



Enabling early childhood care and education (ECCE) managers and practitioners to navigate the complexities of the function shift: A PALAR approach

KJ Thakalekoala

 **orcid.org/0009-0004-2726-5292**

Dissertation accepted for the degree *Magister Education* in
Special Needs Education at the North-West University

Supervisor: Prof Lesley Wood
Co-supervisor: Dr Andri Schoonen

Graduation: July 2025

DECLARATION

I, **Koenane Joseph Thakalekoala**, declare that the research reported in this dissertation is my own work, except for parts that are acknowledged and cited accordingly. I confirm that no part of this dissertation has been submitted for examination to any other educational institution or is concurrently being submitted by another student at any other university.



Signed:

Date: November 2024.....

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I give all thanks to God Almighty, my Ancestors and all the individuals who made this study possible. Your unmatched support, guidance, patience and encouragement have been invaluable. In particular, I extend my deepest gratitude to my most exceptional supervisors. Prof. Lesley Wood, your wisdom, patience and prompt responses have been very instrumental throughout this journey. Dr. Andri Schoonen, thank you for believing in me, even during moments when I doubted my capabilities. Your kindness, guidance and unwavering encouragement kept me going. I am deeply grateful to the ALS team I worked with, the ECCE managers and practitioners: Thembeke Matsemela, Rebaone Tsintsiri, Mmule Seakgosing, Mamonkwe Kate Makhubu, Mme Kgomo Tshupe, Refiloe Mercy Kgokong and Boitumelo Caroline Mataboge. Thank you for your insightful contributions, experience, dedication and participation in this study. I would also like to express my gratitude to the ETDP SETA, for your financial support, which made this study possible. And Nosipho, thank you for always making ends meet.

To my family and friends, especially my lovely wife (Irene), I cannot imagine how I would have accomplished this without your support. Thank you for your patience, encouragement and sacrifices. To my mother-in-law (Mme Puleng), thank you for taking care of our children when the journey got tougher. To my siblings and father (Ntate Mohau), *ke leboha haholo Bataung*. To my beautiful kids (Hlalele le Hlalefo), thank you for your patience and *understanding*. To my late mother, I am striving to make you proud. Thank you for your guidance and protection. To my colleagues in the ECD unit, especially my considerate manager (Mme Vicky), thank you for your support, care, encouragement, and shared moments of laughter.

From the depths of my heart, I am profoundly grateful to everyone who has walked this journey with me. Your encouragement, trust and unwavering support of my vision have made all this possible. I am forever grateful.

ABSTRACT

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) is a crucial phase in a child's life that lays the foundation for holistic development. When nurtured well, it enables children to prosper throughout life and helps them develop into adults who contribute positively to the socio-economic development of the country. Yet, early childhood education remains one of the least developed sectors, characterised by poor infrastructure, underqualified staff, a lack of specialised programmes, limited access to quality services, and a lack of monitoring and support. To bring about improvement in the quality of and access to ECCE, a shift of responsibility for the function from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education took place in April 2022. This function shift aims to professionalise the ECCE sector, which is largely privately owned and informal. However, those that it affected the most, the ECCE managers and practitioners, were largely unprepared. This study explores their experiences related to the function shift and attempts to help them navigate the changes it requires.

I approached this study through participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) methodology. Through PALAR principles, I aimed to establish a collaborative relationship with ECCE managers and practitioners in a semi-rural context. I recruited seven participants who were working in the field, two practitioners and five managers of ECD centres. We formed an action learning set and met weekly for two hours at a time. Data was collected through a combination of transcripts of our discussions and creative and visual methods, including drawings, collages and model building. I also kept a reflective diary that I used throughout the study to reflect on the process and progress, and my own learning. These various methods enabled participants to express themselves effectively in a playful and interactive manner. Guided by critical action learning theory, participants worked collaboratively to identify and navigate the complexities of the function shift.

Five key themes emerged through the two PALAR cycles: 1) Participants' lack of knowledge, uncertainty and resistance towards the function shift, 2) Lack of support and training for ECCE managers and practitioners, 3) Emotional and financial challenges, 4) Competitive tendencies delaying collaboration and progress, and 5) Recognising the potential of collaborating to navigate the complexities of the function shift. This last theme emerged in cycle two and enabled them to develop specific actions to address the problems identified in cycle one. These actions included 1) the formation of support groups and promotion of teamwork, 2) promoting stakeholder involvement, 3) ensuring compliance and financial stability, 4) conducting further research, and 5) improving service delivery. Participants collaboratively generated a plan of action with timelines. This included an establishment of a hub that they named Rekopantswe. Participants

established this hub to enable each other to navigate the complexities of the function shift, and further maximise the benefits thereof. Through this hub, participants can collectively advocate for relevant ECCE sector support to promote sustainability in the sector.

This study contributes to improving the practice of ECCE and informs policy in that it highlights the need improved communication from government. It indicates the importance of practitioners forming communities of practice to collaboratively address sector challenges for equitable and inclusive support and monitoring. The study further showed how action learning can enable practitioners and managers to work together to learn with and from each other to support continuous professional development.

Keywords:

Collaboration, critical action learning, early childhood care and education; participatory action learning and action research; professional development; sustainable development.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Action Learning	(AL)
Action Learning Set	(ALS)
Action Research	(AR)
African National Congress	(ANC)
Basic Education Laws Amendment	(BELA)
Critical Action Learning	(CAL)
Critical Transformative Paradigm	(CTP)
Department of Basic Education	(DBE)
Department of Health	(DoH)
Department of Local Governance	(DLG)
Department of Social Development	(DSD)
DG Murray Trust	(DGMT)
Early Childhood Care and Education	(ECCE)
Early Childhood Development	(ECD)
Early Learning Programmes	(ELPs)
National Curriculum Framework	(NCF)
National Development Plan	(NDP)
National Early Learning Development Standards	(NELDS)
National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy	(NIECDP)
National Integrated Plan for ECD	(NIPECD)
Non-Governmental Organisations	(NGOs)

National Qualification Framework	(NQF)
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)	
Participatory Action Learning and Action Research	(PALAR)
Participatory Action Research	(PAR)
Republic of South Africa	(RSA)
South African Integrated Programme of Action	(SAIPA)
Sustainable Development Goal	(SDG)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION	I
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	II
ABSTRACT.....	III
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	V
CHAPTER 1	1
OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Background and rationale.....	2
1.3 Guiding research questions.....	6
1.3.1. Primary/guiding research question.....	6
1.3.2. Secondary research questions.....	6
1.4 Theoretical framework.....	7
1.5 Research methodology	7
1.5.1. Research paradigm	8
1.5.2. Research design: Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)	8
1.5.2.1 Research methods.....	9
1.6 Validity.....	10
1.7 Ethical considerations.....	11
1.8 Chapter summary	11
1.9 Outline of Chapters	12

CHAPTER 2 13

A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL

	FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY	13
2.1	Introduction.....	13
2.2	Positioning ECCE in a Global Context	13
2.3	ECCE in the Republic of South Africa (RSA)	14
2.4	ECCE transformation in RSA	15
2.5	The administration of ECCE in RSA before 2022	17
2.6	The ECCE function shift.....	18
2.7	Current challenges facing the ECCE sector	21
2.7.1.	Infrastructure	21
2.7.2.	Nutrition for children.....	21
2.7.3.	ECCE staff and qualifications.....	22
2.7.4.	Limited access to quality ELPs	22
2.7.5.	Economic environment	23
2.8	Action learning (AL) as a theoretical framework	24
2.8.1.	Defining action learning	24
2.8.2.	Aims of action learning.....	25
2.8.3.	Components of action learning	26
2.9	Chapter summary	28

CHAPTER 3 29

A THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1	Introduction.....	29
3.2	Research Methodology	30

3.2.1.	Research paradigm	30
3.2.2.	Research design: Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)	31
3.3	Research methods.....	37
3.3.1.	Participant recruitment.....	37
3.3.2.	Data generation strategies.....	39
3.3.3.	Data analysis	43
3.4	Validity.....	46
3.5	Ethical considerations.....	47
3.5.1.	Permission and informed consent.....	47
3.5.2.	Anonymity and confidentiality.....	48
3.6	Chapter summary	49
CHAPTER 4 50		
	DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS	50
4.1	Introduction.....	50
4.2	Discussion of the themes and sub-themes that emerged	50
4.3	Theme 1: Participants' lack of knowledge, uncertainty and resistance towards the function shift	51
4.4	Theme 2: Lack of support and training for ECCE managers and practitioners	57
4.5	Theme 3: Emotional and financial challenges set against sustainability and survival.....	62
4.6	Theme 4: Competitive tendencies delaying collaboration and progress ...	65
4.7	Theme 5: Recognising the potential of collaborating to navigate the complexities of the function shift	68

4.8	Implications of collaboration	80
4.9	Chapter summary	81
CHAPTER 5		82
CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION ON LEARNING		82
5.1	Introduction.....	82
5.2	Revisiting the research questions.....	82
5.3	Implications of the findings	83
5.4	Questions emanating from this study for future exploration	85
5.5	Limitations and challenges of the study.....	86
5.6	Personal reflection on learning	87
5.6.1.	As a researcher.....	87
5.7	Contribution of the study	89
5.8	Concluding thoughts.....	90
REFERENCE LIST.....		91

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1:	Overview of the research methodology.....	29
Table 3.2:	Four philosophical assumptions of a research paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mertens, 2017)	30
Table 3.3:	Participant biographic details	38
Table 3.4:	Overview of the ALS sessions	39
Table 4.1:	Overview of themes	51
Table 4.2:	Overview of action plans	71
Table 4.3:	Participants' action plan to navigate the complexities of the ECCE function shift	79
Table 5.1:	Implications of the findings and guidelines for the sector.....	84

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1: The PALAR process (adapted from Wood, 2019)	33
Figure 3.2: PALAR cycles (Wood, 2020)	34
Figure 3.3: Phases and stages of theme development (Adapted from Dawadi, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).....	44
Figure 4.1: Lack of knowledge about function shift (P5)	52
Figure 4.2: Persistent lack of knowledge about function shift (P2)	53
Figure 4.3: Mixed emotions due to function shift (P4)	54
Figure 4.4: Parents' reactions to special needs (P4 & P6).....	59
Figure 4.5: Emotionally strained due to fear of job loss (P2)	62
Figure 4.6: Financial strain (P4 & P6).....	63
Figure 4.7: LEGO model (all participants).....	69
Figure 4.8: Department's WhatsApp group	70
Figure 4.9: Formation of support groups (P4 & P7)	72
Figure 4.10: Working together to improve service delivery (all participants)	73
Figure 4.11: Conducting further research (P4 & P6)	75
Figure 4.12: Expectations of ECCE managers and practitioners from the function shift (P1 & P4).....	76
Figure 4.13: Advocacy for a special needs ECCE centre (P4 & P6)	76

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in the Republic of South Africa [RSA], the responsibility for which has shifted from the Department of Social Development [DSD] to the Department of Basic Education [DBE] in 2022. Although this transition is officially known as the Early Childhood Development (ECD) function shift, I refer to it in this study as the ECCE function shift, to align with my focus on birth to four years. It represents a significant policy and administrative step towards improving access to quality early learning programmes (ELPs) and advancing the professionalisation of the sector. However, this shift also brings complexities for the ECCE managers and practitioners who are responsible for implementing these changes, many of whom were unprepared for its implications.

ECD is the process of holistic development for children from birth to various age groups, depending on which source is consulted. For example, White Paper 1 initially stated that it was from birth to nine years (Department of Basic Education (DBE), 1995), which includes the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3). The Department of Social Development (DSD) (2006) says it covers birth to seven years; the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 2015) defines it from birth to compulsory formal schooling, as does the Children's Amendment Act No. 41 of 2007 (DSD, 2007), which now means entry to Grade R, as amended by the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act No. 32 of 2024 (RSA, 2024). The South African Schools Act (SASA) clearly states that every learner must attend school from the first day of the year in which such a learner reaches the age of seven years (RSA, 1996).

For the purpose of this study, I adopt the definition provided by the South African government website and NIECDP (2015), which frames ECD as development from birth up to age four. This study focuses specifically on the earlier stages of ECD, in other words, on pre-school education, which in RSA is commonly referred to as ECCE. Oppenheim and Archer (2021) define ECCE as encompassing early learning, care, well-being, and stimulation services for children from birth to school-going age; a definition that aligns closely with the birth-to-four focus of this study. According to Dawes et al. (2020), ECCE provides ELPs and services that offer valuable opportunities for children to access good nutrition and experience holistic learning and growth.

The DSD was initially responsible for Chapters 5 and 6 (Partial Care and ECD) of the Children's Amendment Act, which addressed the management and strategy for ECCE services and programmes (DSD, 2007). However, in his 2019 State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that there would be a shift of ECCE functions from DSD to DBE (South African Government, 2019). The ECCE function shift is a purely administrative process where functions or roles and responsibilities are transferred from one Minister to another (Atmore, 2022). It is a shift of ECCE services and programmes' administration from DSD to DBE. The function shift aims to better meet the developmental and early learning needs of children from birth to age four (Ebrahim et al., 2021).

This administrative shift requires collaboration from different departments. While the DSD remains responsible for the welfare of children, the DBE is now responsible for ELPs, practitioner skills and qualifications, quality control and curricula (DBE & DSD, 2022). The ECCE function shift officially took place on 1 April 2022 (DBE, 2022a). However, there is very limited research on this shift and how it has been experienced by those directly involved, namely ECCE managers and practitioners.

This study explores how ECCE managers and practitioners collaboratively learnt how to navigate the complexities introduced by the function shift to provide insights into how to manage the changes better. In the following sections of this chapter, I provide and discuss an overview of the study, namely the background and rationale, research problem, research questions, theoretical framework, research methodology and the measures taken to ensure validity, reliability and ethical considerations.

1.2 Background and rationale

According to Rudolph et al. (2019), in 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) identified access to enhanced quality ECCE programmes as one of the potential strategies to redress the inequalities of apartheid. Throughout the years, programmes, plans, policies, and reports have been formulated to address this potential strategy. Amongst them was the National Early Learning Development Standards (NELDS) for children from birth to four years, which aimed at achieving all the developmentally desired expectations for children (DBE, 2009). The National Development Plan (NDP) Vision for 2030 was then developed in 2011, which also identified ECCE as the most effective and cost-effective time to intervene in a child's development, as it is the period of the most rapid physical and cognitive development (Raikes & Shaeffer, 2016; RSA, 2015). As such, it is also the most effective time to assist in the prevention and/or early identification of developmental difficulties and disabilities (RSA, 2015) for timely intervention (DBE, 2001).

In 2015, the NIECDP set three termed goals: long-, medium- and short- (of which the function shift is part). The long-term goal of the policy is that by 2030, there must be fully comprehensive age-and developmental stage-appropriate quality ECCE programmes available and accessible to all infants and young children and their caregivers. The medium-term goal that supports this aim is that by 2024, age- and developmental stage-appropriate essential components of the comprehensive quality ECCE programmes will be available and accessible to all infants and young children and their caregivers. The short-term goal was that by 2017, the government should have established the necessary legal framework(s), initiated the organisational structures and institutional arrangements, undertaken the planning, and arranged the financing mechanisms necessary to support and realise its commitments to ensure universal availability of and equitable access to ECCE services. We can already note that the attainment of the short-term goal is not yet complete, because although the function shift has occurred, all the financing and structural mechanisms are not yet established to the extent that universal access to ECCE is possible. In line with the policy, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) was developed to provide guidance for those developing programmes and working with babies, toddlers and young children from birth to age four (RSA, 2015).

Raikes et al. (2023) emphasise that ECCE is rapidly gaining more attention and significant monetary and social investment from companies, government departments, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Concerted efforts are being made to upskill and professionalise the ECCE workforce (Oppenheim & Archer, 2021; DG Murray Trust [DGMT], 2018; Dulvy et al., 2023) to improve the sector in RSA in line with global trends (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018; Ebrahim et al., 2021). With potential innovative public-private partnership (DGMT, 2018), this investment in ECCE would be a significant driver of socio-economic transformation and development.

Mosala et al. (2017) argue that expanding quality early learning opportunities in disadvantaged communities can interrupt cycles of poverty and unemployment, creating long-term returns for both the individual and the broader economy. As it provides an opportunity for (mostly) Black women to earn an income and provide employment in impoverished communities (Attanasio et al., 2021). It also enables women, as primary caregivers and the most disadvantaged sector of society, to enter the labour market (Brooks, 2021; Brooks et al., 2022). Brooks (2021) emphasises that 95% of key staff at ECCE centres are women, with Black women in the majority.

Globally, most countries have already migrated ECCE services from various ministries into the Ministry of Education. For example, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development (OECD) (2016), Finland moved ECCE from Health and Welfare to the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2006, in line with the recognition of the importance of ECCE for the country's economy and social wellbeing and to move away from an emphasis on childcare and welfare to child learning and stimulation. In RSA, the official migration only occurred in April 2022, although there have been various preparations over the last few years. However, the ECCE sector is market-led, dominated and largely owned by private providers (Wills & Kika-Mistry, 2021), including individuals, NGOs and philanthropic trusts. Since the sector is mostly private, it remains informal, inequitable, inadequate, and inaccessible to most children in the country (DBE, 2022b; Visser et al., 2021).

Research has shown that families who have higher incomes provide their children with better education (Wimer & Wolf, 2020), both in the public and growing private sectors. Conti and Heckman (2012) argue that children from families at the top of the income distribution benefit more from good parenting and schooling, and the disparity between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' is widening. Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019) emphasise that there is no equitable access to quality ECCE provisioning, resources and expenditure in certain geographical areas for young children in RSA. Like basic education, those who can pay for it receive a good education, but those who cannot – the majority in RSA – do not. While there may be a political determination to address ECD policy objectives, the current allocation of a mere 2% of the total education budget towards ECCE implies inadequate funding to achieve these objectives, as it subsidises only 27% of the centres' operational expenses (DBE, 2022b).

As the first attempt to obtain an overview of the sector to begin to regulate, monitor and improve it, the DBE conducted a census in 2021. According to the DBE (2022b), only 1 660 316 children access ELPs out of a potential 5 000 000 (0-5-year-olds). Approximately 60% are enrolled in urban areas and 40% in rural areas; only 48% of these children are from low-income households. This educational divide starts at ECCE and continues throughout the schooling system, as children who start behind stay behind (Spaull & Kotzé, 2015).

