and to promote continuity from home to ECEC environments. This explains why ECCE centres ought to canvas well-trained and/or experienced practitioners who can reduce the challenges that children usually encounter during the transition from their homes to the ECCE centres. Since a positive transition lays the foundation for healthy academic outcomes and developed social skills. Dockett, Petriwskyj and Perry (2014) argue strongly for the employment of practitioners who can navigate such transitional processes.

It is, furthermore, necessary for the practitioners and all stakeholders within a school setting to help young children and their families to progressively collaborate with the ECCE centres during the transitioning process. In this way, partnerships between homes (families) and schools (practitioners) can form that would be beneficial to children's development and emotional security. Petriwskyj, Thorpe and Tayler (2014) view the building of congruent relationships between ECEC centres, practitioners,

children and their families as an elemental feature of communities, which implies that communities are co-responsible for their children's mental health and holistic well-being. In turn, ECEC centres should endeavour to understand the needs of young children and their parents and work closely with families to stimulate the academic and social outcomes of their children (Rim-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000; Welchons & McIntyre, 2017). This means that all stakeholders, including the ECCE practitioners, need to be productive in helping children to connect with their new environments and to feel accepted.

Figure 2.1 below illustrates the pertinent role players in the transitional process, while listing the inherent emotional investments and professional characteristics of the respective participants.

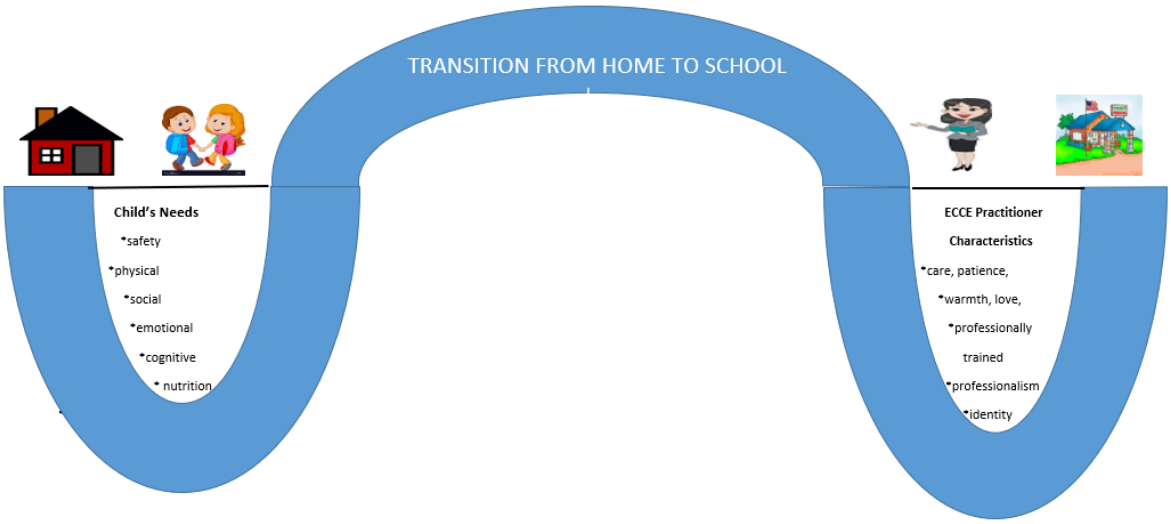

Figure 2.1: Children's transition from home to school

The figure depicts the relative vastness of the step taken by a child who leaves the safety and security of home to venture to a formal educational environment. Children have specific needs that must be met if the transitioning process is to be smooth (Wong, 2015). Simultaneously, practitioners must be equipped with certain qualities to meet those needs and to prepare the children for the stressful, demanding and unfamiliar new environment.

To understand the effect that such an experience has on a young child, it is necessary to first obtain valid perspectives on transition through reviewing all available and relevant literature. The following sections discuss those perspectives.

2.2 PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSITION

Vogler, Crivello and Woodhead (2008) argue that no distinct definition for the concept of 'transition' exists, and present a broad definition that considers 'transition' as a central action or procedure occurring at times during a person's life that prompt changes to a person's activities, roles, statuses and relationships. All changes require individuals to adapt to different physical and social spaces and practices.

Kennedy, Cameron and Greene (2012) estimate transition as being a complex and yet not a well-defined occurrence that children have to endure when they leave home for substitute care, which is what some children may consider as an infringement. Such changes – especially when the changes influence their identities and necessitate the building of new relationships – may mystify a young child. Practitioners must collaborate and support families to ensure continuity. Dunlop (2003) explains the concept of 'transition' in terms of an individual's reaction to the enforced journey that comprises various changes. A child's first experience of this journey affects all future experiences of transitioning. The nature of the reactions results from an individual's own life experiences, which may accentuate or obstruct the process.

Other researchers have based their views regarding 'transition' on specific arguments. Dockett and Perry (2007) and Fabian (2006) all emphasise that transition can be perceived as a range of procedures for individuals who must move from one context to another within a limited timeframe. One such example is when a child leaves home on the day when he/she must go to preschool for the first time. Children begin to experience changes in their own identities as they assume new roles; they are not merely children in a household anymore but have become learners who compete for attention from one caregiver. Kagan and Neuman (1998, p.366) present a different view, distinguishing "vertical" and "horizontal" paths during a transition. The vertical path relates to the major change from a certain status to another while following an "upward shift". In the case of young children, this shift is associated with the transition

from life at home to life at the ECEC centre, which can be a traumatic experience. The horizontal path relates to more conventional transitions, occurring regularly at a daily rate. A large segment of the focus on a transitioning child involves the movement of the child through various settings and the resultant impact on the child's well-being (UNESCO, 2006).

Conversely, Bridges (1980) depicts 'transition' as a natural process for individuals, although the transitions also become turning points for personal growth. He explains the three-stage psychological process when, firstly, a person lets go of old ways and identities, then recognises what happens after the letting-go and, finally, creates new commencements. These three stages are closely connected, and individuals sometimes find themselves in one or more phases at any time. In managing a transition, an individual must be guided through the three phases. Individuals complete the final stage when they accept a new beginning. Brammer and Abrego (1981) describe 'transition' as any change that includes personal awareness and the possibility of new behaviour. This process, however, starts before a person experiences the episode and continues beyond the actual event.

Van Gennep (1960, p.21), a seminal writer on the topic of transition, believes that a social transition is an influential event that serves as a "rite of passage" that identifies the movement from one phase to another. The multiple and vibrant phases involved provide a clear understanding of the nature of the rites of passage. The first (preliminal) phase is the "rite of separation" that occurs when an individual disconnects from his present group. The second (liminal) phase occurs when the person reaches the threshold towards change. A person typically finds himself with a new group in this phase, though he is not yet fully integrated into that group. In this regard, the third (postliminal) phase signals the accomplishment of having adjusted to life within a new group and environment. Van Gennep's (1960) 'rites of passage' perspective analyses the complete transitional progression. Lam and Pollard (2006), in their study of young children in Hong Kong, adopted a holistic approach to integrating rite of passage concepts for transitioning children. They employed a transitional programme to induct children who move from home to school.

Schlossberg (1981, p.5) developed the *transition theory* because of the "need for a framework that would facilitate an understanding of adults in transition and lead them

to the help they needed to cope with the ordinary and extraordinary process of living". She outlines transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles" – a description that is also applicable to the transitional journeys of children and their associated support structures. The theory also describes three types of transitions: anticipated, unanticipated and non-events. Anticipated transitions occur when, as envisaged, 3-year-old children commence their first year at ECCE centres. Unanticipated transitions appear unexpectedly and are not scheduled. Events of this type include the sudden death of a family member or a divorce. Non-event transitions include those events that persons expect to take place, such as when babies who, although expected to be born, were never born (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton & Renn, 2010).

Goodman, Schlossberg and Anderson (2006) assert that transitions are usually accompanied by some observable as well as some minor life changes. Schlossberg's theory highlights the fact that a transition exists only if it is defined by the individual undergoing it. The context refers to the relationship of an individual to the transition – one's own or someone else's – and the setting of the transition which comprises aspects of work and personal relationships.

A transitioning experience significantly alters a person's daily life. According to Rutter (2012) and Wong (2016), transitions normally produce stress and other simultaneous transitions add tension to the individual's psyche, making it harder to cope. Positive influences can make stress more tolerable, especially when children are given opportunities to build supportive relationships. Dockett and Perry (2015) argue that, while a transition can be linked to one identifiable event or non-event, it is usually a time-spanning process. At first, individuals become overwhelmed by their new roles, relationships, routines and assumptions. A transition can act as an opportunity for further growth or, conversely, cause an individual to regress in development.

Goodman et al. (2006) argue that persons who guide others' transitions need to understand the type, context and impact that a transitioning experience has on an individual. Schlossberg (1989) acknowledges four critical elements that influence transitions: the situation, the self, support and strategies. These four elements are known as the "4S's", which provide a framework to identify the resources that influence an individual's ability to cope with a transition. An individual's ability to cope with a

transition hinges on the available resources in these areas. All individuals uphold both assets and liabilities as they confront transitions. At times, the assets may outweigh the liabilities but at other times, the liabilities may offset the present assets, in which case the transition becomes more challenging to achieve (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012).

The following figure illustrates the four critical elements that influence transitions.

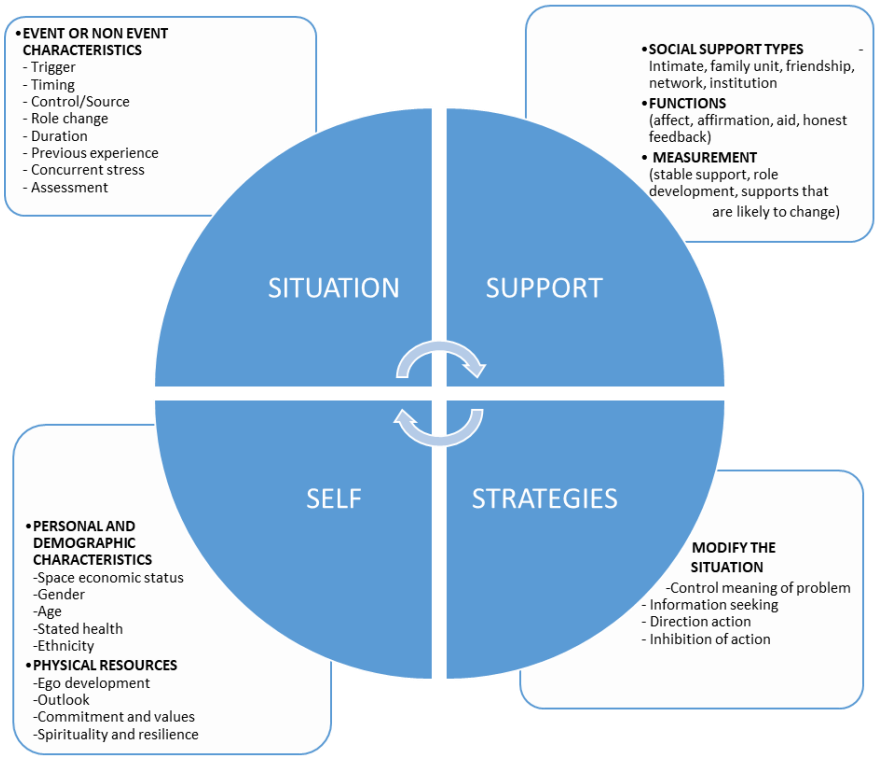

Figure 2.2: Coping resources: the 4S's (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012, p.62).

An individual who examines the first "S", which is 'the situation', must consider the following concepts: the *trigger* that activates the transition, the *timing* which refers to the time frame of the transition; the *control* that denotes the general management of change by the ECCE workforce and the *role change* that can be anticipated during this indefinite time. These factors can cause the transitional *duration* to be lengthy or simply transient. In some cases, *concurrent stress* can overwhelm an individual while others can easily adjust or even seem unaffected by the events. Therefore, an individual may assess the circumstances in relatively optimistic, virtuous or critical manners (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012, p.62–68). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) agree that a stressful transition may affect an individual's ability to respond

positively. Schlossberg (1984), too, confirms that the appraisal of any transition relies on the context in which the event takes place. For a young child, the new situation may be complicated and test his/her coping skills. If a child had a previous experience, which was managed well, then the current transition may be easier. However, the amount of stress that a child experiences during a transition may unsettle the child. Young children need influential adults who can minimise their distress when facing a difficult transition.

The second "S" denotes 'the self'. Here, the assets and liabilities that individuals take to the transitioning process are examined. Approaches to any event differ according to each 'self'. The two key areas here are personal resources and physical resources. The personal and demographic characteristics include gender, socioeconomic status, stage of life, state of health, ethnicity and age, which “directly affects how a person perceives and assess life” (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012, p.74). Personal resources include ego development, outlook, commitment, values, opportunity and resilience.

The 'self' determines the unique way in which an individual responds to an event (Anderson, Goodman & Schlossberg, 2012). Young children often undergo psychosocial traumas and other harsh childhood experiences. Some children may appear unaffected by these occurrences but others’ behaviour is often negatively influenced. This means that practitioners and caregivers need to understand the various contexts to promote resilience in children. Resilience can be defined as the ability to overcome threats to a normal function. The ability to cope with stress and adversity is viewed as a positive trait. Good experiences help children to acquire resilience while they also develop social and emotional skills to help them remain positive in challenging situations (Masten, 2014; Nolan, Taket & Stagnitti, 2014). Aspects such as psychological toughness, high self-esteem, social skills, self-care skills and good peer relationships instil elements of resilience in children. It is necessary, however, to adopt an approach that will create safe environments and healthy attitudes and behaviours to avoid adverse childhood experiences (Rutter, 2012).

Ernst, Johnson and Burcak (2019, p.15) promote the idea of “nature preschools”. Such schools have positive influences on children’s strengths, which relates to their

resilience in that environment. Children who engage with natural environments demonstrate growth, use independent thought and develop self-regulation. Brown (2015) emphasises the need to praise children (when due) and to focus on their respective strengths and personalities. They thereby gain knowledge that will help them to cope, remain positive in adverse situations and build confidence in their abilities. Chaotic environments, conversely, can undermine children's ability to improve self-regulation. When practitioners invest in a well-planned and well-regulated environment and understand children's interests and respective backgrounds, then the children's psychological presence and sense of belonging will increase (McDonald, 2013).

The third "S" represents 'support'. Social support is mostly viewed as the key to handling stress and mainly comprises strong relationships with immediate family members, friends, co-workers and communities. Pendleton's (2007) study indicates that any support from close family and friends props up individuals who face a stressful event. A support system can quickly mobilise an individual and even spread outward to social institutions and the community. Such aid becomes necessary to ease the transition. For young children, support should include strong relationships with their families, peers, communities and the ECCE centres where they spend more time. Support must affect, affirm, aid and provide honest feedback. Those who receive adequate support, as described, will have a more composed transition than those who receive little support.

The fourth "S", 'strategies', assesses ways in which individuals cope with a transition. Coping mechanisms relate to the variety of responses that modify a situation which includes responses that control the meaning of a problem and responses that help an individual to manage the stress after it has emerged. Coping responses also ensure that individuals adjust to existing stress without being conquered by it (Evans et al., 2010). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) agree that a successful coping strategy moderates stress. Coping strategies also incorporate a selection of activities that reduce negative responses to stress. Practitioners could harness problem-focused strategies such as proper planning for main events. They need to scrutinise each element during a child's transition and should provide tangible support to individuals who face adversities in the process (Kong, 2011).

Brooker (2002), furthermore, emphasises the importance of understanding the role of culture during a child's transition to a new setting. To illustrate, discrepancies between parenting practices in a child's home environment and the values and beliefs espoused by the new institution (ECEC centre) may readily trigger feelings of failure or confusion in the child's mind. Since children's experiences and interactions in their new environments are key elements in successful transitions, a large degree of similarity between home and care centres' cultures is vital for their successful inductions into ECCE routines. Similarly, Doucet and Tudge (2007, p.309) postulate that transitions can cause a "cultural shock" in children, resulting in struggles to become competent in a relatively foreign culture and environment. Despite these potential problems, some children can still experience transition as elating and enriching. Such positive kinds of mental state, according to the authors, emerge only when a child can identify with positive aspects in a new environment (Cook & Coley, 2017).

Rogoff's view (2003) is that all individuals undergo transitions during their lifetimes, which usually signify modifications to their identities that, ultimately, influence their communities as well. He regards the processes of transition as both individual and social experiences, actively created as individuals participate in social and cultural processes. Dockett and Perry (2014) view an educational transition as a collaborative process that gradually manifests itself, meaning that the process usually includes numerous cultural events and social activities during the shift from one environment to another. Thus, the central focus should be on recognising children's strengths and providing support to enhance their senses of belonging and competence in the new environment. An educational transition embodies continuity as well as a change that involves a variety of individual and social elements. Such engagements occur while children consider the new procedures and expectations in their new surroundings.

In his view of transitions, Harper (2016) includes the period of insecurity that occurs when children separate from a known environment (home) and move into another (the schooling environment) that may provoke anxiety and adjustment difficulties. His definition indicates that transitions can be complex processes for children who rely on trained individuals to assist them. Wickett (2017) suggests that the period of transition provides ideal opportunities for practitioners and families to establish positive and

collaborative relationships. This eventuality should be a major consideration during the planning of a child's transitioning process. Accordingly, ECCE centres should design their programmes in such a way that families can also bolster their children's well-being throughout the transitioning period. Children with healthy mental states tend to learn better and develop stronger relationships with other individuals during the transitional stages.

The Educational Transitions and Change (ETC) Research Group (2011, p.1–4) presents a more contemporary view of transitions that incorporates family, child and community. This group considers the transition to an educational environment as a vibrant and forceful process that requires consistency while children adjust to a new environment. This process is characterised by opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements. These dispositions assure a high quality of learning and personal development that later promotes aspects of social justice, competency and well-being for the child. According to this perception, a successful transition is only accomplished when the child (and family) feels connected to the new environment and strong relationships are built (Sasser, Bierman & Heinrichs, 2015).

Likewise, Margetts (2007) identifies the senses of unity and belonging as primary indicators of productive transitions, adding that young children and families find the complex changes more difficult to manage. Consequently, practitioners need to provide capable support so that the children may feel valued, build their potential and relate well to others while they confront various challenges in their new environment. Petriwskyj (2014) proclaims that the facilitating of transition is, in any system, a policy issue. Transitions of young children provide incentives for their personal growth and development; however, if a period of transition is handled in a hurried and insensitive fashion, then it may cause personal regression and various obstacles to development.

The following section discusses children's responses to transition when a new phase in their lives commences at their ECCE centres.

2.2.1 Children's experience of transition

Existing literature on how children cope with transitions provides deeper insights into the actual nature of the children's experiences during this novel phase of their lives.

Positive transitioning experiences promote a context for the building of relationships with new peers and adults and act as a predictor for social-emotional and educational success (Ackesjö, 2013; Dockett & Perry, 2016). Children's transitioning experiences evidently hinge on the levels of support they receive, the influences of their diverse backgrounds and the implementation of transitional policies.

Ackesjö (2013) postulates that transitions are perceived as significant events for children and are mostly associated with tenseness. Most educational transitional agendas, therefore, are designed to reduce the number of problematic experiences for children. Dunlop (2014, p.43) argues that individuals undergo a series of transitions throughout a lifetime that may present valuable opportunities for personal development, since transitions often involve processes that are entrenched within social, language, cultural and political histories. However, caregivers must be aware that children remain within the confines of their families and the new settings and hence must be guided to accumulate "transition capital". Dunlop (2014) further stresses how important it is for caregivers to consider the elements that children bring to the transitioning phase – elements that can, sometimes, promote or suppress their adaptation to school. Children's experiences are shaped by their life events, earlier transitioning experiences and their respective ways of interacting with the environment in which the transition occurs. When caregivers timely attend to problems, then the children's interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities can improve substantially.

According to Margetts and Phatudi (2013), several prior studies have associated transition with changes to a child's internal and external behavioural patterns. The adaptation to an ECCE centre occurs during a key stage of a child's life, when they may lack social and emotional confidence and when the child may depend on the support of caring adults. Children are expected to reform their personal lives and behavioural responses in a short amount of time when they move out of familiar homes into unfamiliar educational centres. Regrettably, not all practitioners are equipped with the necessary skills to help children manage this process confidently. Accordingly, Goodrich, Mudrick and Robinson (2015) agree that behavioural and emotional regulation help children to confidently adapt to ECCE settings, which reduces the level of discomfort they may endure. Trained practitioners are more adept at helping children to adapt their behaviour and emotions.

Skouteris, Watson and Lum (2012) state that children's home experiences amongst family members mould their transitioning endeavours. The transitions, entrenched within the social contexts of home and school environments, are depicted in relation to the relevant relationships and interactions. Practitioners are required to assist children in adapting to unpredictable elements in their new setting and unlocking their educational and social-emotional potential. Welchons and McIntyre's study (2015) found that children's transitional difficulties largely relate to expectations that they should conform to unfamiliar environments, instantly display independent behaviour and act like self-sufficient persons. The reality, however, is that the children are still young and inexperienced. It is, therefore, the parents' and practitioners' responsibility to assist them during the transitions (Bryce et al., 2018). O'Farrelly and Hennessy's exploratory study (2014) indeed found that ill-prepared children experience stress, anxiety, discomfort and aggression – often manifested in tantrums – during transition because of being separated from their families. Schools must arrange visiting days prior to opening days so that the children can become acquainted with the environment. Dockett and Perry (2016) note that children are relieved of uncertainty about the unknown when they connect with others in the new setting. When children enter an unfamiliar environment where they do not recognise anyone and are immediately subjected to high expectations, then they may show signs of tension and display resistance.

Van Laere & Vandenbroeck (2017) maintain that, if schools want to help children to adjust to a new situation, then they need to be informed about each child's characteristics and family background, to hence adopt an appropriate type of support. Schools can then formulate plans to accommodate and empower the children who are at risk of inadequate adjustment. Children who experience a sense of belonging can be easier protected from regressing. Similarly, Recchia's study (2012) demonstrates that children whose sense of belonging is disrupted manifest their transitional distress by becoming unwilling to cooperate with the practitioners. Her study further emphasises the value of employing effective and knowledgeable practitioners who can help children to overcome their challenges and create opportunities during their transition. Peters (2010) describes the intricacies of distinctive learning and emotions in the quest to facilitate transitional successes. She argues that children must feel a sense of belonging when they enter their new environment, as their emotions may be

unstable at the time. Children with a strong sense of belonging and purpose collaborate better with their peers in solving problems and maximising their potential. Social dissatisfaction and task avoidance may result when caregivers fail to properly attend to the children (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Harper, 2016).

Fabian and Dunlop's study (2007) aligns with Recchia's findings (2012), having found that transition is a collaborative process that takes place over time. This means that practitioners should, always, be willing to smooth the transition process by working together with the children as well as their families. Parents who participated in that study confirmed that the transitions affected their children's well-being and provided new challenges, although those transitions also presented the children with new opportunities to develop their characters (Dunlop, 2014).

Ackesjö (2014) explored children's perspectives on the problematic elements of their transition. Her study established that some children's social discontinuity was not caused by a big school environment or being surrounded by a new culture, but that it was the parting of ways from their old friends that became hard to bear. Still, opportunities to grow increased when the children began to make new friends, which improved their sense of self-worth and restrained their emotional and behavioural problems. Eldén (2013) and Simonsson (2015), likewise, stress the importance of incorporating children's perspectives in research to obtain clarity on their transitioning experiences and understand their coping mechanisms. Studies by Chan (2012), Harper (2016), Wong (2016) and Bryce et al. (2018) identify this process as a period of potential stress – when children are expected to adjust to several unforeseen changes within their physical environments and engage in new roles and relationships. These bewildering circumstances often yield behavioural, cognitive, social-emotional and physical concerns.

The mentioned studies serve as reminders that young children struggle to adjust to stressful changes on their own. They need the support of dedicated practitioners to cope with the various changes, understand their own emotions and build strong relationships in the new and unfamiliar environments (Harper, 2016). Murray (2012) and Recchia (2012) agree that the opportunities presented by transitions – if capably managed – may instil senses of belonging, knowing, security, safety and familiarity in

transitioning children. If the opportunities are not properly managed, those senses can easily be cast into disarray while the children adjust to the more formal environments.

Children tend to panic when they do not recognise anyone in an unfamiliar environment. Effective practices can ensure positive experiences instead. Positive influences boost their confidence, helping them to form stronger relationships with their peers and cope better with emotional challenges (Dunlop, 2014). Children who receive support will function more effectively in their new environment as they adjust faster, display confidence and acquire self-control (Margetts & Phatudi, 2013). A child's family plays an important supportive role during a transition. The next section examines this influence.

2.2.2 Transition experiences of children from diverse backgrounds

Krieg, Curtis, Hall and Westenberg's study (2015) explains that, despite global policy reforms, many children from disadvantaged societies are still deprived of high-quality early childhood programmes. The lasting effect of educational deprivation is that the performance gap between privileged and underprivileged children continues to widen. In a study conducted at a Belgian pre-school, the researcher discovered that children from disadvantaged backgrounds often attend early learning centres that are staffed by untrained personnel with insufficient pedagogical knowledge, and where the focus is more on academic learning and not the care element. Such environments create stressful experiences for children who have to learn to become independent without teacher support. These situations negatively impact on children's transition experiences (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Markström & Simonsson, 2017).

Picchio and Mayer (2019) investigated how children from migrant backgrounds coped with their first entries to early care centres in Italy. They found that the children did not gain autonomy as much as having to face more obstacles and restrictions, since they usually did not understand the official language spoken at their centres. They recommend that caregivers should be encouraged to enhance their practices and obtain the ability to act as mediators and facilitate social interactions among children from diverse backgrounds. Picchio and Mayer (2019) add that teachers' practices must be explicit and they must endeavour to understand children's needs and competencies. Amerijckx and Humblet (2015, p.7) stress the fact that initial encounters

can overwhelm a child. It is important to know that initial experiences not only affect present outcomes but also influence future outcomes. Therefore, a child's social and family backgrounds should be considered and "common values" should be agreed upon as a basis for interaction.

Fabian (2012), as well as Lillvist and Wilder (2017), state that practitioners can improve children's experiences by skilful planning of transition activities and making continual adjustments (as necessary) during and after a transition. For children to experience a stable transition, Dockett and Perry (2013) propose that schools must acknowledge and accommodate the fact that children come from diverse backgrounds and that each child arrives with his/her own inherent but invaluable experiences. This approach will help children to have an optimistic start to life at an early learning centre while reducing their stress levels. Children's first moments at a collective learning environment are always psychologically and emotionally challenging but especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds who have not yet grown familiar with the dominant language (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2015; Kalkman & Clark, 2017).

2.2.3 The impact of transition policies and programmes on children's transitional experience

Developed countries have already explored and improved their policies, programmes and strategies to ease children's experiences of transitioning from home to school. Researchers in Australia, New-Zealand and European Union (EU) states – Sweden, Germany, Belgium, Norway and Italy have completed comprehensive transition studies, which illustrates how highly those countries rate the significance of children's entries into the ECCE domain while also valuing the roles of families, practitioners and transition policies. While well-developed policies promise logical transitional sequences, these countries also attempt to reduce inequalities among children in early years through their policies (Jensen, Broström & Hansen, 2010; Wright, 2012; Ackesjö, 2014; Dockett & Perry, 2014; O'Kane, 2016; Kalkman & Clark, 2017; Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2017; Picchio & Mayer, 2019).

Policies that are adjusted to suit particular contexts and meet the immediate needs of children are more effective in easing their transitional challenges (Hirst et al., 2011). The mentioned transition studies also conclude that a focus on children's mental

health and well-being correlates with positive transitions at early learning centres. The purposes of constructive transition policies are to enhance children's experiences, help them to understand the transitional practices and negotiate the changes in their statuses (Rosier & McDonald, 2011). Fabian (2012) agrees that formal policies are instrumental in promoting higher levels of consultation and continuity in children's transitioning from home to school. Effective policies, therefore, ensure better coherence in practice. Practitioners can also employ their prior knowledge of children's behaviour to raise the standards of their practices. A planned approach to building relationships between caregivers and children is imperative to success and can enrich children's transitional experiences.

Dunlop (2014) suggests that proponents of successful educational transitions must challenge policymakers about social support for children and any plans to improve their well-being. Indeed, other studies indicate that successful transition practices foster long-lasting educational and social benefits for children (Fabian, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2007; Griebel & Niesel, 2013). Researchers like Dunlop (2014) and Welchons and McIntyre (2015) have used longitudinal studies to examine changes over time and to gain more insight into the nature of children's experiences during the crucial phases of transition. They have confirmed that children who are not properly assisted tend to struggle with the transitioning to a new environment. Those studies have established that transitions can be daunting, unsettling and stressful to children, especially those who are sensitive to changes in their lives (Kennedy, Cameron & Greene, 2012; Recchia, 2012; Bell-Booth, Staton & Thorpe, 2014). Miller (2014) suggests that practitioners must consistently strive to manage stress-free transitions while applying the principles of effective policies that pertain to early childhood education. Schools should employ proven government policies as a primary resource in building a transition framework that will support caregivers. In turn, governments should assist schools to develop programmes and processes that are more context-related, collaborative and considerate of parents' views. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2009) and EU states explained the significance of well-prepared transitions when it documented various improvements in outcomes relating to the children's mental states, educational prowess, health and future employment prospects. Those outcomes reinforce the perception that quality practices can guarantee successful transitions from home to school.

Wong's study (2015) was motivated by the fact that children are known to show degrees of stress when placed in new environments. Most of his sample population of children, who were adjusting to life at an ECCE centre, seemed uncomfortable and tense while they were expected to comply with new rules, fulfil the high expectations of practitioners and respect their authority. The practitioners and children in Wong's study (2015) participated in a social-emotional programme at the ECCE centre that supplied them with information on skills relating to communication, stress management and conflict resolution. This intervention programme improved the social-emotional well-being of the children and the related competencies of the practitioners. Benner, Thornton and Crosnoe's study (2017) highlights the benefits of preparatory programmes for children who are transitioning from home to ECCE centres. Their study illustrates that children who had participated in such programmes managed to adjust well during their transition year – socially as well as academically. Proactive strategies will help relieve children's fears, anxiety and uneasiness about their new circumstances (Harper, 2016).

As mentioned above, prior studies have indicated that early childhood centres in some developed countries commit to their transition policies and strategies. Margetts and Phatudi's study (2013), however, established that principals at South African centres generally are unaware of any transition policies or strategies. Instead of assuming proactive approaches to resolve transition-related problems, principals in South Africa appear to believe that their districts should assume those responsibilities. Approaches like these indicate a general indifference towards policies and discourage valuable transition experiences for children. Chan's study (2012) emphasises the need for practitioners – and hence also school principals – to be informed and motivated to develop strategies that create stimulating environments that will smooth the various changes enforced upon the children and their families. ECCE practitioners, too, require support in implementing new policies that relate to children's transitions.

2.2.4 Family involvement during the transition period

Schools that collaborate with families can provide a harmonious start to early learning for children. Parents will also feel valued and hence support the transition process (Kienig, 2017; Krinninger & Schulz, 2017). Lam (2014) suggests that the shift to a new

environment disrupts a child's regular schedule and presents new challenges to the child. Schools should involve the families and offer support so that both parties' well-being is taken care of before the annual opening of schools. When transition programmes are implemented prior to opening day, families will be made aware of their crucial roles in preparing their children for a stress-free transition. Various researchers have confirmed that schools' collaboration with families supports children's adjustment to the new setting (Dockett & Perry, 2014; Miller, 2014; Harper, 2016; Lillvist & Wilder, 2017; Wickett, 2017).

Accordingly, Griebel and Niesel (2013) consider children's transition as a social process, which means that children and families must progress in a transition together. Parents usually request that their children are placed with children they know to ensure social stability for them. Parents, too, are often affected by the changes in routines and overwhelmed by the new demands. Once their children enter ECCE centres, they may benefit from advice on managing their emotions and coping with the circumstantial changes – not unlike their own children. Therefore, trusting relationships between teachers and parents need to be established from the onset (Correia & Marques Pinto, 2016; Lillvist & Wilder, 2017, Wickett, 2017). Schools are required to intensify learning and development for both parties and adopt a strengths-based family approach transition, to genuinely engage with and assist parents during this momentous time and promote their own and children's growth (Webb, Knight & Busch, 2017). This event can be an emotional time for families as they, too, need to adapt to new procedures and physical environments with their children. They should be informed of their undertakings at home in terms of perceptions, expectations, hopes and fears. This process will enrich the ways in which children perceive their transitioning experience.

Parents send both verbal and non-verbal messages about the pending transitioning experiences to their children. The studies of Mirkhil (2010) and Kiernan and Mensah (2011) affirm transition as a defining moment in a young child's life, and that preparation at home can culminate in a successful transition. Strong partnerships between home and school should, therefore, serve as the foundation for transition strategies. Less stress will follow when parents ensure that their children are mentally equipped for the transitioning process. Jarrett and Coba-Rodriguez (2015) studied a

group of low-income African American mothers who kept track of their children's learning of basic skills during their transition. The mothers endeavoured to improve their children's academic and social-emotional statuses, which proved to be a beneficial strategy. The study demonstrated greater possibilities exist for children when their families participate in the transition process.

Ferretti and Bub (2017) explored the correlation between family routines and children's academic and social-emotional readiness prior to transition. Analyses of results revealed that the establishment and commitment to simple routines at home – such as mealtimes, bedtime and reading routines – set the tone for key developmental milestones and decreased behavioural problems like poor conduct, hyperactivity and inattentiveness at the ECCE centre.

In a study by Van Laere and Vandenbroeck (2017), parents expressed legitimate concerns that their migrant children may be excluded from activities or transferred to an additional-needs facility, since they were not versed in the dominant language (Dutch) at the centres. They feared that there would be nobody to help their children manage their physiological and emotional needs. Schools should address these concerns prior to the actual transitioning period to ease the parents' fears, while teachers should be trained in these sensitive areas (Picchio & Mayer, 2019). Parents deserve opportunities to express their concerns about their children's backgrounds to educators (Wickett, 2017).

The sourced literature relating to children's experiences of transition confirms that families play a vital role in preparing their children for transitioning to an educational setting…. The influence of the adults at ECCE centres is almost equally as important because of the emotional insecurity borne in the minds of the newly arrived children. ECCE practitioners are also instrumental in developing children's competencies while the children receive their initial exposure to early educational processes (Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta & Jamil, 2014). It is, therefore, necessary to investigate how young children develop holistically and to ascertain what kind of support they need to enhance those skill (Brooks & Murray, 2018).

2.2.5 The role of the practitioner in promoting smooth transitions

A teacher's presence during a stressful transition has a protective function as it reduces high reactivity in children (Kalkman & Clark, 2017). Denham, Bassett, Sirotkin and Zinsser (2013) confirm that consistently inspiring interactions with caregivers generate positive effects on children's development across social, emotional, physical and cognitive domains during the transitional period. "Toxic stress" may disrupt healthy development during a transition and have long-lasting negative effects on learning, behaviour, physical health and mental health. Importantly, teachers need to guide children in developing these areas during initial stages (Centre on the Developing Child, 2014). An intervention study by Conners-Burrow, Patrick, Kyzer and McKelvey (2017) indicates that teachers who had received high-quality training, followed by monitoring of the implementation of early programmes, use planned activities effectively and provide children with opportunities to develop foundational skills. They use good language and creatively utilise physical play to promote self-regulation, which is an indispensable skill for a transitioning child (Sawyer, 2017; Brooks & Murray, 2018).

Dmytro, Kubiliene and Cameron (2014) find that children love to use play in exploring relationships. Play sessions also provide a collaborative context for teachers and parents to construct positive psychosocial and academic outcomes for children. Teachers can implement advanced play-programmes through a five-stage framework that comprises planning, role-development, use of props, rich language and increased playtime (Bodrova, Germeroth & Leong, 2012). Enhancing a young child's transition is a shared responsibility among families and ECCE staff – especially the practitioners – who should conscientiously work to ease this complicated experience through play-based activities. Parents and teachers are the first socialisation figures to contribute to children's emotional competence. Hoff (2013) suggests that children can develop their language skills through word games. Such play-based activities have strong associations with academic and social skills. Children benefit when they can meaningfully participate in play-based activities in well-arranged and socially rich environments (Gray, 2013).

Effective social-emotional pre-academic and schooling programmes improve children's well-being, and when practitioners manage to enhance the children's

learning prowess at the centres, then well-functioning classrooms without many behavioural problems result. The experiences they provide can foster or hinder development in this area (Denham, Bassett & Miller, 2017). Teachers must regulate their own emotions and communicate effectively, which will prompt children to emulate them. In this way, a child may grow to understand his/her feelings, regulate and express their emotional responses calmly, maintain lasting relationships and appreciate others (Zinsser, Denham, Curby & Shewark, 2015). Sprung, Münch, Harris, Ebesutani and Hofmann (2015) recommend that teachers must be responsive to children's emotional clues and thus create supportive relationships which will serve as a buffer to stress.

Children rely on their emotions and communicative abilities when they interact with their peers. Teachers can use music or games to further develop children's reasoning, social and language skills. Goodman, Joshi, Nasim and Tyler (2015) emphasise that practitioners should concentrate on interactive social-emotional skills to help children form warm, secure relationships, learn how to solve problems, regulate their emotions and develop the mental strength to cope with hostile situations. Those skills have positive and lifelong outcomes. Children with developed social-emotional and academic skills can maintain loving relationships and express themselves well in an early childhood learning environment (Halle & Darling-Churchill, 2016). Children deserve sufficient opportunities to express how they feel to their peers and should be encouraged to use prosocial strategies to resolve conflict rather than resorting to aggression (Curby, Brock & Hamre, 2013).

Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph and Strain (2003) proposed a model – within the context of positive relationships between the various interested parties such as practitioners, teachers, children and their families – to enhance children's social-emotional development and reducing problematic behaviour. Problematic behaviour arises when children are anxious, bored or upset. Kirk and Jay (2018) maintain that attention needs to be given to the interaction between the environment, relationships and play. For instance, teachers can listen attentively to the children's conversations as they move about in the classroom and kindly correct any language mistakes. In this way, children will learn to independently apply their skills and be self-assured when confronted with challenging situations. Practitioners are, therefore, encouraged to use

corrective practices in the classroom to address problem behaviour and support appropriate behaviour.

According to Heller et al. (2012), a positive relationship between a teacher and the children is a prime element in helping the children to learn about their characters and supporting their developmental needs. A negative teacher-child relationship becomes a stressor to a child which will weaken the child's adjustment to school, perpetuate negative behaviour and stunt the child's development (Sprung et al., 2015). Conversely, an approachable environment encourages constructive relationships and strengthens children's emotional health – this is a primary principle in teaching "reciprocal and emotional responsiveness" (Gestwicki, 2017, p.289). A supportive environment harnesses practices that help children to accept guidance and understand classroom routines. It also promotes the moderation of challenging behaviours and problematic interactions with peers (Timmons, Pelletier & Corter, 2016).

In the pursuit of enhancing children's social-emotional development, practitioners need to be aware that relationships are not automatic processes but are built on a knowledge of children's behaviour and responsive interactions in a tolerant environment. Children need to be informed about the expectations within the learning environment, as those expectations will likely significantly differ from those they experience at home and in their communities. A supportive and enriching classroom environment enhances the children's bond with their practitioner. When children understand what is expected of them – like when and how to do what – then they will be less inclined to engage in challenging behaviours. Importantly, practitioners and families need to serve as enablers of young children's emotional competencies. Papadopoulos et al. (2014), as well as McLaughlin, Aspden & Snyder (2016), suggest that secure, responsive relationships alone are not adequate to facilitate social skills in children; practitioners need advanced knowledge about specific strategies that will enhance children's social abilities in acceptable and purposeful ways.

Caregivers must demonstrate positive skills, like empathy, to encourage children to discuss their feelings and inspire them to become compassionate. Therefore, opportunities should be provided for them to observe, participate and engage others with their ideas. McLaughlin, Aspden and Clarke's study (2017) recommends five

strategies to promote children's social-emotional competencies. Practitioners can use *emotional literacy* to instruct children about various emotions and feelings, question them about how they are feeling and to allow them to express their emotions appropriately. The strategy of *social problem-solving* allows children the opportunity to express themselves and articulate a problem when involved in a social conflict. They must be encouraged to solve social conflicts using the steps presented by the practitioners. In developing emotional regulation, practitioners could teach children how to calm down by, for instance, offering them a quiet area to unwind when upset, which may help to make a distressed child feel safe. Children can also be instructed in social skills, such as maintaining strong ties with friends and dealing with disappointments (Selmi, Gallagher & Mora-Flores, 2015). Furthermore, ECCE centres can employ individualised interventions for children who continually display difficult behaviour despite efforts to develop positive relationships with them. These and possibly other professional relationships are required to implement activities that would support children's social-emotional development (Gonzalez-Mena, 2011).

To lay a secure foundation for children's future emotional and academic success, adults, such as caregivers, need to guide young children in developing their competencies. This endeavour includes the balanced regulation of children's emotional expressiveness; provision of positive experiences; and opportunities for them to express their preferences, care for a friend and narrate experiences (Bilmes, 2012). Adults should be aware that emotional competence at a young age favourably determines a child's social and academic achievements – in the present as well as the future. A child is more likely to foster positive life outcomes, experience higher levels of well-being and have a stronger motivation to learn throughout his lifetime than those with poor emotional skills (Denham, Bassett & Zinsser, 2012; Goodman, Joshi, Nasim & Tyler, 2015).

Cole and Tan (2007, p.528) define emotional competence as "adaptive emotional responses that help an individual [to] reach goals, cope with challenges, communicate emotional states and needs, manage emotional arousal, discern other feelings and appropriately respond and recognise how emotional communication and self-presentation affect relationships". Denham et al. (2013) and Sasser, Bierman and Heinrichs (2015) agree that emotions are an instrumental factor in early childhood

learning processes and that emotions develop alongside and in collaboration with parents, practitioners and peers. Children are hence potentially able to utilise their emotions and facilitate their learning prowess. It is vital that children learn how to healthily express and regulate their emotions. Practitioners can also instruct them in developing self-control, emotional awareness, social adeptness and simple problem-solving skills. Children's expertise in these areas sets the stage for a successful ECCE experience and beyond (Zinsser & Zinsser, 2016).

A child who has achieved emotional competence is more likely to seek assistance from others when perturbed or to offer consolation to a peer in distress (Zinsser, Denham, Curby & Chazan-Cohen, 2016). Emotional knowledge and self-regulation are two dominant components of emotional competence, which practitioners can harness to help children develop and even steer their interactions with peers and other adults in constructive ways. It is important for practitioners to remember that social-emotional learning is a continuing process of gaining a set of skills. They must become socially aware and consider others' perspectives (Denham, Brown & Domitrovich, 2010). Emotional knowledge, itself, comprises two basic elements. The first is to help children recognise and distinguish the emotions that they experience. It helps when adults can verbalise those emotions on their behalf. A child usually cries when upset, while adults can verbalise how they feel. The second element involves the recognition of how certain situations may induce children to feel due to prior experiences of the children's expressiveness. Denham, Bassett, Zinsser and Wyatt (2014) imply that emotional knowledge promotes academic success when he illustrates the strength of the relationship between individuals' emotional knowledge and academic achievements.

Emotional knowledge helps children to recognise their own emotions when other persons give expression to theirs. A child's interaction with expressive caregivers, therefore, intensifies his/her emotional knowledge. Young children who can discern the emotions of their peers are more socially adept and can easier engage with practitioners (Zinsser et al., 2016). Denham, Wyatt, Bassett, Echeverria and Knox (2009, p.38) suggest that emotional regulation uses "physical, cognitive and/or behavioural strategies to dampen or amplify internal or emotional experience". These inter-related domains – notably cognitive and emotional domains – combine to develop

behavioural regulation. This means that emotional regulation involves children's ability to productively manage their emotions by being aware of their feelings, monitoring them and modulating them when necessary. Emotionally developed persons utilise their emotions to help rather than impede themselves in coping with a range of situations.

Social-emotional competence, in this context, comprises combinations of trusting relationships, opportunities for expression, motivation, positive interactions among children and practitioners as well as developmentally appropriate activities. Those elements set the foundation for social-emotional and cognitive development in a childcare environment (Cook & Coley, 2017). Good experiences, firstly, enable children to competently manage their thoughts and feelings, use their imaginations and express themselves confidently. Secondly, those experiences make them more likely to engage in goal-driven actions such as controlling their behaviour, impulses and temperaments (Murray, Rosanbalm & Christopoulos, 2016; Timmons, Pelletier & Corter, 2016). Caregivers who frequently interact with children should model appropriate expressiveness to facilitate the preschoolers' development of emotional regulation. Children, furthermore, need to be assisted in knowing how to express their emotions appropriately to certain situations. For instance, children would benefit if they are able to adjust their emotional expressions to suit classroom norms and protocols. A child who encounters difficulties in learning these skills may not obtain the necessary resources to adapt to the new environment and focus on learning. Other children who can regulate their emotions are able to properly focus on their tasks and sustain healthy relationships (Denham, Bassett & Miller, 2017). Therefore, the emotions exhibited by children – and their efforts to identify and regulate their emotions – within the social climate of a classroom are also important elements of academic learning.

Negative behaviour from a caregiver, however, may overstimulate a child who is only beginning to learn how to regulate his/her emotions and understand others, thereby providing the child with negative examples in reacting to situations, events and people (Jeon, Buettner & Hur, 2016). At other times, certain emotional expressions may not even need any modulation, like when a child cries having hurt himself. Denham (2012) argues that parents and practitioners all play vital roles in socialising children's emotions, noting that the experiences that children accumulate can either impede or

inspire the development of their emotional competencies. Adults who frequently interact with children usually demonstrate an assortment of emotions. Children observe and learn from visible or verbally expressed emotions. Denham, Bassett and Miller (2017) warn that a practitioner's ability to productively socialise children could be hindered by certain contextual factors like job stress or individual characteristics, such as an inadequate education level, lack of experience or a troubled background. This emphasises how vital it is that practitioners are well trained in the field of early childhood education if they are expected to successfully manage key issues like transition.

The following section probes the qualities that an early childhood practitioner needs to have to maintain a vibrant emotional climate at an ECCE centre.

2.3 QUALITIES OF AN ECEC PRACTITIONER

The establishment of early childhood education (ECE) has been extensively researched and has yielded strong evidence for both long- and short-term benefits. Studies have revealed strong links between ECE, practitioner involvement and the young child's (from 0 to 5 years old) achievement in the critical domains of cognitive and social-emotional development (Bredekamp, 2011). It is, therefore, crucial that the ECCE practitioner should continually do introspection to verify whether she possesses the characteristics and attitudes that a young child in her care needs to thrive. Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015) state that not everyone is consistently self-aware, advanced, competent and thoughtful. As humans, we tend to become unsympathetic and sceptical towards others. It is thus very important to guide those young minds to start looking at themselves objectively. Urban, Vandenbroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari and Peeters (2012) explain that competence is interconnected with personal qualities and habits such as professional preparation and abilities to integrate newly acquired knowledge, skills, values and attitudes with their working environment. Practitioners who succeed in these areas are likely to build on this knowledge and improve their practices. Studies by Denham et al. (2013) and Sims and Waniganayake (2015) indicate that children who receive high-quality education and care from professionally qualified practitioners tend to excel in academic tasks and mature into socially competent human beings. This is because the social-emotional skills and positive

relationships that they construct with others intensely influence their well-being and educational outcomes.

While ECCE has a constructive effect on children, parents and society, its effectiveness depends on the inherent qualities of the practitioners. The quality of ECCE is, furthermore, dependent on the respective competencies of a child's family, the practitioners and their communities who accept responsibility for their basic needs (Sylva, 2014). O'Conner et al. (2017) advise practitioners to use their knowledge and skills to ease children's transitions and ensure that the crossing over from the base (the home) to the new environment (ECCE centre) occurs as seamlessly as possible. Since 3 to 5-year-olds are in a demanding phase of intellectual, social and emotional development (Bredekamp, 2011), caregivers need to provide ample intentional opportunities for their growth and development.

Practitioners fulfil an important role in providing these opportunities for children's growth and development. Moreover, all transition practices should focus on the child and practitioners need to secure constructive relationships with the child. These components are vital since a relationship-based approach indicates that individuals respect and value each other within the spheres of interactions (Dombro, Jablon & Stetson, 2011; Gitomer, Bell, Qi, McCaffrey, Hamre & Pianta, 2014). To satisfy these requirements, practitioners must demonstrate certain characteristics, personalities and qualities. A practitioner enters the ECCE environment with her whole life history, including inherited life characteristics, personality, life experiences and values (Denny, Hallam & Homer, 2012). These aspects steer the practitioner's performance even though she might be unaware of these qualities. Therefore, practitioners need to continuously reflect on their practices and goals for the young children in their care as they work in intricate and inconsistent contexts (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015).

Serdyukov and Ferguson (2011) mention the need for ECCE centres to appoint professionally qualified practitioners with sound knowledge in teaching methodologies and interpersonal and communication skills. They add that it is not only the professional competencies of practitioners that influence children's experiences of learning but also their personal qualities, values, dispositions and other attributes. These elements, therefore, determine a practitioner's success in the educational field. A practitioner generally transmits both professional and personal characteristics whilst

working with young children. A combination of these qualities empowers practitioners to effectively facilitate the process of transition. Sound personal qualities are essential for practitioners as they are instrumental in educating children and monitoring their well-being and development (Colker, 2008; Sylva, 2010; Serdyukov & Ferguson, 2011; Denny, Hallam & Homer, 2012; Sahin & Adiguzel, 2012; Sheridan, 2013). Klassen and Tze's study (2014) established that the personal qualities of practitioners in developing countries are often not researched. The knowledge gained from such studies could help to develop better recruitment systems and training programmes. In a similar vein, Serdyukov and Ferguson (2011) state that good pre-service training programmes can ensure sound traits among student-practitioners which then become integral parts of teacher training programmes. This approach can help to overcome the restrictions of current training practices that depend solely on content knowledge and pedagogy.

Colker's study (2008) incorporated 43 ECE practitioners and identified twelve operative qualities that make them successful, even though early childhood practitioners' tasks are generally quite complicated. These qualities include "passion, perseverance, willingness to take risks, pragmatism, patience, flexibility, respect, creativity, authenticity, love for learning, high energy levels and a sense of humour". The qualities reinforce the perception that practitioners' eagerness, dedication, flexibility in adjusting to children's varying levels of development and approaches to interactions with children can benefit a child from the first moments of transition (Denny, Hallam & Homer, 2012; Jung & Han, 2013). These qualities make the practitioner aware of children's needs and the fact that children learn at different paces.

A practitioner's vigour can motivate the children during this sensitive period. When a practitioner shares her passions – like, for example, interest in music, art or story-telling – with the children in her class, they may begin to emulate her. Practitioners also need to know that children have their own emotions, and their reactions to stories or activities can easily spin into frustration, anger or uncontrollable sobbing. A patient, creative practitioner may tenderly respond to such outbursts or switch to a humorous activity (Bredekamp, 2011; Mortensen & Barnett, 2015). While creativity has been cited as an invaluable quality for individuals working with young children, Cheung's study (2012) illuminates the advantage of having practitioners who are inspired

creatively. Those practitioners always show flexibility while communicating; listening and thinking about what will work best for a child. They may carefully arrange indoor and outdoor play areas with rich material or multi-sensory activities that allow children to explore the area freely, express themselves and interact with others (Gestwicki, 2017).

