

**CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN REDUCING POVERTY AND
ENVIRONMENTAL RISK: CASE STUDY OF ECHO YOUTH
DEVELOPMENT**

BY

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I declare that this thesis mini dissertation is my own original work. Where secondary material is used, this has been carefully acknowledged and referenced in accordance with university requirements.

I understand what plagiarism is and am aware of university policy and implications in this regard.



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ABSTRACT

CHILDREN'S AGENCY IN REDUCING POVERTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL RISK: CASE STUDY OF ECHO YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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South Africa ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and the Welfare of the Child (ARCWC) and is therefore bound through international treaties to protect and promote children's rights, including the right to participation (Hall, Richter, Mokomane & Lake, 2018:48). Children's right to protection does not deny their agency to make decisions on programmes and interventions affecting their current and future development (IICRD, 20075).

The goal of the study was to explore and describe how children's agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk in the case study of Echo Youth Development. This goal was obtained within a human rights-based approach as theoretical framework.

The researcher used a qualitative research approach, and the type of research was applied. The research design was an instrumental case study, and a purposive sampling method was used to sample five child participants and five key informants from Echo Youth Development. Data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews and data was analysed according to themes.

Findings indicate that children's agency is recognised and respected in all the phases of the Echo youth programme. Although children have the right to freely participate, and know that their views will be heard and considered, recognising and

respecting their agency in participation is balanced with what Echo Youth Development regards as in their best interest. Findings show that the Echo youth programme recognises children's agency in mitigating poverty and environmental risks through participation.

The study concludes that children's agency is more likely to be recognised and respected if participation includes empowerment; intentional discussions take place with children to allow their input; adults in the programme remain emotionally grounded during conflict situations; the house parent-child ratio is low; a neutral platform is created for agency and participation; and finally, applying the principle of community.

Recommendations on how children's agency can be further recognised and respected in programmes planned and designed for them, include empowering them to participate, developing communication platforms, practicing mindfulness during conflict situations, and applying the principle of community.

KEY WORDS

Child

Child agency

Poverty

Environmental risks

Participation

Echo Youth Development

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CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa has a population of 57 million of which 19.6 million (35%) are children (StatsSA, 2018). According to Hall et al. (2018:13), in 2017, 65% of children lived below the “upper bound poverty line (with a per capita income below R1 138 per month)”; and 30% were in households where no adult was employed. Hall et al. (2018) add that the Child Support Grant, received by more than 12 million children by mid-2018, made an impact on their poverty – but only on an alleviation level and not on an eradication level.

The poor educational foundation of many children from early childhood and “the weak social structures and associated problems of violence and abuse”, keep children trapped in poverty and socially and physically excluded from mainstream society (United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), 2014:6). Hawkins (2010:68) adds that the most vulnerable people, which include children, are more likely to live in the most degraded environments, where they are exposed to environmental risks such as poor sanitation, pollution and lack of clean water.

The National Plan of Action (NPAC) for Children in South Africa 2012-2017 (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2012:47) expresses commitment to protecting and enhancing natural resources and assets for the benefit of children. To ensure a better quality of life for children affected by poverty, the NPAC stipulates that they should receive social grants and other social services, have access to Early Childhood Development (ECD) programmes, basic education and health care (RSA, 2012:89).

According to the United Nations (UN) (2015), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to realise human rights for all through the attainment of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. Children are the stakeholders inheriting and shaping future societies and as Eurochild (2017:3) rightfully claims, “We [children] have not inherited the Earth from our parents, but we

have borrowed it from our children”. This claim emphasises the importance of children, inter-generational equity and justice, and a continued focus on the advancement of child development. However, equity and justice for children are threatened by external circumstances like environmental risks, poverty and violations of their rights.

At an age when children are able to understand the choices to be made they have a right to participate in the decision-making process that ultimately affects their future. Involving children in discourses and decision-making processes regarding poverty reduction and sustainable livelihoods broadens their human capital through their contributions, while developing new skills, responsibilities, acceptable ways of living and sharing space with others as well as tolerating and working with people who hold views that differ from theirs (Katunga & Lombard, 2016:200-201). Their participation also expands their social capital by introducing them to diverse socio-economic, political, environmental and cultural networks, systems and resources that they might not have been privy to if they had not participated in poverty reduction and sustainable livelihood programmes (Katunga & Lombard, 2016:200-201). Children have the right to participate in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes that affect their current and future lives, and not be passive bystanders. Children have agency and should be recognised for the contribution they can make in reducing poverty, creating sustainable livelihoods and mitigating environmental risks for sustainable development in their communities. This study investigated how children’s agency is recognised in reducing poverty and environmental risks in the Echo youth programme.

The concepts relevant to the study are as follows:

- **Child**

A child is a person under the age of 18 years (RSA, Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

- **Agency**

Agency refers to the capacity of a human being (irrespective of age) to make meaningful choices and decisions about events that influence his or her life today, and in the future. To exert agency, people must be presented with opportunities to

express their views and share their experiences; they must be seen as capable and valued human beings and citizens of their communities (Gowrie SA research summary – Sense of agency, 2015). In this study, unless otherwise indicated, agency means the agency of children.

- **Poverty**

In the context of this study, poverty encapsulates more than low income; it includes social and physical exclusion, a sense of powerlessness, exclusion from decision-making and lack of access to education, health care and clean and safe environments (Green, 2012:6). Poverty reduction is about giving people opportunities to access education, health care, water, and sanitation “to cope with the shocks of everyday life” (Green, 2012:10). These opportunities are embedded in human rights and recognition that children have agency to influence the outcomes of a sustainable future.

- **Environmental risks**

In a sustainable development and human rights framework where SDGs and human rights are intertwined (UN, 2015), environmental risks are regarded as an environmental justice issue which means, according to Hawkins (2010:68), “the human right to live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment”. Environmental risks can stem from physical and social environments, and for purposes of this study will focus on poverty, the lack of access to clean water, poor sanitation, pollution, and violence.

- **Echo youth programme**

Echo is a faith-based organisation situated in the inner-city of Pretoria that has been operating since 1992. The organisation’s focus in service delivery includes facilitating change, nurturing individuals and healing communities (Echo Youth, 2015). This is achieved using a holistic approach to assisting people in overcoming current obstacles, restoring their worth and dignity, and ultimately resulting in independent, well-adapted and responsible members of society. Echo Youth Development renders services to people living and working in the city, including children, adolescents, students, and parents, the elderly, homeless people, sex workers and drug addicts (Echo Youth, 2015). According to the UN (2015), innovation and relevance within a contemporary society is valued, and results in effective and efficient service delivery that is aligned with the SDGs. The study of children’s agency in reducing poverty and

environmental risk was conducted under the Christian Community and Discipleship theme within the Echo youth programme. The National Youth Policy defines youth as those individuals aged 14 to 35 years (National Youth Policy, 2015:10). The Echo youth programme responds to the physical and social needs of adolescents, while also focusing on the spiritual wellbeing of these adolescents (Echo Youth, 2015). Within the criteria framework for participation in this study, the researcher focused on children in the age group 14 to 17 years.

1.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Poverty and environmental risks violate human rights. A human rights-based approach was thus a suitable theoretical framework for the study. Such an approach anchors programmes, policies, plans and processes of development in a system of rights, which promote sustainable development outcomes and people empowerment (United Nations Human Rights, 2018:1). As will be discussed in Chapter 2, a theoretical approach embedded in a human rights-based approach was appropriate to investigate how child agency is recognised in reducing poverty and environmental risk.

The right to development recognises

...that development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting there from (UN, 1986:1).

A human rights-based approach makes a society socially more equitable and is the basis upon which social justice can easily be accomplished (Wronka, 2016:5). Furthermore, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) recognises the importance of including in the human rights-based approach the notion of a developmental child rights approach (IICRD, 2007:4). The approach was developed to challenge the perspectives of professionals regarding their views of children as not only being passive recipients of services, but active right-holders with the agency to make decisions on programmes and interventions affecting their current and future development (IICRD, 2007:5).

1.3 RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ending poverty in all forms is the highest priority of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015). Elimination of child poverty is crucial for sustainable economic and social development (UNICEF 2014:12). The progress that South Africa has made in the past two decades in reducing the extent of poverty and social exclusion and their effect on children (SAHRC & UNICEF, 2016:4), especially through social grants, is significant but not sufficient to enable escape from the trap of poverty. For children living in poverty, inadequate healthcare, poor nutrition, poor quality education, social and physical exclusion and environmental risks restrict their “aspirations and hopefulness” to “create a more prosperous future” (SAHRC & UNICEF, 2016:7).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development includes global poverty goals that are specific to children. Therefore, poverty reduction measures related to children have to be in place when reporting on national progress of the SDGs. Increased household income through social grants is one measure providing for children’s rights to social security and the curbing of child poverty (SAHRC & UNICEF, 2016:6). In addition, children have the right to access social services and programmes on education and health care and protection against environmental risks such as pollution, poor sanitation, and lack of access to clean water and violent environments to ensure that they are not left behind (UNICEF, 2018). Childhood constitutes both vulnerabilities and evolving capacities, which require a balance between children’s protection rights and their participation rights. It is thus important to recognise that being a child does not automatically render children as helpless and/or passive in their environment. Children should be regarded as individuals with agency who can and want to participate in creating a sustainable future for themselves and others by giving inputs into the conceptualisation, design, implementation and monitoring, and evaluation of programmes to achieve the intended outcomes.

A literature review indicated that there is little research evidence of the extent to which children are included in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of programmes that reduce poverty and environmental risks and contribute to sustainable development outcomes. Therefore, this study explores how children are involved in the conceptualisation, developing,

implementation and evaluation of programmes that are intended to reduce the impact of poverty and environmental risks on their livelihoods and well-being, for a sustainable future. It is envisaged that the outcomes of the study will inform policy and practice on how the recognition of, and respect for, children's agency can be incorporated into programme conceptualisation, design, implementation and monitoring, and the evaluation of outcomes that reduce poverty and environmental risks.

The **research question** for the study was as follows: How is the agency of children recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks in the Echo youth programme?

The research question was informed by the following sub-questions:

- What are the goals and intended outcomes of programmes/interventions to reduce children's poverty and environment risks?
- How are children involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes/interventions?
- What factors influenced the recognition and respect/non-recognition and disrespect of children's agency in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes/interventions?
- What must change in order to recognise and respect the agency of children in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programmes/interventions?

1.4 GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of the study was to explore and describe how children's agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk in the Echo youth programme.

The objectives of the study were as follows:

- To conceptualise and contextualise poverty and environmental risks of children within a human rights-based framework.

- To explore and describe the goals and intended outcomes of programmes/interventions to reduce children's poverty and environmental risks.
- To explore and describe how children are involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes/interventions.
- To explore and describe the factors that influence the recognition and respect/non-recognition and disrespect of children's agency in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes/interventions.
- To make recommendations on how children's agency can be recognised and respected in the conceptualisation, design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of programmes.

1.5 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher used a qualitative research approach to gain insight into the study phenomenon from the participants' perspective (Fouché & Delport, 2011:64). The study was applied and had both explorative and descriptive research goals (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95). An instrumental case study design was used which allowed an in-depth understanding of the study phenomenon (Mertens, 2010:324), that is how children's agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select five key informants and five children between 14 and 17 years who are involved in the Echo youth programme. Data was collected by means of one-on-one interviews guided by interview schedules which allowed the researcher to have flexibility in collecting in-depth information (Greeff, 2011:352). Data was analysed according to themes by using the six-step process of Clarke, Braun and Hayfield (2015).

1.6 DIVISION OF THE RESEARCH REPORT

The research report consists of four chapters:

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction to the research study. The relevant concepts to the study are defined, the theoretical framework of the study is briefly introduced, and the rationale and problem statement discussed. It includes the research question and the goal and objectives of the study are presented. Furthermore, a brief overview of the research methodology for the study is presented.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review. The discussion includes themes related to children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk, giving an overview of policy and legislative frameworks relating to children. The chapter also presents the global and national context of children living in poverty; the characteristics and milestones of the adolescence developmental stage in relation to their development of agency, and finally, the sustainable development framework.

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology, the empirical study and the findings of the study. The research methodology includes the research approach, type of research, research design, the population and sample, the data collection method, quality of data and data analysis, the ethical aspects of the study and the limitations of the study.

In Chapter 4, the key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study are presented and discussed.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The former United Nations Secretary General, Kofi Annan, made the following profound statement with regard to the importance of sheltering children in all spheres of their lives and development:

There is no trust more sacred than the one the world holds with children. There is no duty more important than ensuring that their rights are respected, that their welfare is protected, that their lives are free from fear and want and that they can grow up in peace (cited in Abrahams & Matthews, 2011:5).

Every child has the right to be treated with dignity and to be sheltered based on their vulnerability and total dependency to be cared for. The chapter starts with an overview of policy and legislative agendas for development and how it presents frameworks for child participation. The next section focuses on the human rights-based approach as theoretical framework for the study, followed by a discussion within a national and global context, on children living in poverty. Following this, the characteristics and milestones of the adolescent developmental stage are examined, followed by children's agency and participation in their own development. The three dimensions of sustainable development, namely, social, economic and environmental, are then discussed, followed by a summary of the chapter.

2.2 POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS RELATING TO CHILDREN

This section will consider global, national and regional agendas, legislation and policies as frameworks to advocate for child participation and in doing so, recognising that children have agency that continuously develops as they are exposed to capacity building opportunities. The discussion will include the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015) on the international level and on a regional level, the Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want* (African Union, 2015). Within a South African context, the National Development Plan 2030 [hereafter NDP 2030] (Republic of South Africa (South African Government), 2012); the *Children's Act 38*

of 2005; the Framework for Social Welfare Services (RSA, 2013), and the *Social Assistance Act* 13 of 2004 will be discussed.

It is critical to have an in-depth understanding of how these agendas, legislation and policies, including the advantages and disadvantages, can be used to facilitate the development of agency of all children.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [hereafter 2030 Agenda] proposes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to address poverty, inequality, environmental degradation and ultimately, achieve sustainable development (UN, 2015). It emphasises that addressing exclusion is important to combat inequality; it includes the voices of all, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, while protecting and promoting people, the planet, prosperity, peace and partnerships (UN, 2015). UNICEF (2014) confirms that all the SDGs apply to children and elevates their role by emphasising their right to directly engage in the attainment of these goals. The 2030 Agenda clearly emphasises that no one should be left behind in the process of development, which includes promoting a continuous awareness and protection of the human dignity of children (UN, 2015). Although the 2030 Agenda advocates the inclusion of all, regardless of age, the researcher is of the opinion that exclusion is regrettably the reality. Unfortunately, ignorance regarding the impact of inequality is rife and therefore inclusion must be advocated for on the basis that all human beings have inherent dignity. It is a concern that the SDGs do not address the systemic challenges such as the unique history of countries, unreconciled injustices and differences; and very importantly, cultural beliefs. Therefore, a more context-specific aspiration in terms of sustainable development would be more feasible in attaining the SDGs – specifically in South Africa. It should however be noted that the SDGs inspire hope amongst those seeking to achieve them. As the SDGs are ambitious and universally signed, it forms part of the broader perspective, inclusive of the global fight against poverty and inequality. as a guideline to facilitate sustainable development outcomes for social work practice and education, thereby contributing to the SDGs, and in particular to ensure that the agency of children is recognised and not overlooked.

On a regional level, social workers can draw from the Agenda 2063: *The Africa We Want* [hereafter Agenda 2063]. Agenda 2063 outlines the aspirations to be achieved

and describes its seven goals. These goals pertain to Africa being prosperous through the promotion of inclusive growth and sustainable development. It further emphasises upholding justice, human rights and the rule of law. The attainment of such a prosperous Africa is dependent on a people-driven approach that relies on the potential of especially children, youth and women. Agenda 2063 emphasises the value of utilising a people-driven approach that encourages active citizenship.

Although the positive elements of a people-centred focus include tapping into the strengths of the vulnerable, including children, Agenda 2063 acknowledges the responsibility of all citizens to uphold justice and protect the human rights of all people, as governments are not capable of maintaining this ideal independently. It calls for a deeper realisation of the importance of a shared responsibility – a responsibility from which children cannot be excluded. Agenda 2063 recognises and encourages the importance of inclusive growth and development (African Union, 2015), which is fundamental for harmonious sustainable development.

The objectives of Agenda 2063 to address poverty and inequality are aligned with the goals promoted in the South African context by the NDP 2030, the Children's Act 38 of 2005; the Framework for Social Welfare Services, and the Social Assistance Act 13 of 2004.

South Africa's history of human rights violations resulting in continuous inequality and injustices elicited the need for empowerment and reconciliation to deal with the ongoing effect of past injustices (RSA, 1997). Following the establishment of democracy, South Africa adopted various agendas, legislation and policies to respond to the gross human rights violations and past injustices (Patel, 2015:49). The NDP 2030 identifies nine core challenges pertaining to the overall functioning and capabilities of South Africa – one of which includes the role of children within a democratic South Africa (RSA, 2012). In addition, these challenges include the low employment rate; the low quality of education for black citizens; poor infrastructure in terms of structure, location and maintenance; the lack of inclusive development due to spatial divides; the unsustainable drain of resources produced by a deficient economy; unequal provision and poor quality of public services; the high occurrence of corruption; and finally, that South Africa remains a dichotomised society (RSA, 2012). The NDP 2030 responds to these challenges by enabling socio-economic

freedom, which will create an environment in which to expedite the elimination of income poverty, and a secure society free from inequality (RSA, 2012). Unfortunately, South Africa has shown little progress in achieving the goals outlined by the NDP 2030 which ultimately affect the most vulnerable. Socio-economic transformation requires active citizenry in a socially cohesive environment (RSA, 2012). Active citizenry includes the right of children to participate and be recognised for their agency (Writer, 2021) in contributing solutions to poverty and inequality.

Article 12 of the Children's Act 38 of 2005 emphasises the right of children to participate in decision making as recognised citizens of South Africa. The Children's Act legislates a platform to ensure the promotion and protection of children's rights on national and provincial levels, which promotes child participation (Education and Training Unit (ETU), 2021). Having agency, does not deny children's right to protection. The Framework for Social Welfare Services is aligned with poverty alleviation strategies as well as social assistance and relief services, which ultimately provide a safety net for children and other vulnerable groups in need of care (RSA, 2013:32). The Social Assistance Act provides a level of economic security to those children living in poverty and deemed eligible through the provision of non-contributory cash transfer programmes, including the Child Support Grant. Such endeavours aim to ensure that the basic needs of children in poverty are met (RSA, 2015:34). However, needing a safety net does not mean that children cannot participate in matters of concern to them, and develop their agency to do so.

The following statement (UN, 2015) captures the essence of child participation and of children having agency in contributing to sustainable development:

The future of humanity and of our planet lies in our hands. It lies also in the hands of today's younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations. We have mapped the road to sustainable development; it will be for all of us to ensure that the journey is successful and its gains irreversible.

In summary, global, regional and national agendas, legislation and policies present frameworks for children to participate in combatting poverty and contribute toward sustainable development. The right of children to participate in matters that concern them made the human rights-based approach an appropriate theoretical framework for the study in the attainment of agency.

2.3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

Human dignity is considered central to human rights (Patel, 2015:82) and therefore, a human rights-based approach was an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. Broberg and Sano (2017:668) define a human rights-based approach as “a conceptual framework for the process of human development that is normatively based on international human rights standards and operationally directed to promoting and protecting human rights”. This approach, moreover, should uphold the empowerment of individuals to assert their rights through access to equal opportunities and expecting accountability from those in power.

The Bill of Rights as outlined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa encompasses the human rights applicable to all – including children. Furthermore, the rights of children as a vulnerable group are specifically highlighted. It is clearly stated that “[a] child’s best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child” (RSA, 1996:11). In order to establish and protect the best interest of the child, the child as the subject’s agency and participation must be included and valued. Thus, the most crucial human right is upholding dignity, specifically by ensuring the participation of children in matters that concern them as they are not passive objects but rather contributors to their own development success; participation acknowledges their dignity as valued citizens.

South Africa signed and sanctioned the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as well as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), which ultimately obligates South Africa to promote and protect the rights of all children (Hall et al., 2018:48). These treaties outline four core principles, including “non-discrimination; the right to life, survival and development; child participation; and the best interests of the child” (Hall et al., 2018:47). In this study, the organisation of the rights of a child are based on the view of Heimer and Palme (2016:435) that the UNCRC organises the rights of children in terms of provision, protection and participation. This framework of organising of rights provides for an integrated analysis of the interrelationship between the rights of children and how it affects the construct of children’s agency as rights-holders with a particular focus on the right of children to participate in decisions that influence their current and future development.

UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka (cited in Branch, 2015:) clearly emphasises the causal link between human rights and human dignity:

Our hopes for a more just, safe, and peaceful world can only be achieved when there is universal respect for the inherent dignity and equal rights of all members of the human family.

The successful application of the human rights-based approach is dependent on a unanimous contribution and active citizenship to ultimately promote children's agency, equality and human rights. Poverty infringes on the rights of children to food security, education, health, housing, safety, and general wellbeing and should be addressed on a national and global level to confront the issue of inequality and the upholding of children's rights.

2.4 CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY WITHIN NATIONAL AND GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Poverty is considered a national priority and also a global dilemma. This becomes evident when considering statistics that indicate that 71% of the world's population live in low-income or poor households and approximately 2.8 billion people worldwide utilise wood chips, crop waste or animal dung for cooking and heating purposes (The Borgen Project, 2021).

In terms of a global picture of child poverty, serious threats are posed with regard to the deterioration of an environment that fosters healthy growing children. Children make up 2.2 billion of the world population; however, 1 billion of these children are living in poverty. As a direct result of these high levels of inequality and poverty, an average of 800 children died per hour during 2012, mostly due to preventable causes, including unsanitary water and the absence of administered vaccinations (The Borgen Project, 2021). The detrimental effect of poverty on children has become well-nigh indisputable. Due to their unique vulnerability and the vital developmental stages they are in, children are particularly vulnerable to poverty. Ironically, however, although children are perceived to be vital in the eradication of global poverty, nearly one in two people living in extreme poverty are below the age of eighteen (End Child Poverty Global Coalition, 2021). Due to the fact that children constitute a major part of those living in extreme poverty, it appears crucial to involve children in overcoming the battle against poverty.

In 2020, the World Bank declared South Africa as the most unequal country in the world, while the 2020 UN Human Development Index and Human Development Report confirm that the country has shown very little progress to eradicate such inequalities (Mlaba, 2020). Besides deviations and inequality between the wealthy and the poor in terms of life expectancy and education, it should also be noted that the wealthiest 10% of the country possess more than half of the nation's income, whilst the remaining 40% is shared among 7.2% of the population (Mlaba, 2020). This emphasises that poverty cannot be eradicated without resource redistribution.

Inequalities in terms of poverty and race were still strikingly higher for black South Africans in 2018 with 47% of black households living in poverty. This prevalence is high compared to other households living in poverty, including 23% of mixed race headed households, 1% of Indian/Asian headed households and below 1% of white headed households (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018:14).

The demographics of South African poverty are particularly concentrated in rural areas and the majority of the poor are described as being single, unemployed, black female South Africans, while poverty areas are concentrated in Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018:6). An average of 20% of South Africans live below the food poverty line. This indicates that roughly 12 million South Africans were unable to fulfil the financial demands of a daily minimal required dietary calorie intake in 2016 (English, 2016). During 2019, 49.2% of South Africans lived below the upper bound poverty line (StatsSA, 2019). Unemployment has kept 23.3% South Africans trapped in poverty, as reported in the second quarter of 2020 (Winnings, 2021). Unfortunately, this figure has risen steeply during the Covid-19 pandemic leaving a total of 32.5% South Africans unemployed by the first quarter of 2021 (StatsSA, 2021). However, there has been an upswing in the number of South Africans who have been able to break through the poverty barrier, in that roughly 2 million South Africans have risen from extreme poverty since 2006 due to government initiatives like the building of free housing (English, 2016).

Children aged between birth and 18 years constituted 34% of the total population of South Africa by 2019 (Hall et al., 2019), thus confirming their value, agency and necessity in the process of participation and development in order to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality. Child poverty in South Africa is of great concern, and

mostly a multidimensional one at that. Multidimensional child poverty occurs when three of the following possible indicators are true for a child's circumstances: poor nutrition and general health; lack of education, lack of access to water, poor sanitation, housing and protection (Biggeri & Ferrone, 2021). Overall, 62.1% of South African children live in multi-dimensional and income poverty (UNICEF, 2020). Moreover, two thirds of South African children in rural areas are multi-dimensionally and income poor (UNICEF, 2020). Statics show that 13.1% of South African children are deprived of at least one indicator, whereas at least 80% are deprived of two indicators (StatsSA, 2021). These indicators or the lack thereof, prevent children from enjoying their rights and developing holistically and to their full potential. A child that is born into extreme poverty today will require at least four to five generations to acquire the national average level of income (Save the Children, 2021). It is therefore imperative that immediate and radical attention be given to the eradication, or at the very least, alleviation of poverty. Multidimensional poverty inhibits development and consequently hinders children's present and future context. Poverty impacts children more severely at certain ages. The following section will consider the characteristics and milestones of the adolescence developmental stage.

2.5 CHARACTERISTICS AND MILESTONES OF THE ADOLESCENCE DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE

There are various milestones associated with the adolescent stage of development. The success of these milestones is impacted by the child's context and resources to achieve these milestones. Furthermore, the stage of adolescence and its markers relate to the positive impact children's agency has on the attainment of sustainable development, as will be discussed below. For purposes of this study, milestones in terms of the cognitive, emotional and social development of adolescents will be examined next.

Considering adolescent's **cognitive developmental** markers, adolescents tend to become intrigued by possible career interests and they are looking to form relationships with people other than their parents (American Psychological Association, 2002:15). This imperative stage can be utilised by encouraging adolescents' agency through realistic knowledge acquisition of the current state of their country, its needs, and how they can ominously participate. This approach can

further be strengthened through leadership and mentorship programmes where children get exposed to positive peer relationships.

The **emotional development** of adolescents is characterised by expressing their feelings through action rather than by words (Spano, 2004). They have a voice that can be translated into much needed action if they are given the opportunity to be heard. Adolescents become increasingly self-aware during this stage, and for them it is crucial that they be perceived as normal within social contexts (The American Psychological Association, 2002:21). If agency, advocacy and participation can become normalised practice among children, which adolescents are already naturally inclined towards, these elements can become a sustainable movement inspiring significant change and endless participation.

The identification with role models during the **social development** phase of adolescents becomes prominent (Spano, 2004). This provides an opportunity for the government and all citizens to shape the young minds of the future to be accountable in terms of their integrity and character as well as their duty to participate in the alleviation of poverty and the aspiration to attain equality.

The milestones of adolescence have an influence on children's agency and level of participation, as will be discussed next.

2.6 CHILDREN'S AGENCY AND PARTICIPATION IN THEIR OWN DEVELOPMENT

Children's agency and participation in their own development was the central theme of this study. Although literature is preoccupied with children's participation, it remains lacking, especially in terms of the consequences that the absence of participation holds for children (Näsman & Palme, 2017:316). The involvement of children in their social development promotes democracy and participation (Androff, 2016:41). Individuals' participation in decision making pertaining to matters impacting them is a key element in upholding basic human rights (Androff, 2016:41). Therefore, it is an infringement of children's rights if they are not involved in their development.

Agency allows children to gain power and provide input with regard to their circumstances. Viviers and Lombard (2012:8) consider the student uprising of 1976 in South Africa, which aimed to challenge the ruling system of Apartheid and

ultimately claim quality education, as an example of the impact and power that child agency holds. This initiative taken by the students also emphasises children's civil rights and their agency and drive to attain the fulfilment of such rights.

As previously indicated, acknowledging children's agency does not deny their vulnerability. According to the Human Sciences Research Council (2010:3), all children are vulnerable due to their unique characteristics which include their developmental needs and their dependency on adult care and assistance. However, some children are considered to be more vulnerable due to their specific social and economic contexts. In a study conducted by Cherrington (2018:504) regarding how children from rural South Africa conceptualise hope – the children state first and foremost that hope can only be cultivated after one's basic needs are met. Such needs include a healthy diet, shelter, access to medical care and access to education.

Participation of children in their own development requires firstly, input in the process of planning programmes, and secondly that they are capable of influencing decisions (Reed, 2008:2422). Therefore, the empowerment of children within the various components and development phases of the programmes that they are engaged in, is essential. However, limited resources and a generally poor level of education amongst South African children make this a challenge in some instances. Child friendly approaches, specifically designed to explain each programme, could assist in this matter, but it would be insufficient in addressing all associated challenges of child participation. A holistic approach to development on a social, economic and environmental level is required to ultimately provide children with a platform to participate in their own development.

Children who live in poverty and are exposed to environmental risks, need hope to believe that their participation will contribute to their wellbeing and a sustainable future. For the construct of hope to be present, an individual must have a vision to attain something meaningful in conjunction with the agency to attain it (Cherrington, 2018:502). Furthermore, hope is a catalyst for change and has been linked to an individual's ability to be resilient and to cope, which ultimately increases their general wellbeing (Cherrington, 2018:502). When agency is absent or oppressed, individuals are stripped of their hope as an important coping mechanism, as well as their

inherent need to change and address their circumstances. Hopelessness inhibits self-determination and maintains inequality, whereas resilience cultivates hope. Clutter et al, (2008:999) state that resilience includes how effectively a system is able to respond to a hazard while remaining fully functional, but moreover resilience creates an opportunity for learning and development based on the impact of the hazard. It can be deduced that ultimately, resilience allows its own strength and security to become more if it is managed sustainably.

Building resilience promotes children's agency. For child participation to be addressed as a key element in matters that concern them, the status quo regarding how children have been historically perceived and treated by adults needs to be redefined in harmony with their ability and need to make valuable contributions toward their own development (Viviers & Lombard, 2012:11). Therefore, vulnerability ought not to label children with the notion of helplessness and victims of their circumstances, but instead serve to emphasise areas that require attention and addressing these factors through capacity development to improve resilience (Cannon, 2008:1). Once these factors have been identified, it allows for a transition from vulnerability and weakness to resilience and capacity.

In mitigating environmental risks and poverty, the view of Cannon (2008:1) on resilience is helpful in that it is not present only after damaging events and disasters have occurred, but it (resilience) could be a proactive measure allowing children to not be left more vulnerable after they merely survived disaster threats. In a study by UNICEF, an adolescent child asserted her need for agency that is inclusive and proactive when asked to share her views on what her role should be in combatting climate change: "What I can say is not only am I the future, I am a human being now. So the things, like climate change as it affects you, it affects me. If not more. So that's why I think I should have a voice in this" (UNICEF, 2011:11).

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of vulnerability and its composition, the interaction between five components of vulnerability needs to be analysed while considering the specific community, including livelihood and the strength and resilience of the community to hazards; wellbeing and base-line status; self-protection; social protection; and governance (Cannon, 2008:4). A platform for children's right to participation should therefore be provided to firstly, create a sense

of dignity and agency, and secondly, to gain a realistic representation of the five components of vulnerability relevant to each child's unique environment (Cannon, 2008:4). Recognising children's agency includes allowing them to assume an active role in their own development; thus, removing the notion of their passivity because they have the capacity to contribute to the attainment of the five components outlined above (Cannon, 2008:4).

Patel (2015:89) indicates that in order for vulnerability to be transformed into resilience, the capacities of children need to be developed. Capital development encompasses the harmonious interaction between the social and economic development of children. In the context of social development, capital development consists of both human capital and social capital (Patel, 2015:89). Before clarifying the difference between these two concepts, as well as their benefits in terms of building resilience, it should be noted that both components ultimately build on the foundation of strengths already existent in children. Utilising such strengths allows a natural transition to growth and resilience.

Patel (2015:89) states that human capital investment entails those ingenuities that offer positive returns to those benefiting from the investments through education, housing, nutrition and capacity-building programmes. Social capacity formation promotes macro welfare through social integration (Patel, 2015:89). Poverty, and therefore vulnerability, are often associated with social exclusion (Lyons & Huegler, 2011:37). It becomes clear that social capacity formation allows for social integration of the marginalised while simultaneously allowing the attainment of children's basic needs and rights through human capital investment (Saracosti, 2008:571). To facilitate children's agency, structures promoting human and social capital ought to be established to prevent exclusion, oppression and heightened vulnerability. Stronger resilience and capacities are not only an investment in children, but the investment in itself provides a positive return for the community at large. Cherrington (2018:503) confirms the mutually reinforcing contributions of children in the context of Ubuntu in that by "increasing social cohesion and connectedness, the community becomes greater than the sum of its parts, and the individual gains personal benefit by belonging to the collective".

When children's agency has been enabled and protected for children as a collective, they can be active role players in the attainment of sustainable development on a social, economic and environmental level.

2.7 SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Sabreen, aged 15, voiced the following in the Global Childhood Report (2019:6): "I feel like I own the world. Gaining literacy and numeracy skills, and creating my own business, is the gateway to controlling my own life". Sustainable development in conjunction with building resilience and capacity development has empowered Sabreen to move from vulnerability to social and economic inclusion.

The 2030 Agenda proposes that sustainable social, economic and environmental development must occur in the midst of upholding five key components, namely: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership (UN, 2015). The following section will consider the social, economic and environmental dimensions as equal contributors to sustainable development.

2.7.1 Social dimension of sustainable development

For children's agency and participation to be ensured, their level of social inclusion must be sufficient to compensate for their ability to participate. To attain social inclusion, the baseline must be to explore social exclusion and its dynamics. Pierson (2016:12) developed a comprehensive and contemporary definition for social exclusion:

Social exclusion is a process over time that deprives individuals and families, groups and neighbourhoods of the resources required for participation in the social, economic and political activity of society as a whole. The process is primarily a consequence of poverty and low income, but other factors such as discrimination, low educational attainment and depleted environments also underpin it. Through this process people are cut off for a significant period in their lives from institutions and services, social networks and developmental opportunities that the great majority of society enjoys.

Although the phenomenon is entitled "social" exclusion, it must be combatted holistically on all levels of society, including the economic and environmental fronts when considering the contributing factors of social exclusion. This also calls for a multi-disciplinary approach to attaining social inclusion. This definition furthermore,

highlights the need for early intervention as social exclusion starts as early as the quality of education obtained by children.

Social development proposes a progressive model that enables the attainment of social justice and the empowerment of vulnerable and excluded populations (Elliott, 2011:103). The vital role of such a progressive model resulting in social integration is confirmed through the regular association of social exclusion with poverty (Lyons & Huegler, 2011:37). The importance of the social dimension in sustainable development may be overlooked, but Patel (2015:88) clearly contradicts this by highlighting that the social and economic dimensions are mutually reinforcing, as economic growth promotes the redistribution of resources, which in turn increases the level of equality.

The development of infrastructure, environmental sustainability, child care systems, effective health care and educational systems as well as institutions, respond to the detrimental impact of poverty, exclusion and the ultimate cost to humanity (Elliott, 2011:105). Advocacy allows for the adoption of social investment strategies that utilise and build on people's capabilities resulting in productive and fulfilling lives (Lombard, 2014:48). This process must be facilitated by encouraging participation of those affected systems, including the voice of children. Moreover, it requires a collective response from all citizens through innovation and resource redistribution in order for this approach to be feasible and effective. Banerjee (2005:7) considers social justice and what it means on a practical level stating that it is generally accepted that all people are entitled to have access to resources that will meet their basic needs, but ambiguity arises when people's deservingness of such resources are discussed. Banerjee goes on to say that the argument is whether resources should be distributed equally or fairly, and whether those who are marginalised qualify for these resources based on previous oppression and deprivation (2005:7). Regardless of the school of thought identified with, due to the collective responsibility people have for one another, those who are the wealthiest must redistribute their resources, as this will lessen equality and in time, contribute to the wealth of the nation.

Mwansa (2011:369) accentuates the need to move away from the current state of maintenance in approaching social problems in service delivery to the use of

potential and original responses. This confirms the value of a strengths-based approach in the empowerment of individuals and communities to become integrated in society. The significance of social capacity formation becomes clear once more when considering that the development of social networks allows for the attainment of increased trust and cooperation, overcoming systemic inequality, promoting social integration and ultimately, benefiting the community at large (Patel, 2015:89). Social integration results in the elimination of social exclusion and consequently high levels of extreme poverty and marginalisation. Lombard and Kleijn's (2006:215) notion of a developmental approach to service delivery correlates with moving away from a traditional approach by addressing individual problems on a macro level and thereby addressing systemic problems which maintain poverty and inequality.

Social investment also emphasises the role of environmental sustainability due to the negative impact of eco-systemic problems and erosion in terms of food and water shortages (Elliott, 2011:105). Therefore, environmental sustainability is attributed to relieve poverty and exclusion. Human society has a responsibility to respect the limits of resources provided by the environment in its attainment of social investments (Lombard, 2014:45). Environmental sustainability and the pursuit of equality will provide the most vulnerable who lack resources, with the tools to facilitate increasing their agency and power to rectify their disadvantageous circumstances.

The approach towards promoting social inclusion must be rooted within an African context rather than a western paradigm, as it will create a natural link between knowledge and practice (Mwansa, 2011:367). Considering the more communal nature of indigenous South African culture, as opposed to individualism upheld by western cultures, it coincides with the notion of facilitating social cohesion as a contributing factor to social inclusion (Mwansa, 2011:367). Within the people and the cultures of South Africa, lie the inherent strengths and solutions to unique, context-specific social problems, including poverty and inequality. Cultivating national pride through such approaches to service delivery instead, will promote children's agency through fostering congruency between who they inherently are and the capacity of those characteristics. Sewpaul (2014:13) however, warns against a contradictory point of African culture in that leaders should not justify human rights violations with cultural practices. This demands accountability and discretion by African leaders on

the path towards a new paradigm for social inclusion, including specifically social, economic and environmental development. As alluded too, social inclusion requires integration of the economic dimension for sustainable development.

2.7.2 Economic dimension of sustainable development

Considering individual agency and social structures and the interaction between these themes, Morselli (2014:6) proposes the possibility that social structures are the result of continuous social relations and patterns over time and space, ultimately granting these social relations the power to become established social structures. This power dictates the rules regarding individual agency among people depending on where they fit within the social structures. Research shows that 65% of all the income in South Africa is owned by 10% of South Africans, but moreover, this group also possesses over 85.6% of all wealth (land, investment shares, pensions and policies) in South Africa (Webster, 2020). Unfortunately, this highlights persistent wealth inequality in South Africa and efforts to overcome white minority rule and the legacy of Apartheid have not been significant enough to reduce inequality (Chatterjee, Czajka & Gethin, 2021). The late Minister Edna Molewa stated at the informal Plenary Meeting of the UN General Assembly to commemorate Nelson Mandela International Day in 2018 that attention ought to be given to the importance of overcoming the gap between the rich and the poor. The gap has remained widespread, and for as long as this gap remains only the wealthy can enjoy prosperity and human rights (Department of Forestry, Fishery and the Environment, 2018).

The analysis of the social welfare policies in Taiwan is an example of an effective method of addressing social exclusion, resulting in social and economic inclusion (Hsueh & Chang, 2016). Taiwan experienced a decline in the birth rate which ultimately resulted in increased population ageing, to which the Taiwanese government responded with innovative policy implementation. This policy addressed the consequences of the global economic recession in 2008 in an attempt to protect their most vulnerable citizens.

Two policies were adopted in the government's approach to the promotion of social inclusion; firstly, near-poor families with full-time workers were granted a subsidy in an attempt to prevent further economic loss. Such pro-active measures emphasised

the value of relying on the capabilities of service users, and moreover, the value of prevention and early intervention (Hsueh & Chang, 2016). By ultimately encouraging active citizenship and placing the responsibility on fulltime workers, the notion of self-determination and participation is once more accentuated.

Secondly, Taiwan instituted a college internship programme that responded to the decline in young graduate employment as a consequence of the global financial crisis. The need for this policy emphasises the clear collaboration between social and economic development, and also the value of empowerment and capacity enhancement (Hsueh & Chang, 2016).

Taiwan's policy implementation shows the potential that is characteristic of a government that remains attentive to the wellbeing of its people. Social exclusion as well as social welfare dependency was prevented through the implementation of these policies.

New technologies and social media form part of the ten identified global driving factors that have shown to attain significant growth since 2000 in terms of creating and advocating for opportunities to aid children to reach their full potential (Global Childhood report, 2019:11). However, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its accompanying transformation pose a great threat to the further impacts of South Africa's structural inequality and political disorder. The South African government warns that those advances associated with the revolution will replace repetitive unskilled jobs that are currently providing millions of South Africans with an income (ANC, 2017:16). This demands the acquisition of a new set of skills based on innovation and critical thinking in order to promote future adaptability to the new work force and the advances envisaged in relation to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. This approach is especially critical when considering the heightened speed of the drastic technological changes due to Covid-19 and its impact on the current order of the day, which is problematic for South Africans given the great inequality between the rich and the poor. However, Professor Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, perceives the Covid-19 pandemic as a rare and narrow opportunity to be innovative and reimagine the world as it is currently known (World Economic Forum, 2021). This statement inspires hope for a future

where all could be included through development – thereby ultimately not excluding anyone.