Furthermore, 69% of the 42 420 ECCE centres included in the census are unregistered and therefore rely solely on the fees paid by parents/guardians (DBE, 2022b), who are predominately in the low-income segment in areas riddled with unemployment. Some parents are not able to pay monthly fees, although they can be as low as R150. Sixty-two percent of the ECCE centres allow some learners to attend at no cost (DBE, 2022b). This means that the centres struggle to meet their financial demands, and the quality of education suffers (Aina & Bipath, 2022). This is a social injustice, which Van Dyk and White (2020) say should be recognised as such, acknowledged and rectified, as ECCE provides a high return to society through increased

personal achievement and social productivity (Heckman, 2014; Kotzé, 2015). To support this suggestion, in 2013, the South African Integrated Programme of Action (SAIPA) for ECCE developed an infrastructure rollout plan for ECCE with special emphasis on rural areas (RSA, 2013). Unfortunately, due to the lack of funds, not much has been done to improve the situation.

In terms of the 198 361 practitioners active in the sector, only 52% possess relevant ECCE qualifications at NQF Levels 4–9. Twenty-seven percent have only attended uncertified and unaccredited skills training, and 22% have no relevant training at all (DBE, 2022b). This means that ECCE practitioners, especially those working at rural centres, do not have the necessary education and training to execute their duties effectively (Zulu et al., 2022, p. 9). To date, the government has not monitored or regulated the sector, something that the function shift aims to address.

To actualise the NIECDP goals, the guidelines set in the NCF and other ECCE improvement strategies for overcoming these challenges and inequalities in ECCE, the function shift was undertaken to provide support and funding to slowly move towards a publicly supported sector, in line with formal schooling. Evidence shows that two years of pre-school has a positive impact (Fox & Geddes, 2016) on children's development. In SA, the DBE is firstly attempting to provide all children (4-5-year-olds) with two years of pre-school education before entering Grade 1 (DBE, 2015; RSA, 2011), but ideally, this should start at a much earlier age. The DBE regards the function shift as a ten-year process (DBE & DSD, 2022); therefore, the more data they have access to, the more useful it will be in helping to inform their decisions. This study contributes to this knowledge base.

As a qualified Foundation Phase teacher who has worked at the Grade R-level, I am deeply concerned about the ECCE sector and its (in)ability to provide quality education. In my current position, I coordinate Grade R teachers, ECCE managers, and practitioners. This has given me deep insight into the problems facing ECCE centres in general, and I aim to help the ECCE managers and practitioners to understand the benefits of the function shift and to help them maximise these benefits.

Although the function shift is very important for the sector, it is still a new phenomenon, and very little research has been conducted on the challenges and successes thereof. There are fears, frustrations and myths around it at ground level. Practitioners fear losing their jobs as they do not hold the qualifications required by DBE (Wood & Neethling, 2024), yet the poor salaries paid (predominantly under minimum wage) means the sector cannot attract qualified staff. The ECCE managers are equally concerned as their enrolments decreased drastically in some areas because there is already physical migration of children from community-based ECCE centres to

Grades R and RR classes in schools. In my experience, parents are taking their children to schools because public schools are seemingly more affordable than ECCE centres as they cannot turn children away if the fees are not paid. According to Wood and Neethling (2024), ECCE stakeholders seem minimally- and misinformed, particularly regarding the age-appropriateness of the curriculum and teacher competencies for these migrated learners. Parents do not fully understand the importance of ECCE and have just heard that children should go to Grade R, so they moved them there at four-and-a-half, which is the minimum age allowed. However, schools often are not equipped with materials and teacher expertise to offer the kind of stimulation that young children need in the form of holistic, play-based learning and age-appropriate activities.

In this study, I conducted qualitative research to explore the complexities, experiences, feelings, knowledge and needs of ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift. I consequently decided to focus on this topic, as, in my line of work, I observed some of the complexities encountered by various ECCE managers and practitioners. Through collaboration with ECCE managers and practitioners, this study provides critical insights about the value of navigating the function shift collaboratively, contributing to increased sustainability and quality ELPs. The research findings are intended to support the DBE and other policymakers in their ongoing efforts to professionalise the ECCE sector. In the following section, I present the guiding questions explored in this study.

1.3 Guiding research questions

Considering the challenges associated with the function shift and its impact on the ECCE sector, this study addresses the following research questions:

1.3.1. Primary/guiding research question

How can ECCE managers and practitioners best navigate the function shift towards quality and sustainable education?

1.3.2. Secondary research questions

- a) What are the experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations of the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift?
- b) What actions can they take to address the issues identified?

As part of our ethical agreement, the research questions in this study were negotiated between the participants and me throughout the research process. The above-mentioned questions

represented our anticipated focus, informed by trends observed in the available literature and my own experiences regarding the function shift. In the subsequent section, I provide an in-depth discussion of the theoretical framework employed in this study.

1.4 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework provides certain assumptions and principles to guide the study and to act as an analytical lens when making meaning of the data (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). For this study, I chose Action Learning (AL) theory as the theoretical basis, as it is well suited to demonstrate the transformation in participant learning.

Serrat (2017) explains AL theory as a process where small groups, action learning sets (ALS), collaborate to understand complex problems before acting and reflecting on that action to ascertain if it improved the situation. This process continues until all agree that their initial goals have been attained. In this way, they learn on an individual and collective level, with and from each other. Developed by Reginald Revans in the 1940s (Pedler, 2012), this theory is well-suited to guide this study as I aimed to involve a small group of ECCE managers and practitioners to learn how to better navigate the function shift in ECCE. The group identified current challenges facing their practice within an ECCE centre. They then collaboratively developed strategies together to maximise the benefits of the function shift, ultimately enabling them to deliver quality education. In line with AL theory, participants had equal opportunity to provide input, and all contributions were valued. In the following section, I discuss the research methodology employed in this study.

1.5 Research methodology

This section provides an overview of the research methodology I applied in this study, encompassing the chosen paradigm, research design, research methods and measures I implemented to increase validity. Additionally, I outline the ethical considerations that informed and guided the study.

Kumar (2019) defined research methodology as the systematic approach researchers use to collect, analyse, and interpret data to answer research questions. It comprises the paradigm, design and specific methods and outlines measures to ensure validity (Creswell, 2014). I began by explaining the paradigm I adopted to guide my decisions in this study.

1.5.1. Research paradigm

According to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017), Khatri (2020), and Okesina (2020), a research paradigm can be depicted as the philosophical framework to which the researcher ascribes. For this study, the research paradigm is the critical transformative paradigm (CTP), which comprises the critical paradigm rooted in critical theory (Asghar, 2013) and the transformative paradigm focused on attaining change towards social justice (Mertens, 2007). The CTP investigates current reality as seen by participants with a view to changing it to be more socially just (Mertens, 2007). Thus, in this study, I aimed to integrate the experiences, realities, and ideologies of ECCE managers and practitioners to foster positive change and attitudes towards the possibilities that the function shift offers.

The four philosophical assumptions of any paradigm concern ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. The ontological assumptions of CTP hold that there are numerous interpretations of reality, depending on the perspectives and experiences of the individual (Wood, 2020). Thus, all ideas and opinions contribute towards socially constructed knowledge (epistemological assumptions) that is dynamic and contextual in nature. CTP is grounded in values (axiological assumptions) that are life-enhancing and promote the well-being of both people and the planet. Thus it is apparent that CTP requires a methodological approach that fosters participation and democratic decision-making, and therefore, I have chosen participatory action learning and action research (PALAR) as the design.

1.5.2. Research design: Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR)

This section provides a brief overview of PALAR as a research design, with more detail provided in Chapter 3. PALAR emphasises active engagement and collaboration with participants to generate practical knowledge, address real-world challenges, and promote social change. PALAR represents the integration of two concepts: Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Action Learning (AL), as discussed by Kearney et al. (2013). This comprehensive approach is designed to foster social justice and address challenges effectively. According to MacDonald (2012), PAR is a research approach grounded in the philosophy that acknowledges the significance of involving the individuals being studied – in this case, ECCE managers and practitioners – in the entire research process, particularly pertaining to their field of expertise, such as the shift in the ECCE function. Equally, AL is an educational process involving small groups of 5-8 individuals, referred to as Action Learning Sets (ALS) (Wood, 2020), who examine their actions and experiences to enhance performance (Serrat, 2017). Additionally, they gather insights regarding emerging sector developments to maximise the associated benefits.

The implementation of PALAR is cyclical in nature, with the learning from one cycle informing the next. This collaborative and inclusive methodology fosters empowerment, ownership, and collective learning, ultimately leading to more relevant and sustainable outcomes. The specific methods suited to this design will now be discussed.

1.5.2.1 Research methods

This section examines the research methods employed in the PALAR study, encompassing participant recruitment, data generation strategies, and data analysis.

(i) Participant recruitment

Participant recruitment is a crucial aspect of the study. Therefore, I recruited ECCE managers and practitioners working at both registered and unregistered centres within the [name of the nation] where I worked. To achieve this, I created a leaflet clarifying the study's purpose, the possible benefits, potential risks (Xu et al., 2020), and the targeted participants. The targeted participants were a group of seven ECCE managers and practitioners who were already working at ECCE centres in 2019 when the ECCE function shift was first announced during the launch in 2022 and who were currently working at an ECCE centre. I decided to recruit seven participants as this is a manageable number that allows for meaningful engagements, enabling each participant to share their experiences and views.

Upon preparing a leaflet, I discussed it with my colleague, who is an administrator and an independent person, and explained why I could not handle the recruitment personally. I tasked my colleague to conduct the recruitment from the ECCE centres. He distributed the leaflets to the ECCE managers and practitioners at their respective centres, providing an explanation of the study's purpose and objectives. During this process, I was telephonically available to address any questions and concerns for clarification. The ECCE managers and practitioners were requested to show their availability and willingness to participate. Throughout the recruitment process, my colleague maintained communication with the interested participants until the agreed-upon date when he shared the candidate details with me.

These participants likely experienced most of the assumptions, fears, and unsettlements related to the study's subject. By involving my colleague in the recruitment, we ensured a more neutral and unbiased approach, as he did not have the same direct working relationship with the participants as I did. Furthermore, in the subsequent section, I discuss the data generation strategies applied in the study.

(ii) Data generation strategies

The data generation strategies I employed in this study included transcribed discussions with participants, creative and visual methods and my reflective diary. Transcriptions of the research group meetings provided the richest source of data for a PALAR study (Wood, 2020). I audio-taped and transcribed each session. Creative and visual methods encouraged participants to critically reflect on their experiences and imagine alternatives (Glaw et al., 2017), ensuring that they contributed to knowledge production. These methods were also useful for encouraging the participation of those members who may not have felt comfortable voicing their opinions orally. In the first cycle, I used the draw-and-write technique (Rose, 2022) to elicit their experiences, knowledge, feelings and expectations regarding the function shift and how it would affect their roles as ECCE managers and practitioners. In the second cycle, I used collage to evaluate the participant's learning. Additionally, I kept a reflective diary (Germain et al., 2016) to record my insights about the research process, my learning and assumptions so as to guide me in making any required changes as the project evolved. Participatory research methods promoted increased involvement, trust, communication flow and collaboration (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020) within the group. I provide more detail on the methods in Chapter 3 of this study.

(iii) Data analysis

Data analysis is a critical process in qualitative research that involves systematically organising, interpreting, and comprehending the gathered data to uncover patterns, themes, and insights (Creswell, 2014). As the study progressed, the participants helped to analyse the data through discussions and by grouping insights into preliminary themes. I then took these themes and analysed them through a theoretical lens. I analysed the transcripts of recorded discussions, visual data, and my reflective diary following the specific steps of Braun and Clarke (2012) to identify key themes and develop a coherent narrative. I provide more detail on the model in Chapter 3 of this study.

I maintained a reflexive stance, critically reflecting on biases and engaging in discussions with ECCE managers and practitioners to ensure trustworthiness (Tracy, 2019). The analysis was reviewed by my critical friends and member-checked by participants to enhance validity (Tracy, 2019), a concept I discuss in the following section.

1.6 Validity

The validity of the findings was ensured through the following criteria: outcome validity (did the study result in the outcomes desired?), process validity (did I outline the research methods and

process well?), democratic validity (did every participant have a chance to contribute to knowledge production?), catalytic validity (did the research result in emancipatory and educative outcomes as well as practical change?) and dialogic validity (were the findings judged reasonable by peers when shared throughout the process?), as proposed by Herr and Anderson (2015). Next, I discuss the ethical considerations.

1.7 Ethical considerations

This section will primarily focus on addressing the ethical considerations related to the study. I recognised that ethical considerations held significant importance in research. Particularly within the context of a PALAR approach, where active attention to power dynamics and the creation of an inclusive environment are crucial (Hauser et al., 2023; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Rigg, 2005).

Ethical considerations encompassed the principles and guidelines to which I, as a researcher, had to adhere to ensure the ethical conduct of this study. These considerations involved safeguarding the rights, well-being, and dignity of participants while upholding integrity in research practices. Key ethical considerations included acquiring informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, minimising risks, promoting fairness and inclusivity and upholding research integrity (Akhtar et al., 2021; Fleming & Zegwaard, 2018; Kaiser, 2009).

Confidentiality and informed consent were strictly followed, with participants having the option to remain anonymous through the use of pseudonyms (Kaiser, 2009). I sought voluntary consent, ensuring participants had the freedom to withdraw at any stage throughout the study without any pressure or repercussions. I obtained approval from the university's ethics committee and informed consent was acquired from ECCE managers and practitioners. I informed them of the potential risks and benefits of the study. Additionally, an ethical agreement was developed with participants during the first session to ensure mutual understanding and agreement on desired outcomes. The informed consent letter (see Annexure A) contained comprehensive information about the study's aims, purpose, benefits, and risks. I handled data confidentially and used it only for research purposes. I upheld principles of fairness, gratitude, and *ubuntu* (compassion and humanity) throughout the research process and maintained open communication with participants.

1.8 Chapter summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive outline of the study, highlighting key aspects such as the background and rationale for the research, the research questions, the theoretical framework

guiding the study, the chosen research methodology, considerations of validity and reliability, and ethical considerations. The next chapter addresses the concepts and theories guiding the study.

1.9 Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1 provides the background, rationale, problem statement, purpose and significance of the study. It also introduces the research question and contextualises the function shift within ECCE policy developments.

Chapter 2 presents a review of relevant literature and policy documents. It explores the historical and current ECCE landscape in RSA. It continues to explore the implications of the function shift and the theoretical framework underpinning this study, including participatory and critical learning paradigms.

Chapter 3 explains the research methodology, highlight the critical transformative paradigm and PALAR design. It details the collaborative data generation strategies (including action learning set (ALS) discussion sessions, visual arts & a reflective diary), as well as ethical considerations and validity criteria.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the ALS processes, structured into themes and sub-themes that emerged through thematic analysis. These illustrate how ECCE managers and practitioners experienced, responded to, and began to co-navigate the function shift.

Chapter 5 offers an implication of key findings, reflections on the PALAR process, and practical recommendations for supporting ECCE stakeholders in navigating systemic change. It concludes with limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I offer a comprehensive exploration of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), encompassing its global and national context. I examine the implementation of ECCE in the Republic of South Africa (RSA) before the 2022 shift of the ECCE function and explain the reasons underlying it and the desired results, particularly regarding professionalisation and quality improvement through policy implementation. I also address the challenges encountered by ECCE managers and practitioners in meeting policy requirements and enacting the necessary changes. Furthermore, I highlight the need to mitigate these challenges and their implications if they were left unattended. I conclude the chapter by explaining the relevance of Action Learning (AL) theory to the study and how ECCE managers and practitioners could use it to effectively address the challenges they face.

2.2 Positioning ECCE in a Global Context

The history of childhood education is as long as the history of compulsory schooling (Vandenbroeck, 2020). Despite this, a universal term to denote it is still lacking. Globally, various terms such as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Early Childhood Education (ECE), Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Early Childhood Development (ECD), Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), crèche, and daycare are interchangeably used to describe processes, actions, and support during the early years of a child (UNESCO, 2019). The use of these multiple terms reflects diverse perspectives on how the sector is conceptualised and highlights the lack of uniformity in the sector across different contexts and countries (Akkari, 2022). For this study, I used the term ECCE, as it is currently the one used in the RSA for children from birth to four years of age. Shaeffer (2019) suggests that ECCE is perceived as more comprehensive, multisectoral and integrated in nature, covering holistic outcomes for children related to health, education, nutrition and protection.

Globally, there is no consensus on the specific age range that ECCE focuses on, with some countries initiating it even before conception. Denmark, Sweden and Jamaica consider ECCE to range from birth to compulsory school age, integrating it into a unified system (D'Angelo et al., 2023). In different national settings, the age range extended from birth to six years or up to eight

years (Shaeffer, 2019). Moreover, in some cases, the focus was from the age of three to the compulsory school age (OECD, 2020). However, what was clear was that ECCE involved education and care during the early years of one's life. In the context of this study, I specifically referred to care, and education provided from birth to age four. This definition aligns with that stated on the RSA government website and in the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECDP) (RSA, 2015).

This study adopts the birth to four age range not only in alignment with the NIECDP and the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (RSA, 2015). It also directly reflects the focus of the ECD function shift (Department of Basic Education (DBE) and Department of Social Development (DSD), 2022; Ebrahim et al., 2021) and responds to a critical area of need. Children in this age group are often most vulnerable to gaps in service delivery, as many ECCE centres remain unregistered, under-supported and reliant on fragmented services due to limited state backing (DBE, 2022b; Visser et al., 2021). From age five, learners were already under the Department of Basic Education (DBE), as Grade R forms part of the formal schooling system. This limit marks a significant policy gap in the years before formal schooling. In the next section, I further explore this gap in the South African context.

2.3 ECCE in the Republic of South Africa (RSA)

In RSA, Early Childhood Development (ECD) is a commonly used umbrella term that encompasses the processes, actions, and support provided during a child's early years as stipulated by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) (2010). ECD is a complex term, particularly with the new focus on pre-school (0-4 years) care and education. For example, as detailed in Chapter 1 of this study, White Paper 1 initially defined ECD as the period from birth to nine years, including the foundation phase (grades R–3) (DBE, 1995). The primary objective here was to provide education with a focus on early identification of barriers and implementation of necessary interventions. The Department of Social Development (DSD) (2006) defined it from birth to seven years (the compulsory school age at the time), as did the Children's Amendment Act No. 41 of 2007 (DSD, 2007) and the NIECDP (RSA, 2015) also defined it from birth to compulsory formal schooling. The South African Schools Act (SASA) requires that learners begin school on the first day of the year they turn seven (RSA, 1996). The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act No. 32 of 2024 has now been signed, reducing the compulsory school age to six years and making Grade R compulsory from the age of five (RSA, 2024). This legislation specifies that the minimum admission age for a learner entering Grade R in a public school is four years, turning five by 30 June in the year of admission (DBE, 2022a).