Zinsser et al. (2016) believe that children gain much from empathetic practitioners who can relate to them. Empathy for the child encourages the practitioner to perceive things from a child's point of view and to harness that insight to recognise how the child feels. An empathetic practitioner is always intuitively sensitive to children's feelings and may be able to stimulate empathy in children through dramatic plays or stories that involve animals or mythical beings like fairies. Empathetic practices instil in children a sense of integrity and confidence (Svensson, 2013). The warmth that kind practitioners radiate is a helpful quality that assures children that they are treasured, special and held in high esteem in their new setting. Restless children quickly settle down when the reception from a practitioner is affirming and favourable (Feeney, 2012). An intuitive practitioner should manage groups of children well and exert good control because she cares for them and commits to developing warm personal relationships with them. The warmth they receive in return becomes the foundation for everything they do and achieve (Bredekamp, 2011; Denham et al., 2014). These special qualities enable a child's self-concept to thrive, prompting the child to appreciate learning and being in a stress-free environment. In this way, the children start to realise their purpose. Practitioners, therefore, need to embrace good attitudes, be positive and communicate effectively so that the children learn to become confident and feel that they belong (Walker, Myers-Bowman & Myers-Walls, 2008; Taguma, Litjens & Makowiecki, 2013).

Bredekamp (2011), as well as Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015), note that a child's understanding and emulation of good principles can be nurtured in the ECEC environment, since young children tend to admire adults who are unprejudiced, treat them and others well, respond thoughtfully to questions and engage them in solving problems. A practitioner's core values ought to enable them to remain grounded and integrate their values into the features of learning. It will also ensure a stable learning environment during a child's transition. Children who are supported in this manner

achieve academically, sustain social relationships, develop better self-control and feel more secure in a new environment. The practitioner's self-awareness empowers them to assess their functioning and motivate them to advance in a chosen field, guided by the high standard set in the classroom. They can take responsibility for their conduct in such an environment (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015; Jeon, Buettner & Hur, 2016).

Practitioners who draw from their personal abilities and beliefs are quick to nurture a progress-enhancing climate for children (Feeney, 2012). Such a climate strengthens active development and backs smooth transitions. These dedicated practitioners readily avail themselves to children by providing them with positive early experiences. Practitioners with the capacity for consistency, reason, courage, strength of character, integrity, empathy and appreciation are magnets for first-time ECCE entrants. A consistent practitioner easily builds trust between herself and a child. Children instantly settle down in a predictable environment and appear more relaxed with their new routines (Bredekamp,2011). For this reason, emotional constancy is considered as another appropriate trait for ECCE practitioners. Consistent practitioners are "informed and effective" and can meaningfully sustain the well-being of a transitioning child. They know which aspects to focus on and how to help children make sense of their world (Bredekamp, 2011; p.16).

Reasonable practitioners can raise the standards of reason in classrooms by being knowledgeable about the developmental stages of children. An understanding of those stages avoids inexperienced practitioners from pitching their standards either too high or too low or to draw any conclusions without verification of facts (Feeney, 2012). Importantly, practitioners need to possess a strong character, determination and endurance when dealing with tantrums on children's first day at school. A self-assured practitioner can recognise the real problem and, over time, help children to cope with any intense emotional responses during the first few days. Forthright and authentic practitioners can foster confidence amongst themselves and children by being sincere about their feelings. They express objections to children's unacceptable habits while giving praise when a child cooperates. An authentic practitioner will not wilfully expose a child to spells of bad temper as they are so defenceless at a young age (Gestwicki, 2017). Bredekamp (2011) notes that a high-calibre practitioner continually displays the qualities of care, commitment and warmth, which warrants the development of healthy

relationships with the children. Again, this approach becomes the basis for all they do professionally. Dedicated practitioners are reliable and enjoy spending time with children. However, Jennings (2015) reminds us that many practitioners work in stressful, exhausting and emotionally charged settings that contain their energy to sustain a high level of teaching and maintain healthy relationships with children. Still, if practitioners want to avoid a breakdown in trust and the various relationships, then they must keep displaying mindfulness, compassion and self-efficiency.

Rekalidou and Panitsides's study (2015) lists three categories of personal qualities that practitioners should conform to. Firstly, love – a practitioner should love children and accept them unconditionally. Secondly, discipline – a practitioner should exercise respectfulness, firmness, self-discipline and self-confidence. Thirdly, resilience – a practitioner should maintain patience, perseverance, communicative competence and adaptability. Attuned practitioners who provide emotional support to children bestow a learning environment with emotional consistency, easing a child's transitioning to an ECEC centre (Zinsser et al., 2013). Young children steered by practitioners with similar qualities are more likely to enjoy a smooth transitioning experience.

Serdyukov and Ferguson (2011) argue that a practitioner with an adaptable, calm and positive mindset is better equipped to construct healthy relationships with others. Such practitioners are able to promote team spirit and acknowledgement and acceptance of individualism amongst children. Empathetic practitioners can also help children to grow psychologically healthy (Sims & Waniganayake, 2015). Practitioners bestowed with these mentioned qualities – and others such as mindfulness and compassion – are inherently competent to support emotionally traumatised children and tend to have a good grasp of what constitutes a high-quality learning environment. They focus on their performances, manage stressful situations, sustain healthy learning environments and persistently provide emotional support to children (Jennings, 2015).

Gitomer et al. (2014) rate *love for children* as the most significant interpersonal quality that practitioners should possess. Their love for children empowers them to accept, encourage and motivate children and to communicate well with both children and parents. Practitioners' love for children enables them to commit to professionalism, being aware of the actual importance of their profession and remaining dedicated to those they serve. They harness their knowledge of various support systems to meet

children's needs and concerns. Additionally, practitioners' commitment and dedication to the cause of early childhood learning promote productive teacher-child interactions, which are relevant during the transition process.

Vorkapić and Peloza (2017) examined the qualities, traits and well-being of Croatian practitioners, motivated by the nature of their work that necessitates a large degree of emotional engagement to assist children in regulating their emotions. They sought to establish whether the practitioners possessed the kind of qualities that would support this purpose. Their study confirmed the value of practitioners' personal qualities and found that strong connections between life satisfaction, happiness and optimism are necessary for the pursuit of supporting young children. The desired personal qualities relate to "extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience" (Vorkapić & Peloza, 2017, pp.21–28). The study concludes that practitioners who are sociable, warm, trusting, self-disciplined, and never cease their intellectual curiosity send signals to children that learning is fun and that positive learning outcomes can be achieved by everyone.

Aliakbari and Darabi (2013) note that practitioners with vibrant verbal abilities, who are socially competent and know how to communicate openly, can recognise and meet the needs of children. Those individuals draw from their own personalities to reassure insecure children and boost their motivational levels. They also show children that they really care for them by keenly listening to them. According to Gonzalez-Mena (2014, p.66), this involves not only listening to their verbal accounts but also the practice of "holistic listening". Through holistic listening, the practitioner can notice verbal cues and changes in facial expressions and body language. Young children feel assured when they know that someone is listening to them and making the effort to understand them. It becomes likely that a child may then continue discussions with the practitioner. A medium for communication is thus formed.

Practitioners' personal qualities can either steer children's transitions in a productive direction or allow the children to stagnate in their development. Good qualities may emerge through professional preparation. Other personal qualities such as sound values and caring dispositions help to ensure successful transitions for children. Practitioners who acquire a range of good qualities like passion, respect, perseverance and flexibility can reconstruct a child's conception of 'self' in a new

environment. Such practitioners are naturally responsive to children's emotional and learning needs and can sustain healthy relationships with them.

2.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter explored the literature on transition where attention was paid to the critical factors that affect children's transitioning from home to ECCE centres, as well as the importance of practitioners ensuring smooth transitions for the 3-to-5-year-old age group. The review established that an educational transition happens to be the most important transition for a child, which is also marked by a doubtful mindset. Transitioning is a complex process and the phenomenon is not yet well-defined. Children who transition to an early learning centre experience this phenomenon at an early age when they are required to cope with the high expectations of teachers and assume new roles, relationships and identities. The journey from home to an early learning setting can thus be emotionally depleting for children because of their sense of belonging being disrupted. It can, however, also become a turning point for personal development. Importantly, practitioners need to smooth this demanding process for children and minimise their emotional stress. The varying perspectives on transitions indicate that this process triggers changes in an individual's behaviour, activities and roles. According to Schlossberg (1981), the persons who guide a transition process must understand the type, context and impact of a transitioning event on young minds. Schlossberg's theory of transition includes the elements of 'the situation', 'the self', 'support' and 'strategies'. These elements provide a framework to identify resources that influence the ability of an individual to cope with a challenging transition.

Good experiences become predictors for social, emotional and educational success for children and increase their transition capital. Children who are not prepared for a transition experience more stress and become uncooperative because of the disruption in their sense of belonging. Early visits to the new setting can put a child's mind at ease. Since a successful transition entails a collaborative effort, practitioners must work whenever possible with the families of the children and create opportunities for the children to make sense of their new world.

Despite global policy reforms to entrench equal opportunities, children from disadvantaged communities still lack access to high-quality early childhood learning opportunities. They continue to be taught by untrained individuals who provide little attentive care. Developed countries employ well-designed policies, orientations and transitional frameworks to strengthen transition resources for children. The goal is to provide structure to early learning programmes and promote continuity in the transition from home to school. Schools need support from educational authorities to implement effective transitional processes. Transitions can become stressful for parents too as they are also affected by the new routines. They need support to maintain more stable routines at home, which can positively translate to the child's transitioning experience. They need to be informed of their critical role during this time. Migrant parents also have concerns as their children seldom speak the language spoken at their children's new school and, therefore, require assistance from the school. Practitioners assume a decisive function during this time as they frequently interact with the children to purposefully reduce their stress levels. Teachers can develop children's foundational skills by incorporating active learning programmes. The incorporation of physical skills in the daily programme promotes self-regulation in children. Children need to be taught social skills that they can apply during challenging situations. Practitioners with prosocial qualities like eagerness, patience, respect and a sincere passion for children's learning are more responsive to children's needs. In summary, the crucial role of practitioners in supporting this complex process and the qualities that they should possess were acknowledged in the reviewed literature.

This chapter reflected the contextual and conceptual perspectives on young children's transition from home to early learning centres. The following chapter discusses the theoretical framework that guided this research study.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 presented an extensive discussion of young children's transitioning experiences. The reviewed literature confirmed that the transitioning between two critical environments, which is the familiar home setting and an unfamiliar Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) centre, is a most distressing experience for young children. The child at the core of the transitional journey requires active stakeholder involvement to connect with and adapt to the new environment, and to maintain stable relationships.

This chapter reviews the literature on the theoretical framework supporting this study. The backdrop of this theoretical framework is provided by literature on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of 1979. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's bioecological theory of development – an extension of the ecological theory and established in 1994 – positions the child at the centre of interrelated structures with each directly or indirectly connected through multi-layered social interactions. Researchers need to scrutinise these interactions to uncover the influences that encompass a developing child (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). At the heart of the theoretical model is the child living through a critical time of transition.

The theory recognises the value of family settings, communities, peers, preschools, practitioners and the interactions between various subjects and conditions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Berns, 2013). The bioecological theory hence presents the context for a study of the transition journey within the ECCE environment. The theory is also used to fulfil the primary purpose of this study, which is to establish what the frameworks are for ECEC practitioners in children's transitions from home to school. The relevance of this theory to my study is illustrated by the fact that it enabled me to explore the impact of different environmental systems on a young child's transition to an ECCE centre.

In this chapter, I also discuss child development as a critical concept that contains gradual age-related changes across three developmental domains: physical, social-emotional and cognitive development. Importantly, practitioners must recognise that these domains are interconnected and need to be addressed simultaneously. To enable triangulation in this study and to obtain a clear understanding of the development of 3-to-5-year-olds, I incorporated Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development (1963) and the stages of personal and social development into the investigation on social development. Piaget's sensory and preoperational stages – where children flourish cognitively during the early years – are included in the discussion of cognitive development.

3.2 BRONFENBRENNER'S THEORY OF ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS (1979)

Anfara and Mertz (2015, p.xvii) suggest that a "useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story. It is a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon." In light of that statement, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979; 2005a) proposes a model for development in context over time. The theory's strategic principles elucidate the various components that impact the transitioning experiences – across the home and ECCE domains – of children from 3 to 5 years old. The theory offers the framework to examine interactions with individuals' contexts within communities and the broader society. According to Bronfenbrenner, children are shaped not only by their personal attributes but also by the ever-widening environments in which they develop (Bogenschneider, 1996). The ecological theory empowered me to explore, among others, the five basic needs for positive development in children, together with the social-emotional challenges that 3-to-5-year-olds encounter as they embark on their initial journey to the ECCE centre.

Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology of human development acknowledges that human beings cease to advance when detached from their social environment and also defines human development as "the progressive mutual accommodation between the developing person and changing properties of the immediate and broader contexts in which the person lives" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.21). Therefore, active interaction in a constantly changing environment between the developing individual and the environment is critical for progress. Children are an integral part of their environment

and the mutual influence between the child and their environment forms the basis of Bronfenbrenner's theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Petriwskyj (2014) corroborates the notion that a young child's life cannot be alienated from their social environment. This notion is built on the basis that inconsistencies in one layer of the ecological system could impede progress in the other layers. Therefore, attention should not be directed only on the child and their immediate environment when we examine their transition experiences but also on their interaction with the greater environment (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner's theories (1979; 2005b) intensify everything concerning children and their environments that influence their developmental and maturing process. The ecological systems theory observes the social context in which children exist and engage in activities. Children also assume enduring roles that provide social meaning in a specific setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1974). Bronfenbrenner further advises that human development takes place through reciprocal interaction between the human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in the environment. Hence, the social context of a child's connections and experiences determines the extent to which children develop their abilities and achieve their potential (Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). To understand how children develop, the observer must note how children behave in natural settings and interact with the adults close to them over prolonged periods (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The ecological perspective enables the researcher to pay attention to bidirectional interaction between the child's immediate environment and the community that they interact with, while observing their mutual development (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). The reciprocity between children and the environment is illustrated by the theory's confirmation that children are part of their environment and are influenced by it while also influencing their environment. This means that both children and their environment tend to influence each other. The bioecological model of development maintains that bidirectional relationships lay the foundation for a child's cognitive and emotional development (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) is not merely confined to the gradual influence of activities in people's lives; it also analyses the shared effects of a series of social differences and developmental transitions over time. In Bronfenbrenner's view (1976),

an appropriate setting is necessary as participants are more likely to participate in specific roles with parents, peers and teachers for a certain time. The elements of place, time, tasks, and roles form the fundamentals of an effective setting. He further argues that ecological transitions take place as an individual's "position in the ecological environment is altered as a result of a change in role, setting or both" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.xiii). Thus, individuals could experience a change in roles, directives and practices as they move from a familiar to an unknown setting.

Three major principles constitute the bioecological model. The first principle specified by Bronfenbrenner (1994, p.380) maintains that

> "…especially in its earliest phases, and to a great extent through the life course, human development takes place through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active, evolving bio-psychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment".

This means that, as the child matures, relationships become more complex.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) demonstrates here that the interactions in the ecology should be secure so that individuals mature appropriately and steadily adjust to every setting. These interactions are characterised as proximal processes and consists of child-child and parent-child engagements.

The second principle (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p.39) postulates that,

> "The form, power, content and direction of the proximal processes affecting development, vary as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person and the environment (immediate and remote) in which the processes are taking place, and the nature of the developmental outcomes under consideration."

This principle proposes a multifaceted relationship between the quality of the interactions in any system and the developmental outcome. Bronfenbrenner (1989) advocates that the effects of proximal processes are greater than those of the overall development in which such processes occur. To illustrate, this means that whatever

happens in the child-child and parent-child activities have stronger control over the developmental impact than whatever takes place in the entire institutional involvements.

In the third principle, the environment is reflected upon as a "nested arrangement with concentric structures, each contained within the next" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.22). Bronfenbrenner (1977) mentions that these are basic structures entrenched in the ecology of human development that include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem, all of which support the growth of relationships and interactions. Such relations produce patterns that influence human development, as depicted in Figure 3.1 (Swart & Pettipher, 2005, p.11).

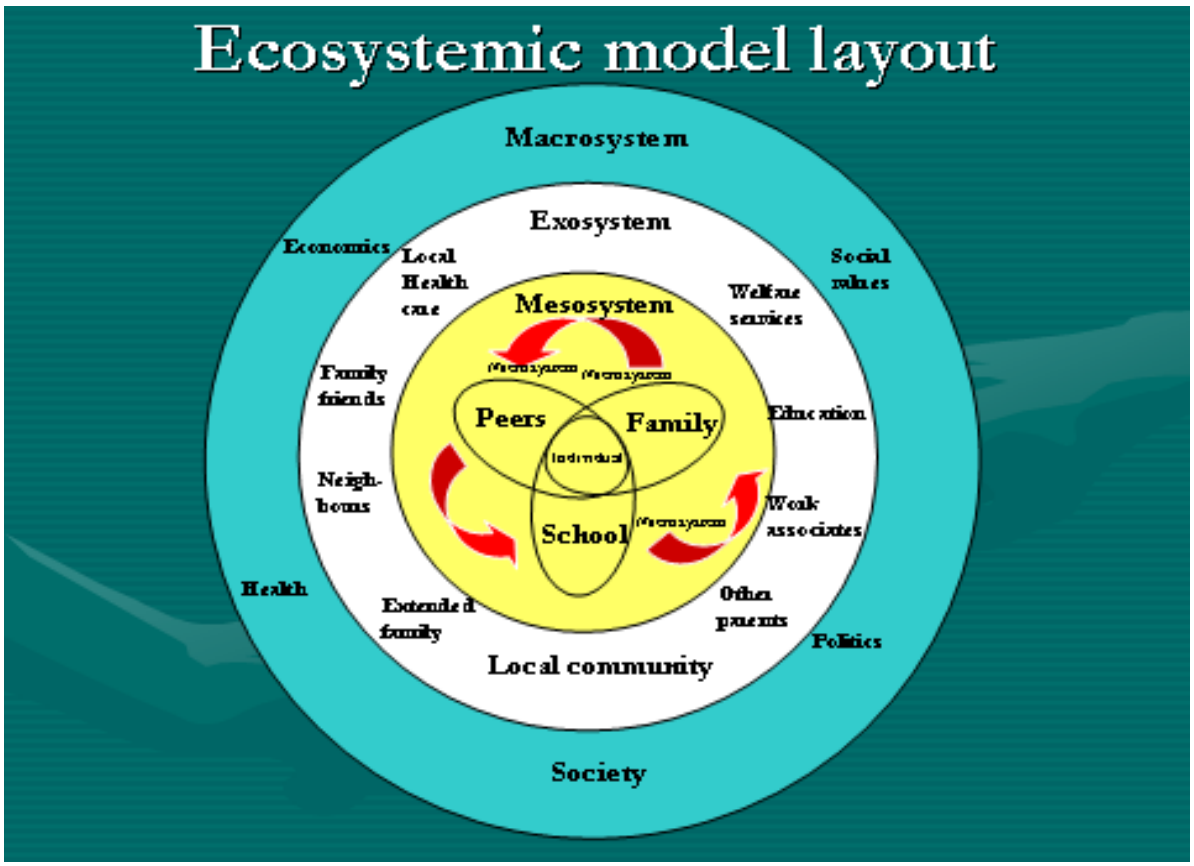

Figure 3.1: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

According to this visual presentation, the child is positioned at the core of the five environmental systems or layers and are driven by numerous circumstances associated with each of the five systems. Within the boundaries of these layers, the child dynamically participates and influences each interaction. The microsystem,

which is centred on the home setting, has the most dominant influence on the child. All individuals in the microsystem have the greatest influence on the child, according to the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner regards the next system, the mesosystem, as a pivotal relational network that occurs between the home and school (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010). This is followed by the exosystem that comprises the influences from external environments which individuals never experience directly (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). This is then followed by the influences of the macrosystem that denotes the significant culture or subcultural content which entrenches the microsystem, mesosystem and the exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Finally, the chronosystem – as the last layer – represent a life transition, as experienced by individuals during their lifetimes (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; 2005b). The various systems are explained in more detail in the following subsections.

3.2.1 Microsystem

The environment in which the child finds himself from birth and thereafter contributes significantly to the development of a child because of the proximity to objects and persons (Bredekamp, 2011). The microsystem, as the innermost of Bronfenbrenner's environmental layers of contexts, is defined as "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.18). The developing child has experiences with important aspects that include various activities and interpersonal relations with influential individuals (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010; Bredekamp, 2011; Berk, 2013). Biological attributes as well as cognition and social interaction play prominent roles in a child's development (Bredekamp, 2011). The microsystem (micro meaning small) centres on a child's immediate physical and social environment wherein the individual meaningfully interacts with others in a face-to-face mode. At some stage, the individual is affected by the activities and people in the microsystem (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010; Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory ponders the extensiveness of the environment within the microsystem, which is an important element in a child's development (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). According to Bronfenbrenner (2005a), interactions that take place on the microsystem level (proximal process) become the key mechanisms for development

as reciprocal interactions emerge between a child and those close to the child such as family members, peers and community members.

In this study, the microsystem represents the child. The focal areas include the child's relationships with their immediate family, community, practitioners, peers at home and the ECCE centre as well as the various media that have a direct impact on the child's overall development and their ability to adjust to a new setting. Much of a child's behaviour is learned, to a large extent, in the microsystem through interaction with family, peers, ECCE programmes, religious institutions and the community. These elements and settings have an important influence on a child's development (Paquette & Ryan, 2001; Bredekamp, 2011). Developmental outcomes are acquired through positive interactions within microsystems that include the child (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). In this study, the family constitutes the most influential factor, providing the children with basic care, warmth, love and various prospects for advancement in life (Berns, 2013). When children are deprived of the opportunity to work with various objects, emulate positive behaviour or initiate an activity, they will be less competent at an ECCE centre. Freeman (2011) agrees that the family and childcare environments are significant elements within the microsystem due to the influences that close interactions have on children's growth and development. The family is thus considered the primary socialiser of a child and generates the most vital impact on their development (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004).

The ECCE centre or school is a setting where the child gains knowledge about society. Teachers serve as role models who can inspire them in many ways. In South Africa, however, many unqualified practitioners still teach at ECCE centres in rural areas and townships. This situation denies many young children access to quality early childhood care (Atmore, Van Niekerk & Ashley-Cooper, 2011). The ECEC setting allows children to meet a peer group wherein they can find companions to interact with and gain life experience, independence and a better sense of who they are. In this setting they can also learn more about cooperation and role-taking.

The community, or the immediate neighbourhood, is a central setting and facilities like a library and playgrounds can enrich children's lives (Berns, 2013). For the purpose of this study, I included the media, which is not considered by Bronfenbrenner as elements in a microsystem although I concur with Berns (2013) that the media setting

broadens the child's outlook on life by providing them with opportunities to interpret the world from past, present and future perspectives and learn about roles, relationships, attitudes and behaviours. A significant part of a child's behaviour is acquired in the microsystem (Paquette & Ryan, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that the developing child is not merely an impassive beneficiary of the various processes embedded in the systems, but that they also influence the way in which systems are experienced. The child, therefore, also influences how society responds to their needs.

3.2.2 Mesosystem

The mesosystem ('meso' meaning intermediate) forms the second basic structure of Bronfenbrenner's environmental layers or contexts of the ecological system theory and is an important link between a person's intermediate settings (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). It "comprises of the linkages and interrelationships among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school and neighbourhood peer group)" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.25). Similarly, Freeman (2011, p.829) states that "people, places and events are involved in the mesosystem's synergy of interactions, for instance, neighbourhood, schools, institutions, local residents, a child's family members". Accordingly, a mesosystem is "a system of systems". It is generally reconstructed or expanded every time the developing person enters a new setting. This primary link or interconnections may include other persons who participate in both settings such as family members, ECCE personnel or peers who act as transitional links in a social network; these persons provide the necessary formal and informal communications between settings. Resultantly, the ecological theory regards this as a situation in which the same individual participates in several settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The settings within the microsystems interconnect to build the mesosystem, which means that anything that happens in any of the microsystems may affect the other system (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010). The important contribution of structures in a child's microsystem indicates that a strong child-adult relationship is instrumental in positive development (Paquette & Ryan, 2001). All the individuals –

including parents, teachers, peers and neighbours – who frequently interact with the child contribute immensely to the child's well-being (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013).

In this study, the young child's family, ECEC centre and peer group at the ECCE centre are regarded as significant sectors of the mesosystem. The impact of the mesosystem on a child depends on the quality of interrelationships (Berns, 2013). Paquette and Ryan (2001, p.30) confirm that "the family is the closest, most intense, mostly durable, and influential part of the mesosystem". They also believe that "the influence of the family extends to all aspects of the child's development; language, nutrition, security, health and beliefs are all developed through the input and behaviour related feedback within the family" (Paquette & Ryan, 2001, p.23). Bronfenbrenner (1979) discusses the case of a child arriving alone on the first day at the ECEC centre. This indicates a single link between the centre and (only) the child. A weak linkage between the family and centre – in terms of the child's experiences and values – negatively affects a child's achievement. Where the link between a family and the centre is productive, the child tends to excel in all areas.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) asserts that, even though the family is the primary setting wherein most human development is initiated, it is, nevertheless, just one of the settings in which developmental processes can and do occur. Conversely, some adverse environmental conditions and incidents emerging from outside the family may interrupt the close relationships within the family, which may substantively diminish human development. Accordingly, Woodside, Caldwell and Spurr (2006) explain how important it is that the various parts of the mesosystem work together in the interest of the child. The greater the qualitative connections between elements in a child's mesosystem, the more it will benefit the child's socialisation. When this happens, the microsystem will enrich all activities that take place in the macrosystems. This can happen, for instance, when parents invite their children's friends over to their homes. The permission a child receives from parents strengthens the socialisation impact. The influence of the mesosystem can be enhanced by other means, such as when businesses in the community actively support centres and schools (Berns, 2013).

3.2.3 Exosystem

The exosystem ('exo' meaning outside) is the third basic structure of Bronfenbrenner's environmental layers or contexts. This layer constitutes connections with social settings and systems that persons hardly experience directly, yet still have profound influences on their growth and development (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.26) describes the exosystem as "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, by what happens in the setting containing the developing person". In subsequent writing, Bronfenbrenner (1986, p.723) refers to environments "external" to a developing individual in which they have controlled access. In an exosystem, the links between two or more environments emerge in a way that indicates one setting is not part of the child's direct experience yet affects the child in one of their microsystems (Freeman, 2011; Berns, 2013). In Paquette and Ryan's (2001) opinion, culture is an important element of the exosystem and often provides society with the material resources, support, values and contexts in which relationships occur. Other components of the exosystem include major institutions of society like agencies of government, communication and transportation facilities, the working world, mass media distribution of goods and services, informal social networks and the neighbourhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1976).

In this study, the child's exosystem includes larger social settings such as the parents' workplace. Even though children may be inactive participants in those settings, they are still affected by this structure in one of their microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Berns, 2013). Berns (2013) discusses several components in the exosystem such as a parent's workplace, a family's social network and community contexts, and find that any incident in those settings or the neighbourhood has an effect on the child. For example, where a parent's work setting requires compliance instead of being involved as an active participant in decision-making, that parent may apply the same principle in their parenting endeavours, which translates to exercising stricter control over the child at home. It is thus likely that circumstances at the parent's workplace may influence the child's life. A parent's dismissal from a job could negatively affect the child if the parent becomes unable to buy necessities; such situations are bound to disrupt the child's socialisation process. However, a parent's promotion at work means

that they may afford extra luxuries for the household. Even the construction of a shopping mall close to an ECEC centre affects children's socialisation and learning because of more noise and activity in the children's immediate surroundings.

3.2.4 Macrosystem

The macrosystem ('macro' meaning large) is Bronfenbrenner's fourth environmental layer and consists of society and the subculture to which the maturing child adapts while taking note of their belief systems, lifestyles, patterns of social interactions and life changes. The macrosystems are considered as groups of directives for ecosystems, mesosystems and the microsystem (Berns, 2013). In Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the macrosystem comprises circles of more distant people, events and institutions that inconspicuously affect the child (Freeman, 2011). As the outermost environmental layer or context, the macrosystem embodies the larger cultural or subcultural context whilst the micro-, meso- and exosystem are deeply rooted settings where continuous progress takes place (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010). Therefore, a macrosystem denotes the prime institutions of the culture or subculture, like the educational, socioeconomic, legal and political institutions in which the other systems feature (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). Bronfenbrenner (1979, p.26) notes that, while creches or playgrounds in France may seem similar to and operate like those in the United States of America, for example, distinctions exist between the two societies that influence the respective home, education, care, neighbourhood and work settings in their own ways. Such "intrasocietal" differences depict the macrosystems' concept that a system's blueprint varies for different socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural groups.

Democracy has been the basic belief system in several countries and is an example of a macrosystem. This system has also been adopted in South Africa since 1994. Democratic principles influence the labour arena as employers are not allowed to discriminate when appointing staff. Democratic sentiments hence shape ECCE-family relations as centres need to inform parents about their policies while parents have the right to inquire about those policies. Furthermore, democratic principles transform the content of teaching programmes at the ECEC centre in the macrosystem because children need to understand the principles of children's rights. A child who lives in South Africa and assents to the democratic doctrine is thus influenced by such a

macrosystem, although the child can also be part of other macrosystems such as their ethnic group and culture (Berns, 2013). Bronfenbrenner (1977, p.515) states that a macrosystem "differs in a fundamental way from preceding forms in that it refers not to specific contexts affecting the life of a person but to general prototypes, existing in the structure or substructure and activities occurring at a concrete level".

According to Bronfenbrenner (1976, p.6), such macrosystems are "conceived and examined not only in structural terms but as carriers of information and ideology that, both explicitly or implicitly, endow meaning and motivation to particular agencies, social networks, roles, activities and their interrelations". At the broadest level of society (the macrosystem), individual development may be affected by changes in laws or political and social structures (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). In this study, the macrosystem denotes the economic, social and political legacies and the education system of the country.

3.2.5 Chronosystem

The chronosystem forms the fifth basic structure and involves temporal changes in the ecological systems or among individuals. The chronosystem, in its basic form, centres mainly on life transitions that often incite developmental changes during a life (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Freeman, 2011). The chronosystem reviews the components of complex patterns and structures that occur during life and analyses their influences on a person's development in terms of the various changes within the settings in which an individual resided (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The chronosystem, therefore, represents the changes that happened in either the environment or the individual and influenced the direction in which development occurred during a lifetime (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010).

According to Sigelman and Rider (2009), the fundamental reason for Bronfenbrenner's establishment of the concept of the chronosystem was to encapsulate the essence of the gradual changes in people and their environments that unfold patterns or sequences in a person's lifetime. Viewed alongside the chronosystem, it becomes necessary to establish whether – in comparison to previous social statuses and conditions – all the changes that had taken place are significant, whether the gains outweigh the deficits and whether individuals have learned to adjust to and cope with

changing developmental contexts in their pasts (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). As suggested by the ecological systems theory, one must consider events at various levels of the human ecology that relate to the individual, family, home, ECCE centre, practitioners, peers and community settings when dealing with children who are transitioning to an ECEC centre (Bogenschneider, 1996). The ecological theory of human development, therefore, presents a trail of the state of children's transitioning that can be evaluated in terms of the changes at various levels of the ecological system (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004).

In summary, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a theoretical framework for investigating the experiences of children during transition. The theory enabled me to focus on the complex interactions that affect the child's home and ECCE centre during this critical period of transition. The following section strengthens this framework by focusing on the development of the transitioning child.

3.3 THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Sigelman and Rider (2009, p.3) define development as "orderly patterned, and relative enduring changes and continuities in the individual that ensue between conception and death". Greenfield and Cocking (2014) explain child development as a vibrant structure that is rigorously influenced by family, culture, growth and genetics. Burchinal (2018) notes that recent research in the field of human development – especially in the fields of behavioural, neuro-, cognitive and educational sciences – reveal physical, linguistic, social and emotional domains as the major elements of human development. These elements are deeply interwoven in certain parts of a young child's brain and are key to early learning prowess. Strengths or weaknesses in one area can either activate or deactivate development in other areas (Thompson, 2014). Conversely, the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner is a contextual model that perceives human development as an interactive process entrenched within the broader personal and environmental contexts in which the young child lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This context affects the child's development and is derived from the relationship that the child shares with the family, as well as his/her associations with peers in classroom settings. Children are further affected by cultural

political and historical elements (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Jones, Bouffard & Weissbourd, 2012).

All the domains of development need to be considered for one to appreciate how a young child matures. In early childhood education, references to the development of the whole child are frequently made. In this study, I discuss three comprehensive domains of child development as suggested by McDevitt and Ormrod (2013). These domains encompass the physical, social-emotional and cognitive development that needs to be nurtured in the early years.

In the following section, I first discuss *physical development* to illustrate that each child develops according to their own pace. I also reflect on the role of maturation which includes aspects of genetics, brain development and motor skills. Other areas of physical development include use of the body, play, nervous system growth, size, shape, skills, bones, muscles and the pre-operational stage, since the children in this study belong to a relevant age group. I then discuss *social-emotional development*, emphasising how necessary it is that a child acquires rich experiences in a supportive environment and develops healthy relationships with responsive adults to boost neural activities. This discussion includes Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. A discussion of cognitive development and Piaget's related theory, with an emphasis on the sensorimotor, concludes the section.

Development is described as successive and summative because milestones tend to be reached in an expected way. Thus, well-planned experiences encourage children to advance to higher levels. Parents, caregivers and practitioners must recognise the implication of each of these areas of child development and realise how closely they are interrelated. Each prominent area readily merges with the others to sustain the total development of a child (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015) and is discussed as such.

3.3.1 Physical Development

Rates of development in children vary. While direction and sequence of development are comparable for every child, it should be noted that each child advances at their own pace. All children are born with their own unique inclinations while physical and

environmental forces differ for each one (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). McDevitt and Ormrod (2013) postulate that a child's development is influenced by his experiences and rate of maturation. They define maturation as the elucidation of genetically determined potential that takes place while the child grows.

Children's rate of motor development depends on good experiences and strong interactions with caregivers. The teaching of fundamental motor skills enables children to apply that knowledge to the playing of games and other physical activities. Those who do not acquire these skills become less active than their peers who do (Kail, 2011). Mavilidi, Okely, Chandler & Paas (2017) argue that children must be provided with good quality equipment and resources to refine these skills. Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015) explain that a young child's body increases in mass and size while they develop and they develop more complex responses to fine and gross motor activities. Khan and Hillman's study (2014) on early childhood physical activity and aerobic fitness confirms that active brain growth occurs in early childhood and that school-based physical programmes – with the inclusion of aerobic fitness – for young children optimise the brain's cognitive health. This means that children need to gain sufficient first-hand experiences in their various groups. The exclusion of tasks may have a detrimental effect on the development of motor skills. Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015) warn that poverty-related health problems during the early stages could affect a child adversely. This risk factor could have lifelong consequences for the child in terms of development.

Young children become progressively mindful of their bodies, physical efforts, and spatial and directional awareness while they move their bodies and interact with the environment. They even can make basic responses to various sensory inputs (Lobo, Kokkoni, De Campos & Galloway, 2014). As they continue to physically develop, they explore different ways to move around and interact with the environment. Their bodies become more controllable and streamlined, their perceptual and cognitive development thrives, they build on existing motor skills and master more complicated movements. Therefore, strong relations exist between motor and cognitive growth in young children. An increase in physical activities shapes a dynamic milieu for motor skill development and lays the foundation for enhanced cognitive functioning (Fedewa

& Ahn, 2011). With competent adult supervision, children learn to regulate their movements in response to the demands of hands-on tasks (Wang & Wang, 2015).

The majority of 3-to-5-year-olds love using their swiftly growing gross motor skills. They become deeply engrossed in fantasy play and initiate pretend characters into their physical play. They enact the roles of parents, doctors, firemen, superheroes and villains. Such activities motivate them to participate in creative and collaborative interactions (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015) further state that their motor development is characterised by throwing, jumping, skipping and hopping. These are the preferred activities of a young child who enjoys experimenting whilst showing better proficiency in balance. At age four, a child can usually write letters, numbers and add some details to their drawings. At age five, a child has gained dexterity in their hands and fingers, enabling them to use scissors and draw images with more adeptness (Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2015).

3.3.2 Social-emotional development

The Centre on the Social and Emotional Foundation for Early Learning (CSEFEL) (2013a) defines social-emotional development as the developing capacity of a child – from birth through to five years old – to establish relationships. Built into this domain are five interrelated skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Any effective programme that supports the development of these competencies can improve a child's well-being. A socially and emotionally competent child is more competent in their environment because they are socially aware, emotionally attuned and can better manage relationships and conflicts. They are able to empathise, appreciate the perspectives of others, appreciate diversity and accept social norms. They know when to cooperate or to seek help from others.

Steed and Roach (2017) describe social development as the endeavour of learning how to interact with other individuals. Socially developed children understand the need for rules, sharing and the taking of turns, although they still need support to thrive and build lasting relationships. McDevitt and Ormrod (2013) explain social-emotional development in terms of regular adaptations in the forms of emotions, self-concept, motivation, social relationships, moral reasoning and behavioural advancement, which

relates to the nature of a child's interaction with others. This includes affectionate relationships with other adults outside the family circle – such as practitioners and other caregivers – who are influential in the promotion of a children's well-being, acceptance by peers and their academic achievements (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013).

Children's social-emotional development begins at birth and is mostly influenced by profound experiences and the ways in which they interpret their world. The developing human brain thrives on favourable experiences. For this study, I focused on the child as the key figure during the transition from home to the ECCE centre and the related aspects of children's social-emotional development, such as the early childhood practitioner, brain architecture, attachment and positive relationships.

3.3.2.1 Factors that influence the social-emotional development of a child

Across contextual development frameworks, young children's social-emotional development guides their social interactions and establishes the quality of their contacts with others within (and across) each entrenched context (Chen, 2011). These factors need further discussion.

(i) The ECEC practitioner

The foundation for a child's healthy social and emotional progress is established in the early years. It is, therefore, essential that the early childhood practitioner possesses an in-depth understanding and appreciation of theories relating to children's social-emotional development – traits which will also help a practitioner become a socially and emotionally competent teacher. Practitioners need to monitor children continually and ensure that they remain engaged in activities and achieve social-emotional competence from continuous interaction with the environment.

According to Jennings (2015), teachers encounter various challenges that hinder their ability to uphold an ideal classroom environment, which may cause behavioural problems. The use of collective social activities may reduce challenging behaviour in class. Professional practitioners should be able to translate the above-mentioned theories into sound practices at children's centres. Children adapt their social and emotional behaviours through reactions of others to their behaviour, their close

observations of adults, peer behaviour, role-playing during play and the opportunities created for social interaction. These adaptive skills must be fostered in young children (Nelson, Kendall & Shields, 2013). Therefore, the practitioner should design a supportive environment to foster relationships. A child who receives consistent emotional support will also have a strong relationship with the teacher (Denham, Brown & Domitrovich, 2010; Gordon & Browne, 2014). Halle & Darling-Churchill (2016) suggest that children who are socially and emotionally well-developed adjust faster to new environments and are better equipped to develop secure relationships with their peers and practitioners.

Hoffman (2016) postulates that social-emotional development in early childhood lays the foundation for later social and behavioural success. Any child who is unsuccessful at acquiring basic social-emotional skills during the early years will be burdened by its effect throughout his/her life and may struggle with low self-esteem. Teachers' stress levels need to be managed so they can help children cope with social-emotional challenges (Morris, Denham, Bassett & Curby, 2013).

Mindful practitioners at ECCE centres aspire to serve the children well. They have a clear understanding of their social-emotional competencies which they employ to create healthier social-emotional conditions for the transitioning children (Zinsser & Zinsser, 2016). Practitioners should be knowledgeable about focal areas regarding brain development, relationships, attachments, competencies and self-regulation – aspects necessary to sustain the children's acquisition of social-emotional skills during the transition. If managed appropriately, children will become more confident, intellectually inquisitive and able to express their feelings in the new environment (Gordon & Browne, 2014). As social-emotional development is such a dynamic feature in a child's early life, I will now define this essential concept.

All supporting relationships can contribute to a child's development and have overall long-term benefits. Teachers' behaviours serve as the basic norms for children to learn about the nature of emotions and relationships. The teachers must be able to regulate their emotions and manage stress levels in class (Jennings, 2015). Children receive unsupportive care when their teacher lacks the required pre-service training and experience (Jeon, Buettner & Hur, 2016; Zinsser et al., 2016). A stressed teacher is more likely to offer inconsistent emotional support to traumatised children (Zinsser &

Zinsser, 2016). Jennings (2015) confirms that teachers who model appropriate behaviour and display prosocial qualities tend to provide stimulating activities for the children and encourage them to establish positive relationships, which help them to thrive socially and emotionally.

(ii) The role of the brain

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC) (2015, p.7) states that a child's initial experiences build his "brain structure", which, at first, are basic circuits that gradually evolve into more complex circuits. Certain brain sections remain attentive to higher-order functions such as social-emotional and cognitive capacities. The NSCDC (2015) concludes that the early childhood period is a momentous time in a person's life. This is because the architecture of the developing brain is still susceptible to the influence of relationships that begins in the family, then extends to other influential adults such as extended family members and those who provide a child with early care and education. Thompson (2014) adds that prolonged stress from terrifying experiences like adversity and extreme poverty can reduce the number of neural connections in certain parts of the brain. Good environmental experiences positively imprint on a brain and prompt the child to execute instructions well (Cozolino, 2014; Moore, 2014).

Children's experiences with adults influence their brain structure while they seek interaction and emotional engagement with them. These relationships positively influence learning behaviour as well as physical and mental health. Healthy social-emotional development is likely to occur when children can rely on adults who are responsive to their needs and efforts. This "serve and return process" leads to faster development of the basic brain circuits (Chief Medical Officer of Health, 2011, p.12). Any professionals who work with young children need to realise that the brain is not a self-governing organ but is closely interconnected to other bodily systems. Therefore, the brain is not entirely cognitive but also emotionally powerful.

Good early experiences can combat a build-up of early adversarial experiences during early childhood (Moore, 2014). Children thus need to have caregivers who can provide them with supportive, caring and stimulating environments and opportunities such as playing, talking and exploring. Nurturing relationships support appropriate regulation

in children as well as better functioning endocrine systems, which are requisites to learning and adjustments. It is the perfect time for caregivers to teach skills like the regulation of emotions, consideration of other perspectives, calming strategies and understanding the natural consequences of deviations, as these skills influence brain circuits (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017). Any slight deficiencies in a child's circumstances may undermine the full development of his brain. Even ill-considered responses from an adult can interrupt cerebral functions such as early learning skills, social-emotional control and further cognitive development.

Advances in neuroscience and new knowledge gained from recent studies on brain development now provide practitioners, parents and communities with intriguing insights into the role that life experiences play in neural processes. Studies have established that experiences have a lasting effect on learning behaviour as well as physical and mental health (NSCDC, 2015). Nelson, Kendall and Shields (2013) suggest that brain architecture in the early life stage indicates a critical window of opportunity – from birth to five years old – for teaching and social-emotional learning. Fulfilling experiences positively influence the nature and quality of the developing brain architecture.

Babies are born with all the neurons they need to have. During the first three years after birth – a period of physical brain plasticity – most of the brain development occurs. Plasticity is the most distinctive feature during this delicate period as neural pathways to various developing areas of the brain are formed, which are connected and strengthened according to a child's experiences. Children who have been afforded ideal resources and care from the beginning of their lives will probably achieve better outcomes than others born into challenging circumstances (Sokolowski, Boyce & McEwen, 2013). Housman (2017) argues that, considering the neuroscientific developments and the emergence of improved ECEC centres, practitioners must receive sufficient training in approaches to social-emotional learning. Qualified practitioners can manage the social-emotional element involved in the co-regulation of children. They will have been trained to anticipate and respond to children's individual needs and to provide physical and emotional comfort to an anxious child.

(iii) Attachment

The term 'attachment' describes emotional relationships that develop over time through face-to-face interactions, play, touching and individual attention; in this instance, between child and caregiver. Such relationships significantly improve children's personal development and strengthen their transitional skills. Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2013) confirm that a child's ability to secure affectionate interpersonal relationships (attachment) is an important feature of development. Primary caregiving is a key principle that promotes adult and child attachment (Kovach & Da Ros-Voseles, 2008).

Attachment, as a concept, is closely related to parenting skills that can promote a respectful relationship between a child and caregiver. Responsive, sensitive and consistent parenting accord children a secure sense of attachment. Securely attached children generally become more self-confident and enthusiastic in exploring their environment as this reduces stress in children. Such exploration can be initiated at any time by the caregiver which will in turn strengthen the child's attachment to the caregiver (Solter, 2013). Moore (2014) adds that children should be provided secure environments and experiences that not only protect them from harsh conditions but also enable them to build attachments and much-needed competencies. Colmer, Rutherford and Murphy (2011) advise that, when children's needs are met, they are then likely to form secure attachments with caregivers, while those whose needs are barely met will form less secure attachments.

Denham et al. (2009) and Solter (2013) consider attachment as the emotional relationship that progressively develops between humans. Attachment is also considered as a special kind of play that triggers laughter. Productive interactions between adults and children strengthen those connections. This initial relationship bestows the child with an ability to later form close and healthy relationships with other individuals. A secure attachment in early childhood requires caregivers to be sensitive to a child's psychological needs and to be emotionally present in the child's life. Frequent physical contact with children and collaboration with their parents are needed (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). Conners-Burrow et al. (2017) find that children who are identified as disruptive at the preschool level may be insecurely attached individuals whose emotional behaviours have been affected. Caregivers need to be sympathetic

to the varying attachment styles that children demonstrate. Securely attached children are generally more confident, positive and sociable, while they can exhibit self-control and eagerness to take on the initiative in building relationships. Insecure children tend to be more withdrawn, fearful, anxious, noncompliant, hostile and angry. Caregivers must hence plan secure environments and programmes that will help children to adapt at their own pace.

Brophy-Herb et al. (2009) finds that a receptive parent-child interaction – and when the mother can support a child's mental state and interpret his desires, thoughts, interests and feelings – already project a more secure attachment for a child only 12 months old. A securely attached child should be able to enter an ECEC centre quite capable of handling disappointment and other emotional discrepancies they encounter. Children rely on their mothers as vital resources in learning how to manage their emotions and benefit when their mothers are open and accepting of their feelings. It follows logically then that social-emotional development relies on the forming of trusting relationships within social groups (Read, 2014).

The first collaborative development task that children must achieve is the establishment of sound interpersonal relationships with caregivers. When children's needs are taken care of and recognised, healthy attachment results. In terms of a preschool child's acquisition of social skills, the development of a strong attachment between the child and caregiver is a vital element in securing positive and enduring social, emotional and academic prowess later in life, even towards adulthood (Gillespie & Hunter, 2011).

(iv) Positive relationships

According to the Government of Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health (2011) in Canada, positive relationships during the early years set the tone for later relationships in a child's life. Positive early relationships enable children to cooperate with others, care for others, express and share opinions, resolve conflicts and understand how other individuals may feel. They shape their own identities, gain a sense of self-worth and obtain valuable experience in this manner. CSEFEL (2013b) agrees that a positive relationship with a parent(s) or caregiver can sustain the social development of a child. Children must be allowed to develop and maintain healthy relationships and seek help

as required. Children make headway in gaining competence that allow them to effectively solve social situations, but this success is related to the quality of relationships they share with adults (Bassett, Denham, Fettig, Curby, Mohtasham & Austin, 2017).

Risky early experiences can acutely influence young children, although quality parenting can safeguard children from related stress (Thompson, 2014). This attribute becomes vital when a child transition to an ECCE centre. Warm, trusting relationships and interactions between children and practitioners encourage children to resist social pressures. The following section discusses the concept of social-emotional development as proposed by Erikson in his psychosocial development theory.

3.3.2.2 Erikson's theory of psychosocial-development

In his inspiring work, *Childhood and Society* (1963), Erikson introduced his psychosocial theory of development, which is a refinement and expansion of Freud's psychosocial view of personality development. He theorised that a child's personality grows in response to his social world similar to the way their skills for social interactions develop. The theory remains compelling when it describes the eight critical stages of social and emotional development that encompass the human lifespan (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015). Erikson found that the social environment merges with biological maturation, presenting the child with a "crisis" that needs to be unravelled, while each stage contains a developmental task that is psychosocial in nature (Huitt, 2008, p.1).

The theory is based on the view that during each stage of human development, and as children mature, both society and culture incite various crises for each age group. Erikson envisages development as a passage through a series of stages that comprise goals, concerns, accomplishments and changes (Woolfolk, 2007). At each stage, Erikson describes sequences with a possibility for healthy development on one end with the prospect of harsh consequences on the other end. He views development as the product of conflict between two extremes. Positive experiences are required for a healthy growth curve, although it is equally imperative that the negative poles of psychosocial resolutions must not be undervalued (Marcia & Josselson, 2013). All potentials acquired in one stage allow the individual to move successfully to the next

stage. It is also possible for an individual to return to earlier stages and resolve conflicts.

In this study, I examined the first three stages relating to children from birth to 5 years old. The goal was to understand the advantages for children who have been nurtured in trusting environments and granted opportunities to acquire independence. The three stages of social and emotional development are discussed here.

(i) Trust versus mistrust (from birth to age 2)

Caregivers' most important task is to ensure that infants develop a deep sense of trust in the world and that their need for food and love will be satisfied (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). Once this trust is established the infant begins to feel secure. The infant develops trust through amicable relationships with caregivers. An unpredictable adult may send the negative message to the child that the world is an unreliable place and they are incapable of influencing it (Bredekamp, 2011). Infants instantly sense their environment and produce movements in response (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010).

Huitt (2008) states that an infant's first instinct is to develop a foundation for a healthy personality and to gain a sense of trust in themselves and others in their environment. Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015) believe that all nurturing and responsive relationships in a child's first year are crucial to the development of trust. Consistently high-quality care given to infants enables successful outcomes. A child whose basic needs for nourishment and physical contact are met will sense that the world is reliable and safe, thereby attaining natural trust. This sense of trust is vital because it lays the foundation for positive self-esteem. Some caregivers fail to provide this security for children. When this happens, a child may struggle to maintain future relationships since their hope and ability to trust others and themselves will have dwindled. Mistrust creates a feeling of detachment and the resultant loneliness can persist throughout a child's life.

(ii) Autonomy versus shame and doubt (2 to 3 years old)

According to Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015), this stage commences when the child is about 12 to 15 months old, when they begin to experiment in their world. The

growing toddler learns to organise sets of patterns, act independently and assert themselves as human beings. They substantiate their efforts with statements like "Me do it!" or "Mine" (Bredekamp, 2011, p.104). Most inner conflicts centre on toilet training and self-help skills. This sensitive stage makes some children self-conscious as they experience shame and low self-esteem. When they are well-received and supported by accommodating adults who recognise the need for children to assert themselves, they will develop independence and move efficiently through the next stages. Children who are granted the opportunity to become self-sufficient according to their abilities will achieve autonomy (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015).

Autonomy suggests confidence in one's competency. Unconstructive responses from other individuals signal to a child that they are incompetent and unable to function effectively. Every time that an adult demonstrates impatience and insensitivity towards children for asserting themselves, they activate senses of shame and doubt in the child, which becomes a dominating influence in a child's life. In these instances, children begin to feel helpless (Bredekamp, 2011). Since children have a "built-in-desire to test their own abilities", it is vital that the adults who care for them express regular admiration for their initial strides towards independence (Gestwicki, 2017, p.261). Caregivers should recognise that young children need an optimal social-emotional environment to promote the development of a strong sense of self and should be encouraged to complete tasks and explore the world. Even the smallest of their accomplishments should be praised (Gestwicki, 2017).

(iii) Initiative versus guilt (3 to 5 years old)

The early childhood constitutes the most phenomenal years in children's lives since their sense of ability and language increase rapidly (Bredekamp, 2011). This is a critical period for a young child transitioning to an ECEC centre as it shapes a child's insight into the world and his willingness to explore and learn. Children should be afforded the opportunity to express their creativity and natural curiosity. Children have an extraordinary ability to communicate and visualise. This sense of confidence motivates them to initiate their own activities during the early years. Adults should let them ask questions when they invent their games and enrich their imaginations. Allowing them to handle certain objects like a hammer and pieces of wood – under careful supervision – warrants the achievement of initiative (Berns, 2013). However, a

child's sense of initiative may be obstructed when denied the opportunity to explore or ask questions; guilt may then become the predominant feeling. The resolve for reaching this stage lies in reassuring children's initiative and protecting their safety (Bredekamp, 2011; Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015).