Capacity development and empowerment of children and the community at large is essential in combatting poverty and ensuring inclusion for all. It provides citizens with the ability to participate in the attainment of their own success and wellbeing. Social entrepreneurship and innovative thinking provide an avenue to combat future and current inequalities, poverty and marginalisation during the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Poverty and other societal ills are the result of persistent inequality and injustice. The insurance and promotion of equality, through a social entrepreneurship paradigm, allow for the execution of freedoms and the development of full potential for all people (Lombard, 2014:43).

A social entrepreneurship paradigm to economic development and poverty eradication provides an alternative to the traditional paradigm in fighting such social issues. Traditional approaches include for example, the provision of food parcels and availability of social grants (Berzin, 2012:187). Social entrepreneurship promotes social change through an innovative combination of resources that create social value (Lombard & Strydom, 2011:334). Through the enablement of needed enterprises, societal problems can be lessened by successful social entrepreneurship (Germak & Singh, 2009:88). Therefore, social entrepreneurship contributes to the sustainable development of communities and the environment by utilising the financial capital available to address alternative social problems.

A study conducted by Katungu and Lombard (2016:188) in Zimbabwe, Mberengwa District, provides evidence of successful social entrepreneurship and its impact on communities. The ability of the local government in the Mberengwa district to meet the needs of orphans was severely affected by social and economic problems including, “severe financial hardships, malnutrition, neglect, ill-treatment, abuse, child labour, dropping out of school, lack of food, clothing and blankets, inability to obtain birth certificates, and the stigma and discrimination associated with being an orphan” (Katungu & Lombard, 2016:188). To address these hardships, income generating projects were developed by using the assets available in the community such as honey harvesting and nutrition garden projects that generated profit that was then

utilised to meet the needs of the orphans and ultimately, adding social value to the community.

Social and economic development must be executed in such a way that it is beneficial to and protects the environment's limited natural resources.

2.7.3 Environmental dimension of sustainable development

The essence of environmental justice is essential when considering environmental sustainability. It advocates for the wellbeing of all humankind and the protection of the Earth, as both are equally important for sustainable development. Natural resources and the Earth's capacity are limited and that holds implications for distributive justice, ultimately affecting the most poor and vulnerable on a social level as well (Gibson, 2004).

According to Isbister (2001:3), justice entails allowing a person to get what he/she deserves. However, determining what a person deserves is a rather complicated matter. Social work has historically been intertwined with human rights (Sewpaul, 2014:13). However, poverty in itself is a gross violation of human rights (Hartley, 2015:141). This highlights the relevance of considering the concept of justice for all.

Social justice comprises three elements including equality, efficiency and freedom and therefore, “[p]eople deserve to be treated as equals, they deserve to be free and they deserve to get the best they can out of their limited resources” (Isbister, 2015:4). These elements often contradict one another and consequently contribute to the complexity of balancing these elements and defining what is just and equal. Efficiency ought to be highlighted as it directly impacts the environment and the sustainable development thereof, due to the limited nature of the environment in terms of resources” (Isbister, 2015:4).

A lack of resources often results in exclusion from social, economic, political and cultural contexts which inhibit social integration (Lyons & Heugler, 2011:38). However, “[s]ocial justice is promoted through social integration”, and not exclusion or marginalisation (Department of Social Development, 2006:11). Fairness is another important component of equality and justice.

Fair distribution of resources appears to be more feasible than equality, but fairness can only be promoted in conjunction with equal opportunities which subsequently afford all citizens the opportunity to overcome predispositions. Furthermore, one needs abilities in order to fulfil capacities (Lombard, 2014:49). Without ensuring equal opportunities for all and leaving no one behind, social exclusion and injustice is reinforced rather than social inclusion and social justice. Through the promotion of human progress for all, inclusive human progress for all becomes attainable and will ultimately be achieved, as the collective wellbeing of all and in particular South Africa, will result in a positive ripple effect in social, economic, cultural and political spheres.

President Cyril Ramaphosa's statement confirms this notion when he states that economic growth alone will not ensure social and economic transformation, but instead a fundamental shift in resource creation and distribution is required (RSA, 2018). This statement has to be routed in sincerity to promote equality rather than repeating the historical injustices of South Africa. If history repeats itself, it will inherently affect the most vulnerable and poor as they will be excluded from the labour force (Lombard, 2015:484). Resource unsustainability contributes to poverty, while on the contrary, resource sustainability helps to alleviate and reduce poverty.

Although threats to the environment pose a risk to people of all ages, children are deemed particularly vulnerable and this vulnerability is described as multidimensional, mainly due to the diverse changes (physical, social and emotional) that occur over the span of childhood (UNICEF, 2011:1). When children do not have the needed resources for their development due to environmental unsustainability and other factors, children will inevitably be left behind.

A mother's concern and reality are cited in a report *Exploring the Impact of Climate Change on Children in South Africa*: "So I come from a poor community and everything, what am I going to worry about? Feeding my children with food that I can afford, or saving the environment?" (UNICEF, 2011:5). Unfortunately, this complex situation is seen in the majority of children and although it is perceived as two separate concerns, the first will inevitably become unattainable without the harmonious presence of the latter.

Poverty creates and maintains environmental risk and is therefore perceived as an environmental risk in itself. This ultimately poses a threat to child protection and the sustainable social, economic and environmental development of children. Continued environmental risks preserve high global and national levels of poverty and specifically, child poverty.

In the context of this study, poverty is more than low income. It is also about social and physical exclusion, a sense of powerlessness, exclusion from decision-making and lack of access to education, health care and clean and safe environments (Green, 2012:6). Poverty reduction is about giving people opportunities to access education, health care, water, and sanitation “to cope with the shocks of everyday life” (Green, 2012:10). These opportunities are embedded in human rights and recognition that children have agency to influence outcomes for a sustainable future.

Maria Montessori captures the essence when considering the role of children in the promotion of social and economic equalities, the promotion of the dignity and worth of people, working toward environmental sustainability and solidifying the recognition of the significance of human relationships: “Children are human beings to whom respect is due, superior to us by reason of their innocence and of the greater possibilities of their future” (Montessori cited Prowant, 2019). Children offer unique views and approaches to the current global and national issues, but moreover, bringing hope for a sustainable future.

2.8 SUMMARY

In summary, various elements need to be taken into account when involving children in decision-making processes on poverty reduction and protection against poverty and environmental risks. Children should enjoy and participate in all the human rights that are enshrined in the Constitution of South Africa. The Constitution upholds the rights of all by ensuring access to resources such as education, health care services, and clean water. The human rights-based approach was an appropriate theoretical framework for this study, as it is embedded in human dignity and the right to participate which implies access to all other human rights. The development agendas and policies considered present frameworks for recognising children’s agency and right to play an active role in reducing poverty and environmental risks. Child poverty and children’s risk due to environmental injustice and environmental

hazards are human rights matters, and social workers and other professionals have a responsibility to combat injustices on global, national, and local levels to ensure that not one child is left behind. Agencies, governments and civil society should all be involved in programmes pertaining to children so as to grapple with the structural roots of poverty and mitigate environmental risks. The social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development are fundamental in addressing these issues.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, EMPIRICAL STUDY AND FINDINGS

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the research methodology that was used to conduct the study, the empirical study and the findings of the study.

The study was guided by the following research question:

How is children's agency recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks in the Echo youth programme?

The research question was informed by the following sub-questions:

- What are the goals and intended outcomes of the programme to reduce children's poverty and environmental risks?
- How are children involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme?
- What factors influence the recognition and respect/non-recognition and disrespect of children's agency in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme?
- What must change in order to recognise and respect children's agency in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme?

3.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The study used a qualitative research approach which allowed the researcher to understand the phenomena from the participants' point of views (Fouché & Delport, 2011:64). Furthermore, it allowed the researcher to obtain undiluted quality information based on the meaning and experiences of children and key informants that are assigned to the programme (Rubin & Babbie, 2014:471). In relation to this study, the researcher intended to understand children's agency in participating in the

Echo youth programme in reducing poverty and environmental risks from the point of views of children and key informants.

The study was both exploratory and descriptive in nature. The exploratory purpose was to answer the “what” question and thus gain insight into children’s agency in reducing poverty and environmental risks (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:96). The exploratory study enabled the researcher to gain insight into the situation, programme or community of the participants (Babbie, 2017:92). The study answered the question, ‘How is children’s agency recognised and respected in programmes aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risks in the Echo youth programme?’

The purpose of the study was also descriptive and intended to answer the “why” and “how” questions (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95). Thus, the descriptive study allows the researcher to gather descriptive data through the participants’ spoken or written words (Fouché & Delport, 2011:65). In the case of the study, children and key informants involved in the programme explained the degree and nature of children’s agency in reducing poverty and environmental risks through the Echo youth programme.

The study used an interpretivist paradigm as it utilised a human rights framework to inform the researcher on the type of questions to ask (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:60). Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm allowed the researcher to understand social reality through the eyes of different participants – in the case of the study, children and key informants (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:60). In the context of this study, the researcher wished to understand how children are involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme that they are engaged in.

3.3 TYPE OF RESEARCH

The study was applied research. The study aimed at solving specific practice problems and developing new knowledge on a practical situation relating to recognising and respecting children’s agency in reducing poverty and environmental risks (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95). The knowledge was thus generated through the investigation of a practical situation, which in turn, resulted in possible solutions that may be utilised in practice (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014:74). The

study focused on how children's agency is respected and recognised in solving poverty and environmental risks that affect them. The findings of the study can be used by organisations to solve problems related to children's right to participate. Furthermore, the study's findings can be of value to policy makers in addressing policy challenges concerning children's participation in interventions that affect their well-being (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:95).

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

The researcher used a case study design. A case study is a preferred strategy when "how" and "why" questions are posed and enables participants to share their stories due to close collaboration between the researcher and participants; and using a 'case study' method provides insights into an issue (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:82). Case studies allow for the attainment of familiarity with the social world of a small number of people, while identifying patterns and themes within the milieu of participants (Fouché & De Vos, 2011:320), as well as gaining new knowledge about a social issue (Fouché & Schurink, 2011:321). More specifically, the researcher utilised an instrumental case study design to conduct the study, as it allowed for the development of an understanding of a phenomenon with the goal of increasing the ability to generalise the findings to other cases (Mertens, 2010:324).

The advantages of a case study design are that it provides an in-depth and detailed account of a case in a real-world context (Creswell, 2014:97), and it enables participants to share their stories due to close collaboration between researcher and participants (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:82). Additionally, the case study is specifically "useful when exploring those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes and provides insight into an issue or helps to refine a theory" (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:82). Therefore, it assists the researcher "to learn more about a little known or poorly understood situation" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013:141), which in the case of the study, was children's involvement in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Echo youth programme.

3.5 RESEARCH METHODS

Methods are the tools used by the researcher to collect data and are influenced by the research question, aim and theoretical framework (Nieuwenhuis, 2016a:51). Qualitative research methods seek to gather deeper meanings attached to particular human experiences, gathering theoretically richer observations (Rubin & Babbie, 2015:46). The various research methods will be discussed in 3.5.1 to 3.5.5.

3.5.1 Study population and sampling

A study population refers to the total group of individuals or units from whom information is sought (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014:132). The study population for this study included key informants and children involved in the Echo youth programme. The study population for the key informants included the Director, two social workers, house parents and volunteers. These were the first five key informants available during the recruitment process to participate in the research study. The child population included all the children between the ages of 14 and 17 who directly benefit from the Echo youth programme and reside in Echo Youth.

Sampling refers to the methods utilised to select a number of people from a given population (Mertens, 2010:309). Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was utilised to define a representative sample for the study (Maree, 2016:198). When using purposive sampling the researcher identifies a particular need for information and then makes a judgment on the specific required criteria according to which participants will be chosen (Davis, 2012:106).

The sample of the study consisted of a minimum of ten participants: five key informants and five children. The participants met the following criteria:

- **Key informants**

Key informants who were willing to participate in the study and met the following criteria:

- Involved in the development and/or implementation of the programme
- Familiar with the involvement of children in the programme
- At least two years' involvement in/with the programme
- Conversant in English

- Preferably male and female
- Willing to share their views and experience on the programme.
- **Children**

Children who were willing to participate in the study and met the following criteria:

 - Aged between 14 and 17 years
 - Involved for at least one year in the programme
 - Preferably male and female
 - Conversant in English
 - Having the ability to share their views and experiences regarding the programme.

Echo Youth Development granted written permission to conduct the research (see Annexure A). The senior social worker assisted the researcher in gaining access to the research participants by providing a list of participants who met the sampling criteria. The sample for the key informants included two social workers, one house parent and two volunteers. The first five child participants on the name list who were willing to participate in the research, formed the sample for the study.

3.5.2 Data collection method

The data collection method was by means of semi-structured interviews with both child and key informant participants, guided by an interview schedule, respectively (see Annexures B and C). This method was suitable as it allowed the researcher to have flexibility to prompt further, which then led to more in-depth information (Greeff, 2011:352). Nieuwenhuis (2016b:92) defines interviews as two-way conversations in which the interviewer asks participants questions to collect data and learn about the views of the participants. The interview was guided by predetermined questions, but the researcher and participants were allowed to pursue the themes differently (Davis, 2012:121). Semi-structured interviewing, therefore, allows for more natural interaction between the researcher and the participant (Rubin & Babbie, 2015:168).

Qualitative studies are guided by the criteria of data saturation which refers to the point at which all the themes and categories have been saturated and therefore no further data is required (Nieuwenhuis, 2016b:84). Saturation is vital in order to

accomplish exceptional work in qualitative research, and in turn, for the number of participants in the study. Data saturation was reached after ten interviews, thus no further participants needed to be interviewed. The interviews took place at a meeting place at the houses the children reside in.

3.5.3 Data analysis

The researcher adopted thematic analysis to analyse the research data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis technique that allows the researcher to develop codes and themes. It is flexible, allowing the researcher to respond to data as they engage in it (Clarke, Braun & Hayfield, 2015:224).

The researcher followed the six-step process in analysing data as described by Clarke, Braun and Hayfield (2015).

- **Step 1: Familiarisation**

The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants to capture their verbatim expressions and then transcribed. The researcher became familiar with the transcribed data by reading it at least twice from a curious and critical perspective, asking why the participant answered the question as he/she did (Clarke, et al., 2015:231).

- **Step 2: Coding**

Coding begins with a close reading of the data and identifying short phrases, which can be semantic or latent in nature (Clarke et al., 2015:235). The researcher systematically identified and labelled the features from the data that were relevant to the study and research question (Clarke et al., 2015:230). The researcher made space available on the right side of the transcripts to code the data in relation to the research question. The researcher followed the suggestion of Clarke et al. (2015:235) that it is preferable to start firstly with the latent coding, to search for the deeper meaning and afterwards shift to the semantic phrases that are obvious.

- **Step 3: Searching for themes**

Searching for themes does not mean that the researcher finds themes that already exist in the data, but rather, “you are aiming to create a plausible and coherent thematic mapping of your data” (Clarke et al., 2015:236). In other words, the researcher developed themes which were clear from the collected

data, and which informed the research question. The researcher examined themes and sub-themes in the data, as recommended by Clarke et al. (2015:236).

- **Step 4: Reviewing themes**

The researcher had to determine whether the identified themes coincided with the meanings in the coded data. It required that the researcher pause throughout the process of generating themes in order to check where there was an appropriate fit between the themes and codes, and whether each had a clear feature or “distinct essence – or central organising concept” (Clarke et al., 2015:230). In reviewing the themes, the researcher decided not to change anything (Clarke, et al., 2015:238).

- **Step 5: Defining and naming themes**

The researcher described and summarised each theme, and explaining the core, the coverage, the scope, and the limitations of each. It also entailed naming the themes, particularly to capture the essence of each theme as well as to develop a creative ‘spirit’ in this process (Clarke et al., 2015:240).

- **Step 6: Writing the report**

Report writing happens simultaneously with the analysis, and the definition of themes assisted the researcher in identifying main points inherent in the themes (Clarke et al., 2015:241). As recommended by Clarke et al. (2015:241), when writing up this research report, the researcher typically included quotes from key observations and the expressions of participants because strong evidence is needed to provide a clear understanding of participants’ views and experience of the studied programme.

3.5.4 Data quality

Data quality was ensured by means of establishing trustworthiness. The four concepts that inform trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability/auditability and confirmability (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:191).

3.5.4.1 Credibility

In qualitative studies, the researcher obtains an in-depth understanding and insight from participants on the research topic (Du Plooy-Cilliers, et al., 2014:258). In the process of establishing credibility, the researcher questioned whether there was a fit

between the views of the participants and how he/she reconstructed and represented those (De Vos, Strydom & Fouch, 2011:420). The researcher ensured that the research participants' views are reflected in the finding of the study (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:191). The researcher was also aware of possible bias that may influence the credibility of the data (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192). The credibility of findings was also enhanced by triangulating the data from two participant groups, children and key informants. In this regard Drisco (1997, cited in Lietz & Zayas, 2010:193) states that data triangulation and observer triangulation are both important in reaching a “completeness” or an exhaustive response to the research question. The researcher also kept an audit trail of the research process and observations and debriefed by discussing the research and findings with a peer (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192).

3.5.4.2 Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency of the findings if the study was to be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One strategy to evaluate dependability is auditability which encompasses the manner in which research procedures are recorded and permitting others, external to the study, to observe and critique the study (Leitz & Zayas, 2010:191). For purposes of this study auditability was applied by the continuous supervision and constructive critique of the research supervisor of the University of Pretoria.

3.5.4.3 Transferability

In qualitative studies, findings cannot be generalised (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:195), but could be applicable to other similar populations or settings in which the research has been conducted (De Vos et al., 2011:420). As an evaluation technique, transferability is therefore “achieved when the findings have applicability to another setting, to theory, to practice, or to future research” (Lietz & Zayas 2010:195). To increase transferability, researchers focus on how typical the participants in the context have been studied and how the findings apply to this context (Nieuwenhuis, 2016c:124). The researcher used thick descriptions to increase the transferability of the findings to other similar organisational settings by giving in-depth accounts of the phenomenon of child participation, and participants' views on how children are

recognised in conceptualising, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating in the Echo youth programme (Lietz & Zayas, 2010:194).

3.5.4.4 Conformability

Conformability implies that the participants – and not the interest and the biasness of the researcher – shaped the findings of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Conformability therefore refers to the objectivity of the researcher which could be confirmed by others in the findings of the study (Schurink, Fouché & De Vos, 2011:421). Nieuwenhuis (2016c:125) highlights that research findings should reflect participants' true contributions, which confirms that the researcher should guard against being biased and allowing his/her interest in the study to influence the research findings. To counteract possible bias, the researcher used reflexivity as a strategy to analyse possible self-interest and influence in the research study (Drisko, 1997 cited in Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192).

To remain aware of the research process and observations, the researcher also used an audit trail by keeping a diary indicating the research process from the start to the final reporting on the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, confirmation of the findings was also strengthened by the triangulation of data.

3.6 PILOT STUDY

Barker (2003:327) describes a pilot study as testing and validating an instrument by using a small group of participants to administer it. Therefore, the pilot study serves as a feasibility study before the research study is conducted in order to determine the adequacy and appropriateness of the research methodology, sampling, data collection instruments and the data analysis (Strydom, 2011:237). A pilot study is also important for the reviewer to determine his/her own level of interviewing skills (Greeff, 2011:350). A pilot study conducted for the purposes of qualitative research is usually informal and the participants possess the same characteristics as those in the main study (Strydom & Delpont, 2011:394). This is a method of testing the measuring instrument that is to be utilised in the main study (Strydom, 2011:240). The first interviews with a key informant and child participant, respectively, served as the pilot study. No changes were required to the interview scheduled following the interviews. Findings of the pilot study were included in the main study.