In the realm of early childhood, children naturally develop and progress. However, ECD provides systematic support to help them reach their full potential by focusing on specific areas through established systems (Aboud & Proulx, 2019). This is important because ECD provides deliberate and age-appropriate support that affects their overall development and well-being and lays the foundations for future success. ECD manifests itself in a range of organised and sustained activities that aim to encourage children to learn and develop holistically (OECD, 2020). This development process occurs in the earlier years of ECD, which is ECCE, spanning from birth to age four, as emphasised by the NIECDP (RSA, 2015).

ECCE is mainly facilitated through early learning programmes (ELPs) and inclusion services (Dawes et al., 2020). The ELPs can be centre-based or non-centre-based (DBE, 2022b), but the focus of this study is on centre-based programmes. These ELPs are designed to nurture the holistic development of children for early identification of needs and provision of necessary interventions (DSD, 2006; Mwaipopo et al., 2021; Shaeffer, 2019). ELPs operate as non-familial learning and care initiatives aimed at serving children before their formal entry into compulsory school. This strategic position aims to support learning, provide care, nutritious meals, and hygiene facilities and contribute greatly to the future well-being and social development of these young learners (OECD, 2020; Raikes et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2019). ELPs that actively involve families operate in natural contexts where possible, incorporate evidence-based interventions, and take a comprehensive treatment approach (Aboud & Proulx, 2019) are associated with notable improvements in mental health outcomes (Cardona & Neas, 2021). Ultimately, such ELPs contribute to the well-being of the individuals involved and the broader well-being of society as a whole (Klein, 2016; Shaeffer, 2019; Vandebroek et al., 2018). However, such ELPs are not the norm in RSA, and therefore the sector needs to be transformed to improve quality and access (DBE, 2023).

2.4 ECCE transformation in RSA

Currently, international collaboration significantly influences the growth and direction of ECCE in RSA (Akkari, 2022; Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018). This leads policymakers to have the opportunity to compare successful models, integrate effective strategies, and adapt policies to global standards, as well as to consider various perspectives, experiences, and best practices. In 2015, the United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 4.2, aspiring to ensure that by 2030, all girls and boys will have access to high-quality ECCE programmes (DG Murray Trust (DGMT), 2018; UNICEF, 2017). In RSA, a significant transformation has occurred in the ECCE sector since 1994 when the African National Congress (ANC) government assumed control, particularly regarding the developing plans, policies, and strategies to enhance the ECCE

sector. Over recent years, ECCE policies have been formulated, influenced by international perspectives, and guided by two core principles: 1) to redress the inequalities of apartheid and 2) to uphold the rights of children (Harrison, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2019)). The objective was to nurture the holistic development of children and their caregivers (DSD, 2006). The most important policies that have guided the development of the sector in recent years are listed below.

1. The *Interim Department of Education Policy for Early Childhood Development, in 1996*, provided for the implementation of a National Reception Year Pilot Project to test a lower-cost model and curriculum for the implementation of the Reception Year in partnership with nongovernmental organisations and community-based ECD service providers (RSA, 2015).
2. The *White Paper on Social Welfare published in 1997*, aimed to facilitate the provision of appropriate developmental social welfare services to all South Africans, especially those living in poverty, those who are vulnerable, and those who have special needs (RSA, 1997; 2015).
3. The *Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Education (2001)* prioritised the establishment of a national system of provision of the reception year for children aged 5 years that combines a large public and smaller independent component (DBE, 2001; RSA, 2015).
4. The *National Integrated Plan for ECD (NIECDP)*, to bring greater synergy and coordination to current government programmes undertaken by various departments in the area of ECD (RSA, 2015).
5. The *Children's Amendment Act No. 41 of 2007* aims to give effect to certain children's rights as contained in the Constitution and establish principles related to the care and protection of children (DSD, 2007; RSA, 2015).
6. The *National Early Learning Development Standards (NELDS)* were designed for children from birth to four years of age, with the aim of meeting all developmentally desired expectations (DBE, 2009).
7. The *National Development Plan (NDP) Vision for 2030, established in 2011*, highlighted Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) as the most effective and cost-efficient period for intervention in a child's development, with the phase of the most rapid physical and cognitive growth (Raikes & Shaeffer, 2016; RSA, 2015).
8. The *South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF)* for children from birth to four was developed in 2015 to provide guidance for those developing programmes and working with babies, toddlers and young children from birth to age four (RSA, 2015).

The commitment of both the government and stakeholders to improve the condition of the ECCE sector is evident in the time and effort dedicated to formulating the policies. However, despite advancements in policy development, the corresponding commitment to effective implementation has not been fully realised.

Globally, frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (in particular-SDG 4.2) emphasise the importance of universal access to quality early childhood education as a foundation for lifelong development (UNESCO, 2019). RSA's national priorities; evident in the National Development Plan (RSA, 2011) and the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Plan (RSA, 2015) mirror these aims. However, persistent barriers remain. These include poor interdepartmental coordination, uneven subsidy allocations, and limited infrastructure development in rural areas, and inequitable access to professional training and support for ECCE practitioners (Atmore, 2019; DBE, 2022b; Visser et al., 2021). These systemic constraints undermine the effective implementation of ECCE policy across the country.

The most significant change in ECCE has been the change in function from DSD to DBE in 2022. Before I explain this, I present an overview of ECCE in South Africa prior to 2022, as this has various socio-historical implications for its current landscape.

2.5 The administration of ECCE in RSA before 2022

The ECCE sector in RSA, in township and rural settings, has historically been predominantly controlled and owned by private providers, as highlighted by Wills and Kika-Mistry (2021). The sector initially originated as an arrangement in which women took care of children while their parents were at work, particularly in situations where there were no grandparents or older children available for childcare (Evans, 2021; Samman et al., 2016). This arrangement then led to the situation where unemployed women took the role of caregivers, resulting in a system of childcare during working hours, hence the reason for large private ownership and lack of formal training/qualifications. Unfortunately, the widespread occurrence of private ownership has led to an unregulated, informal environment with unqualified caregivers, resulting in inequitable and inaccessible ECCE for most children (Visser et al. 2021).

Apartheid-era inequalities resulted in only 6% of black children attending ECCE by 1994, as noted by Atmore (2013), subsequently contributing to lower retention rates of learners in primary school (Shanker et al., 2015). Even among the 6% who accessed ELPs, these programmes were of very poor quality (Kotzé, 2015), providing not much more than a childcare service. The childminders lacked formal training and qualifications and were self-taught 'on the job'.

The NIECDP (RSA, 2015) highlighted that ECCE services should be collectively delivered by various government departments, with the DSD being the key custodian of the sector. Notwithstanding the progress made in ECCE, the sector still faced major delivery challenges, particularly with regard to infrastructure, nutrition, programmes, learning resources, policy implementation, practitioners, and funding. With the DSD-facilitated registration process, provincial departments subsequently began providing subsidies to registered and qualifying ECCE centres (Atmore, 2019).

According to the DBE (2022a), only 40% of ECCE centres are registered with the DSD, including those registered conditionally. Furthermore, only 33% of the 42,420 ELPs received subsidies from the DSD, leaving the remaining 67% reliant on parents' fees for funding (DBE, 2022a). This paints a concerning picture, considering that ideally, 100% of ELPs should receive subsidies from DSD. Furthermore, this led to ECCE centres relying on parents' fees and donations from larger organisations for financial support, including practitioners' salaries (Müller et al., 2023). Internationally, there has been a shift towards improving and professionalising the sector, and RSA has followed suit by shifting the core function for ECCE to the DBE. In the following section, I explore the significance behind the change in the function of ECCE and its impact on the ECCE sector.

2.6 The ECCE function shift

Initially, the DSD was responsible for Chapters 5 and 6 (Partial Care and ECD) of the Children's Amendment Act, focusing on maintaining and providing a strategy for managing ECCE services and programmes (DSD, 2007). However, in his 2019 State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a significant change in the responsibility for ECCE operations (South African Government, 2019). The DBE, as the education ministry, will now oversee ECCE, taking over from the DSD. This change, referred to as the function shift, specifically targets children from birth to four years – the education of those from grade R to grade 3 has always been the responsibility of the DBE. The need to continue delineating the age groups again points to the need to have clearly defined terms within the sector.

Atmore (2022) describes the ECCE function shift as a purely administrative process involving the transfer of duties, functions, roles and responsibilities from one minister to another. It is a shift of ECCE services and programmes' administration from DSD to DBE. The DBE has served as the custodian of schools from the beginning, providing a solid foundation for the implementation of policies and programmes aimed at regulating and consistently improving the well-being of children. The shift in ECCE functions is anticipated to establish a similar solid foundation for the implementation of policies, programmes and strategies aimed at regulating and professionalising

the ECCE sector, as noted by Ebrahim et al. (2021). The success of this shift is expected to improve equitable access to quality ELPs and further changes in policies (Fredman et al., 2023).

Similarly to schooling, the DBE does not assume sole responsibility for the holistic development of children. This requires convergent support from different departments (DBE & DSD, 2022) – the DSD will still be responsible for the welfare of children, and the Department of Health (DoH) will still be responsible for immunisation and health compliance. The Department of Local Governance (DLG) will continue to be responsible for supplying goods and services, while the DBE will now be responsible for coordinating services to ELPs and creating policy around practitioner skills and qualifications, quality control and curricula.

The ECCE function shift officially occurred on 01 April 2022. This launch symbolised a collaborative partnership between the DBE and DSD as well as other key stakeholders (DBE, 2022b). The need for collaborative efforts among government departments arose from the fact that, although DBE officials have experience in education, there is a lack of expertise specifically in ECCE. Here, DSD officials continue to play a vital role. Consequently, some officials were transferred from DSD to DBE as part of the function shift, ensuring a transfer of administrative expertise in addition to the policy and programme responsibilities (DBE & DSD, 2022).

The function shift does not signify a change in ownership of the ELPs, as the status quo remains predominantly private (DBE, 2022b). ECCE centres will continue to operate from their original locations, but there is now a move to register them, develop staff, monitor quality and improve access for children. It is a pro-poor policy (DBE, 2023) aimed at establishing an integrated service delivery model, leveraging the gains from DSD, systemising and institutionalising the functions of the ECCE, improving the services of the ECCE through cooperation with existing DBE programmes and improving the provision of resources. The function shift aims to revise the regulatory framework for ELPs, establish a management information system for the ECCE centres, improve the administration of ECCE subsidies, improve funding for ECCE, and refine the implementation systems for the infrastructure component of the ECCE conditional grant (DBE, 2022b). Additionally, ECCE centres will now be more education-focused, and practitioners will be required to be qualified.

The shift in ECCE functions represents the most significant improvement made by the government in improving the sector (Wills & Kika-Mistry, 2021) following the formulation of policies. The DBE and DSD (2022) underline that the function shift is crucial to achieving equitable quality access, bringing order to the sector, and providing practitioners with dignity and purpose in their work with children. The registration of ECCE centres, accompanied by increased

monitoring, is expected to improve compliance in the centres and lead to improved education and care for children. Furthermore, the day-to-day operations of the centres are anticipated to improve due to increased subsidies, allowing parental fees to be directed towards enhancing infrastructure or supplementing resources and improving the salaries of practitioners.

Despite these policy intentions, several critical tensions emerge in the implementation of the function shift. While the function shift reflects international trends and is supported by global best practices (UNESCO, 2019; Ebrahim et al., 2021; Atmore, 2022; DBE, 2022b) toward integrated early childhood services, RSA's policy developments often face structural and resource-related constraints; they are not always grounded in the lived realities of ECCE managers and practitioners responsible for implementation. Financial constraints remain a significant barrier, especially in low-income communities where poverty affects children's nutrition, access to stimulation, and consistent attendance at ECCE programmes (DBE, 2022b; Wills & Kika-Mistry, 2021). Furthermore, the voices of ECCE managers and practitioners are frequently underrepresented in policy dialogues, while decision-making is largely driven by officials and national priorities. This creates power imbalances between government departments, NGOs, and private providers, with policies sometimes reflecting ideal scenarios that overlook implementation contradictions. A more grounded, participatory approach to policy-making is needed to ensure that ECCE reforms are not only well-designed but contextually responsive and equitable.

In a nutshell, the function shift is presumed to bring about 1) improved coordination, particularly between the government departments (DBE & DSD, 2022), ECCE staff and other stakeholders. 2) increased equitable access to quality ECCE services will allow more children to access ELPs (DBE, 2022b). 3) improved provision of learning materials, nutrition (DBE & DSD, 2022) and teaching and learning. 4) improved policy alignment, implementation and compliance, in areas such as infrastructure and registration 5) improved professional development, particularly of ECCE staff and department officials.

The function shift brings about repercussions across multiple areas, necessitating amendments in existing policies, such as the Children's Act, and the development of new regulations on qualifications, staff employment, and operations (DBE & DSD, 2022). However, despite the potential benefits, stakeholders, particularly ECCE managers and practitioners, have concerns, anxiety, fear, uncertainty, and expectations surrounding these changes. Therefore, there is a pressing need to assist them in preparing themselves, being proactive, embracing change, and maximising the potential benefits thereof. Despite the potential benefits, the current state of the sector persists, and challenges continue to be encountered, as outlined in the following section.

2.7 Current challenges facing the ECCE sector

The contemporary challenges confronting the ECCE sector are the results of apartheid-era historical social and economic inequalities (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019). The perpetuation of these inequalities is emphasised by Karisa et al. (2022) and Visser et al. (2021), who highlight persistent issues such as inadequate teaching resources, a children-to-teacher ratio of 1:31, poor infrastructure, and a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding ECCE services for children with disabilities. This is the devastating reality encountered by most ECCE managers and practitioners, who have to comply with the changes required by the function shift. Subsequently, the following section delves into the broader challenges facing the ECCE sector.

2.7.1. Infrastructure

In RSA, ECCE infrastructure poses a serious challenge, with numerous facilities lacking essential services such as running water, electricity, or proper sanitation, as noted by Atmore (2019), Fredman et al. (2023), Harrison, 2020 and Mbarathi et al. (2016). The issue lies in the fact that the ECCE sector is predominantly privately owned (Wood & Neethling, 2024), requiring owners to construct and maintain their own structures with parental fees or lifetime savings. Consequently, many ECCE centres are essentially located in the backrooms within the owners' premises, featuring dilapidated or low-quality classrooms that are uncomfortably cold in winter, excessively hot in summer, and prone to roof leaks.

Some private owners simply use part of their houses or outbuildings as ECCE classrooms. Other centres operate within church premises (Van der Westhuizen et al., 2019). The DBE census (2022a) tells us that most programmes (60%) are equipped with flush toilets connected to sewage. However, approximately 13,234 ELPs still rely on pit latrines, with or without ventilation. Furthermore, flush toilets connected to septic tanks (3%), chemical toilets (2%), and bucket latrines (4%) are also present in some ELPs. This is a concern for the ECCE centres in marginalised areas as they cannot meet the minimum requirements for registration under such conditions.

2.7.2. Nutrition for children

In socioeconomically challenged communities, where families face financial difficulties, there is a significant challenge in ensuring that children receive nutritious and balanced meals, which affects their overall development (Maalouf-Manasseh et al., 2016). The influence of nutrition on the comprehensive development of children can result in reduced concentration in ECCE centres and long-term developmental delays (Atmore, 2013). Consequently, children often depend on feeding

schemes provided by ECCE centres, leading to an observed increase in attendance (Devereux et al., 2018).

The DBE (2022a) notes that 84% of ELPs provide breakfast, while 94% provide lunch. With the support of various organisations and community initiatives, some ECCE centres have established food gardens to enhance food security and create a more stable nutritional environment (Thorogood et al., 2022). Other unregistered ECCE centres depend solely on fees and frequently face challenges in providing essential provisions such as food. Consequently, these centres often close, resulting in unemployment among practitioners and a reduction in access to ECCE.

2.7.3. ECCE staff and qualifications

Women play a predominant role in ECCE, serving as the main contributors to the sector. Brooks (2021) found that 95% of key staff in the ECCE centres are women, with poor black women in the majority. Most practitioners are in the process of developing their teaching skills to complement their ability to care for children (Smit et al., 2020; Zulu et al., 2022). It is essential that all practitioners are trained and receive ongoing training in ECCE and the management of programmes and facilities for young children (DBE, 2023).

Although there is no policy as yet that says that practitioners should have a minimum qualification, in the sector the minimum qualification of ECCE National Qualification Framework (NQF) Level 4 (Atmore, 2013) is regarded as essential by most stakeholders. However, according to the DSD, in 2006, the minimum expected qualification for practitioners was NQF Level 1, while NQF Level 4 was for management. A considerable number of practitioners still lack formal qualifications. The DBE (2022a) noted that 27% of practitioners had no relevant qualification, while 22% had no qualification at all. Moreover, the census included ELPs in middle-class areas, and this skewed the results since most of the qualified practitioners appeared to be from urban communities/middle-class ECCE centres. Unfortunately, the function shift will widen the existing inequalities, as the unqualified practitioners in rural communities will struggle to meet the minimum requirements. However, through this study, ECCE practitioners and managers will be assisted in navigating and identifying legitimate channels to meet the requirements of the new policies still in development.

2.7.4. Limited access to quality ELPs

Only 1 660,316 of the 4 000 000 children aged between 0-4 access ELPs (DBE, 2022). Enhancing the accessibility of high-quality ECCE programmes is crucial, especially in rural communities where 40% of ELPs are situated (DBE, 2022a) and where the absence of such

programmes profoundly affects socio-emotional development (Goto et al., 2021). Achieving proportionate universalisation and increased equitable access is essential, as improving quality alone is insufficient if it predominantly benefits the already privileged, as seen in the 60% of ELPs enrolment in urban communities (DBE, 2022a; Tsegay et al., 2017; Vandenbroeck, 2020). ECCE provision is still underdeveloped in regions with high poverty rates, resulting in limited and unequal access (OECD, 2020; UNICEF, 2020).

The realisation of access to quality ELPs involves a comprehensive system that encompasses both private and public settings, finances, and the workforce, coordinated both vertically and horizontally (Raikes et al., 2023). The function shift in the ECCE sector aims to align with this direction; however, challenges persist, particularly those faced by ECCE managers and practitioners, which will be explored and navigated through this study.

2.7.5. Economic environment

The ECCE sector is an integral component of larger systems, both globally and within RSA. Its dynamics are impacted by and impact the country's future economic, political, social, and community developments (Brooks et al., 2022; Wood & Neethling, 2024). The staff employed in the ECCE sector play a very important role in the country's economy and children's lives, yet they earn the least. According to the DBE (2022a), there are 198,361 ECCE practitioners in the sector. If the government employed these practitioners, the sector would play an even larger role in the country's economy and in the lives of black women (Brooks et al., 2022).