Inferences drawn from the psychosocial theory have paramount implications for early childhood practitioners as crucial aspects of development takes place during the first few years when children place their trust in adults. Practitioners who understand that children are in the process of becoming independent satisfy their needs. ECEC centres that offer high-quality early childhood programmes assist children to constructively advance through Erikson's developmental tasks. Well-trained practitioners who plan activities that allow children to work at their own pace and make their own decisions about activities, resources and routines promote a sense of autonomy in the children (Woolfolk, 2007; Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015). Children learn to become independent in this way, also because the practitioner is available to provide physical and emotional support. Children's sense of initiative is enhanced when practitioners give children time, toys and materials that encourage them to explore and engage in fantasy play. Their sense of initiative will likely increase when the teaching programme allows them to practice their emergent skills. It is important that practitioners encourage the children to move boldly through these developmental tasks during the transition period.

3.3.3 Cognitive development

Shaffer and Kipp (2010), as well as McDevitt and Ormrod (2013), explain how cognitive development bolsters thinking processes and how the processes vary qualitatively over time. According to these views, children play a dynamic role in their personal development by constantly seeking out new experiences to grasp what they perceive around them. Their learning is connected to age-related transformations that take place in mental activities such as thinking, learning, speaking, reasoning, perceiving and memorising. These changes are stimulated by their experiences at their homes, ECCE centres and in their communities (Read, James & Weaver, 2018).

Cognitive development comprises the development of reading, writing and other academic skills as all these experiences denote concrete learning (McDevitt &

Ormrod, 2013). Children need authentic connections with individuals and objects to understand their world. A child develops logic and abstract thoughts through multitudes of hands-on experiences, and organise their experiences by sorting objects and classifying people and events. Adult facilitation in such activities helps children to access high mental processes like problem-solving, reasoning and communicating. Whatever they see, hear and experience scaffolds what they have already grasped (Hamre, 2014).

Bornstein, Britto, Nonoyama-Tarumi, Ota, Petrovic and Putnick (2012) emphasise the necessity to provide children with stimulating equipment within the different settings to introduce, describe and interpret the external world to the children who require uninterrupted learning opportunities. Resultantly, both their spoken and understood vocabularies rapidly increase during this time. While language is strongly related to culture, children from families who value communication tend to be more expressive.

According to Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), inconsistencies and stress within a family setting have disruptive effects on the development of a child's cognitive capabilities. The National Science Teachers Association (2014, p.2) claims that young children are keen to participate in scientific practices, thereby "constructing knowledge", which promotes reading and mathematical abilities. Many children are at risk of not developing cognitive content because of low instructional quality in the early childhood setting. I examine here Piaget's theory (1973) to understand cognitive development at a young child's level.

3.3.3.1 Piaget's theory of cognitive development

Researchers who examine child development aspire to understand how children think and learn. They often refer to the work of the prominent cognitive theorist, Jean Piaget, who initially trained as a psychologist (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015). According to McDevitt and Ormrod (2013), Piaget's theory deliberates on development and learning theories. The concept of development centres on the competencies of a child while learning stresses the fulfilment of these competencies.

Piaget (1973) wanted to gain an understanding of the nature of knowledge (epistemology) and developed a profound interest in children's development while

studying intelligence testing at the Alfred Binet Laboratory. He observed and became curious about discrepancies in children's wrong answers to questions. He began to investigate children's thought patterns while observing his own children (Patterson, 2008). He established that children think in ways that are relatively different to adults and emphasised the usefulness of strong relationships for their cognitive development.

According to Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015), children construct knowledge through physical and genetic abilities that include brain growth and motor skills, in combination with their experiences of people and objects in their environment. They obtain physical, social and logico-mathematical knowledge as they develop. Children gain physical knowledge by operating in the physical world; for example, when they play with toys with varying textures, shapes and weight. They obtain social knowledge from others, which includes language, values and rules. When children are taught to observe and categorise associations between objects, they develop their logico-mathematical knowledge (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). Children learn to observe, compare and reason by employing that logico-mathematical knowledge.

Feeney, Moravcik and Nolte (2015) suggest that children begin to recall, reconstruct and build on their earlier experiences as soon as they can participate in fantasy play. This process enables them to elevate their understanding of objects and conditions. Early encounters with symbolic thought prompt a child to think critically and reason, which is a prerequisite for later achievement. Piaget's theory assumes that children construct their understanding of the world on a trial-and-error basis through intense interactions with people and objects in the environment. They simultaneously start to "manipulate and make mental predictions about objects and actions in the world around them". Piaget hence concludes that, through reflections, children's thinking becomes more logical while their understanding of reality escalates (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013, p.10).

Piaget (1983) postulates that, through interactions with the environment, children acquire a more organised way of verbalising their experiences (Berns, 2013). Lefa (2014) suggests that Piaget referred to structures as schemas which, essentially, are distinctive sensory-motor maps that children form based on their knowledge about the world. Early schemas lay the foundation for future mental frameworks. The schemas include both physical and mental actions involved in understanding and knowing.

Infants become engrossed with physical schemas like sucking, grasping, gazing and rattling. Children between 3- and 5-years old step away from physical schemas, progressing towards mental schemas where they obtain realistic thoughts and abilities to solve problems. In Piaget's opinion, schemas represent a collection of knowledge and the procedures involved in finding that knowledge. As related abilities develop, children use fresh information to adapt to present schemas.

Paget's theory of cognitive development suggests that children progress through a series of developmental stages that begin with interactions and include existing mental structures and experiences (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015). Four stages are likely to occur in the same expected sequence for every child, although the precise age at which one moves into the succeeding stage differs from child to child. Atherton (2011) believes that these stages facilitate independent thinking in a child. Kail and Cavanaugh (2010) note that each stage illustrates an intricate mode of thinking. I will focus on the first two areas which are relevant to my study.

(i) Sensory-motor stage (0–2 years)

Piaget describes the first stage of cognitive development as the sensory-motor stage since the infant assesses the environment and responds to it by performing movements (motor) (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010; Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015). The child relies on emerging motor skills to manoeuvre objects and learn about their properties. Certain impulses drive their initial responses. Piaget, intrigued, note how promptly the infants could direct their attention to a new focus (Feeney, Moravcik & Nolte, 2015). For instance, an infant responded to a mobile device placed under them by vigorously kicking towards the dangling objects above them. Infants' motor control strengthens as their cause-and-effect experiences increase. In turn, they construct gratifying outcomes. The physical play and exploration become an inseparable part of cognitive development. Infants who are constantly moving and exploring enthusiastically create their own intelligence and perception. Through experience, the infant becomes aware that people and objects still exist, even when they are not close by. During this stage, "children learn to produce pleasurable events first in relation to their own bodies and then in relation to other people and objects" (Desai, 2010, p.6).

(ii) Preoperational stage (2–7 years)

The second stage of cognitive development spreads from infancy to toddlerhood and early childhood. At the beginning of the preoperational stage, children can generally creatively employ symbols, words and numbers to illustrate their knowledge (Atherton, 2011). During this time, they persistently interact with the world through their perceptions, having grown assured of their own views. They continue to absorb new and direct experiences such as direct care and sensory stimulation. In this period, a child will likely pay attention to only one attribute of an object or experience, which is why they easily become misinformed (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2010).

3.3.3.2 The role of the ECEC practitioner in supporting cognitive development

Practitioners must be mindful that cognitive and social-emotional development are deeply intertwined and vital to a child's later academic learning. Both these capacities are processed in the same areas of the brain. Practitioners must establish a context with an embedded cognitive learning focus to extend children' thought processes. Gopnik (2012) maintains that the driving force for advanced early childhood learning must embrace play-based programmes that support cognitive learning, especially inquiry-based science education. The environment must be prepared with appropriate materials for children to experiment with and satisfy their curiosity. During this time, children should be guided how to regulate their emotions, which can improve cognitive competencies; the introduction of playful practices will help children to master these skills and thrive (Cremin, Glauert, Craft, Compton & Stylianidou, 2015).

Children need to be given unlimited opportunities to develop their cognitive skills like observations, improved attention spans and flexibility through play. Goal-directed and well-planned instructions and explicit teaching methods will help children to become involved in initiatives like exploring, experimentation, demonstrations and testing of hypotheses to develop a strong sense of self. When children engage in play, they naturally become more attentive, motivated, focused and determined by directing their energy to a particular activity (Ramani, 2012). Children who have been allowed to engage in constructive play have improved innovativeness, spatial processing and language abilities. Furthermore, when children are allowed to play with objects and toys of varying textures and shapes, they tend to become more inventive and design

their own strategies to solve problems. Free playing and teacher-directed activities act as ideal contexts to support the development of shape and texture knowledge. A guided form of play has tremendous positive effects on a child's learning curve while also improving his cognitive skills (Timmons, Pelletier & Corter, 2016; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

Children's concentration levels improve as they often have to persevere until finding a solution to a problem. Anxious children will not always be able to process information accurately. The practitioner must present playful experiences to deepen learning endeavours and enhance concept development and testing. Children enjoy repeating actions because they want to test their experiments and adapt their efforts. They should, therefore, be given ample space to try new activities, take risks and experience a sense of agency. Free play increases children's knowledge bases and improves cognitive outcomes (Cremin et al., 2015).

Through a systematic review of literature on child development and the two relevant theories of Erikson and Piaget, I realised how those theories are appropriate to this study of practitioners' training, because applied knowledge of children's behavioural, physical, cognitive, social and neurological maturation becomes a key requirement for those working with young children – especially during their transition. The guiding of children through the developmental stages (reaching milestones) further contributes to their adjustment in new environments. Armed with this knowledge, and by involving children's families and communities in the planning of stimulating activities, centres can ensure that children experience a smooth transition.

3.4 CONCLUSION

The theoretical and conceptual framework utilised for this study comprises a range of perspectives on the development of 3-to-5-year-olds and their impact on their environments. The key framework is grounded in Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development, which elucidates how children develop within multi-layered contexts. This chapter further investigated child development theories including Erikson's psychosocial theory of development, which focuses on the quality of interactions that children indulge in – specifically in relation to their communities' expectations of their

behaviour. Those expectations may positively or negatively influence a young child's social-emotional development. Piaget's theory of cognitive development provides a framework to investigate how children develop cognitively during the sensory and preoperational stages.

Chapter 4 clarifies the research methodology employed to gain an understanding of the respective influences of ECCE centres and practitioners on children's development during the transition period.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 3 reviewed the theoretical framework that underpins this study. I utilised Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979; 2005a) to investigate 3-to-5-year-old children's transitioning experiences – from home to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) settings – and to explain how the different settings influence a young child's development. Given that a child's general development contributes to their adjustment at the centres, Erikson's psychosocial development theory and Piaget's theory of cognitive development (1973) were assimilated in the theoretical framework to explore how the children's physical, social-emotional and cognitive development takes place.

This chapter reflects and validates the research philosophy and the methodological perspectives, as well as the research design. Included in the discussions are interpretations of ontological and epistemological viewpoints that strengthen qualitative research, particularly the explanation for undertaking such an approach, and the reasons for my selection of methods. As the researcher, I implemented a practical research design that describes and endorses the approach employed in fulfilling the research objectives, purpose and aims. As a result, certain procedures related to the research questions, research sites, decisions about the impact on people, groups and cases, ethical issues, research validity, and the collection, organisation and analysis of the field data were integrated. In terms of the issue of identified research areas, I deemed it necessary to describe certain practical challenges I had to overcome while conducting the fieldwork. I hence include an account of how I managed them, along with some meaningful insights that I gained from those experiences.

This chapter commences with the research questions that guided my empirical study into the functional components of a training programme for practitioners to learn how to competently manage the transition of children from their homes to ECCE centres.

4.2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main objective of this research was to attain realistic and precise answers to the empirical research questions that guided data collection in this study, as stated in Chapter 1 and below.

4.2.1 Primary research question

What are the key components of a training framework for Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners in facilitating transition from home to school?

4.2.2 Sub-questions

- How do young children experience a transition?
- What are the requirements for young children's holistic well-being?
- What qualities should practitioners have to ensure a smooth transition from home to school?
- What guidelines can practitioners follow during the transition period?

In adhering to the guidelines offered by Marshall and Rossman (2015), I ensured that the questions were unrestricted, emergent, engaging and reiterating the study's purpose in more specific terms. I used terms such as *what* and *how* to investigate the fundamental phenomenon.

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

Yin (2016, p.83) regards a research design as a "logical blueprint" or an overall strategy to construct empirical evidence that will, in due course, be needed when solving a research problem. McMillan and Schumacher (2014, p.28) perceive a research design as "a scientific inquiry and evidence-based inquiry that approaches to research can be primarily quantitatively or qualitatively and that research can be categorised as basic, applied, evaluation or action". The design usually portrays the logic used to organise the study and involves the issues of "when, from whom and what conditions the data will be obtained" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014, p.28). The design comprises the logic and initial planning that connect the research goals,

principles, data and analysis in such a way that the study's findings would be relevant to the research questions. This process increases the study's accuracy (Yin, 2016).

Yin (2016) lists eight design choices for a qualitative researcher to consider. The first two options relate to global issues, suggesting that a researcher can choose whether to finalise the design at the beginning or add portions of the design later in the study. Nevertheless, the researcher must assure from the onset that it is a credible study. Maxwell (2013) recommends an interactive approach, whereby a qualitative study's purpose, research questions, conceptual context, methods and concerns for validity all continually interact. The third and fourth design options relate to careful defining of data collection units and considering of sampling units. With the fifth design option, the researcher must look for concepts that later become abstract. The last three design options relate to the issues of focusing on generalisability or transferability, preparing a research protocol and early-stage planning to obtain participant feedback. These options serve as a useful guide to the researcher.

When planning the research design, a researcher needs to focus not only on a feasible research problem but also on a feasible way to convert the research into practical elements (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). The researcher's key focus should hence be on implementing a design that will generate logical and trustworthy conclusions from the answers to the research questions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). I will now discuss the research paradigm as a feature of my research design.

4.3.1 Research paradigm

Researchers can choose between different key paradigms or worldviews that include post-positivism, social constructivism, transformative, postmodernism, pragmatism and critical theory. Each theory is founded upon its own ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological philosophy (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Creswell (2014) defines a paradigm as a general philosophical orientation, or a set of beliefs about the world and the nature of reality, that is incorporated into the study. Beliefs about reality establish a worldview, which, in terms of research, is based on discipline and foci, including aspects such as mentors, participants' predispositions and various experiences that the researcher has had (Creswell, 2014). In Hammersley's (2012) view, paradigms are not merely methodologies but include approaches and

perceptions of the world; in essence, how a person grasps the real world. Neuman (2006) states that a paradigm justifies a set of beliefs, models, perceptions and assumptions related to the conducting of good research.

According to Alghamdi and Li (2013), paradigms define how the world works, how knowledge is extracted from this world, and how one thinks, writes and talks about this knowledge. Paradigms define the types of questions to be asked and the methodologies to be used in answering them. Paradigms decide what is published and what is not published. Accordingly, Denzin and Lincoln (2011) assert that researchers assume distinctly different ways of deliberating the concept of social reality and that every person uniquely interprets this reality. However, one can effectively approach these conceptions of the social world through an examination of the implicit and explicit assumptions underpinning them. Over the years, researchers have pondered why it is crucial to grasp the various philosophical assumptions. Ontological assumptions focus mainly on the social phenomenon that the research plans to investigate. In this case, the nature of reality and its attributes become the defining issues (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A qualitative researcher must embody the notion of multiple realities. These multiple realities consist of various forms of evidence – expressed in themes – using the real words of participants and revealing different perceptions. Epistemology signals what is added as valid knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The second set of assumptions are epistemological, which emphasises knowledge. Subjective evidence is gathered as the research works closely with participants. This subjective evidence must be gathered in the field to provide an important context for what participants are saying. The axiological assumption, as the third assumption, relates to human nature and what that contributes to the study. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that they bring their own values to the study. The fourth assumption, the methodology, illustrates the process of research. An inductive approach typifies qualitative studies while the process is shaped by the researcher's involvement during the collection and analysis of data. The inductive logic followed by qualitative research starts from the ground up, as opposed to working from a given theory (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

In this study, I opted to work from a paradigm for constructing knowledge which is referred to as humanistic, naturalistic or interpretivist. Interpretivism is sometimes described as constructivism because it accentuates the fact that individuals can allocate their own meaning to their experiences (Maree, 2016; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). The interpretivist paradigm is embedded in the idea that methods to understand knowledge related to humans cannot be the same as that applied in physical science since humans first interpret their world and then act upon their interpretations of the world (Hammersley, 2012). The interpretivist approach also recognises that actions and individuals are extraordinary. Consequently, social reality is gathered and deduced by the individuals who participate in the social world in accordance with their ideological positions (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). An interpretivist researcher is inclined to use logical processes while acknowledging that several socially constructed realities exist, unlike positivism which relies on a single reality (Hammersley, 2012). Maree (2016) proposes that the social contexts, values and principles of individuals and their communities are key elements in the attempt to understand human behaviour.

This means that, instead of trying to be objective, qualitative researchers consider their own professional judgement and perceptions when interpreting data. This process places more emphasis on contexts and values (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Hammersley (2012) states that constructivism expects researchers to concentrate on approaches that guide the effective construction, structure and character afforded to independent objects and relationships between them. As a researcher working from this paradigm, I believe that it was necessary to identify the perspectives of individuals who participate in the ongoing activities being investigated. This approach views reality as multi-layered and multifarious. It is, therefore, imperative to scrutinise situations through the participants' eyes and not through the researcher's perceptions.

The ontological assumptions of interpretivism are that social reality is perceived by multiple people who interpret actions in varied ways, thus giving rise to multiple perspectives of a single event (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018). To understand how people accumulate meaning within this "multiplicity", the researcher needs to enter the world of the participants and observe it from within through direct experience of the people. This helps the researcher to describe in detail

these “multiple perspectives” of participants (Maree, 2016, p.60; Creswell & Poth; 2017). In this study, I report on these “multiple realities” as evidence in themes by using the exact words of the participants, hence presenting the diversity of perspectives offered by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p.20).

My role as a researcher in the interpretivist paradigm is to understand and decode the world in which the participants live and then to observe the circumstances in the settings “through multiple lenses of the individuals involved”. This process helps a researcher to not only gain the participants’ views of events taking place but also to concentrate more on interactions, contexts and settings. This enables the interpretation and reporting on social reality through the participants’ perspectives (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Creswell, 2018). The researcher needs to pay close attention to the varying perspectives to provide a rich description of the phenomenon being investigated (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Knowing that the same phenomenon often yields different perspectives, I elicited the views of six practitioners who work with children between 3 and 5 years old to help me understand the phenomenon of young children’s transitioning experiences. I also needed to clearly understand each of the perspectives that they may present on this phenomenon.

According to the epistemological position, interpretivism is constructed on the idea that subjective data is acquired from participants in the field and must be conferred socially. Since individuals acquire subjective meanings of their experiences, the interpretivist paradigm supports the need to consider subjective human interpretations of an event, meaning that the participants’ perceptions of the living world are used as the starting point in interpreting a social phenomenon (Maree, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Therefore, my goal in this research was to trust the participants’ opinion and to use broad questions purposely to construct the meaning of the situation. I spent time with participants in the field and preserved their exact quotes. I used open-ended questions to attentively listen to the individual’s voice while speaking about their actions in the setting (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Given the above information, I drew evidence from children and the practitioners to grasp their explanations of the transition phenomenon, while being mindful of obscured social forces and structures behind the phenomenon. Since knowledge arises from circumstances and cannot be reduced to a simplistic interpretation, I

investigated the likely components that could be included in a framework to help practitioners facilitate children's transition from home to the ECCE centre. I fused my investigation with the belief that divergent layers of meaning will be discovered while thick descriptions would uncover the nature of the phenomenon (Scotland, 2012). I kept in mind the knowledge that my experiences and personal practices may ultimately influence my interpretation of findings.

The ontological and epistemological perspectives informed the methodological choices I made, notably in relation to my approach to this inquiry. According to Creswell (2018, p.24), the interpretative methodology focuses on obtaining an understanding of a phenomenon from the viewpoints of individuals, hence the researcher needs to frequently probe the "process" of interaction between people and pay attention to the contexts in which people reside to acknowledge the historic and cultural backgrounds of each participant. As a researcher, I am aware that my personal background and experience affect the way that I interpret situations. Accordingly, the interpretivist engages in case studies, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology and narrative study as favoured methods (Creswell, 2009). This interpretivist approach enabled me to conduct an in-depth study of how practitioners interact and manage young children who have just transitioned to a new environment.

Interpretative methods outline individual perceptions, obtain insights into behaviour, and describe conduct in terms of the individual's experiences and background, rather than having the researcher overwhelm the participants. Vitally, the interpretivist researcher must acknowledge that behaviour is initiated by social standards (Scotland, 2012; Maree, 2016). Thus, the data gathering techniques for interpretivist research include observations to gain insight into practitioners' perceptions of situations.

Table 4.1 reflects the assumptions on which an interpretivist perspective is constructed (Maree, 2016, p.61).

Table 4.1: Assumptions and application of an interpretivist perspective

Assumptions	How it features in my study
Human life can only be understood from within.	As the focal undertaking of interpretivism is to detect the subjective world of human experience, I

We can primarily search for the subjective experiences, interpretations and interactions of people in their social environment.	intentionally preserved the authenticity of the studied phenomenon and delved deeply into participants' responses to understand their subjective experiences from within. In this way, I could perceive how practitioners and children construct their worlds and the resultant effects on children's social-emotional, cognitive and physical development.
Social life is a distinctively human product. The meaning that people give to a certain phenomenon is linked to the unique context thereof.	This involves the understanding that the transition experience planned for children is dependent on how the phenomenon is interpreted. This research presented the opportunity to ascertain the explanations of participants in terms of their distinctive environmental context, and to explain how the practitioners can create or inhibit healthy development.
The human mind is the purposive source of origin and meaning.	An in-depth literature study enabled me to grasp how children assign meaning to their own experiences and to appreciate how their actions and interactions with others influence their social-emotional, physical and cognitive development.
Human behaviour is affected by knowledge of the social world. Understanding more about social realities enriches our conceptual framework and provides a link between the concrete and abstract worlds.	Interpretivism proposes that a "social reality is typified by a multiplicity" because individuals interpret incidents in their own ways (Maree, 2016, p.60). Therefore, I entered the world of the participants to observe it from inside. Consequently, multiple realities surfaced from my interaction with practitioners regarding their encounters and the children regarding the phenomenon. The different perspectives incite a mutual understanding between what occurs in the concrete world and the theoretical framework from which one can operate to create significant relationships (Matjeke, 2004).

The social world does not 'exist' independently of human knowledge. Our prior knowledge, values, beliefs and intuition influence the way we understand reality.	I accepted that my knowledge and past experiences were indistinguishably connected to my research on children's transition. This principle guided the conducting of this research as well as my understanding of the transition phenomenon.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) mention that the researcher's preferred paradigm guides their assumptions during research according to methods, participants, tools and results rendered. My research focus and philosophies relating to the phenomenon requires a qualitative research approach, which I discuss next.

4.3.2 Research approach

Early childhood policies in South Africa emphasise that the early childhood workforce must implement quality programmes at their centres. The need thus exists to investigate how practitioners in the varying school types – especially at inner-city, township and farm schools – facilitate young children's transitions from home to their schools. I decided that a qualitative research approach applied to this study because of the nature of the phenomenon to be explored. This approach allowed me to gather in-depth information about how practitioners drove the process of transition (Creswell & Poth, 2017). I accepted Maree's (2016) explanation that a researcher's conducting of qualitative research relates to disclosing how humans position themselves in certain settings and how they make sense of situations through investigating a range of symbols, rituals, social roles and structures.

I adopted a qualitative research approach because, firstly, my research could only be successful if I interpret practitioners' stories about children's transitioning experiences and, secondly, it is a type of social inquiry that embraces a clear, open data-driven method that highlights the importance of subjectivity within the inquiry. The approach enabled me to scrutinise naturally occurring cases in data and to use verbal rather than numerical structures. The complexity, inconsistency, multiple layers and richness

present in the social and educational worlds are best studied via the qualitative approach (Hammersley, 2013).

The purpose of facilitating children's transition and the engagement of practitioners as key players in this natural setting confirmed qualitative research as the most appropriate methodology for this study. Qualitative research comprises "meaning-making individuals" who can ardently compile their own meanings of certain situations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p.288). Hence, qualitative research considers individuals to be expressive and creative in their actions. These actions allow meanings to be created from social situations as well as interactions. Meaning is derived from social interchanges, as used by participants to evaluate situations that are bound to cultural contexts and multiple realities. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), qualitative research is carried out contextually; therefore, the researcher needs to pay attention to each case's context to credibly describe the multiple and divergent interpretations of the origins, uniqueness and consequences of each situation. In this way, the researcher can concentrate on the participants' subjective versions and explanations of a phenomenon, especially their verbal "definitions of the situation" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018, p.289).

The purpose of this study – to understand how practitioners facilitate young children's transition from homes to ECCE centres in real-life settings – rendered qualitative research as the most appropriate method. This is consistent with the views of Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2018) that a qualitative researcher aims to study people, things and objects in their natural settings, while the collected data is analysed inductively. Table 4.2 below illustrates how McMillan and Schumacher's (2014, p.345) nine key characteristics of qualitative research, as usually found in most qualitative studies, featured in my study.

Table 4.2: Key characteristics of qualitative research

Characteristic	How it features in this study
Research is conducted in a natural setting where the focus is on the participant's	As a qualitative researcher, all the data I required for the study was collected from participants who directly experienced the issue being studied. Nobody was taken to a laboratory or given instruments to

experience of a phenomenon.	complete tasks. I was able to collect prevalent data by directly talking to them and observing them in their environment.
The researcher serves as the key instrument in data collection.	All the data I required for the study was collected by myself through interviews and observation of participants' behaviour.
The researcher utilises multiple data gathering methods.	Instead of relying on a single source, I gathered several forms of data in the field, such as interviews, observations of practitioners in practice, the learning contexts, children's participation in the learning programme and children's drawings of their teacher. These multiple sources enabled me to make sense of the data and organise them according to themes.
The research involves complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic.	I harnessed the collected data to build categories, themes and patterns from the "bottom up" and organise the data inductively into conceptual units. I worked back and forth between the themes to establish a complete set of themes.
The researcher values the participants' multiple perspectives and meanings.	My purpose was to grasp the views that participants held about children's transitions. Their contributions added to the multiple perspectives that exist on the studied phenomenon.
The research is situated within the participants' setting or context.	This study was situated within the participants' context. I was, therefore, sensitive to the contextual features and the influence of the participants' own experiences.
The study encompasses an emergent and evolving design.	I understood that the research design for a qualitative study is emergent.
The researcher's reflexivity is acknowledged.	As a qualitative researcher, I had to constantly reflect on my role in the study and acknowledge that my personal background and cultural experiences are

	aspects that will enable me to determine the analytical themes and assign meaning to the data.
The study offers a holistic, complex picture.	I tried to present a multi-layered picture of the problem by reporting mainly on the intricate perspectives. I identified numerous factors involved in the process which included outlining the bigger picture that appeared. I, therefore, had to acknowledge that this bigger picture is not an uncomplicated picture but rather a representation of complex factors interacting in diverse ways. I ensured that this picture reflects true-life and just how certain incidents operate.

4.3.3 Research type

Having situated my research within the interpretivist paradigm, I identified a qualitative case study as the most applicable research type for this study. Creswell and Poth (2017, p.96–97) define a case study as a "qualitative approach in which the researcher investigates a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audio-visual material, documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes". Case study researchers usually study real cases that are in progression so that they can accumulate accurate information.

Yin (2014, p.16) defines a case study as an "an empirical inquiry that: 1) investigates a contemporary problem within its real-life context, when 2) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which 3) multiple sources of evidence are used". Yin adds that a case denotes the study of a case (or cases) from a real-life context and the evaluation may be directed to real objects, individuals, small groups, organisations or programmes. On a lower, more concrete level, the evaluation may be directed to a community or a relationship. I selected a case study type of research to gain deep insight into the transitioning experiences created by each

practitioner for the young child whilst they make their journey from home to the centre. The case study research also enabled me to explore and observe various contextual factors that affect children's transitions.

As indicated by Creswell and Poth (2017), the most distinguishing characteristic of a sound qualitative case study is that it portrays an in-depth understanding of a case. This can only be attained if the researcher accumulates and assimilates numerous forms of qualitative data. I, therefore, harnessed multiple sources of evidence to conduct an empirical inquiry of the transition phenomenon within its natural context to reveal the complexities and multifarious nature of a young child's transition. As in most case study research, it was essential for me to spend prolonged periods at each site and interact with the study's subjects. This allowed me to record details about the context surrounding the focal cases. I was able to gather comprehensive evidence regarding the physical environment and the relevant historical, political, economic and social factors. I collected data through interviews with practitioners and observations of classroom practices, which included the practitioners presenting the daily programmes as well as attending children. The children included in the study were asked to draw a picture of their teacher.

McMillan and Schumacher (2014) point out that a multiple case study necessitates the researcher to select multiple cases to describe, compare and exemplify the issue, which would enable a comprehensive interpretation of a phenomenon. My desire to study the transition phenomenon prompted me to study multiple cases to obtain the needed insights into different perspectives of the issue. In this study, I viewed the practitioners as individuals who are directly involved in the transitions of young children and recorded their experiences of a child's first day at the ECCE centre, and the accompanying challenges and victories. I allowed each practitioner to narrate their stories about how they met the challenges. The nature of the multiple case study and the transition phenomena indicated that I needed to employ different strategies to collect data, which eased the subsequent analysis. The multiple cases being studied helped me to draw valid comparisons. Ultimately, each case study is suited for acquiring more information about little known or poorly understood situations.

4.4 RESEARCH METHODS

Qualitative research is enclosed in the structure of the scientific method that covers research elements such as the research questions, theories, substantive data collection and credible analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2017). A lot of research studies, at present, centre on problems that implicate gender, culture and marginalised groups. My research problem includes marginalised groups at disadvantaged schools who have to facilitate transition together with a group of practitioners from a historically advantaged setting. Maxwell (2013) remarks that decisions relating to *where* to conduct a research study (the site) as well as *who* to involve (the participants) are pivotal aspects of the research method. The researcher is responsible for selecting the sites and participants under careful consideration. Methods used to collect data is influenced by the research problem that may be reviewed in adherence to the context. Researchers must be aware that difficulties relating to research methods go beyond site selection, data collection and analysis; they may include problems relating to the establishment of healthy research relationships with study participants, for instance. Maxwell (2013) believes that the selections should be interactive processes.

4.4.1 Research sites and participants

While designing this research, I detected a relevant issue regarding young children's movements from their acquainted environment, their homes and family members, to a relatively new setting containing many unknown individuals. This movement from a known to an unknown setting is referred to as a 'transition' (Section 2.2). In trying to understand how the concept of transition is facilitated, I learnt about the theories and constructs that accurately explain how this notion is conceptually understood. My challenge was to secure practical ways to extract relevant data from the identified sites and participants. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2014), the process of selecting research sites and participants affords the researcher the freedom of entry to sites that may be suited to the research inquiry. When I accessed any potential sites, I remained aware of my rationale for selecting suitable sites and participants. I needed to be responsive to the research context and respectful of proper research practices (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

4.4.1.1 Purposeful sampling

Another interrelated step, prior to the actual data collection, involves the selection of a strategy for purposeful sampling of participants and sites when probability sampling – where the researcher applies statistical inferences to a population – is not applicable (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The strategy must ensure that individuals who can enlighten the research inquiries are selected as participants. The researcher needs to establish the type of purposeful sampling to be used, determine the sample size and then decide who will be the participants. All the selected individuals must be able to contribute information relating to their knowledge and experiences of the study's topic. Such individuals are likely to produce rich data about the phenomenon (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). Researchers usually select exceptional cases and employ maximum variation as a sampling strategy to represent diverse cases, which enable them to comprehensively describe each of the multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

I realised that purposeful sampling was the most appropriate method for this study, based on the fact that I needed to gather the most pertinent information about the phenomenon from the participants to obtain the required insights. The considered individuals usually have specific characteristics that obey the criteria for inclusion in the research sample. Purposeful sampling, as the term suggests, requires that the researcher compiles a population sample suitable to the study's objective. In this study, I selected individuals who were typical practitioners at ECEC centres as well as some who exhibited varied perspectives on the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Children who were coming to school for the first time and placed in Grade R were selected for this study.

4.4.1.2 Research sites

Initially, a researcher identifies a research site and looks for individuals who are accessible and keen to provide information on the phenomenon being explored. Once permission is granted to conduct research at the site, the researcher can start acquiring the necessary data. The researcher must naturally select sites and participants with care. The gaining of entry to sites and participants produces its own set of challenges, however. It is not always a simple task to persuade individuals to participate and earn their trust (Creswell, 2018).

Creswell and Poth (2017) list several procedures that can be followed to determine suitable research sites. Firstly, as a qualitative researcher, I had to consider problems and perceptions about the facilitation of children's transitions from home to ECCE centres. I hence considered certain assumptions, theories and relevant concepts that explain how the transitioning process is theoretically understood. I then needed to focus on the practical tasks associated with the multiple case study. I thus located suitable sites and individuals who appeared able to provide information that may illuminate the research inquiry. Next, I undertook a series of data collecting activities. A researcher should, firstly, be aware of *where* it is best to obtain relevant and useful data, and record the geographical location of each site. Secondly, the researcher needs to know *how* to extract the needed data from the location and participants. The selection of research sites and participants becomes the hallmark of multiple case studies as the contributors can yield multiple perspectives on the phenomenon. The following paragraphs explain the procedures involved in my selection of research sites.

A representative case sampling method can be used to select a site with the highest typical cases of a population intended for a study. Patton (1990) emphasises that a site should not deviate from a usual site where the target population is expected to be identified. I considered public ECCE centres as typical sites where practitioners are likely to have relevant information on the phenomenon of interest: a child's transition. I selected three schools from the Tshwane region that differed in terms of school infrastructure, resources and funding. This was done according to the quintile of schools used by the Department of Education to categories schools based on the respective communities' economic statuses. Public schools are divided into five quintiles. The Quintile 1–3 schools represent the poorest public schools in each province and receive the most funding from the government to assist with upkeep. The parents are exempt from paying school fees. A Quintile 5 school is found in the wealthiest communities and receive the least funding from the government. Parents pay school fees as determined by the School Governing Body (SGB) (Hall & Giese, 2008; Dass & Rinquest, 2017). I selected an inner-city school, a township school and a farm school. The township and farm schools share similar topographies. Descriptions of these public schools now follow.

I selected a township school as a research site as the phenomenon of interest to this study was first detected at such a school. A township is an underdeveloped racially segregated urban area that developed in the early 19th century to provide housing for black labourers outside cities. The histories of the regions and the housing structures for township residents have created conditions and circumstances of adversity that continue to the present-day. Young children in these environments usually attend township schools that are dysfunctional because of generally high poverty in the communities. Parents who can afford school fees usually enrol their children at inner-city and city schools. Township settlements suffer widespread unemployment and high levels of HIV infections, violence, crime and abuse. Schools erected in townships are mostly of substandard quality.

The buildings at township schools are not properly maintained and dusty fields usually serve as playgrounds. Other features at these schools include a lack of essential resources and poor-quality teaching by unqualified practitioners. Soon after the onset of democracy in South Africa, the South African Schools Act was passed in 1996, which signalled the beginnings of a new era for the public schools in South Africa. The new policies prioritised human rights to basic education, equity and non-racism. All school-going children in South Africa, including those between 3 and 5 years old, are entitled to quality education today. However, poor teaching and learning conditions persist in most township ECCE centres because of substandard practitioner qualifications. High-quality education thus becomes unattainable for young children in townships. For this study, I selected a township school situated in Mamelodi, outside Pretoria city, since the setup at this school fits the above-mentioned description. This school has been categorised as a Quintile 3 school because of the high poverty levels and the numbers of families headed by grandparents or youths. The parents of children attending these schools from Grades RR and R do not pay school fees.

Farm schools exhibit similar levels of socioeconomic deprivations as township schools, but due to the different environments, will still yield valuable data to this study. These are schools primarily for black children living in rural areas. Most of their parents are employed as farm labourers. Rural schools are the poorest public schools in the country. Like townships, rural communities' economic hardships are inherited from the apartheid era. Before 1994, most rural children lived far away from the school buildings

and many had to walk to their schools, causing the daily attendance to be draining and stressful experiences for the children. Consequently, many rural school children never finished their schooling. Fortunately, the government improved children's access to schools with the advent of the democratic era. Children are currently being transported to school on buses and they benefit from the schools' nutrition programmes, receiving meals during breaks. Unemployed youths prepare those meals. The youths are employed for a year and receive a stipend from the government for their services.

The greatest challenges that rural schools face, apart from a lack of teaching resources, overcrowded classes and poor infrastructure, are the lack of high-quality early childhood development and childcare programmes. These schools are generally unable to attract and retain qualified teachers. Numerous children are still exposed to poor ECCE programmes, which means that past inequalities have not been erased yet. The government also introduced the universalisation of grade R that requires all practitioners to acquire a full qualification in early teaching. Most practitioners teaching in these disadvantaged schools have not yet earned their qualifications, while many have been granted extensions to completing their courses. School principals have been cautioned by district offices not to employ unqualified personnel in future. If a warning is breached, the principal will become personally responsible for the payment of such a practitioner. The farm school selected as a research site for this study was declared a Quantile 1 school by the government, meaning that the parents are not obliged to pay school fees. This school is situated on the outskirts of Pretoria.

Inner-city schools are generally situated in affluent suburbs. Children who attend these schools have access to high-quality resources and proper infrastructures like halls, libraries, computers and well-maintained sports fields and facilities. The abundant facilities at these schools contribute positively to higher learner achievement and consistency. The schools' profile has changed profoundly in the democratic era as the schools were initially intended to serve the white community exclusively. Inner-city teachers in the pre-democratic era had generally received proper teacher training which most black teachers were deprived of. These schools still boast high-quality facilities and well-trained teachers to serve ECEC programmes. These schools are categorised as Quintile 4–5 schools, meaning the parents are expected to pay school fees for the upkeep of facilities and funding for additional academic staff employed by

the SCB. For this study, I selected a well-maintained inner-city school that boasts of many successes attributed to the highly trained and dedicated ECCE staff. This third research site, a Quintile 5 school, was selected to enable valid comparisons with the approach of the practitioners at the first two schools in facing challenges related to the transitioning processes.

4.4.2.3 Participant selection

Selections of participants for this study were limited to urban, semi-urban and rural schools that presented ECCE programmes. I decided upon a total of six participants: two from a township school, two from a rural school and two from an inner-city school. The selected individuals were evaluated as the most appropriate individuals to shed light on the transition phenomenon. The selection of practitioners from the township and rural schools was vital because of the concern that most practitioners at such schools were not qualified in the early childhood field, yet had been given the responsibility of facilitating the transitions of young children. All sample schools were public schools and the selected practitioners taught in English, Sepedi and Zulu, although interviews were conducted in English.

4.4.2 Data collection methods

Creswell and Poth (2017) suggest that researchers should not expend all their energies on the data collecting procedures. Researchers should also deliberate on the ethical issues relating to the various permission needed, ways of developing rapport with participants, the anticipation and management of potential problems in the field, interview protocols and observational strategies. Figure 4.1, adapted from Creswell and Poth (2017), illustrates the data collection circle containing the main elements that investigators ought to consider to manage the research steps effectively.

Figure 4.1: Data collection activities

I focused on the series of activities defined by Creswell and Poth (2017) to ensure that ethical considerations were adhered to before and throughout the data collection process. Once the sites were selected and preference given to purposeful sampling, I considered that the permission to conduct research does not guarantee that the participants – especially the practitioners – will behave naturally in the presence of an outsider who compiles notes throughout the day in their professional spaces. I contacted the participants and assured them that their routine activities would not be disrupted (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). During my first meeting with the participants, I clarified the study's purpose to avoid them being misinformed. As I was required to collect data from multiple sources, I developed protocols for the interviews and observations in advance. I also had to foresee some difficulties, called "field

issues", such as sudden refusals to participate. As a final preparation, I decided on a system of data storage that would be easily accessible and protected from damage or loss.

I systematically collected data elements from the six practitioners and the children that they taught. I recorded details of all the practitioners' activities from the time the children arrived at the centre (07:45 at each site) until they departed (13:30 at the township and inner-city schools and 15:30 at the farm school because of the bus schedule). I also observed the children's interactions with their teachers and peers throughout the day and noted how they participated in the day's activities. My observations included the organisation of the physical environments – indoor and outdoor – such as the learning environments and the playgrounds explored by the children. All observational details were written down and supplemented by photographs where necessary.

The list of research activities – interviews, observations, photography and drawings by the children – were undertaken at all the sites. I included unqualified personnel from the township and rural schools in the study because of the government's strong post-1994 commitment towards the upgrading of early childhood care. Two decades later children attending thes schools were still taught by unqualified practitioners. The reviewed literature indicated that countries like Australia and New Zealand have successfully developed early learning frameworks to ensure successful transitions for young children by building their experiences and helping practitioners to competently manage diversity at their centres. A good transition programme has distinct educational and social benefits to the children (Margetts, 2007). Children in this age group (in the pre-operational stage of 2–7 years old) enjoy receiving direct care and stimulating sensory experiences. They thrive in environments that provide them with opportunities to use their senses.

The main sources of data were the interviews and observations. These methods accorded me the opportunity to obtain actual information and significant explanations from the practitioners at the different sites about the transition phenomenon. I did not rely solely on the views of the practitioners. As a qualitative researcher, I probed the intensity of different types of data to enhance the overall validity of the study. Table

4.3 contains information on the target of the investigations, the data collection methods used and the purposes of each strategy.

Table 4.3: Details of data collection

Target of investigation	Method	Purpose
Practitioners: Methodologies adopted by practitioners	In-depth interviews Observations	To observe and gain first-hand information on how practitioners at the various sites plan and implement the daily programme, organise the learning environment, and provide the emotional, social, physical and moral support during the transition.
Children: Participation in activities	Observations Drawings	To obtain a real understanding of how children participate in the daily routines planned by the practitioners and how they interact with the practitioners and peers. By letting them draw their teachers, I can initiate a dialogue about the picture.
Environmental layout	Observations Photographs	To describe the indoor and outdoor environment at each site and how children become accustomed to their new learning environment, and to determine the extent to which the physical environment contributes to the transition experiences of children.

4.4.2.1 Semi-structured interviews

Qualitative researchers are keen to capture descriptions that are deep and multi-layered to justify participants' descriptions of knowledge and social reality (Maree, 2016). Warren and Karner (2014) define interviews as a reciprocal social interaction where an interviewer asks the interviewee a range of questions about their ideas, opinions and behaviours to glimpse the participants' world through their eyes. This becomes a valuable source of information if used skilfully. Brinkman and Kvale (2014,

p.3–4) add that an interview is "the knowledge constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and interviewee" and, therefore, is "an attempt to see the world from the subjects' point of view, to unfold the meaning of their experience, to uncover their lived world". This study required me to understand the views and reasoning of the participants, so I elected to use semi-structured interviews to generate extensive knowledge from the participant. I carefully formulated the open-ended questions using an interview protocol because, according to Brinkman and Kvale (2014), research questions are often the sub-questions in a study. I hence obeyed principled interview practices and the ethical prescriptions to ensure that the questions were well-phrased so that the participant could understand them and give appropriate responses. As the researcher, I also had to ensure that the interviews were completed in the specified times.

This open-ended type of interview allowed me to probe deeper and seek clarifications where necessary. I had to be attentive to participants' responses to identify emerging lines of inquiry that are related to the phenomenon. I had to ensure that all questions were credible and used detail-oriented probes to confirm that I grasped the "who", "where" and "what" responses presented by the participants (Maree, 2016, p.94). I also employed "clarification probes" to verify with participants that my understanding of what they related was accurate. Participants were also encouraged to ask for clarification if they were not sure about a question.

After gaining permission to conduct the interviews and having explained the purpose of the research project to the participants, I conducted the interviews with them at the research sites after school hours. The interviews were recorded on audiotape. During the interviews, I had to be vigilant and give the interviewee my full attention while taking note of non-verbal communication clues such as eye contact and signs of enthusiasm, disinterest or anxiety. All these behaviours were recorded. I behaved like a good listener rather than being the dominant speaker throughout the interviews (Brinkman & Kvale, 2014).

The personal interviews allowed the participants to share their personal experiences, ideas, beliefs, views, opinions and behaviour relating to their experiences with new groups of children at the schools. I noted that the participants were relaxed and composed during the interviews. Although one participant at the inner-city school

suffered from flu on the day of the interview, she chose not to reschedule the interview and informed me that she was ready to assist. She appeared delighted while she related her experiences even though her voice was affected by her sickness, which complicated the transcription of the interview to a degree.

The practitioners were all outspoken and open about their experiences with transitioning groups of children. I was hence convinced that the mode of data collection was appropriate, which facilitated my inquiry into transitioning children's uneasiness and apprehension on their first days at the centres. The practitioners' manner of responses to the first three questions revealed their commitment to this emotional event. Conducting these semi-structured interviews was helpful and informative as the participants eagerly responded to the remaining questions. I gained a lot from this experience thanks to the participants who made time to share their experiences with me after a long day with lively, energetic children. This allowed me to understand how they interpret and structure their worlds according to the phenomenon of transition.

4.4.2.2 Observation

Observation is recognised as a realistic, practical educational tool that researchers use to broaden their awareness of a situation. It acts as the backbone of "free-flowing" qualitative research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015, p.280). Researchers frequently employ this method to derive profound meanings of a phenomenon because it allows the researcher to look at, hear and understand reality like the participants do, and to understand how the setting is socially constructed in terms of communication. This flexible method allows researchers to smoothly shift from one research aspect to the next as unanticipated yet meaningful data elements could present themselves (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015; Maree, 2016). McMillan & Schumacher (2014) add that observations enable researchers to catch a glimpse of and listen to what is directly taking place. While it is regarded as an effective data collection technique, researchers may still have to contend with issues regarding validity and reliability, even in cases of low deduction observation. Once I adopted observation as a method of data collection and gained the necessary permissions, I considered the following guidelines after selecting the research sites:

- At each site, decide "who or what to observe, when, where, and for how long" (Creswell & Poth, 2017);
- Determine the unit of observation (a teacher, class or a group);
- Define how much structure is required in the observation;
- Determine the time required to observe;
- Confirm the timing of the observation (morning or afternoon);
- Describe the context of observation (lessons, outdoor activities);
- Describe what occurred at the sites during lessons, outdoor activities or any other events;
- Assimilate the subjective and objective observations;
- Follow principled observational procedures, inform participants on completion of the observations and data usage, and express gratitude before departing;
- Compile detailed accounts based on the field notes after observation;
- Provide full descriptions of the participants, behaviours and activities that occurred (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

I supplemented the in-depth interviews with observations as the nature of the investigated phenomenon – transition – lends itself to observations. Observations are often driven by a study's goal and the research questions (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). The observations allowed me to record patterns of behaviour displayed by participants without coming close to their personal spaces, like during the interview sessions. All that was required of me was to use my senses to capture pertinent events. It is not possible to record everything, and I, therefore, reported broadly and focused on the elements that related to the research questions.

Qualitative researchers should be aware of the four types of observations and the degrees to which the observer becomes immersed in terms of participating and observing.

- *Complete observer*. The researcher is a non-participant and remains unobtrusive and uninvolved.
- *Observer as participant*. The researcher becomes involved in the situation while focusing only on their roles.

- *Participant as observer*. The researcher allows a participant to observe the situation but may mediate in any changes taking place.
- *Complete participant*. The researcher becomes fully absorbed in activities so that those being observed forget that they are participants (Maree, 2016).

In each type, the researcher will look for patterns of behaviour in a certain setting to understand the participants' assumptions, values and beliefs. I conducted low-keyed, unobtrusive observations; my only obvious action was frequent writing, which may have seemed a little obtrusive. I scrutinised the physical environments, practitioners, children, interactions and conversations. It also afforded me time to reflect on my own behaviour. Each practitioner and the children in their care were observed over three days. The observations allowed me to compile rich portraits of the practitioners, children and the learning and social settings. I also made an observational checklist that helped me to record all the elements that I needed. The checklist included the organisation of the physical environment, the practitioners' indoor and outdoor practices, their manner of speaking to the children, their recognition of the children's feelings, displays of affection and anything that could enhance the children's cognitive, social-emotional and physical skills. I was able to ascertain whether practitioners did what they claimed to do at the centres.

4.4.2.3 Children's drawings

Over the previous two decades, social research has documented the suitability of certain innovative techniques to interpret the lived experiences of young children. Lately, researchers use young children's drawings as a communicative tool since they draw what they know in their own way. Emphasis is also being placed on "listening to their voices" to obtain deep insights into the children's words (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013, p.65). The incorporation of a child's voice while engaging them in drawings means that they are recognised as knowledgeable individuals concerning their own lives. The calls for researchers to use this participatory method in studies of young children have gained in volume. The method encourages young children to reveal their true thoughts, providing rich, first-hand data about their experiences, perspectives and lives (Pascal & Bertram, 2009; Hall, 2010). Pascal and Bertram (2009) add that the act of listening to children's voices in research is about recognising their strengths as

communicators of their feelings. Children voice their fears, pains and joys through drawings and thus provide clues about their relationship with the world.

Therefore, I utilised the drawings of children as a means of gathering data for this study. Drawing a picture is a spontaneous play-activity that comes automatically to children. To supplement my other observations, I invited children from each research site to draw a picture of their teacher. My objective was to construct an understanding of how children perceive their new teachers, having known them for only a few weeks. I tried to achieve this by engaging them in conversations while they made their drawings. I asked questions like, “What you are drawing?” and “Do you like your teacher?”. Some children were very articulate about their artwork. Most could draw and speak simultaneously, although some chose not to speak at all while drawing – their focus was on completing the activity first.

4.4.2.4 The role of the researcher

McDevitt and Ormrod (2013) explain that the key roles of qualitative researchers are to engage in the conception, collection, analysis and writing of their research studies. A researcher should exercise self-control, overcome any personal preconceptions and understand that, in a qualitative study, the focus should be on fostering an interdependent relationship with the participant. I tried to conduct an ethical study throughout this process. From the onset, I had to keep in mind that the research question steers the methods used to collect and analyses the data. Therefore, I utilised meticulous and logical methods to gather and document the data. I had to ensure that any biases, assumptions or beliefs that could influence the collecting of data or my interpretation thereof were promptly identified and addressed. It is vital that researchers remain objective and balanced throughout their studies (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Accordingly, McMillan & Schumacher (2014) suggest that a researcher must have some prior professional experience of the phenomenon under study, which would enable them to identify with participants. Accordingly, during my observations and interviews, I could always relate to the practitioners’ challenges and concerns within the early childhood environment, and especially with the practitioners from the township and farm schools.

4.4.3 Data analysis

Data analysis in a qualitative study is a decisive step that includes methodical arranging of data sets and rearranging of data elements to facilitate an understanding of what the data represents, which allows the researcher to describe, interpret and explain the phenomenon (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010; Maree, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this study, the phenomenon involved the facilitation of transitions. As suggested by Maree (2016), data is usually gathered from a range of sources that create raw text. In this study, data was accumulated in the forms and contexts of interview transcripts, image data (which included children's drawings and photographs), observational data and field notes of people's behaviour.

The first step in this data organisation process involved the number of participants, background information and a discussion of the context in which the study was done. Wellington (2015) states that the data must first be unscrambled into manageable and sensible components, and then clustered and categorised so that more meaning emerges. The researcher can include new data components into these categories, and must continually compare the elements while establishing the categories that are closely integrated. Emerging categories must be reviewed and corroborated so that they can be combined into a sensible whole.