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The University of Pretoria provided ethical clearance for the study (see Annexure D). The researcher was guided by a set of ethical values and principles that provided moral principles, as well as rules and expectations on how to conduct herself towards the research participants (Babbie, 2017:63). Data should not be obtained at the expense of human beings and therefore researchers should handle all ethical aspects relevant to the study (Strydom, 2011:113). The following ethical considerations were taken into account for the purpose of this research study:

3.7.1 Avoidance of harm

There was no threat of physical harm but possible emotional harm to research participants of the study (Strydom, 2011:115). As the study examined poverty and environmental risks, talking about the hardships could have evoked emotional responses and feelings of disempowerment, especially for the children. The key informants, on the other hand, may have been aware that they did not fully grasp the concept of children's agency, which could have been disturbing to them. In order to avoid harm for the participants (in this context children and key informants), the researcher informed them through the informed consent and assent letters about the possible risks involved when they decided to participate in the research study (Babbie, 2017:65).

3.7.2 Debriefing of participants

Debriefing entails "sessions during which subjects get the opportunity, after the study, to work through their experience and its aftermath, and where they have their questions answered and misconceptions removed" (McBurney, 2001, cited in Strydom, 2011:122). Debriefing offers an opportunity to clarify any matters or concerns about the research study and therefore, it is best to debrief participants directly after the session as the researcher did in the case of this study (Strydom, 2011:122). No referrals to the social worker were necessary.

3.7.3 Anonymity and confidentiality

Shielding the identity of the participants was considered as an important ethical aspect in this study. The participants were known to the researcher and hence anonymity could not be guaranteed, only confidentiality. The researcher committed to confidentiality in that the research findings were not presented in a manner that identified any particular participant (Babbie, 2017:67; Padgett, 2017:83). The upholding of confidentiality was indicated in the informed consent and assent forms that the participants signed when they agreed to participate in the study.

3.7.4 Deception

Deception entails the misleading of participants, purposeful misrepresentation of facts, or keeping information from participants (Strydom, 2011:118). The researcher ensured that all the participants understood what the study entailed and did not withhold any information that participants may have wanted to know. Prior to the interviews, the researcher ensured that the participants fully understood the content of the informed consent and assent letters before they were asked to give consent (by signing) to participate in the study.

3.7.5 Informed consent and assent

The researcher is responsible for and has an obligation to thoroughly explain the study to the participants in order to establish a platform for informed consent (Babbie, 2017:65; Strydom, 2011:118). Informed assent is a term that is used to convey an agreement to participate in research from those who are not yet eligible to enter into a legal contract (Ford, Sankey & Crisp, 2007:20). The legal guardians were requested to give informed consent for their children to participate in the study (see Annexure E). The letters of informed consent for the key informants (see Annexure F), and assent letters for the child participants (see Annexure G), included the fact that all interviews would be audio-recorded and transcribed and that all information would be treated with confidentiality. Participants were informed that the research data would be stored at the University of Pretoria for a period of 15 years.

3.7.6 Dissemination of findings

Dissemination of research findings explains what the researcher will do with the findings once the research project is completed; thus, how the findings will be made available to the public and whether the researcher intends to publish the findings (Bak, 2004:35). In the case of this study, once the project was completed, the researcher submitted the research findings to the University of Pretoria (UP) in the form of this research report. The research findings may also be submitted to a scientific journal for publication and be used for possible conference papers. This information was also included in the informed consent and assent forms.

3.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following limitations should be considered when deriving meaning from the research findings. Firstly, as the study was carried out with only five key informants and five child participants involved in the Echo youth programme, the views shared are not of the programme in its entirety, but rather a small representative sample of the population. Conformability assisted the researcher to remain objective. Furthermore, to counteract possible bias, the researcher used reflexivity as a strategy to analyse possible self-interest and influence in the research study (Drisko, 1997, cited in Lietz & Zayas, 2010:192). Finally, credibility was used to gain an in-depth understanding from the participants on the research topic by reconstructing the views of the participants that fit together (De Vos et al., 2011:420).

Secondly, being familiar with the Echo youth programme, the staff and the children, and being involved as a volunteer in programme activities with some of the participants; it could possibly have influenced the objectivity of the study. However, the researcher took extreme caution to conduct each interview in the same manner and with the necessary professionalism. Furthermore, all the data that accrued from the participants were recorded, transcribed and analysed in a consistent manner to ensure objectivity. Furthermore, the data obtained was rich and enabled the researcher to write up the data in a manner where all participants' voices were integrated. The researcher is of the view that knowing some of the participants did not negatively affect the data collected during the study.

3.9 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The empirical findings of the research study will be presented in this section. The biographical data of the research participants will be presented first, followed by the main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data.

3.9.1 Biographical information of the research participants

The researcher interviewed five key informants and five children. The biographical information of the two categories of participants will be presented below. Real names of participants have been replaced by codes for the sake of confidentiality. Key codes of informants are identified as 'KI' followed by the participant number, and child participants are coded as 'CP' followed by the participant number.

3.9.1.1 Biographical information of the key informants

The biographical information for the key informants is given in Table 3.1, and includes their age, sex, the duration they have been with the organisation, the duration of time they have been involved in the programme, and what phases of the programme they are involved in.

Table 3.1: Biographical information of key informants

Key Informants	Age group	Sex	Years in organisation	Years and months involved in programme	Phases of involvement
KI1	31-35 years	Female	9 years	9 years	Implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
KI2	26-30 years	Female	2 years	2 years	All the phases.
KI3	46-50 years	Female	13 years	13 years	Planning, monitoring and evaluation.
KI4	26-30 years	Female	8 years	5 years	All the phases.
KI5	31-35 years	Female	9 years	9 years	Implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The researcher interviewed key informants between the ages of 28 and 48 years; two participants, respectively, were in the category 26-30 years and 31-35 years, and one in the category 46-50 years. All key informants were female due to the limited number of males involved in the Echo youth programme. The key informants have been with the organisation and in the programme for a period of between 2 and 13 years, with an average of seven and a half years. One has been with the

organisation and in the programme for 2 years; one for 5 years, two for nine years and one for thirteen years. Three participants were involved in the planning/conceptualisation phase of the programme; two key informants were involved in the design of the programme; four have been involved in the implementation of the programme, while all the participants were involved in the monitoring and evaluation phases of the programme.

3.9.1.2 Biographical information of the child participants

Table 3.2 shows the biographical information of the child participants, including their age, sex, the years of involvement in the programme, how long the participants have been involved in the programme, whether they attended school, and which grade they were in if they did.

Table 3.2: Biographical information of child participants

Child participant	Age	Sex	Involvement in programme	School grade
CP1	17 years	Female	2 years	Grade 12
CP2	17 years	Female	1 year	Grade 10
CP3	17 years	Male	1 year	Grade 10
CP4	17 years	Male	3 years	Year 2 (MID)
CP5	16 years	Female	1 year	Grade 8

Three female and two male children formed part of the research study. Four children were 17 years old and one 16 years old. Three children have been involved in the programme for three years, one for two years and one for one year; thus, ranging from a period of one to three years. All of the participants attended school; there was one in Grade 8, two in Grade 10, one in Grade 12, and one in year 2 of a school for learners with mild intellectual disability (MID).

Themes and sub-themes

Table 3.3 indicates the six themes, respective sub-themes and categories that emerged from the data. Similar themes and sub-themes emerged from the interviews with the key informants and children and will be integrated into the discussion of the findings. Where pertinent differences were observed, these will be indicated as such.

Table 3.3: Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes	
Theme 1: Participation of children in the programme:	1.1 Application, screening process and interview 1.2 Children's right to participate in the programme 1.3 Involvement of children in planning of activities 1.4 Involvement of children in the implementation of the programme	
Theme 2: Access to services that uphold human rights	2.1 Access to education (school) 2.2 Access to healthcare 2.3 Access to a safe and clean environment	
Theme 3: Mitigating poverty and environmental risks	3.1 Influence of the programme regarding the mitigation of poverty and environmental risk 3.2 Suggestions to mitigate poverty and environmental risk	
Theme 4: Contextualising the child concept and child agency	4.1 A child is vulnerable and in need of protection 4.2 Children can make meaningful choices 4.3 Children need protection and have agency	
Theme 5: Factors influencing child recognition and respect	5.1 Factors contributing to showing recognition and respect	5.1.1 Financial resources 5.1.2 Human resources 5.1.3 Quality of relationships between adults and children
	5.2 Factors contributing to showing non-recognition and disrespect	5.2.1 Children's incapacity and responsibility 5.2.2 The best interest of the child principle 5.2.3 Agency versus discipline
Theme 6: Suggestions to recognise and respect children's agency through their participation	6.1 Intentional discussions 6.2 Remaining emotionally grounded 6.3 Child and house parent ratio 6.4 Platform for voicing opinions 6.5 Applying the principle of community	

The findings will next be discussed under the themes and sub-themes. Findings will be substantiated by direct quotations from the participants and where applicable, verified by literature.

3.9.1.3 Theme 1: Participation of children in the programme

Findings reveal that participation starts with the application and screening process when a child is interviewed to assess whether he/she meets the criteria to join the Echo youth programme. Children are treated as individuals and their level of participation is based on their emotional maturity. Key informants and children both indicated that children's right to participate is respected and that they are involved in the planning and implementation of the programme. Children are permitted and

invited to voice their opinions, and are encouraged to take initiative. These findings will be discussed in the sub-themes below.

Sub-theme 1.1: Application, screening process and interview

Participants confirmed that a multitude of people can initially apply for the child to join the Echo youth programme, including adults, social workers, parents, teachers, and families, friends of adolescents who currently benefit from the youth programme, churches or children's homes. Referrals to the Echo youth programme are made on different grounds, including when children have no available alternatives because of particular circumstances that the child is confronted with or has grown up in. This is evident in the following statements:

KI1: *“Usually an external social worker applies for the child, but it is also possible for a parent, a teacher or even the children’s home to apply when a child has nowhere else to go. Sometimes children are naughty and their current placement only applies to get rid of the child, in which case Echo isn’t necessarily the answer. It works best in our system to involve children who have no other option and usually even though it is not about success, the success rates with those children are typically higher. Children who have other support don’t normally adapt well within our system.”*

KI2: *“Sometimes children are naughty and their current placement only applies to get rid of the child, in which case Echo isn’t necessarily the answer. It works best in our system to involve children who have no other option and usually even though it is not about success, the success rates with those children are typically higher. Children who have other support don’t normally adapt well within our system.”*

KI4: *“Well, you apply based on circumstances and situations in which they come from, a grown up on their behalf will apply, sometimes a grown up is a teacher, a social worker, or their own family.”*

KI5: *“Children are often referred by school social workers or youth workers, or by DSD social workers who have come to know the programme.”*

Echo is also well established in the Moot area, and a lot of churches and organisations, as well as friends of current teenagers know of us, and will apply for teenagers or refer people to us.”

The children have an opportunity to consider whether they want to join the Echo youth programme. After a meeting has been held with the child and the person who applied on behalf of the child, the child has to give informed consent if he/she chooses to join the Echo youth programme. The child is not forced to make a decision during the interview, but is provided with a period of time to consider their choice. A child is expected, in the case that they do choose to live on the Echo Youth Development premises, to choose it wholeheartedly. These sentiments are reflected in the below statements by key informants:

K12: *“...but I firstly have an intake interview with the child and their parent or guardian. We have coffee and I explain what Echo is as a whole.”*

K12: *“I think this is a very difficult issue, as one of our main criteria for selection is whether a child wants to stay with us. So, when a child initially moves in with us, they choose to stay with us a 110%.”*

K15: *“Part of the interview process is explaining the child’s options and rights as it pertains to living at Echo. Because they are teenagers and sometimes already old enough to be exempt from the system, they most definitely have a choice in whether they want to stay there. After the interview they are given some time to think about their options and come back with their choice.”*

Children’s participation in matters that concern them is in line with the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 that provides a platform that ensures the promotion and protection of children’s rights, as well as the promotion of child participation (ETU, 2021). Upholding dignity is considered to be the most valuable human right, especially through the promotion of children’s right to participate in their own development and not to be considered passive objects (RSA, 1996:11). Dignity is recognised through participation and therefore, children are recognised as people.

Sub-theme 1.2: Children’s right to participate in the programme

All the key informants reiterated that children have the right to participate, which often allows children to be treated as individuals based on their needs and personalities. Child participation serves as a monitoring and evaluation mechanism and allows the Echo youth programme to adapt the programme according to the input and needs of the children.

The level of participation is not equally spontaneous amongst all children. Some children require more encouragement and attention to participate freely. The programme allows for organic and intentional participation through its design and this broadens the affect in the long term. Residency in the Echo Youth Development permits children to be included and to participate in the Echo community. Activities that promote organic interaction include day-to-day tasks, whereas intentional activities refer to camps, counselling, extra-curricular activities, Eduboot, and the church community. The following statements reflect this:

KI3: *“By staying in the houses they are automatically included in the day-to-day household. They become part of our community. This is the unintentional way that happens spontaneously. Then we have the intentional side of camps, counselling, extra-curricular activities, Eduboot and the church community. We decide to walk the road with the child and develop individual plans.”*

KI1: *“...the feeling of the children being included in this decision is what makes the difference in the long term.”*

KI2: *“It depends on the child. Every child is treated as an individual. Some children need a bit more encouragement, whereas other children love the attention coupled with participation.”*

Some activities are not optional even within a child-friendly participation framework. These are reasonable expectations which are in the best interest of the child and include activities such as education, safety, development, church and health. Within this framework there is room for negotiation on the details of what a child is expected to do, for example the type of sport they are interested to participate in.

KI3: *“We enrol them in school, they go to school and they are forced to attend school. We give them everything they need.”*

KI3: *“I think the high school houses are relatively voluntarily forced within a framework. For example, you have to do an activity but you can choose which activity.”*

KI5: *“There are non-negotiable things, like going to school, or seeing a doctor when you are sick. But that would be true for any household.”*

CP5: *“Sometimes, sometimes it’s not optional. Some activities aren’t optional.”*

One key informant suggested a transitional approach to participation where the level of agency matches the child’s emotional age:

KI3: *“I think there should be a transition as children grow older. As a younger child, children ought to submit to their parents more. But as children grows older they have a need for autonomy.”*

Children’s participation, including those who are most marginalised, allows them to express their views, influence decision-making and ultimately, achieve change (O’Kane, 2013:2). Withholding children from participating in matters that concern them is a violation of their human rights (Androff, 2016:41). The Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that children are permitted to express their views freely and that these views ought to be heard and that children’s participation in matters that affect them must be facilitated (World Vision, 2021). Children should be perceived as active participants in creating solutions, as the benefits of such participation have been widely documented (Ruiz-Casares, et al., 2016:3). The finding on the level of agency corroborates the view of Reynecke (2013) that children have the right to participation and to express their views if they are capable of forming such views based on their age, level of maturity and stage of development.

Sub-theme 1.3: Involvement of children in planning of activities

Most of the key informants and child participants agreed that children are involved in the planning phase of the youth programme activities. The children specifically indicated their awareness of their right to freedom of speech by emphasising that they can verbalise what they want:

KI1: *“I think they definitely have choice. A simple example that occurs often is for instance what activities will be done over a weekend.”*

CP1: *“For children’s decisions I am included, but sometimes I’m not.”*

CP2: *“Yes, we do get a choice. Next weekend we are going out so she did communicate that we shouldn’t make plans for that.”*

CP4: *“Yes, I have been asked. Many times, if we are doing something they would ask what I think we should do. So it’s nice.”*

CP4: *“Everyone has a say, all the boys. If one of us don’t like the way it’s being done then we can speak to the house parents. They will listen to us.”*

Involving children in the planning phase results in programme content that better reflect their needs (Commissioner for Children, n.d.:4). However, involvement in programme activities should be broader than the planning phase. O’Kane (2013:2) states that permitting children to be involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes, allows for the overall improvement of their social position in that their rights are acknowledged and respected in society.

Sub-theme 1.4: Involvement of children in the implementation of the programme

Findings show that children are involved in the implementation of the programme, as they are permitted to give input regarding the realisation of the activities. Opportunities for initiative and participation are also frequently created, whether at camps, church or at home. However, when a child decides to make a commitment towards a certain activity, they are expected to continue with the activity for a minimum of three months as to ensure an informed decision on whether to continue with the activity:

KI1: *“It would involve a discussion which entails the planning phase. We would mostly be responsible for the design phase as it involves arrangements and logistics. The child would then participate in the activity with the expectation that they do it for at least 3 months before*

deciding whether they want to continue. This could be the implementation and monitoring phase. And then after a while we will all evaluate the progress and whether the child still wants to participate in the activity. This applies to everything.”

KI2: *“For example camps, they might not be responsible for the logistical arrangements of the camp, but the children are free to make suggestions of what they would like to do at the camp. Also, in terms of church, some of the children help with the setup. We don’t give many instructions but rather allow them to take initiative.”*

KI4: *”It just feels like this is the flow of the culture. So, understanding learning also, together we eat breakfast, you know. So that’s not something that they really have any initiative to take. But whoever wakes up earlier will come and help me with the food, you know. So that’s kind of initiative by them.”*

Agency in the Echo youth programme is often coupled with lessons of responsibility and perseverance by teaching the children to persevere even when discomfort is experienced:

KI4: *“But the minute it’s something that they don’t like to do, or they don’t want to do in that moment, then it does feel a little bit for them, like, this is such great schlep and I’m being told to do it.”*

A child participant indicated that she enjoys church and camps and doing dishes together as these activities also offer opportunities for social interaction:

CP2: *“Church and camps are a nice way to get to know more people of the Echo community and also doing the dishes I find that a lot of us talk around there and get to know each other better.”*

The positive experiences of children in programme activities are supported by literature. It is considered good practice to involve children in the implementation of a programme, as it promotes the relevance and effectiveness of the programme (Child Protection Unit, 2003:2). Jamieson et al. (2011:19) concur that the participation of children in the implementation of any programme is essential. Moreover, talents and

gifts can be used to enhance the participation and involvement of children (Freeman, Raffan & Warwick, 2010:4).

3.9.1.4 Theme 2: Access to services that uphold human rights

Findings reveal that children in the Echo youth programme have access to education, as school attendance forms part of one of the main requirements in order to be accepted into the programme. Their access to education is further strengthened by additional academic support and provision for their academic needs. All participants indicated that children have access to health care through partnerships formed between Echo Youth Development and medical professionals, permitting pro bono services. The majority of child participants indicated an overall improvement in their mental health since their participation in the programme. All the participants indicated that the children have access to a clean and safe environment, including clean water and sanitation. Children are encouraged to be active participants in this process.

Child participants' views summarise the integrated services that uphold their rights:

CP1: *“The right to education, the right to food and shelter, the right to safety. I think those are the most important.”*

CP2: *“The right to safety, the right to have some sort of a say”.*

CP4: *“Yes, I know a lot about children’s rights. I know children have the right to education, they have the right to a safe environment and they have a right to speak out what they feel.”*

CP5: *“To be fed, shelter, taken care of, education.”*

Access to these rights will be discussed below as sub-themes.

Sub-theme 2.1: Access to education

All the key informants reiterated the importance of school attendance and special attention to academic support and activities. School attendance forms part of the criteria for selection in that a child has to attend school or another educational programme in order to be accepted into the programme. Academic support entails an Eduboot programme where children attend homework classes every afternoon.

These sessions are enriched with tutors and house parents that assist the children with their homework. The children attend former Model C schools with a high standard of education that is subsidised by the government. It is clear that the children who benefit from the Echo youth programme's right to education are fulfilled. The key informants elaborated on the value of education as follows:

- KI1: *“Edubooost is a programme designed for the children to help them with homework in the afternoons. We have someone who supervises the session and we also get students from the University of Pretoria to act as tutors in order to improve their academic performance.”*
- KI2: *“Part of our main criteria is that the children must be in a school system and they must attend Edubooost. Furthermore, we are dependent on government subsidy to cover school fees.”*
- KI4: *“All of them go to school. That is a requirement in our high school houses and the functioning is that you definitely have to be a school going person and school is not an option. So that is, you know what we uphold. The second thing is I think that their schooling is something that is completely subsidised so there's no there's no hurdles in access to education. They go to former model C schools that are providing on par education. On top of that, is that they have access to other supplementary information and input to help them along this educational journey. So, they've got Edubooost, they have access to tutors, they've got Wi-Fi at home, you know, they've got this, there's never a situation where I couldn't hand in the project, because I didn't know how to build a bridge, you know, there's a community of people who are very able, capable and available to assist with that type of stuff.”*
- KI5: *“Every child that lives in a house has to be in school or busy with and educational programme. We also offer extra support with an Edubooost programme. Edubooost is an afternoon programme where children have a focussed environment to do their homework. There are also volunteer tutors to help the children with studying, homework and assignments/projects.”*

The Echo youth programme fulfils the children's educational needs by providing them with school clothes, stationary, extra classes and any financial needs associated with extra-curricular activities. These resources are provided sparingly as to ensure sustainability:

KI3: *“School clothes, stationary, we provide them with extra classes if, we pay for their extra-curricular activities and we encourage them to participate.”*

KI2: *“We purchase these items at the beginning of the year and encourage the children to take ownership of their belongings. We try to teach them that the world doesn't just continuously give.”*

Although the children are compliant with the Edubooost programme, they are not eager to participate at all times:

KI4: *“I think, you know, no child likes doing homework, so they don't like it at all. And I think they feel that that is the greatest thing that they've got no choice.”*

The children agreed with the fact that they have access to education. They confirmed that they attend school and the Edubooost programme. Some of the participants expressed gratitude for the dedicated academic time, as they were not exposed to such opportunities previously:

CP1: *“We got students that came and helped us and then there is also one of the house parents at the boys who help us with homework.”*

CP2: *“Um, like, we have Edubooost and we have dedicated time to actually study.”*

CP3: *“Omdat ons die reg het om skool toe te gaan. Daai is vir my die belangrikste.” [Because we have the right to go to school. That for me is the most important.]*

CP4: *“I get more time to study now because we go to Edubooost after school and then I also study at home so there's no interruption. I can study*

better and longer. There is someone to help me. At Edubooost normally there are tutors then I'll ask them."