Children from rural areas and poor families often face barriers to accessing ECCE, contributing to a higher likelihood of school dropout (DBE, 2001). This disadvantage in education can hinder their chances of employment as adults, perpetuating a cycle of family poverty that becomes difficult to break. Children who access ECCE services are associated with higher levels of employment and earning potential, and ultimately an increase in productivity and the country's gross domestic product (DSD, 2006).

Vorwerk (2020) emphasises that the government's knowledge and understanding of ECCE is limited. Therefore, the sector has regrettably received comparatively less attention from the government (Atmore, 2019) until recently with the ECCE function shift. However, to ensure the success of this transformation of function, the DBE is now working with a wide range of stakeholders to address complex issues at various levels related to quality and access.

Under these circumstances, there are many challenges that arise from a shrinking economy, where parents struggle to pay for ECCE, and therefore, the poorest children suffer. Government

cannot and will not be able to take over the sector. Thus, ELPs must find ways to survive and realise most of the benefits of the function shift while trying to reduce the inequalities. To effectively navigate these challenges, ECCE managers and practitioners must actively embrace change and adopt a proactive approach. Therefore, I advocate for the incorporation of action learning as an important mechanism to facilitate this process, enabling ECCE managers and practitioners to effectively adapt to the changing landscape and contribute constructively to the development of the sector.

2.8 Action learning (AL) as a theoretical framework

This section explores the theoretical framework shaping the study's approach, focusing on the ECCE function shift. A theoretical framework is essential to guide research and lay the foundation for knowledge development within the study (Chukwuere, 2021; Grant & Osanloo, 2014). It provides a structured framework built upon established theories within the field of investigation. In this study, the chosen theoretical framework is action learning (AL) theory.

2.8.1. Defining action learning

According to Pedler (2012), AL is not just a theory but also an idea, a philosophy, a discipline and a method developed by Reginald Revans in the 1940s. AL theory is an approach to problem-solving, collaborative enquiry, self-development, learning by doing, reflecting on the outcomes, and gaining new insights and knowledge within relatively short timeframes (Marquardt & Waddill, 2004; Rigg & Trehan, 2004). AL is a powerful approach with benefits and key principles (Serrat, 2017), summed up by Revans in the following formula:

$$L = P + Q + R \text{ (Learning = Programmed knowledge + Questioning + Reflection):}$$

$$\text{Learning = Programmed knowledge inclusive of literature, history and case studies}$$

$$+ \text{Questioning the new phenomenon and what is not yet}$$

$$+ \text{Reflecting on what was attained and how it was attained (Serrat, 2017).}$$

This formula acknowledges that everyone involved brings prior knowledge to the learning process. In this study context, ECCE managers and practitioners have valuable knowledge to contribute to answering the research questions. They can effect change by reflecting on their collective knowledge and experience, learning from and with each other, and subsequently acting upon the acquired knowledge.

The AL key principles are outlined by Serrat (2017, p. 592) are as follows:

- *Learning begins with not knowing.*
- *Individuals and groups who assume responsibility stand the best chance of taking actions that will make a difference.*
- *Learning involves both programmed knowledge and questioning insight.*
- *Learning should be greater than the rate of change.*

These key principles are the guiding tools to executing AL effectively. Therefore, researchers and participants need to consider the key principles when using AL. Pedler (2012) highlights that AL has sparked controversy by promoting learning over teaching and championing practitioner knowledge over that of experts. The rationale behind this phenomenon is that, often, researchers approach participants with pre-existing knowledge and conduct research primarily to reaffirm and endorse their speculations and predetermined answers (Serrat, 2017). Consequently, AL, with its humanistic values, requires seasoned researchers who understand that they do not possess all the answers. This approach highlights the collaborative dynamic between researchers and participants, working as co-researchers to co-create new knowledge and bring social justice.

2.8.2. Aims of action learning

Zuber-Skerritt et al. (2020) note that AL has primarily been used in management, business and organisational development contexts, while action research (AR) was applied more predominantly in community development and education contexts. Over the years, the close relationship between the two was then realised. This connection is especially notable because AL enables people to solve complex problems and to significantly increase speed and quality with equal emphasis on individual, team, and organisational learning (Marquardt & Waddill, 2004). Through AL, both the community and the ECCE sector can derive greater benefits.

AL aims to motivate participants to learn, reflect and act, emphasising the importance of not acting without prior learning and reflection (Pedler, 2012) and focusing on the right questions rather than the right answers (Mumford, 1995). In this study, AL can facilitate participants learning from each other, co-creating new knowledge around the function shift, reflecting on their learning, acting to address the problems they identify, and further sharing with the larger ECCE sector. As further explained by Serrat (2017), AL aims to explain how small groups collectively work on complex problems, take action, and learn both as individuals and as a team. This aim validates its appropriateness for the study, given that it entails a small group of ECCE managers and practitioners working in an action learning set (ALS) (Serrat, 2017). The ALS will regularly meet

and participate to identify and address challenges associated with the ECCE function shift, all while nurturing a culture of continuous learning.

2.8.3. Components of action learning

According to Marquardt and Waddill (2004, p.3), AL consists of the following components:

- *A problem or challenge of importance to the group*; in this context, it is the complexities of ECCE function shift experienced by the ECCE managers and practitioners.
- *A group of 4-8 members, ideally from diverse backgrounds and/or parts of the organisation*; the ALS consisted of seven ECCE managers and practitioners from both registered and unregistered centres, with me as a facilitator.
- *A process that emphasises questions and reflection*; the participants met regularly in agreed upon sessions to discuss the function shift related issues, where questioning was used to deepen their thinking and participation to find ways to better navigate the function shift.
- *The power to act on strategies developed*; the participants decided on the mobilisation and dissemination of the co-created knowledge.
- *A commitment to learning at the individual, team and organisational levels*; each participant was responsible for sustaining the learning
- *An action learning coach*, who focuses on and ensures that time and energy are devoted to capturing the learning and improving the skill level of the group. I facilitated the discussions and encouraged maximum participation of all.

Through this approach, ECCE managers and practitioners can effectively navigate the complexities of the ECCE function shift and sustain positive change by applying this learning in the future.

Marquardt and Waddill (2004) contend that Revans never operationalised AL into a standard approach. Instead, various individuals have modified and developed their own approaches and models over the years, realising that AL is based on practical knowledge (Trehan & Rigg, 2015). This led to AL variations, including critical action learning (CAL), as articulated by Pedler (2012).

In 1994, Wilmott introduced CAL to link critical management studies to practical management learning (Hauser et al., 2023; Rigg, 2005). This approach emphasises the importance of critical reflection on the influence of emotions, power and politics within the group (Chang, 2019; Hauser, et al., 2023). Rigg (2005, p.3) explains, “CAL aims to promote explicitly critical thinking, giving recognition to the way politics and emotion are integral to organising, as well as the role in

facilitating and constraining the scope for learning.” CAL is an established approach within AL that promotes equality, diversity and inclusion (Hauser et al., 2023), addresses short-term goals and strengthens freedom and democratic values (Pedler, 2012). The facilitator plays an important role in ensuring that all this happens.

CAL was a suitable theory to guide my thinking in this study, particularly in my role of facilitator. By facilitating the process, I ensured a thorough examination and elimination of power relations, creating a collaborative environment where all participants actively contribute to the co-creation of new knowledge. Because the ALS consisted of both ECCE managers and practitioners, I had to manage the interaction to ensure practitioners did not feel intimidated and managers did not dominate. I also had to manage negative emotions when they arose to ensure they did not impair the democratic and trusting relationships within the group. The establishment of ground rules helped to develop equal respect for everyone, within a caring and supportive environment. Following the principles of action learning permitted all participants to express their opinions freely and truthfully.

Hauser et al. (2023, p. 117) further elaborate that facilitation in CAL does not concentrate on developing the person, but on creating and containing the process through which courses of action are developed, and within which personal and inter-personal learning takes place. I will facilitate learning.

Rigg (2005) highlights that in CAL, critical reflection is encouraged by four activities:

- a) *Assumption analysis*: Through this activity, ECCE managers and practitioners’ (faulty) beliefs, values and social structures were challenged.
- b) *Contextual awareness*: I helped ECCE managers and practitioners to realise that their assumptions are socially and personally created based on previous experiences and knowledge, and that there is nothing wrong in recreating these assumptions based on what we learn from each other as a group.
- c) *Imaginative speculation*: This activity enabled ECCE managers and practitioners to think of new ways of navigating the ECCE function shift and maximising its benefits.
- d) *Reflective scepticism*: As the ALS co-created their new knowledge, they also learnt to question things they had previously just accepted.

Once again, this approach endorses that, as a facilitator, I should approach the process with a positive mindset and acknowledge that my understanding of the shift of the ECCE function and the challenges faced by ECCE managers and practitioners may be limited. Therefore, my role should be to facilitate their expression of challenges and their proposed solutions. This approach

underscores the importance of fostering a positive atmosphere to facilitate the co-creation of new knowledge.

2.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I discussed the global and national context of ECCE and its significance, highlighting the absence of a universally accepted term for ECCE worldwide. I provided an in-depth exploration of ECCE's transformation until 2022, when the function shift was officially launched. Through this exploration, I revealed ongoing efforts, particularly through policy developments, aimed at addressing the inequalities inherited from the apartheid era. I presented critical aspects of the ECCE function shift, including the expectations, implications, and potential mitigation strategies, to underscore the importance of the ECCE functions to be transferred and professionalising sector. Lastly, I explored action learning (AL) and critical action learning (CAL), theories, highlighting their relevance and application in this study for co-creating new knowledge and promoting social justice. In the next Chapter I explain and justify my methodological choices.

CHAPTER 3

A THEORETICAL JUSTIFICATION OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

In this study, I aimed to explore how early childhood care and education (ECCE) managers and practitioners experienced the function shift with the goal of supporting them to better navigate its complexities. In this chapter, I provide a review of the research methodology, including paradigm, research design, research methods and measures to improve the study's validity. Additionally, I explain the ethical considerations that informed and guided the study. I adopted a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design, as this approach allowed participants to engage in a collaborative way and to learn the process of lifelong action learning. Here, I remind the reader of my main research question: How can ECCE managers and practitioners best navigate the function shift towards quality and sustainable education? In Table 3.1 below, I present an overview of the research methodology.

Table 3.1: Overview of the research methodology

Methodology	
Research paradigm	Critical transformative paradigm (CTP)
Research design	Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)
Methods	Participant recruitment: Purposive sampling
	Data generation strategies: Transcripts of recorded discussions Critical reflective diary Creative and visual methods: Model building, Collage, Drawing,
	Data analysis: Thematic analysis
Validity criteria	Outcome Process Democratic Catalytic Dialogic
Ethical considerations	
Permission and informed consent	
Anonymity and confidentiality	
Justice	
Beneficence	
Respect for persons	

3.2 Research Methodology

A specific methodology includes systematic theoretical analysis of paradigms, designs, methods, validity and ethical considerations in the field of study (Igwenagu, 2016; Kumar, 2019). Researchers use these specific approaches and techniques to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in a field and propose appropriate solutions to emerging phenomena (Reed et al., 2021). I now discuss the methodology in detail.

3.2.1. Research paradigm

A research paradigm is a researcher's philosophical framework that encompasses their way of thinking, worldview, perspective, beliefs, principles and interpretation of the world or ideal world (Khatri, 2020; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Okesina, 2020). In this study, I chose the critical transformational paradigm (CTP), which is rooted in critical theory (Omodan, 2022) with a transformative intent (Mertens, 2021). CTP is grounded in social justice with the intent of enabling those affected by the issue to collaborate in transforming their current reality (Uthman, 2023). Here, participating ECCE managers and practitioners collaborated to find ways to overcome inequalities, address existing challenges and navigate the demands placed on them by the function shift while also taking advantage of the new opportunities it posed. A research paradigm comprises four philosophical assumptions: Ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Nguyen, 2019). In Table 3.2 below, I discuss each of these assumptions in relation to how they informed this study.

Table 3.2: Four philosophical assumptions of a research paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mertens, 2017)

Philosophical assumption	How these assumptions informed this study
Ontology <i>There are multiple versions of reality, depending on the social positions, perspectives and experiences of individuals, leading to various interpretations of reality.</i>	As an ECD coordinator, participants in the study may perceive me as having authority or influence over their perspectives due to my role in sector. However, it's crucial for me to clarify that I approach this study not as their coordinator, but as a fellow peer seeking knowledge alongside them as benefits the relational ontology suited to participatory studies. I will recognise the different perspectives and experiences of the participants as having equal value. We can only learn about perspectives and experiences of each other only when we enter into a full and open relationship with each other (Wood, 2020).
Epistemology <i>Guides researchers in determining the trustworthiness of their data and influences their approach to uncovering knowledge within a</i>	I will put the ECCE managers and practitioners at the forefront of sharing perspectives and experiences around the function shift, what they know, its impact and how they think we can use it to our benefit. Knowledge will be co-constructed and experiential knowledge will be combined with

Philosophical assumption	How these assumptions informed this study
<i>research context. This includes the discussions of a research group and how the sharing of experiences is facilitated to ensure inclusion.</i>	theoretical knowledge to better understand the situation and how to improve it.
Axiology <i>The nature of the ethics and values to promote wellbeing and social justice in a respectful manner.</i>	In research, ethics and values play a crucial role in achieving the goals of improving conditions and generating new knowledge. This study is guided by a set of values that include respect, integrity, honesty, transparency, accountability, trust, persistence, benevolence, and equity. These values will shape the ethical framework of the study, ensuring that participants are treated with respect, the research is conducted with integrity and transparency, and there is accountability for actions and decisions. The values also emphasise the importance of trust, persistence in overcoming challenges, benevolence towards participants' well-being, and promoting equity for equal opportunities. In essence, these values underpin the purpose of the study and enhance its ethical conduct.
Methodology <i>The systematic inquiry involves examining how participants collaborate and engage in democratic decision-making concerning the recording, analysis, and reporting of learning outcomes to external parties.</i>	A primary objective of this study is to ensure active participation from every participant involved. A key aspect of achieving this is by creating an environment where every participant's voice is heard during our meetings. Continuous learning and being open to new ideas will help to establish a conducive environment for participation, where power relations and roles will be discussed and monitored throughout the study.

This paradigm closely aligns with the use of Critical Action Learning (CAL). Both are grounded in the principles of collaboration, knowledge co-creation, critical reflection and challenge systemic inequities, such as those within the ECCE sector, as I have explained.

3.2.2. Research design: Participatory action learning and action research (PALAR)

A research design encompasses a plan that connects conceptual research problems with feasible empirical research (Boru, 2018). I employed it as the master plan for knowledge construction, providing a detailed step-by-step instruction from the beginning to the end of the study process. Furthermore, as Akhtar (2016, p. 69) stated, a research design should address key questions, such as:

1. What is the focus of the study, and what type of data is required?
2. What are the sources of data needed for the research?
3. What is the appropriate sample size or number of cases for the study?
4. Which sampling method should be employed?

5. What method of data collection would be most suitable?
6. How will the data be analysed?

By addressing these questions, I ensured that the research design provided a framework to guide the research process, that I met the research objectives, and that I collected relevant and reliable data. In this study, I employed PALAR, which Zuber-Skerritt (2011) described as a philosophy, methodology, theory of learning, and facilitation process for community engagement. PALAR is aimed at addressing real-world challenges and promoting social change by those most affected.

PALAR represents the integration and harmonisation of two concepts: Participatory Action Research (PAR) and Action Learning (AL), as discussed by Kearney et al. (2013). This comprehensive approach is designed to foster social justice and address challenges effectively. PAR is a research approach grounded in democratic processes and philosophy that acknowledges the significance of involving the individuals being studied rather than research for research's sake conducted on people/communities (MacDonald, 2012; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). ECCE managers and practitioners investigated a real-life issue that affected them: the shift in ECCE functions.

AL is an educational process involving small groups of 5-8 individuals, referred to as action learning sets (ALS) (Wood, 2020), who examine their own actions and experiences to enhance performance (Serrat, 2017). Seven ECCE managers and practitioners and I gathered and shared insights regarding the shift in ECCE functions to maximise the associated benefits. The ALS learned from the experiences of each participant and co-created the new knowledge about the ECCE function shift. The PALAR process encompasses two equally important components: relationship and research. Figure 3.1 illustrates the PALAR process.