In this study, I analysed the data according to the spiral image as determined by Creswell and Poth (2017, p.186). As the data analysis spiral consists of five loops, I approached the analytical process by rotating the analytical circles instead of employing an inflexible approach. The first and largest loop in the spiral includes the management and organisation of data. I prepared and named files that could be easily retrieved. This method includes analysis by hand. The next step involved obtaining a sense of the data by reading and noting any emergent ideas. These included short phrases, ideas and key concepts that came to mind. Memos, according to Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014, p.95), are "not just descriptive summaries of data but attempts to synthesise them into higher-level analytical meanings". I compiled concise notes while reading and summarising the field notes. I also constantly reflected on the data. After compiling my notes, I advanced to the third loop of the spiral, which is to describe, categorise, code and interpret the data. Creswell and Poth (2017) describe this stage as the core of qualitative data analysis. At this point, I compiled in-depth

descriptions and used codes to acquire a credible interpretation. The final phase of the spiral combines representations and visualisations of the data to present details of all that was uncovered in the data.

4.4.4 Trustworthiness

Tracy (2010) lists eight distinguishing criteria that qualitative researchers need to be aware of to ensure that the study's quality is enhanced by relevant research questions that can reliably challenge assumptions, harness theoretical constructs, ensure sincerity and address issues of vulnerability and transparency. Accordingly, the credibility and trustworthiness of research findings are cited as central standards in a qualitative study, meaning that a qualitative study must be founded on validity and reliability. In seeking to establish the trustworthiness of my data, I spent a considerable amount of time observing the participants in their natural setting. During this time, I was able to gather data from multiple sources which included interviews, observations of activities inside and outside the classrooms, children's drawings and photographs of the sites (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2018).

I considered Lincoln and Guba's (1985) suggestion that contradictory voices and explanations facilitate the triangulation and crystallisation of data. I reflected on my biases and gave preference to the many complex interpretations that emerged from the participants' views of their work and the children's activities. This process was supported by useful input from colleagues and corroboration of the findings by utilising different types of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2013). I sought to develop and maintain quality throughout my study, which included ensuring that the research question is significant and relevant to the early childhood field, as well as interacting professionally with the participants who made significant contributions. By maintaining a high standard of research, the study has the potential to advance the field of early childhood education in conceptual, methodological, theoretical and practical ways.

I gave careful thought to research ethics, as recommended by Tracy (2010). While in the field, I was aware of my influence on the participants. I refrained from being critical about their practices and remained committed to the purpose of the research. I remained an active observer so that I could later relate and explain the participants'

stories, having obtained a clear understanding of the participants and their activities. I persistently worked to accomplish the study purpose by ensuring the suitability of my methods and establishing correlations between i) the literature and my research questions, and ii) my interpretations and findings. The evaluation of a qualitative study through precision signifies the "extent to which the findings of qualitative research are authentic and the interpretations reliable" (Abrams, 2010, p.540). The subsequent procedures and strategies must satisfy the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Maree, 2016).

4.4.4.1 Credibility

The use of multiple sources enhanced the credibility of this study (Yin, 2014). According to Abrams (2010) and Tracy (2010), 'credibility' encompasses the extent to which the findings exemplify credible conceptual interpretations and can be achieved by incorporating the concepts of triangulation, plausibility and demonstrations of how the findings and conclusions were derived. A credible study can provide concrete details and reveal implicit knowledge. Multiple modes of data collection allowed me to draw from several credible procedures in my study, such as the corroboration of evidence through triangulation, prolonged field observations, generation of rich descriptions and engagement in reflexibility (Maree, 2016). The processes of compiling multiple data sources, maintaining a high level of involvement with the data and giving detailed descriptions of the research design and methods all contributed to the trustworthiness of the data and findings. The processes were necessary to cast new light on the participants' perspectives. Creswell and Poth (2017) confirm that, when several sources are consulted to document a code or theme in the data set, then the triangulation of information will increase the validity of the findings. For this study, I used multiple methods such as observations, interviews and drawings to uncover minor and major themes that corroborated the evidence.

Triangulation assisted in the creation of a complete, comprehensive and contextual picture of the phenomenon of transition. Methodological triangulation is associated with the utilisation of multiple tools for data collection. In this study, the tools for data collection included observations, interviews, photographs and drawings. Data triangulation also relate to the collection of data from different categories of participants; here, the study relied on inputs from children and practitioners from

varying backgrounds. As Leedy and Ormrod (2015) recommend, the length of time I spent in the field enabled me to build a rapport with the participants, make detailed observations and become familiar with the respective contexts and cultures. That allowed me to detect any misrepresentations that usually sprout from distortions contributed by the researcher or participants. During this time, I was able to formulate interim assumptions and persistently look for evidence that corroborates those assumptions. While I ensured that the data was systematically collected, I paid attention to any inconsistencies in the evidence, as not all data elements are appropriated in the designing of codes and themes. It was thus important that I report any negative analysis, which is necessary for a realistic evaluation of the phenomenon being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2014).

To ensure credibility of the interviews and the observation protocols I had developed, I first established interview themes and questions, while I allowed the research questions to guide my observational practices. My supervisors read and offered useful advice. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2015), the generation of thick, rich descriptions increases the credibility of a qualitative study. In Stake's opinion (2010, p.49), "a description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details". I provided a deep conscientious analysis based on complete descriptions of the physical environments and activities that took place during the days at the schools, allowing meticulous details to flow naturally into the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In the efforts to enhance the study's credibility, I tried to contextualise the participants and sites to produce information that would resonate with readers and help them to grasp the various perceptions by prompting readers to identify with the participants and empathise with events described in the study (Tracy, 2010).

4.4.4.2 Transferability

Qualitative researchers need to employ the concept of dependability, which indicates the extent to which the findings of a study can be replicated in a similar context with analogous participants. I attempted to illustrate transferability by emphasising the research design, its execution, the integrated processes of data collection and analysis and the theoretical conceptions underpinning the study (Abrams, 2010; Maree, 2016). I endeavoured to explain the processes and approaches that can be adopted for conducting the same study under similar circumstances and in identical contexts. I

hence clearly explained the research questions and research design which were considered with distinct theoretical and philosophical principles in mind. Detailed descriptions of the varying activities that I was involved in at each of the physical sites – such as the observations, interviews, writing of field notes, interpretations and ethical issues – are included in this report (Freeman, 2011).

4.4.4.3 Confirmability

'Confirmability' denotes the degree to which the results are cleared of researcher partiality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2007). It also indicates the extent to which data that was justly collected can boost the validity of the research findings (Abrams, 2010). Confirmability further relates to the researcher's ability to address complexities and limitations to a study, such as problems with trust between researchers and participants and issues that relate to the specific roles of researchers and participants, as well as ethical and political interpretations. I did all that was necessary to ensure that the study's findings were not influenced by my personal beliefs or biases. The honest recognition of one's subjective perceptions increases trustworthiness. My experiences with previous studies were reflected in my activities during this research.

4.4.5 Ethical considerations

Leedy and Ormrod (2015) and Maree (2016) opine that when human beings – who can think, understand, reason and undergo physical or psychological discomforts – are requested to participate in an investigation, then the researcher must carefully consider the ethical repercussions of what they intend to do. Accordingly, Leedy and Ormrod (2015) delineate four categories of ethical issues: protection from harm, voluntary and informed participation, right to privacy and honesty with professional colleagues. Since I included vulnerable members of our society – young children between 3 and 5 years old – in the study, I had to take special care and be sensitive of their needs as they could not protect their own interests (Creswell, 2016). Parents and legal guardians signed consent forms (Appendix D) and those children were given the opportunity to participate in the drawing activity.

I divulged the study's purpose to the participants who I treated with respect, along with the traditions and routines they follow at each site (Creswell, 2016). None of the

participants was forced to participate and all were informed that their participation is voluntary. The participants were assured that all information obtained from them will be treated confidentially and that their identities will always be protected. No personal information about the participants was divulged to anyone else (Creswell, 2016; Maree, 2016). Whilst I gave priority to the human participants in this study, I always demonstrated the same principles of respect towards the research sites. The participants' right to privacy was thus acknowledged.

4.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I touched on the theoretical frameworks selected to explain children's transitioning experiences, and then complemented that with a thorough discussion of issues relating to the methodical position that underpinned my approach to the data collection and analytical procedures during and after fieldwork. I pursued a qualitative research approach to obtain a clear understanding of the phenomenon and incorporated an interpretive paradigm, which I realised was the most relevant philosophical paradigm for this study. In this respect, the study was expected to yield the lived experiences of participants as relating to the phenomenon that the study investigated. A multiple case study ensued, and relevant cases were drawn from three distinct categories of schools existing within the South African schooling system. I could hence study the participants in their natural setting to faithfully explain how they perceive the phenomenon through the lenses of their knowledge, opinions and experiences. In this way, I endeavoured to enrich my understanding of the phenomenon. Multiple data collection strategies and a comprehensive analysis presented a strong case for finding valid answers to the research questions.

Chapter 5 contains an extensive analysis of the data.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains the research process at each site, and presents a detailed analysis of the data obtained through observations, interviews and drawings. I also present key findings extracted from the data collected at the three research sites: an inner-city, township and farm school. As a multiple case study design was followed, the data is here presented case by case. The discussion of each case starts with a description of each research site and how entry to the site was gained. This is followed by detailed accounts of observations and analyses of interviews and the children's drawings. It includes the themes, categories and subcategories that were derived from the coding processes.

The first case was conducted at an inner-city school situated in an affluent suburb in the east of Pretoria. The participants comprised two qualified practitioners and 46 Grade R children between the ages of 4½ and 5 years. The second case was situated at a historically disadvantaged township school in Mamelodi, also situated in the east of Pretoria. Participants in this case included one unqualified practitioner while the other practitioner had attained a diploma in early childhood education just prior to this study. The72 Grade R children, between the ages of 3½ and 4½ years, emerged as a pivotal part of the case. The third case included two unqualified participants teaching at a remote farm school about 25 kilometres outside of Pretoria city. The 62 Grade R children, between the ages of 4½ and 5 years, were transported to school daily from nearby farms and informal settlements served as instrumental young participants.

As a researcher working from an interpretivist perspective, I define my reflections from data gathered in an explanatory layout. The outcome is a vivid explanation of the phenomenon as recognised and acknowledged by practitioners and children who have undergone transition.

5.2 CASE A

This case study was conducted at a well-established inner-city school in the east of Pretoria and comprised two highly qualified, hands-on and experienced practitioners together with 46 Grade R children between the ages of 4½ and 5 years old. Most of the children are not conversant in the language of teaching and learning (LoTL) of the school, which is English.

5.2.1 Research site

The first research site was a popular inner-city school, excelling in academics as well as sports and culture. Moreover, as a former model C school, it has become the most privileged of all state schools in the country (more information in 4.4.2.1). The school has inherited excellent infrastructure from the previous political dispensation and is still well-maintained. Parents are required to pay school fees because of limited funding from the Department of Basic Education. Children attending this school have access to well-trained practitioners, stimulating learning materials and resources to enrich their learning experience and identity. Both the indoor and outdoor settings support various aspects of children's learning and encourage them to communicate effectively with their peers and practitioners. Children have access to stimulating resources in this setting and many opportunities to interact with their peers. There are, for instance, numerous fine as well as gross motor materials, props in the fantasy area, innovative equipment like computers to incite children's interest and musical instruments at the music centre – all of which help to build resilient and self-assured identities in children. The parents' school fees are used to maintain facilities at the school and to cover the costs of cleaning materials.

Currently, the school serves 1 100 children. After schools introduced the reception year class (Grade R) – according to the White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development policy document (Department of Basic Education, 2001) – this school erected three prefabricated (temporary) classrooms. The yearlong reception class includes a range of school-readiness activities to prepare children for formal schooling in a holistic manner. Children between the ages of 4½ and 5 years are admitted to

Grade R. The school employs professionally trained practitioners who can meet the social-emotional, physical and cognitive needs of young children.

According to the school principal, the focus of the Grade R class is to provide high-quality programmes to prepare the children for formal schooling. Hence the school only admits 70 children, although more than 500 applications are received annually. The school has three Grade R classes; two classes accommodate 24 children and 22 children are in the other class. The school admits children from diverse cultural backgrounds, including immigrants. Strong teamwork ethics exists and the practitioners show utmost dedication and affection towards the children who are nurtured in a safe enclosure throughout the day.

The departmental head supports the early childhood practitioners and oversees their daily preparations. They attend regular curriculum meetings and actively participate in professional development activities that pertain to children's well-being. Among the valuable messages that the staff received from one of their professional training courses was that the school must ensure that the play area is secured from intruders so that the children's well-being will not be jeopardised. Safety inside the play area has, therefore, been prioritised. The following photographs depict the research site:

Figure 5.1: The outdoor play area

Figure 5.2: The indoor play area

Figure 5.3: Children set up play utilities

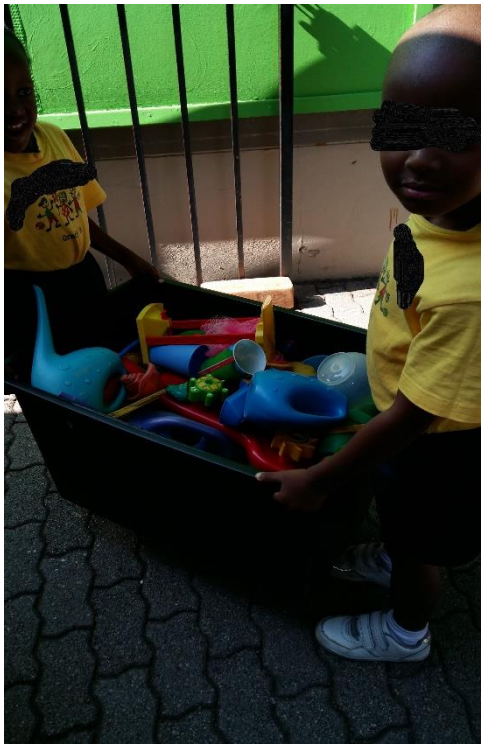

Figure 5.4: Children pack toys

Figure 5.5: Children work cooperatively in small groups

5.2.2 Profile of practitioners

The following table presents a profile of the two practitioners from Site A.

Table 5.1: Profile of practitioner participants (Site A)

Case A	Participant	Age	Years of experience	Qualifications
Inner-city school	Cathy	30	9	B.Ed. degree (Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase)
Inner-city school	Tammy	29	7	B.Ed. degree (Early Childhood Development and Foundation Phase)

Pseudonyms are used for all the participants. Both practitioners are females and have near 10 years of experience in early childhood teaching. Their qualifications and love for children have empowered them to help most of the children at their school to make a smooth transition. Cathy is the current Grade R leader. Tammy has only taught Grade R classes in her seven years of experience. Both have obtained a degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE) and have taught in numerous schools and departmentally organised professional training courses. They have been trained on the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) relating to the Grade R programme. They also received training on policies relating to Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) that helps teachers to recognise, assess and run programmes for children who need special assistance and to increase their involvement and inclusion in school.

5.2.3 Gaining access

After being granted ethical clearance from the University of Pretoria, I approached the school principal and explained to him the purpose of my study in seeking permission to conduct research at this site. The school's administration officer helped to set up appointments with the principal. The principal showed an immediate interest in the study, informed me that she would notify the departmental head and requested that in future all communications should be directed to her. The departmental head informed

me of the positive response from both practitioners and I met with them before the commencement of fieldwork to explain the purpose of my study. I told them that I needed to observe each of their classes for three days and that I intended to ask some children to draw a picture of their teacher. I told the practitioners that I also wished to interview each of them on an afternoon convenient for them.

5.2.4 Observation data

Observations were conducted at this site in the fifth week of a new school year. I deliberately planned this period of time for the fieldwork as the children seemed to have adjusted and were seemingly comfortable in the new environment. The practitioners have already learnt the children's first names, the daily routines had been established and the children seemed to enjoy the activities. The children seemed to have responded positively to a recycling project taking place at the school. The practitioners were often heard sharing their perspectives about the recycling project with the children. They were there to receive children from their parents every morning and expressed their appreciation to the parents for participating in the project. The children were always supervised, which helped to foster a strong sense of safety and security among them.

I used a checklist during the observations on which I indicated the different areas of observations as key headings, starting with how the practitioners approached transition (Annexure) This made it easier for me to jot down all that I observed. I had notified the practitioners that I would not interact with the children except on the day of the drawings. My observations relating to all the key headings are now discussed.

5.2.4.1 How did the practitioners approach transition?

Cathy and Tammy are both experienced and well-qualified practitioners at the inner-city school. They are vibrant, hardworking, passionate and robust individuals who have adopted a constructive, interactive, flexible and holistic approach towards enriching the transition experience of every child in their care. They provided continuity of care by using consistent, predictable and meaningful routines to help the children in their time of adjustment and promote a smooth transition. Their professional and emotional commitment evidently supported the transitioning children's well-being as the children

received daily nurturing and reliable care. The practitioners offered children a loving connection that eased the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar. They made it possible for children to get involved in healthy social relationships.

5.2.4.2 How did the practitioners interact and connect with the children?

I observed that this site's practitioners showed genuine warmth and affection for every child in the setting. They were clearly committed to fostering secure connections with the children. The practitioners used a well-structured daily programme that encouraged the children to appropriately engage with their new surroundings. This set the tone for children to interact with new people and understand what is expected of them. It also helped to reduce unacceptable behaviour. They incorporated a range of stimulating activities and high-quality learning support materials to keep the children motivated and enrich their physical, cognitive, social and emotional competencies. The children appeared to be confident, secure and engaged with their new environment. The classrooms were print-rich environments that reinforced the children's mathematical and language skills and their understanding of science concepts. The birthday charts were the children's favourite wall adornment; birthdays were celebrated by all. The children were made to feel special on their birthdays. I saw evidence that the children were developing their thoughts, ideas, imaginations and that they could make good choices for their groups. The practitioners showed interest in the children's ideas. The teacher-initiated activities appealed to the children in this age group, which promoted smooth transitions.

The children were taken to the library daily where the practitioner read them stories. The practitioners asked them questions about the stories; the children were encouraged to answer in complete sentences. They discussed the main characters of the stories and sometimes role-played parts of the story. The children favoured this practical activity and enjoyed using the available props. They had access to computers for at least twenty minutes per day. The daily activities supplemented current themes in the programme and increased the children's knowledge.

The practitioners interacted spontaneously with the children as they entered the classrooms each morning and throughout the day. The children were guided to acquire good hygienic practices and understand the need to eat healthy food. They were

supervised during mealtimes and given opportunities to discuss the food's textures, colours and shapes. The practitioners were approachable and spoke at the children's level to them during mealtimes and other activities. The children were free to ask questions and positive talk was encouraged throughout the day.

The practitioners gave each child their undivided attention when they made efforts to speak, and no child was abruptly cut off but lovingly acknowledged. They adeptly motivated and inspired the children to participate in all the activities and to do their best, which built their confidence and instilled a sense of belonging. They employed comprehensible language when speaking to the children; the children thus responded well to the instructions and activities in this soothing set-up. They guided the children to understand the concept of time and coaxed them to speak and develop their language skills. They responded appropriately to the children's efforts to converse in English, which was not the home language for the majority of children.

The practitioners presented a range of fulfilling sensory and investigative experiences like storytelling, role-playing, indulging in fantasies, playing with playdough, sand or water, drawing, painting and playing outside. The children had a lot of fun at the sand and water play areas. They were encouraged to fill up jugs, pour water, dig and scoop sand. By being meaningfully occupied with the range of fine and gross motor play-activities amongst peers, the children could feel secure in a fairly new environment.

To be more specific, Cathy warmly welcomed and greeted the children every morning and had quick talks with some parents when necessary. Some of Tammy's children received taps on their backs and she always had something humorous to say to them, making them feel accepted. A boy with Down syndrome in Cathy's class, Bongi (pseudonym), came to Tammy every morning to sit on her lap and stroke her hair. Cathy used a soft but audible tone when addressing her children, whereas Tammy was louder and firmer but very affectionate towards all the children. There was hence little chance of boredom setting in.

These two practitioners created a socially rich environment that helped children to feel secure, safe and comfortable. They created ample opportunities for all the children to become active and bond with the educators and peers in the setting. It was quite evident that such practices supported smooth transitions. They used theme-teaching

to advance the children's understanding of mathematical and language concepts, thus guiding them to acquire and use new words. Tammy introduced more complex vocabulary that related to body parts like knees, elbows, ankles and calves. I noticed that the children understood her and could follow instructions. They responded appropriately to open-ended questions, which indicated that the practitioners extended the children's knowledge, experiences and interests. The children received many opportunities to describe their new experiences. Tammy repeated or rephrased her instructions whenever the children seemed hesitant. She constantly prompted them to listen attentively and participate in activities. In turn, the children's contributions were acknowledged, making them feel valued. The practitioners used children's names to involve them in activities which made them feel that they belong in this new setting. I witnessed a strong bond emerging between practitioners and children at this site, and children who encountered problems in this respect received their support.

5.2.4.3 How did the practitioners execute their responsibilities?

Cathy and Tammy consciously guided their children to work harmoniously and build mutually respectful relationships. They adhered to their responsibilities and executed them professionally. The children had access to a range of toys which were used by the practitioners to creatively organise those resources into different stations, hence providing the children with a variety of learning experiences. The toys and other learning materials were communal items; the children were constantly reminded to share the resources, hence learning to appreciate the value of sharing. The children were also guided to be accountable for the resources, hence learning how to become responsible. I saw some children assuming new roles and assuming the responsibility of either setting up or clearing the areas. This illustrated how the practitioners succeeded in teaching the children to become independent.

When Cathy worked with children in small groups of four, demonstrating to each how to finger paint, others became impatient in wanting to participate. Cathy told those children to be patient because their turn will arrive and that it is good behaviour to wait patiently. She thus helped to instil good values in the children, which will ultimately help them to develop as sound human beings. She often reminded the children that they needed to share learning spaces because they could not all work in a certain area simultaneously. In this way, she inculcated them with the norm of being considerate

to others during the transitions. She always praised the boys who played cooperatively at the mini-soccer goalposts as they took turns to shoot goals. Those words of encouragement built stronger self-esteem in the children.

Cathy intervened immediately whenever children were seen taking toys by force away from others. She told them that grabbing is dangerous and unacceptable in her class and that they needed to consider other people's feelings. If the situation got out of control, she took the toy away from both children. She then reminded everyone that they need to share everything in the classroom, always play fairly and ask politely. Tammy frequently reiterated the class motto of "sharing is caring", which is an effective way of reinforcing a core value. When someone deviated, she repeated the motto loudly which prompted the others to join in and repeat the phrase. I heard her tell children that, when you share, you are being a good friend and that it is a good way to invite friends to play with you. Both practitioners engaged the children in fantasy play, encouraging them to nurture special friendships and invite inhibited children into their imaginative journeys. The children generally seemed comfortable sharing, awaiting their turns and working contently alongside their new friends.

The two practitioners constructed spacious environments wherein the children could activate their senses, develop their own initiatives and become creative. The use of hands-on activities encouraged creative expression and the development of problem-solving skills. Children had opportunities to paint, either with brushes or their fingers, and even blow paint. The children learnt to add dish-washing liquid or washing powder to the paint and then talked about the different textures. They drew pictures by using crayons, markers or coloured pencils. They learnt how to work with scissors and build objects with Legos. The playdough-sessions afforded them opportunities to strengthen the muscles in their hands. There were rolling pins, plastic knives, straws, buttons and cookie cutters for the children to use. The children generally worked in small groups while engaging in these activities. They were taught to listen carefully to instructions and respect others who were busy speaking.

Cathy questioned the children about their various activities. She was always interested in their creations and offered advice to help them improve their skills. Cathy taught them how to mix paint, instructing them to use three scoops of powder paint and add a cup of water. The children seemed proficient at this activity. Tammy allowed the

children to lay out the props for a socio-dramatic play in the classroom. She guided the children to use imaginative play and hence understand and connect to the world around them. I noticed that some girls took on the assertive roles of a mother while her 'children' had to act submissively. Some boys enjoyed playing the commanding police officer and using the handcuffs rather forcefully. The children were encouraged to take turns in playing different roles every day. practitioners would then ask questions and listen attentively while the children expressed themselves, thereby showing real interest in their outcomes. Both practitioners guided children in activities at the block construction area inside and outside the classrooms. They encouraged the children to build taller buildings, towers and bigger garages to park their toy cars in. The children were also encouraged to build puzzles in a quiet and separate room. Some children worked in groups while others worked independently and with deep concentration on a puzzle. The available range of activities helped the children to feel safe and secure in a relatively unfamiliar environment. These activities satisfied children's curiosities and enhanced their literacy, maths and science skills.

Both practitioners at this site seemed to have good control over their emotions. I never saw them yelling at children and they always responded composedly to any of the children's tantrums. There were enough play-based activities to supports the children's development of self-control and problem-solving skills. The classroom rules further ensured that the children learnt self-control. Cathy was a role model of self-control in her class; she used composed and gentle language when the children grew restless. She would convey her emotions to children clearly but gently: "*I am upset that some of you are still fiddling when you are supposed to be listening*." Tammy also made children aware of her unhappiness with poor behaviour, especially when they demonstrated selfish tendencies like not co-operating, not sharing, grabbing toys and throwing them around. Both practitioners provided extra supervision at the block construction area because of some minor clashes having occurred. The children were appropriately guided in this respect and seemed to cooperate during my observations.

Tammy often employed action rhymes to calm children when necessary. The planned activities prompted children to make decisions, persevere, build resilience and develop control. The practitioners' organisational abilities benefited not only the children but also themselves. The children were always engrossed in activities, which meant that

the practitioners were less burdened with having to control unruly behaviour and outbursts. This means they also had more time to express warmth and affection towards the children, to build safe and secure relationships with them and to spend time with a few who were not coping as well as others. Both practitioners constructively helped children to externalise unruly behaviour. Any unruly children were given two warnings and if they failed to respond positively were then excluded from an activity, or given 'time out'. They adeptly employed other creative means to restore calmness whenever necessary. Tammy encouraged the children to have control over the spaces they occupied, teaching them that their hands should not be touching or annoying others unnecessarily. They thus guided the children to control their behaviour as well. These activities enabled children to become independent, socially responsible, self-disciplined and to distinguish between right and wrong.

5.2.4.4 How did the practitioners respond to children's emotions?

I noticed that both Cathy and Tammy were attuned to their own emotions and love children unconditionally. They never ignored a child who needed emotional support. They authentically responded to children's need for security and always had comforting toys available. The children were taught to respect others, share and control their emotions when playing with others. By teaching these values of respect, the children cooperated more and improved their relationships with others. Both practitioners were available at all times and assisted any children who became emotionally distressed, making them feel secure. They formed close attachments with every child and acknowledged their efforts, thus strengthening their well-being. They controlled tense situations very well and sympathised with children who were upset. Children in this age group often become distraught over minor issues. These proactive practitioners knew how to quickly reassure children, especially when others had hurt them intentionally or when they had hurt themselves accidentally. Cathy would encourage children to tell her how they are feeling if she did not know why the child is crying; she would then pacify the child with a soft teddy to play with.

The practitioners had alerted the other children to Bongi's condition (Down syndrome) and they accepted him as part of the group. I observed that they did not overreact when Bongi disturbed them but instead calmly handed him over to the practitioner. Cathy also responded to Bongi's strong emotions at times, especially when he became

frustrated and, for example, toppled the children's construction or threw their puzzle pieces away. Tammy pacified him by removing him from the group, calmed him down and led him to a quiet corner to engage in another activity by himself. There were many soothing toys in that corner which helped him to calm down. He was sometimes given a glitter bottle to shake, directing his attention to the colourful stars inside.

Any disruptive behaviour was addressed appropriately, leaving no child to feel helpless. This approach helped the children to adapt to their new environment and others around them. Knowing that the practitioners respected their emotional needs, the children could be active and feel more confident and secure.

5.2.4.5 The learning environment

My observations confirm that the practitioners used their skills and knowledge to create a rich, welcoming, clean, safe, accessible and varied environment. The children were kept in a safe enclosure throughout the day, free from threats – especially bullying. This is a key responsibility of the practitioner. Such a setting supports the child's transition experience. The well laid-out indoor and outdoor environments helped the children to have fun with their peers and take risks in a safe environment, knowing that the practitioner was close by and available if needed. This layout indicated that the practitioners knew the value of a well-organised environment. This prompted children to socialise with new friends. Adequate space was available to them to be active in groups or play alone with puzzles if they wanted, which is a suitable policy for the age group. I saw the practitioners making the children aware of how to play safely and help each other in an environment where they could all run freely. The children evidently felt secure and their confidence grew while exploring.

There were at least five learning stations inside the classrooms that supported free choice and teacher-initiated activities. The children had access to a painting table, a library corner, and a block play area where they could enact dramatic play and gross and fine motor activities. The practitioners had creatively set up these areas. I observed warm and positive interactions taking place between the practitioners and children during all activities. The classroom was arranged in such a way that the practitioner could move between groups, provide direct supervision and encourage them to do their best. The indoor area had appropriate charts of basic maths,

languages, life skills and birthday dates that promoted learning and a sense of well-being and belonging. The children's creations were displayed in the classroom, an outdoor play area and in the foyer. In this secure environment, the children felt free to discover the surroundings either with their peers or on their own. Those freedoms allowed the children to become confident and be stimulated by the planned activities. Both practitioners were quick to sense when something was amiss and stepped in to support the children when necessary. There was ample space for gross motor play outside. Space outside was carefully organised, free of hazards, so that the children could not trip over other children or equipment. The soft-landing surfaces helped to prevent serious bruises from falls, confirming that the children's need for safety was considered. The gates were locked to increase security on the premises.

The children had opportunities to decide for themselves whether to play on the jungle gym, in three Wendy houses for blocks and fantasy play or to work with manipulative toys. Those activities developed the children's senses of confidence, creativity and self-expression. I observed some children having uninterrupted fun on the jungle gym with continual supervision from the practitioners. The children were, therefore, encouraged to develop their climbing, balancing, throwing and tumbling skills. They also improved their coordination and balance and strengthened the muscles in their legs and arms. Both practitioners were passionate about creating exciting learning experiences for the children who could make decisions about activities by themselves, such as setting up areas or packing items. In this setting, the children enjoyed a variety of experiences that enhanced their happiness and sense of belonging.

5.2.4.6 Summary of observations

The practitioners worked closely as a team and supported each other in bringing out the best in each child. The children were exposed to a range of experiences and seemed quite comfortable in the new setting. The practitioners responded effectively to the needs of all children. They showed unconditional love to the children, never ridiculing them for mistakes but instead, gently corrected them. The children could participate in a range of activities that supported their social, emotional, cognitive and physical well-being.

The next section presents a discussion of the interview data gathered from the practitioners. The interviews were conducted to obtain an understanding of the practitioners' and children's experiences of the concept of transition.

5.2.5 Interview data

During the interviews, I elicited responses from the practitioners about various aspects of the children's transitioning process. Interviews at this site lasted about 30 minutes. Both practitioners exuded enthusiasm as they answered questions. The first question concerned the practitioners' experiences of transition.

5.2.5.1 How did you experience the children's first day at school?

A child's transition from a home to a school is considered as the most significant educational transition that could be made – a process that is usually filled with uncertainty, anxiety and tension. A child depends on the support of caring, warm and trusting individuals (Dunlop, 2003; Fabian & Dunlop, 2007; Hirst et al., 2011). I wanted practitioners to share some of their own experiences of the child's first day in this new setting. These two trained practitioners acknowledged that the first day is usually traumatic for some children. Tammy emphasised that it is also a very demanding day for them as caregivers, as some children become bewildered and emotional in the new environment. She had to hurry around, stay attentive and settle the tearful children. The children generally seemed uneasy and apprehensive in the new surroundings. Cathy confirmed that a new environment, especially a very big school like theirs, can cause nervous tension in young children. They agreed that the children perceived the large buildings in an unfamiliar location as threatening. Cathy and Tammy provided valuable insights on how they experienced and managed a transition with their new group of children on an extremely eventful day.

> Tammy: *The first day, oh! The first day is always such a rush. A very emotional day for them. A lot of tears and a lot of time trying to settle them down, getting them used to our routines. A lot of them were a little apprehensive. The first day I must say is but a blur. It goes by very quickly, but it is an exciting day to meet our little ones. For me I enjoy it. I love it*.

> Cathy: *Last year there was tears, lots of tears. This year none of my children cried on the first day which is unusual as this is a big school. You know in a big school it is nerve-wracking*.

Cathy attributed the management of a smooth and effective first day to the planning and implementation of a successful orientation programme in the previous year. She stated that children now had the opportunity to meet her and spend time with her first. She felt that children in her current class were emotionally more stable, confident and ready to explore the new environment as they were orientated earlier than usual, which set the pace for the first day. Cathy stated that the children adapted smoothly to the new setting and separated easily from their parents. She smilingly recalled how these children experienced their first day at the school.

> Cathy: *They came in for orientation the year before. They came to school. They knew what class they were in. They spent some time with me, so they were more at ease with separation from their parents*.

The orientation programme, administered by Cathy, relieved much of the anxiety that children normally experience.

5.2.5.2 How did the children experience the first day?

Here, I wanted to ascertain whether practitioners had plans in place to manage the first day. It was established that Cathy had invested in a well-organised orientation programme the year before. The confidence shown by children in Cathy's class astonished her as they did not exhibit any uneasiness. Tammy contended that the massive building and a new environment tend to intimidate the children. However, beneath this initial uncertainty, she noted a strong enthusiasm, interest and curiosity in some children. They seemed set to discover what the new environment had to offer.

> Cathy: *So, the first day went smoothly and they knew what they would be expecting. Like I said I have quite a confident group of children this year and we make the first day lots of fun. We draw pictures of ourselves, we sing, we dance*.

> Tammy: *And the majority of the time, it is the first time they have been in such a big school and a big environment like this, but they are excited as well as eager to play on the playground and eager to come into the classroom and see where they are sitting*.

Cathy indicated that they plan their practical activities to help children become acquainted with others in the class. They encouraged them to make friends by having them sit close to another. The strategy seemed to make the children feel welcome and comfortable. Even so, they did not become too concerned if a child did not immediately make friends. The focus of the first week is the children's adjustment to a new setting. Cathy added that they made the first day an enjoyable one for the children. They handed out some symbols to children during this day – a picture to identify each child in the setting. The practitioner then discussed the symbols with the children and even played some games with the symbols.

> Cathy*: We don't really sit still on the first day, and its lots of getting to know each other. They receive their symbols for the year. We sit in circles; we talk about what their symbol is. They always get excited on that day. We hide the symbols; we try and play games where to find the symbols*.
>
> Tammy: *We see what pictures (symbols) they get. Overall, it was a good day. I think they enjoyed the first day. Ja (yes), it was a good day for them*.
>
> Cathy: *The first week is really orienteering for them. They learn about the class, they learn about each other, who their friends are. If you don't have a friend, we don't make a big thing about it. We get their friends to sit next to them so that they can socialise*.

5.2.5.3 How did you try and comfort uneasy children?

Young children tend to feel a little apprehensive in an unknown setting. With my next question I wanted to determine whether the practitioners at this setting planned and provided support to children who had difficulty in settling down on the first day. Tammy openly indicated that, although this was not recommended practice at this site, she had adopted a more maternal and loving way to pacify traumatised children by picking them up, embracing them and giving them unconditional love. She helped them to

make friends and helped some onto the jungle gym so that they could feel more at ease. Cathy stated that none of her children needed comforting because they were all confident and composed.

> Tammy: *We are not supposed to do this, but I am one of those who does this because it is not their fault. I pick them up. I love them a lot and try to introduce them to a friend, things like there is a friend to play with, put them maybe on a jungle gym, maybe they enjoy playing on the jungle gym*.
>
> Cathy: *There was no one who was uneasy. Not this year, but last year we had a boy who was very anxious. He would cling to me for most of the day. There was separation anxiety*.

Tammy reassured sobbing children by telling them that their parents will soon come to fetch them. Until then, she would occupy them with interesting and motivating activities.

> Tammy: *But I also say mommy is going to be here just know. We are going to do a lot of fun work in the class. We look at our pictures, we colour in pictures. So, I try to make it exciting for them to do*.

Both practitioners demonstrated care, compassion and love when responding to a child in distress.

5.2.5.4 How did you assist children who experienced problems in socialising?

Being aware that young children in a strange environment tend to isolate themselves, I wanted to know how the practitioners at this site helped such children to gain confidence and become more sociable and relaxed with those around them. The practitioners described their skills in helping children to develop socially and respect others, which is the foundation of solid relationships.

The practitioners confirmed that they use various social activities to help children communicate effectively and form friendships. They created opportunities for the children to interact with others, nurture friendships and be considerate of others' emotions. Cathy stressed the importance of making others feel worthy and being

sympathetic to them. Tammy urged some children to invite those who tended to play alone to their games. She spoke gently to the children who experienced problems and encouraged the class to have fun together.

> Cathy: *We teach them social skills, keep them as close as possible when we teach. We stick with each other. We encourage them to think about what the other person feels, make them feel special and important. And children who struggle with this, we help in various ways, one on one sometimes*.
>
> Tammy: *I have a little boy who prefers to be on his own. He doesn't really interact with others and I often encourage other children then to include him in their little games that they are playing. But if he doesn't want to play with other children, I do speak to him. We are friends in this class, mostly through encouragement. We don't fight with each other. We all play together. This is some encouragement for other children to play*.
>
> Cathy: *Few children struggle with socialising; we mediate with them. We take them out on that day, and we do sit and follow routines*.

5.2.5.5 How did you involve parents in the daily programme?

Because of the importance of healthy relationships between parents and the school, I wanted to know how the practitioners assisted parents to help their children during this demanding time. The practitioners at this site described the efforts made to involve the families in the learning programme so that they could help their children to adjust well. They regularly invited parents to formal meetings to share important information about their children's learning and development, about what was expected from the children at school and how to practise certain helpful activities at home. They used communication books to inform the parents about themes in their programmes.

> Tammy*: We have many meetings at our school like parents' evening. We show them what we will be doing in the term. How to help your child how to practice at home*.
>
> Cathy: *We have a lot of parent evenings. We have our parent evenings where we integrate. We talk about what is expected*.

> Tammy: *We tell them about what we are learning about, healthy living, what to eat? We talk about the food pyramid. We explain on a weekly basis what we are learning in their communication books*.

Although not involving the children, the practitioners hinted that they held special meetings with the respective Grade R parents to distribute learning materials such as worksheets and booklets that the children had to work with at home. They employed intervention strategies and held follow-up meetings with the parents whose children were unable to cope with the demanding cognitive tasks during the transitional period.

> Cathy: *They get graded worksheets, booklets. We have a special meeting with the Grade R parents. We give homework and if we find someone struggling with something, we discuss the problem with the parents. We discuss skills that we do in the term*.

> Tammy: *Last week we had a meeting with parents where we showed them how to help their children with the things that they were struggling with, to help them with playdough, so we have meetings where we show them what to do. We got many home programmes, the things that we send home, that they are struggling with, that they take home. We have got a whole file with intervention strategies that we send home*.

> Cathy: *But we have an open-door policy and meet parents one on one and have training meetings. We have plenty of parent meetings throughout the term to help them*.

Although it was still early in the year, much emphasis was placed on academic outcomes during the planned meetings.

5.2.5.6 In your opinion, how long does it take a child to adjust to the new setting?

My aim with this question was to establish how much time children needed to settle in at the early childhood setting. It may have negative implications on children's well-being if they take too long to adjust. Tammy maintained that the first term is critical, adding that children usually use the first term to acclimatise to routines and become

more secure. Cathy, being the more self-assured practitioner, believed that some children in her class had already adjusted, which is a great accomplishment.

> Tammy: *I think the first term they are settling down. I would say by the end of the first term they should be adjusted by then*.
>
> Cathy: *I have children in my class who are already adjusted. Last year, I had a child who did not adjust. He would cling to me the whole day. It often coincides with their age. I urge them to be confident*.

5.2.5.7 How would you describe a fully-adjusted child?

The purpose of this question was to obtain the practitioners' perceptions of a child who has adjusted to the early childhood setting. They asserted that fully-adjusted children are socially, emotionally and intellectually stimulated. They demonstrate resilience and can establish more secure relationships with their peers and practitioners. Interestingly, group work seems to appeal to the well-adjusted child.

> Tammy: *They are excited and happy to come to school. They don't cling onto mommy. They walk by themselves to the classroom. They are happy to see their friends, happy to see their teacher*.
>
> Cathy: *Confident, able to socialise, help peers, interact with the teacher*.
>
> Tammy: *They are eager to learn, and they want to work in their groups*.

Table 5.2 below summarises how the two experienced practitioners at Site A identified the characteristics of well-adjusted children during transitions.

Table 5.2: Characteristics of well-adjusted children (Site A)

Cathy	**Tammy**
Approaches tasks confidently	Enthusiastic about school
Demonstrates social and emotional competence	Displays capacity for self-regulation and social competence
Supports peers	Independent
Initiates interactions with practitioner	Overcomes separation anxiety

	Resilient
	Collaborates
	Enjoys group work

5.2.5.8 What are the qualities of a good Grade R practitioner?

I also wanted to obtain the practitioners' views about qualities that are appropriate for working with young children, since positive qualities may help to smoothen the transitioning journey of many insecure 3-to-5-year-olds.

As professionally qualified practitioners, Cathy and Tammy could list the qualities that effective practitioners embody. Each identified professionalism, adaptability, passion and creativity as personal qualities that Grade R practitioners should display. They emphasised the importance of understanding the teacher's role and proper planning of learning opportunities that enhance children's initiative in adapting to routines.

> Cathy: *You must be able to go with the flow in Grade R, go according to the plan. Sometimes you don't go as planned. You have lots of fun activities, and you know your role as a teacher, and you must get children used to a routine. You must get used to Grade R teaching and routines. In the beginning, children can't get used to Grade R teaching in a sense that a Grade R teacher needs to adapt*.
>
> Tammy: *You must enjoy what you are doing. I think you have got to be creative, know how you think about your lessons, how you take time to teach, you got to get down to their level. A lot of people say you have got to be a special teacher in general, because they are so small*.

Tammy and Cathy believe that practitioners always need to be professional because of the demands of the reception year. This means that practitioners must be professionally trained and able to plan and provide quality learning experiences. Moreover, they need to be energetic and passionate because routines are demanding, and they must make activities enjoyable. Practitioners need to be disciplined, loving, caring and passionate about teaching in this phase so that valuable knowledge and skills can be imparted to them. That will help children to master self-control and adjust

to routines. Tammy added empathy as a key trait of a practitioner. In summary, they felt practitioners must possess a combination of exceptional qualities.

> Cathy: *She must be an energetic person because we don't sit still. She needs to be firm in helping children cope with the reception year. We need to teach them skills they need in Grade 1, in terms of self-control, listen when the teacher is talking and adapting to routines. (She must be) adaptable, very loving but not 'babying' them*.
>
> Tammy: *I think you really got to enjoy the little ones. I think you got to be caring, understanding and you are basically their mommy at school, that's how a mommy is*.

Table 5.3: Qualities of a good Grade R practitioner (Site A)

Cathy	**Tammy**
Energetic	Passionate
Firm	Caring
Strong	Understanding
Effective	Caring
	Maternal love

The interviews at Site A proved to be quite an invigorating experience for me. The practitioners' hard work was borne out by their evident exhaustion in the afternoons. Yet both sacrificed extra time in an afternoon to participate in the interviews, and enthusiastically so. Most of their responses concurred with what I had observed at the site, except for aspects that could not be observed by myself and where I relied on the participants' accounts. I can confirm that the two practitioners – because of their qualifications and passion – were confident and accountable caregivers who knew their profession well and trusted their abilities to help children through transitions.

5.2.6 Drawings and comments

Young children's drawings, according to Eisner (2013), is a very basic form of their expression, just like imaginative play, as it allows them to develop their language, imagination and express personal and emotional responses. Children are perceived

as conversant informers who can symbolise their real and imaginary worlds through their drawings (Sanak-Kosmowska, 2018). Steele and Kuban (2013) suggest that drawings can assist children to elaborate on elements of their experiences. I, therefore, opted to use children's drawings as a data collection method since they can easily express their inner worlds through their drawings. This would help me, as the researcher, to understand how they interpret their environment and feel about the relationship they have with their practitioner.

All the children at Site A were invited to draw a picture of their teacher. This activity took place during an outdoor free-play session. Not all the children chose to make a drawing. The drawings were conducted on the fourth day of observations; by then, the children were used to my presence. The children communicated freely with me and often showed me their drawings just to get some response. On that day, Cathy helped me set up the area for the activity, and cover the tables with plastic covers. We placed some sheets of blank A4 folios and trays of wax crayon, pencils and coloured pencils on the tables. The children were happy to see the blank paper because they were used to printed computer paper. I clearly explained the instructions to the children. I informed them that I would question them about their drawings and that I would like to keep their drawings, which they agreed to. Most participating children focused fully on the drawing activity and took their time to complete their drawings.

5.2.6.1 Bongi's drawing

This drawing was completed by Bongi (pseudonym), a cheerful 5-year-old boy with Down Syndrome. He drew a picture of his teacher, Tammy.

Figure 5.6: Drawing by Bongi

Bongi was the first to finish his drawing, and he was the only one who was able to speak incessantly about his teacher. The picture above – of teacher Tammy and Bongi – was affectionately drawn by Bongi, a child with Down Syndrome. The departmental head alerted me of his condition on my first research visit and suggested that I should not pay much attention as he can be quite disruptive. Conversely, his condition made Bongi suited to this study, as his transitioning experiences could shed fascinating light on the phenomenon. Both practitioners warmly embraced and included him in all their activities even though he became restless and threw tantrums at times. Cathy disclosed that she never had to deal with a child with special educational needs of this nature before, so she examined Down Syndrome and what she learnt helped her to accommodate him. She hence included a lot of drawing, fine motor, gross motor and musical experiences in his daily programme. According to Cathy, such activities improved such children's well-being, attention and fine motor skills. Cathy played music while the children made drawings, during which she also engaged him in free-play activities. Cathy explained that Bongi often puts down his crayon, claps to the rhythm of the music and then continues drawing, which is heartening for her.

Interestingly, Bongi drew himself together with the teacher, indicating that he regarded her as an important person in the school setting. Bongi, a slightly overweight 5-year-old boy, became easily frustrated and threw tantrums on the playfield and in the

classroom. He chose to draw a picture of Tammy, the teacher next door whom he was very fond of. His teacher, Cathy, confirmed that he was close to Tammy, especially during outdoor playtime. I often saw him sitting on her lap while she rocked him. There is not much detail in his drawing, but two people can be seen. According to Bongi, teacher Tammy is the figure on the left. He pointed to himself as being on the right. He drew Tammy as slightly bigger than him which, according to Cansever (2017), indicates a measure of his respect for the teacher. No arms or facial features were inserted in both drawings the individuals' arms and facial features were not inserted. This is understandable as Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) indicate that children with disabilities usually eliminate the hands and facial features from their drawings. These authors furthermore report that children in distress often omit the neck completely, as can be seen in Bongi's drawing. In this drawing, both figures are completely shaded which is an indication that he is anxiety (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011). Bongi also drew thick and some faint brown vertical lines to depict their clothing. This skilful depiction is usually used by children without impairments and might not be relevant for children with disabilities. He pointed and said, "*This is teacher Tammy's dress, and these are my shorts*". The lines seem to dominate the drawing. Deguara and Nutbrown (2018) believe that, in such a case, the child explores enclosure and trajectory symbols, thus showing affection and appreciation for direction offered to him. The thick and faint brown lines that cover the bodies of the two people he drew reveals "a form of insideness" and closeness that they share (Nutbrown, 2011, p.11; Rolling, 2013).

While I probed Bongi to explain his drawing, he pointed to a part of it and said, "Her ponytail", then swayed his hands in the air to simulate the way that her ponytail moves. This gesture indicated his awareness of how confident and energetic Tammy is around children. A child can visibly reflect a person's physical appearance in a drawing (Cansever, 2017). Bongi's drawing reflected a well-groomed teacher with a neat ponytail. He looked satisfied with his drawing when I asked him what else he liked about the teacher, and then exclaimed, "*I sit on her lap!*" He then stood up, clapped his hands joyfully and added, "*She pushes me on the swing".* Children, according to Cansever (2017), distinctly depict the actions of a person in their drawings. Bongi also offhandedly demonstrated the to-and-fro movements of the swing. At the time, his expressions confirmed that he felt content and relaxed in the setting. The conversation

with Bongi revealed his appreciation of Tammy's exceptional qualities such as her enthusiasm, energy, confidence, compassion, love and care.

5.2.6.2 Neo's drawing

The next drawing was done by Neo (pseudonym), a 5-year-old girl who was very close to her practitioner, Cathy.

Figure 5.7: Drawing by Neo

Neo became excited when she learnt that she was going to draw a picture of her teacher. She and her friend Sara clasped hands and jumped around showing their excitement about drawing "*Teacher!*" Neo also helped to set up the area for drawing. She knew where to place the crayons. At other times she also helped with laying out play equipment outside, such as bean bags, hoops, small balls and skipping ropes. She seemed to have strong leadership and organisational skills. Unlike Bongi, Neo calmly sat at the table, listened to the instructions, then unhurriedly made her drawing. I observed that she used coloured pencils. She made outlines in black and coloured in with red and pink. She took about ten minutes to complete her drawing and then showed her friend the drawing. She held the paper up to show everyone and proudly kissed her image of her beloved teacher.

Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) state that children enjoy drawing what they understand and appreciate. These drawings displayed the extent to which the children were aware of their surroundings. Neo sketched her teacher with her hands extended, portraying Cathy's readiness to connect and accommodate others (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011; Wright, 2012). The hands suggested that Cathy is ready to hold something. Neo's drawing stylishly depicted a friendly teacher standing with a smile on her face, wearing a beautiful dress. Neo's drawing manifests a typical description of happiness – a smile (Barton, 2015; Burkitt & Watling, 2016). When I asked Neo what she liked about her teacher, she said, *"I like her ponytail and smile"*. Cansever (2017) and Deguara and Nutbrown (2018) confirm that children pick up details of physical characteristics quickly, like gestures, appearances and facial expressions. Hence, Neo drew someone confident, neat, well-dressed and happy.

Apart from liking her teacher's ponytail and smile, Neo stated that she "*lets me play with her toys in the dolly house*". This is yet another positive attribute of the teacher that Neo had identified. Both practitioners allowed children to use all available equipment. The "dolly house" attracted the children, presenting them with lots of fun activities. Cathy and Tammy continually watched over them while they played there. They encouraged the children to play fairly and apologise whenever they made mistakes or upset someone. Neo thus looked up at her teacher showing her appreciation. The interview with Neo illuminated Cathy's positive traits as an energetic, warm, caring and genuine practitioner who shared toys with the children.

This case study clearly illustrated that transitions can proceed seamlessly. With all systems in place and programmes implemented professionally, these affectionate practitioners proved that a qualification in Early Childhood Education is an essential element in helping young children to adjust to a new environment. The two drawings supported the observational data, especially Bongi's drawing that portrayed his close bond with teacher Tammy. The drawings, my observations and the interviews with the practitioners and children confirmed that both practitioners supported the needs and interests of the children entrusted in their care.

The second case study examined how the practitioners at a township setting perceived and influenced the transitional experiences of young children.

5.3 CASE B

Case B centred on a township school that was a complete opposite of Case A. The 72 newly admitted 3½-to-4½-year-olds at the school were guided by unqualified childhood practitioners. During my research activities at this site, it became clear that their lack of training and subsequent non-professional behaviour might hinder young children's transitional experiences.

5.3.1 Research site

The research site is a township school situated in a very poor community. The school has been classified as a Quintile 3 school based on the poverty level of the community. This means that parents are not obligated to pay school fees, and the government allocates funds for the running of the school. These funds are used to purchase learning support materials for the children and the general maintenance of the school. Most of the parents are unemployed and grandparents often have to care for their orphaned school-going grandchildren, supported only by a meagre social grant from the government. The school claims that its funds are inadequate to cover all costs.

My interviews with the two practitioners revealed that children who attend this school face a range of hardships in their daily lives, including hunger, poor health, abuse, poverty and loss of a parent(s). This school is a standard township school with a dilapidated school building, neglected gardens, unclean toilets, and situated in a community that experience many challenges. A lack of tight security means the school regularly loses teaching and learning resources, computers and food delivered for children, due to break-ins. To add to their despondent situation, these young children are taught by unqualified personnel as township schools are unable to attract qualified practitioners. Once practitioners qualify, they move to the foundation phase where they receive a higher salary with benefits. The early childhood classes at this site are overcrowded – each class contains more than 35 children.