CP4: *"Yes, there is not a day that you will stay home, unless you are very, very sick and you can't get out of bed. There's no taking chances. Otherwise you go to school every day."*

The findings confirm that education acts as a powerful tool that can be utilised to lift the most socially and economically marginalised out of poverty and be active citizens in society (UNESCO, 2021a). UNICEF (2021a) affirms that every child has the right to attend school and learn, regardless of whom they are and what their circumstances entail.

Sub-theme 2.2: Access to healthcare

The Echo youth programme provides the children with full access to health care. Due to positive partnerships within the community, Echo has a network of medical professionals like doctors, a dentist, a gynaecologist, psychologists and psychiatrists that provide pro bono medical services for less serious health problems. In the case of health problems that require more serious attention, children are referred to Steve Biko Academic Hospital and Weskoppies Hospital. This also accentuates the need for government health services to be sufficient in attending to the needs of those deemed vulnerable. When free medical services are not available or sufficient, Echo Youth Development assumes responsibility for the payments needed:

KI1: *"We have two doctors and a dentist who provide free consultations to our children so the basic medical needs are covered. One of the doctors even provides free medication. Should a child require more serious medical attention, we make use of government hospitals like Steve Biko Hospital."*

KI: *"When the need is psychiatric we also make use of government hospitals like Tshwane District Hospital, Steve Biko Hospital or Weskoppies Psychiatric Hospital. In severe cases, due to state hospitals often changing the children's medication or the children being untruthful with the psychiatrists, we would get a referral for assistance from a private psychiatrist. Sometimes these psychiatrists are willing to*

see the children for free or at a reduced rate. We do the same in terms of psychologists for children who need therapy. Where needed, Echo will provide the necessary funds made available by private donations.”

KI3: *“Yes, they have access to health care. We have a doctor that sees them for free and provides them with medication. If they need to go to Steve Biko or Weskoppies, we take them.”*

KI4: *“I think also in a comprehensive way. They've got access to health care when they need it. Even in terms of medical care, that is optional, things like your contraceptives, you know, that is something that they have free access to be it the injection, an IUD, whatever it is, they've got access to that. And also, things like after the medical aftercare, that is something that is oftentimes funded by the programme itself, you know, things like medication that's over the counter, psychiatric medication that might not really be provided by a medical professional, but it does get funded and seen through by the programme.”*

KI5: *“Echo has a network of private healthcare professionals that offer their services for free. This includes two GP's [general practitioners], a dentist, gynaecologist and psychologists and psychiatrists. We take healthcare very seriously and try to meet every need. We also make use of state care when possible.”*

The child participants confirmed their access to health care through doctors and medication. Access to clean water also benefits their health in that the children are able to shower daily:

CP1: *“Whenever one is sick we are taken to the doctor so our health is taken care of.”*

CP3: *“Soos hulle gee my pille op tyd en as ek siek is vat hulle my na die dokter toe om seker te maak ek is gesond.” [Like they give me pills on time and when I'm sick they take me to the doctor to make sure I'm healthy.]*

CP4: *“I can have like a shower whenever I want to go shower. When I was in Cape Town I didn’t have that type of life. I lived in an informal settlement, like a shack, with my mom, my dad and my brother. So, we didn’t have that type of sanitation and it helps a lot here.”*

The child participants expressed that their mental health has improved since their involvement in the programme. The children receive support from house parents and psychologists when needed. Their improved mental state allows them to focus more on their academic development:

CP1: *“Every single house parent can help with my life or my personal things so I got the psychologist that Echo got for us that I was seeing every Wednesday so that lady was helping me to deal with everything.”*

CP2: *“I guess it’s like I have no other stress to worry about it’s just yourself.”*

CP4: *“Like now I have no problems because I am more focused on school and when I got here I used to think about it a lot but then it went away because everyone was trying to help.”*

The findings indicate that children have access to comprehensive healthcare, both physically and mentally. Health within a human rights context constitutes “the state of physical, mental and social well-being and does not only mean an absence of illness or disease” (Humanium, 2021). South Africa ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child in 1989 and consequently shows commitment to the protection and promotion of children’s right to health care (Buchner-Eveleigh, 2016:5). The Echo youth programme meets children’s right to healthcare.

Sub-theme 2.3: Access to a clean and safe environmental

All the key informants confirmed that the children have access to clean water and sanitation. In the case of temporary obstruction to these rights, an alternative will be put in place until the services have been restored. The Echo Youth Programme aims to provide the children with a household that resembles normality and therefore, cleanliness is a top priority. In terms of violence, the programme strives to protect the children from any incidences, but the possibility of exposure to violence instigated by the children is a possibility due to their troubled backgrounds. However, the houses

are protected by an alarm system, good lighting and fencing as reflected in the following quotes:

- KI1: *“The children have access to running water, sanitation and a clean environment. There isn’t really violence, but especially in the boys house there is a chance that some of the boys will engage in violence towards the house parents or amongst each other. However, the programme exists to ensure that children do not have to be exposed to any of these elements.”*
- KI4: *“Like they’ve got clean running water. They’ve got proper ablution facilities. Yeah, they’ve got everything that they need. And should there be a situation that arises that happens to jeopardize one of those things temporarily, so like, if there is a water shortage whenever they don’t go three days without bath.”*
- KI5: *“A big goal at Echo is to provide a household as close to normal as possible. This includes proper houses that have weekly or biweekly cleaners, proper sanitisation, good food and all other necessary resources. In terms of safety and risk it also includes house parents that are always at home to look after the kids.”*
- KI3: *“It is relatively safe. We have an alarm system, good lighting at evening and fencing. We would hope the houses protect the children from violence but I think there is always a chance that they could be exposed by another child.”*

The Echo youth programme promotes reunification services with the children’s family members as far as possible and therefore, also supports visits to family members when the child is not exposed to any violence during these visits. However, visits to family members often include no access to clean water, sanitation or food. Mitigating factors are put into place; like shorter visits or food parcels, that are sent with the child during a visit in order to address the poverty elements that may be present at home.

- KI1: *“The children may be exposed to such elements when they visit their families. Ultimately, we want the children to feel part of our family but*

the ideal remains that they maintain a good relationship with their biological families in instances where it won't be damaging to the child. We encourage children to visit with their families during school holidays or over weekends when it isn't life threatening. For example, if the reason for their placement is poverty, we will assist with a food parcel during the child's stay."

KI2: *"A lot of the children would have access to water, but none of the other elements. Mostly children would be exposed to violence, especially those who have abusive backgrounds – whether it be physical or emotional abuse. Some of the children come from extreme poverty and do not necessarily have their own bed to sleep in. These circumstances may not be clean and they may not have access to clean water."*

KI2: *"I think we provide an alternative to these situations as the majority of our children are raised in such circumstances such as violence and extreme poverty. Hygiene also poses challenges especially in the boys' house because the children were never taught to be clean or to save water or to use any resources sustainably. They were never taught this as children."*

The Echo youth programme motivates children to be active participants in obtaining their right to a clean and safe environment. This is achieved through chores such as cleaning the house and their own rooms. The basis for cultivating these duties is found in the development of secure relationships between the house parents and children. Furthermore, the driving factor for maintaining a clean and safe environment often stems from wanting to teach children to be independent adults or to utilise financial resources sustainably. The programme however, does not save resources to be environmentally sustainable. Participants referred to children's responsibility to keep their environment clean and respect scarce resources:

KI4: *"I think one of the things that is in terms of the cleanliness or the environment, that's something also you're trying to teach now that they too, I mean, they too are active participants in creating that environment for themselves. You know, so the cleanliness of the*

house, things like giving the chores, things like making sure that once a month we spring clean the house and we do their rooms, you know that kind of stuff.”

KI5: *“I think it's, it's, it's more relational in the sense that, you know, telling them about the fact that you can't take a 500 hours shower, because water is a scarce resource. We don't have unlimited, but it I think, myself, I know, it does boil down to the finances of it, you know, so I'll save the switch off the lights, because it's expensive.”*

CP1: *“Making sure our rooms are neat and clean and making sure the house is tidied up and then there is outside people who come and clean.”*

CP2: *“We all do chores. I clean my own room, I don't like anyone cleaning my room. And I wash dishes on a Saturday and I will help around if they want me to do anything.”*

CP3: *“Ja, dis veilig. Dis skoon. Ek raak nie maklik siek van vuilgeid of enige iets nie. Soos, ons het 'n schedule. Elke seun was skottelgoed elke tweede dag.” [Yes, it's safe. It's clean. I don't get sick easily of dirtiness or anything like that. Like, we have a schedule. Every boy washes dishes every second day.]*

CP4: *“We get our toiletries from the house fathers so we each get it.”*

CP5: *“Yes, the houses are very clean.”*

In alignment with the findings, all children have the right to a clean and safe environment, secure surroundings and channels for physical activity allow conditions for children to survive and thrive (WHO, 2019:3). Access to a clean and safe environment is vital as the especially vulnerable and marginalised children are disproportionately exposed to and impacted by environmental harm regardless of their little contribution to it (UN Environmental Programme, 2021). Within the process of attaining this human right, children should be active participants in finding solutions to matters that affect them personally (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2016:1).

3.9.1.5 Theme 3: Mitigating poverty and environmental risk

Findings indicate that children with difficult backgrounds require more time to adapt to a new lifestyle that mitigates poverty and environmental risks. The children at the Echo Youth Programme are protected against poverty and environmental risks, but they are exposed to these circumstances again when they visit their families. Mitigating factors are however, in place at the Echo Youth Programme. Participants indicated that the youth programme influence the alleviation of poverty and environmental risks and made suggestions on how it could further be alleviated as will be next discussed in the sub-themes.

Sub-theme 3.1: Influence of programme on mitigating poverty and environmental risks

Findings indicate that it takes time to create awareness among children; to change their mind-set so that they are aware of the necessity of maintaining a clean and safe environment. It includes developing more environmentally sustainable habits and if resources such as water and energy are wasted, children are reprimanded.

KI2: *“With time and a lot of effort the children become more aware of the environment and that we shouldn’t waste and make it dirty and that we should share with one another. We live in community. Ultimately that is one of the biggest fundamentals of Echo, although these principles are normally instilled during early childhood.”*

CP3: *“Ja, hulle leer ons baie. Hulle baklei met ons, maar nie altyd nie. As ons water mors of ons mors krag dan raas hulle bietjie.” [Yes, they teach us a lot. They fight with us, but not always. If we waste water or electricity then they fight with us a little.]*

Key informants specified that children who benefit from the Echo youth programme, are protected against poverty while they are staying at the houses. Unfortunately, poverty and exposure to poverty cannot be completely avoided as many of the children’s families live in poverty. Children’s past circumstances at home as well as their views and concerns are considered in decisions regarding home visits (see sub-theme 2.3). Poverty is also mitigated by limiting the time spent with family members if the circumstances are potentially harmful.

KI4: *“I think in terms of the poverty while they're here in this confinement, they are not necessarily exposed to it, because they've got all their needs met. You know, there's food, there's water, there's everything, physical, your basic needs are fulfilled. But because of where they come from, that stuff is here, it doesn't happen in a bubble. So here, this is literally it's happening in a silo, but the families are still exposed to it, you know, some of the families are still living hand-to-mouth and the communities in which their families still reside in, you know, so if they do go visit, that exposure is there.”*

KI3: *“Okay, so the visits are dependent on the child, obviously, and the circumstances that which brought them to here. Let me say, once a month, okay. Yes. And the mitigation also is the duration. So, it's not for extended periods of time. It's literally for hours an afternoon, I bet that when you leave, you have already eaten, you know, and by the time you come back, you're going to come back and eat. Yeah, and if it's a weekend, you're going for the weekend, it's not these extended, or especially if there is circumstances that have not have like going into space that has very little access to certain resources.”*

Poverty is considered a violation of human rights (Hartley, 2015:141). It encompasses both social and physical exclusion, a sense of helplessness, being excluded from participation and decision-making and finally, a lack of access to education, health care and clean and safe environments (Green, 2012:6). Consequently, poverty reduction is about providing the vulnerable with access to services to assist them in being resilient to the impact of poverty and environmental shocks (Green, 2012:6).

Environmental risks pose a threat to all people, but especially children are considered to be vulnerable, which ultimately affects their development physically, socially and emotionally (UNICEF, 2011:1). When children do not have the needed resources for their development due to environmental unsustainability and other factors, they will inevitably be left behind. Within an environmental justice framework, environmental sustainability must be prioritised in overcoming poverty and inequality, as the alternative would negatively affect the poor and vulnerable (Gibson, 2004).

Sub-theme 3.2: Suggestions to mitigate poverty and environmental risks

The child participants responded with empathy when consulted on their opinion to alleviate poverty. Suggestions included providing the poor with donations and food and especially, to give more attention to the poverty as social issue:

CP3: *“Meer aandag aan dit te gee en probeer om hulle te help. Deur vir hulle [mense in nood] kossies te gee. Klein, klein veranderings dan sal alles beter gaan.” [Give more attention to it and try to help them by giving them [people in need] food. Small, small changes then everything will go better.]*

CP4: *“They [people] can help each other, be kind to other people, care about other people, because there are some people who don’t have the same opportunities that we have and then you get some people that take it for granted. Guys that sleep outside have nothing to eat, they suffer, while someone that has everything, takes it for granted.”*

CP5: *“Maybe like once in a while we go to the area and donate stuff and have a day where you feed everyone [homeless people].”*

The child participants responded with optimism in terms of their possible involvement in mitigating environmental risks. Ideas to address environmental risks included cleaning up the neighbourhood and polluting less, and responding to violence as it relates to poverty and environmental risks. The need for communities to work together in order to address environmental risks was also accentuated.

CP1: *“Involve us, like, maybe one day just go outside and sweep and pick up papers. Like teach us how to do such things.”*

CP2: *“I feel like we could maybe do like little clean ups every now and then for those areas.”*

CP4: *“We can stop pollution, because it’s causing sicknesses after a while. We could also be more clean like if you see a paper you pick it up and put it in the bin. If everyone does that then there won’t be pollution.”*

CP5: *“When violence is happening we must stop and actually try to do something.”*

The right to live in a clean and safe environment is imperative for child development and cultivating happiness (UNICEF, 2014:12). The responsibility that comes with agency also rests on children to contribute in obtaining a safe environment in the broader community. Picking up litter, whether on a small or large scale, will have a positive influence on the environment on a long term basis (Reverman, [sa]). Therefore, cleaning up the environment is considered admirable and will contribute to instilling self-motivation to increase environmentally responsible behaviour (Furusa, 2015:4).

3.9.1.6 Theme 4: Contextualising the child concept and child agency

Participants had various views on the child concept, ranging from being vulnerable and in need of care and protection, while also having agency to make meaningful choices. Most of the participants perceive children as individuals who are able to give meaningful opinions while maintaining their need for protection. Findings reveal that recognising the agency of children allows the Echo youth programme to adapt in accordance with the child's needs. However, agency must be coupled with empowerment to ensure the responsible use of such agency. Within this responsibility, emphasis is also placed on the value of quality relationships. Vulnerability is coupled with the need to still be, as one participant put it, as playful as children. These findings will be discussed in the sub-themes below.

Sub-theme 4.1: A child is vulnerable and in need of care and protection

Two key informants used the age of a child to frame their view of the child concept. Thus, all children under 18 years are vulnerable and should be protected, including making decisions for them.

KI1: *"...they remain vulnerable and should be protected until the age of 18."*

KI5: *"So there are instances where we have to make decisions about them because they are children and they are vulnerable."*

One child participant indicated the need to be allowed to be a child while still being a child:

CP1: *"Like playing with water balloons. Even though we are old, we still like playing them."*

Although children are deemed vulnerable based on their developmental needs and adult dependency (Human Sciences Research Council, 2010:3), acknowledging their agency does not deny their need for protection. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021), the search for independence in the adolescent developmental stage exposes children to opportunities and risks in the community, making it essential to ensure the presence of supportive parents, quality schooling and local economic opportunities. UNICEF (2021b) states that “all children have the right to be protected from violence, exploitation and abuse”. However, vulnerability should not label communities, or children in the case of this study, with the notion of helplessness and victims of their circumstances, but rather emphasise areas in need of capacity building to improve resilience (Cannon, 2008:1). Recognising children’s agency, allows for a transition from vulnerability to resilience and capacity.

Sub-theme 4.2: Children can make meaningful choices

Findings indicate that long before joining the Echo youth programme, many of the children made decisions and took on responsibilities which were supposed to have been assumed by adults. Some key informants indicated that they perceive children as individuals with the ability to make choices; a finding which was echoed by child participants. The following quotes reflect these findings:

- KI1: *“Yes. We had a child who lived in the first house when Echo was still brand new and very inexperienced. As an adult he said that he felt lonely often and that they did not get enough intentional attention. Echo learned from this experience and realised that presence is what makes the difference and consequently increased the number of house parents per house and decreased the number of children per house. Even children currently living in the house, when they have made progress and are more open, a conversation about their experience in the house becomes valuable.”*
- KI2: *“Our whole system is about this. We aren’t traditional and children have a right to say what happens to them, especially due to their older age. They are less in need of adults to make decisions on their behalf as many of them have already been exposed to decisions that were*

supposed to be made by adults. They have also assumed various adult responsibilities before staying with us.”

CP2: *“I don’t feel like there is an adult and then a child thing with that big of a gap there, because they sort of like put themselves in our shoes and look at it from our perspective.”*

The finding that children have the agency to make meaningful choices is accompanied by accountability and empowerment to ensure children’s agency is used responsibly. The age of the children provides an indication of their level of agency.

KI3: *“I believe children have agency but it should be accompanied by accountability and empowerment. If a child is low functioning, agency becomes dangerous without empowerment.”*

KI5: *“The age of the child plays a big role.”*

Child participants’ responses reflected emotional intelligence in understanding that their agency is not threatened when their suggestions are not adopted.

CP4: *“Sometimes, although they are taken seriously, sometimes someone else’s idea is better. That’s just how it is, you can’t always be right.”*

CP2: *“Maybe, depends. Because I don’t know if they would change the way that they do things because of one person’s view.”*

Lansdown (2021) states that children are recognised as humans that are competent and who possess the inherent right and capability to participate in all matters that concern them, and consequently, children are considered key informants on their own lives. Recognising the value of children’s opinions through participation results in personal development, better decision-making and outcomes, better protection of children, respect for others, and accountability (Harris & Manatakis, 2013:10). Moreover, autonomy is a central feature in the psycho-social development of adolescents (Soenens, Vansteenkiste & van Petegem, 2017:16).

Sub-theme 4.3: Children need protection and have agency

The key informants revealed that they aim for the healthy development of the children through unconditional love and perseverance which will ultimately result in children who are able to practice their agency in their best interest because they are protected in their right to agency.