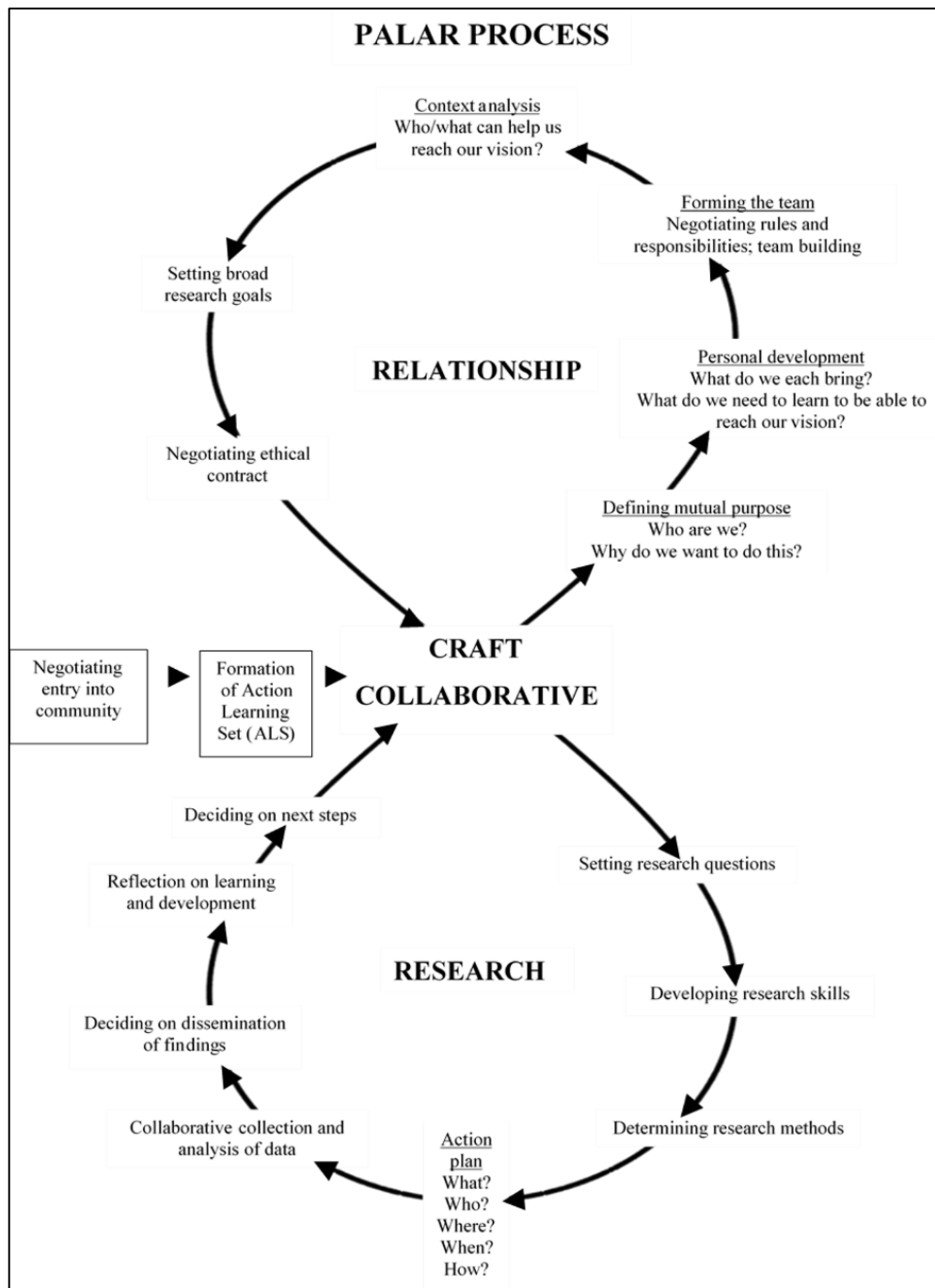


Figure 3.1: The PALAR process (adapted from Wood, 2019)

The PALAR process begins by negotiating entry into the community and establishing the action learning set (ALS). I gained access to the community through the administrator in our office, who recruited the ECCE managers and practitioners for the study. However, they already knew me from my coordinator role. These participants formed the ALS that I worked with in this study. The ALS process involved several in-person sessions with seven ECCE managers and practitioners. This process allowed participants to express their experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations regarding the function shift. The ALS sessions were designed to facilitate

collaboration and engagement amongst participants, enabling them to reflect on their experiences and take collective actions.

In PALAR, both components (relationship/research) unfold simultaneously within each cycle (Wood, 2020). Building a relationship includes identifying participants' assets to raise self-awareness and a deeper understanding of oneself (Akinyemi et al., 2021; Pretorius & Plaatjies, 2023). When ECCE managers and practitioners were aware of their strengths and weaknesses, it was easier for the ALS to leverage and benefit from the strengths of each participant. Participants were intentional about their participation, as they were aware of the impact their strengths and weaknesses brought to the ALS.

The research component comprises a cyclical process of planning, action, evaluation and reflection, where learning from one cycle informs the next (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). This process fosters empowerment, ownership, active engagement and collaborative learning, ultimately leading to more relevant and equitable outcomes (Fabillar & Wang, 2019). In Figure 3.2 below, I provide an insight into the cycles applicable to this study, answering the research question: How can ECCE managers and practitioners best navigate the function shift towards quality and sustainable education?

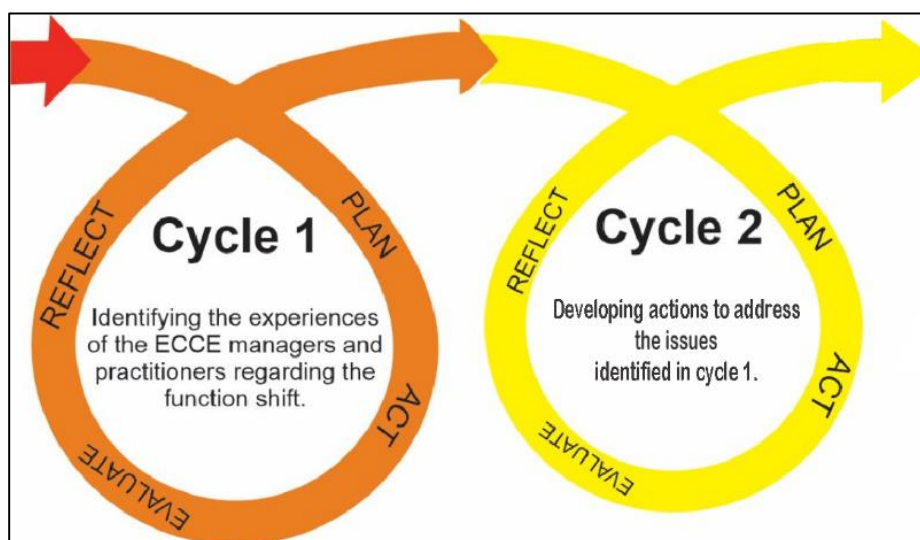


Figure 3.2: PALAR cycles (Wood, 2020)

(i) Cycle One

In cycle one, we planned how to conduct the study and focused on answering the first sub-question: What are the experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations of the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift? During our first ALS meeting, I introduced

the project. We established a mutual purpose to reaffirm that we have the correct participants and to create a shared understanding and a base for effective communication. Through this establishment, we aligned goals, vision and mission to minimise conflicts and set points of reference for conflict resolution. We negotiated the methods to use and decided on drawings and transcribed recordings of discussions.

(ii) Cycle Two

Building on and continuing from cycle one, in cycle two, we focused on addressing the second sub-question: What actions can they take to address the issues identified? We used drawings and collages to generate data. We revisited our goal, vision and mission, reminding ourselves of the roles, rules, ethical contract and power play to confirm that every participant is still committed to our trust and respect for grounded relationship and agreement.

Using the data collected from cycle one, we highlighted what worked and what didn't work. We went on to re-strategise how we can improve and address issues from cycle one. We identified and recorded what worked and didn't work. We further went on to discuss the implications that all these outcomes meant for the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the ECCE function shift. As I facilitated the process in these cycles, I was mindful of the principles of PALAR as outlined by Zuber-Skerritt (2011), the 7Cs and the 3Rs. The 7Cs include the following:

Communication: *“PALAR requires communication to be dialogical, symmetrical and inclusive”* (Wood, 2020, p.30). By fostering such communication within the study process, ECCE managers and practitioners had the opportunity to communicate in their preferred language, primarily Setswana. I was also using both Setswana and English in communicating and probing further. This practice inherently helped to eliminate power dynamics (Rigg, 2005), improved engagement and reinforced adherence to the initially established rules. It made it even easier for the ECCE managers and practitioners to express their views without focusing on the language but on the meaning of their contributions.

Commitment: *“This principle refers to the need to reflect on the dedication of the core project team to process and outcomes”* (Wood, 2020, p.31). At each meeting, I checked with the group if they were happy with the process and progress and created an opportunity for them to voice any issues they might have had.

Competence: *“This principle refers to the participants’ perceived capability to conduct the research effectively”* (Wood, 2020, p.31). I ensured that all participants understood the data generation methods before they began and assisted them in collaboratively identifying emerging themes.

Compromise: *“This principle means that the ability to compromise depends on being willing to listen to other points of view and reach mutual agreement”* (Wood, 2020, p.31). From the beginning of the project, I encouraged the ECCE managers and practitioners to discuss their experiences, and we went on to negotiate, compromise on some views and collectively reached a way forward for the benefit of the whole ALS and the actualisation of our goal.

Coaching: *“The ALS meetings should be a place where people mentor each other and regard each other as critical friends”* (Wood, 2020, p.32). Given the diversity in our experiences, skills, competencies, and knowledge, successful **collaboration** and co-generation of new knowledge coaching took place naturally as the experienced managers and practitioners were able to assist those newer to the field. By identifying our strengths at the beginning of the collaboration, we could draw on the assets that each possessed to the benefit of all. Throughout the research, I also encouraged the participants to seek mentors from the community that they identified as possessing appropriate knowledge and skills to ensure sustainability of support when I withdrew from the field.

Critical self-reflection: I encouraged each participant to self-reflect, and as a facilitator, I continually reflected on how I was influencing the group, the group process and progress by means of a reflective diary. Later in the process, I requested the participants to reflect on their learning and development.

These principles are aligned to the 3Rs of PALAR:

Relationship: This is the core ingredient in building a successful process. The ALS established a supportive, respectful, and trust-based relationship before commencing data collection. This relationship was nurtured throughout the data generation process.

Reflection: We reflected on both the process and progress throughout the study.

Recognition: This principle refers to the recognition of the learning of the participants and allows them to choose how they would like to share this learning with others and have it publicly recognised.

The implementation of PALAR in this study signified a departure from traditional, objective and researcher-driven approaches by actively involving ECCE managers and practitioners throughout the research process. By embracing a participatory approach, the study acknowledged their expertise, experiences, and perspectives as valuable contributions to understanding and addressing the challenges within the ECCE field. The integration of AL with the PAR process

enabled the participants to learn how to learn and thus become lifelong learners who can continually improve their practice.

As a researcher, PALAR enabled me to function as a co-researcher (MacDonald, 2012), actively engaged in data generation alongside ECCE managers and practitioners. This collaborative approach aimed to navigate and explore the advantages and challenges associated with the shift in ECCE functions from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Through PALAR, participants gained a deeper understanding of these benefits and contributed to the smooth transition process. The following section explores the research methods employed in the study.

3.3 Research methods

In this section, I examine the research methods employed in this study. Research methods are the strategies used by researchers to answer the research question (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020), encompassing participant recruitment, data generation strategies, and data analysis. I further provide a comprehensive explanation of the methods utilised to effectively address the research objectives and generate meaningful insights within the context of the study.

The research methods used ALS discussions, creative and visual methods, and a reflective diary were well suited to the participatory, collaborative, and transformative aims of this PALAR study (Wood, 2020; Kearney et al., 2013). They enabled deep, inclusive engagement with the lived realities of ECCE managers and practitioners. These methods supported authentic co-creation of knowledge (Glaw et al., 2017) while also facilitating personal and collective growth in navigating the function shift (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

3.3.1. Participant recruitment

Participant recruitment is a crucial aspect of the research process. It involves selecting individuals who meet specific criteria and can provide valuable perspectives and experiences for the study (Manohar et al., 2018). Purposive sampling is when a participant is chosen intentionally for the qualities they possess (Etikan et al., 2016). In this study, I focused on recruiting ECCE managers and practitioners working in both registered and unregistered centres, including those owned by and affiliated to the [name of organisation] and privately owned centres within the [name of the nation]. I took this approach because I work in this area and wanted to ensure diversity and representativeness.

To reach these ECCE managers and practitioners, I developed a recruitment leaflet (see Annexure B) describing the objectives and other relevant aspects of the study. I discussed this

leaflet with my administrator colleague and then asked him to recruit participants for me as an independent person for ethical reasons, as emphasised by Kubicek and Robles (2016). He distributed the leaflets at various ECCE centres and guided participants through the process. He dealt with the interested participants throughout until they signed the consent forms. Upon signing the consent forms – he then handed them over to me. This approach was aimed at mitigating power dynamics, as my existing collaborations with certain centres could have created a situation where staff members felt obligated to participate even if they did not genuinely want to volunteer for the study (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). Following that, I confirmed the participants' interest and scheduled the meeting date with them over the phone.

The following table indicates the biographic data of the participants who volunteered for this study.

Table 3.3: Participant biographic details

Pseudonym/ name	Position	Centre un/registered	Affiliation
Participant 1	Practitioner	Registered	Affiliated
Participant 2	Practitioner	Unregistered	Not affiliated
Participant 3	Manager	Unregistered	Not affiliated
Participant 4	Manager	Unregistered	Not affiliated
Participant 5	Manager	Unregistered	Not affiliated
Participant 6	Manager	Unregistered	Not affiliated
Participant 7	Manager	Registered	Affiliated

The recruited ECCE managers and practitioners and I formed an action learning set (ALS). An ALS is a small group of individuals who meet regularly over a period to learn collaboratively from and with each other, engaging in continuous self-reflection (Wood, 2020). Within this ALS, we developed a shared vision for collaboration, clarified our mutual purpose, identified the knowledge and skills each participant brings, and acknowledged areas for further growth. We then proceeded to establish guidelines and assign roles (see Figure 3.1). I, with the goal of fostering trustworthy relationships and empowering participants to take ownership of their learning and embrace lifelong learning. Vu (2020) emphasises that participants are more likely to engage meaningfully when they are invited into decision processes and reflective discussions; a principle that aligned

well with the goals of our ALS. This approach enhanced the overall validity and credibility of the research findings (Stahl & King, 2020). The following section explores the data generation strategies employed in the study, highlighting the methods used to gather rich and insightful information from the participants.

3.3.2. Data generation strategies

Data generation strategies refer to the systematic approaches and techniques used by researchers to obtain relevant data that aligns with the research objectives. These strategies also involve using tools and techniques that ensure the reliability and validity of the collected data (Babbie, 2016; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Opening more options for collecting data assists participants in participating maximally.

In this study, I used the following methods: Transcripts of recorded ALS discussions, a reflective diary, and creative and visual methods as essential components within the PALAR approach to data generation. In Table 3.4 below, I summarise the sessions and methods used to generate data throughout the study.

Table 3.4: Overview of the ALS sessions

Session	Date	Purpose of the session	Activity	Data	Cycle
1	16 May 2024	Building a relationship, establishing the ALS, introductions, signing consent forms, discussion of group norms and expectations, outlining roles.	We were all engaged in discussions, established a WhatsApp group, read and signed forms.	Transcription of discussions	1
2	23 May 2024	Relationship building, documenting rules, building confidence, deciding on a vision.	Created rules, building a vision model with LEGO, discussions.	Photos of model built, a list of rules, transcripts of discussions	1
3	30 May 2024	Relationship building; attending a webinar on the two years function shift updates and the idea is that they learn from broader stakeholders and share their learning.	Engaging in the affirmation activity. Participation in the webinar.	Drawings with captions and transcribed narratives	1
4	06 June 2024	Relationship building, context analysis, exploring Cycle One research question "What are the experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations of the ECCE managers and	Continuing with affirmation activity – exploring strengths and how we can assist the ALS Participants drawing their experiences, feelings, knowledge and	Drawings, transcripts of discussions	1

Session	Date	Purpose of the session	Activity	Data	Cycle
		practitioners regarding the function shift?"	expectations regarding the function shift.		
5	13 June 2024	Relationship building, continuation of Cycle One research question.	Participants continuing to draw their experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations, started presenting their drawings.	Drawings, transcripts of discussions	1
6	20 June 2024	Relationship building, continuation of Cycle One research question.	Participants continued to present their drawings.	Drawings, transcripts of discussions	1
7	27 June 2024	Relationship building, identifying common patterns emerging from Cycle One.	Identifying common patterns from participants' presentations.	Charts, transcripts of discussions	1
8	04 July 2024	Identification of actions to address issues identified in Cycle One.	Developing a collage to address the issues identified in Cycle One.	Collages, transcripts of discussions	2
9	18 July 2024	Discussion of collages.	Sharing and discussing the information on the collages.	Transcripts of discussions	2
10	15 August 2024	Development of an action plan.	Developing an action plan in relation to the collages.	Charts, transcripts of discussions	2
11	23 September 2024	Review of the action plan	Various activities in a whole day session to develop confidence to review and implement the action plan	Charts, transcripts of discussions	2
12	24 October 2024	Action plan progress update.	Progress discussions regarding the action plan.	Transcripts of discussions	2
13	06 November 2024	Disseminating findings.	Presented findings at a regional seminar for practitioners involved in the ETDP SETA Chair research.	PowerPoint Presentation.	2

(i) Transcripts of recorded discussions

Transcripts are word-for-word texts of what was spoken. They are necessary and a main method of data generation in PALAR; however, they can never capture spoken interaction in its entirety (Richardson et al., 2022). Transcripts capture the verbatim accounts of participants' conversations, providing rich and detailed data for analysis (Alase, 2017). I recorded each

session, listened to all the discussions, re-listened for clarification, and transcribed them at my own pace (Hill et al., 2022). Recording the discussions was the easiest part of this study. I requested consent and just pressed record throughout the whole session, allowing the discussion to continue naturally. The transcripts enabled me to delve deep into the perspectives, thoughts, and experiences of the ECCE managers and practitioners, offering valuable insights into the ECCE function shift.

(ii) Critical reflective diary

A reflective diary served as a personal written account in which I reflected on how each session unfolded and how ECCE managers and practitioners expressed their experiences, thoughts, and emotions towards the ECCE function shift (Germain et al., 2016). This diary also acted as a self-reflection tool, encouraging me to introspect and articulate how I facilitated the session and impacted the progress of the ALS (Creswell, 2014). My self-reflection was mainly guided by the following questions: What kind of climate did I create for the participants? How was I relating and interacting with the participants? What were my strengths and weaknesses in the session, and how can I address them? What can I improve on to get every participant to actively engage? These questions provided me with access to my inner reflections and assisted me in improving with every session, as they provided me with deeper understanding and insights (Tracy, 2019).

In line with the principles of PALAR, critical self-reflection was central to this study (Wood, 2020). While the reflective diary captured personal insights, its use extended beyond introspection; it became a responsive tool that informed my facilitation and ethical engagement (Germain et al., 2016). For instance, in an early session I wrote:

Today I felt a bit unsettled. I realise now that I entered the room expecting the participants to be more informed. Their uncertainty made me think; have I failed to position this topic in a way that meets them where they are?
(Reflective Journal, Session 2, 30 May 2024)

This prompted me to adapt by co-creating understanding with participants, encouraging them to first share their knowledge before offering structured inputs. Later in the process, as trust and dialogue deepened, I noted:

Interestingly, I am no longer experiencing any anxiety. Everyone is now comfortable and actively participates (Reflective Journal, Session 7, 27 June 2024).

These reflections show how my assumptions were challenged, how facilitation improved over time, and how PALAR's emphasis on democratic, catalytic learning was lived out in practice. The learning was mutual; and informed how I present the findings in Chapter 4.

(iii) Visual methods

Glaw et al. (2017) highlight that visual methods refer to various techniques that allow participants to visually represent their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, such as drawing, collage, photovoice, cellphilmimg, and digital storytelling. We negotiated and agreed on building a model using collage and drawing, which contributed to gaining a deep understanding of the participants' experiences, thoughts and perspectives (Bartoli, 2020).