Figure 5.8: A waterlogged jungle gym

Figure 5.9: Children spend most of the day in this large mobile class

5.3.2 Profile of practitioners

The following table presents a profile of the two practitioners from Site B.

Table 5.4: Profile of practitioner participants (Site B)

Site	Participant	Age	Years of experience	Qualifications
Township school	Pearl	37	4	Studying towards a qualification in Early Childhood Education
Township school	Kuagelo	36	11	Diploma in Early Childhood Education

The practitioners had four and eleven years of experience, respectively. Pearl had less than five years of experience with no formal qualification although she was busy studying towards a qualification in Early Childhood Education. Kuagelo had more than ten years of experience and had earned a diploma in Early Childhood Education just prior to this research. The practitioners did not plan their lessons but, instead, used the prepared CAPS-aligned lesson plans issued by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Both practitioners had received training on SIAS policy.

5.3.3 Gaining access

Gaining access to this site was an uncomplicated process. The principal was pleased to announce that this was a much-preferred school by researchers who frequently conducted pilot studies at this site. The school staff were used to collaborating with researchers and they also gave me their full support. The most recent study, conducted by a researcher from the University of Pretoria and a team of professors from Japan and the Philippines, concerned parental involvement during children's completion of science projects. This project had a positive outcome. Thus, the principal had no objections to my request for another study to be conducted at this school. All the mentioned ethical procedures were adhered to and explained to the practitioners.

5.3.4 Observation data

My observations at this site occurred at an inopportune time because the practitioners had not yet received their stipend from the Department of Education. They were tense, unfocused and appeared detached from the new group of children who were still in the process of transitioning. The situation caused inconsistencies as the practitioners were not emotionally available for the children and showed little interest in their well-being. They spent a lot of contact time on their cell phones trying to contact district officials to enquire about their salaries. This unfortunate situation frequently took them out of the class, as they requested the principal to make calls on their behalf.

5.3.4.1 How did the practitioners approach transition?

According to my observations, Kuagelo and Pearl's approach to transition lacked commitment and dedication. Without leadership and adequate training, these practitioners conducted many of their daily activities in a thoughtless and inconclusive way. Some positive traits emerged. They ensured, for instance, that the children's nutritional needs were taken care of. Kuagelo was sympathetic to a few children who cried each morning and attended to others who became ill at the school. Other core areas that are vital to children's development was overlooked though. For example, both practitioners were unable to create play-based opportunities for the children. They did not plan nor implement any stimulating outdoor activities to prompt children to use their senses, imaginations or urges to explore in little groups. My observations

at this site confirmed that children from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be marginalised by uncaring and unprofessional practitioners. Their right to transition smoothly in a safe environment is subsequently disregarded.

5.3.4.2 How did the practitioners interact and connect with the children?

At this site, I observed that not much effort was made by either practitioner to build healthy relationships with children. The interactions generally seemed cold and the practitioners appeared unapproachable, hence I saw little signs of enthusiasm and confidence building up in the children. Neither of them took a personal interest in the children; they rather played the role of childminders. Each day began in a tedious and uneventful fashion for the children, as no adult was present to welcome them. The practitioners attended morning briefing sessions which extended into contact time. During that time, the children had to sit on a small carpet impatiently awaiting the practitioner's arrival. The classroom was not designed to promote the development of fine motor or cognitive skills. No theme teaching, story-telling or question-and-answer sessions took place during my observations. The children were left unsupervised which generated anti-social behaviour in some. Other children could freely enter the classroom and bully, fight or even hit the children if they wanted to. The children's need for safety was, evidently, forfeited by uncaring adults.

I noted that these two practitioners usually arrived long after the morning siren had rung and made no immediate attempt to acknowledge the awaiting children. This deprived the children of opportunities to connect with the practitioners, having been snubbed from the first moments. Kuagelo usually tended to fundraising issues in school, collected money for trips and issued notices to staff on these issues. I observed how the children waited for some acknowledgement from the practitioners, but that rarely happened. On one occasion Pearl spoke outside to some parents who had arrived unexpectedly, then walked over to the kitchen where, as the supervisor, she had to ensure that the cooks had all the ingredients and gas for cooking. The children at township schools received meals from the school feeding scheme.

A haphazard style of interaction with the children commenced only after the practitioners attended to less-relevant issues that did not pertain to the children. The children's visits to the bathroom were unattended. On some occasions, Kuagelo

decided to accompany children to the bathroom, but when she would meet Pearl on the way there, they would chat while the children were on their own in the bathroom. No training was given to the children about proper hygiene practices. Precious opportunities like these to connect with the children were squandered by the general inefficiency.

The daily routines were unpredictable, erratic and confusing to a child who is transitioning to a new environment. When lessons eventually began, the interactions seemed somewhat cold, restrained and rushed since most of the teaching time was used for personal and more trivial affairs. Children who did not speak Sepedi were often ignored. The practitioners did not use a common language to speak to the non-Sepedi children, who tended to become disruptive whenever they were disregarded. The practitioners were evidently not sensitive to the children's communication needs. Their instructions were often not clear either. The children were not encouraged to participate in discussions and some were brushed off during a speaking turn. Opportunities to build caring and trusting relationships with children were hence not prioritised at this site. This poor management of classroom signalled the practitioners' unpreparedness. Classroom rules were not explicitly explained to the children.

Morning discussions in each class were monotonous and uninspiring, and followed by repetitions of the days in a week, months in a year, and shapes. The children were disinterested and restless. Each child had to repeat what was taught, but they showed no enthusiasm for those laborious tasks. Those sessions usually took about thirty minutes. The children were not questioned during discussions to inform the practitioner of what the children already knew and to revise work whenever necessary.

Children in both classes mostly engaged in teacher-directed activities for about two hours in the mornings. Pearl focused on colouring activities. She outlined shapes on paper for the children to colour in. Children from Kuagelo's class followed the activities outlined in the DBE workbooks. Those activities are academic in nature and the focus is on completing school readiness activities. There were diminished prospects for active interactions at this site as the children had few opportunities to collaborate with their peers. All the activities for children were prescribed by the Department of Basic Education, which means they were deprived of opportunities to make their own decisions, develop their initiatives, use their imaginations or coordinate and exercise

body movements. They did not work in small groups frequently enough to learn how to negotiate or even spend time alone with an activity they enjoy. They did not get any chances to engage in fantasy play during my observations, or to share toys and their ideas with others. The limited range of interactions seemed to undermine the children's thinking prowess and confidence. The general disorder in the classrooms indicated that the practitioners were not active in developing the children's confidence and resilience, while their safety was compromised as well. The practitioners were not directly involved in play-activities either. Therefore, it can be concluded that the practitioners at Site B were unable to create a smooth transition journey and help the children to cope with change.

5.3.4.3 How did the practitioners execute their responsibilities?

These practitioners did not execute their responsibilities enthusiastically or professionally. Hence, they were unable to transfer basic values such as respect, kindness and sharing to the children. The children did not get proper opportunities to learn how to share items. For instance, sometimes children wanted to use the same colour of crayons while drawing and then started to argue. Kuagelo would then shout furiously to those children that they needed to wait. No explanations were given why a child needed to wait, or why it is necessary to be fair and share the crayons. Practitioners need to model good deeds so that children can internalise them. I never saw either of these practitioners harness ideal teaching moments to make children aware of building friendship through sharing.

Creative expression at this site was hardly promoted as the practitioners did not create a conducive learning environment, nor did they create space inside or outside to encourage the children to be creative or express themselves spontaneously. The children were only allowed to be involved in DBE-directed activities, which were not always done because the practitioners were frequently out of the classes. The children spent most of their days either on the carpeted area in the classrooms or the tabled area next to it. The practitioners had blocks, puzzles, storybooks and Legos, all packed in boxes. It should be among the first duties of a responsible practitioner to lay those items out on the tables for use during routines. However, drawing and painting were the only activities available to the children during my observations. The children in both classes derived little enjoyment from these activities, also because the practitioners

held the brush for the child to paint an outline. The children were called one by one to paint while the others waited, and some children did not even get their turns. They would then continue the following day. While the practitioners claimed that most toys had been stolen so they do not have anything, I noticed that they had new and untouched learning materials stored in boxes, which they never took out and set up in their classes. The practitioners, therefore, could opt to play some games or improvise with the children, but they remained detached instead. The opportunities for creative self-expression and problem-solving were virtually non-existent for Site B's children.

I observed how the poorly organised environment in both classrooms made it difficult for the children to develop self-control or reduce impulsive behaviour; there were few opportunities for them to learn how to make good decisions, play fairly or sympathise with others. Some children grew frustrated with the others because they constantly bumped into each other in the disorganised environment. The frequent absence of the practitioners from classes and the erratic routines confused the children and prevented them from developing discipline and self-regulation. They were often restless and wanted to play with the toys that were still packed in the boxes. Neither practitioner had any corrective measures in place to restrain disruptive children. Instead, they spent a lot of time yelling at the children in response to unacceptable behaviour. Pearl seemed to have little control over her own emotions. Even in the fourth week of the new term, two children in Pearl's class still cried each morning and she was unable to calm them. They had not adjusted to the new settings and routines and had not made new friends. Those children were taken to teacher Kuagelo as she was more loving and compassionate towards them. My observations at this site convinced me that the children could have learnt self-control if they were spoken to warmly and allowed opportunities to explore, discover things for themselves, play with their peers in groups and build strong and trusting relationships with others. However, the children constantly fought with others and their poor behavioural patterns were hardly noticed or remediated by the unresponsive practitioners. Whenever children reported that others had hurt them, they were yelled at by the practitioners.

5.3.4.4 How did the practitioners respond to children's emotions?

I noticed that Kuagelo did sympathetically respond to the two unadjusted children who could not settle down and continued crying and screaming each morning. Kuagelo had

temporarily moved them from Pearl's class as they seemed to be more comfortable in her presence. Pearl had spoken to them in harsh and high-pitched tones, which can be terrifying for an insecure child. Pearl sometimes gave the children sweets to calm them down but this strategy had limited success, as the children seemed to want a person who could genuinely ease their distress. She was thus unable to display unconditional love or build trusting relationships with the young children. The troubled children could sit close to Kuagelo in her class, and she spoke lovingly and kindly to them. That helped to settle them down. Kuagelo returned them to Pearl's class once they had calm down. Kuagelo often comforted children who felt unwell during the day. My observations were conducted in the heat of mid-summer and some children complained of dizziness. Kuagelo would sympathise with them and take them to the sick room to rest, whereas Pearl became a little impatient with them. Pearl was unable to control her temperaments and moods, and reacted harshly to children who were hurt when she was outside of class. She even yelled at one child, "*Oh, it's you again!*"

5.3.4.5 The learning environment

The physical environment at this site was unwelcoming, poorly maintained, run down and did not appeal to young and active children's interests. It was also not conducive to developing their minds or identities. The practitioners' lack of dedication and passion for their jobs meant that they failed to create secure spaces where children could explore their surroundings. Creative, flexible practitioners would normally set up physical environments that enrich the transitioning experiences and competencies of children. Here, the interests and needs of children were overlooked. For instance, though many toys were available, they were not availed to the children to use during daily routines or to engage with their peers. A proactive practitioner would seize such opportunities. Resultantly, these children were not meaningfully occupied and became disruptive. Furthermore, the lack of commitment from the practitioners meant that the children could not improve their language skills and creativity, nor socialise properly with their peers. Pearl's class was also used as storage for ceiling boards that had been purchased to repair some ceilings that had collapsed after heavy rains. A large trampoline stood against a wall and was never taken outside for the children to play on. The children could not be kept safe from outsiders in the outdoor play area and the poorly maintained wooden jungle gym was situated in a hazardous area. It had

missing steps on its ladder, broken swings, unstable see-saws and the children could easily get splinters. Some of the gross motor equipment had not been firmly anchored into the ground, so the children could not confidently use them.

The outdoor play area had earlier been vandalised and then left in a shambolic state. It also became waterlogged from heavy rains. The disorganisation and lack of action deprived the children of opportunities to engage with and explore that environment. It disturbed me to see the children not acquiring basic skills such as climbing, jumping, peddling, steering or balancing and not experiencing the joy of playing on a jungle gym. Nevertheless, a proactive practitioner could still improvise, play games and set up simple obstacle courses to ensure that children develop physically. Neither of these practitioners showed interest or took any initiative. The practitioners attributed this chaotic state to the recent burglary, heavy rainfalls and lack of funds to maintain equipment and replace the resources that were stolen.

Pearl's classroom was cluttered, untidy and not conducive for a smooth transition. This indicated that the practitioners were not very concerned with the well-being and the safety needs of the children. Children need caring practitioners who can ensure that interactions between them and children are productive in the learning environment. Children do not experience that in this setting.

5.3.4.6 Summary of observations

I noted that, although Kuagelo had completed a diploma in Early Childhood Education (ECE) recently and had eleven years of experience in an early childhood setting, she did not seem to put her newly acquired knowledge into practice. She oversaw a Grade R class who had already turned four years old. Pearl had four years of experience in the early childhood domain and had just enrolled for a formal qualification in ECE, yet she was still unable to lay down rules and follow routines. Both practitioners taught the same concepts and themes to children despite the difference in age groups. The Grade RR children did not, however, participate in school readiness activities, nor did they work from the DBE workbooks. The practitioners gave the impression that they understood grade issues and that the children were adjusting well. Most of their days were spent resolving personal and school committee issues. Observations in these classes were perturbing as the practitioners showed a total lack of knowledge and

skills in almost all areas of child development, which made it difficult for them to create an enthralling transition experience. They seemed unaware of their roles, responsibilities and professional commitment. Instead of assuming a holistic approach towards transition, the practitioners rather assumed the role of a babysitter.

5.3.5 Interview data

Both practitioners spoke Sepedi and were given the opportunity to answer interview questions in Sepedi but they chose to answer in English. Kuagelo had a good understanding of the questions while Pearl experienced a little difficulty with some of the questions. Some of her responses reflected this. The interviews served to validate observations that took place at this site.

5.3.5.1 How did you experience the children's first day at school?

Transition to a new environment can be a setback to a child as well as demanding for the practitioner. I, therefore, asked this question to the practitioners to understand how they managed this momentous day. The two practitioners at this township school confirmed that the children displayed strong emotions when they were separated from their parents. They indicated that the children cried bitterly and were tense in the new environment. Pearl indicated that most children in her class of 36 were overcome by emotion. The first day was chaotic for her since many children cried hysterically, suddenly finding themselves in an unfamiliar environment. Hence, she had to scurry around but felt that she ultimately managed to cope. Kuagelo reported that not all children cried, and some were pleased to be in a new environment.

> Pearl*: The first day is always full of children. It was hectic because the learners, they were not used to the environment. Of the 36, 27 were hectically crying and then I was running around, but at last I did manage. I sat around them and told them that I was going to phone their parents to come and fetch them. I was playing music on the radio and dancing so that they can laugh. I asked them to dance so that they can be free*.

Kuagelo declared that, while some children became emotional, others seemed elated, content and prepared for new challenges in their new setting. She noticed how some excitedly ran around to explore the classroom and how keen they were to learn.

> Kuagelo*: Our first day was full of emotions. Some were happy to be in the class and some were crying. Those who were happy didn't sit still. They were running around trying to touch (things) showing their excitement for being in the class*.

5.3.5.2 How did the children experience the first day?

With this question, I wanted practitioners to describe the children's experiences at the setting. Pearl said the children were uncomfortable and awkward because the classroom set-up was quite different from their home life, which distracted them. She claimed that the presence of strangers in the new environment terrified some children, bringing them to tears.

> Pearl*: You know when they get into the classroom it's like they are going to have another life, not the home life. It was a big boundary to them. They see other teachers outside, and they were like "Oh, teachers, are we going to live with these people?" They were scared, that's why they were crying*.

Kuagelo saw enthusiasm and a strong desire to learn in some children as they entered the classroom. She claimed that not many children were crying. She used the first day to help children bond with each other and established a few rules.

> Kuagelo*: In the classroom on the first day, they came in and wanted to sit down. They were ready to learn. They were expecting to sit down and start writing and doing all those things. We started by introducing each other and laying down a few rules, that we are not going out at any time. Some were ready, only a few were crying*.

5.3.5.3 How did you comfort uneasy children?

A child's first day in a new environment is usually filled with discomfort and tension (Bell-Booth, Staton & Thorpe, 2014). Hence, with this question, I wished to understand how the practitioners comforted any perturbed children. Kuagelo provided tender,

loving care by holding them close to her. She explained that the distressed children became more relaxed when she picked them up. Some children even fell asleep while being cradled in her arms. Pearl contributed to the children's well-being by wiping their tears and pretending to call their parents.

> Kuagelo*: I put them by my side. They wanted to follow me everywhere I go, even if I leave the classroom, they wanted to come with me. Even carrying them, picking them up, holding them. Some even fell asleep while I am carrying them. They felt comfortable. That's how I managed to comfort them*.
>
> Pearl: *I wipe their tears. I take my phone and pretend that I am phoning their parents. Then I say to them your mum is coming to pick you up. You must rest, and just be quiet*.

5.3.5.4 How did you assist children who experienced problems in socialising?

A young child may not find his friends from home in the new classroom and resist making new friends. I asked this question to learn from the practitioners how they fostered the building of new relationships and friendships in their classes, especially among those who were reluctant to make friends. The practitioners stated that children were helped in different ways to socialise like notifying their parents, stressing the importance of socialising and by allowing them to continue building special friendships with those from home. They also paired children who do not speak Sepedi with Sepedi-speaking children. The Sepedi children helped the others follow instructions in Sepedi and with completing tasks. This practice was never observed during my observations.

> Kuagelo: *I start by informing their parents that their child has a problem socialising and they should tell them when they're at home that all children in class are their friends. They must start playing with them*.
>
> Pearl: *I let them sit with their friends from home if they are shy and don't speak or play with the others in class. They prefer it like that, because they know each other and they protect each other, they can help each other*.
>
> Kuagelo: *There are those who don't speak Sepedi and don't want to socialise. So, I give them special tasks to help. I ask them to fetch some tissues for me in*

Sepedi or call someone. If they don't understand I point to that person and when they come, I ask that person to play with them or during break, they must eat with each other.

There were children in Pearl's class who still cried and refused to make friends. The practitioners placed them near other children they were more familiar with, like neighbours and cousins. Kuagelo sat close to the emotional children while they worked in their workbooks to make them feel comfortable.

> Kuagelo: *There are children who are still crying and don't want to socialise. I let their neighbours or cousins go and sit with them, so they start to feel comfortable. But sometimes they don't want them. I sit next to them, next to their table when we work in the DBE books. I talk to them, ask them to fetch more crayons from my table. They follow those instructions*.

5.3.5.5 How did you involve parents in the daily programmes?

I wanted to establish whether there any relationships between the school and the children's families existed, as they could help to ease the transitioning process. During this stage, parents also need some guidance from the schools in terms of acquainting their children to the realities of transition. I also wanted to find out from the practitioners how they informed parents about the school's procedures. Pearl adopted a rather unconventional approach to parental involvement. She casually invited certain parents on their days off to observe what was happening in her class. There was no planned agenda to guide parental involvement. Kuagelo employed practical means of involving parents whenever challenges arose.

> Pearl: *I normally say to parents who are not working during the day, others they go to work early and knock off late, so those (not) working, or have a day off, please come to my class and see what is happening in the class, how the children are participating*.

> Kuagelo: *We encourage them to be involved in their learner's work. Whenever you see that they have some challenges, we invite that parent. You see a learner is not performing at the expected level we have a one-on-one teacher assistance towards them*.

5.3.5.6 In your opinion, how long does it take a child to adjust to the new setting?

Not all children adjust at the same rate. I asked this question to get an estimate from practitioners how long it may take children to adjust to the new setting. According to the two practitioners at the township school, children need at least a term to adjust to the early childhood setting.

> Pearl: *I think in three months*.
>
> Kuagelo: *I would say they differ from one another. Some, they take a bit longer*.

5.3.5.7 How would you describe a child who is fully adjusted?

With this question, I wanted to know whether the practitioners could identify the most important competencies of a well-adjusted child. According to them, the adjusted children showed confidence in managing the daily routines and had strong characters. Some grew into independence by stopping their crying, making new friends to socialise with and learning how to follow the routines.

> Kuagelo: *Can do things by herself, who is able to follow a routine, it's time for going out. Now it's time for eating. The child who is not crying. The child knows when I am at school I am not going to cry. I am here to make friends. I am here to socialise with others*.
>
> Pearl: *They come to me I can do this mam. I will pick up those who are making noise in class. They are confident*.

Table 5.5: Characteristics of well-adjusted children (Site B)

Kuagelo	**Pearl**
Confident	Confident
Emotionally stable	
Socially competent	
Independent	

5.3.5.8 What are the qualities of a good Grade R practitioner?

Here, I wanted to ascertain from practitioners what their perceptions were of the most favourable qualities of a good practitioner. The practitioners at this site were specific in identifying the exceptional qualities needed. Kuagelo listed passion and creativity as key traits, although she never demonstrated much of those in her daily interactions with children. She did have empathy for those who become ill and others who were struggling to adjust to the schooling environment.

> Kuagelo: *If you are not passionate you won't make it in this field, because some days are not the same, not being aware that the child is sick, you expect children to be the same as yesterday, whereas she may be not feeling well, maybe she is feeling emotional because of something happened at home. If you are not patient, you will miss out*.
>
> Pearl: *It's like being a mother towards my learners. I must open my heart. I must love my kids*.
>
> Kuagelo: *If you are not creative you won't see that the child is developing, or the learner is improving*.

Table 5.6: Qualities of a good Grade R practitioner (Site B)

Kuagelo	**Pearl**
Passionate	Motherly
Observant	Affectionate
Creative	Loving
Caring	

My observations indicated that both practitioners neglected many of their teaching responsibilities. They displayed little interest in the happiness and security of children. They regularly failed to honour contact times so that some days passed without the children learning any values or basic skills. In the interviews, Kuagelo described how she pacified any upset children. I observed her doing this quite well. One child also indicated this in a drawing that featured Kuagelo carrying her cousin. Both practitioners related that they made efforts to help them socialise, although I never noticed this.

They said that practitioners need to be passionate, observant and motherly, but I did not notice these qualities in their interactions with children either. Many discrepancies between their interview answers and actions in class revealed themselves.

5.3.6 Drawings and comments

The children made drawings after completion of my observations. By that time, the children were acquainted with me. urges to explore in little groups. My observations at this site confirmed that site (occasionally, children were asked to colour pictures or make their own outlines for colouring). I had to obtain permission to borrow wooden tables from the library for this task as none were available in the classrooms. I covered the tables and placed crayons and sheets of white paper for the children to draw on.

Wright (2012) finds that young children can convey meaning through their drawings. Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) suggest that, if one wants to elicit appropriate responses from children, then they should be allowed to draw something that they are really interested in or familiar with. While the children were seated at their tables, I told them that I wanted them to draw a picture of their teacher, since most of them seemed to be comfortable in their presence. Some were eager to participate in the activity while others showed no enthusiasm. I told them to take their time to complete their drawings and avoided disturbing them. In Kuagelo's class, the children took between five and eight minutes to complete their drawings. I found the sketches very complicated at this site, but the children's simple explanations clarified some my misgivings. Twenty children drew pictures at this site – twelve from Kuagelo's and eight from Pearl's class. I interviewed a few children after they had completed the drawings to understand how they perceived their teacher. Lebo and Simon wanted to talk about their drawings and handed over their drawings once they were done.

5.3.6.1 Lebo's drawing

This is a drawing by Lebo (pseudonym).

Figure 5.10: Drawing by Lebo

This intricate drawing of Kuagelo was made by Lebo, 4½-year-old girl. I observed that Lebo was very attached to her teacher while I placed crayons on the tables. She was eager to help her teacher. She drew her teacher proportionally and included a lot of detail, such as fine hair growing out of the head. The eyes were drawn in the correct spaces with well-shaped eyebrows and eyelashes. The nose was drawn closer to the left eye and two straight lines, with a touch of green inside, formed the mouth on an expressionless face. The use of green is indicative of mixed emotions that the teacher may demonstrate (Fairchild, 2013; Elliot & Maier, 2014). Well-balanced children draw a head that is in proportion to a body (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011). When asked what she liked about her teacher, Lebo replied that her "*teacher is pretty*". This statement correlates with Cansever's (2017) finding that children portray their teachers' physical appearances positively. Lebo portrayed her teacher as neat, well-dressed and bold, as she carries a child with one hand in the drawing. When asked what else she liked about her teacher, she said, "Teacher carries Siya and she gives us fish and rice to eat". According to Lebo, the figure she drew on the left is Siya, her cousin from Pearl's class. When examining how she portrayed Siya, I noticed how small he was drawn. This signals Lebo's protectiveness towards her cousin and she regards herself as (unconsciously) as the stronger and more mature. Siya's face does not have clear facial features on the drawing; it is only a single circle. The greenish tint represents

poor psychological conditions (Deguara & Nutbrown, 2018). The omission of Siya's facial features indicated his reluctance to socialise (Farokhi & Hashemi, 2011).

In my analysis, Lebo expressed her gratitude to her teacher in the drawing. Her cousin Siya still cried in the mornings and Pearl was unable to pacify him, so she brought him to Kuagelo who behaved more loving towards him. I noticed Lebo looking a little tense each morning when Siya arrived. Kuagelo carried him until he stopped crying. She then allowed him to play with Lebo who he seemed to be comfortable with.

Children at township schools receive meals during the day. Most children, including Lebo, enjoyed the fish and rice which was served on a Monday. The practitioners noted how much the children looked forward to those meals, because some unemployed parents were unable to provide meals to their children over weekends. Naturally, some children were very hungry on a Monday. Lebo perceived her teacher as a loving and caring individual who provided them with food.

5.3.6.2 Simon's drawing

This is a drawing by Simon (pseudonym).

Figure 5.11: Drawing by Simon

As suggested by Fan (2012), I used children's drawings to understand more about their experiences in the early childhood setting. The drawing above was completed by Simon, a ½-year-old boy in Pearl's class. According to Pearl, Simon often cried during the first week. He was among the children who had tried to run away from the school, but he seemed to have settled down. He seemed to be still in a scribble stage, yet Simon drew his teacher very intricately. He spoke confidently and was able to answer questions about his teacher. He stated that he liked Pearl because "*she has big earrings and big dreadlocks*" (artificial curls pinned onto her head). He pointed to the dreadlocks – those were straight brown vertical lines drawn on top of the head. He showed the large earrings, seemingly coming out of the head. He identified the eyes, nose and mouth which were drawn in the correct spaces. However, only circles were drawn to depict those physical features. Farokhi and Hashemi (2011) and Rolling (2013) state that children who have encountered difficulties in their lives tend to forget to draw a neck. Here, Simon overlooked the neck and continued to draw only the teacher's body. He added that he liked Pearl because "*she draws circles for us*". Pearl usually drew the outlines of shapes before asking the children to colour them in. I had noticed before that Pearl made sure that they carefully coloured the shapes without moving outside the lines. I even observed her holding the crayons firmly for some children so that they did not move outside the lines while colourings. Simon clearly remembered the art activity that brought him closer to his teacher, when Pearl "*[gave] us brown crayons*". Quaglia, Longobardi and Iotti (2015) identify colour as a valuable element in a drawing that conveys emotional connections. In class, I observed that Pearl placed single colour crayons in each container that she distributed to the children. In this drawing, Simon used brown excessively, depicting his teacher as a caring and supportive person who would draw 'circles' for him.

This case illustrated the need for township schools to scout for qualified practitioners who can enable successful transitioning journeys for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The drawings from innocent children depicted the good that they observed in their teachers. These practitioners were not available for the children throughout the day, nor did they provide exciting activities. Yet, the children depicted their appreciation for the food they receive, the love that Kuagelo gave to Lebo's cousin when he cried every day, and the circles that Pearl drew for Simon.

5.4 CASE C

This thought-provoking case study was conducted in an isolated area of the Tshwane municipal district. The research site was a farm school. A farm school shares similar characteristics to a township school. Both school types were neglected during apartheid and today they still accommodate children from poverty-stricken backgrounds. The 62 children at this school were taken care of by two unqualified practitioners who had a few years of teaching experience in early childhood education, Anna and Emma (pseudonyms). Anna tried hard – as an unqualified practitioner – to engage the children in meaningful activities. Emma had good qualities as a practitioner but was often away from her class, which risked the smoothness of the children's transitions. According to the principal, only on rare occasions would qualified practitioners prefer to teach in rural areas, especially for Grade R classes.

5.4.1 Research site

This farm school was situated in a rural setting outside Pretoria without a single house in sight. While most rural schools are saddled by inadequate infrastructure, toilet facilities, sanitation, water and electricity, this rural school had been renovated. The new buildings had solid structures, running water, functioning toilets and electricity. The playground was a large open, undeveloped field with no opportunities for outdoor play activities. The Grade R classes had a separate building with its own toilets, washing basins, spacious classrooms and a modern kitchen where the daily meals were prepared. The Department of Education had arranged transport for the 950 children attending this school, so the children did not have to walk long distances every day. The children were picked up at 06:00 from nearby farms and an informal settlement. They were bussed home at 15:30. These young children, therefore, spent almost ten hours away from home on school days. There were adequate learning resources, but the children were still taught by unqualified practitioners.

Figure 5.12: Children participate in outdoor activities

Figure 5.13: Children enjoy playing in fantasy area

Figure 5.14: Children follow instructions

Figure 5.15: Children receive meals

Figure 5.16: Children work in small groups

Figure 5.17: Unmaintained play area

5.4.2 Profile of practitioners

Table 5.7 below illustrates the profile of the two practitioners at the farm school.

Table 5.7: Profile of practitioner participants (Site C)

Site	Participant	Age	Years of experience	Qualifications
Farm school	Anna	53	15	Studying towards a qualification in ECD
Farm school	Emma	33	6	Studying towards a qualification in ECD

Anna and Emma were both unqualified practitioners employed at Site C. Anna had fifteen years of experience in the Grade R class and had recently enrolled to further her studies. With six years of experience in an early childhood setting, Emma had finally enrolled at a tertiary institution to earn a qualification. Both practitioners are involved in part-time studies and work until 15:30 at this school.

5.4.3 Gaining access

It was an uncomplicated process to gain access to this farm school. The principal was approachable and willingly allowed me to conduct fieldwork at the school. His view was that a school belongs to the community and that anyone seeking permission to conduct research or use the school premises is most welcome. His approach put me at ease and both practitioners agreed to become participants in the study.

5.4.4 Observation data

Anna and Emma were unqualified practitioners with many years of experience in early childhood education. I noted that Anna was caring, loving and compassionate, while Emma was expressive and enjoyed dancing and singing with the children and playing games. However, she neglected many of her child-care responsibilities. She had a class assistant and often disregarded the children's emotional, social and physical needs while she tended to issues relating to fund-raising and procuring learner support material. The practitioners consumed valuable contact time each morning to clean

their classes. Since this was a non-paying school fee institution (meaning parents are not obliged to pay school fees), urges to explore in little groups. My observations at this site confirmed that to hold onto their belongings.

5.4.4.1 How did the practitioners approach transition?

It did not seem to me that these practitioners were aware of the transitioning processes that the young children undergo. Anna appeared aware that the children found it difficult to adjust and hence adopted a more positive and balanced approach towards transition. She was available when children needed her, indicating responsiveness to the children's needs. The children in her care were engaged in activities throughout the day. She followed a routine and engaged the children in meaningful activities. She monitored their free-play activities and supported them when necessary. Although Emma was a talented practitioner with strong musical and creative abilities, she often neglected her responsibility to be present in class for most of the day. She adopted an indifferent attitude towards the needs of the children. She was aware that most of the children in her class were unable to speak Sepedi but continued to speak to them in Sepedi, stating that they will pick up the language after a while. The time she spent outside of the classroom could have been used to teach children the language skills that they needed. On the days when she was present, she used to sit at her table most of the time. She did not guide the children well during their transitions.

5.4.4.2 How did the practitioners interact and connect with the children?

Anna usually warmly and respectfully welcomed the children after cleaning each morning. She was full of smiles and the children were glad to see her. She spoke in a clear, commanding and deliberate voice. She spoke to the children on their level and gave them her undivided attention when they spoke, responding positively to the way that they communicated. Effective communication during this time of change seemed to improve the children's interaction with the practitioner urges to explore in little groups. My observations at this site confirmed that in class. The children thus were comfortable and felt safe in her presence. Anna was sensitive to the children who did not speak Zulu like her and used Shona words and phrases to involve them in discussions. She helped them to improve their language skills and motivated them to express themselves confidently. The children seemed to appreciate her efforts as they

cooperated and responded well to her non-verbal communication too. She read stories and then asked them questions about it. They responded well to the questions which indicated that they had listened attentively. The children got opportunities to role-play parts of the story. As soon as the children grew a bit restless, she promptly recited a rhyme along with them. Anna approached theme-teaching in an interesting way and tried to extend the children's knowledge about the theme. Her methods established good relationships with the children. Whenever she warmly greeted a child, they responded appropriately.

Emma also greeted children warmly. She attempted to engage with the children during discussions and used theme-teaching to initiate discussions and asked interesting questions to further those discussions. She listened attentively to the children's responses and corrected their mistakes. However, many disruptions occurred during her lessons, and hence she was called a few times to the principal's office. She did not have enough time to give each child her full attention, which frustrated her and made her irritable at times. When she returned from visits to the principal, she tended to rush through the morning routines and cut children off while they were speaking. She let the children continue with free-play activities while she sat at her table and completed other work, like writing minutes or procuring learning support material for the foundation phase educators.

5.4.4.3 How did the practitioners execute their responsibilities?

Anna ensured that the children learnt good values and modelled sharing behaviour. Children were given fruit in her class. When there were not enough for everyone, the practitioners told the children to cut them up and share among everyone. Anna played several games with the children inside the class and when necessary, reminded them that they must wait for their turn. She ensured they had fun while using her authority well. She thus taught them to be patient and responsible during those occasions. Children who became too impatient were told to stand behind her and watch the others have fun. Girls in both classes frequently argued over the few dolls available. Anna quickly drew the children's attention to any unreasonable behaviour that she observed and insisted that the children behave fairly to one another. Unruly children were sent to the "teddy corner" to hug the huge teddy in the class until they calmed down. Emma named the children who could use dolls for the day; the others received their turns the

following day. Anna was always heard asking the children to share and await their turns. She praised the boys who shared the toy cars. There were enough toys for the children to choose one without having to snatch a toy from another child. The children were encouraged to stand in orderly lines during the breaks and wait for their meals.

The children in Emma's class responded effectively under her supervision. She expressed her interest in the creative activities planned for them. The children set up the classroom for painting or drawing activities and cut the playdough into manageable sizes for everyone. They enjoyed these multi-sensory experiences and many were proud of their creations. However, once she left the classroom, the children lost interest in their creative tasks and pandemonium broke out. The children in both classes received opportunities to paint with large brushes, play with playdough and draw with either crayons or charcoal. The children were encouraged to work quietly on their own and not disturb others – not even the practitioner. There were adequate toys and props for the children to engage in fantasy play.

The children at this site played a lot of games outside with the practitioners. The children were cautioned about rules and they exercised due care by cooperating and playing without pushing others or fighting. They were taught to wait for their turns to play. This effectively reduced misbehaviour and helped the children to become more disciplined. They play competitively and seemed to understand that losing is a natural element of games, indicating that they have learnt to cope with disappointment. They were usually praised for their efforts. Both practitioners set up the dressing-up area, which the children enjoyed. This helped the children to develop self-control. I observed how some children confidently assumed the roles of mothers, firemen and policemen. They collaborated and spoke as if they understood the characters they were playing. However, Emma's frequent absence in her class prompted a few children to abandon that self-control and behave anti-socially. The dominant boys tended to overpower others, start fights and jump on tables, which threatened the safety of all. Anna gave poorly behaved children in her class 'time out' by ordering them to go hug the oversized teddy in her class. This corrective practice served to reduce the aggressive tendencies of some. Children at this site did not have access to safe outdoor facilities like a jungle-gym where they could have developed large motor skills, experimented, built resilience and developed self-control. However, they did get opportunities to play games and run

around freely. I observed that the approachable Anna addressed every child courteously. Had Emma committed to spending the whole day with her class, she would potentially have done likewise.

5.4.4.4 How did the practitioners respond to children's emotions?

Anna and Emma were concerned about the children's welfare, especially because most came from poverty-stricken communities. They ensured that the children from very poor families received their meals first during breaks and always checked to see if they needed more food. Anna always enquired from crying children because they were upset, and they were usually hungry or ill. A hungry child was immediately given something to eat. She would hold them close so they felt less tense, then wipe their faces clean with a face towel. During the long school days, some would grow tired or complain of headaches. Anna laid sleeping mats out for those children. Emma also assisted her children but she was often not in class. This meant that some children would cry for a long time until she returned, upon which she assisted them. She was not always present to resolve unpleasant situations or help children to control their emotions. Anna acted quickly to contain emotionally charged situations in her class. She intervened in little squabbles and got naughty children to apologise. She had good control over her emotions and it became easy for children to emulate her. The practitioners allowed the children to sleep between 14:00 and 15:30 when the buses arrived to transport them back home.

5.4.4.5 The learning environment

At this site, I observed the initiatives taken by the practitioners to organise the indoor space. There were about four distinct learning stations. Each class had a library corner for reading, a fantasy play area with a variety of props, a block construction area with blocks of varying sizes and a large table for painting. These stations were organised for independent, paired and group play. There were accessible play spaces near all toys and equipment. According to the practitioners, these quality and age-appropriate toys had been donated by a non-governmental organisation (NGO). The classes were neat because of the practitioners' daily cleaning and high hygienic standards.

The indoor atmosphere was safe, accessible and inviting, with appropriate space to support the learning of new skills during the children's transition. This helped children to feel more secure in their new environment. During the morning routines, the children engaged in fine motor activities like interlocking cubes, block building, puzzles, working with playdough and art materials. The children had cosy spaces to work in, which supported their transition. During the second sessions, children-built things with large blocks, participated in fantasy play, painted, read and worked with playdough. The children could learn, explore and socialise in a safe indoor space. However, the practitioners did not interact with the children while they were engaged in these activities. They would set up the equipment but then leave the children to be active on their own. They used this time to catch up on their administrative tasks. Enough space was available for gross motor play outside, but the equipment there was not in good condition. The climbing, balancing and peddling equipment were unsteady, and the children were warned to stay away from that area. The area was not fenced, so the children sat on the equipment when eating. Resultantly, the children had no opportunities to learn and practice climbing, balancing, throwing, jumping and playing with balls. They did get proper opportunities to participate in social groups, which extended their understanding of the setting they were part of. They played games with the practitioners every day, so children were still able to have fun, create, discover and improvise with guidance from the practitioner.

5.4.5 Interview data

Anna sacrificed her own time during an afternoon to complete the interview. Emma had personal commitments, so we met on a Saturday morning for this purpose.

5.4.5.1 How did you experience the children's first day at school?

Smooth transitions tend to positively impact on a child's future well-being. Since both practitioners were unqualified, I wanted to know how they managed the first day. They declared that they found the first day demanding and exhausting. Most children arrived at the site by buses and were not sure where they were heading. According to the practitioners, the large building and the many new faces confused children. Some tried to get back on the bus and others started looking for their siblings. Several children were too attached to family members and could not easily be separated from them.

Emma: *The first day for me is always tough, very very difficult for us here at the farm school. These children come to school by bus. Some are not sure where they are going. When they get off the bus and see this big building they start to cry. Some want to run away. We run after them*.

Anna: *The first day is very difficult because they are coming from different families. They stay with their mothers at home, so it's difficult when they come here, to be separated from their parents*.

These young children felt lost, having been separated from their parents. Those who already had siblings in the school wanted to be with them.

Anna: *For the first day they ask when the school would be out. "Where is my sister or where is my brother." You just tell them your brother is in classroom. You belong here, until your brother or sister comes and fetches you*.

Emma: *They want to be with their brothers and sisters. Oh! It's so difficult on the first day. It is very tiring for us because the school only finishes at half-past three and we have to stay with these children for the whole day*.

Emma said they used the first day to settle children down. Some grew frustrated and cried because they did not understand the language spoken in the new environment. Anna reported that some children tried to hit her because they were upset.

Emma: *The first day is trying to settle them down. We have a lot of children from Zambia, Congo, Nigeria, Malawi and they don't know our language. There is nothing we can say to them because they are just crying*.

Anna: *They start crying. Some of them are beating us up*.

5.4.5.2 How did the children experience the first day?

With this question, I wanted practitioners to speak about how children coped on the first day. They agreed that the children were unhappy and awkward in an unfamiliar environment. The new building and the many strangers increased the anxiety in these children. Anna felt that the first three days were especially challenging for them.

Emma: *I think they were not happy to be here because it is the first time they were coming to a new place without their parents. Everything is new for them. The building is new, they see strangers, so they were just a little confused and very scared. That is why they cry so much*.

Anna: *For the first three days they have difficulties*.

5.4.5.3 How did you comfort those who were uneasy?

A move to a new environment, away from close family members, can upset young children. I asked this question so that the practitioners could share how they intuitively consoled unhappy children. They used different tactics to comfort distraught children, like directing their attention to a friend, reading stories, singing, engaging them in little tasks, wiping away tears, keeping them in little groups and showing them all that is inside the classroom and on the playgrounds.

Anna: *If they start crying, we show them their friends. "You see your friend is not crying," because we are at school. We read stories with pictures. You tell them to go and fetch crayons and give it to others, they start to become happy*.

Emma: *I help them to stop crying firstly. I wipe their tears. Hold them next to me to comfort them. I sit on my little chair and rock them. I sing for them. They feel better. Then I take them to join the others in the group*.

Anna: *On the first day it helps to be in groups and then we start to play with them. We tell them stories and do actions. We show them the grounds, the toilets and everything in the classroom*.

5.4.5.4 How did you assist children who experienced problems in socialising?

Children in a new environment may refuse to socialise with those around them. I hence asked the practitioners this question so that they could describe how they helped children to engage in positive friendships with other children. Anna used a creative strategy of allowing children to sing, have fun and socialise at the same time.

Anna: *We have got songs (music) for the first term. We ask them to stand in a line. We ask for the child's name. The children talk Zulu, so we say "Kuhle*

ukukona Thabang" which means 'it's good to see Thabang today'. Then we sing more, we are together the happier we become. At the end I tell them it's nice to see mam Anna today. They say, "Hooray".

Emma noticed that children who do not speak Sepedi – especially those originally from other countries – resisted socialising and preferred to be on their own. She mixed the groups so that they begin to talk to each other.

> Emma: *We have a problem with this because our children are not from South Africa only. There are those from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Nigeria, Congo and Malawi. So, it's very difficult for those children to socialise with our children because they don't speak Sepedi. They usually play on their own. I take foreigners and put them in groups where children are speaking Sepedi or Zulu so they can listen to them, hear the new language*.

5.4.5.5 How did you involve the parents in the daily programmes?

I wanted to hear the practitioners' ideas on how they engaged parents during this important time. Parental involvement is difficult to achieve in a rural school because most parents do not have their own transport. Anna sent the children home with completed activities for parents to look at. She emphasised the importance of parents' assistance when problems arise.

> Anna: *If you are doing something you must send them home. You must ask parents to look at those activities. If you have a problem just call those parents to assist you with their learners because with some of the learners, we will try and try if we don't involve parents*.

> Emma: *On the farm school its difficult because of transport. They cannot come to meetings. So, we WhatsApp parents if problems are serious*.

5.4.5.6 How long does it take a child to adjust?

The main reason I asked this question was to obtain practitioners' experienced views about the time that children take to adjust in a new setting. Anna stated that children

adjust according to their own pace; some within a few days but others need more time. Emma felt that it can take up to two months.

> Anna: *Some children adjust even after three days. Others take more time like maybe by end of February*.
>
> Emma*: After the first two months they cope*.

5.4.5.7 How would you describe a child who is fully adjusted?

Here, I wanted to establish how the practitioners portray a child who has adjusted well to the new environment. They indicated that children who have adapted well show more confidence and independence in daily activities and routines.

> Emma: *They stop crying. They participate. They have many friends. They follow the routines. They speak to me, ask for permission to go to the toilet in Sepedi. Those who don't know Sepedi speak in English. They greet in the morning*.
>
> Anna: *They are happy they come running to me from the bus. The greet loudly. They even complain about others who don't share*.

Table 5.8: Characteristics of well-adjusted children (Site C)

Emma	**Anna**
Attuned to emotions	Happy
Understand routines	Confident
Happy	Appreciates fairness
Confident	

5.4.5.8 What are the qualities of a good practitioner?

I needed to ascertain the practitioners' views of the qualities they deem necessary to become an effective Grade R practitioner. They listed qualities such as being caring, patient and helpful.

> Emma: *You must be very patient and caring because children are young, and they don't understand what they are doing. You must be there to support them,*

then they feel comfortable. You must be helpful and caring. These children live far away so you must take care of them until 15:30. You must respect their families and call when they are ill.

Anna: *She must be kind, humble and have a smiley face, that's what she can do as a Grade R practitioner. There are those who are speaking Shona. I then ask the parent what I must say if I want the child to go to the toilet. Then when you speak that language it makes it easier for the child*.

Table 5.9: Qualities of a good Grade R practitioner (Site C)

Emma	**Anna**
Patient	Kind
Caring	Humble
Supportive	Welcoming with a smile
Helpful	
Respectful	
Sensitive to the child's home language	

It was a challenge to conduct interviews at this site because of the long school day, which put a strain on the practitioners. Their responses convinced me that all practitioners need a qualification that would benefit children from disadvantaged communities. This would enhance children's physical, emotional, social and cognitive well-being. The children would thus become more balanced individuals.

5.4.6 Drawings and comments

The children made daily drawings at this site. Just like the children from Case A, the 52 children at this site (27 and 25 from Anna's and Emma's classes respectively) were happy to draw on white paper. Some children asked for two pieces of paper. More children opted to draw at this site because they had more time in the afternoon. Although different colours were available, most children used only a single colour. The majority of children completed their drawing in less than four minutes. This was the only site where some children refused to hand me their drawings even though I told them that I would take a photo and return it; they did not trust me. The children enjoyed

drawing their teacher and were satisfied with their sketches, gazing favourably at their creations. Although the children compared their drawings, none of them returned to their drawings to alter anything. All the children participated in this activity but only a few were willing to explain their drawings. Portia was the first to come forward and answer questions about her drawing. All the responses were positive and were articulated positively and accurately. This signalled to me that the children trusted their teachers and were able to describe their innate strengths.

5.4.6.1 Portia's drawing

Figure 5.18 portrays a drawing by Portia (pseudonym).

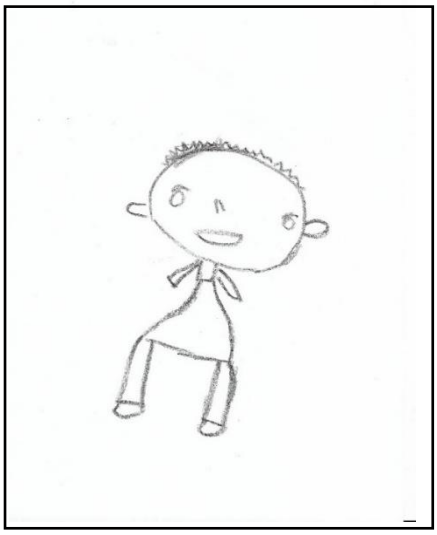

Figure 5.18: Drawing by Portia

Portia was five years old and drew this picture of "*Teacher Anna who likes playing with children*". The drawing depicts a friendly and happy woman, who seems to be dancing. Portia stated that the teacher often asked them to jump up and sing, "*If you're happy and you know it*". When I asked Portia what she liked about teacher Anna, she replied, "*She can dance and sing"*. She stood up and imitated her teacher's dance movements. The drawing portrays someone who is jumping as the feet are up in the air. Portia had noticed her teacher doing this and hence captured that action in the drawing (Wright, 2012; Cansever, 2017). I noticed that she liked to play the role of teacher Anna in the fantasy area. Portia took her time to draw the hair as Anna's hair was always neat. The facial features were all correctly placed. Portia clearly indicated her teacher's

physical appearance and facial expression. She took some time to complete her drawing which indicated her ability to concentrate. Cansever (2017) suggests that young children recognise when their teachers are happy and well-groomed. The children noticed how Anna swept, mopped and cleaned the class every day. She depicted her practitioner as a motivating, lively, energetic, neat and loving individual.

5.4.6.2 Issacs's drawing

Figure 5.19 portrays a drawing by Issacs (pseudonym).

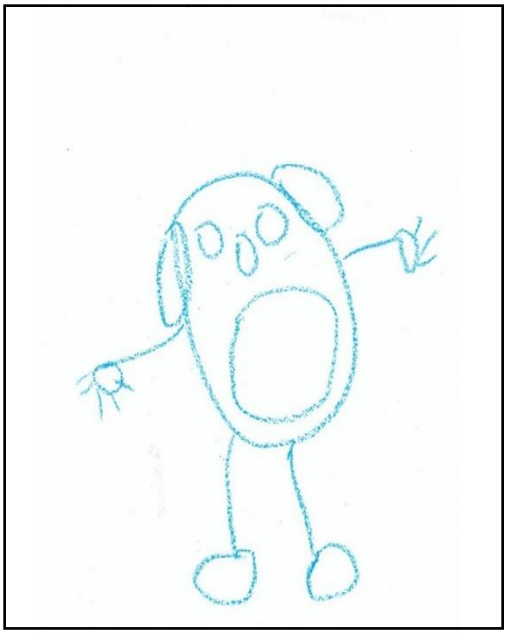

Figure 5.19: Drawing by Issac

Issac is a 5-year-old boy whose favourite colour is blue. I saw him wearing blue and carrying a blue bag to school for most of the time at this site. I had spoken to him a few times before he drew this picture of Emma. On the first day, I waited outside with the children while the teachers were cleaning the classrooms. I immediately observed that he liked talking. He ran around cheerfully and showed his friends his new pair of shoes. He came up to me too to boast about his shoes. I asked him who bought the shoes and he replied that it was his grandparent, who had warned him not to take off the shoes to avoid them being stolen. Issacs then pointed to some other children who he thought may want to steal his shoes. He also showed me who his friends were. During a break, while eating, he sat close by and asked if he could share some of his fish with me. On the day of the drawing task, Isaac wanted me to sit next to him as he

drew his picture. I noticed he picked up a blue crayon. He looked at the crayon for a while, then looked at me for a while, smiled and commenced to draw the above image of his teacher. Burkitt and Sheppard (2014) state that blue is a preferred colour for this age group. As noted in the other case studies, children use specific colours to convey their moods and emotions. Similarly, Elliot and Maier (2014) argue that children can produce different moods and emotions that could not be voiced by words but through the utilisation of colour. Issacs notably portrayed his teacher with an enormous head and mouth, yet the eyes, nose and ears were of regular sizes. When I asked him why his teacher's head and mouth are so big, he did not answer; he held his drawing close to him instead. According to Farokhi and Hashemi (2011), a large mouth is indicative of someone who speaks a lot.

Although Issacs omitted the neck and body, the legs featured prominently. Emma's movements in class were always quick and she never spent the whole day with her class. Issacs naturally noticed that his teacher was often absent and would then freely run around in the classroom. There is thus much emphasis on movement in Issacs's experience of the school, which may explain the prominent legs in the picture. Additionally, he told me that he liked his teacher Emma because she "*can clean the classroom*". Both practitioners at this site cleaned the classrooms while the children played or waited outside. Another reason he gave for liking his teacher was that she "*gives us fish to eat*". The children at this school were from poor families and, according to the practitioners, the school meal may be the only meal they received all day. They seemed to appreciate their teachers for that.

Practitioner Anna, as an unqualified practitioner, was committed to supporting the poor children from farming communities, easing their transitions. Her interview responses and Portia's drawing – illustrating her energy levels – supported my observations of her value to the children. However, Emma's replies to the interview questions surprised me as they did not support my observations. She mentioned some fine practitioner's qualities liking caring, patience and helping children feel comfortable, but then she failed to spend a whole day in class. She described how she grouped children who could not speak Sepedi or Zulu with others in the classroom so they could learn the local languages. However, I never saw this occurring during my observations.