KI1: *“Our aim however, is to make them feel so safe and to create a home for them that even when a child runs away, that they always return. We don’t want children to leave or stay on the streets, but we aren’t a jail and it remains their choice and we try to motivate them to continue to choose Echo as the best place for them.”*

KI2: *“However, we believe that even when the child doesn’t buy into the programme, we continue to buy into it on their behalf and in their best interest. Even during times when a child really breaks all the rules, we will do the opposite. We will punish the child as it is the right thing to do, but we will also love them and spend time with them.”*

KI4: *“Because majority of the time, should they leave and express that choice and use that autonomy to make choices to leave, it means that they’re making their choices out of spaces of fear, of vulnerability, of hurt, and all the emotions that fall on the other side of the spectrum that’s unsafe, and they put themselves in danger.”*

Two child participants confirmed that they are children in need of protection while at the same time having agency which mostly realises through showing respect:

CP1: *“Just because we are here it doesn’t mean we don’t have a voice. So meaning respect should go both ways. As much as I respect adults they also should respect us and our opinions. And we need to be protected also, we are children.”*

CP4: *“We all have opinions and the adults respect it. If we say something, they listen and they will respect it.”*

Children’s participation is necessary for their effective and respectful protection (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2016:2). The special vulnerability of children is recognised by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which underlines the need

to extend special care and protection to children on grounds of physical and mental immaturity (UNCRC, 2021). The UNCRC stipulates that the responsibility of governments is to take protective and preventative measures against all forms of child maltreatment, and to support parents in meeting child-rearing responsibilities through the development of institutions, facilities and services (OECD, 2021).

3.9.1.7 Theme 5: Factors influencing child recognition and respect

Factors that influence child recognition and respect emerged into two sub-themes. On the one hand, factors that influence child recognition and respect, and on the other, factors that influence non-recognition and disrespect.

Sub-theme 5.1: Factors contributing to showing recognition and respect

Factors contributing to showing recognition and respect include the availability of financial and human resources, as well as the quality of relationships between adults engaged in the Echo youth programme and children. Financial resources contribute to the children having access to activities that promote their agency and participation while human resources provide the children with academic support. These findings will be discussed below as sub-themes.

Sub-theme 5.1.1: Financial resources

The availability of financial resources enables the Echo youth programme to engage the children in activities that show recognition and respect for their agency. Activities made possible through funding include horse riding, drama, swimming classes and educational activities. Children's agency is recognised by allowing them [children] to choose the activity in which they would like to participate, and then presenting them with the opportunities to do so.

KI3: *"...so one of the things they do make it possible is our access to funding. You know, something like horse riding, something like drama, something like swimming classes, all of those things are paid for, meaning you chose it, the access to funding allows me to do it."*

KI4: *"So from funders, like individuals, sponsors and donors, there are lots of funds available for educational activities. Beeld Children's fund gives quite a big chunk at the beginning of the year. So, you have to submit a*

proposal of what, what where the funding is going to go and what is going to be useful. And then in those conversations, it was a combination where the kids can choose an exercise as their right to choice and autonomy and agency about the extra mural activities they would like to do throughout the year.”

The achievement of social change relies on the balance of social and economic development (Androff, 2016:28). This notion is founded on the understanding that exclusive economic growth will not result in increased welfare of the population. Redistribution through social investment is imperative in promoting development. Governance strongly influences livelihood opportunities through redistribution of wealth and income amongst different groups of people (Cannon, 2008:5). Therefore, “[e]conomic growth and redistribution are mutually reinforcing, and social investment in social development is not considered to be a drain on national resources, but contributes positively to economic development” (Patel, 2015:88). To ensure resilience, developing the capabilities of people and their capital is vital (Peeters, 2012:295).

Sub-theme 5.1.2: Human resources

The availability of human resources enables the Echo youth programme to recognise and respect children’s agency. Relationship building with service providers has assisted in this regard and ultimately, provides avenues to assist children when needed.

KI2: *“We have a large network of doctors and dentists and also private sponsorships. We also often make use of Helplift, an organisation focused on especially medical assistance as well as other support. With time we have built up good relationships, for example the clinical psychologist at Steve Biko Hospital who consults with one of our children on a weekly basis. As the need arises one looks for assistance and donations where possible.”*

KI4: *“I think another thing that makes it possible for them to participate in the programme and also have agency while doing so, is the human resources we have access to.”*

Human resources provide aid to develop the skills, knowledge and abilities of children, which ultimately contributes to the overall functioning of children (Heathfield, 2021). Economically speaking, human resource development is described as the accretion of human capital and thereafter, its effective investment in the development of an economy (UNESCO, 2021b). The long-term influence of the availability and development of human resources will allow the children to benefit from the Echo youth programme to contribute positively to the economy.

Sub-theme 5.1.3: Quality of relationships between adults and children

The quality of relationships between adults and children allows for children's agency to develop through participation. These relationships form the foundation for interaction and allow the programme to adapt with the children. The quality of relationships also fosters security and an understanding, which spills over to the children's ability to form other relationships and to develop individually.

The key informants' views on relationships and security were articulated as follows:

KI1: *"I think the children's participation is very good. Everything is based on the quality of the relationship between us and them. If a child does not have a good relationship with their house parent, it is usually rooted in something. Then we prefer to try and determine why a child doesn't want to participate and ultimately find a solution with the child. We don't make decisions on behalf of the children, unless it concerns their safety and best interest."*

KI2: *"We didn't start these houses overnight; it was built through years of experience and trial and error and very importantly, the input of the children."*

KI1: *"The goal and intended outcome of the programme is to give the children a better future, in whatever sense. Whether it be support through Eduboot or support within the high school houses, we want to create a sense of safety in order for them to make better choices when they are older. We want them to be part of our family, to understand what family is and what it means to not only live for yourself but for other people. That is our greater goal."*

KI4: *“...but my hope and aspirations that they actually experienced self-actualization, this process you know, ability to feel so secure in relationships that they can actually foster that same security in other relationships, understand what it means to have good parents understand what it means to be not necessarily a good person, but more of, you know, just to be okay, and to be functional.”*

KI4: *“My base of functioning is from the relationships that I've got with my own independent family. So and it's from that, that I'm able to be brave, that I'm able to be, you know, the person that I am. So that's what I would like, that's my goal with them.”*

Child participants echoed the views of sharing in quality relationships with the adults involved in the Echo youth programme. The child participants expressed sentiments of gratitude to be accepted and to be part of a family. The participants were of the opinion that issues are resolved between the adults and children. Participants also feel happy and listened to.

CP2: *“It means a lot to just be accepted by someone who is willing to look after you I guess.”*

CP3: *“Ek sal nie sê een van daai nie, want vir my is ons soos ‘n familie. So daai is net die belangrikste.” [I wouldn't say any of those, because for me we are like a family. So that is just the most important.]*

CP3: *“Soos Nickie hulle as hulle ‘n problem het, praat ons meestal. Ons praat meestal alles ondermekaar uit.” [Like Nickie and them if they have a problem we mostly talk about it. We usually sort out everything amongst ourselves.]*

CP4: *“It makes me feel happy, because no one usually listened to me. I had no say where I used to live in Cape Town. I couldn't say anything. I was just there. I had to just listen. Now it's different because the house parents understand me. They know how I feel already and they listen to me.”*

CP4: *“Well, since I’ve been here it’s been like really awesome. They’re kind, they care and they help you whenever you need help. It feels like home.”*

The findings corroborate with findings of earlier research. Lavis (2016) indicates that children live in an environment of relationships, setting the motivation to understand firstly, their relationships, and secondly, how it contributes to their well-being. All areas of development, as well as the way children perceive their world, are affected by relationships (Raising Children, 2021). It is not only about the presence of the relationship, but also the quality of the relationship (Thompson, 2018:1917).

Sub-theme 5.2: Factors contributing to showing non-recognition and disrespect

Findings reveal that factors contributing to non-recognition and disrespect are threefold. Children may not possess the capacity to always realise their right to participate as expressed by one key informant. The best interest of the child may also at times be prioritised above the child’s right to participate. Finally, agency must remain in conjunction with discipline as children remain children and need to be disciplined as they are developing. These findings will be presented below as sub-themes.

Sub-theme 5.2.1: Children’s incapacity and responsibility

The key informants placed great emphasis on the importance of coupling children’s agency with capacity and empowerment through skills development.

KI3: *“Our children can be rather passive and struggle to verbalise what they feel and instead run away and make a scene. They don’t have the skills to use their right to participation.”*

KI3: *“Yes, it’s dependent on their EQ and where they come from. They have the right but not the capacity and that almost makes the right to participation dangerous.”*

According to the key informants, agency must be considered in conjunction with the child’s developmental age, as well as their emotional age in order to provide protection for the children.

- KI3: *“In our context a very important factor is that their emotional capacity is low. Not with all the children, but the majority. A lot of the time they foster unrealistic expectations like expensive toothpaste or clothing.”*
- KI4: *“I think for other people, you know, for myself, I've got with a lot of freedom that comes with a lot of responsibility, but they don't understand those concepts yet. You know, I don't think they are intellectually and emotionally able to synchronize them, as well as someone who has grown up who's healthy and mature.”*
- KI4: *“Yeah. But that must be happening at age appropriate and intellectual appropriate and emotional intelligence, appropriate doses, you know, because I think many of them to come from spaces where they had way too much agency because they have neglectful parents of you and your choices in what you do. You can do whatever you want to, you know, so and that's inappropriate because they age the emotional intelligence the intelligence itself can't comprehend and take in all of those choices and make them autonomous beings.”*

Past traumas and unhealthy boundaries point out the need for children to remain children who must take responsibility that is appropriate for their age. Key informants articulated their views as follows:

- KI4: *“I think it, they are still children and with their traumas I think their chronological age and their emotional age has a big deficit. Meaning their ability to exercise their agency, you know, you need to proceed with caution. It is dangerous.”*
- KI1: *“Yes. In the end we want children to make good choices, but for that to happen the child must feel safe and be protected. They must not have the responsibility of an adult, but rather be allowed to be a child.”*
- KI1: *“Then we assume the responsibility of adults and make decisions. I also think we must consider their developmental stage and remember that they remain teenagers. We have to distinguish between age appropriate behaviour and behaviour that should raise concern.”*

KI4: *“I would say if I had to quantify it, it would be a 30%:70% in terms of agency, but the agency is really dependent on the child as well, you must depend on the child's their life stage and what's going on with him.”*

KI2: *“I think our children don't have healthy boundaries accompanied by trauma. Choices aren't always respected because it isn't always in their best interest.”*

Key informants indicated that through skills development and empowerment, the children learn to become responsible adults as they develop agency.

KI2: *“We also try to teach them that with every right comes responsibility and consequences.”*

KI3: *“Yes, it's about what they have available in their toolbox. If the only way they have to survive is through shouting and fighting, they need a better tool to take out and use.”*

KI3: *“The outcome is so that they have a stepping stone to launch into the world, especially because they don't have anyone. To give them a foot in the door with skills development and to give them the opportunity to catch up in life. At the core we want them to be able to add value to society.”*

Capacity development and empowerment also result in generational development. As children become adults, they lead the next generation to exert agency and take responsibility for the consequences.

KI3: *“...then we hope to reach the next generation when the child hopefully passed matric, studied and got a job. So hopefully the next generation. We have different children with different backgrounds and therefore, also different capacities. The child may be the first in the family to graduate and when these children have children they would already be different parents from their own parents. And I think the programme contributes to this. In the next generation the burden of poverty is lifted.”*

Child participants reflected similar sentiments to key informants on participation and agency development. The children reflected on the goal and intended outcomes of the Echo youth programme, displaying how the programme presents a process of capacity development, empowerment and skills development which will ultimately result in them participating successfully while building their agency. The programme gives them a safe place and space to develop agency, while also being protected.

CP1: *“For me what it means is reaching out to girls and boys that are in need and helping them with everything and being there for them. It’s like a home to us.”*

CP2: *“They help the children that need a safe place to stay and just to get the help that they need.”*

CP3: *“Dit beteken nogals baie vir my want ek het begint sleg en nou alles gaan baie goed met my. Vordering, so ek gaan vorentoe. Om my ‘n beter lewe te gegee het en hulle help my nogals baie. Om my uit die moeilikheid te hou en die regte ding te doen en alles.” [It means a lot to me because I started off bad and now everything is going well with me. Progress, I’m going forward. To give me a better life and they help me quite a lot. To keep me out of trouble and to do the right thing and everything.]*

CP5: *“I think it’s all about helping kids.”*

The children’s experiences are reflected in the view of a key informant:

KI5: *“The goal is to give a safe, secure place to teenagers who do not have any parents/guardians to look after them and who are not suited to the children’s system like children’s homes. The idea is to give them a proper, normal house and to help them matriculate or finish the highest year at their school.”*

One of the main points in the dispute on the children’s right debate pertaining to agency and the right to participation is to find the balance between the child’s lack of capacity and autonomy and secondly, recognising the child’s right to be an active partner in matters concerning him/her (Reynecke, 2013). Children’s dependency on

adults and adults' reluctance to give effect to their right to participate are important challenges to overcome in child participation and development of their agency (Reynecke, 2013). Therefore, agency and the right to participation must occur in the presence of empowerment. Empowerment allows the development of children's inner confidence, courage and personal strength to finally, attain their full potential (International School of Creative Science, 2021).

Sub-theme 5.2.2: The best interest of the child principle

The best interest of the child principle entails recognition that children have agency, but only if it is in their best interest. When their agency is not in their best interest, adults responsible for the child should instead assume responsibility on behalf of the child, within reasonable boundaries. However, making these decisions for children, should still take place in collaboration with children by explaining to them why it is in their best interest and encouraging them to see how they can benefit from the decision(s).

According to the key informants, the best interest of the child must be balanced with the vulnerability of the child.

K11: *"Yes. I believe that children must have a choice, but it should also be noted that sometimes children need motivation. In most instances if a child has a choice whether they want to go to school, most children won't go to school."*

K11: *"Yes. The parent or guardian must remain responsible for the child above their choice. In certain instances, a child will have more freedom of choice, but in other instances a child will have to be forced to a certain degree to ensure their best interest is protected."*

K14: *"...agency is then at 30%. But best interest is at 70%. So, a lot of the time even things with like extra murals, like I said, that is your agency in that moment, you don't want it doesn't feel nice, you're tired, you're sleepy. And you don't want to do something on a Saturday, like go to drama. But in your best interest you must do, you must learn how to do things that you don't want to do, we don't like to do, because that's how the real world works. You stick to your commitments."*

KI5: *“We set boundaries on behalf of the child but they are absolutely part of the conversation on how much or how little is going to happen and what is the safest thing to do.”*

KI5: *“And hopefully all of those things fall into the category of being reasonable. So that would be things like attending one weekly group activity or going to church once a week. But all of those things are things that your parents would expect of you in a regular healthy household.”*

The right of an adult to make choices for children comes with great responsibility. As indicated by key informant 4, below, it is important to understand why the choice will be in the best interest of the child and that decisions are part of facilitating a process of experiences that will result in the child feeling safe and protected.

KI4: *“I think to a certain extent, you do have the right to make choices, but we need to take into consideration as a child, you've got a limited capacity of understanding things for the global scale, meaning my role in your life is also to help facilitate the process of making decisions that will keep you safe and healthy. So sometimes to them, it feels horrible, and feels like you chopping their hands off and that they don't have anything that is theirs.”*

Most of the child participants indicated that although they are aware of their agency to choose where to live, they understand that this choice is often mitigated based on a deeper conviction that the Echo youth programme is in their best interest. However, they know that it was their choice to join the programme and likewise it is their choice to stay whether they even at times do not like the choices that are made for them.

CP2: *“I joined myself.”*

CP1: *“I could decide whether to leave or not, because it's not like, how can I put it, it's not like I'm forced to be here, but because I need it...”*

CP3: *“Ek het ‘n keuse, as ek wil loop kan ek gaan, maar dis nie die beste keuse nie.” [I have a choice, if I want to leave I’m allowed to go, but that is not the best choice.]*

CP3: *“Soos ek wil nie op die kamp gaan nie, hulle het die keuse gemaak ek moet nou op die kamp gaan.” [Like I don’t want to go on the camp, they made the choice and now I have to go to the camp.]*

CP3: *“Ander tyd is dit goed, ander tyd is dit sleg. Jy sien dit na die tyd.” [Sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s bad. You see it afterwards.]*

CP4: *“Yeah I have a choice in staying and I had a choice in coming here as well. I made the right choice.”*

CP5: *“I don’t have a choice, because I feel like if I value my parents’ decision, I value it so much, even if I feel like leaving, I wouldn’t just go because of a silly argument.”*

The findings confirm the principle of acting in the best interests of the child as captured in the Children’s Act 38 of 2005. Therefore, the best interest of the child is considered to be paramount in any matter concerning a child (StraussDaly, 2020). In 2013, the Committee on the Rights of the Child issued General Comment 13, in which it declared that article 3(1) of the CRC contains, amongst others, a substantive right which it defined as

The right of the child to have his or her best interests assessed and taken as a primary consideration when different interests are being considered in order to reach a decision on the issue at stake, and the guarantee that this right will be implemented whenever a decision is to be made concerning a child, a group of identified or unidentified children or children in general (CRC, 2013).

However, the findings point out that in the best interest of the child does not have to be in isolation of the child. In this study, findings emphasise the importance and value of consultation with children and facilitating a process where they ultimately experience inclusion and safety as a result of decisions made on their behalf. Children’s right to participation acknowledges that children are social actors in their own right and are entitled to be involved in decision-making in all matters that affect their lives, while taking into consideration their evolving capacity and best interests (O’Kane, 2013:1).

Sub-theme 5.2.3: Agency versus discipline

Key informants articulated that discipline is central to child agency. Boundaries for the children in the Echo youth programme are clear, while open conversation about the rules are still encouraged and the views of children are taken seriously. The motivation behind discipline entails the development of children with the ultimate goal of being happy and well-functioning.

KI1: *“Yes, they are aware. Children will often question things and this allows for a conversation about why certain things are the way they are. A child can also use this opportunity to make new suggestions which will be considered if they are reasonable and still allow for consistency in terms of discipline.”*

KI1: *“I think we need to remember that children would always want to push the boundaries and if you give them all the choice and allow them to do whatever they want to, it won’t go better with them. If we let them eat whatever they want to, we won’t have food towards the end of the month or if they don’t have to look after their clothes, they won’t have any clothes to wear. Sometimes their suggestions aren’t practical exactly by because they are still children.”*

KI2: *“I would just like to summarise. With freedom comes responsibility. The child must have the right to participate in their own development, but accompanied by this must be responsibility for choices and consequences.”*

Discipline is contextualised in relationships; this was discussed as an important factor in recognising children’s agency and showing them respect (see sub-theme 5.1.3). Discipline is applied in all aspects of the programme and integrated in the normal household functions. Discipline is also contextualised in understanding where the children come from, where they might not have had any boundaries other than to do what they want or had no choice because of a non-caring environment.

KI3: *“That’s complicated as we have to balance their development with consistency in discipline among the children. But Echo is all about relationship and there are conversations about these things and we*

realise that we need to be consistent but also protect the individuality of each child.”

K14: *“...because of the nature of my relationship with them, and how much time I spend with them, they know the boundaries, they're very, very aware of the things that I'll say and what I'll allow.”*

K15: *“Another big problem is that our children come from a variety of backgrounds that sometimes include abuse and neglect. This coupled with regular teenage development can lead to a lot of risky behaviour and this shows in what they want.”*

K13: *“I think we need to balance agency with the authority of house parents as they are still children growing to become adults. They aren't adults yet. We don't know the quality of the foundation they have and now we have to guide them to adulthood and teach them that it is okay to talk and have an opinion and negotiate, but this must happen in the context of discipline, love and relationship.”*

K14: *“You know, for some of them this is the first time they have grownups who have their long term best interest at heart. It is a bit of a culture shock. Your relational templates that you come into this space with, you know do serve as a little bit of a difficulty because you don't understand why you're not getting your way the whole time. You don't understand there are boundaries you must follow. You don't understand why you can't just chop and change your decisions about what you want to do. You don't understand why you have to go to therapy. You don't understand a lot of things, because for the first time now there is consistency and the turbulence that you come from doesn't gel well with this. It doesn't initially synchronise.”*

The child participants confirmed the use of discipline in the Echo youth programme. Boundaries are clear and the children realise that their choices and actions have consequences. Through discipline the children are taught functional tools to thrive as adults.