According to Fay and Moran (2013), *drawing* involves mark-making to express visual ideas using various instruments such as pencils, pen and ink, inked brushes, crayons, charcoal, chalk, pastels, erasers, markers, and styluses. In this study, drawing was used to allow participants to visualise ideas that couldn't be conveyed with words. I provided drawing materials, including papers and asked participants to use whichever material they found convenient. In Cycle One, I requested them to make a drawing about their experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations regarding the function shift. I further requested them to provide captions for their drawings.

A *collage* is an amalgamation of two or more visual elements or materials that are combined into a harmonious unity of form (Kherid et al., 2024). The prompt was: Make a collage that depicts how you want to address the challenges identified in Cycle One. Participants brought magazines and scissors, and I provided glue. In a case where they couldn't get a certain picture in the magazines, they asked me to search for it on the internet and print it out for them. The collages were completed in pairs. We used this method because it allowed participants to use various materials to express themselves. We worked on the collages over two sessions, during which I encouraged ECCE managers and practitioners to bring additional materials they felt were necessary to help them express themselves.

(iv) Model-building

Buckingham (2009) and Gauntlett (2005) emphasise that creative visual methods are valuable qualitative methods in participatory research, designed to alter the power relations between participants and explore their perspectives. They involve making creative visual artefacts and building models. In this study, participants engaged in model-building using LEGO sets, which included coloured plastic interlocking bricks and various other elements (Peterson & Ziegler, 2021). In the initial sessions of Cycle One, this method proved effective in breaking the ice among ECCE managers and practitioners and facilitated a creative approach to envisioning our ALS

goals. I provided a box of LEGO and asked participants to collaboratively build their ideal ECCE centre. Through this activity, they built a model, reflected on and expressed their thoughts through metaphors (Nerantzi & Despard, 2014). These creative and visual methods have been widely used to study social issues (Herzog, 2019) and have become a valuable tool for data generation (Ong, 2020). In this study, a combination of these creative and visual methods enabled ECCE managers and practitioners to express themselves easily, creatively, and confidently, resulting in the best answers to the research questions.

Integrating creative and visual methods with transcripts of recorded discussions and my critical reflective diary enhanced the richness and depth of the collected data. This multimodal combination allowed for the capture of visual cues, non-verbal communication, and contextual details that could not be fully conveyed through text alone (Forceville, 2022). The inclusion of visual data provided a more holistic understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

The PALAR approach empowered ECCE managers and practitioners to actively contribute to data generation and analysis. By involving them in the decision-making process, participants were able to interpret and evaluate the data. This participatory aspect fostered meaningful relationships, promoting trust, collaboration, and co-creation of knowledge (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The use of creative and visual methods in this collaborative approach facilitated engagement, as visual materials sparked discussion and reflection (Rose, 2016).

Implementing the PALAR approach and respectfully engaging with individuals from diverse cultures created a supportive environment for mutual learning and understanding between myself and participants (Wood & Zuber-Skerritt, 2013). This approach was grounded in trust and respect, allowing participants to feel valued and confident in expressing their opinions (Zuber-Skerritt & Teare, 2013). In this study, the data generated by the ECCE managers and practitioners within the PALAR framework is seen as a valuable contribution, reflecting gratitude and recognition for their input (Maree, 2016). The following section explores the data analysis method used in the study.

3.3.3. Data analysis

This section focuses on the data analysis process carried out in the study. Data analysis is a critical process in qualitative research that involves systematically organising, interpreting, and making sense of the collected data to uncover patterns, themes, and insights (Creswell, 2014). This assisted us in realising whether we had answered the initial research questions.

Bhatia (2017) defines data analysis as the critical examination of raw or generated data to draw conclusions and present them in a format for decision-making. In this study, I used thematic data analysis, which is a qualitative research method that involves systematically organising and analysing complex data collections. The thematic analysis explores themes within data narratives through careful reading and re-reading of transcribed data (Dawadi, 2020). According to Kampira (2021), this process entails identifying and linking themes within the data, assuming that all information carries meaning that can be inferred from central ideas or clusters of ideas.

In this study, a significant amount of data was generated. Upon reflection and transcribing, I discussed key points that emerged from the previous session with ECCE managers and practitioners in the next session. They would then correct or reaffirm me if that was what they were talking about. We then wrote on paper what we thought was common and gave it an initial theme. I further analysed this through my theoretical lens. The thematic analysis allowed me to identify patterns and develop themes through various phases and stages using data generated by creative and visual methods, transcripts and my reflective diary. While traditional interviews were not conducted, rich narrative data was collected through transcribed ALS discussions, reflective diaries, and participant-created visual artefacts. The information provided in Figure 3.3 summarises the phases and stages followed to identify patterns and develop themes in generated data.

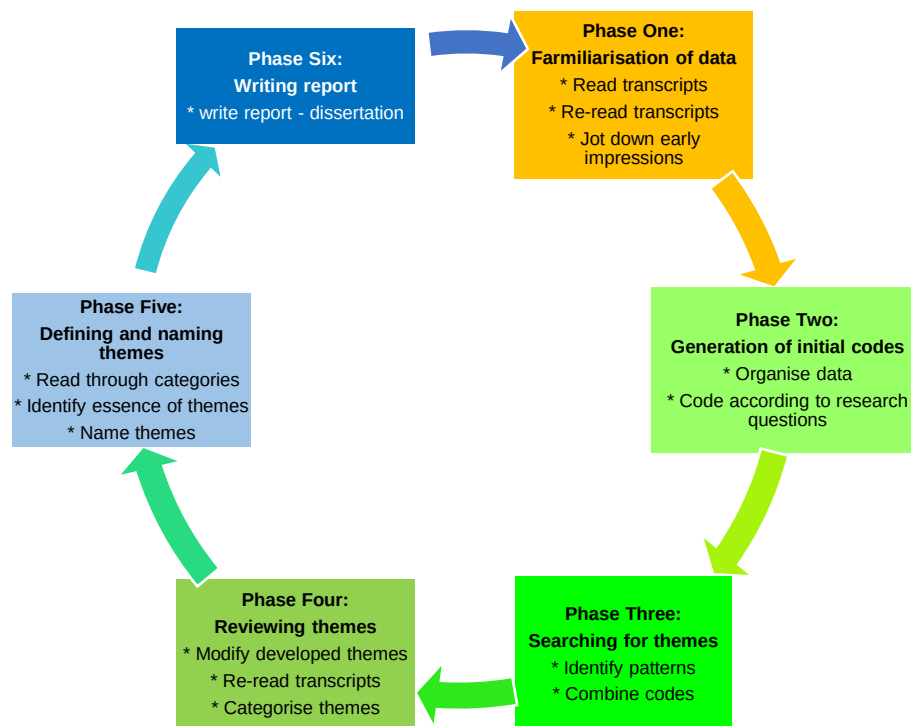


Figure 3.3: Phases and stages of theme development (Adapted from Dawadi, 2020; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017)

(i) Phase One: Familiarisation of data

I started by transcribing the ECCE managers' and practitioners' discussions onto a Word document. I then made sure to back up the document and store it in a secure location, including a password-protected Google Drive folder. During this phase, I carefully read and re-read the transcripts while also examining the LEGO model, drawings and collages that were created. As I went through the transcripts again, I made notes and recorded my initial impressions.

(ii) Phase Two: Generation of initial codes

In this phase, I began organising the data in a logical and systematic manner. I created a table and used line-to-line coding to code the text based on the research questions. I grouped sections of the transcripts that pertained to a particular question together in the table alongside the respective question. Additionally, I utilised open coding, allowing me to develop and modify codes as I progressed through the coding process. Consequently, I established a column where I could include portions of the transcripts that I deemed significant and relevant to the study but did not directly address any of the research questions.

(iii) Phase Three: Searching for themes

Continuing from phase two, in phase three I began to highlight patterns by assigning the same colour to text that sounded the same. By the end of this phase, I had organised the codes into broader themes that conveyed something specific and relevant about the research question.

(iv) Phase Four: Reviewing themes

During this phase, I carefully reviewed and modified the identified themes. I went through each theme, consolidating the highlighted data to ensure that it was logically organised. I also re-examined the data associated with each theme to determine if it truly supported it. In addition, I checked if any data belonged to multiple themes and appropriately relocated it. I made several changes during this phase, including assessing overlapping themes to determine if they were distinct or could be merged. I also developed subthemes where necessary.

(v) Phase Five: Defining and naming themes

This phase represents the final modification of the themes. I thoroughly reviewed each theme to comprehend its essence and how it related to any subthemes. In my attempt to provide feedback to the ALS, I rearranged the themes based on their priority and logical flow.

(vi) Phase Six: Writing report

Since the formalisation of the ECCE function (see Chapter 1), ECCE managers and practitioners have faced multiple complexities. These complexities were experienced prior to the launch, during, and are still being experienced. The aim of this study was to equip ECCE managers and practitioners with the skills and knowledge to navigate the complexities of the function shift in a PALAR approach. In this study, I worked with seven ECCE managers and practitioners who engaged in activities such as building relationships, generating, analysing and disseminating data, and reflecting on their learning and development to determine the next steps.

The findings of this study revealed both the advantages and disadvantages of the ECCE function shift. Most importantly, they provided insights on how to best navigate these complexities. The co-generated knowledge is valuable not only to ECCE managers and practitioners but also to the ECCE sector as a whole and to the study itself. In the next section, I discuss the validity of the study.

3.4 Validity

In this section, I examine the validity measures used in this study. Validity refers to the degree to which a research study effectively measures its intended conceptions, ensuring that the resulting findings and conclusions are both accurate and meaningful (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Edwin, 2019). To ensure the validity of this study, I applied the quality criteria proposed by Herr and Anderson (2015) and emphasised by Elg et al. (2019), which include democratic, dialogic, process, catalytic and outcome validity.

I upheld *democratic validity* by involving ECCE managers and practitioners as co-researchers, providing them with equal opportunities to ensure that their experiences, feelings and knowledge directed the study. To enhance participants' understanding, I applied *dialogic validity* by summarising key points at the end of each session and recapping the previous session at the beginning of each new one. Participants engaged voluntarily in this process. Through this, different issues were identified. In developing actions to address the identified issues, I applied *process validity* by allowing participants to assign tasks to one another, including myself, promoting mutual accountability. This process led to *catalytic validity* by helping participants become more aware of the roles and responsibilities necessary to improve their ECCE centres and meet the function shift requirements. Ultimately, this led to *outcome validity*, as the ALS co-developed a collaborative hub to navigate the complexities of the function shift and other ECCE sector-related issues.

Through this process, I ensured that the findings were both valid and reliable. Careful attention to validity and reliability is crucial for ensuring precise and significant outcomes this. In the following section, I explore the ethical considerations of this study.

3.5 Ethical considerations

In this section, I discuss the ethical considerations related to this study. Ethics are imperative in research, particularly within the PALAR approach, where it is crucial to actively address power dynamics and promote an inclusive environment (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). To address ethical considerations, I had a pre-existing ethical contract in place. I handed a copy to each participant, and we discussed the contents in detail. When they confirmed their satisfaction with the terms, they signed without any amendments or renegotiations.

Ethical considerations encompass the principles and guidelines that I, as a researcher must adhere to ensure the morally correct conduct of this study. These involve safeguarding the rights, well-being, and dignity of participants while upholding integrity in research practices. Key ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality, minimising risks, promoting fairness and inclusivity, and upholding research integrity (Akhtar et al., 2021; Kaiser, 2009). Participants actively participated in several recorded two-hour discussions, engaged in creative and visual methods activities, and collaboratively developed actions to address the identified issues.

I provided participants with detailed information about the study's aims, purpose, benefits, and potential risks. In the first action learning set (ALS) session, we collaboratively developed an ethical agreement to ensure mutual understanding, with a strong emphasis on respect and trust. This commitment guided me to respect participants' privacy, avoid irrelevant personal questions, and address any issues that arose in relation to the research and participants' day-to-day operations. Throughout the study, I upheld principles of fairness, gratitude and *Ubuntu* (compassion and humanity) while maintaining open communication with participants. I took measures to prevent harm, handled data confidentially and used it solely for research purposes. Furthermore, in the following section, I explore the crucial aspects of obtaining permission and ensuring informed consent.

3.5.1. Permission and informed consent

In this section, I discuss the importance of obtaining permission and informed consent in this study. Seeking permission entails obtaining authorisation from relevant authorities, while informed consent ensures that participants fully understand and willingly agree to the study's objectives,

procedures, potential risks and benefits (Field & Behrman, 2004; Kaiser, 2009; Maree, 2016). These ethical considerations are crucial for respecting participants' autonomy and protecting their rights throughout the study process.

I applied to the Edu-REC of the North-West University for research approval and successfully obtained permission to proceed (see Annexure C). I initially planned to obtain permission from the ECCE forums, assuming they were legitimate 'gatekeepers' (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019). However, the ECCE managers explained that they operate independently from these forums, which they described as non-functional due to internal politics. I obtained voluntary consent and granted participants the freedom to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. For instance, in the first session, two ECCE practitioners (Participant 8 & Participant 9) joined but withdrew on the same day. Similarly, in the second session, two other practitioners (Participant 10 & Participant 11) also participated but withdrew on the same day. By prioritising permission and informed consent, I sought to maintain ethical standards, support participant autonomy, and protect their rights throughout the research process. In the subsequent section, I concentrate on the crucial aspects of anonymity and confidentiality.

3.5.2. Anonymity and confidentiality

In this section, I discuss the preservation of anonymity and confidentiality in this study. Ensuring anonymity means that participants' identities, including ECCE managers and practitioners, will be protected, and pseudonyms will be used to maintain confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009). Confidentiality measures will be implemented to protect their personal information and research data from unauthorised disclosure (Maree, 2016). While I could assure confidentiality, it is important to note that complete anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the close involvement and collaboration within the PALAR approach. However, we followed strict confidentiality protocols to minimise the risk of identifying individual participants.

In this study, I prioritised ethical considerations to protect participants' well-being by following strict confidentiality measures and obtaining informed consent. As emphasised by Kaiser (2009), participants had the option to choose anonymity through pseudonyms or to disclose their identities. Ultimately, I coded participants as 'P' followed by a number. Anonymity and confidentiality are crucial ethical considerations in a PALAR approach that contribute to building trust with ECCE managers and practitioners, respecting their privacy rights, and maintaining the integrity of the research process.

3.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I discussed the research methodology employed to explore how ECCE managers and practitioners experience the function shift, aiming to support them in navigating its complexities. I adopted a Critical Transformative Paradigm (CTP) within a Participatory Action Learning and Action Research (PALAR) design. This allowed collaborative engagement and knowledge co-generation. I outlined participant recruitment through purposive sampling, which included ECCE managers and practitioners from various centres within the [name of the nation], a semi-rural area where I am employed. I used data generation methods, including transcripts of recorded discussions, my reflective diary and visual methods (model building, drawing & collage). This provided multiple ways for participants to express their experiences.

Furthermore, I applied thematic analysis across six stages and ultimately developed themes aligned with the research question. I ensured validity through Herr and Anderson's criteria, focusing on democratic, dialogic, process, catalytic, and outcome validity. In ethical considerations, I addressed permission, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality. In the following Chapter, I present the findings.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present a detailed analysis of the findings to answer the secondary questions of the study, namely:

- a) What are the experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations of the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift?
- b) What actions can they take to address the issues identified?

The findings are structured around the key themes and actions that emerged during the two research cycles:

- a) Cycle One: Identifying the experiences (including feelings, knowledge and expectations) of the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift.
- b) Cycle Two: Develop an action plan to address the issues identified in Cycle One.

To provide clarity and structure, I organised findings into themes and explored each theme in relation to the above research questions. I supported the analysis with relevant data, including direct quotes from transcripts, as well as tables and figures that complement the insights, where applicable. Below, I discuss each of these themes as they emerged in Cycle One and Two.

4.2 Discussion of the themes and sub-themes that emerged

Four key themes and sub-themes emerged from Cycle One, with an additional theme emerging from Cycle Two. These reflected the participants' lack of knowledge and support, emotional and financial challenges, and competitive tendencies affecting collaboration. These themes illustrate the complex challenges ECCE managers and practitioners encounter during the function shift, and solutions that they co-generated. Below, I explore each theme in detail following the summary presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Overview of themes

Theme No.	Theme Name
1	<i>Participants' lack of knowledge, uncertainty and resistance towards the function shift</i> a) <i>Miscommunication and misperceptions about the function shift;</i> b) <i>Fears, intimidation and disbelief of information spread about the function shift;</i> c) <i>Panic and feelings of being undervalued led to resistance to change</i>
2	<i>Lack of support and training for ECCE managers and practitioners</i> a) <i>Lack of support and training for professional development in early childhood care and education;</i> b) <i>Lack of training in specialised knowledge to support children with special needs;</i> c) <i>Lack of support and training in preparing for the function shift implications, policy changes and new processes</i>
3	<i>Emotional and financial challenges set against sustainability and survival</i> a) <i>ECCE managers' and practitioners' emotional and financial challenges set against job security and personal survival</i> b) <i>The financial and educational sustainability of centres once the function shift implementation process started</i>
4	<i>Competitive tendencies delaying collaboration and progress</i> a) <i>Lack of collaborative management approaches within centres;</i> b) <i>Perceived competition between centre managers</i>
5	<i>Recognising the potential of collaborating to navigate the complexities of the function shift</i> a) <i>Co-generated action plan to collaboratively navigate the function shift</i> b) <i>Participant personal development: A quest for agency, ownership and lifelong learning</i>

4.3 Theme 1: Participants' lack of knowledge, uncertainty and resistance towards the function shift

In this theme, I explore how the ECCE managers and practitioners lacked knowledge regarding the function shift and were uncertain about its impact on them, which has led to resistance in adapting to the changes. To explore these dynamics in more detail, I discuss the three sub-themes that emerged below.

a) *Miscommunication and misperceptions about the function shift*

In this sub-theme, I discuss the experiences of ECCE managers and practitioners regarding official communication about the function shift. Effective communication is essential to deal with the various government departments, social workers and parents (Wood & Neethling, 2024). Such communication plays a vital role in facilitating the smooth transition of any process. However, participants expressed how some were excluded from the communication, while others appeared to receive timely and adequate updates. This miscommunication, or lack of communication from

authorities, was also identified as a challenge by the joint committee of the Departments of Basic Education and Social Development (DBE & DSD, 2022). It left many participants feeling confused and uncertain about what the function shift entailed, when it would happen and how it would impact their work. The sector inequalities identified by Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019) are ongoing, as some participants were unaware of the function shift and its exact implications. Some assumed it had been delayed or even cancelled, leading to limited or no preparation. Figure 4.1 provides evidence of their lack of knowledge:

lyooo! I don't know anything about that function shift of yours... I think function shift means we are not functioning like we used to function; it means we are moving from level A to level B (P8).