The next section outlines how the themes and categories emerged.

5.5 THEMES AND CATEGORIES

This section describes the process that I selected to categories and interpret patterns and categories as they emerged from data in relation to my research questions, theoretical framework and literature. Bazeley (2013, p.101) defines the initial reading, reflecting and exploring approaches as an "initial foray into new data". In keeping with this definition, I commenced this rigorous process by carefully reading, re-reading, probing, outlining and reflecting on the data. I then summarised the extensive field notes and transcribed the interviews. While reading the field notes and transcribed interviews line by line, I wrote more notes in short phrases in the paper margins and below the children's drawings. This was done by keeping in mind Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's suggestion (2014) that memos must be more than mere informative summaries of the data. The researcher needs to fuse the gathered information with a higher level of logical meaning. I was thus able to decipher the text by thoroughly scrutinising every element in it. I then created the early codes which were assigned to units in the text (examples in Appendix H). These codes were subsequently reduced to themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The themes that emerged from the coding enabled me to find answers to the research questions. Table 5.10 presents the three broad data themes.

Table 5.10: Data themes

Themes	
Theme 1	Response to transition
Theme 2	Transition process
Theme 3	Teacher training

Table 5.11 presents the outcomes of the data analysis as a comprehensive list of themes and categories.

Table 5.11: Themes, categories and sub-categories

Theme 1: Response to transition			
Category 1 *Emotional needs*	Category 2 *Preparation*	Category 3 *Structured daily programme*	Category 4 *Familiarity*

Theme 2: Transition process			
Category 1 *Situation*	Category 2 *Self*	Category 3 *Support*	Category 4 *Strategies*
Theme 3: Teacher training			
Category 1 *Socio-emotional domain*	Category 2 *Physical domain*	Category 3 *Cognitive domain*	

5.6 CONCLUSION

The focus of this chapter was to interpret the findings from data collected during fieldwork. Data collection included observations, interviews with practitioners and children's drawings. The chapter commenced with descriptions of the research processes that centred on the anecdotal narrative of gaining access, collecting data and analysing the high volumes of data collected at each site. The chapter also summarises the procedure followed in codifying and categorising the data to locate relevant themes and categories.

I found the fieldwork – especially the observations – at the three sites to be quite different, respectively. At the sites I observed and interviewed six practitioners who shared their distinctive experiences, interpretations and approaches relating to young children's transitions. The practitioners at the inner-city school aspired to boost the transitioning experiences of children in their care, whereas the township and rural school practitioners were less motivated in that regard. Negative elements, such as a lack of training among practitioners and unattractive wages that prevent qualified practitioners to apply for those positions, have negative influences on the children and their transitioning processes.

The practitioners at Site A drew from a range of strategies to enrich the experiences of children at a stage in their lives when any change seems immense. These trained professionals were able to plan activities and provide continuity of communication among the children and parents. They applied holistic practices and were always responsive to the children. In addition, they created a welcoming learning and social environment that gave children the freedom to explore and discover the new

environment with new peers. This organised and well-equipped setting prompted even the uncomfortable children to be physically active and have fun. The children could gradually adjust to their new environment through the practitioners' planned directives and routines, and continual supportive behaviour. The children at Site A, who were still adapting to the enforced changes in their lives, hence seemed to feel safe, secure, confident, independent and resilient in their new setting.

The children at a township school, however, were led by practitioners who seemed unconcerned about the children's well-being. The unwillingness of several children at this school, Site B, to participate in the drawing exercises, coupled with my own observations, clearly indicated to me that both practitioners had failed to create a meaningful transitioning experience for those children. The children behaved as if they were discouraged to learn and play, and even the dynamic spirit that one normally associates with groups of children was absent. Their interests and drives seemed to dwindle in this uninspiring setting. They sat on the carpets inside the classrooms most of the day, waiting for responses and guidance from the practitioner. The absence of a suitable learning environment denotes an environment where children do not actively play, socialise or acquire any valuable knowledge, skills and confidence during their transitions.

Programmes at the rural school, Site C, presented several other challenges for the untrained practitioners who practised there. They had a much longer working day and did not have the required skills or training to plan for eight hours of contact time with the children. Not having received any training that would have helped them, the practitioners could only productively interact with the children until 11:00. After the first break, the children were engaged with free-play activities until 15:30. The practitioners used those hours to attend to administrative tasks.

The practitioners at the three respective sites hence approached the aspect of children's transitioning quite differently. The trained practitioners (Site A) were highly responsive during the transition period while the untrained practitioners (Sites B and C) neglected several of practitioners' key responsibilities. Their current practices may even impact negatively on their future practices, even after they eventually may have earned proper qualifications in Early Childhood Education.

CHAPTER SIX: DATA INTERPRETATION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to guidelines framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners in facilitating the transition from home to school for young children, aged three and a half to five years. Data had to be collected accordingly and I made use of interviews, observations and drawings to gain the perspectives of six practitioners at three divergent early childhood settings in Pretoria. Chapter 5 presented the data analysis and the three themes with their respective categories that emerged from the analysis (Table 5.11). In interpreting the data, I followed Creswell and Poth's suggestion (2017) that interpreting involves the conceptualisation of the main findings, beyond the category construction, to arrive at a greater meaning inherent in the data. Data interpretation in this chapter, therefore, involves the attachment of meaning to the various themes and categories that were uncovered during data analysis.

The discussion of the outcomes accords with each of the three pertinent themes that surfaced during the rigorous coding process, as aligned with the research questions (Section 1.3.1), reviewed literature and the theoretical framework (Chapters 2–3).

6.2 THEMES AND CATEGORIES

Through a meticulous reading of all the transcripts, I identified key segments that held clear meanings and helped me to make sense of the data. The coded segments were arranged into categories that helped me to determine the relevant themes. The identification of themes and categories – the core of Chapter 5 – enabled me to compile the research findings as illuminated by the gathered data. In line with the aim of this study, namely to develop a training framework for Early Childhood Education and Care practitioners in facilitating the transition from home to school, all three identified themes related to the concept of transition. The first theme addresses the response to transition, the second theme scrutinises the transition process and the

third theme elucidates teacher training. The themes were deduced from the data obtained from six practitioners at three schools. The richness of the data enabled me to reflect on the three major themes realistically and in alignment with the research questions that drove this inquiry. The first theme describes how the practitioners and young children, respectively, responded to the transitioning challenges.

6.2.1 Theme 1: Response to transition

Theme 1: Response to Transition			
Category 1 Emotional needs	**Category 2** Preparation	**Category 3** Structured daily programmes	**Category 4** Familiarity

This theme reflects the research participants' perceptions of how young children transition from home to school. This section provides a systematic interpretation of the variety of perspectives obtained. Four categories were identified here: emotional needs, preparation, structured daily programmes and familiarity. According to Bronfenbrenner's ecosystemic theory, human development occurs as an ongoing, reciprocal adaptation to the external environment (Section 3.1). Translated to this study, it means that young children become closely attached to their social environment, and when they get separated from that environment (like the home) and placed in an unfamiliar environment (like a care centre), they often experience difficulties during the transitioning phase. Children and their environment tend to influence each other and a slight change in one element can affect the other element (Section 3.2).

6.2.1.1 Emotional needs

For a successful transition to take place, the *emotional needs* of a child should be met. The first day of school can be regarded as the 'make or break' of the child's adaptation to a formal educational environment. Practitioners can minimise the accompanying stress by providing emotional support to the children (Section 2.1). Young children who arrive at an early childhood centre should, therefore, have their emotional needs satisfied. They need to be provided with security, warmth, affection, tenderness and understanding to feel welcomed and accepted in the new environment (Section 2.2.3).

A secure environment with healthy interactions will help children to adjust well in a new setting (Section 2.2.1). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory examines aspects that relate to the child's development as well as their environment. The social context in which children live and participate in is important to their overall development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The practitioners at Site A (Case 1) created a rich social and physical environment where children could settle in and become involved with activities. My observations here revealed how committed practitioners positively contributed to the emotional needs of transitioning children. They had adopted an interactive approach that helped the children to feel loved, valued, safe and secure throughout the day. They seemed adept at diffusing tense situations and supporting children whenever they felt upset. It was evident that children happily engaged with their new environment where the practitioners fostered secure connections with every child. In this environment, I observed strong relationships between the children, their peers and the practitioners. Bongi, a boy with Down Syndrome, depicted the affectionate care he received from his teacher, Tammy, in his drawing. When asked what he liked about his teacher, he exclaimed, "*I sit on her lap!*" He then clapped his hands and added, "*She pushes me on the swing*". This was an honest attestation from a child with special needs who was warmly acknowledged in the setting (refer to Section 5.2.4.2).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) argues that the developing child is not just an impassive recipient of various processes embedded in the ecological system. The child, in turn, also influences the way in which the system is experienced, and thus how society responds to his needs (Section 3.2). Therefore, children's transitions away from their home must be handled compassionately and thoughtfully, so that the children start to feel more assured, tranquil and trustful of unfamiliar individuals in the new environment. The reviewed literature confirms that a transitioning period would likely evoke feelings of insecurity and anxiety, which places demands on the well-being of a developing child. This process can become complex and difficult to negotiate if the practitioners are not capable enough to help the children (Sections 2.1–2.2).

The children from Site B (Case 2) found it difficult to develop a trusting relationship with their teachers who were often not present in class to provide them with the comfort and attention they needed. The children were deprived of good experiences by the

lack of an environment that could stimulate them into participating, feeling comfortable and building relationships with their peers and practitioners. Children at the centres depend on their practitioners to guide them and keep them safe. It is a dangerous practice to leave children unattended in class as there would be no one to attend to them in case of an injury. This practice further increased the anxiety levels of children at Site B. When the practitioners were in class, then the interactions were frequently cold and unresponsive since they used much of the contact time to tend to administrative or personal issues.

Emma, a practitioner at Site C (Case 3) was talented in music and art but did not put this skill to good use in class. Instead, she left the class whenever she pleased. The children then misbehaved in her absence and lacked opportunities to learn how to cooperate productively with their peers. Because she did not take her role as practitioner seriously, she failed to protect the young children who relied on her (Sections 5.3.4.2–5.3.4.3). Such practices are detrimental to children who had been separated from their families and needed tender care throughout the school day. Three of the four practitioners at Sites B and C were observed to lack the kind of sensitivity needed to satisfy children's emotional needs.

It is imperative that caregivers respond compassionately to children's emotional needs. In Case 2, the practitioners disregarded the children's need for emotional safety by failing to properly plan, implement routines, enforce general rules or supervise them throughout the day. The lack of interest complicated the children's transitioning experience, especially for those who were visibly traumatised from the first day and who needed extra care and comfort. The time that could have been used to build affectionate and supportive relationships with the children was lost, as the practitioners were not present or inclined to respond to the children's emotional struggles. Practices like these impacts negatively on children's long-term outcomes (Section 5.3.4.1). Each morning, children had to wait for a long time before lessons began. In their frustration, they began to fight and hurt each other. This indicates that their need for emotional safety was unsatisfied due to the carelessness of the adults. The late starts of teaching sessions also meant that educational activities were disregarded. Some essential activities – like practitioners welcoming and interacting warmly with the children – were thus abandoned too. The practitioners' conduct led to

the children becoming more disorientated in the new environment. They were not gainfully occupied in play-based curriculum and activities when they could have learnt how to suitably interact with others, build trusting relationships, discover what is in the new environment and feel like they were in safe hands (Sections 5.3.4.2–5.3.4.3). The children were thereby inhibited from forming close relationships with the practitioners.

The transitioning experience was notably stressful for two children in Pearl's class. Pearl seemed unable to control their strong emotions, even after a month at school. I observed that she would give children sweets to calm them down, but after a while this strategy became ineffective. These traumatised children, instead, needed affection and someone who could accept their feelings and reassure them when they express their emotional vulnerabilities. Among the inappropriate practices that I observed at Site B was that the practitioners frequently dodged their class duties. This tendency set the children's development back, which negatively influences their future emotional outcomes (Section 5.3.4.2). Accordingly, Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that interactions in the ecological system need to be secure so that a child matures steadily and can better adjust to every setting. These interactions are characterised as proximal processes and comprise of child-child, parent-child and teacher-child engagements (Section 3.2). Case 2's children were not afforded the opportunity to feel secure because they were left to progress on their own most of the time – no adult was readily available to protect or regulate their behaviour. They were deprived of the opportunity to form healthy relationships with new friends. The consulted literature confirms that children who are not supported during transitions struggle to adjust. Even slight changes to their lives turn out to be setbacks for them (Section 2.2.3). Kuagelo sometimes helped Pearl to pacify crying children. This action was noticed and appreciated by Lebo as she drew a picture of Kuagelo carrying her cousin Siya who cried hysterically each morning. She remarked that Kuagelo "*carries Siya and gives us fish and rice to eat*". Kuagelo, however, also neglected the emotional needs of her group of children by often disappearing from class (Sections 5.3.4.2, 5.4.4.2 and 5.3.6.1). Anna, of Case 3, was the only untrained practitioner who unfailingly attended to the learning and emotional needs of the children.

Literature reveals that children must feel a sense of belonging as they enter the new environment because their emotions may be fragile during this time (Section 2.2.1).

Case 1's practitioners planned activities specifically to pacify any traumatised children. They used the first week to orientate the children so that they could become acquainted with the new setting, build relationships with their peers and overcome the initial transitioning challenges. The children at Site A quickly gained a measure of independence because their practitioners created ideal opportunities for them to adjust. By acknowledging and providing continuous emotional support, the children developed a true sense of belonging (Sections 5.2.4.2–5.2.4.3).

6.2.1.2 Preparation

The second category relates to how children are being *prepared* for the transition. For the first few years of their lives, children enjoy the comfort and security of family-rearing and the companionship of caregivers, siblings and children in the neighbourhood. They often receive affection and support from their families, which is an important part of their environment. A child's relationship with his practitioners, peers and community directly influences the child's overall development and the way that he adjusts to the new setting (Section 3.2). Wherever possible, parents and practitioners must prepare children in advance for this experience as much of a child's behaviour is learned in the microsystem through interaction with peers and early care programmes. The consulted literature confirms that transitioning to a new environment triggers changes in roles, assumptions, relationships and statuses (Section 2.2).

Lacking life experience, it is difficult for young children to adjust to new routines and expectations and to safely negotiate new relationships. Even though a child's transition to the early care centre occurs as an anticipated event, some still experience problems adjusting initially (Sections 2.1–2.2.1). Practitioners, too, must prepare for a transition period to be able to dispel some of the fears, anxiety, behavioural difficulties and stress that children experience as they enter the new environment. Literature indicates that children usually feel uncomfortable and emotionally insecure when they are unable to fulfil some of the practitioner's expectations. They show progress once they can keep up with the transition programme. That is why it is important to implement well-planned programmes that create continuity and stability in the new setting, thereby easing the transitional challenges. Well-planned programmes help children to regulate their behaviour and strengthen the relationships between practitioners and children so that they can confidently adapt to the new setting (Section 2.2.1).

My observational data confirms that some children take much longer to settle into a new environment, especially in schools where practitioners lack the ability to meet children's emotional needs. Children who were never orientated prior to the opening of the school found it more distressing to be separated from their home caregivers. A well-arranged environment supports development during a transition; a chaotic environment inhibits that development. When a school neglects the physical environment, then children tend to reject the setting as nothing is stimulating enough to capture their interest. Emma, a practitioner in Case 3, reported that the children arrived at the school by bus on the first day and some were not sure why they were even there. Hence, it took Emma quite long to settle all the apprehensive children (Section 5.3.5.1). Pearl, a practitioner in Case 2, found the first day stressful – she became exhausted from running around trying to calm the inconsolable ones down. She estimated that "*of the 36 (new children), 27 were hectically crying*". This nervousness among the children in Pearl's class lasted for a long time. It was already the fourth week of school when my fieldwork commenced and I observed how two children in her class still cried continuously and that she was unable to calm them. She would hand them over to her colleague Kuagelo who managed to soothe them. Pearl thus relied on a more experienced, albeit unqualified, practitioner to support her and the children during the transitioning period (Section 5.3.4.4).

The physical environment plays a central role in enriching a child's understanding of his new surroundings. I observed how smoothly transitions took place at Site A, where the practitioners had prepared a safe and stimulating environment, well-equipped with age-appropriate resources to prompt the children to explore and find new ways of having fun. Those practitioners had methodically organised the learning environment to be aesthetically pleasing for children in this age group. The children were warmly greeted each morning which made them feel welcome. This helped them to become involved in not only the activities but also the setting up of play areas beforehand and the packing away of items afterwards. Such practical activities restored the children's belief in themselves as they were made to feel proud of their accomplishments. The practitioners implemented their planned programmes wisely, making sure that their activities would captivate the minds of young children. In doing so, the children could sense the emotional closeness and guidance offered to them. As a result, the children quickly adjusted to the new routines. According to Farokhi and Hashemi (2011),

children enjoy drawing what they understand. Neo declared that she liked her teacher because "*she lets me play with her toys in the dolly house"*. Priority was given to play-based activities at Site A. Neo often participated in pretend-play sessions where she would enact the role of a mother (Sections 5.2.4.1–5.2.4.2 and 5.2.6.2).

Case 1's children adjusted easier to the new environment because its practitioners were thoroughly prepared. Their general competence included knowing how to keep the children motivated and safe. This group of children were more at ease than others before, as Cathy noted: "*Last year there was tears, lots of tears. This year none of my children cried on the first day which is unusual as this is a big school"* (Section 5.2.5.1).

Case 1's accomplished practitioners, Cathy and Tammy, planned and implemented meaningful learning activities that catered for the different interests of children. I observed how they encouraged children to participate in activities. This allowed the children to bond with their teachers and peers. Both practitioners were always present in classes and during play sessions outside, available to attend to all children's needs. The children had quickly grown accustomed to this level of nurturing and responded positively to the new expectations and rules. The practitioners' supportive behaviour encouraged learning since the children appeared motivated and enthusiastically participated in the planned programmes. Cathy and Tammy acknowledged each child's contributions and strengths, which made the children feel special (Section 5.2.4.2). My conclusion was that a well-prepared environment, filled with pleasurable activities and unconditional love, can contribute to a successful transition.

Practitioners need to build on a child's earlier experiences and create a sense of belonging in the new environment. A lack of preparation and orientation can completely derail a child's transitioning effort. Literature indicates that feelings of helplessness arise when children suddenly move out of the comfort and security of their own homes. They experience change as they assume new roles in the sense that they are no longer children in their household but must compete with other children for the attention of an unknown adult. Therefore, practitioners need to be receptive and help any struggling children to adapt to the unpredictable elements in a new setting (Sections 2.1; 2.2)

Importantly, practitioners must intensify teacher-child relationships and interactions during transitions. The child learns about society at the early childhood centre where the practitioners can inspire children to become active participants (Sections 2.1, 2.3 and 3.2.1). One participating trained practitioner in this study, Cathy, had engaged children and their parents in an orientation programme during the previous year, which resulted in very significant outcomes. Those children got to spend time with the practitioner during the programme and hence bonded with her. They were given a tour of the new environment. They were also allocated to classes which gave them an inkling of what to expect on the first day. This collaboration moulded the children's perceptions of the early childhood centre so they were more at ease on the first day. They were separated from their parents without reservations. She had also prepared a few activities for the first days and allowed them to participate on their own. This prearranged encounter between the practitioner and children helped to eradicate some of the first-day anxieties that children usually display on their first day at school (Section 5.2.5.1).

The advantages of practitioners planning for this event with the collaboration of parents are, therefore, evident. In this way, practitioners access the mesosystem – the second basic structure of Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory – to strengthen the connection between the home and school (Section 3.2.2). This link is essential as the child has just entered a new setting and requires direction from parents and teachers. This association should continue during the entire transitioning phase. The children who have received support from the onset and whose parents are informed about the pending events at the school will experience a more soothing transition. In Cathy's own words: "*They came in for orientation the year before. They came to school. They knew what class they were in. They spent some time with me, so they were more at ease with separation from their parents".* Her testimony confirms that the children at this site were more at ease and confident during the first days, which allowed them to properly benefit from the practitioners' planned programme. Case 1's practitioners endeavoured to *develop* the children in several facets. That could only be achieved with proper preparation and by ensuring that the transitions run smoothly. Confident practitioners tap into their skills and prepare children ahead of the first day (Section 5.2.5.1). A new environment naturally intimidates some young children which emphasises how vital preparation is. Every young child responds to these changes in

their own way – their transitions are shaped by their own life experiences – and for some children, it is a fearful experience (Section 2.2).

Kuagelo and Pearl, Case 2's practitioners, did not prepare for the children's first day at school and hence faced several initial challenges. These observations contrasted with Case 1's findings. Some children enter a new environment with eagerness, like a few children in Kuagelo's class, but she did very little to satisfy this eagerness; she was more concerned about not having been paid by the Department of Education for two months. She spent most of her time out of the class trying to contact officials and thus disregarded her classroom responsibilities (Section 5.3.5.1).

When a child moves to an early childhood centre, the new environment represents the child's immediate context in which most interactions with others occur, and hence becomes an important element in the child's microsystem. Key aspects include activities, interactive relations and adults. Influential adults can inspire children to form close relationships with them and their peers. The relationship that the child has with the practitioner influences their overall development and how the child adjusts to the new environment. (Section 3.2.1). Many children find it challenging to settle into a new environment and bond with unfamiliar people. The practitioners all agreed that the first day is usually traumatic and distressing for the children and they believed that most children felt uncomfortable and tense. Crucially, more effort must be made to plan for this event. Emma, a Case 3 practitioner, found it difficult to cope with children who were confused and who kept asking for their mothers and siblings. She looked despondent when she remarked, "*Oh, it's so difficult on the first day*" (Sections 5.2.5.1, 5.3.5.1 and 5.4.5.1). The consulted literature suggests that children usually display anxiety, trepidation and stress when faced with change (Section 2.1). Tammy, a Case 1 practitioner, stated that "*the first day is a rush, an emotional day, a lot of tears, a lot of time trying to settle them down*". According to Cathy, it is "*nerve-wracking*" for children to be in a big school. They confirmed that the children regard the massive building in an unfamiliar location as a threat. A practitioner in Case 3 had to keep her classroom door locked because some children were terrified and wanted to run away.

Schlossberg identifies social support as among the necessary elements to ensure that a person can handle stress while adjusting to a new situation. A child, therefore, needs full support from caregivers and parents (Section 2.3). When parents ensure – with

help from schools – that children are mentally equipped for the transition process they can overcome stress easier (Section 2.2.2). The support that the practitioners in Case 1 provided to the parents hence impacted positively on the children's adjustment. They conducted regular meetings and training sessions with parents (Section 5.2.5.5). They were attentive to social and emotional stimulations in the new environment which enabled the children to engage in positive social relationships. They provided active supervision and encouraged children to do their best (Section 5.2.4.5).

6.2.1.3 Structured daily programmes

The third identified category relates to how a *structured daily programme* can help the child to become self-assured and enrich their transition experiences. The consulted literature recommends that practitioners explore transitional frameworks, programmes and strategies that will ease children's experiences of transitioning and which value the roles of practitioners and families (Section 2.2.1). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory suggests that the child's connections within the social context, backed by good experiences, determine the extent to which they develop their abilities and attain their potential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Children in Case 1 responded well to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), which is the official curriculum for Grade R. They felt safe as they entered the school grounds because they anticipated what to expect from their vibrant and flexible teachers. Both teachers used a stable and structured programme to begin each day: a short assembly followed by toilet routines, morning ring and indoor free play. The daily programmes were consistently adhered to. I observed how a reliable, balanced programme set the tone for the day and laid the foundation for socialisation. Children effectively changed over from one activity to another without any time being wasted. Explanations offered in the literature indicate that transition is characterised by opportunities, aspirations, expectations and entitlements (Section 2.2). The structured programmes enabled children to progress well in all areas of learning because they had opportunities to try their hands at multiple activities and discover their abilities through the guidance from their practitioners. The children were at ease with their practitioners' expectations while the structured programmes enabled the practitioners to realise their aspirations. These opportunities promoted a sense of belonging and entitlement for the children. The practitioners ensured that the children understood boundaries within the setting

yet granted them the freedom to acquire a strong sense of self. Anna, of Case 3, followed a similarly structured programme and did not deviate much from the daily programme, apart from the approximately 30 minutes she spent cleaning her classroom each morning. She used predictable routines and children responded well to that (Section 5.2.4.2).

Emma (Case 3) did not follow a structured programme for the day and could not sustain the children's motivation to participate in activities. The children knew that they would not be engaged in any teacher-initiated activities during the time that the practitioners used to clean their classes every morning, when they were left unoccupied outside the classroom. That was when the children engaged in dangerous activities such as throwing stones at each other. Anna, to her credit, tried to recover lost time by giving the children unconditional love and care for the rest of the day. She did not leave the children unsupervised and took precautions to keep the children safe and occupied in a structured manner. Her group of children grew accustomed to the routines and regular activities, and thus seemed secure and content in the new setting. Although Emma was a capable individual, she was not committed to presenting a well-structured programme for children. She did not interact lovingly with children or take care of their emotional needs as she frequently left the classroom. When she returned to the class, she appeared frustrated and would interrupt any child who tried to talk to her. She ignored the children whenever she attended to administrative tasks (Sections 5.4.4.1–5.4.4.2). Ignoring young children when they are enthusiastic about learning will only demotivate them. A lack of structure in daily programmes caused chaos at Site B – some children still felt helpless after a month a school. Unpredictable routines meant that practitioners could not meet the children's developmental needs, which is imperative during a transition. The children were presented with monotonous activities instead of exciting age-appropriate activities (Section 5.3.4.2).

6.2.1.4 Familiarity

The fourth category relates to *familiarity*, in the sense that experiences in the new environment should build on previous life experiences to ease any adjustments. This was unfortunately not the case with Case 3's children. These children all arrived by bus because they did not live nearby, and some of them came from neighbouring countries and were hence unfamiliar with the local languages. The practitioners were

unable to properly support those children as they could not understand each other (Section 5.4.5.1). Literature indicates that children who are denied opportunities to interact with their practitioners will not be able to cooperate and participate. Their transitioning journeys will, therefore, be less smooth due to pervasive uncertainties (Section 2.2). Bronfenbrenner (1979) states that children acquire most of their basic skills through interaction in the microsystem. When children do not learn the basics at home, such as mastering a language, they then struggle to cope in a new setting (Section 3.2.1). Practitioners will also find it difficult to help those children to settle in as they cannot comfort them in their language. Emma summarised this dilemma as such: "*There is nothing we can say or do for them because they are just crying*" (Section 5.4.5.1).

The 3-to-5-year-old children operate on the second stage of Erikson's psychosocial theory of development (Erikson, 1980). This is a critical stage for a child as their development is determined by their willingness to communicate, visualise, explore and initiate activities on their own. Practitioners who understand this important stage of a child's development will occupy them with activities where they are free to choose and experience a sense of autonomy (Section 3.3.2.2). Observations at Site A indicated that a variety of resources and well-arranged areas to engage in reading, painting, fantasy play, block construction as well as fine and gross motor activities indeed help children to develop their initiative and gain a degree of autonomy. Children expressed themselves creatively in these activities and learnt how to cooperate with others. The practitioners carefully guided the children, whether alone or in groups (Section 5.2.4.5). The children at Site B, however, were denied the same opportunities to learn how to make their own decisions as they could not indulge in fantasy play, block building or reading activities, because their teachers did not set up any areas for them to explore and hone their skills. No play activities were ever offered outside the classroom (Section 5.3.4.5).

A well-planned transition process can determine how well a child settles into and become familiar with a new environment. Literature suggests that the implementation of transition programmes eases transitioning and establish continuity in the movement from home to the early education centre (Section 2.1). In this respect, Case 1's practitioners managed the situation exceptionally well and the children seemed

assured. Empirical evidence suggests that the children, who were supported from the first day onwards, thrived because the practitioners behaved responsibly, interacted with affection with them and occupied them with productive social activities. Both practitioners reported that they made the children's first day pleasurable by offering them many fun activities. They indicated that children were relaxed about being inside the classroom but also eager to play outside. Cathy used symbols (identifying pictures) to play a game with the children. She said the aim was to allow children to observe what is in the new environment. The first week was used to orientate children so that they could become familiar with the new environment and learn about each other (Section 5.2.5.1). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the child's relationship with peers and practitioners will influence the way the child adjusts to the new setting. Close interactions between practitioner and child will promote healthy growth (Section 3.2.1). The consulted literature confirms that positive transitions lay the foundation for strong future academic outcomes (Section 2.1).

Existing literature emphasises the need to employ sound transition policies and strategies to ease unpleasant transitioning experiences for the children. Children who are not assisted during this critical process become stressed, anxious, aggressive and may throw tantrums (Section 2.2.1). According to my gathered evidence, Case 3's children had to endure significant distress on the first school day as they were not prepared for this gruelling journey. The practitioners' recollections of what transpired on that day were worrying. Those children were bused to an unknown setting (for them) very early in the morning. None of them was accompanied to school by their parents. The school was between 10 and 15 kilometres away from their homes. Most of the children had never seen the school before. They were overcome with emotion once they arrived at the school. Some displayed unexpected behaviour and tried to beat up the practitioners (Sections 5.4.5.1–5.4.5.2). These findings support Bronfenbrenner's investigations (1979). He found that, where a child arrives at an early childhood centre alone on the first day, then only a single link between the centre and the child exists, as only the child has been included. A weak link between the family and centre affects the child's performance (Section 3.2.2).

Literature highlights the need for children to be instructed about expectations at the new environment as they are still young (Section 2.2.1). My empirical evidence

revealed that the children were not adequately supported by the practitioners of Case 2 and by the one practitioner, Emma, of Case 3. Emma stated that the children were confused on the first day because of the large school building and being thrust among 900 other children. I observed that Emma did not step up her support of the confused children. She neither helped them to settle in happily nor did she do anything to regulate their behaviour (Section 5.2.4.2). Literature suggests that children struggle to manage stressful changes on their own. Since they are still young, they need the full support of competent caregivers (Section 2.2.3). Children need to enjoy quality experiences with unfamiliar people within the environment to obtain emotional comfort and a sense of belonging.

The children in Cathy's class (Case 1) responded to transition more reassuringly. They did not experience separation anxiety on their first day as most were already familiar with the environment. They separated easily from their parents and immediately settled into the new routines. This smooth transition was the result of Cathy's planning and successful implementation of an orientation programme. The children behaved more stable, confident and ready to explore the surroundings; they felt connected to their new environment. Her interactive approach to transition eased their transition uncertainties. This agrees with Schlossberg's theory that individuals enter transition with their own assets and liabilities which help them to either cope or fail in a new situation (Section 2.2). The practitioner harnessed the children's strengths by organising the earlier orientation sessions for the families. This event was staged prior to the reopening of school and accommodated by the parents. Hence, everything was under control on the first day and children coped with the change of roles without being overwhelmed by the situation. The transition at Site A was transient. Bronfenbrenner's mesosystem dictates that, in cases where links between families and the centre are encouraging, children tend to excel in all areas (Section 3.2.2).

6.2.2 Theme 2: Transition process

Theme 2: Transition Process			
Category 1 Situation	**Category 2** Self	**Category 3** Support	**Category 4** Strategies

The second theme that emerged from my data analysis relates to the transition process. Schlossberg (1989) regards four factors as criteria for a smooth transition: situation, self, support and strategies (Section 2.2), which refer to the extent that an individual copes with a challenge, depending on their resources in these areas. Practitioners, therefore, need to be aware of these four S's to ensure that children are equipped to meet these requirements in facilitating a smooth transition.

6.2.2.1 Situation

Anderson, Goodman and Schlossberg (2012) describe the first "s" – the *situation* – in terms of how every individual assesses the concept of transition based on his/her own experiences. As a result, every transition is different because everyone appraises the same event differently and deliberates upon subjective factors when evaluating a situation. In the context of my study, the "situation" involves young children's move to a new school environment. Children suddenly find themselves enclosed by large buildings and being among new teachers and other children. To reduce some children's initial discomfort, Tammy explained, "*I pick them up*" (Section 5.2.5.3). The new situation can overwhelm some, but those who had attended orientation – as in Case 1 – were better prepared. They were privileged to have practitioners who were responsive to their needs, helping them to cope well in the new environment. The children willingly assumed their new roles and positively accepted the new situation. Cathy also remarked, *"This year, there was no one who was uneasy, but last year we had a boy who was uneasy. He would cling to me for most of the day*" (Section 5.2.4.4). Case 1's children did not react like the children of Cases 2 and 3 who were overcome by the new challenges (Sections 5.3.5.1 and 5.4.5.1).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979, p. xiii), ecological transitions take place when an individual's "position in the ecological system is altered as a result of a change in role, setting or both". Stated differently, individuals experience changes when they move from a familiar to an unknown setting (Section 3.2). Transitioning children's experiences and perceptions regarding this change are mainly formed by their practitioners. The practitioners' responses to children in a new environment can either foster or hinder their adjustment. My data empirically confirm that children who enter a new environment – especially those of Cases 2 and 3 – initially feel insecure and distressed. The situation was triggered by the strangeness the children felt in a large

school with buildings they have never seen before and having to operate among unfamiliar people like the practitioners and other children. As the children in Cases 2 and 3 did not receive the necessary emotional support from the practitioners, they experienced the situation as threatening and hostile (Sections 5.2.5.1–5.2.5.2, 5.3.5.1 and 5.4.5.1). Schlossberg (1989) asserts that transitions cause stress and pressurise the individuals who have difficulties in coping with the challenge (Section 2.2).

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the environment plays a considerable role in the microsystem and contributes significantly to the development of a child (Section 3.2.1). This study's data empirically confirmed that the sudden new situation affected most children's confidence. Pearl, a Case 2 practitioner, stated that the first day was hectic because the children were not used to the new environment. She described their emotional reactions when she said that the children became rather scared and cried when they saw teachers standing around them. Tammy confirmed that the massive building in the new environment negatively impacted on the children's transitioning experiences (Section 5.2.5.2 and 5.3.5.2. A resourceful practitioner, however, can turn such a situation around and sustain emotionally fragile children by creating a warm, positive climate that would appeal to children.

According to the consulted literature, transitions to new environments cause stress to children as they are expected to adapt to the various related changes in their lives. Case 1's children were already familiar with the new situation because they had the opportunity during an orientation programme in the previous year to visit the school. According to practitioner Cathy, these children were more cooperative on the first day at school and settled well into the new situation. This enabled the teacher to create suitable interactive experiences for the children (Section 5.2.5.1). In contrast, the situation was demanding and challenging for both children and practitioners of Case 3. The children felt threatened and awkward when they arrived at their destination by bus and saw about 950 children gathered in a large hall. The new situation overwhelmed the children who were used to living in a rural area. They became confused and, in desperation, wanted to get back on the bus. Some children frantically looked for their siblings in the crowd. The new buildings, teachers and numerous children in this unfamiliar environment increased the children's anxiety. Practitioner

Emma could not help some of them because they spoke a foreign language (Sections 5.4.1, 5.4.5.1 and 5.4.5.2).

The trained practitioners of Case 1 were able to take control of the situation and lessen the stress for the transitioning children. They applied their skills to create a safe, well-organised and varied environment that helped the children to feel confident. Both indoor and outdoor areas appealed to the children. They were responsive and actively involved in all activities at their new setting throughout the first day. The immediate loving connection between the practitioners and children helped to bridge the gap between the familiar and unfamiliar for the children. The play equipment was always available so the children could venture into the various areas and make their own decisions about activities and who to play with. The children accepted new roles and responsibilities such as setting up the play area outside by themselves, which indicated that they had quickly grown used to the new situation. They also had access to the music and computer centre and a library where they could learn and benefit from resources and equipment inside – this relieved any remaining anxiety. The children realised that the resources were there for their benefit, which improved the children's mindset. The toys and other play equipment, including those used during imaginative play sessions, resembled ones they knew from their homes. The children had access to kitchen utensils and bedroom furniture to enhance their imaginative play sessions. They could relate to and use the resources effectively while playing with their new friends. They hence could assume roles that they had observed in their homes, such as playing parents (Sections 5.2.4.1–5.2.4.2).

Early learning centres that convey high energy atmospheres will be attractive to children and inspire them to attend. This was not the case at Site B (Case 2) since the practitioners did not exhibit much passion to help the children feel safe or to set up an inviting and ordered environment. They did not provide the children with opportunities to play with their new peers in the new surroundings; instead; the children fought amongst themselves. The idea of getting children to experience what is in the new environment and interact freely with the practitioners remained unfulfilled as the environment was largely disorganised. The classrooms were used for storage – boxes of toys lay around that were never unpacked. The children could thus not move around freely or access the learning stations. Sitting idle without any supervision became the

norm for children at this site (Sections 5.3.4.1–5.3.4.2). The children spent entire days with little guidance, affection or interest from the practitioners. They were not prompted to get acquainted with the new environment and feel safe among all the strangers. The practitioners' lack of commitment made it difficult for the children to settle smoothly into their new routines. Pearl's unresponsive attitude prevented the children in her class to bond with her, even a month into the school year. She seemed unsympathetic towards the children's needs and uncaring in her responses to them. The children's efforts to collaborate with either practitioners or peers received little recognition (Section 5.3.4.2). Case 3 practitioner Anna, although unqualified, adopted a more responsive and positive approach towards transition. She warmly welcomed children into the class each morning and was always available when they needed her. She engaged affectionately with the children, took them for walks around the school grounds and sang along with them to help them become familiar with the new surroundings and have fun with their peers (Sections 5.4.4.1–5.4.4.2). Portia's drawing of Anna depicts a friendly, happy and seemingly dancing teacher. Portia explained that she liked her teacher because she gets opportunities to sing and dance (Section 5.4.6.1).

6.2.2.2 Self

The second "s", as identified by Schlossberg (1989), refers to the 'self' and determines how well an individual can cope with a transition. The most important aspects relate to the personal and demographic characteristics as well as psychological resources (Goodman, Schlossberg & Anderson, 2006). In this study, the *self* relates to the emotional well-being of the child. The key focus during the transition process should be on the child's well-being. It, therefore, becomes the responsibility of the caregiver to bestow the child with unconditional love, friendly behaviour and acceptance – all of which will equip the child to buffer the emotional stress (Section 2.2). Positive interactions within the microsystem determine much of the child's developmental outcomes. Hence, close interactions between families, practitioners and children will improve the child's capacity to adapt, grow and develop (Section 3.2.1). According to Erikson's psychosocial theory, practitioners must understand that children are in the process of becoming independent and, therefore, their needs must be catered to. The practitioners should be available at all times to provide physical, social, emotional and

cognitive support to promote the child's development of a strong 'self' (Sections 3.3.2.1–3.3.2.2). When caregivers can enhance a child's social-emotional, physical and cognitive competencies, the child will become more confident and willing to explore the surroundings. The child then progressively assumes new responsibilities and begins to cooperate with others. This illustrates how important it is that practitioners can translate child development theories into sound practices (Section 3.3.2.1).

Because practitioners are in the position to influence children's social and emotional competencies, they must provide supportive environments and focus on practices that encourage children's acceptance of social and emotional guidance. They should guide children to regulate their behaviour and socialise effectively with their peers. A lack of emotional competence hampers child development (Sections 2.2.3 and 3.3.2.1). Empirical evidence in this study indicated that the strong social-emotional connection between children and practitioners in Case 1 existed because the practitioners created a positive school climate and were sensitive to the children's social and emotional needs. They knew how to exploit everyday interactions to teach children valuable skills. They showed the children how to act compassionately towards others, establish healthy relationships and regulate their behaviour in class. The children grew fond of the practitioners and others in the setting. They accepted and respected the established protocols. The children generally expressed themselves well because of the acknowledgement and responsive care they received. The practitioners planned and implemented meaningful learning experiences that supported the child with peers and receive adequate amounts and receive adequate amounts s interests, further cementing secure attachments. Case 1's practitioners seemed always aware of the needs of every child, especially the few who appeared emotionally distressed. The strong practitioner-child relationships eased the children's efforts to adjust to the new setting (Sections 5.2.4.1 and 5.2.4.4). These findings align with the reports in literature that children feel secure and grow attached to the caregiver if their needs are met (Section 3.3.2.1). Unfortunately, Cases 2 and 3's children could not develop these competencies with equal ease, since their teachers were not responsive to their needs, did not plan any stimulating activities and were never seen to warmly welcome the children to class, listen intently or engage them in meaningful educational tasks in

the daily routines. The children were observed to be unable to regulate their emotions whenever their teachers left them to their own devices (Section 5.3.4.1).

Kuagelo, a Case 2 practitioner, responded with empathy to distressed children from Pearl's class. Those children still had not adjusted to the new chapter in their lives. Kuagelo tended to their emotional needs every morning by providing physical comfort to them. In contrast, Pearl's threatening demeanour did not assuage any children's insecurities and she was seen to respond harshly when a child got hurt. Both practitioners of Case 2 often left their classes without engaging the children in activities that could have inspired them to become emotionally strong and independent (Sections 5.3.4.1, 5.3.4.4 and 5.3.5.3). Emma's lack of dedication to her duties meant that she could not effectively improve the children's negative behaviour or enhance their self-control and abilities to positively interact with others. Because of her frequent absences, the children never learnt how to share toys and quarrels erupted. The children hence did not learn the valuable lesson that 'sharing is caring', which was among the lessons that Tammy taught her group. Emma did not teach them how to resolve conflicts, understand how others feel or control their own emotions. Instead, she reacted unemotionally to negative behaviour and even dismissed a child who wanted to explain what had happened. Emma was unable to establish close attachments with any children as she was mostly unavailable when they needed her. The children in her class were deprived of a sense of security due to the practitioners' conduct and approach towards transitioning challenges (Section 5.2.5.3). Issacs used a blue crayon to draw his teacher Emma. He portrayed her with an enormous head and mouth. When asked why his teachers head is so big, he did not answer but held his drawing close to him instead. Literature reveals that children produce different moods and emotions that could not be voiced by words but through the use of colour (Section 5.4.6.2).

Relevant literature suggests that the management of behaviour and the facilitation of emotional regulation and social relationships all depend on the interactions that children experience with others. To adjust emotionally, a child needs affectionate, warm and trustworthy adults, healthy relationships with peers, good experiences and developmentally appropriate activities. Securely attached children become more confident and enthusiastic about exploring a new environment (Sections 2.2.3 and

3.3.3). Practitioners can help children to become emotionally competent if they guide them to regulate their emotions, cope with challenges and communicate their emotional needs (Section 2.2.3). This study empirically illustrated the positive influence of practitioners who responded to children's need for reassurance and helped them in times of distress. Those practitioners detailed how they provided their emotional support and made children feel safe on the first day when some struggled to settle down. They had adopted a maternal and loving way to pacify unsettled children. Tammy said, *"I pick them up. I love them a lot*." Kuagelo carried and consoled tearful children. She remarked that *"some even fell asleep while I was carrying them".* Pearl, Emma and Anna were observed to wipe tears or read soothing stories. I observed how Tammy and Anna continuously supported emotional children. Kuagelo comforted distressed children from Pearl's class. Although Pearl stated that she soothed and comforted distressed children on the first day, she was unable to continue that practice. Not all the practitioners were always patient - even Kuagelo acted quite rash with children on occasion. Pearl and Emma's negative responses were more punitive in nature (Sections 5.2.5.3, 5.3.5.2 and 5.4.5.3).

The consulted literature recommends that children acquire key skills such as socialising, accepting rules, taking turns and cooperating which enrich their experiences in a new environment. Practitioners need to enhance children's socialising skills by example (Sections 2.2.3 and 3.3.2.1). This study's data illuminated how Tammy and Cathy encouraged children to build close friendships. Tammy was concerned about a boy who did not socialise; she then asked others to include him in their games. Cathy improved her children's social skills by teaching them to consider the feelings of others and *"make everyone feel special and important"* (Section 5.2.5.4). I observed how Case 1's practitioners focused on building mutually respectful relationships. Cathy and Tammy enhanced the children's social skills by reminding them that it is a good practice to share toys and await their turns. They ask children to be patient as they wait for their turn and acknowledge those who cooperate (Section 5.2.4.3).

The *self* also refers to taking care of one's physical needs. Children whose basic needs for nourishment and physical contact are met find the world a safe and consistent place and attain a sense of trust in others (Section 3.3.2.1). They need a clean space

to engage with. Case 1's practitioners made the effort to check children's lunch boxes to ensure that they are eating healthy snacks. Parents were advised not to send children to school with junk food. The children of Cases 2 and 3 came from poor communities and depended on the school's nutritional programme for their meals. Their teachers had to ensure that each child received enough food to eat during the lunch breaks (Sections 5.2.4.2, 5.3.4.1 and 5.4.4.1). Physical activities improve brain development. Children need to exercise their gross/fine motor, sensory, creative, imaginative and construction skills to develop holistically (Sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.2.1).

This study's data empirically confirm that Case 1's practitioners presented a variety of activities daily to improve the children's physical development. The practitioners allowed children to situate props in the fantasy area to keep them stimulated and allow them to have fun with their friends. Cathy encouraged the development of self-expression, confidence, safety awareness, collaboration and independence. Only at Site A did children have access to a well-maintained jungle gym. The outdoor play area offered enough space for the children to run around and practice their climbing, throwing and balancing skills. The practitioners were alert and ensured that children landed safely when they jumped off the climbing apparatus and did not engage in dangerous play (Sections 5.2.4.3 and 5.2.4.5).

My observations of Case 2's practitioners indicated that neither was interested in promoting opportunities for physical development. The children were required to transition to a new environment without any fun activities in the daily programme. The children could paint every day, but their creative urges were stifled – both practitioners even held the brushes for the children while they attempted to paint. Children came to them one-by-one to complete this activity, which meant that they did not see all the children's efforts in a day. They then had to continue painting the next day with no other activities having been planned for those who had completed their paintings. The outdoor play area was too dilapidated to allow the children to develop gross motor skills like climbing, jumping, steering and balancing. The development of children's coordination and muscular control was hence neglected (Section 5.3.4.3).

Observations at Case 3 was more heartening. Anna used the available resources for the children's benefit. Emma assisted capably on some days but she often did not remain for the duration of activities. She thus abandoned those responsibilities. Anna

sometimes completed activities on Emma's behalf. The fun activities were not conducted daily either – in the week of my observations, a fun activity was conducted only twice. Children from Anna's class were seen painting, drawing with crayons or charcoal and working with playdough. They experimented with different textures and enjoyed any such multi-sensory activities. Anna set up the fantasy area for children, where they could apply their imaginations and play with different props. However, she then neither engaged with the children nor encouraged them to improve. Although the jungle gym was defective, the children still tried to play games outside, such as walking on stilts while Anna helped them to balance. The children played competitive games and sometimes ran around freely while they threw and kicked balls around, which refined their coordination, muscular control and flexibility. They had a range of activities at the site that encouraged them to use all their senses (Section 5.4.4.3).

According to Piaget, the 3-to-5-year-olds proceed towards mental schemas that improve their cognitive abilities, such as building realistic constructs and learning how to solve problems. Schemas symbolise a collection of knowledge (Section 3.3.3.1). My observations revealed how children's interactions with practitioners, other children, objects and events helped them to gather knowledge, especially in Case 1. The children were encouraged to enhance their ideas through helpful communication with their practitioners. The practitioners always allowed the children to express their ideas. They had access to toys that they could arrange, match or sort into groups by colours or sizes. They could work in groups or pairs while manipulating objects. Such activities helped them to make sense of things (Section 5.2.4.2).

Children are in the pre-operational stage when they enter the early learning centre. They need opportunities to work with symbols, words and numbers to understand those concepts. They need direct care and adequate sensory experiences (Section 3.3.1).

According to the consulted literature, children need good experiences with people and objects in their environment to acquire knowledge and understanding. They use words, numbers and symbols to illustrate their knowledge (Sections 3.3.3.1–3.3.3.2). Case 2's children were unable to acquire such knowledge because they did not get to play frequently enough with toys or other materials of different textures, shapes and weight. Their developmental progress was impeded because they were denied

refining certain skills like categorising, ordering and observing associations between objects. Those practitioners had not yet realised the value of promoting a holistic focus for transitioning children (Sections 5.3.4.1–5.3.4.2). Anna, a Case 3 practitioner, helped children to develop positive dispositions for cognitive skills by communicating effectively and providing them with hands-on experiences. The children understood and respected the need for rules. Some children responded better to non-verbal communication because they did not understand Zulu. Anna tried to satisfy the children's language needs. They responded well to her stories, poems and rhymes. Children's knowledge is extended through theme-teaching that help children to grasp new concepts (Sections 5.4.4.2–5.4.4.3). Children need support to enhance their social, emotional, physical and cognitive competencies. They hence need caregivers who can provide intentional opportunities for adjustment, growth and development in a new setting.

6.2.2.3 Support

The third "s", according to Schlossberg, represents the *support* that individuals require during a transition. Schlossberg describes support as an important element to manage stress effectively. During a transition, individuals will need unlimited support from friends, family, networks or institutions to reduce stress. The key function of support is to continuously aid the individual undergoing transition (Section 2.2). In the context of this study, support for a child transitioning to an early care centre arrives in the form of family, friends and the practitioners at the new institution (Section 2.2).

According to consulted literature, children who do not receive support experience more stress during the transition period. Practitioners must be sensitive to issues of diversity, language, culture, values, aptitudes and attitudes of each child (Section 2.2.1). Empirical evidence in this study point to the reality that the children from the research sites came from diverse backgrounds and many did not speak the language spoken at the new setting. They needed support from their practitioner and peers as an inability to speak a language among unfamiliar people serve as an additional stressor during transitions. Those children tended to withdraw from social activities. Case 1's children seemed to cope reasonably well with English even though it not the home language of many. Those practitioners helped every child to improve their use of the spoken language at the site. They encouraged children to discover and use new

words, phrases and ideas at every opportunity. During the morning discussions, they listened attentively to the children and corrected them when necessary while also expanding on their ideas. They always responded positively to children who attempted to speak English correctly, especially when it was not their mother tongue. Language slipups were playfully rectified, which became fun lessons for them all. This support mechanism worked well and improved the children's social skills as they enjoyed participating in language-related activities. Their confidence in learning a second language thus improved (Sections 5.4.2.1–5.4.2.2).

Anna, of Case 3, was equally sensitive to the language needs of those who were unable to speak Zulu and offered them a lot of support. She encouraged children to converse in Zulu but also allowed them to use their home language if they were unsure of the Zulu word. She valued and respected the variety of languages spoken in her class and often used Shona words and phrases to involve more children in the class discussions. She thus helped them to confidently express themselves (Sections 5.3.4.2 and 5.4.4.2.). However, the children of Case 2 and those from Emma's class (Case 3) who came from foreign countries and hence did not understand Sepedi or Zulu, received little support from their practitioners. Emma stated that she believed those children will eventually master Sepedi if that was the only language they heard at the site (Section 5.4.4.2). Kuagelo, of Case 2, claimed that she paired Sepedi children with non-Sepedi speaking children to help them with tasks and understanding instructions. This did not occur during my observations at this site (Section 5.3.5.4).

Literature sources suggest that practitioners who display empathy – meaning that they can perceive things from a child's perspective – can help children to become psychologically healthy (Section 2.3). Case 1's practitioners exhibited empathy and respect for the children's respective abilities. They worked well as a team to support the special educational needs of Bongi, a boy with Down syndrome. He was warmly acknowledged by them as well as the children and received their unconditional love. The practitioners reminded the other children not to overreact when he disturbed them (Sections 5.2.4.2 and 5.2.4.4). Cathy, as a professionally qualified practitioner, had read extensively about Bongi's condition and employed several sensory and fine/gross motor activities to support his well-being. My observational data confirmed that Bongi was content in the new setting because of all the support. He chose to draw Tammy

– the neighbouring practitioner – in the drawing activity and described her fondness for him (Sections 5.2.4.4 and 5.2.6.1).