CP1: *“Everything works well for us because we get food every night, we go to bed every night at a certain time. Before 10’ o clock you must be in bed. We are not allowed to go out whenever we want to which is actually like a good thing because we can’t just go out by the gate and tell no one where you’re going because then you’ll be grounded. So, it’s a good thing that they actually have that rule, because then they can know where we are going, because if they know where we are going and anything happens they can’t get hold of us.”*

CP2: *“Yes, but it would depend on whether Buhle [house parent] agrees.”*

CP3: *“Ek dink as ons, om keuses te maak, as ons jong tieners, dis nie maklik nie, maar ons leer dit. Maar die ding is wat nie lekker is van die plek nie is, as jy ‘n keuse gemaak het en dis nie reg vir hulle nie, dan is dit mos nou verkeerd vir hulle, dan word ons gestraf omdat ons daai keuse gemaak het.” [I don’t think it’s easy to make choices as young teenagers, but we are learning but the thing that isn’t nice about this place, if you make a choice and it’s not okay with them, then it’s wrong according to them, then we get punished because we made that choice.]*

CP4: *“I’m not sure what they can do, because everything is so nice. We all get chances to do things, all the boys. Like [name] has gone to the farm with [name] to build stuff, next time I will go. He’s learning us to work. They are teaching us responsibility of being clean. If you’re room is dirty, you get punished.”*

Findings indicate that there is a clear understanding of rules and discipline among children, and when boundaries are overstepped, what the consequences thereof could be. In a human rights context, discipline is defined as the process of “optimising children’s understanding and fostering their evolving capacities to actualise their rights” (Durrant & Stewart-Tufescu, 2017:359). This is attained through agency in harmony with discipline. Parents or guardians have to model behaviour and utilise discipline as punishment when the behaviour is not followed. However, discipline is also coupled with rewards when the child acts appropriately (Psychology today, 2021).

3.9.1.8 Theme 6: Suggestions to recognise and respect children’s agency through their participation

Suggestions made by key informants and child participants to show recognition and respect towards children through their participation included having intentional discussions with the children allowing their input, remaining emotionally grounded during conflict situations, attending to the house parent-to-child ratio to ultimately improve the quality of relationships and level of participation, creating a neutral platform for intentional discussions, and finally, applying the principle of community in enabling the services that recognise and respect children’s agency through their participation. These findings will be discussed below as sub-themes.

Sub-theme 6.1: Intentional discussions

Intentional and open discussions about the children’s input are encouraged in an attempt to improve the children’s lives. Along with this input, the responsibility and consequences attached to children’s rights are enforced. Allowing the children to participate assists them in developing problem solving skills, responsibility and accountability.

K12: *“Yes, we have open conversations about this in the house. It isn’t only the decision of the social worker or the house parent. The culture of the houses is typically to include the children. We also try to teach them that with every right comes responsibility and consequences.”*

K13: *“We need intentional discussions and general intentionality to involve them. We need to ask the question of what can be done to make things better for them. We need to consider this for the future because it involves problem solving. We want them to take ownership of the house. They are here on a voluntary basis and that’s why we can hold them accountable.”*

The study’s findings resemble a mentoring focus in the Echo youth programme. Mentoring entails a relationship consisting of formal or informal processes in which the mentor provides intentional guidance, motivation and encouragement with the intention of empowerment (Reeves-Blurton, 2019). Roompact (2021) recommends three proposals when having intentional discussions about child agency and

participation, namely: focusing on basic counselling and listening skills; assisting children to go into purposeful conversations while encouraging adaptability; and communicating goals for the conversations.

Sub-theme 6.2: Remaining emotionally grounded

Key informants emphasise the necessity to remain emotionally grounded during conflict situations with the children. It includes reaching out to children in times of conflict, allowing them to voice their opinions as this may be what they need. It is important to maintain objectivity; this is ensured by weekly meetings and continuous WhatsApp discussions amongst the adults involved in the programme.

KI1: *“At times we can put more effort in protecting their rights even when they are naughty because during these times we are inclined not to. I think it may be good to even in these times to give them a chance and hear what they have to say.”*

KI2: *“Yes, because sometimes we get so angry that we don’t listen and all they probably need is to be heard in that situation.”*

KI4: *“But the best interest is not necessarily just determined by, you know, so we have these weekly meetings, as we speak about the children and, you know, we’ve got this WhatsApp group, where even if my own judgment could be clouded by my emotion, because I’m a human being. In that moment, the decision is very collaborative with other adults in the space.”*

Findings show the importance of programme leaders remaining connected to keep emotionally grounded and holding one another accountable for decisions and actions. The ability to maintain awareness of the here-and-now is considered a powerful skill and assists adults and children in their functioning Mount Vernon Family Therapy (MVFT) (2021). Frattaroli (2020) proposes methods to remain grounded including, practicing gratitude; taking a break, connecting with others; prioritising your mental and emotional health; and staying active.

Subtheme 6.3: Child and house parent ratio

The ratio of house parent to child plays an important role in the quality of relationship, ultimately determining the quality of input received by the children, as articulated by one key informant.

KI5: *“There needs to be a better ratio child:house parent. The better the relationship, the better the communication and the better we understand and respect the needs of the children.”*

Low child-to-adult ratios are favourable as small group sizes ensure enough one-on-one attention for every child; it caters for every child’s specific needs, resulting in a feeling of safety and security (ChildCare, 2021). There must be enough adults to supervise the children and to ensure that the children are safe from any dangers (NSPCC Learning, 2019).

Sub-theme 6.4: Platform for voicing opinions

Key informants and child participants suggested creating a platform where the children may feel heard and voice their opinions. This platform could be without the presence of the house parent(s) creating a neutral space with a facilitator that also has the children’s best interest at heart and confidentiality is respected. Furthermore, children’s agency should be limited to the areas where they display capacity. The child participants have a need for a meeting space where they can feel heard and give their input.

KI2: *“Yes, I think we can create more platforms for the children to voice their opinions. For example, in a neutral group where the house parents aren’t present, like Weirdos, where the facilitator still has the children’s best interest at heart.”*

KI3: *“I would think they don’t have too much of a say in the menu, but they should. However, their capacity doesn’t always allow for it. We need to determine the grey areas where they could have a say and agency. Children need a platform to say what they feel, even if it might not be in their best interest and we convince them otherwise.”*

KI4: *“...there is a space where they can express their disgruntlement with the functioning of the house, obviously, how it functions also is that it's quite confidential what they speak about. But I think from that space, they feel heard, as a grownup who has influence in their minds, that they telling all these things that they are unhappy with.”*

CP2: *“Maybe have like small meetings with us and each of us give our own idea.”*

CP3: *“Hulle moet maak dat ons in daai meeting saamsit en dan sê ons hoe ons voel.” [They must let us sit in the meeting and then we say how we feel.]*

The child participants explained their emotional reaction to adults who do not listen to their opinions. This included a feeling of disrespect, not being valued, not cared for, worthlessness and unimportance. One participant indicated that for some adults the approach to not care what a child thinks is acceptable, as adults' opinions are valued.

CP1: *“I feel like I'm not respected or valued.”*

CP2: *“That they might not really care what you have to say or bother with what your problem is.”*

CP4: *“I felt like I'm worth nothing. No one has to listen to me, because I'm not important.”*

CP5: *“It means you don't really care what I think, but it's fine because you're an adult.”*

The child participants described what it instils in children when an adult values a child's opinion and protects their right to participation. This includes feelings of respect, being heard, being helpful, happiness, being understood, being smart and finally, being important. One participant noted that it is normal for adults to respect his opinion.

CP3: *“Voel normaal.” [Feels normal.]*

CP1: *“For me I feel respected.”*

CP2: *“It makes me feel good that someone is actually there to listen to what I have to say and if they do something about what I’ve said then it might just benefit us, the children that are staying here.”*

CP4: *“It makes me feel happy, because no one usually listened to me. I had no say where I used to live in Cape Town. I couldn’t say anything. I was just there. I had to just listen. Now it’s different because the house parents understand me. They know how I feel already and they listen to me.”*

CP5: *“It makes me feel smart, I think. It makes me feel like I have something important to say.”*

Findings show the benefits that children experience when feeling respected and valued. Providing children with many opportunities to talk develop their language and conversation skills (Resources for Early Learning, 2021). Intentional discussions contribute greatly to the development of a child in that it fosters language development, relationship building, discovering the world, reasoning and understanding diversity (Smith, 2021). Launchpad (2021) proposes five strategies for engaging children in meaningful conversation, including finding opportunities in everyday activities; engaging a child in everything; speaking at their level of understanding; being open to talk about anything; and finally, being a good listener.

Sub-theme 6.5: Applying the principle of community

Findings emphasise the important role that the principle of community plays in the Echo youth programme. The availability of resources allows the Echo youth programme to provide for the rights of the children involved in the programme. As indicated in theme 2, the Echo youth programme engage medical professionals that render services for free. Furthermore, the programme also utilises government medical services, indicating the need for effective government relief in support of communities. The Echo youth programme has access to funds for educational purposes through Beeld Children’s Fund (cf. sub-theme 5.1.1). In further support of academic needs, students from the University of Pretoria volunteer as tutors for the children (cf. sub-theme 2.1). Other volunteers also assist the children with homework. Finally, a group of volunteers provide their time at no expense to

ultimately build relationships with the children in order to help them develop in different areas. The findings are reflected in the following quotes:

KI1: *“We have two doctors and a dentist who provide free consultations to our children so the basic medical needs are covered. One of the doctors even provides free medication. Should a child require more serious medical attention, we make use of government hospitals like Steve Biko Hospital.”*

KI2: *“We have an Edufund funded by Beeld Children’s fund and private donators that helps us to purchase school uniforms and stationary and any other education related needs.”*

KI4: *“...sometimes someone from the University of Pretoria, their students that come and help them with homework, and one of the house parents, he's the boy's house parent at the moment.”*

KI4: *“There is a group of people who are very invested in the children’s lives and their overall being, even in those spaces of making choices, agency and autonomy. You know, they are adults that guide them in it and they have active sincere relationships with the children. And it’s within those spaces also that I think they develop themselves.”*

The community principle emphasises the importance of the collective in creating an enabling environment of caring and support to assist the children to thrive; and the sharing of strengths and capacity to enable the children to thrive. A strengths-based approach advocates for the notion that all service delivery efforts should be aimed at assisting service users to discover and explore their strengths and resources (Weyers, 2011:23). Linking with the strengths-based approach, Patel (2015:87) suggests considering the capability approach which acknowledges the strengths and capabilities of service users and their right to be actively involved in their development. The Echo youth programme has mastered the principle of community by utilising available resources and ultimately approaching service delivery from a strengths-based approach, resulting in a community that works together in order to uphold the best interest of the child. “Ubuntu”– I am because we are – shapes the sense of self based on relationships with others, ultimately promoting group goals

above individual goals (Paulson, 2021). Through the principle of community and Ubuntu, the Echo youth programme has recognised the dignity of children and upheld their right to participate in matters affecting them.

3.10 SUMMARY

Chapter 3 provided an overview of the research methodology and the ethical considerations of the study. Several themes were discussed, which included factors such as children's involvement and participation in the various phases of a programme, different perspectives on the understanding of the child concept, vulnerability and protection and suggestions on how to recognise and respect children's agency in the design, planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluation of the Echo youth programme.

The next chapter presents the key findings, conclusions and recommendations from the study.

CHAPTER 4

KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter concludes the research study. It commences by considering the manner in which the research goal and objectives of the study were met; and presenting and reviewing the key findings and conclusions drawn from the study. Finally, recommendations will be made based on the findings of the study.

4.2 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The goal of the study was to explore and describe how children's agency was recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk in the case study of the Echo Youth Programme. The goal of the study was achieved through the following objectives:

Objective 1:

- To conceptualise and contextualise poverty and the environmental risks of children within a human rights-based framework.

This objective was achieved in Chapter 2 where poverty, and environmental risks were conceptualised and contextualised within a human rights-based framework (see sub-section 2.3). Poverty was defined in sub-section 2.4 as social and physical exclusion, a sense of powerlessness, exclusion from decision-making and lack of access to education, health care and clean and safe environments (Green, 2012:6). Poverty and environmental risk are interrelated and social and economic development must take environmental sustainability into account (see sub-section 2.7.1 and 2.7.2).

Objective 2:

- To explore and describe the goal and intended outcomes of the programmes to reduce children's poverty and environment risks.

This objective was addressed in Chapter 3. Participation and developing agency are key components of the Echo youth programme. Children's participation starts with their decision to join the Echo Youth Programme or not (see sub-theme 1.1). Participation is seen as the children's right and hence they have the opportunity to engage in the planning of activities and implementation as they are allowed to give their views on their experiences which present opportunities to evaluate the programme and suggest changes to the programme (see sub-themes 1.2-1.4). In Chapter 3, participants shared how the Echo youth programme facilitates access to children's right to education, health care, clean water and sanitation (see sub-themes 2.1-2.3), which shield them from poverty and environmental risks. Environmental risks pose a threat to all people, but especially children are considered being vulnerable, which ultimately affects their development - physically, socially and emotionally (UNICEF, 2011:1). The child participants provided suggestions to alleviate poverty and environmental risks (see sub-theme 3.2), such as arranging clean-up days. Building relationships is an important aspect of the Echo youth programme as relationships are the foundation for participation and influence the programme to align with the needs and strengths of the children. Participation in matters that affect them evokes positive feelings in the children, while, on the contrary, it effects them negatively when they do not feel equally engaged (see sub-theme 5.1.3). Children are empowered and learn skills by participating in different programme activities which develop their capabilities and agencies (see sub-theme 5.2.1).

Objective 3:

- To explore and describe how children are involved in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

This objective was achieved in Chapter 2 (see sub-section 2.6) from a literature perspective where it is stated that children's participation in decision making pertaining to matters impacting them is a key element in upholding basic human rights (Androff, 2016:41). The participation of children in their own development requires firstly, input in the process of planning programmes and secondly that they are capable of influencing decisions, which translates to all five phases of participation in a programme, namely conceptualisation, design, implementation,

monitoring and evaluation of the programme. Participation must be socially, economically and environmentally sustainable (see sub-section 2.7.3) in order to protect children from exclusion, poverty and environmental harm (UNICEF, 2011:5).

The objective was also achieved in Chapter 3 where participants provided practical examples of their understanding and involvement in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the Echo youth programme (see sub-themes 1.2-2.4). The participants explained their participation in planning various activities, such as leisure activities over weekends, as well as various extra-mural activities. O’Kane (2013:2) states that when children are involved in the planning, implementation and monitoring of programmes, an overall improvement of their social position is observed as their rights are respected and acknowledged in society. In sub-section 4.3, the child participants confirm their participation in all the phases of the programme, from planning to implementation, and from monitoring and evaluation to design. Although children have the right to freely participate, and know that their views will be heard and considered, recognising and respecting their agency in participation is balanced with what the Echo youth programme regards as being in the best interest of children to ensure a sustainable future for them.

Objective 4:

- To explore and describe the factors that influenced the recognition and respect/non-recognition and disrespect of children’s agency in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

The objective was achieved in Chapter 2. Factors that contribute to showing recognition and respect include the importance of having financial and human resources for programme activities, and the quality of relationships between adults and children (see sub-theme 5.1). Factors which contribute to showing disrespect and non-recognition of children’s agency, include children’s lack of capacity to always realise their right to participate; the best interest of the child may at times be prioritised above the child’s right to participate, and over emphasising children’s agency at the expense of discipline (see sub-theme 5.2). Suggestions made by key informants and child participants to show recognition and respect towards children through their participation included having intentional discussions with the children,

allowing their input, adults remaining emotionally grounded during conflict situations, attending to the ratio between house parent and children to improve the quality of relationships and the level of participation, creating a neutral platform for intentional discussions, and finally, applying the principle of community (see sub-theme 6.1 - 6.5).

Objective 5:

- To make recommendations on how children's agency can be recognised and respected in the conceptualisation, design, implementation and monitoring, and evaluation of the programme.

Objective 5 is discussed in this chapter in section 4.4 below. The objective was informed by the literature study and suggestions made by participants and given in Chapter 3 (see themes 5 and 6) on factors that influence child recognition and respect.

4.3 KEY FINDINGS OF THE STUDY AND CONCLUSIONS

The key findings and conclusions drawn from the findings will be discussed in this section. The respective findings will be followed by the conclusion on the particular finding.

- Findings reveal that participation starts with the application and screening process when a child is interviewed to assess whether he/she meets the criteria to join the Echo youth programme. Various adults or systems involved in the child's life may apply for a child to join the Echo youth programme. A pertinent reason for a child to join Echo Youth Development relates to not having any alternatives due to the particular circumstances the child is faced with. However, it remains the child's decision to join Echo Youth Development or not. Informed assent is expected from the children before they join Echo Youth Development.
 - It can be concluded that children's right to participation is respected from the inception of their involvement with Echo Youth Development. The Echo youth programme embraces the concept of recognising children's

agency without denying their potential vulnerability and need to be protected.

- Child participation in the programme allows children to be respected as individuals based on their needs, strengths and personalities. Children's participation also serves as monitoring and evaluation mechanism for the programme as it allows Echo Youth Development to adapt the programme according to the input and needs of the children. Some children participate more spontaneously, whereas others require more encouragement. Participation is both organic and intentional as determined by the programme outline and activities. The participation in some activities is not considered optional as it contributes to the holistic wellbeing of the children. There is however, room for negotiation within this framework. Children's emotional maturity is vital when considering their participation in the programme and therefore the level of agency and participation is matched with the child's emotional age. The children are of the opinion that they have the right to verbalise their input regarding activities and the programme at large. Initiative is also encouraged during these phases through the design of activities. Finally, children are requested to participate in activities for a minimum period of three months before determining whether the activity will be continued with in order to ensure an informed decision.
 - The programme's approach to participation is empowering in that it meets the children where they are on their level. Children are encouraged and supported to develop confidence and agency at their own pace and level. The programme's required three months engagement before a decision is made on continuing with an activity or not, teaches children the value of experience and reflection in order to make informed and responsible decisions.
- Findings show that children are included in both the planning and implementation phases of Echo's Youth Programme. Children's engagement in the implementation phase of the programme includes giving feedback on the activities of the programme, which implies engagement in the monitoring and evaluation phases of the programme. Although children have some

choices in programme activities, others are compulsory, such as attending school and engaging in the supporting Eduboot Academic Programme. Children are financially supported with regard to their educational needs, including stationary, school clothes, extra classes and extra-mural activities.

- It can be concluded that the children's participation and input are embedded in all the phases of the Echo youth programme. Starting with engagement in the planning phase through to the implementation phase, engaging in ongoing feedback on activities, which relates to the monitoring and evaluation phase, which in turn, influences the design of the programme. Although children have the right to freely participate, and know that their views will be heard and considered, it does not mean that all their suggestions will be accepted to amend the programme. Recognising and respecting children's agency in participation is balanced with what Echo Youth Development regards as being in the best interest of the children to ensure a sustainable future for them.
- Through well-developed partnerships within the community and access to government services, Echo Youth Development provides the children with a variety of services, including comprehensive health care. Echo Youth Development has a network of medical professionals, including doctors, a dentist, a gynaecologist, psychologists and psychiatrists that provide pro bono medical services for less serious health problems. In the case of health problems that require more serious attention, Steve Biko Academic Hospital and Weskoppies Hospital assist the children. Churches, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and volunteers, among others, are involved in rendering services to the children.
 - The Echo youth programme is a holistic, trans-disciplinary programme that provides a wide range of services to facilitate the wellbeing of children. The programme is developed to deal with past experiences, current challenges, and shaping a vision for the future.
- Findings reveal that children are protected against poverty and environmental risks in the Echo youth programme. They are provided for in their basic needs and have access to a clean and safe environment. The children are actively

involved in keeping their environment clean and healthy. They have individual chores in the house. The programme supports family reunification services, and therefore visits to family members are permitted in the case of non-violent exposure. However, when children pay visits to their families, they could be re-exposed to poverty and environmental risks where they have originally come from such as lack of clean water, sanitation, and food. Mitigating factors are put into place for children's home visits such as keeping the visits short and sending them home with food parcels. Participants' suggestions to mitigate poverty and environmental risks included identifying the causes and implications of poverty, finding donations, reducing pollution, and organising environmental clean-ups. The need for communities to work together in order to address poverty and environmental risks was also accentuated.

- In conclusion, the Echo youth programme recognises children's agency in mitigating poverty and environmental risks through participation. Furthermore, the programme facilitates opportunities to learn and apply strategies to mitigate poverty and environmental risks in the children's living environment and the broader community.
- Participants had various views on the child concept, ranging from being vulnerable and in need of care and protection, while also having agency to make meaningful choices. Most of the participants perceive children as individuals who are able to give meaningful opinions while recognising their need for protection. The development of agency must be coupled with empowerment to ensure the responsible use of such agency. In this process, emphasis is placed on the value of quality relationships.
 - It can be concluded that the Echo youth programme recognises and respects children's agency while acknowledging their potential vulnerability and need for protection.
- The findings show different ways in which children's agency can be recognised and respected while participating in different programme activities and phases of the programme. Financial and human resources, as well as quality relationships between adults and children are contributing factors in

showing children recognition and respect. Factors that contribute to showing non-recognition and disrespect toward children include children's inability to assert their right to participation, upholding children's agency at the cost of serving their best interests, and the imbalance between upholding children's agency and exercising discipline.