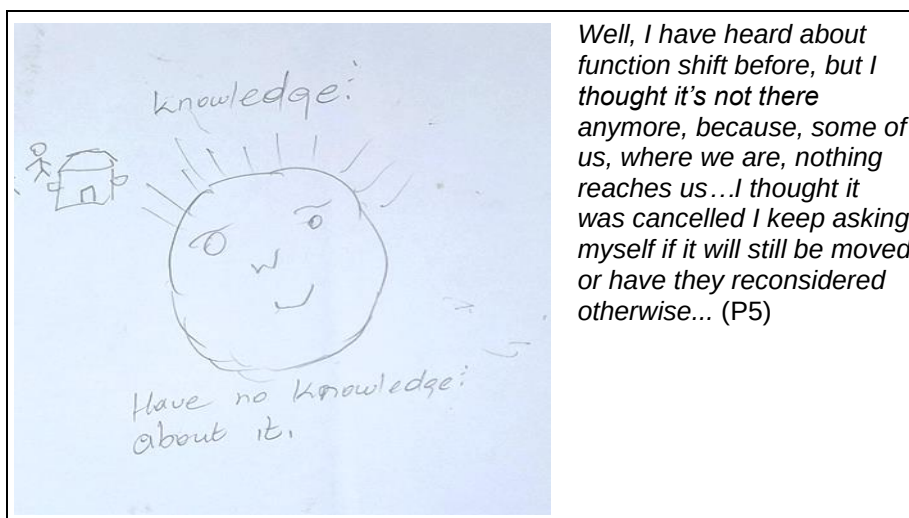


Figure 4.1: Lack of knowledge about function shift (P5)

These responses highlighted their lack of understanding, feelings of confusion, doubts and exclusion. Furthermore, participants indicated the scepticism and frustrations that arose due to miscommunication, as illustrated in Figure 4.2:

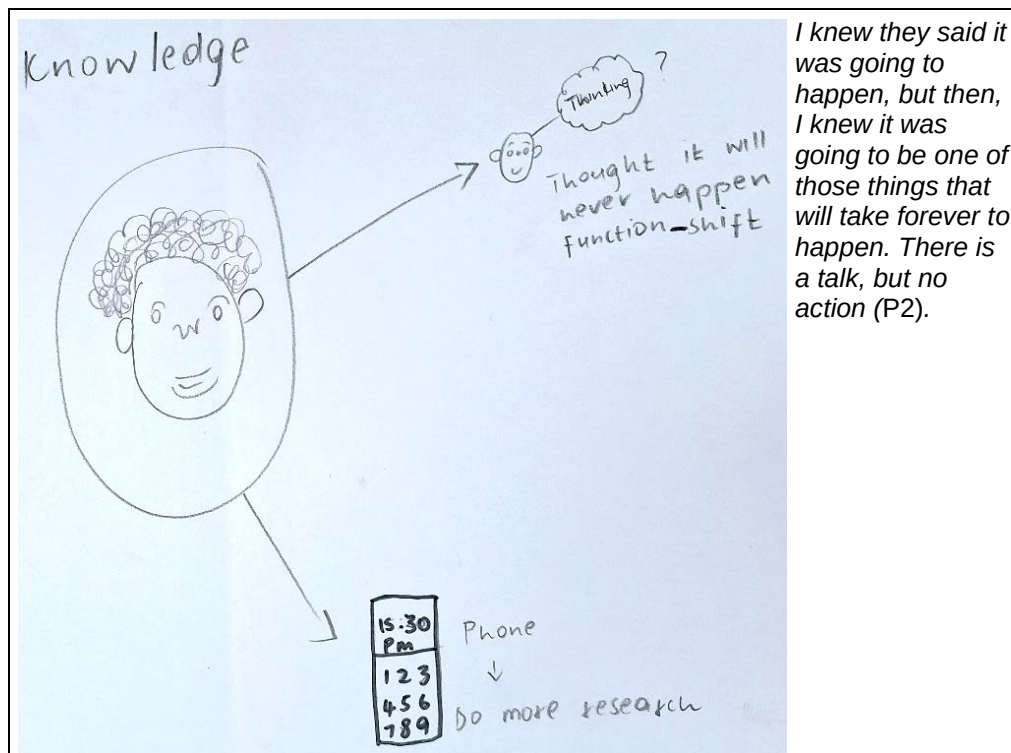


Figure 4.2: Persistent lack of knowledge about function shift (P2)

P7 added further perspective on the misalignment:

Function shift happened, but it was just a mere word, in actions it hasn't happened. When you go to the Department it is a problem, the DSD officials only gave some documents to the DBE officials, they are not even working together. When there are things that you need, they won't help you; they will tell you that they don't know anything, including EMIS number...(P7)

Drawing from their prior experiences of limited communication and commitment, participants thought that officials were not effectively implementing the function shift. Although the government acknowledges the importance of communication, as demonstrated by the provincial governments conducting communication activities and district roadshows (DBE & DSD, 2022), the scale of these efforts was clearly insufficient. Based on the participants' comments, many ECCE managers and practitioners were overlooked. Hence, they saw this as a lack of communication. Such ineffective communication not only promoted misunderstandings but also highlighted participants' lack of confidence in both the officials and the transition process, as also emphasised by Baloyi and Makhubele (2018).

Participants observed that parents also lacked sufficient knowledge regarding the function shift. Upon hearing that DBE would assume the functions of ECCE, some parents moved their four-year-old children to schools. This shift was terrible for the children, as schools were often

unprepared for ECCE in terms of infrastructure, appropriate curriculum and qualified practitioners to teach this age group. Some schools accepted and mixed these younger children with grade R learners who were typically five and a half years old, likely due to the lowered grade R age in the BELA Act (RSA, 2024). P1 further expressed this frustration:

You know, the ups and downs were caused by the Department of Social Development... Some parents were amidst the ups and downs; they shifted children from ECD centres to the schools. And then when they get there they are not coping (P1).

These incidents left participants with mixed feelings, which led to the sub-theme I explore below.

b) Fear, intimidation and disbelief of information spread about the function shift

In this sub-theme, I discuss the feelings of participants regarding the function shift, reflecting on their initial reactions when it was first announced by President Cyril Ramaphosa in his State of the Nation Address in 2019 (South African Government, 2019) and when it was officially launched in 2022 (DBE, 2022a). As illustrated in Figure 4.3 below, participants expressed mixed emotions, encompassing fear, intimidation, anger, panic, shock, uncertainty, worry, and sadness.

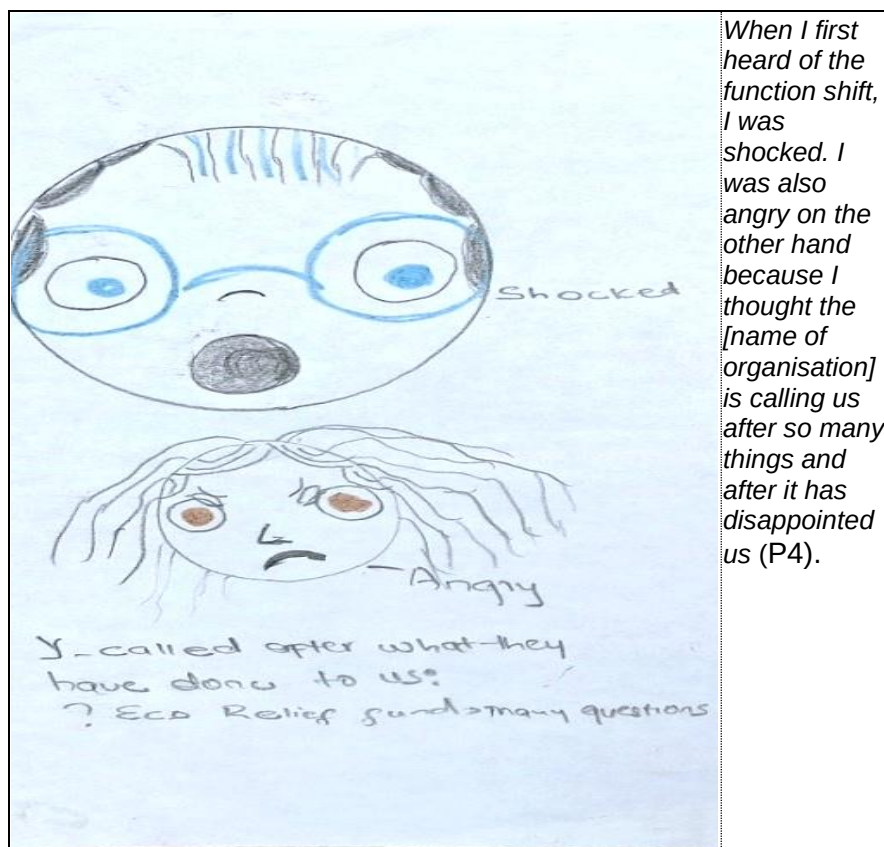


Figure 4.3: Mixed emotions due to function shift (P4)

Part of this statement indicated how participants thought the function shift was the process of the local organisation, which, in their view, had previously disappointed them. The perception of the function shift being a process of this local organisation brought anger to many participants, as they expressed that the organisation is no different from the DSD. As P4 continued:

Even if [name of organisation] can ask me to be part of them, I am going to refuse [raising tone]...They too didn't assist me with anything. Do you remember there was an incident about the ECD relief fund? We went up and down, doing this and that. My documents were up-to-date, I was only waiting for that money (P4).

As participants were recruited by an employee of [name of organisation], some mistakenly thought he was calling them on behalf of the organisation. This illustrates the frustration, feelings of victimisation and exclusion felt by the ECCE managers and practitioners, as also discussed by Atmore (2022). It indicated a genuine plea for support, as they felt isolated and unsupported, which led to their resistance toward adaptation. I discuss this further in the subsequent section.

Most of the fears stemmed from the ineffective communication highlighted in the previous sub-theme. Initially, participants were under the mistaken impression that DBE would take over ECCE entirely, meaning that all children would have to move to schools, which led them to worry about losing their income. P1 expressed the sense of panic: *We were panicking because we thought we might lose everything*. Moreover, some participants felt intimidated by the unknown, and others doubted the accuracy of the information they received. In line with this, DBE (2022a) highlighted the mixed emotions caused by the function shift, which is further validated by these participants' expressions.

In addition to concerns about their own future, participants were also stressed and worried about the children's development, as expressed by P4 and P5:

I was stressed that these children will be going to the schools where it is overcrowded (P4).

At the time I was just alright and excited, but after some time... hei, just mixed emotions. I was alright about the function shift, but also stressed, especially about the children taken from us to the schools (P5).

Participants may not have been aware of the exact teacher-to-learner ratio. However, they were aware of the issues of overcrowding in schools and recognised that a congested learning environment was unlikely to be conducive to effective development. This was further expressed by P4:

Bagolo, on the matter that children are not coping at schools. When children leave my centre and go to school, each and every quarter their parents give me a report. So the teachers ask too as to which ECD centre they are coming from. So to be honest, even if this function shift does happen, they are putting pressure on the teachers as you would find that one teacher is overcrowded with learners in one class, whereas these learners were alright in our ECD centres and there is improvement in the ECD centres because the children are no more just sleeping and eating, we are teaching them (P4).

c) Panic and feelings of being undervalued led to resistance to change:

In this sub-theme, I explore the resistance and panic exhibited by the ECCE managers and practitioners toward adapting to the function shift and their feelings of exclusion and being undervalued by the authorities. Although there was a plan that outlined the function shift process (DBE, 2022a), participants felt that the function shift was never effectively communicated and was then imposed upon them before they could even understand it fully. This lack of- or miscommunication left them feeling undervalued, disregarded, and excluded from decision-making processes as they were not consulted despite their extensive experience in the sector. Baloyi and Makhubele (2018) earlier indicated that challenges in the ECCE often lead to resistance and panic. As such, the miscommunication led participants to be resistant toward adapting to the function shift and panicking as they thought they were going to be forced to close down for not meeting the minimum requirements and that they might lose everything, as expressed by P1:

We were panicking because we thought we might lose everything...We are expected to follow the new regulations, but nobody asked for our opinion. We are the ones working on the ground and we know what works best (P1).

Since participants were not kept in the loop regarding the developments, they perceived the function shift as being abruptly launched, with no updates since it was last announced. The resistance was, therefore, a self-defence mechanism for many participants, although it also delayed their adaptation process. Despite this, it also allowed them time to seek more related information and better understand the implications of the function shift. Ultimately, participants felt unsupported and ignored by the DBE.

According to Action Learning (AL) theory (Pedler, 2012), learning begins with not knowing, and is fostered through opportunities to question unfamiliar challenges in a safe, collaborative space. In this study, the confusion and resistance expressed by ECCE managers and practitioners reflected

a missed opportunity for such collective inquiry and reflection. Their reactions were a natural response to a change process that lacked structure, support, and spaces for critical engagement with the function shift. This broader lack of support is the focus of the following theme.

4.4 Theme 2: Lack of support and training for ECCE managers and practitioners

In this theme, I explore the participants' struggles stemming from the lack of support and professional development opportunities for ECCE managers and practitioners, despite the expectation to meet the minimum compliance requirements. As expressed by P2:

I don't know how we are supposed to survive this shift without help. It's like they expect us to just handle it all on our own (P2).

Authorities, NGOs, and existing tribal bodies experience this lack of educative and supportive environment across levels, particularly within the site of this study. This is a practical example of systemic inequality, as emphasised by Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019). While some centres receive NGO support, others do not, which participants perceive as unfair treatment and lack of support. This matter extends beyond the function shift, reflecting longstanding differences. I further explore this theme through the three sub-themes outlined below.

a) Lack of support and training for professional development in ECCE:

In this sub-theme, I discuss the limited support and lack of training opportunities for professional development in ECCE centres. This challenge makes it difficult for participants to adapt to new sector developments (Zulu et al., 2022), such as the function shift. It is essential to continually develop and upskill to meet the sector's evolving demands, particularly with the ECCE now under the DBE, which has pledged to professionalise the sector (Wood & Neethling, 2024). When ECCE managers and practitioners receive proper training, they will be able to deliver quality care and education for children. However, due to the miscommunication discussed in Theme 1, participants expressed anxiety about the relevance of their qualifications in relation to the function shift, as noted by P5:

So, because in the centres the qualifications are not equal...if they are doing this shifting will they be looking at the qualifications too or not? (P5)

Participants expressed a need for workshops and for existing personnel to be given priority when development opportunities arise. They raised concerns about the lack of professional development opportunities, noting that when such opportunities do emerge, some practitioners are excluded due to their age (*You know they always say 25–35 years, P1*). Additionally, these opportunities frequently demand resources that participants lack, such as time due to their full-

time work commitments and money, as their limited earnings make it difficult to afford training fees. As highlighted by Visser et al (2021), these challenges are often faced by ECCE managers and practitioners from under-resourced centres. Participants also wanted to get accredited training that would be recognised for employment, rather than just ad hoc workshops:

When it comes to the workshops, I believe they must be credited too. It is the opportunities for things like ECD learnership, why can we the existing staff be the first preference offered those opportunities? (P1)

The trainee must be willing to commit for 24 months. The trainee will be required to attend classes on weekdays and some weekends (P6).

Participants noted the lack of proper support which persists even within their ECCE centres after some staff members have attended the workshops and have to report back. P1 elaborated:

We are never taken through, it is always in the meeting, given a slot to share summarised information (P1).

This highlights that the feedback is very brief and appears as merely a tick box activity rather than going professional development which would require some follow up. Additionally, participants recognised the importance of meeting the minimum qualification requirements, which further contributed to the feelings of anxiety discussed in Theme 1, as anticipated by P5:

So, reason why I am asking is because, since it is something that is coming we should know for instance, with myself I only came out of grade 12 and went into the ECD centre without any qualification, so do I have a chance or not? (P5)

Among the seven participants I worked with, four ALS members received no support or training. One participant had attended workshops through an organisation that recently adopted their centre, while only two members received training and resources from a local NGO that supports them. This included workshops on curriculum, first aid, nutrition, administration, governance, and management, as well as National Qualification Framework Level 4 (NQF L4) training, ongoing monitoring, and resource provision. These are critical areas which many other ECCE centres do not have access to. Furthermore, participants noted an increase in children with special needs at their centres, an area in which they also lack support, as discussed below.

b) Lack of training in specialised knowledge to support children with special needs:

In this sub-theme, I discuss the lack of training in specialised knowledge to support children with special needs. Specialised knowledge in ECCE is essential for delivering intentional and impactful

interventions. Children often have various special needs that require tailored approaches, and when addressing these needs at an early age, they can be managed and even reduce their impact. Among the seven ALS members, only one had attended a workshop on special needs, which was brief and not specialised training. This reflects a significant gap, as many ECCE managers and practitioners lack adequate training in special needs support, a critical area, particularly now as the sector moves towards professionalisation. Although, not pointing out to a certain individual, they further indicated that there is a need to have a special needs ECCE centre.

P4 noted the long-term impact of this gap:

We are not trained to deal with these children... Unfortunately, this delays them at school and everything else (P4).

But honestly speaking, we have to be trained on how to deal with these children. Otherwise, if we are not trained, we will not know how to deal with them or what they want. So, which means we are doing an injustice to them when they are at our centres (P6).

P5 shared the same sentiments saying:

You know, we realised that we need an ECD centre for children with special needs (P5).

Although participants lack training in this area, they observed that parents often deny or overlook their child's special needs, as illustrated in figure 4.4 by P4 and P6.