6.2.2.3 Strategy

Schlossberg's describes the fourth "s", *strategies*, as ways in which individuals cope with a transition. Coping strategies ensure that individuals familiarise themselves with the new situation and recognise that they are not alone but that other involved individuals will assist. In the context of this study, this concept included programme planning, parent-teacher sessions, resilience-building and the instilment of good values (Sections 2.2 and 2.2.2). Coping responses include attempts to modify the situation by helping the individual to accommodate the stress without feeling overwhelmed by it. Individuals need help to manage any absorbed stress. Coping strategies include a range of behaviours to reduce stress. Considering the children's ages, the practitioners needed to adopt coping strategies that involve direct action to relieve a child's distress (Section 2.2.2).

Effective relationships between parents and practitioners can initially help children to adjust quickly in a new setting and benefit their well-being in the long term. Consulted literature stresses that families need to play a supportive role in preparing children for the transition process. Parents, too, can experience transition anxieties. Transition is a collaborative process; therefore, practitioners need to work closely with both children and their families to smoothen the transitioning process. A successful transition can be accomplished when a child and the family feel connected to the new environment (Section 2.2). The ecological systems theory confirms that all individuals, including parents, teachers and peers, who frequently interact with the child contribute to their well-being (Section 3.2.2). Case 1's practitioners enabled parent-teacher collaboration as a coping strategy to help the children manage stress and not become overwhelmed by it. They arranged regular parent-teacher evenings to discuss the children's transitional progress. This strategy connected parents with the environment while the practitioners explained to parents how they could assist their children at home. Cathy stated that they *"talk about what is expected*", and "*discuss skills that we do in the term*". They used communication books to inform parents about the educational themes and any noteworthy incidents that may have occurred. Tammy added that they

"*explain on a weekly basis what we are learning in their communication books*" (Section 5.2.5.5).

According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), strong links between families and the centre's teachers enable children to excel in all areas, while weak linkages impact negatively on their development (Section 3.2.2). Case 2's practitioners were not trained to harness parent-teacher collaboration as an effective coping strategy. Pearl sometimes invited parents to visit the school on their day off to observe how their children participated in activities. However, they never fixed a collaborative strategy to manage the children's stress effectively. Kuagelo only invited parents when she noticed that a problem exists. Consequently, Case 2's children took much longer to adjust to the new environment, especially those from Pearl's group (Section 5.3.5.5). Case 3's practitioners found it challenging to collaborate with parents due to contextual factors, but they called parents in when problems arose (Section 5.4.5.5).

Literature sources confirm that children who had previously experienced psychosocial trauma may suffer increased stress levels when they enter early learning centres (Section 2.2). Many of Cases 2 and 3's children had already been challenged by harsh experiences at home, like abuse, neglect, poverty and loss of a parent. Some children were refugees. Entry to their early childhood settings thus traumatised them even more. It is hence imperative that practitioners offer tangible caregiving and adaptable coping skills during the transitioning stage. Early childhood centres need to utilise effective coping strategies that would increase children's resilience and bolster the psychological toughness and self-esteem of those who face crippling levels of stress (Sections 2.2 and 2.2.1).

The trained practitioners of Case 1 utilised the varied learning environment and meaningful routines to fortify the children's resilience and adaptability. Quality teaching practices featured prominently in this case. The practitioners understood the importance of nurturing children to increase their resilience and sense of security. They were able to satisfy the children's adventurous spirits by responding positively to their attempts to cooperate, share and make good decisions. The children's decisions were acknowledged and respected. I observed how they encouraged children to make friends and maintain those friendships responsibly and with confidence (Section 5.2.4.3). Anna (Case 3) used other effective approaches to build children's resilience.

Poverty at an early age could entice a child to resort to thievery to survive. In one instance, Anna cautiously advised a child who had confessed to having stolen chickens for a meal about his wrongdoing. She constantly guided children to embrace good values.

Some literature sources note that the transition to an educational environment is a dynamic process that requires consistency during the adjustment phase. Consistent strategies will promote children's competencies and senses of well-being and social justice (Section 2.2). This study's gathered data illustrated that the opportunities to adapt – as created by Cathy – had enabled her group of children to cope with the demands of the new environment in less than a month. She said she "*urge(s) them to be confident*". She described well-adjusted children as those who approach tasks confidently, demonstrate social and emotional competence, support their peers and initiate interactions with the practitioner (Section 5.2.5.7). Pearl's inconsistent approach to the transitioning process had a negative influence on children's well-being – she believed that children take three months or longer to adjust to the new setting (Section 5.3.5.6). This is a quite long period that indicated that the children were not benefiting socially, emotionally, mentally and physically.

Schlossberg's theory was useful in assessing and preparing children to transition from home to school. The situation can become more controllable for children if caregivers invest in setting up stimulating environments that encourage participation. It is imperative that children in this age group are guided to engage socially of affection, security and reassurance. They need to develop close friendships and be given options to regulate their emotions.

6.2.3 Theme 3: Teacher training

Theme 3: Teacher training		
Category 1 Social-emotional domain	**Category 2** Physical domain	**Category 3** Cognitive domain

The third theme to have emerged from the data denote the importance of proper teacher training. The majority of participants in this study were untrained practitioners

whose approach to the care of children, and specifically their transitioning endeavours, vastly differed from those of the trained practitioners. In line with my conceptual framework, I identified three pertinent categories under this theme, namely the social-emotional, cognitive and physical domains, which were discussed as facets of child development (Section 3.3).

Consistent and inspiring interactions between a caregiver and a child positively influence the child's social-emotional, physical and cognitive development (Section 2.2.3). Given those findings, training in those areas should be a prerequisite.

6.2.3.1 Social-emotional domain

The first category examines the social and emotional domain. Literature sources describe this domain as five competency bands that include self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness and responsible decision-making. Effective social and emotional programmes and strategies implemented by practitioners can foster the child's self-efficacy, responsiveness to social-emotional clues, relationship management, problem-solving skills and ethical responsibility (Section 2.2). Intervention studies on social and emotional learning indicate that qualified practitioners are well suited to enhance those competencies among children (Sections 2.3 and 3.3.2).

Skilled and well-trained practitioners, in practice, ply their trade according to a community's expectations. They create a social context that may boost children's social and emotional development. Children who develop healthy relationships with their practitioners and peers are less likely to engage in challenging behaviour (Section 3.3.2). Studies of neural architecture reveal that the ages between birth and 5-years-old present a critical window of opportunity for social and emotional learning (Section 3.3.2). This study's gathered data showed that Case 1's practitioners were degree holders who had intense training in the field of Early Childhood Education. They had subsequently outperformed their untrained counterparts in this study. They used their understanding of content, pedagogical knowledge and child development theories to create a rich and integrative environment at their school. Their responsiveness and consistent engagement with children in all learning activities enabled the children to excel in this domain, which fostered a sense of belonging. Teacher presence and

commitment in class offered children a better sense of acceptance. They minimised the eruption of unacceptable behaviour by diligently engaging children in relationships and esteem-building activities. The quality learning materials, variety of activities and nurturing support from caring practitioners enabled children to develop their ideas, thereby enabling them to overcome the challenges associated with transition and competently manage their emotions. This improved the children's understanding of and adherence to social norms since the practitioners were always present and receptive to their needs and social cues (Sections 3.3.2 and 5.2.4.2).

Sustaining a child's social-emotional development involves a social context where children would feel emotionally safe while learning about social skills and management of emotions, which would enable children to maintain fulfilling relationships. Fulfilling experiences also influence the nature and quality of development (Sections 2.2.3 and 3.3.2.1(ii)). Cathy described the interplay between social and emotional domains as such: "*We teach social skills. We keep them as close as possible when we teach. We stick with each other. We encourage them to think about how the other person feels*." Tammy said that she had told the children: "*We are all friends in this class. We don't fight with each other. We all play together*." The practitioners were proactive, creative and quick to resolve a problematic situation. They knew how to make a situation amicable for everyone, like teaching children to share and collaborate in group formats.

The practitioners' pro-social strategies helped the children to resolve conflicts instead of resorting to aggression (Section 2.2.3). Cathy used an effective strategy to ease Bongi's negative emotions when he became disruptive. She moved him to a quiet area – that she had created – where children could calm down by hugging a soft teddy bear. The other children were instructed to be empathetic to Bongi; instead of getting frustrated with him, they calmly handed him over to their teacher. My observations confirm that the children were taught respectful values and emotional control. They inspired children to, at all times, be empathetic and considerate – they demonstrated these attributes in themselves. Such positive social-emotional skills were instilled in the children throughout the day while they played, expressed themselves and assumed the responsibility of resolving their interpersonal battles. Both practitioners helped children to relate effectively to others while they explored the setting. Children

spoke respectfully to others while they mixed paints. They also spoke confidently to their responsive teachers (Sections 5.2.4.2 and 5.2.5.4).

Practitioners' availability to assist any emotionally distressed children was a significant contributor to their emotional wellness (Section 5.2.4.4). That had helped children to become aware of their feelings and learn how to appropriately express their emotions (Section 2.2.3). Literature sources suggest that practitioners must understand the processes and mechanisms involved in strengthening children's emotional competencies and ways to respond appropriately to emotional displays (Section 2.2.3). Kuagelo, a Case 2 practitioner, had children in her class who often snatched crayons from others since there were not enough crayons for all of them. She always shouted at the children to behave, yet never explained to them why they had to share the crayons. Case 2's practitioners could not identify ideal teaching moments to encourage children to work cooperatively or share items (Section 5.3.4.2). Insufficient training in this domain impacted negatively on children's transitioning experiences as they were never taught the value of caring, sharing and learning to wait their turn. These practitioners rarely demonstrated compassion and empathy toward children. In this study, Anna (Case 3) was the only untrained participant who displayed consideration for troubled children.

Children need to be guided about the expectations and demands of a specific environment – in this case, the classroom. They should be encouraged to engage in positive relationships with others, solve problems and handle conflicts. Securely attached children confidently explore their environment and maintain functional relationships (Sections 2.2.3 and 3.3.2.1). Case 1's children obtained social and emotional competencies in a rich social context where they were given opportunities to interact with peers, nurture new friendships and consider the emotions of others. They were encouraged to invite others into their play (Section 5.2.5.4). Cathy explained that they "*encourage them to think about how the other person feels*". They readily intervened when disagreements among the children occurred and provided them with alternative options of behaviour. This helped the children to understand their emotions since the adults comfortingly responded to their negative emotions. Importantly, practitioners need to make children emotionally literate by teaching them

about various emotions and allowing them to express their emotions appropriately. They should be regularly asked to describe their feelings (Section 2.2.3).

Nurturing relationships support emotional regulation in children and the functioning of their endocrine systems, which are requisites to learning adjustment (Section 3.3.2.1(ii)). Practitioners must be aware that relationships are not spontaneous processes but are built upon responsive interactions in diverse environments. Secure attachments elevate children's social and emotional competencies (Sections 2.2.3 and 3.3.2.1. (ii)). However, both untrained practitioners of Case 2 and one of Case 3 (Emma) lacked sufficient content and pedagogical knowledge and were, therefore, ill-equipped to promote children's social and emotional adeptness. In the absence of training and understanding of this critical domain, the children found it difficult to relate well to others and were not at ease when they spoke to the seemingly uncaring practitioners. Days passed by without children being engaged in any play-activities. Hence, those children never had proper opportunities to build rewarding relationships, find new friends, communicate freely or engage in cooperative activities (Section 5.3.2.1).

The situation described above illustrates how practitioner incompetence works to the detriment of children's development in this domain. Literature sources maintain that such children are likely to lack the emotional competence to achieve their goals, cope with challenges and communicate their emotional needs. Children are more likely to become emotionally stable through positive interactions with primary caregivers in their new environment (Section 2.2.3). My observations at Cases 2 and 3 (Emma) indicated that opportunities for relationship management never took precedence. Kuagelo, Pearl and Emma failed to accommodate the diversity in their classrooms and could not satisfy the language needs of the children who did not speak the local languages. This was stressful for young children who felt they were being excluded from most activities. They hence preferred to isolate themselves from the others because their teachers were unable to engage them. Kuagelo said that she helped those children by pairing them with Sepedi-speaking children so that they could learn the language. However, I never observed this practice. Emma noted, "*I take foreigners and put them in a group where children are speaking Sepedi or Zulu so they can listen to them*." My observations, however, indicated that children from disadvantaged

communities seldom received emotional and physical comforts and may not advance in this domain. Those who spoke a foreign language were often snubbed, affecting their social-emotional well-being (Sections 5.3.4.1 and 5.4.4.2). Negativity from caregivers can diminish children's responses to situations and people (Section 2.2.3).

Practitioners are responsible for securing the foundation for children's emotional successes. They must assist children to express and manage their emotions, which will help them to develop meaningful friendships, self-confidence and empathy. The experiences they create for children can either promote or impede their social-emotional competencies (Sections 2.2.3 and 3.3.2.1). For example, Case 1's Cathy, a self-assured practitioner, provided hands-on experiences for children to successfully develop in this domain (Section 5.3.4.1). The children in her class had adjusted at an impressive rate. February had just begun when she claimed: "*I have children in my class who are already adjusted*". She described well-adjusted children as "*confident, able to socialise (and) interact with the teacher*". Tammy described well-adjusted children as children who "*didn't cling to mommy, they walk by themselves to the classroom, they are happy to see their friends, happy to see their teacher*". Positive interactions between Cathy, Tammy and the children impacted enhanced the children's ability to adjust. Pearl, who did little to attune children to any social-emotional stimulation, said, *"I think they need three months to adjust*," which can be considered as too long. Her response indicated that she was not committed to addressing the children's immediate emotional needs. Her response was also due to her inconsistency and inappropriate conduct in the classroom. She frequently left children unattended and asked certain children to identify noisy individuals. She believed that a well-adjusted child is one who would confidently say, "*Mam, I will pick out those who are making noise in class"* (Sections 5.2.5.6–5.2.5.7 and 5.3.5.6–5.3.5.7). Uneventful programmes, with little vibrancy in daily activities, restricted children's progress in this domain.

6.2.3.2 Physical domain

The second category pertaining to the theme of 'teacher training' scrutinises the *physical domain*. For a child to transition smoothly, activities to promote physical development need to be methodically presented through continual interactions with the people and resources within an environment (Section 3.3.1). Bronfenbrenner's

ecological systems theory perceives human development as an interactive process entrenched within the broader personal and environmental contexts in which children live. This context affects the development of a child and is derived mainly from relations with others. The interaction that a child has with his family, practitioners and peers may promote or suppress his development in the physical domain (Section 3.3).

This study's gathered data empirically revealed that only the two professionally trained and experienced practitioners of Case 1 could effectively plan and implement appropriate development experiences to facilitate progress in the physical domain. They harnessed the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement as a framework to derive age-appropriate activities to help children thrive in this domain (Section 5.2.2). They were empowered with skills and content knowledge gained from earlier training and thus had better insights into the physical needs of children. They hence presented programmes for physical activities that improved the physical well-being and self-esteem of children. They understood the critical role they had to play in strengthening this domain which promoted a sense of connectedness in children. Literature sources maintain that physical development is influenced by maturation (Section 3.3.3). Progress in motor development depends on good experiences and consistent interactions with caregivers. The skills acquired from motor activities enable children to apply their knowledge and reasoning abilities to games and cognitive functions (Section 3.3.1). The children of Case 1 were consistently engaged in developmentally appropriate activities like cutting, threading and painting in an environment that was free from hazards, intensifying their physical and cognitive growth.

Furthermore, Case 1's practitioners had created a safe environment in which children could share in collaborative fun with their peers. Any risk they took in exploring their new environment was taken in the knowledge that their teachers were nearby and ready to assist them. The layout of the play area reflected the practitioners' commitment to creating a dynamic learning environment to support the development of physical skills and strengthen neural circuits. That indoor space allowed them to engage in collaborative activities such as block building or role-playing. Alternatively, they could choose to work alone with fine motor activities (Section 5.4.2.5). The practitioners also created sufficient space outside where children could engage in physical activities on high-quality equipment (Sections 5.2.4.1 and 5.5.4.2). The

trained practitioners' strategies enabled children to have fun while revelling in physical tasks outside.

In contrast to the high levels of professionalism and commitment demonstrated by the trained practitioners to ensure that the learning environment is conducive to physical development, Case 2's untrained practitioners completely excluded physical activities in the learning programme (Section 5.3.4.2). Literature sources confirm that children who do not acquire physical skills are less active in later life than those who have done (Section 3.3.1). The classrooms at Site B were cluttered and unaccommodating for physical activities. The first step in promoting children's physical well-being would be to organise a safe and welcoming environment where appropriate physical routines could take place daily. Although resources were available to help children develop fine motor skills, the practitioners failed to take any initiative to promote engagement in this domain. This led to children being sedentary for most of the day as they sat around on the carpet in class during the time allocated for physical activities (Section 5.3.4.2). This practice is disadvantageous to children in this age group – literature sources confirm that, when children explore different ways to move their bodies, they build on existing motor skills and develop more complicated skills (Section 3.3.1). Therefore, it would be difficult for the children of Case 2 to excel in this domain in later life because they were never taught the basics of physical skills (Section 5.3.4.2).

Emma, of Case 3, had her classroom well organised, ready to promote the children's development of fine motor skills. Unfortunately, her apathy towards those activities disrupted the children's chances of becoming physically accomplished. Her unprofessional approach towards investing in this domain deprived the children of becoming competent in this area of learning (Section 5.4.4.2). Literature sources inform us that children – with adult supervision – learn to regulate their movements in response to the demands of physical tasks (Section 3.3.1). Hence, Case 2's children and those from Emma's group in Case 3 would not fulfil their potential in the physical realm (Section 5.4.4.2).

Literature relating to the fields of children's development and educational sciences confirm that the physical domain constitutes a major element of human development (Section 3.3.1). Practitioners require knowledge, competencies and good teaching approaches towards children's physical development. They should construct

programmes that inspire children to acquire the various skills that pertain to the physical domain. In Cases 2 and 3, insufficient content knowledge meant that the children had limited exposure to this critical domain. Some physical activities took place at Site C, but infrequent practitioner commitment and weak expertise meant slow progress. All jungle gym activities at Sites B and C were suspended due to defective equipment. Hence, the children's body, spatial and directional awareness may not have been fully developed because the children were denied opportunities to master the basics in this domain.

Children between 3 and 5 years old enjoy experimenting and developing gross motor skills, and they become proficient with practice. They tend to become deeply engrossed in physical play sessions. Such activities also motivate them to participate in collaborative interactions (Section 3.3.1). It is advantageous to have, among school staff, a group of highly skilled practitioners to lay the foundations for young children's immediate and future physical well-being. Case 1 fitted this depiction well as the practitioners committedly supported the children's progress by implementing enriching activities and games for an hour every day, much to the delight of the young children. Those practitioners explicitly taught children physical skills, encouraging them to excel in this domain through careful guidance. The physical activities took place in a lively environment. The children seemed confident and motivated, and became good team players while they attained various valuable skills from their enthusiastic teachers.

Young children's bodies are more controllable and their physical development thrives when they learn new movements (Section 3.3.1). Case 1's trained practitioners found creative ways to encourage the children to pursue their physical development. They used the first three weeks to promote the children's gross motor skills by having them arrange moveable toys in their respective classes. Cathy and Tammy's groups took weekly turns to set up obstacle courses by using learning resources such as balls, ropes, hoops and bean bags. They set up the area 15 minutes before the other group arrived. The children also arranged accessories for water and sand play. They were instructed to increase the levels of complexity for some activities, like shifting the goalposts further away for the boys who enjoyed playing soccer. The children seemed comfortable taking on new challenges while improving their motor skills. The practitioners always demonstrated how certain equipment should be used and taken

care of (Section 5.2.3). Children's hopes to obtain quality teaching can be diminished if teachers are not trained in child development outcomes. Case 2's untrained practitioners could have engaged their children similarly to Case 1, but they never aspired to do that because too few resources were available.

Young children's bodies increase in mass and size as they develop (Section 3.3.1). When children learn about healthy food and hygienic practices, they can begin to take responsibility for their health. As Tammy, a trained practitioner, understood the need to develop children in this domain, she informed the parents about the educational themes: "*We tell them what we are learning about, healthy living, what to eat. We talk about the food pyramid*" (Section 5.2.5.5). They constantly reminded children to eat healthy food (Section 5.2.4.1). This was not possible in Cases 2 and 3 as the practitioners served the children prepared meals. They could not realistically exploit that time as a special teachable moment.

6.2.3.3 Cognitive domain

According to Piaget, children need good relationships and experiences with people and objects to construct knowledge and understanding (Section 3.3). For children to easily grasp abstract concepts in the early learning setting, practitioners must understand the role they play in fostering the *cognitive domain.* Literature sources describe 'cognition' as a set of mental processes or representations whereby knowledge and understanding can be constructed so that one's perceptions, memory, intellect and actions thrive progressively (Section 3.3). Children play a dynamic role in their personal development and are constantly searching for new experiences from those around them. Their learning is connected to age-related changes that take place in mental activities. Moreover, children require uninterrupted opportunities to learn and must be provided with stimulating equipment to remain motivated in interpreting the external world (Section 3.3.3). According to my observations at Site A, Cathy and Tammy were the only practitioners in this study who followed effective strategies to help children interpret their external world. They were devoted to creating a stimulating learning environment, which they planned together. They had adopted constructive, holistic teaching approaches and hence used developmentally appropriate activities and concrete objects to enable good experiences that will enhance children's learning of complex language, mathematics and science concepts. They worked in partnership

with parents to strengthen children's learning in this domain. Tammy commented: "*Last week we had a meeting with parents where we showed them how to help their children with the things that they were struggling with and to help them with playdough"* (Sections 5.2.1, 5.2.2, 5.2.4.1 and 5.2.5.5).

Cathy and Tammy used their organisational skills and understanding of children's development theories to construct a safe and rich learning environment that would encourage children to acquire new cognitive concepts. Multiple learning centres at the school facilitated small group learning, with about five children in each group, making it more convenient and practical to inculcate communicative functions and cognitive skills in children (Section 5.2.4.2). Literature sources suggest that a rich learning environment can be instrumental in shaping neural circuits (Section 3.3.2.1(ii)). The environment of Case 1 was enticing to children which positively influenced the children's learning endeavours, as the children were actively engaged in a variety of experiences throughout each day. The practitioners ensured that children obtained new language skills from them as well as their peers in this rich environment. Those practices, however, were not observed at Site B where the practitioners lacked expertise and basic training in this critical area. They did not use the allocated time effectively either. Practitioner incompetence destabilises children's cognitive learning (Sections 5.2.4.2 and 5.3.4.2).

As trained practitioners, Cathy and Tammy prioritised planning and enacted their professional roles competently and with flexibility, which positively influenced the children's growth in the cognitive domain of learning. To demonstrate how she performed her role as a professional, Cathy observed: "*You must be able to go with the flow in Grade R, go according to plan. Sometimes you don't go according to plan. You must have lots of fun activities and know your role as a teacher and you must get children used to a routine*." Tammy added, "*You must be creative, know how you think about your lessons, you got to get down to their level*" (Section 5.2.5.8).

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) supplies schools with prepared lesson plans. Case 1's practitioners used those plans as a guide but they focused on presenting a better standard of activities for the children (Section 5.2.2). Cases 2 and 3's practitioners use those lesson plans but neglected certain activities that reduced their ability to develop the children holistically. Being untrained, they did not realise the

importance of complementing those lesson plan to suit their context. They merely chose a few activities on certain days when the children grew restless (Section 5.2.2). To complement their planning, Case 1's practitioners employed a constructive, hands-on and goal-driven approach to promote inquiry-based learning and to facilitate children's learning of critical skills (Section 5.2.4.1).

Literature sources state that age-related transformations also occur in children's skills in terms of language, reasoning, understanding of concepts and memory. Those changes are shaped by their experiences among their families at home and practitioners at the early learning setting. Children love to engage with symbolic thought and want to express themselves through make-belief activities (Section 3.3.3). Cathy and Tammy recognised the need to provide developmentally appropriate activities to enhance language, mathematics and science concepts in children. They promoted symbolic thought which allowed children to indulge in spontaneous learning by harnessing real-life contexts, as they enacted roles of family members and certain other occupations such as a nurse, doctor or teacher.

The morning ring was where they shared information, ideas and even compassion for the children who were absent the day before. The practitioners contributed positive messages to extend the children's thinking prowess. Questions were asked specifically to elicit their responses. Story-reading was a daily event and the children were afterwards questioned about the plot and characters. Children in Tammy's class used good vocabulary to describe the characters that were explicitly explained to them. They were also taught complex words that relate to the human body. They pointed to their ankles, knuckles, wrists, calves and shoulder blades in the process. The children improved their language and mathematic skills via printed media in the environment. They acquired some basic life skills through the birthday chart on the wall. The children's language abilities seemed to have advanced rapidly at this site. This was probably because the practitioners emphasised correct language usage, discouraged single-word responses and corrected mistakes (Section 5.2.4.3). There were thus opportunities for the children to develop their logical reasoning skills and understand mathematical concepts like shapes, sizes, colours and quantities. They showed children who worked at the sand and water areas how to fill plastic jugs and cups with water or wet sand. The children could experiment with different textures.

This integrative approach prompted children to become better communicators and solve problems. The positive approach to learning meant that the practitioners were close to the children. They asked them questions and suggested where they could improve while building towers with blocks or mixing paint (Section 5.2.4.2).

Case 2's practitioners hardly ever set play areas to prompt children to learn in this domain. The children got few opportunities to use their senses and imaginations to put forth any ideas about items around them or discover things in their groups (Section 5.3.4.1). This was the only site where pretend-play was never introduced to the children. When interactions occurred, it was mostly repetitive and not effective. Poor classroom management contributed to Case 2's practitioners', as well as Emma's of Case 3, failure to improve the children's communicative skills by listening to them as they spoke or questioning them to prompt them to formulate their thoughts. In addition, the exclusion of music, storytelling, sensory learning and pretend-play restricted the children's acquisition of language, mathematics and science concepts and ability to employ mental representations. For example, Kuagelo's class worked mostly in their DBE books while Pearl drew pictures for the children and asked them to colour them in. There were thus few opportunities for children to engage with activities that could have increased their cognitive abilities (Sections 5.3.4.1–5.3.4.2). The children's efficacy was suppressed due to teacher incompetence.

Pearl never allowed a child to select any activities or work cooperatively towards becoming independent individuals. She made all her decisions as an untrained practitioner. She gave each child a single crayon to draw with each day. Simon used only a brown crayon to draw his teacher. When asked what he liked about his teacher, he replied that *"she draws circles for us*". He added that "*she gives us brown crayons*" (Section 5.3.2.2).

6.3 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I sought to ascribe meaning to the three themes that emerged from the data analysis process (Section 5.4.4) and to respond to the research questions as presented in Chapter 1. This study aimed to investigate key components of a training programme for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) practitioners to facilitate

children's transition from home to school. The investigation focused on practitioners' perceptions of the processes of transition that determine how children adjust to an unfamiliar learning environment. The theories of Bronfenbrenner and Schlossberg, as well as theoretical perspectives of child development that include the theories of Erikson and Piaget, made it possible to scrutinise the themes.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) suggests that children do not develop in isolation but in close proximity to their family, home, school and community. The theory declares that a child's behaviour is largely learned in the microsystem. The theory incorporates the richness of a child's physical and social environment, which is an important component of a child's development, especially at an early learning centre where exploration of an unfamiliar environment takes place and new relationships are established. Distant systems also influence certain aspects of a child's development that strengthen the link between the home and a school when the child enters the new setting. An analysis of Schlossberg's theory (1981) of the four critical elements in development – the situation, self, support and strategies – was used as a framework to identify resources that influence the ability of a child to cope during a stressful transition. The stress associated with transitions can disrupt an individual's capacity to manage the situation. The study confirmed that the first day at a school setting (entry to a new situation) overwhelmed most children as they were required to regulate themselves in an unfamiliar environment where they were surrounded by strangers, unfamiliar children and large buildings in the absence of their trusted family members. Responsive caregiving was found to be essential during this period. For a child to establish a strong sense of self and overcome stress, an integrated approach to learning must be programmed. This study established that practitioners who work with diverse groups of children need to be attentive to every child's home language, background, customs and special needs. It became evident that good planning, collaboration with parents and the instilment of sound values and resilience in children enable them to cope better with the challenges during transitions. Relevant literature suggests that a clear understanding of children's development theories enables practitioners to create stimulating activities that enhance children's cognitive, physical and social-emotional learning capacities.

A comprehensive investigation into responses that relate to the transitioning experiences of practitioners and children, along with teacher qualifications and children's drawings, revealed that trained practitioners can guide the process of transition effectively and create positive experiences for the children. Such practices enable children to adjust smoothly, participate confidently and benefit from a well-planned learning environment where multiple activities and opportunities to explore alongside peers exist. Trained practitioners are, above all, the architects of a child's successful transitioning experience. They can never be substituted by untrained individuals because noncompliance from facilitators in an early childhood setting has detrimental effects on the well-being of a child. Literature sources reveal that an educational transition is the most important transition that children ever experience. Smooth transitions have profound implications for children's future well-being. Competent management of a transitioning process is essential for a child's successful adjustment to a new environment (Section 2.1).

CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6, I provided an interpretation of the findings of the study, which was done in accordance with the review of relevant literature, the theoretical framework that underpinned the study, as well as the research questions that guided the study. This interpretation considered the interviews conducted with the practitioners, observations of practitioners in practice and children's drawings.

This concluding chapter commences with a summary of each preceding chapter, followed by the key literature and empirical findings that were identified during the study. These findings enabled me to address the four research questions that underpinned this study. The chapter includes recommendations – following from the findings – to ensure a fully-trained early childhood workforce and high working standards, and to enable the provision of basic infrastructure, in-service training, orientation programmes and diversity management. Also included are suggestions for further research in related areas and a list of the study's limitations. The thesis concludes with a reflection of the overall research process.

7.2. CHAPTER SUMMARIES

The following section presents concise summaries of the six previous chapters, highlighting noteworthy findings that were of relevance to this study.

7.2.1 Chapter 1

Chapter 1 presented a general background to this study by describing the components that relate to the rationale of this research, the research problem and subsequent research questions underpinning this study. It also presented summaries of key concepts, the research methodology, ethical considerations and an exploratory review of relevant literature. The chapter briefly explained the theoretical framework that

included the theories of Bronfenbrenner, Erikson and Piaget; this framework provided the lens through which the literature and data could be understood.

7.2.2 Chapter 2

A review of literature, applicable to the conceptual and contextual framework in which the research aims were embedded, was conducted. The chapter explored how the process of transition affects the overall development of the child. It was ascertained that children who transition well from their home base to a new setting readily acquire social-emotional skills that enable them to cope with the demands of a new environment. It was also clear that children who do not receive adequate support while having to adapt to a range of changes often struggle to cope with the demands that transitioning places on them. Published studies confirmed that, as schools become more diversified, more children are at risk of making an unfulfilled transition because their individual characteristics may not be attuned to the features of the new environment – particularly relating to culture and language. The review also revealed that an educational transition is the most influential transition a person can ever experience; therefore, well-trained practitioners are needed to intently restore educational continuity.

During a transition, the focus must be on welcoming the children with warmth, setting realistic expectations for them and building enduring relationships with the children and their families. These fundamentals tend to promote continuity and a better sense of belonging for children in a new setting. In addition, studies suggested that transitions were eased when the children were engaged with transitional events prior to the official opening of a school. A sudden burst of stress can derail a child's adjustment to a new environment, which illustrates the usefulness of transitional events in the months before a school opens. To understand how children progress during a transition, I incorporated Schlossberg's theory of transition (1981) in my examination of the conceptual perspectives of transition. Children's success during a transition depends not only on transitional policies but also on how those involved with the children understand and implement those policies. Successful transitional practices have long-lasting educational and social benefits for children.

The chapter revealed that support during a child's transition must be a shared responsibility. The family, community and practitioner should collaborate to ensure that this complex process runs as smoothly as possible. Family engagement during this critical time helps to forge stronger partnerships between home and school environments. For instance, families can assist the transitioning endeavour when they provide their children with stable routines and other simple initiatives. The chapter also explored the critical role of the practitioner as a key supportive figure in the child's overall development; teacher support during challenging transitions has become a major area of interest in early learning and development. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the most important qualities that practitioners need to have to competently manage a transitioning process.

7.2.3 Chapter 3

Chapter 3 continued with the argument outlined by Chapter 2, which is that the child should take centre stage during a transition journey. Effective stakeholder commitment must ensure children's smooth navigation through a transition towards a new setting. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979) was included in the theoretical framework that enabled me to understand how the various environmental systems influence a child's transitioning experience and well-being. In this study, the child's family, the practitioners and the early childhood setting – especially the classroom and the outdoor terrain – represented the various ecological layers in which the child operates. The chapter also reviewed child development as a critical area that demonstrates age-related changes in the three developmental domains, namely the social-emotional, physical and cognitive domains. To strengthen the theoretical framework, I incorporated Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development and Piaget's cognitive theory, which helped me to understand the social-emotional and cognitive development of the child between the ages of three and five years.

7.2.4 Chapter 4

This chapter explained the research methodology implemented to substantiate the research design and methodological perspectives of the study. Situated in an interpretative paradigm, I adopted a qualitative research approach which made it

viable to involve case studies. The cases were obtained from a real-life context where I could study young children's experiences of transitioning from their homes to their schools, as well as their practitioners' involvement during this sensitive time. The chapter also described the procedures to demarcate the research sites and establish the sampling and data collection methods. The chapter concluded with an examination of the four criteria that determined the study's trustworthiness, which are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability – in conjunction with the ethical considerations involved in this study.

7.2.5 Chapter 5

Chapter 5 focused on the analysis of the empirical data collected from the six participating practitioners and children to find credible answers to the research questions formulated in Chapter 1. The data collected during fieldwork – interviews with practitioners, observations of their interactions with the children, and the children's drawings) – were analysed according to each case. The chapter firstly explained how entry was gained to the research sites and then provided biographical data of the six practitioners. The chapter's focal point was the data analysis during which key themes and categories were identified to serve as the basis for the interpretation of findings (described in the following chapter).

7.2.6 Chapter 6

In this chapter, I interpreted the empirical findings based on the literature review, the theoretical and conceptual framework and the research questions. The interpretation was presented by utilising the three themes that emerged during data analysis, which were a) response to transition, b) the transition process, and c) teacher training. A careful examination of each theme and the various categories aided the data analysis process. I drew extensively on the practitioners' perceptions of transitions, my field observations and the children's drawings. I included direct quotes from participants during the interviews and the children's ingenuous accounts of their drawings to present a compelling and realistic outlook of the transitional process. Each of these procedures added value to the collected data.

7.3 OVERVIEW OF KEY LITERATURE FINDINGS

In this section, I present an overview of the findings that emerged from the literature review.

7.3.1 Findings relating to general perspectives of transition

To successfully clarify and establish a training framework to guide ECCE practitioners in assisting children who transition from home to school, the effects of a transition on a child's psyche needs to be understood first. A central event like a transition requires individuals to adapt to varying physical environments, social spaces and practices. The transitional process can abruptly change a young child's normal activities, roles, identities, expectations and relationships. Relevant to this study, children experience dissonance in their identities as they are forced to assume new roles that require support from practitioners. Practitioners must understand that every child experiences a transition uniquely due to their own life events and encounters with earlier transitions.

Children are expected to adapt to new physical and social environments, participate in less familiar activities and build new relationships with caregivers and peers. Since this is not a natural process, many children are wary of the many demands imposed on them, causing insecurity and resistance to change. Support during this process is indispensable, as transitions produce stress and make coping difficult. The support can be sufficient if continuity is created in the move from a home to a new environment. The focus, then, should be on employing and retaining well-trained practitioners who are committed to assisting young children on their transitional journeys and hence lay the foundation for their future academic and social-emotional outcomes.

Schlossbergs theory locates four key elements, which are the situation, self, support and strategies. If the new *situation* – which includes new roles, routines and responsibilities – overwhelms a young child, he/she will require support to cope with the challenges. The *self* refers to personal and physical resources that an individual brings to a transition. An individual's socioeconomic status, ethnicity, values, spirituality and resilience are elements that significantly influence a transition. *Support* is critical for those experiencing stressful transitions while caregivers' application of sensible *strategies* reduces transitional anxieties for children and their families.

Another valuable perspective concerns practitioners' understanding of the role that culture plays during transitioning periods. No caregiver should underestimate this critical element because children usually experience the move to a new environment as a "culture shock", which is exacerbated when they are confronted by foreign cultures. Schools need to do their utmost to bridge the gaps between parental ideologies and the principles upheld by a school. If not adequately addressed, some children may become distressed and confused, delaying any progress in their transitioning processes. Despite the various difficulties, some children are quite resilient and naturally adaptable. The results of studies infer that such children tend to identify with the positive aspects in a new environment.

Furthermore, the process of transition can be viewed as a collaborative endeavour, as active participation in individual and social events improve relationships with peers and caregivers. Practitioners should, therefore, help children adapt to any unpredictable elements in their new settings by preparing rich and interesting environments. Additionally, researchers recommend the incorporation of families and communities during educational transitions and stress the importance of consistency to children who are busy adjusting to a new environment. High-quality learning and personal development occur when opportunities to maintain aspirations and expectations are created for children.

7.3.2 Findings relating to children's experiences of transition

Findings indicate that most children initially experience a transition as emotionally threatening and stressful. Consequently, practitioners are tasked to soften difficult transitions. Successful transitions translate to social and academic benefits for children and opportunities to overcome some natural fears associated with change. Therefore, it is crucial to assimilate transitional policies, frameworks, strategies and programmes as support mechanisms for the children. Such frameworks seem to work well in developed countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand. High-quality practices can guarantee successful transitions, such as preparatory programmes designed to lay the foundation for emotional, social and behavioural adjustment from the onset. Unfortunately, inconsistencies exist in approaches to the transitional process in developing countries. A study conducted in South Africa found that school

principals are largely unaware of transitional initiatives introduced by the government. The principals also insist that departmental officials are responsible to empower teachers. Such misconceptions can affect children's transitions. Sources in literature confirm that the transitional process influences a child's behavioural patterns as it occurs at a time in children's lives when they tend to be insecure and in need of adults' reassurance. Previous research reveals that children from disadvantaged communities will likely be managed by poorly-trained teachers. These children will often have encountered trauma and inattention at home which complicates their transitions when they are suddenly exposed to rigorous academic learning. Their language needs are often not met if they do not speak the dominant language at their schools. Literature sources emphasise the importance of supportive interventions to help any untrained teachers to improve their practices. This is because new situations may disorientate children who are under-prepared, which prompts behavioural, cognitive, physical and social-emotional concerns.

Children who do not receive adequate support during transitions experience more stress and anxiety. Transitional distress lowers children's willingness to cooperate with practitioners and programmes at new schools, and they struggle to transform their behaviour to cope with any additional demands placed on them. Literature sources confirm that several teachers are ill-equipped to help children cope with such changes. Too much change can overwhelm a young child; therefore, teachers must plan their sessions well and keep the new routines uncomplicated. In this respect, a balanced child-centred approach works well for ethnically diverse groups of children. Reliable teachers understand the collaborative nature of transitions and know to work closely with families to enhance the children's competencies during a transition.

7.3.3 Findings relating to family involvement during the transition process

Literature relating to family involvement during a transition confirms that successful educational transitions are founded on strong partnerships between homes and schools. A child's transition can be a stressful time for parents too and they should receive support to help their children adjust to the new physical environment. Since a transition is a social process, schools need to liaise with families to build trusting relationships with them. When a school's personnel have healthy interactions with

families, the prospects of successful transitions improve. Parents should be orientated with the new circumstances awaiting their children before the school opens, and advised to maintain stable routines at home but also adjust routines wherever necessary to accommodate the changes in the children's lives. This strategy can relieve parents' stress, develop their trust in the school and secure healthy relationships with their children's teachers. When parents are equipped with skills to empower children, they become more prepared mentally. Meetings with parents prior to the opening of schools alert them of their responsibilities to prepare their children for the transitions.

In the case of migrant families, the transitional period can be emotionally taxing for parents who may, justifiably, believe that their children will be excluded from activities and that the staff will not attend to their children's communicative and psychological needs. Published studies recommend that schools must interact with those parents and children to actively address their concerns.

7.3.4 Findings relating to the practitioners' role in ensuring smooth transitions

According to literature sources, a teacher fulfils a protective function during a transition and the adult presence should reduce reactivity in children. Many children, however, may develop "toxic stress" when they find themselves in an unknown environment, which disrupts their development. As with other types of stress caused by chronic neglect, abuse or extreme poverty, this stress can, in the long term, negatively affect young children's behaviour and their physical and mental health. Caregivers can provide physical and emotional comfort, though, by means of consistent and effective interactions. They can lay the foundation for a child's present and long-term development by providing meaningful emotional and social – and pre-academic – support. Caregivers who sympathetically respond to children's holistic needs will likely develop supportive relationships with them strong enough to serve as protectors against toxic stress. An unresponsive approach from a caregiver will likely be an immediate stressor to the child, disrupting his adjustment to school life and prompting negative behaviour. Children from disadvantaged communities' benefit immensely from positive relationships with caregivers that enhance their capacity to develop.

Caregivers who have established supportive emotional and social environments enable children to focus on practices that promote their senses of emotional safety, their collaborative and explorative natures and academic willingness. When children trust their caregivers, their academic and social skills improve noticeably. Children who are well instructed in terms of expectations within the new environment are more likely to adapt smoothly. Solid structures and predictable routines serve as barriers against environmental pressures. The children should be encouraged to participate in language games, pretend play and the enactment of stories – those activities are strongly linked to academic and social prowess. Children learn to negotiate, compromise and assert themselves positively through such activities. Caregivers must encourage children to apply new skills in challenging situations and to resolve interpersonal conflicts amicably.

Effective practitioners provide a high standard of learning that results in high functioning classrooms with children who are aware of their responsibilities. Problematic behaviour surfaces when children become bored, anxious or upset. Attentive practitioners who incorporate effective social-emotional strategies construct lasting relationships with the children as well as their families. Individualised interventions help children to moderate their behaviour. Schools that employ practical corrective skills and calming strategies minimise children's problematic behaviour considerably and allow children to understand their emotions, manage social difficulties and maintain effective relationships. When children acquire emotional competence, they are more likely to seek help, console a peer in distress and regulate their emotions. In this way, children learn about the 'self', become confident and relate well to others; their drive for independence soars. Trained caregivers can successfully implement effective intervention programmes. Because quality care sets the tone for future academic learning, caregivers are obliged to foster children's emotional well-being. Emotional training is socially and cognitively beneficial to children and should be employed by schools during the transitioning year.

7.3.5 Qualities of an ECCE practitioner

Apart from the use of innovative teaching approaches, sources in literature list a range of qualities that practitioners should have to support young children during uncertain

times. Competence, for instance, is a desired quality for early childhood practitioners and is acquired through professional training. Competent practitioners are able to integrate newly acquired knowledge, skills and values and can discern how to expand their knowledge and improve their practices. They know how to help children to excel in academic and social activities. Another prominent desired quality is a passion for a career in child care and education. Practitioners who are passionate about children, their learning and the curriculum will be able to make children who find themselves in an unfamiliar environment feel happy and secure. A passionate practitioner will be better equipped to understand children's emotional states and learning needs, which will allow for robust and fulfilling interactions with children. Furthermore, an adult's passion for music and storytelling enables them to share those skills with children who, in turn, can emulate them and develop their own skills. A study conducted with 43 early childhood practitioners identified other qualities like perseverance, patience, love for learning, respect, creativity, flexibility, high energy levels and a sense of humour. Practitioners who have all or most of these qualities will successfully meet the demands of their jobs. Some sources mention that practitioners who are eager, dedicated and insightful will likely employ healthy approaches in their interactions with transitioning children.

Other essential traits that practitioners must embrace, and closely related to the above-mentioned qualities, are empathy and emotional consistency. Practitioners with these qualities can maintain affectionate relationships with children, recognise how they feel and perceive things from a child's viewpoint. Warmth is another empowering quality that improves communication and forms a healthy self-concept in a child. The quality of creativity allows practitioners to be flexible in their thinking about what is best for each child. Because practitioners are required to provide children with positive early experiences – according to sources – consistent and reasonable practitioners will likely possess the strength of character to draw children closer to them.

Consistent practitioners foster confidence in children and always provide quality care. Reasonable practitioners will ensure that children progress according to their pace without pitching their standards too high or low. Strength of character, determination and endurance are ideal qualities for practitioners to manage the strong emotional reactions among children in the first few days at school. Authentic practitioners are

knowledgeable and commit to hands-on learning. Practitioners who are resilient and disciplined are suited to promote team spirit and a sense of belonging among new children in an early learning centre. Children who are nurtured with those qualities will be more motivated to adapt and become independent.

7.4 OVERVIEW OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

My study aimed to establish guidelines for a framework for ECCE practitioners in facilitating transition for children, from 3–5 years of age, based on the data obtained from participants in this study. For this purpose, I observed teacher-child interactions from their arrival time at the schools until departure time, analysed children's drawings of their teachers and conducted interviews with practitioners. The three themes that emerged from the data revealed that each participant's views were deeply rooted in their respective beliefs, attitudes, values, backgrounds, temperaments and approaches to the management of children and their parents during the transitioning period. Having closely interacted with participants and observed their daily practices, a thorough analysis of the data produced the following empirical findings.

7.4.1 Findings related to children's response to a transition

The first theme to have emerged from the data related to children's responses to their transitions. I identified four categories within this theme: emotional needs, planning, structured programmes and unfamiliarity. Findings were interpreted accordingly.

Literature sources confirm that an educational transition is a complex process where most children become emotionally destabilised and require support to cope with the strains of a transition process; especially as they need to reconstruct their identities, establish new roles and a sense of belonging in an environment that threatens their safety (Section 2.2.3). Accordingly, this study indicates that most children respond apprehensively when they arrive at a new environment. Some became more anxious when they had to be separated from their parents. Such responses were typical of children who had seen the schools for their first time and were taken aback by the strangeness of the new setting.

This study indicates that there are numerous advantages to advance planning for the following year's transitioning phase by scheduling open days and meetings with parents. Such practices evidently reduced the period of transitions. Children who had visited the school before the formal school year began were lesser traumatised than others, as they had better ideas of what their new lives would be like. The process of meeting their practitioners and seeing the environment beforehand shaped their expectations about school life and they, resultantly, were quicker to engage in activities with other children and explore the new environment once the classes commenced. It made it also easier to separate the children from their parents on the first day at school. Early positive interactions in the classrooms strengthened children's attachment to their teachers which contributed to smooth transitions.

This study confirms that committed and responsive teachers can ease traumatic transitions and the emotional insecurities of many new children by designing well-structured daily programmes. Unresponsive teachers neglect their responsibilities and dampen children's enthusiasm to explore the new environment. Teacher availability in class often indicates how children thrive when their security and emotional needs are met. High availability boosts children's willingness to participate in activities, achieve learning goals and build relationships with others. Negative practitioner conduct, especially frequent absence from class, constrains children's cooperative instincts and reduces the quality of their transitions.

Practitioners' failure to meet the children and their parents beforehand can negatively affect some children when the schools reopen. Failure to assist children to become familiar with the environment exacerbates their feelings of anxiety. Anxiety incites resistance to transition and the process then becomes prolonged and exhausting for both children and adults. The findings also suggest that the practice of bussing such young children to their schools at 06:00 and bussing them back home at 15:30 is unreasonable and very taxing for the children. Spending extended time at school is likely to harm the transitioning experience. Additionally, some migrant children struggled to fit in as they had to deal not only with a new environment but also a foreign language in the classroom. According to my observations, the teachers who had migrant children in their classes had made no plans to facilitate their language acquisition or institute other means of easing their transitions. Those children's social,

emotional and academic well-being – critical elements during transitions – were resultantly weakened. Making matters worse, some practitioners' lack of interest in the children's welfare and their inconsistencies in conduct limited the distressed children's willingness to bond or develop trusting relationships with others.

This study's findings indicate that proper planning by practitioners' benefits children during the transition process; a structured schedule motivates children to engage in activities and conform to teacher expectations. An interactive teaching approach energises children and makes them feel appreciated when they are included in the day's events. Children respond keenly to appropriate creative activities. They will sense that they belong in the new environment when the practitioners respond to their needs and support their interests. When children are meaningfully engaged in a structured environment, they will tend to settle down and accept their new roles. The findings show that a well-planned physical and social environment creates a safe context in which secure relationships between teacher and child, and among children, can develop.

7.4.2 Findings related to the transition process

Literature sources suggest that high stress levels during transitions can impede children's progress. This study confirms that caregivers' supervision in four critical areas – the situation, self, support and strategies (Schlossberg) – may stimulate or inhibit the transition process.

In terms of the *situation*, this study confirms that transitions do not appeal to most children because of the changes and emotional upheavals associated with having to negotiate oneself in an unfamiliar environment with imposing buildings and numerous strangers. Aggravatingly, some practitioners lack the willingness and expertise to provide the necessary care and security to the transitioning children. Trained practitioners, conversely, understand the importance of creating a safe emotional climate for a new group of children, and they base their interactions with children on each child's background and needs. This approach creates a welcoming space for children who must adapt to a situation they have no experience of. This means that, although a new situation can impact negatively on children's coping abilities, teacher competency and sensitivity to a child's emotional needs can make the situation more

tolerable and fulfilling for children. A supportive practitioner can thus bridge the gap between a familiar and unfamiliar situation through involved interactions, tenderness and encouragement. Adequately supported children are emotionally equipped to trust their teachers, accept new roles and carry themselves confidently in new situations. The transitioning endeavour further improves when children get opportunities to explore the new situation alongside their new peers.

The study's findings emphasise the fact that dedicated practitioners are able to help children achieve their developmental outcomes and contribute to the development of the *self* during transitions. Teachers who understand the importance of developing the child as a whole being, hence involving all developmental dimensions in their planning, implement activities that maximise children's full potential. Children's sense of self increases when teachers remain on high alert during this sensitive period and use everyday activities to instil values, such as respect and compassion, and guide the children in building relationships and solving conflicts. Well-supported children become more confident – actively and expressively – and learn to take risks. Literature sources, backed by findings from this study, indicate that children start to feel secure when they are continually supervised, meaning that the practitioner is present and involved in their activities. These findings align with sources stating that children become secure and grow attached to a caregiver when their needs are met. Children become disruptive when their developmental needs are disregarded.

The third crucial element in the transition process is *support*. According to sources, unsupported children develop high levels of stress during transitions. Practitioners need to consider diversity in terms of culture, race, language and values during this period. The children in this study came from diverse backgrounds but not all were actively supported during the transition period. At one research site, the problem was managed in practical and exciting ways so that children quickly grasped the primary language. Children naturally learn languages when they speak with peers and listen to stories. Unfortunately, teachers who do not accommodate children who cannot speak the dominant language or who believe that a child will learn the language over time without their encouragement simply delay the children's transitioning prowess. Such children endure a transition without gaining from social interactions. My

observations at the sites confirm that children who received support and nurturing from the onset enjoyed more successful transitioning journeys than the others.

The *strategies* discussed in this study refers to coping strategies. The findings here indicate that coping strategies indeed enable children to familiarise themselves with and adapt to a new environment. The participating practitioners who engaged children in activities to help them adjust to new routines, cooperate with their peers, share items and think about how others feel, made them feel accepted. Those practitioners were also positive role models that the children wished to emulate. Such strategies helped to reduce the children's stress levels. When the practitioners engaged with parents during meetings, they opened lines of communication that established a sense of belonging for parents in the early learning community. As a strategy, therefore, schools must communicate freely with families and try to establish mutually trusting relationships from the beginning. For instance, practitioners can conduct practical demonstrations to show parents how to use certain resources like playdough at home. Such engagements may help the parents feel valued and supported. Regular communication with parents – both formal and informal – appears to be a valuable strategy that positively influences a transition. Conversely, meetings without agendas on how to support a transitioning child prove to be ineffective for transitions.

The study's findings also indicate that day-to-day activities, especially the routines, should be a highly valued element in the building of resilience in children who find themselves in a new environment. Strong commitment from teachers to implement simple strategies – such as warmly welcoming children each morning, monitoring them while they interact and acknowledging their feelings respectfully – helps children to adjust confidently to the learning centres. At the research sites where such strategies were ignored, the children's adaptation to their new settings occurred at a slower pace.