- To conclude, showing recognition and respect towards child agency, involves taking into consideration the needs and requests from the children, programme facilitators and relevant role players. Recognising and respecting children's agency is reflected in engaging them in all the phases of the Echo Youth Programme.

4.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate that Echo Youth Development already employs a number of strategies successfully in engaging children in the programme. Based on the findings and conclusions, the researcher consolidates strategies in the following recommendations on how children's agency can be further recognised and respected in the conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes/interventions that contribute to reducing poverty and environmental risks.

4.4.1 Empower children to participate and develop agency

The Echo youth programme should intentionally increase the opportunities for empowerment and skills development of children to see themselves as individuals with agency and capacity to exercise their right to participation. Empowerment and skills development should occur organically during the performance of day-to-day tasks or intentionally during educational and household activities. Mentoring by peers plays an important role in strengthening children's efforts in developing resilience and agency.

4.4.2 Develop communication platforms

Findings indicated the need to intentionally discuss child agency and participation amongst adults involved in the programme in order to allow and expand opportunities for the children's input. It is recommended that adults continue with

their WhatsApp conversations and arrange face-to-face meetings as necessary in supporting one another to initiate activities that facilitate empowerment and consequently, children's agency and participation. Furthermore, it is recommended that children become more deliberately involved on a daily, informal basis by casually involving them in conversations with the adult role players in the programme. That will provide opportunities to the adults to reflect on their engagement with the children on different levels. Training of house parents and volunteers regarding the promotion of children's agency and participation can strengthen their actions to recognise and respect children's agency and participation in programme activities. Creating a neutral platform where children can freely express their opinions without fear of judgement is essential to show recognition and respect to children. Knowing that the sharing of views on programme activities does not necessarily mean adopting them into the programme, however, creates a safe space for children to openly share their views and reflect on their inputs in contributing to the programme.

4.4.3 Practice mindfulness during conflict situations

Findings emphasise the need for house parents to remain emotionally grounded during conflict situations. Likewise, children have to be encouraged to voice their thoughts and opinions during conflict episodes, but within boundaries that show respect to others and themselves. The act of merely being heard – also in times of conflict and emotional episodes, allows children to develop agency and shape their participation. House parents and other adults involved with the children should keep one another accountable to practice mindfulness during emotional episodes. It is further recommended that children be permitted to communicate their opinions after highly emotional incidences and that this right be communicated to them in advance, which they can learn to practice with dignity.

It is recommended that staff and volunteers undergo debriefing sessions at least once a month and that professionals facilitating such services be independent and preferably not closely related to the children or adults at Echo Youth Development in any way. Debriefing is essential to remain focused and to recognise and respect children's agency and feel comfortable when children freely share their views and emotions. It provides the necessary safety to staff and volunteers to develop a

trusting relationship with the facilitator, thus allowing them to experience debriefing as essential and valuable.

4.4.4 Apply the principle of community

Applying the principle of community results in a broader community of services available to Echo Youth Development to strengthen them in their vision to provide for the overall wellbeing and a secure future for the children. Findings indicate that the Echo youth programme utilises volunteers based on various volunteering opportunities. These opportunities create different support structures that should be used in a manner that optimally benefits the Echo youth programme and the children, but also the community through engaging the children in community activities. Despite their own circumstances, children indicated that they would mitigate poverty and environmental risks by providing donations to the poor, work together as a community and finally, to clean up the environment and pollute less.

Creating awareness for a clean and healthy environment should be an ongoing activity that the Echo youth programme can take on to reduce environmental risks for the children while promoting environmental justice. Furthermore, Echo Youth Development can work with volunteers and, in addition, partner with other organisations that do outreach work related to mitigating poverty and environmental risks in broader society, so that the children can join their excursions to communities where they can contribute and, in doing so, learn to become responsible citizens.

The findings affirmed the value of quality relationships between children and adults (house parent, staff, volunteers, among other role players) as it develops trust and facilitates children's agency and capacity to participate. Therefore, it is recommended that the house parent-to-child ratio must be aligned to facilitate trusting relationships. In addition, it may be helpful to involve more volunteers to assist house parents with the workload to free up their time to spend more quality time with the children. These initiatives can be driven through regular management meetings with house parents to assess their work load and needs.

4.4.5 Further research

Findings of this study and literature indicate ongoing debates regarding how to balance children's agency with their capacity to participate. Further research can be

done to determine how this gap can be closed by recognising and respecting children for their ability to participate while at the same time empowering them to do so.

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ANNEXURE A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY



November 2021

Consent to Participate in Research Study

Dear Ms. L Vosloo,

Echo Youth Development hereby give informed consent to Ms. Liesel Vosloo to conduct her research titled: "Children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk: Case study of Echo Youth Development" at our organization.

We are fully aware of the goals of the study, the procedure, risks and discomfort, benefits, participation rights, confidentiality and anonymity as outlined by Ms. L Vosloo.

We look forward to participating in this study.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Reitz", is written over a horizontal line.

Kind regards

Rochelle Reitz

Social worker

(10-37989)

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ANNEXURE B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – CHILD PARTICIPANTS

Goal of the study: The goal of the study is to explore and describe how children’s agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk in the Youth Programme of PEN [To determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and dangers in the environment.]

Participant number: CP

Biographical information

Male: Female:

How old are you?

Are you in school? Yes No

If yes, what grade are you in?

If no, what are you currently doing?

.....

How long have you been involved in the programme/intervention? years..... months

Questions:

1. Can you tell me what the programme/intervention is all about and what it means to you?
2. How did you get involved in the programme/intervention?
 - Could you decide for yourself whether you wanted to join and do you have a choice to stay in the programme or not?
3. How does the programme/intervention help you to deal with problems in your life? [If vague, prompt what kind of problems they have in relation to poverty and environment risks such as pollution; no access to clean water, poor sanitation and violence).
4. How does this programme/intervention help you with
 - Your school work?
 - Taking better care of your health?
 - Learning about clean water?
 - How to have a safe and clean environment?
5. Tell me about your participation in the programme/intervention. How do you participate, and what are the things you do?

6. What children's rights do you think the programme/intervention protect?
 - How does the programme/intervention respect your right to participate and have a say in what the programme/intervention should look like and do for you?
7. What is your experience of how adults in the programme/intervention see a child?
 - A child is a person who is helpless and must be protected. Adults know best what a child needs and should take decisions for her/him.
 - A child is a person who have ideas on how to approach and resolve society's problems such as poverty and unsafe and unhealthy environments. A child needs an opportunity to choose and decide what she/he wants and what is best for her-/himself now and in the future. A child wants to be recognised and respected as a person who can speak for her-/himself and make decisions about things that involve them. [We call this agency.]
 - A child is a person who needs protection but who also have opinions that adults should listen to and respect. [Agency]
8. What of the programme/intervention do you think work well for the children, or do not work well for them, and why do you say so?
9. Have you ever been asked to give your ideas on any aspect of the programme/intervention – e.g. what the programme should include and do for you; or what you like or don't like about the programme?
 - If so, in what way did you feel these ideas were heard and taken seriously by adults?
10. Do you have any example(s) where you had the opportunity to share your ideas on any aspect of the programme/intervention and your contribution was heard and considered / or not heard and considered?
 - How does it make you feel if adults listen to your ideas and take them seriously?
 - How does it make you feel if adults do not listen to your ideas or not take them seriously?
11. What are the factors (things) that make it possible or difficult for you to participate in the programme/intervention in a way that you feel you, and your contributions are important and appreciated?
12. What can the organisation do to involve children more in the planning and decisions on the programme/intervention so that it can contribute to a better life for you?
 - What should the programme focus more on to reduce children's poverty and make the environment cleaner and safer for them?
13. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me on how children can contribute to the programme/intervention?

Thank you for participating in the study.

ANNEXURE C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE – KEY INFORMANTS

Goal of the study: The goal of the study is to explore and describe how children’s agency is recognised and respected in programmes/interventions aimed at reducing poverty and environmental risk in the Youth Programme of PEN.

Participant number: KI

Biographical information

Male: Female:

How long have you been with the organisation? years

How long have you been involved in the programmes/interventions?years.....

monthsIn what age category do you fall?

20-25 Years	26-30 years	31-35 Years	36-40 years	41-45 years	46-50 years	51-55 years	56+ years
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In what phase of the programmes/interventions are you involved? (Tick all applicable.)

Planning / conceptualisation	Design of content	Implementation	Monitoring	Evaluation
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Questions:

1. What is the goal and the intended outcomes of the programme/intervention for the children?
2. How do the children get involved in the programme?
 - What choices do the children have with regard to staying or leaving the programme/intervention if they so which?
3. To what extent does the programme/intervention help children to ease the burden of poverty and possible environmental risks (such as pollution; no access to clean water, poor sanitation and violence).
4. In what way does the programme/intervention promote the children’s access and rights to
 - Education
 - Health care
 - Clean water,
 - Sanitation, and
 - A safe and clean environment?
5. How would you describe the children’s participation in the programme/intervention?
 - Do they participate out of their own initiative or only if they are requested, or told to participate?

6. Do you think children have a right to participate and make decisions on the programme/intervention that affect them?
 - If so, are the children aware of their right to participate and influence decisions on the programme/intervention and why do you say so?
7. How do you see and approach the 'child' concept?
 - As a person who is vulnerable and who should be protected.
 - As a person who has the ability to make meaningful choices and decisions about events that influence her or his life today and in the future [agency].
 - As a person who needs protection and who have agency.
8. To what extent would you say the children in your programme/intervention have agency if you look at their participation and involvement in decisions that affect them? The involvement refers to any one or more phases of the programme/intervention that is, planning/ conceptualisation of (new) ideas, the design of the content of the programme, the format and implementation of the programme/intervention, and the monitoring and evaluation of the programme/intervention.
9. Are children asked to give their views on the programme/intervention and if, in what way are these views considered and respected, or not?
10. Could you share any example where children have made inputs to the programme/intervention which were considered and respected, or not, in any of the phases of the programme/intervention [planning/ conceptualisation, the design, the implementation, the monitoring and evaluation].
11. What factors make it possible or difficult to recognise and respect children's contributions and decisions (agency) in relation to the planning/ conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of a programme/intervention intended to reduce their poverty and environmental risks?
12. What in your view must change to recognise and respect children's contributions, decisions (agency) and participation in the respective phases [planning/ conceptualisation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation] of the programme/intervention to reduce poverty and environmental risks?
13. Do you have any further comments that you would like to share on the topic that may benefit my study?

Thank you for participating in the study.

ANNEXURE D: APPROVAL BY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE



Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho



9 December 2021

Dear Ms L Vosloo,

Project Title: Children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk: Case study of Echo Youth Development
Researcher: Ms L Vosloo
Supervisor(s): Prof A Lombard
Department: Social Work and Criminology
Reference number: 11254930 (HUM013/0619 Line 1) (Amendment)
Degree: Masters

Thank you for the application to amend the existing protocol that was previously approved by the Committee.

The revised / additional documents were reviewed and **approved** on 09 December 2021 along these guidelines, further data collection may therefore commence (where necessary).

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the amended proposal. Should your actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,



Prof Karen Harris
Chair: Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof KL Harris (Chair); Mr A Bizos; Dr A-M de Beer; Dr A dos Santos; Dr P Gutura; Ms KT Govinder Andrew; Dr E Johnson; Dr D Krige; Prof D Maree; Mr A Mohamed; Dr I Noomé; Dr J Okeke; Dr C Puttergill; Prof D Reyburn; Prof M Soer; Prof E Taljard; Ms D Mokalapa

ANNEXURE E: INFORMED CONSENT FORM – PARENTS/GUARDIANS



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA



06/06/2019

Researcher: Liesel Vosloo
Tel: 083 261 6964
E-mail: lieselkie@gmail.com

INFORMED CONSENT FORM Parents/Guardians

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Liesel Vosloo. I am a master's student at the University of Pretoria in the programme MSW Social Development and Policy. I am doing a study to determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and environmental risk. In this study, I would like to talk to your child to hear how they see their involvement and participation in the programme to ensure that they benefit as intended by the programme. Your child will have to opportunity to say whether he/she wants to participate in the study, and whatever the decision, it will be respected. If they are willing to participate, they will sign an assent form that contain the following information.

Title of the study

Children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk: Case study of PEN's Youth Programme

Goal of the study

To explore and describe how children's agency influence reducing poverty and environmental risk in the Youth Programme of PEN.

What will happen in the study?

If you give permission for your child to join the study, I will talk to him/her one-on-one, asking questions in relation to the goal of the study, that is; how they see their involvement and participation recognised in shaping the programme so that they can benefit from it to reduce their poverty and environmental risks. Your child will be one of five children in the programme that I will be interviewing. The discussion should be between 45 and 60 minutes. With the child's permission, I will be voice recording the conversation so that I do not miss any important information that he/she shares. The interview will take place at PEN on a date and time agreed with the organisation.

Risks and discomforts

There will be no risks or danger to your child to participate in the study. Your child will know that he/she will have the freedom to not answer any question if they do not wish to respond too. I will be available after the interview to talk to the child on his/her experience of the interview. If needed, I will refer the child to speak to Smangele Bhengu, senior social worker at PEN.

Are there any benefits for joining the study?

Your child will not receive any money or gifts for his/her participation. The study is intended to recognise that children's views are important and that they should be listened at to ensure that programmes that are designed and implemented for them, serve their best interests.

Participants' rights

Even if you give permission for your child to participate in the study, he/she will still have the choice to indicate whether he/she wants to participate. If your child agrees to participate, he/she will sign an assent form to indicate that he/she fully understands that participation is voluntary, and what his/her rights are. If your child agrees to participate, but at any time during the interview, decide to withdraw, he/she will be welcome to do so without any consequences.

Confidentiality

The information that your child will share with me, will be treated confidentially. Nobody will be able to see which information was provided by which participant. I will use the information obtained from the study to write a research report for submission to the University of Pretoria and for academic journals. Your child's name, as in the case of all the other participants' names, will not be displayed in any of these documents. I will give participants an imaginary name to protect their identity. When the study is complete, I will submit all my research information to the University of Pretoria for safe keeping for 15 years where after it will be destroyed. If data is used again, it will be for research purposes.

Inquiries

If you have any questions or want to discuss any aspect of the research with me, you are welcome to call me on 083 261 6964 or send me an e-mail at: lieselkie@gmail.com.

CONSENT DECLARATION BY PARENT/GUARDIAN

I, _____, hereby give permission for my child,
_____ (write name of child) to participate in this study.

Signature parent/guardian

Date

Signature researcher

Date

ANNEXURE F: INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY – KEY INFORMANTS



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA



06/06/2019

Researcher: Liesel Vosloo
Tel: 083 261 6964
E-mail: lieselkie@gmail.com

INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY: KEY INFORMANTS

Dear Participant,

My name is Liesel Vosloo. I am a master's student at the University of Pretoria in the programme MSW Social Development and Policy. I am doing a study to determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and environmental risk. Your participation in the study will assist me to understand the topic and achieve the goal of my study.

Title of the study: Children's agency in reducing poverty and environmental risk: Case study of PEN's Youth Programme

Goal of the study: To explore and describe how children's agency influence reducing poverty and environmental risk in the Youth Programme of PEN.

Procedures: The study will use one-on-one interviews to collect data from participants. Each interview is expected to take approximately one hour. The interviews will be tape recorded with your permission. The tape recordings will be transcribed for purposes of data analysis. Only the researcher and the study supervisor will have access to the tapes and transcripts which will be stored in a secure place by the University of Pretoria for a period of 15 years. If data is used again, it will be for research purposes.

Risks and discomforts: There are no known risks and discomforts that may be endured by participants in this study. The participants will be debriefed by me after the interview. If needed, they will be referred to the senior social worker, Smangele Bhengu, of the organisation to discuss any discomfort that may have developed during the interview.

Benefits: Participants will not receive any incentives for being involved in the study. The study will benefit the participants indirectly in that they will contribute to social work knowledge regarding social work and environmental justice.

Participants' rights: Participation in the study is voluntary and participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any question that they do not wish to respond to.

Confidentiality and anonymity: Information collected in the study will be treated confidentially and the names of participants will not appear in the research report or the scientific journal in which the results will be published. Findings will not be presented in a way that could be directly linked to any specific participant.

Person to contact: If participants have questions or concerns relating to the study, they may contact the researcher at 083 261 6964 or email her at lieselkie@gmail.com.

Declaration

I,, understand my rights as a research participant, and I voluntarily consent to participate in this study. I understand what the study is about and how and why it is being conducted.

Signature participant

Date

Signature researcher

Date

ANNEXURE G: ASSENT FORM – CHILDREN



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA



01/06/2019

ASSENT FORM: CHILDREN

Dear Participant

My name is Liesel Vosloo. I am a master's student at the University of Pretoria in the programme MSW Social Development and Policy. I am working with other students in a study to determine how children are engaged and participating in programmes that are intended for them to reduce poverty and dangers in the environment. We involve children in the study, and I chose to use your programme for my study. Please read carefully through this form because if you agree to join the study, you will have to say so in writing.

What is a research study?



A research study is a way to find out new information about something. Nobody can force you to participate in a research study if you do not want to. You therefore have a choice to participate in the study or not and if you choose not to participate, that is OK.

If you join the study what will then happen?

If you agree to participate in the study, I will talk to you for about 45 to 60 minutes at a place where you feel comfortable to sit and talk. I will ask you questions on the programme that you are engaged in. Questions will be about whether you get the opportunity to tell what you like or do not like about the programme, what it means to you to be in the programme; whether joining in the programme has made a difference in your or your family's live or contributed to any changes in the environment. You will also be asked to say how you think children should be engaged to make sure that their views and ideas are included and respected in programmes that are intended to reduce poverty and environmental dangers.

I will make notes when we talk, but it will be hard for me to talk and write at the same time. If you allow me, I would like to voice record the interview. I will then listen to the recording and type everything that you and I said. If you want to, I can play the recording back to you and /or let you read the manuscript (my notes) or read it with you, to make sure that you feel happy about what we have talked about. The voice recording and all my typed notes on the interview will be kept safely at the University of Pretoria for 15 years.

Is there anything to be afraid of?



There is nothing to be afraid of in participating in the study. The researcher does not have any intention to cause harm to you. If you do feel that the researcher asked or say something that may hurt you, you can speak to the coordinator in charge of the programme or anyone else in the programme that you know you can trust. Remember that you can decide at any time to stop participating in the study. If you do, nothing will happen to you.

Are there any benefits in joining the study?



You will receive no money or gifts if you participate in the study. If you agree to participate in the study, you will help me to understand how children participate in programmes that affect them. That will further help me to find better ways to include children's views and ideas in programmes that is intended to reduce poverty and dangers in the environment.

Do you have rights in this study?



Yes, you have. Even if your parent or guardian gave permission that you can participate in the study, it is still your choice, and nobody can force you to participate if you do not want to. Even if you agree to participate, you still have the choice to excuse yourself anytime if you do not want to continue. Furthermore, you have the right to not answer any question that make you feel uncomfortable. No one will be upset if you do not want to participate in the study and you will not be punished if you decide not to participate. Children's rights are very important.

Who will know that you participated in the study?



Your parents or guardian will know that you may join the study because they will give their permission that I may ask you to join the study. However, they will also know that it is still your own choice and that you will have to agree if you want to participate. The coordinator of the programme at the organisation will also know that you may participate in the study as he/she will provide me with the names of children that I could approach as possible participants. If you decide to participate, your parents or the organisation will not know what you have said to me. You can choose an imaginary name, so if I write about the findings of the study, nothing that you said will be linked to your name. Your identity will thus be protected. Only the researcher will know what you have said, and her study supervisor will have access to the voice recordings and notes on the interview.

What if you have any questions?



You can ask any questions that you may have about the study. You can find me on my mobile phone at: 083 261 6964 or email me at lieselkie@gmail.com.

Would you like to participate in this study?

_____ Yes,  I will participate in the study.

_____ No,  I do not want to participate in the study.

_____ Participant

_____ Signature

_____ Date

_____ Researcher

_____ Signature

_____ Date