The development of the child is important in early childhood because basic skills acquired at this time support lifelong skills. The child's relationship with the teacher is vital because children adjust quicker when the practitioner knows how to support and interact with them. This study found that children from disadvantaged communities and migrant children remain exposed to inferior child care services and are taught by teachers who are still untrained or disinterested in the children's well-being.

7.4.3 Findings related to teacher training

Practitioners play a central role in children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. If schools want children to succeed in social, emotional and cognitive domains, then they need to ensure that teachers receive the necessary training and have access to continuous support. That strategy would, crucially, enhance teachers' knowledge and skillsets. Transitioning children benefit from improved social-emotional, physical and cognitive learning when their teachers are well-trained and able to enhance their everyday teaching skills. Training programmes must empower teachers to understand the advantages of educating the child as a whole and, vitally, encourage them to be responsive to children's social-emotional, physical and cognitive needs. Teacher-training programmes must include a module on child development theories to inform them of the processes of change in children's learning and development over time. Such a programme will equip teachers to design appropriate experiences for transitioning children because they will be aware of their vital function in support of the children in their care.

Social-emotional development is an important element of children's ability to obtain confidence, build friendships and appreciate the people in their lives. Routines at early learning centres should, therefore, guide children to apply social skills, build relationships, cooperate with others and solve problems. Children learn to regulate their emotions when practitioners offer compassionate care, which emphasises the value of practitioners to children's social-emotional development. Only the trained practitioners who participated in this study took the initiative to engage children in a range of social-emotional activities to facilitate their transition. They engaged children, for instance, in structured routines that made them feel secure and acknowledged. They successfully guided children to negotiate challenges, express preferences, regulate emotions and manage conflict. They applied their knowledge through proactive strategies that created a favourable setting for smoother transitions. Those practitioners, having provided a calm haven of emotional well-being, managed to reduce the children's stress levels which allowed them to capture a sense of emotional stability in the new environment. The teachers' approach of always being available to calm any distressed children helped the children to feel accepted in an enclosure different from their homes.

Observations made in this study indicate that the untrained participants were unable to provide emotional support to children and were often not available when the children needed them the most. The children who did not speak the dominant language at the school had to suffer exclusion from social activities. That prevented those children to build strong relationships with others or even trust their teachers who made no attempt to teach them social skills or help a fearful child to settle down. Those practitioners allowed ideal teaching moments to pass by every day, losing the opportunities to enhance children's competencies during the transitioning period. Absences and other unprofessional approaches by practitioners put a struggling child's immediate and future development in this domain at risk because of the emotional needs not being satisfied. This study's findings indicate that most untrained practitioners cannot support children emotionally because they lack vital academic knowledge about proper classroom management skills and children's developmental stages. A significant finding from this study, however, indicates that untrained practitioners who are committed to and passionate about children's well-being can genuinely support children by being consistently and emotionally available to them.

The physical domain was documented as a major parameter in child development. Opportunities to craft fine motor skills help children to develop strength and dexterity in their hands. Training in this domain is essential if teachers want to ensure that children play, explore and interact with the items that facilitate fine motor development. Equally, teachers need to know how much time to devote daily for the development of children's gross motor skills that will help them to gain endurance and confidence in their bodies. The development of these skills correlates with children's ability to handle more complex physical challenges. This study found that trained participants vastly contributed to this domain as they used content from the official curriculum to plan outdoor lessons. The children at their research site had ample opportunities to actively participate in gross motor activities and develop their muscles. At other sites, however, the lack of knowledge about the importance of physical learning in the early years meant that the practitioners conveniently excluded physical activities from daily schedules. Although some resources were available, the practitioners were still not motivated to set up the play areas. The clutter inside and outside the classrooms prevented the children from accessing play areas, so they were classroom bound and

inactive. A child's inability to master the physical domain impedes his healthy physical development.

Furthermore, this study found that the trained practitioners enacted their professional roles competently and successfully empowered children to achieve age-related transformations such as improving memory, reasoning and concept formation abilities. They ensured that children participated daily in developmentally appropriate activities so increase their understanding of their world. This helped them to explore and make sense of their environs. Children who are exposed to a good selection of resources quickly grasp language, mathematical and scientific concepts, and they also enact pretend play and use language creatively. My observations confirm that these children participated enthusiastically in a range of activities from arrival until departure. This occurred because the participating practitioners prepared lessons and used departmental lesson plans to augment cognitive development; hence, quality prevailed in all the teaching domains. This study further found that children who only engage with workbook-related activities miss vital opportunities to explore and experiment with concrete objects; colouring-in activities limit their self-expression and creativity. Both literature sources and empirical findings reveal that trained practitioners are an invaluable resource in the early childhood setting.

7.5 RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

This section presents the research conclusions in response to the initial research questions (Section 1.5.1). First, the secondary questions are answered, allowing comprehensive research conclusions to be made in response to the main research question.

7.5.1 Research questions

The secondary questions posed in this study prompted the following of an empirical route in this study; the observations and interviews, in particular, were designed to obtain responses that would ultimately provide a clear answer to the primary question (as the crux of this study). The key findings that provided answers to these questions were entrenched in the main themes that emerged during the data analysis and

interpretation processes, as described in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively (Tables 5.14 and 6.3).

The following sections present conclusions to the secondary questions.

7.5.2 Sub-question 1: How do young children experience a transition?

Literature sources refer to 'transition' as a process of change that encompasses several events and experiences that occur when the child moves from one setting to another. The process signals separation from a predictable routine and familiar environment to a setting characterised by uncertainty, strangeness and changing roles. These changes yield stress and most young children encounter uneasiness and require additional support and care. A practitioner's preparation for this process influences how a child adapts during times of uncertainty.

Most young children experience insecurity, apprehension, separation anxiety, feelings of being devalued and a loss of attachment to family members and friends as they transition to an unfamiliar setting. By engaging children in pre-transition activities, such as having them visit the school before the first day to see and explore the new surroundings and meet the practitioners and other children, alleviates much of first-day trauma. Children will then feel more secure, be ready to cooperate and take on new challenges amid numerous changes they will experience. Sufficiently supported children tend to overcome uncertainty, find a sense of belonging and accept their new identities and roles in the new environment. When children know they are being supported, they feel acknowledged and safe in an unfamiliar environment. Those children separate easier from their parents, participate willingly in daily routines and build constructive relationships with others. Practitioners' welcoming attitudes, responsiveness to children's emotional needs and commitment to daily programmes enable children to experience positive transitions. This is because children learn to understand their feelings, control their behaviour and develop socially while they engage in novel activities when they are in an emotionally stable environment.

When children initially enter an unknown environment, unprepared and unaware of the expectations placed upon them, they tend to resist through challenging behaviour. Transitional trauma is heightened when the child is not conversant in the dominant

language of teaching at a school. At some research sites, children were bussed to school on their first day. Among them were children who grew scared and nervous because the practitioners could not understand their languages to tend to their needs. Those children remained tense and despondent a few weeks after the reopening of schools because they did not feel acknowledged and had fewer opportunities to participate in exploratory activities.

The establishment of routines assists in making children feel secure in their classroom communities and is thus a significant contributor to transitioning success. Children who are supported by their practitioners tend to thrive in the new environment – they accept rules, experiment with items in the play areas and build friendships. A practitioner's nurturing presence and interactive teaching methods provide emotional security to children which encourage them to discover more about the world around them. Children with special educational and language needs experience a more relaxed transition when they are supported, loved unconditionally and accepted by everyone. Transitional fear is eased by warm daily welcomes, tender care, bonding and adequate mental stimulation throughout the day.

Children experience positive transitions when the environment is inviting, engaging and contains age-appropriate resources that support their interests and development. Children adjust quicker to a new setting when they have access to a rich and varied environment where the practitioner is always present to prompt them to explore the indoor and outdoor spaces in safety. At one research site, soon after the school year commenced, I observed fully-adjusted children taking responsibility to creatively set up an outdoor play area for activities. This event confirmed that a practitioner's insight and commitment can drive seamless transitions for children and transform their insecurities to confidence.

7.5.3 Sub-question 2: What are the requirements for young children's holistic well-being?

Holistic well-being focuses on engaging and developing the whole child by paying attention to the child's physical, social-emotional and cognitive domains. Children flourish when their needs are met. Practitioners hence need to draw from a wide range of strategies that focus on the different dimensions of child development. Emotional

security is the basis for a child's overall well-being during a transition as an interplay exists in the way the child feels, thinks and behaves. Commitment and responsiveness from practitioners lay the groundwork for holistic well-being. Similarly, a practitioner's lack of knowledge and experience of child development means that the critical area pertaining to a child's well-being is not attended to.

Holistic well-being supposes that practitioners prioritise the building of reciprocal relationships, provision of consistent emotional support, development of skills and provision of opportunities for children to interact with others in an emotionally secure environment. The establishment of emotional security helps children to understand themselves, become independent and engage in all spheres of learning. A transition usually triggers feelings of uncertainty and confusion, while the movement from home to school places demands on the child's emotional well-being. Accessible practitioners help children to accept and understand their feelings and that of others during times of distress. Children feel secure and become confident when given the opportunities to participate in a range of activities or to play alone. They learn how to interact with others from different cultures, listen to others, negotiate their roles, await their turns and show empathy. These traits have positive effects on a child's emotional well-being.

Children adapt to a new situation when practitioners create a safe emotional climate and base their interactions on children's needs and interests. They feel more assured and learn to trust unfamiliar individuals when the adults in the room listen to them. Their academic and social skills improve when they are warmly accepted. When practitioners know how to diffuse tense situations and support children when they are upset, they reinforce the secure connections that children need to engage safely and happily with the environment.

Consistent routines and reliable supervision build children's confidence, reduce their frustrations and make them feel more secure. These competencies act as barriers against environmental challenges. The practitioner's presence is required throughout the day as they need to answer children's questions, guide them, help them solve their problems and make them feel safe. When children are continually engaged in meaningful social, physical and cognitive activities, they develop better control over themselves and attain higher levels of contentment. They learn that events can take

place in an organised way. They also learn how to improve their language usage, respond to friends' feelings, take turns and control their emotions. Practitioners who acknowledge children's accomplishments endow them with a sense of belonging and the confidence to adopt positive attitudes about themselves and others. Supported children learn how to negotiate risks while experimenting and exploring. Secure environments promote children's thought processes, communicative abilities, health and safety. When children trust their practitioners, their emotional, social and academic skills improve, which contributes to their holistic well-being.

7.5.4 Sub-question 3: What qualities should practitioners have to ensure a smooth transition from home to school?

Smooth transitions are not automatic processes; they require the efforts of knowledgeable, enthusiastic, patient and energetic practitioners who commit to the process – even before schools reopen. Practitioners who are passionate about children have compassion for their insecurities and fears. They are caring, committed to their work and creative in finding ways to keep children interested and active. Such qualities may ensure a stable transition process. An eternal passion for and dedication to children's learning enables a practitioner to take care of children's emotional needs. Devoted practitioners will make their first day at school a memorable day for children, after which they will maintain support during the transitions. Children thrive in an environment where practitioners are helpful and compassionate. Importantly, those qualities are vital to helping special needs children feel appreciated. Dedicated, hardworking practitioners will meticulously plan their schedule and routines, and meaningfully organise the learning environment. The resourceful nature of practitioners at a research site was observed as they prompted the children to set up a play area outside in a brief amount of time. Children respond well to practitioners who are energetic and can keep them interested and amused. Creative practitioners know how to guide children in adapting to various changes. Emotionally competent individuals are effective practitioners and can handle a range of emotions, address problematic behaviours and accept children unconditionally.

7.5.5 Sub-question 4: What guidelines can practitioners follow during a transition?

Transitions to a new environment can be challenging for families and children who enter a new setting without knowing anyone and need to gain a better understanding of the expectations in the new setting.

Practitioners must invite parents to a meeting before school opens to inform parents about expectations, daily programmes, school rules and any developmentally appropriate resources for the children. The parents need to know that their children will participate in theme teaching and that they will have to assist their children in collecting material relating to each theme. Importantly, the practitioners must try to obtain some background information on the new children from their parents, such as home languages and cultural backgrounds. They could then centre their planning around these issues. Language needs must be prioritised, especially those of children who do not speak the setting's official language. Competent practitioners can design programmes to help children learn the dominant language and use positive interactions to sustain the learning process. Untrained practitioners can attend courses that focus on teaching English as an additional language. In terms of health, practitioners need to obtain information as early as possible about children who may be diabetic, diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), suffer from asthma, allergies or other serious ailments, as well as information about any prescribed medications. All such information will be useful to practitioners in their planning.

During such an open day at the school, the practitioners must familiarise the families with the school grounds, buildings and the classroom. They can take the children on a tour of the school grounds and show them the play areas, the equipment they could use, music and computer centres, library and school hall. A school at a research site had all these facilities, and the practitioners had successfully organised an open day during the year before to familiarise the children with the equipment, classroom and surroundings. The children were given time to play on the jungle gym to help them relax. This strategy meant that the children arrived at the school's reopening with less anxiety about their life ahead.

7.5.6 Primary research question: What are the components of a training framework for ECCE practitioners in facilitating transition from home to school?

This framework is founded on the empirical evidence produced by this study: untrained practitioners are unable to facilitate transitions because they lack knowledge about the developmental stages of children. The untrained practitioners who participated in the study largely ignored the emotional, social and language needs of the children in their care. They conducted their day-to-day activities in unsafe and disorganised environments.

This framework is designed to reach the untrained early childhood practitioners and equip them with the understanding about the importance of events during transitions, and knowledge about the planning and implementing of quality programmes to ease children's transitions. Each component of the training framework will be designed to enhance a practitioner's competence level and content knowledge. The components can be presented in the form of modules. Practitioners must be instructed on the use of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) documents as reference when planning activities. Training could be presented in the forms of induction, mentoring, coaching and shadowing. School management teams should ensure that untrained practitioners are inducted into the organisation where they can acquire instructions about proper administration of Grade R classes. The induction should be planned well with its programme carefully compiled. Practitioners should be informed of pertinent legislation applicable to Grade R teaching. During this time, a practitioner could be attached to a mentor who would oversee the integration of the practitioner into the system. The untrained practitioners' practices may thus be observed by experienced practitioners (shadowing). Each participant will be provided with a training manual, and incentives provided to practitioners upon completion. They could be awarded certificates upon completion as well as financial support to complete their studies.

Considering the findings above, the following components can constitute a training framework for practitioners in facilitating transitions.

The first primary component of the training framework must expand practitioners' knowledge about the developmental stages of a typical 5-year-old to ensure that activities are age-appropriate and based on the interest and skills of children in this age group. Advanced knowledge of the developmental stages of a child across each domain will give the practitioner a functional foundation for accommodating the needs of incoming children. This is the starting place for the planning of programmes and environments for transitioning children. Lessons and instructions based on a typical child development stage are more likely to fulfil the social-emotional, cognitive and physical needs of a child. This knowledge will empower practitioners to be flexible in supporting children who excel as well as those who require additional support. Knowledge of child development will encourage a practitioner to keep learning goals in mind and to plan and design developmentally appropriate activities that will motivate children to learn and progress without fear of the unfamiliar setting. They will learn how to adopt programmes that align with curriculum standards. All their planned activities should relate to a child's stage of development. This foundational knowledge will enhance confidence in their practices and help them to communicate their expectations to their colleagues and the children's parents.

The second primary component of this training framework will require practitioners to focus on the transitioning child's emotional and social needs. Practitioners should become proficient at adopting systematic approaches to teaching social skills. Practitioners' understanding of the developmental stages of children will enable them to respond appropriately to their needs. Practitioners fulfil a vital function in supporting children during transitions and it is hence imperative that practitioners are properly trained in the planning of activities that sustain the social and emotional development of each child. Children learn best when their needs are met. When a practitioner understands this, they realise that it is typical for a 5-year-old to become anxious and tense when he finds himself in an unfamiliar environment among strangers. Many children will react negatively to this stimulus and express their emotions strongly. When responding to outbursts, practitioners must focus on easing the child's discomfort without using harsh tones or threats. When children are handled compassionately, their emotional needs are fulfilled and they obtain a sense of security. A practitioner who guides a child to build trusting relationships with adults provides the child with security, comfort and a strong base from which to explore the

new environment. The child will be able to develop self-control, respond appropriately to other children's feelings and display affection towards them. Responsive practitioners understand the unique ways in which children express their needs and will assist them to develop their skills in self-regulation through consistent care. A practitioner's ability to plan and implement flexible routines brings control and security to an entire group of children. Children should be guided to work in small or bigger groups, learning how to cooperate with others, await their turns, share items and observe rules. Their confidence is bolstered when they are given opportunities to experience joy in a new setting, where they can select their activities, participate in fantasy play or sing songs in satisfying their emotional and social needs. Trained practitioners will always be readily available to provide emotional support in times of uncertainty, which is bound to positively influence children's emotional, social and academic success.

Knowing how to support children who are unacquainted with the dominant language at a school is critically important to those children. Without support, those children quickly feel excluded and become lonely and confused. It is, therefore, imperative that practitioners can sensitively respond to the language needs of diverse children – including migrant children – to bestow a sense of belonging on them at the new setting. Training programmes must hence ensure that practitioners expand their knowledge about language teaching, and that they can develop strategies and programmes to assist children with language difficulties at learning centres. Active engagement in theme teaching also helps children to expand their vocabularies related to those themes. Other strategies such as interactive teaching, story-telling, visual aids, gestures, physical demonstrations, non-verbal communication clues and enactment of parts in roleplaying (with dialogue) further encourage children to communicate with others and improve their skills with a new language. These are all strategies that the framework could reflect upon. Practitioners must also ensure that, on the first day at school, adults are present who can understand the practitioners and communicate all necessary information to the children in their home language, to ease their anxieties.

The learning environment is a vital parameter in the development of a transitioning child. Therefore, competent practitioners should be able to construct emotionally supportive learning environments and activities that satisfy children's cultural and

holistic needs. Practitioners must know how to arrange classrooms and outdoor play areas so that they are welcoming, and how to organise all the learning and playing materials so that they are accessible to children. The training framework must hence guide practitioners to be proficient in the setting up of rich learning environments. Classrooms must be divided into clearly marked spaces for learning, play (such as pretend-play and playing with items), culture (painting and song) and science. There should thus be enough space for children to hone their various skills in safe and secure – and yet challenging – environments. The practitioners should also learn how to take proper care of their environments, and guide the children in doing the same.

The third and final component of the training framework should be an inclusivity-based training regime to improve practitioners' abilities to create safe and inclusive learning spaces and to institute appropriate activities for special needs children. The training programme must teach practitioners how to identify and manage children with special needs. The training should cover aspects of planning and implementing activities to remedy any delays in development. The earlier that individual needs are addressed, the fewer children will fall behind. On a personal level, practitioners must be able to provide social-emotional support for each child and work closely with the parents to understand their children' s interests, likes and dislikes.

7.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the literature and empirical findings, the study's main conclusion is that the employment of untrained practitioners hampers young children's transition from home to school and, subsequently, their future learning outcomes. The following recommendations to the Department of Basic Education (DBE), district officials and schools can ensure that employed practitioners become equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to meet the diverse needs of young transitioning children.

7.6.1 Recommendations for the Department of Basic Education

The following two recommendations should be considered by the DBE as the executive body overseeing legislative aspects regarding the education of children.

7.6.1.1 Cut-off date for obtaining a qualification as a Grade R practitioner

The DBE must determine a new cut-off date for untrained practitioners already based at schools to earn a formal qualification. An earlier deadline set by the DBE stipulated that, after 2019, no practitioner with a qualification below Level 6 – which constitutes the National Diploma in Grade R teaching – will be allowed to teach a Grade R class. However, many practitioners who still have not obtained the required qualification are still employed by the DBE, while urgency to complete training programmes is lacking. This poses a risk to young children entering school life because the unqualified practitioners' lack of knowledge and skills to properly teach these children not only unsettles transitioning children but also impairs their well-being. The new cut-off date, if properly enforced, should motivate practitioners to complete their qualifications in good time and equip themselves with the skills necessary to ensure that children's needs are sufficiently met during the transition process.

7.6.1.2 Database to monitor unqualified practitioners

The DBE should compile a list of untrained practitioners to ensure that they are supported whilst working towards a qualification and not being allowed to teach at schools. Such a list will enable the DBE to track the progress made in their studies and to present the practitioners with opportunities to attend in-service training courses specifically for diversity management, additional language teaching and the preparation of children for transitions. The DBE has assured schools that the present group of untrained practitioners will not be dismissed from the system but allowed time to complete their qualifications while still teaching Grade R classes. Therefore, it is imperative that untrained practitioners receive compulsory basic training as a backup while busy earning their qualifications. In this respect, bridging modules could cover topics like child development, planning, routines, classroom management, teacher-parent partnerships and the layout of physical environments at schools. In addition, officials need to make follow-up visits to schools to monitor practitioners' progress in terms of implementing improvements in their teaching methods.

7.6.2 Recommendations for district coordinators

Coordinators are tasked with the responsibility to manage the curriculum in the field of early childhood education in terms of legislation and policy. They are required to distribute learning resources and to design and manage training sessions for Heads of Department (HoD's) and practitioners. The following two recommendations are directed at district coordinators:

7.6.2.1 Conducting of audits at early childhood institutions and primary schools

District coordinators should conduct audits of early childhood institutions and schools to ensure that all the resources received by schools are fully utilised. They need to ensure delivery of resource packs, DBE workbooks and pre-planned lessons to schools, and that practitioners are informed of the use of those valuable resources; without proper guidelines, the resources tend to be stored in classrooms by untrained practitioners and never put to good use. It is recommended that early childhood facilitators at district offices distribute these resources at training sessions where they mediate lesson plans. The facilitators should also emphasise the importance of practitioners adhering to a structured programme. District officials should hold a lesson mediation meeting with practitioners at the beginning of the year in their relevant clusters – these sessions would enable practitioners to facilitate children's transitions.

7.6.2.2 Training sessions for Heads of Department

District coordinators should provide training sessions to HoD's to enable them to provide leadership and support to practitioners. Training can be done through regular seminars and training workshops to help them understand the importance of play-based learning. At present, HoD's claim that they have not been adequately trained to supervise practitioners as their key responsibility is to manage the Foundation Phase. It is recommended that district coordinators assume the responsibility to empower HoD's who, in turn, can provide consistent support based on the needs of practitioners and ensure that practitioners plan age-appropriate activities that promote children's physical, social-emotional and cognitive development. HoD's need to be able to supply examples of good programmes for practitioners to ensure that everyone performs at

the desired level. Regular monitoring must also occur to ensure that practitioners adhere to the basic requirements regarding planning and curriculum delivery.

7.6.3 Recommendations for schools

The School Management Team (SMT) and practitioners need to be empowered to provide high-quality early education to children and contribute to their future learning outcomes. The following recommendation is directed at SMT's:

7.6.3.1 Management of diversity by School Management Teams and practitioners

The school principal, deputy principal and Head of Department must work closely with practitioners to support them while they facilitate children's transitions. South African schools generally admit children from diverse backgrounds; the children hence need the attendant adults' support to help them feel accepted in the new environment. This is a sensitive area as SMT's have not been trained in this area and, consequently, lack the skills to empower staff. It is recommended that schools and district coordinators arrange training sessions for practitioners in the field of diversity management to help them manage the needs of children from various cultural and linguistic groups. This is necessary to ensure that all children new to a school are equally accommodated. Schools could also invite parents who speak the language of a migrant child to help them adjust to the new learning environment.

7.6.4 Recommendations for practitioners

The practitioner must be able to plan and implement smooth transitions with support from the SMT. Such engagements can ease children's anxieties about life at a school. The following two recommendations are directed at practitioners.

7.6.4.1 Create a rich environment

A chaotic learning environment can increase the anxiety level of young children. Practitioners must know how to create a rich environment that will encourage children to be active, interact with others and maintain relationships.

7.6.4.2 Prepare children in advance for transition

Transitions leave most children feeling emotionally fraught. It is recommended that HoD's and practitioners engage the children's parents to initiate the transitioning processes in the form of an open day at the school grounds at least three months prior to the reopening of schools. This strategy may substantially ease the trauma that children normally experience on their first day at a school. A well-planned open day will provide children with opportunities to get to know their practitioners and peers, as well as opportunities to participate in certain activities to accelerate their familiarity with the new environment.

7.6.5 Recommendations for parents

It is important to realise that parents also become stressed during their children's transitions to school life. They also need sound advice from schools in preparing their children for their school careers. The following recommendation is directed at the parents of transitioning children.

7.6.5.1 Acquainting parents with school procedures

Practitioners must communicate important aspects of their children's upcoming transitions to parents. It is recommended that well-coordinated proactive strategies like workshops and demonstrations for parents and children are implemented. Practitioners can organise information-sharing sessions with parents to help them prepare their children at home for the new experience. Parents can receive copies of school rules, policies and daily classroom schedules at such meetings.

7.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

While the findings of this study are significant and provide valuable insight into children's needs and experiences during transitions, and while the findings specify the elements that are vital to a training framework for practitioners, numerous pieces of evidence emerged during the investigation that illuminate children's true experiences during transitions; yet those aspects remain under-researched. Several possibilities for future research exist to potentially strengthen or expand the results disclosed in

this research and provide a clearer understanding of children's experiences and practitioners' facilitation of transitions. This study will also benefit from follow-up research. Some areas for further research include:

- Strategies that positively influence a child's adjustment to new settings;
- A follow-up study with participants after they had qualified to establish how they incorporated their newly acquired pedagogical knowledge, skills and attitudes in their classrooms and programmes;
- A study, in collaboration with early childhood officials from the DBE and district coordinators, on potential strategies to support untrained practitioners while they complete their qualifications;
- Examination of effective strategies to support children and families from diverse backgrounds.

7.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although this study was successfully conducted, it was not without its limitations, which are listed below.

- South Africa is a country with nine provinces, each comprising specific geographic and cultural groups. The inclusion of other provinces in the study could have provided a more consummate perspective on the experiences of transitioning children in South Africa.
- I anticipated involving school management members as participants in this study but was unable to secure their participation at disadvantaged schools as they believed they were not adequately trained in the early childhood field and hence viewed participation as an added responsibility. They felt that they lacked the necessary skills to engage in this study.
- Being eager to commence with fieldwork, I had hoped to begin with data collection on the first day of the reopening of schools to get an accurate view of events transpiring at the school. However, the National Department of Education's policy on permission to conduct research at schools stipulated that research could not take place before the second week of February. This meant

that I had to rely on practitioners' recollections and perceptions of their management of the initial transitioning period.

- The conducting of interviews in a rural school was challenging due to the long school days. Practitioners kept postponing the interviews due to time constraints and exhaustion. They eventually agreed to do the interviews on a Saturday morning. The prolonged uncertainties during this time were stressful for the researcher.

7.9 CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study tapped into a key area of early childhood development: a child's transition from home to school, which requires commitment and proficiencies from those who direct this process. A review of literature on children's transition in developed countries indicates that the principles embedded in transition frameworks, educational policies and teacher empowerment programmes promote successful transitions. Those practitioners, who are guided to engage effectively with frameworks, policies and programmes, draw from their beliefs, experiences and pedagogical knowledge, which is essential to navigating a functional transition. Much of a child's transitioning success can be attributed to the practitioner's preparedness and ability to nurture the social-emotional needs of children and collaborating with parents.

Within the South African context, the post-1994 government introduced several legislations, plans and strategies to promote equitable and quality early childhood for all children. More South African children now have access to early childhood care but despite a profusion of new policies, legislation, curriculum reviews and acts the quality of service provided to children and the approach of most untrained practitioners are still questionable – especially in terms of the facilitation of transitions.

This study allowed me to observe transition practices at schools from the second week of February. Interviews with practitioners provided insight into their experiences, views and approaches related to the transitioning period. I became aware that unqualified practitioners are ill-equipped to manage a successful transitioning endeavour. This means that children's developmental needs are disregarded. I had to observe how children from impoverished backgrounds became innocent victims of inferior quality

education whereas “the goal of early childhood education should be to activate the child’s natural desire to learn” (Montessori). This noble goal will be unattainable for many children if untrained practitioners continue to teach large swathes of South African children.

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Appendix A: Letter to principal and practitioners

Dear Principal/Practitioners

REQUEST TO CONDUCT AN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

I am a student at the University of Pretoria and I am enrolled for a PhD degree in Early Childhood Education. I am engaged in research entitled "The key components of a training framework for Early Childhood Education and Care Practitioners in facilitating transition". I would like to ask whether you will be willing to grant me permission to conduct my research at your school/class.

To fulfil these requirements, I need to observe two practitioners while they conduct their daily programmes, interview the practitioners and observe three learners in class. These three learners will be required to draw a picture and asked questions on what they have drawn. The parents of these learners will then be interviewed. The interview will take more or less thirty to forty minutes. All interviews will be conducted after contact hours at a venue preferred by participants.

Practitioners and parents who are willing to participate will be required to read the letter of invitation provided to them. If they are willing to participate, they will be required to complete and return a consent form. Learners will be given assent forms which will be signed by their parents.

Participation will be governed by the following principles:

- Participation in this research is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw at any time they so wish.
- The results from participants will be treated in a confidential manner, recordings from the interview will be only heard by the practitioner, parent, the researcher (Mrs M.S. Chetty) and the supervisor (Prof. M.G. Steyn).
- Information related to the interviews will not be accessible to anyone besides the participants if they so wish.

- The name of the school will not be used when discussing information or results pertaining to this research study, with the intent of protecting the name of the institution and the participants.
- Should the participants and school wish to know what was found during the research a summary of the findings will be made available accordingly.

Participation in this study will benefit practitioners as they will be given the opportunity to describe their experiences which is relevant to the study. The research findings from participants' experiences would assist in the compiling of a research report. This study has the potential of assisting the Department of Basic Education, to outline a training programme for practitioners in facilitating children's transition as the National Curriculum Framework for birth to 4 years is on the brink of being rolled out to schools.

Yours sincerely,

MS Chetty (Mrs) Prof M.G. Steyn (supervisor)

Appendix B: Consent forms to principals and practitioners

I have read the consent letter and have understood the terms of participation

I do agree/not agree (delete which applies to you) that my school/class should participate in the research titled "The key components of a training framework for Early Childhood Education and Care Practitioners in facilitating transition."

I do agree that practitioners and learners in my school/class will be observed. Practitioners and parents will also be interviewed. The interviews will be audiotaped.

Position at school…….

Signature……

Date……

Appendix C: Letter of information to the Grade R learner

ASSENT FORM FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

Project title: Key components of a training framework for ECEC practitioners in facilitating transition

Researcher: M.S. Chetty

	Oral description	Visual description
1.	I want to tell you about my research project. When someone does research, it means that they want to learn more about something. In my research, this is how it will work: I am going to sit at the back of the class and watch how mam teaches the children in class and how children listen and answer questions.	 
2.	The study will help me more to understand how children feel when they start school and how your teacher helps you to enjoy school, make friends, play at the fantasy corner, read the books you want, draw, play outside on the jungle gym, and in the sandpit. After watching you learner I will write a report that will help teachers to make learning fun for children as they enter school.	 
3.	I will be coming to your class for a week in February to watch you learn and ask you to draw a picture of your teacher. I will talk to your teacher and parents.	 
4.	There will be no risks in this study and whatever you tell me about your drawing will not be shared with anyone. You will not have to do anything new for me, but on one day I will ask your teacher to allow you to draw of picture of your teacher before you pack up.	 

5.	• While you draw, I will be seated close to you and watch you draw. I will then ask you a few questions about what you have drawn and then write some notes in my book. • When I will use something that you have said then I will use a pseudonym (nickname). A pseudonym is when you change the real name with another name so that you are protected. If you are Paul, I will say that this is the picture that Prince drew.	 
6.	Before you say if you want to help with the research of not, you are welcome to ask me any questions about the research. If you are at home and you are wondering about anything or have a question then, you are very welcome to phone me (0793067820).	
7.	If you say that you want to be a participant in this study and later you decide that you do not want to be part of it anymore, you can tell me at any time: "I don't want to be a part anymore." I promise that no one will be angry with you if you do not want to carry on being a participant.	

Before you decide that you want to be a part of this study or not, you can ask me anything that you are wondering or that you have a question about.

The following box contains two faces. The first one is the smiling face that is showing thumbs up and the second one is a sad face that is showing thumbs down. If you would like to participate in this study, you can circle the face that is smiling. If you do not want to participate in the study, you can circle the sad face.	
	
Yes, I want to be a participant	**No**, I do not want to be a participant

_____	_____	_____
Name of the child:	**Name of the child** (written by themselves)**:**	**Date:**
_____	_____	_____

Appendix D: Letter to parents and legal guardians

I am a student at the University of Pretoria and I am enrolled for a PhD in Early Childhood Education. I am asking for permission that your child may participate in my research. The title of my study is: "Key components of a training framework for Early Childhood Education and Care Practitioners in facilitating transition", where I will be investigating what the role of practitioners are in helping a child to adjust to pre-school. The research requires observations of children during class and outdoor lessons. On the days that the children are observed, I will be seated at the back of the classroom and will not speak to any children. On one day only, I will ask children to draw a picture of his or her teacher and explain the drawing. I hope that the results of the study will be useful for the development of a training programme for practitioners when facilitating transition.

The learners will be governed in the following terms:

> The names of the learners will not be used in the study. I will use a pseudonym (nickname) will be used if I want to refer to what the child said during the drawings.
>
> Participation in this research is voluntary. In other words, if the child does not want to draw, they may continue with other work. Children have the right not to participate.

If you have any questions about the consent letters you may contact me at the following details.

Mrs M.S. Chetty
Cell: 079 306 7820

Appendix E: Consent forms to parents and legal guardians

Dear Parent

I have read the consent letter and understand the terms of participation explained in the consent letter.

I do agree/do not agree (delete which applies to you) that my child should participate in the research titled "Key components of a training framework for Early Childhood Care and Education practitioners in facilitating transition".

I understand that my child will be observed in class and participate in a drawing activity. I further understand that participation is voluntary and my child may not participate in the drawing activity if he or she chooses not to.

Parents signature……

Date ……

Appendix F: Letter to the Gauteng Department of Education

Gauteng Department of Education
PO Box 7710
Johannesburg
2000

Dear Sir/Madam

REQUEST TO CONDUCT AN EDUCATION RESEARCH

I am Magesveri S. Chetty, a Doctoral (PhD) student at the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Education. As a requirement of my studies, I am engaged in a research study entitled "What are the key components of a training programme for early Childhood Education and Care Practitioners in facilitating transition". This study is supervised by Prof M.G. Steyn. With this letter, I request permission to conduct the above-mentioned research at four primary schools in the Tshwane South Region.

As the Department of Basic Education has recently introduced the National Curriculum Framework for the birth to 4 years, the purpose of this study is to provide guidelines for a training programme that the Department of Basic Education, district offices and school management teams may use when outlining a training programme for practitioners in facilitating children's transition from home to school. This research might break new grounds in the training of practitioners.

In order to carry out this investigation from each of the selected schools I need to observe the practitioners in practice, observe three learners and ask them to participate in a drawing activity, interview two practitioners and three parents whose children were observed. All interviews will be conducted after school hours.

I undertake to observe the following research principles throughout the research process:

- I will assure participants (practitioners, parents and learners) voluntary participation and freedom to participate and withdraw anytime they wish.
- Obtain informed consent to participate.

- Observe confidentiality and anonymity from the school by keeping raw data and field notes confidentiality.
- To omit or not use the names of the participants' institution when discussing information or results pertaining to this research study to protect the names of participants and that of the institutions.
- Information related to the interviews will not be accessible to anyone besides the participants if they so wish.
- I will leave my contact numbers in case contact needs to be established in matters related to this research study.
- Participants will terminate the research at any time if they so required.

Participation in this study has a direct benefit to practitioners, parents and learners in that by participating in the study they are given the opportunity to share their experiences during the transition period. I trust that you will consider my request to do the above research in your region and that you will inform me about your decision as soon as possible.

My contact numbers are: 0793067820
Email: msvchetty@gmail.com

Yours sincerely

M.S. Chetty (Mrs) Prof. M.G. Steyn (Supervisor)

Appendix G: GDE Amended Approval Letter

GAUTENG PROVINCE
Department: Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

8/4/4/1/2

GDE AMENDED RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER

Date:	16 January 2018
Validity of Research Approval:	05 February 2018 – 28 September 2018 2017/141A
Name of Researcher:	Chetty M.S
Address of Researcher:	P O Box 70590
	Wilgers
	Pretoria 0122
Telephone Number:	012 999 3044 079 306 7820
Email address:	msvchetty@gmail.com
Research Topic:	What are the key components of a training programme for Early Childhood Education and Care Practitioners in facilitating transitions?
Number and type of schools:	Four Primary Schools
District/s/HO	Tshwane South and Gauteng North

Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved to conduct the research. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to both the School (both Principal and SGB) and the District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted.

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

22/01/2018

1

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
Tel: (011) 355 0488
Email: Faith.Tshabalala@gauteng.gov.za
Website: www.education.gpg.gov.za

The following conditions apply to GDE research. The researcher may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

1. *The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s concerned must be presented with a copy of this letter that would indicate that the said researcher/s has/have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*
2. *The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s must be approached separately, and in writing, for permission to involve District/Head Office Officials in the project.*
3. *A copy of this letter must be forwarded to the school principal and the chairperson of the School Governing Body (SGB) that would indicate that the researcher/s have been granted permission from the Gauteng Department of Education to conduct the research study.*
4. *A letter / document that outline the purpose of the research and the anticipated outcomes of such research must be made available to the principals, SGBs and District/Head Office Senior Managers of the schools and districts/offices concerned, respectively.*
5. *The Researcher will make every effort obtain the goodwill and co-operation of all the GDE officials, principals, and chairpersons of the SGBs, teachers and learners involved. Persons who offer their co-operation will not receive additional remuneration from the Department while those that opt not to participate will not be penalised in any way.*
6. *Research may only be conducted after school hours so that the normal school programme is not interrupted. The Principal (if at a school) and/or Director (if at a district/head office) must be consulted about an appropriate time when the researcher/s may carry out their research at the sites that they manage.*
7. *Research may only commence from the second week of February and must be concluded before the beginning of the last quarter of the academic year. If incomplete, an amended Research Approval letter may be requested to conduct research in the following year.*
8. *Items 6 and 7 will not apply to any research effort being undertaken on behalf of the GDE. Such research will have been commissioned and be paid for by the Gauteng Department of Education.*
9. *It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain written parental consent of all learners that are expected to participate in the study.*
10. *The researcher is responsible for supplying and utilising his/her own research resources, such as stationery, photocopies, transport, faxes and telephones and should not depend on the goodwill of the institutions and/or the offices visited for supplying such resources.*
11. *The names of the GDE officials, schools, principals, parents, teachers and learners that participate in the study may not appear in the research report without the written consent of each of these individuals and/or organisations.*
12. *On completion of the study the researcher/s must supply the Director: Knowledge Management & Research with one Hard Cover bound and an electronic copy of the research.*
13. *The researcher may be expected to provide short presentations on the purpose, findings and recommendations of his/her research to both GDE officials and the schools concerned.*
14. *Should the researcher have been involved with research at a school and/or a district/head office level, the Director concerned must also be supplied with a brief summary of the purpose, findings and recommendations of the research study.*

The Gauteng Department of Education wishes you well in this important undertaking and looks forward to examining the findings of your research study.

Kind regards

.....

Ms Faith Tshabalala
CES: Education Research and Knowledge Management

DATE: 22/01/2018

2

Making education a societal priority

Office of the Director: Education Research and Knowledge Management
7th Floor, 17 Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, 2001
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Appendix H: Coding Interview Transcription

Reflective notes	Transcription of interview	Initial codes named
	Tammy The first day oh! the first day is always such a rush. A very emotional day for them, a lot of tears, a lot of time trying to settle them down, getting them used to our routines. This is a big school, lots of people on the first day I must say {s but a blur. It goes by very very quickly. It can be overwhelming but it is an exciting day for me to meet our little ones. For me I enjoy it I love it. I pick them up. I love them a lot and I try a lot to introduce them to a new fiend, things like there is a new friend to play with; put them maybe on the jungle gym, maybe they enjoy playing on the jungle gym. But I also say mummy is going to be here just now. We are going to do a lot of fun work in the class. A lot of them as I said were a little apprehensive. And the majority of the time it is the first time they have been in such a big school and a big environment like this but they are excited and as well as eager to play on the playground and eager to come into the classroom}and see where they are sitting, what pictures (symbols) they get. Overall, it was a good day. I think they enjoyed the first day. We play games. Sharing is caring. They like to say that when we teach them class rules that we have toys in teachers class belong to teacher and I share the toys. We wanting to hear teacher teach now is sharing toys with you, but the rule is now you need to share the toys with your friends. They quiet seem to understand it like that, also like saying to them if you share with your friend you invite them, you invite your friends to play with you. You got a friend who wants to play with you I have a little boy who prefers to be on his own. He does really interact with the others and I often encourage other children then to include him in their little games that they are playing or invite him to play when they are playing in the dolly house where they are playing. Ja, (yes) mostly through encouragement from other children, to learn from the other children, or if he is not interested in playing with other friends. I don't push it too much but then it is he doesn't want to play with the other children, so I do speak to him. We are all friends in class, mostly through encouragement. We don't fight with each other. We all play together. This is some encouragement for other children to play. We have many meetings at our school like parent evenings like I say. We show them what we will be doing in the term. How to help your child, how to practice at home. Last week sometime we had an evening at school where we showed the parent how to help their children with the thing they were struggling with, how to help them with the play dough, so we have many evenings where we literally show them what to do. **Cathy** Last year there was tears. Lots of tears. This year none of my children cried. This is unusual in a big school. There was no one who was anxious. This year none my children cried. In a big school it can be nerve-wracking. They came for orientation. The first day went smoothly. They knew what they would be expecting. There was no one who was uneasy.	uncertainty anxiety new peers/ identity easing anxiety new identity identity practitioner approach easing anxiety identity practitioner approach Initial anxiety Identity easing anxiety identity anxiety new identity easing anxiety

	T have quite a confident group of children. W made the first day lots of fun. We draw a picture of ourselves. The first day was full of emotions. There were those who didn't sit still. Some cried a lot. Some touched everything showing their excitement. They were ready to learn. We start by introducing each other, laid down some few rules. There are those who are speaking Shona, don't socialise I give them special lessons. I tell them to call Elizabeth in Sepedi. If they are confused, I point to Elizabeth. I put them by my side. They wanted to follow me everywhere I go. Even carry them picking them up **Pearl** The first day is full of children. It was hectic. Learners are not used to this big environment. I was running around. They look outside the class and see tall teachers outside. I am sure they think are we going to live with these people. It's like a new life for them. It was a big boundary to them. Are we going to live with them? **Anna** The first day is difficult for them. They stay at home with their mothers so it's difficult when they come here and have to be separated from their parents. Some of them they are beating us up. Emma The children came to school by bus they were not sure where they were going. When they get off the bus, they see a new building they want to run away. They want to be with their brothers and sisters. It's so difficult on the first day. We have a lot of children from Zambia, Congo, Malawi and Nigeria. They don't even know our language. We have to teach them our language. There is nothing we can say to them. Some want to run back to the bus. It's difficult to control over thirty children. The first day is trying to settle them down so that you can teach. So, they must get used to the new environment and new building Cathy We have parent evenings where we integrate. We talk about what is expected. We discuss problems with parents. Communications and skills that need to be worked out we call for the intervention file with all sorts of home programmes in there so that parents can practice. That's how we involve them in that. We are learning about that on our own. We tell them about what we are learning about, healthy living. We talk about the good pyramid. We explain on a weekly basis about what we are learning and things like that. We have an open-door policy. We also have training for parents.	anxiety Uncertainty anxiety/ helplessness new identity anxiety/helplessness practitioner approach practitioner approach

Coding procedure for Theme 2: “Transition Process”

Theme described	Final code categorised	Expanded codes applied	Initial codes named
TRANSITION PROCESS	situation	• lots of new people • tall teachers outside • it’s a rush • very hectic • everything is new • big school • new building • it’s like having a new life • nerve-wracking • it’s a blur • it’s difficult to be separated • little overwhelming	anxiety uncertainty
	self	• they receive symbols • talk about symbols • introduce ourselves to others • prefer to be alone • teach them our language	identity

TRANSITION PROCESS	support	• wipe their tears • hold them close • play games • pick them up • even carry them • some fell asleep in my arms • put them on the jungle gym • first week is orientation • let them sit next to a friend • find them a friend	easing apprehensiveness
TRANSITION PROCESS	strategy	• many meetings • orientation • involve parents • explain weekly • open-door policy • discuss problems • show them what to do • help children-play-dough • share toys	practitioner approach

Appendix I: Observational Checklist

Does the practitioner:	Yes	No	Comments
Create a rich, stimulating and varied environment that is welcoming and accessible			
Allow children to explore and learn in a safe indoor and outdoor spaces			
Organise the learning environment so that children move freely between activities			
Speak to children on their level/ respond positively to each child's way of communicating			
Respond positively to each child's feeling/ try to form warm, caring attachment with each child.			
Display affection towards children, give gentle hugs and warm smile			
Help children recognise and respond to feelings of others			
Anticipate problems and steps in to help			
Encourage good listening and communication skills			
Help children learn problem-solving skills			

Help child develop self-control/ show empathy for others			
Encourage children to share and take turns Encourage every child to invite others to join in their play			
Encourage and nurture special friendships			
Respect and support a child's need for security (toy, blanket) from home			
Show an interest in children's discoveries			
Encourage creative expression, role-play and imaginative play			
Allow children to set up and clear some activities			
Help a child to respond to diversity with respect			
Sensitive to the needs of children learning English as an additional language			

Appendix J: Interview Questions

1. How did you experience the children's first day?
2. How did the children experience the first day?
3. How did you comfort those who were unhappy?
4. How did you help children who experienced problems in socialising?
5. How did you involve the parent in the daily programme?
6. How long does it take a child to adjust?
7. How would you describe a child who is fully adjusted?
8. What are the qualities of a good grade R practitioner?

Appendix K: Interview Transcript

Interviewer
How did you try and comfort children who were uneasy?

Interviewer
How did you experience the first day?

Practitioner 1

This year was actually a little different from last year and I've got quiet a confident group of children this year as compared to last. Last this year there was tears, lots of tears This year none of my children cried in the first day which is quite unusual as this is a big school. You know in a big school its very nerve wrecking in a big school. The children came in for orientation the year before. They came to school. They knew what class they were in. They spend some time with .So they hey were more at ease with separation from their parents. Their experience was also unique So the first day went smoothly and they knew what they would be expecting. And separation from parents.

Interviewer
How did the children experience the first day?

Practitioner
The first day, their experience was unique for me. I think the children like I said I have got quite a confident t group of children this year and we make the first day lots of fun. We draw pictures of ourselves, we sing, we dance, and we don't really sit still on the first day and its lots of getting to know each other., games that we play. So, they receive their symbols for the year. We sit in circles and we talk about what their symbol is. They always get very excited on that day. So, on that we hide the symbols, so we play games where they try and find them. So, there are a lot of fun activities, but also aimed at getting to know what is there, their place in the class. So, during the first week its really orienteering for them and they learn about the class, they learn about each other, who your friends are. If you don't have a friend, we don't make a big thing about it. We get their friends to sit next to them.

Practitioner
There was no one who was uneasy. No, this year, but last year we had a boy who was very anxious. He would cling to me for most of the day. This year I didn't have any of them. That little boy is in my class again this year. He was still mature at the end of the year. There was separation anxiety.

Interviewer
How do you help children develop self-control?

Interviewer
How did you try and comfort children who were uneasy?

Practitioner
So we have, we are quiet firm with rules me I am a qualified teacher and have been teaching all the grades. I like to make sure that when they sit on the carpet, they they sit flat on their buttocks, they stop and listen and hands in their basket (on their lap) We teach them to stop fiddling or with each other, or their friends while on the carpet. We want confident listening. So, we encourage that from day one. We just call it magic carpet; everyone is on the magic carpet and everyone is listening. If a child is doing, we didn't want them to do I would look at them so that they are listening. I like it where they can get to a point. Where I start talking and they look at me. I won't start talking until they look at me So that takes a lot of self-control. What usually do is I would shake a bell. I got a bell it's like auditory, if a child is not responding to what you want them to do. I calm them down and then carry on. So, I encourage that throughout the year and throughout the year to try and teach them that when they do that they need to be in control of themselves .

Interviewer
What are the qualities of a good grade R practitioner?

Interviewer
What are the qualities of a good grade R practitioner?

Practitioner
Must be able to go with the flow in grade R, go according to the plan. Sometimes you don't go as planned. You have lots of fun activities and know your role as a teacher and you must get children used to a routine. You can be exactly where you are on this day and other days you can't be. Where you want to be. you must get used to grade R teaching and routine. Children can't get used to routine Our routine is quite different from pre-school routine (3 year old) and beginning children can't get used to routine in a sense that grade r teacher needs to adapt. She must be an energetic person because we don't sit still. She needs to be very firm, very firm in helping children cope in the reception year. We need to teach them skill they need in grade 1.in terms of self-control., listen when the teacher is talking and adapting to routines.Definately adaptable,very energetic, very loving, but not "baby" them and there is a big difference form me in terms of "babying" and being firm and loving. So, this for me is most important.

Interviewer
How do you assist children who experience problem in socialising?

Practitioner

So, there is a lot of teaching in grade R, is to be disciplined is to keep up teaching, teach them social skills, keep them as close as possible when you teach, how we talk. We stick with each other and respect each other as we have a lot of shouting over each other, to arrive on time is talking, your turn is coming. We try to encourage them to think about how the other person feels. We have shouting, lots of shouting over each other, everything look, listen, look out and be able to see who is talking, your turn is coming. We try to encourage them to think about how the other person is feeling. Make them feel special and important and children who struggle with that we help in various ways. One and one sometimes. Few children struggle with socialising we mediate with them. We take them out on that day and we do sit and follow routines.

Interviewer
How do you encourage to share?

Practitioner

So, there is a lot of teaching in grade R, is to be disciplined is to keep up teaching, teach them social skills, keep them as close as possible when you teach, how we talk. We stick with each other and respect each other as we have a lot of shouting over each other, to arrive on time is talking, your turn is coming. We try to encourage them to think about how the other person feels. We have shouting, lots of shouting over each other, everything look, listen, look out and be able to see who is talking, your turn is coming. We try to encourage them to think about how the other person is feeling. Make them feel special and important and children who struggle with that we help in various ways. One and one sometimes. Few children struggle with socialising we mediate with them. We take them out on that day and we do sit and follow routines.

Interviewer
How do you encourage to share?

Practitioner
So, we have stations that help children to get used to a situation. Ideally, I have a group playing with Lego (points to the area where fine motor skills activities are laid) and I am over there with children with the children drawing. We take turns. We have a clock and timed.so they get used to it, teach them understanding that other people need to be able to use and take turns so nobody gets frustrated. I didn't get a turn and cries a bit, its disturbing. We also try to make sure that there are enough (equipment). Sharing is difficult but at this age, even in grade 1 it is difficult, but we try and mediate We will try and remind them to think about another people's feeling. It is difficult for them, even at a We try and

Practitioner
Confident able to socialise, independent, interact, help peers, interact with the teacher. Confident enough to independent enough.

Interviewer
How long does it take for a child to adjust?

Practitioner
I have children in my class who are already adjusted. I have a child who has not yet adjusted. It often coincides with their age baby. I urge them to be confident. I would say majority of the children adjusted, comfortable with

mediate this a lot. I also put them in a situation when we shared, pick up that book and they will eventually get their turn. Its hard for most of them.

Interviewer
How do you involve parents?

Practitioner.
We have a lot of parent evenings. We have our parent evenings where we integrate. We talk about what is expected. They get graded worksheets, booklets. We have a special meeting with grade We are of and give homework and if we find some struggling with something to make. We discuss problems with parents. We always call parents in. Communication and on their communication and skills that need to be worked out and what we do in the term. But we have an open-door policy and meet parents one on one and also have training meetings. We have plenty of meetings throughout the term to help them.

Interviewer
How would you describe a child who is fully adjusted at school?