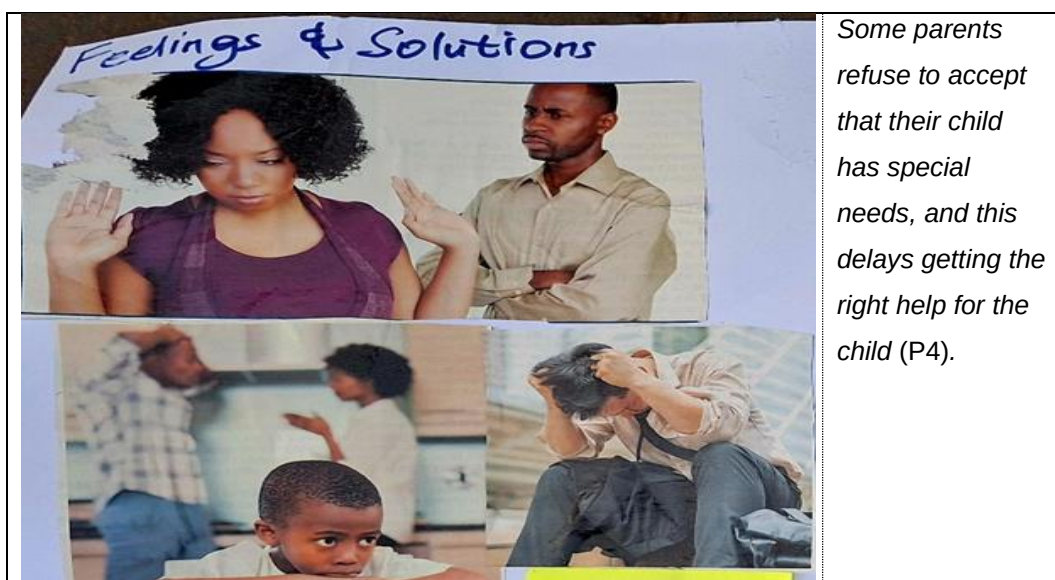


Figure 4.4: Parents' reactions to special needs (P4 & P6)

While it may be easy to identify children with special needs, it is also risky to do so and communicate with parents. Communicating with parents who may be in denial requires special training, which these ECCE managers and practitioners did not have. This highlights the importance of training ECCE managers and practitioners to enable them to intervene accordingly and also support the parents since it is evident that parents, too, lack training and support to accept and deal with the special needs of their children.

Yes! Most parents are in denial (P5).

The mother was so in denial. I even asked a manager from one centre, she once worked at a special school... I also called a social worker... But the parent said the child is okay, he is just still developing speech but he'll be okay (P1).

Smit et al. (2020) emphasise that there are gaps in the knowledge and training of practitioners, even dire in specialised areas. This lack of training in special needs support is reflected in the broader ECCE sector, where special needs support is not prioritised. Although policies exist to address special needs and promote inclusion (DBE, 2001; RSA, 2015), the gap in implementation leaves the ECCE managers and practitioners without access to sufficient professional development opportunities, particularly in this area. Below, I discuss the perceived lack of support and training in preparing for the function shift.

c) Lack of support and training in preparing for the function shift implications, policy changes, and new processes:

In this sub-theme, I explore the lack of support and training experienced by the ECCE managers and participants in preparing for the function shift implications, related policy changes and new procedures. As previously defined in Chapter 1, the ECCE function shift represents a major transition, impacting various Acts and policies. This phased approach (DBE, 2022a) required thorough training and a deeper understanding of policies, procedures and new administrative requirements. However, support on the ground was limited, and there appeared to be misalignment between various government levels, as also identified by the joint portfolio committee on Basic Education and Social Development (DBE & DSD, 2022). The ECCE managers and practitioners were not adequately guided through the policy changes and administrative processes to effectively navigate the complexities of the function shift. This concern was further emphasised by P1 and P6:

I specified that we should get workshops. Proper workshops, for practitioners and managers... it is painful...when it is only one person attending workshops. How will the other practitioners benefit? You know, after attending a workshop, you are

going to tell us only what you remember, whereas, if we all attend, what I remember, and what you remember will complement and will each remember different pieces to contribute. By so doing, there will even be positive vibes at work, without always having that thing of one person attending everything and others not going anywhere (P1).

P6 highlighted the need for even better benefits and inclusion of everyone:

Expecting salary from the DBE, same services that the schools get. To get proper workshops. Are we currently getting any workshops? No, other people are getting workshops while others are not any (P6).

Participants are expected to get their salaries and continuous professional development opportunities from the DBE, as teachers are also getting them from the DBE. These statements further highlight the gaps and feelings identified in Theme 1, as participants felt unprepared for the function shift. They expressed worry about whether their centres and qualifications would meet the minimum compliance requirements. Although capable, the lack of adequate support and training left participants doubting their abilities and preoccupied with presumed challenges rather than effectively navigating the function shift. Limited communication channels between DBE and participants further increased these issues, as not all participants had equal access to information. As expressed by P6:

It's intimidating, to be honest. It feels like the government just wants to make things harder for us... How can they expect us to do this without proper support? (P6)

Some ECCE managers and practitioners will forever feel excluded and unprepared, which may lead to lack of confidence, increased resistance and mixed feelings toward the function shift. According to AL theory, creating conditions that enable learning is a foundational principle (Pedler, 2012; Wood, 2020). Without access to structured training, mentoring, or dialogic spaces, the ECCE managers and practitioners were unable to reflect critically, access relevant knowledge, or take informed action. The absence of support systems not only deepened their sense of exclusion but also disrupted the core elements of the AL cycle; particularly the interaction between questioning, reflection, and co-learning. This lack of enabling conditions hindered their ability to navigate the function shift effectively. If this situation persists, ECCE managers and practitioners will continue to experience emotional and financial strain, a theme I discuss further in the subsequent section.

4.5 Theme 3: Emotional and financial challenges set against sustainability and survival

In this theme, I explore the emotional burnout, operational demands and financial strains faced by ECCE managers and practitioners. Visser et al. (2021) also observed these challenges, particularly in under-resourced ECCE centres. These challenges are particularly extreme as they navigate the uncertainties surrounding job security, survival in harsh environments and the sustainability of their centres, as P2 illustrated in Figure 4.5 below,

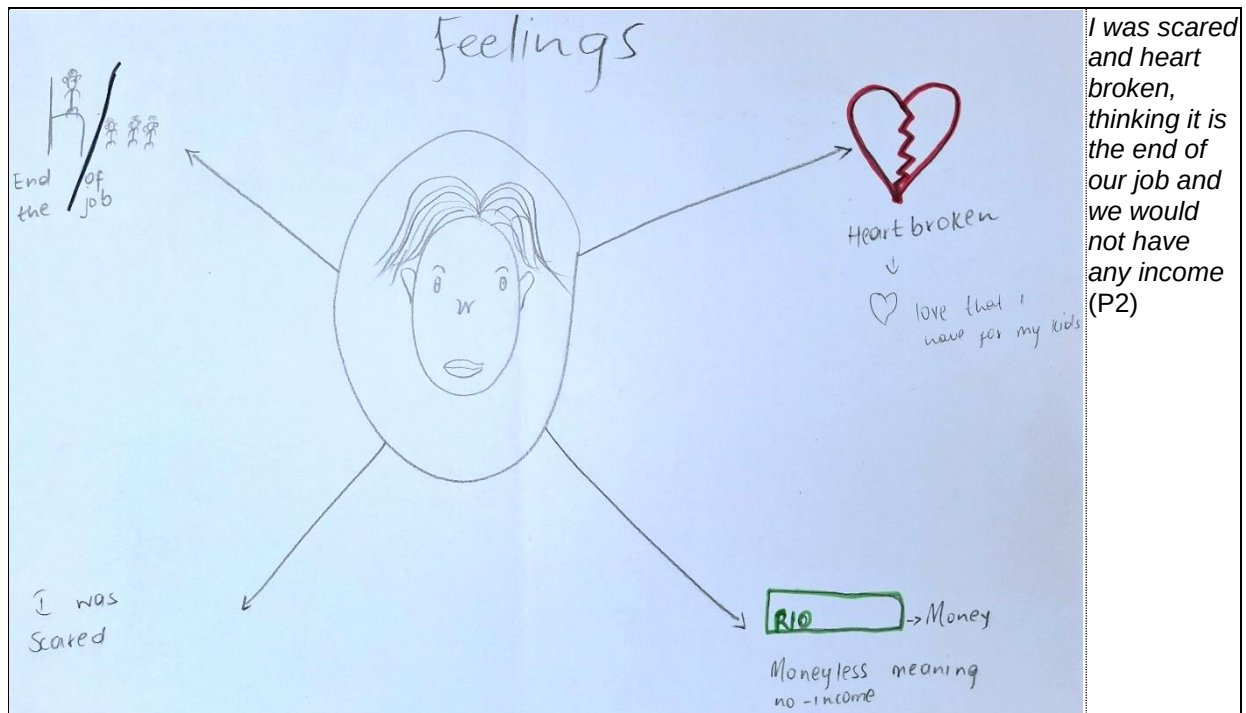


Figure 4.5: Emotionally strained due to fear of job loss (P2)

Participants expressed how pressured and isolated they felt while they were expected to carry on regardless of the ongoing challenges that impacted their well-being. These challenges arose within the work environment, from dynamics between practitioners, from managers to practitioners, and the pressure on managers from parents and stakeholders, which ultimately affect practitioners. I explore these issues further in the sub-themes below.

a) ECCE managers' and practitioners' emotional and financial challenges:

In this sub-theme, I explore how participants felt left to navigate the function shift on their own while managing daily demands and financial strains. They expressed that they work with limited resources and, as highlighted in Theme 2, there is a lack of support, intensifying their mixed emotions and concerns about job security, not having an income and well-being. These had an emotional toll on participants, with many expressing feelings of anxiety, stress and fatigue about their ability to cope with existing demands alongside the function shift pressure:

We are working harder than ever, but we don't know if it's enough. There's always a fear of failing (P1).

We're working harder, but it feels like we're not making any progress. It's exhausting. The emotional strain is real. We are all feeling overwhelmed by the extra responsibilities (P4)."

In Figure 4.6, P4 and P6 expressed how they are also under the financial pressure of maintaining their centres, which sometimes leads them to take money from their households.

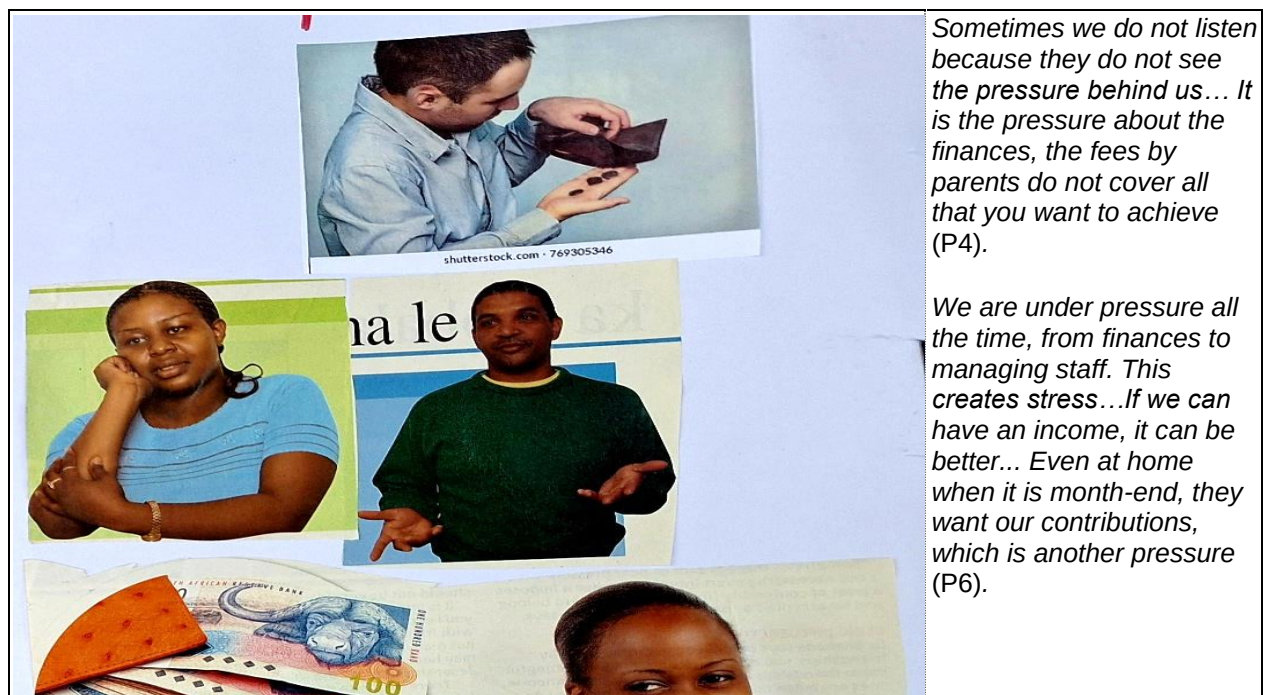


Figure 4.6: Financial strain (P4 & P6)

As raised by P6, these struggles extended beyond the workplace, affecting their home lives as well. They also faced difficulties and mistreatment from some parents, ranging from negative attitudes to non-payment of fees, their sole source of income. The situation worsened as enrolments declined due to parents taking their children to schools. As P6 shared:

The issue of being undermined, it is because most of these parents know us from our communities with a certain character, and when it comes to the centre, I am a different person... It starts with children's numbers drastically dropping, I used to have about 70 children, but now I have only 25 and I have three employees, I have to pay them (P6).

Financial burden is the main challenge which leads to operational barriers and emotional strain as highlighted by Ashley-Cooper et al. (2019) and Baloyi and Makhubele (2018). It is even worse

for the ECCE managers as they bear the burden of daily financial operations, staff salaries and ensuring their own survival. Despite the DBE aiming to professionalise the sector (Wood & Neethling, 2024), many ECCE managers and practitioners remain unsupported, leaving them to bear the consequences of the transition gaps. Given the absence of emotional support at their workplaces, the ALS provided them with a much-needed space to vent and find mutual support.

b) Financial and educational sustainability of centres after the function shift:

Despite being overwhelmed and emotionally strained, ECCE managers and practitioners demonstrated resilience and determination to continue with their work, even if they have not yet registered their centre as a first step toward professionalisation (DBE & DSD, 2022).

Yes. I just have to keep going, even if I do not see the light for now, I know at the end of the tunnel there is a light (P6).

Building on the goals outlined in Chapter 1, the function shift has been seen both as a professionalisation effort and regulatory pressure point for the sector by also integrating it into the schooling system, at least for children aged three to five. However, the function shift has also increased the financial and operational challenges for ECCE managers and practitioners, particularly those from unregistered centres, as they strive toward sustainability under what they perceive as stricter regulations.

To fully maximise the benefits of the function shift, it is crucial to complete registration, which would enable centres to receive a per child subsidy (set at R17 for 2025) (Brooks et al., 2022) and alleviate some of the financial strain. However, participants previously found the registration process challenging due to a lack of support:

I have honestly been angrier because I have been trying to register for years, but I couldn't. I disliked that a lot. I have done a lot of good job without being registered or receiving assistance from anyone (P4).

This frustration led many participants to abandon the process, which meant they would get no financial help from the DBE. If this situation persists, as Atmore (2022) warned, ECCE centres may close down, which endangers their financial sustainability and the care and education of children. The misconceptions continued to dominate, as expressed by P6:

Function shift is taking over, it is going to strain us, and we are going to need even a simple R10. These children will go to schools. We will not have anything to eat, or live with (P6).

Participants were worried that they would not have any income, be broke and not even have a mere R10. They were worried about their survival. When participants are faced with security and survival issues, they resort to competing (Baloyi & Makhubele, 2018) for the children rather than collaborating and complementing one another.

The emotional and financial strain described here reflects not only the consequences of an unsupported transition but also a breakdown in the relational and reflective structures that AL theory. AL theory emphasises shared problem-solving, emotional containment, and collective reflection (Pedler, 2012; Wood, 2020). Without these enabling conditions, ECCE managers and practitioners were left to manage overwhelming demands in isolation; resulting in emotional burnout and unsustainable practices. The absence of a learning community or structured support system prevented them from transforming adversity into growth, undermining one of the key principles of AL theory. This led to the emergence of another theme: the competitive tendencies delaying collaboration and progress. I discuss this theme below.

4.6 Theme 4: Competitive tendencies delaying collaboration and progress

In this theme, I explore how ECCE managers and practitioners compete instead of collaborating to improve their operations and the sector. They fear that helping others may result in losing children to the better-resourced or more attractive centres. Each manager aims to create a centre that attracts more parents, which leads to a lack of collaboration and working in silos. Supporting others is seen as risky behaviour. The ECCE managers and practitioners highlighted mistrust and jealousy among themselves, particularly among managers. No one wants to see another manager succeed more than the others, especially those familiar with each other's socio-economic backgrounds.

There is that jealousy and competition that once I help her she is going to take my children. And you find that her environment is even more beautiful than yours plus they are not the same. I mean even when we meet the first thing we ask is how many do you have? It is a lot here. Too much competition (P6).

Participants do not realise how these competitive tendencies delay collaboration and progress. Collaboration among ECCE managers and practitioners is crucial, mainly for sharing knowledge and resources and giving each other support, particularly amidst the complexities of function shift.

As part of their support, they may even collaboratively address shared issues and create financial and ECCE educational sustainability. I explore this theme further under the sub-themes below.

a) Lack of collaborative management approaches within centres:

In this sub-theme, I discuss the lack of collaborative management approaches within ECCE centres. Participants felt that collaboration between managers and practitioners was minimal. Some managers did not promote teamwork, showing favouritism among practitioners, mostly when workshops were available. The same practitioner was often chosen if the manager could not attend. This was perceived as managers not trusting other practitioners. Additionally, managers sometimes withheld information from practitioners and even restricted their interactions with parents. This behaviour appears to be a class issue and hierarchical relationship (Zulu et al., 2022), as some managers were reluctant to view practitioners as their equals.

The practitioners can have their own support groups it is okay. If they are lacking somewhere they can come to us and ask... (P6)

This they do out of fear that their ECCE practitioners might use that knowledge to leave and open their own centres, as initially observed by Baloyi and Makhubele (2018). Unfortunately, this lack of collaboration and teamwork within centres can limit creative problem-solving, reduce efficiency and lead to biased decision-making (Ashley-Cooper et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2013). This conduct affects staff morale and causes the same feelings explored in Theme 2, and further creates fractions among practitioners.

Even those who are excluded exclude others. Given the limited support and inclusion these participants receive, somehow, competition is bound to happen, even though it is counterproductive for improvement as they miss out on the synergy that unity creates. These competitive tendencies go beyond individual ECCE centres. I explore this further in the subsequent sub-theme.

b) Perceived competition between centre managers

In this sub-theme, I discuss how competitive tendencies between ECCE managers delay collaboration and progress in the ECCE sector. The ECCE managers struggle to maintain the enrolments in their centres, as the competition to attract more parents is intense. This conduct spills over to fundraising. Participants often withhold information about potential donor support until they have fully secured the deal or are steps ahead, and even then, they delay sharing with others. The perceived scarcity of resources, as also noted by Baloyi and Makhubele (2018), particularly financial strain, as also highlighted in Theme 3, drives ECCE managers to compete to enrol more children.

This persisting competitive conduct leads to ECCE managers working in silos, operating independently, even when they could be working together to strengthen their resilience and best navigate the complexities of the function shift. For instance, there are some already registered ECCE centre managers who could assist others to get registered and benefit from the DBE subsidies, but because of the competitive tendencies they are not leveraging on that.

It is unfortunate that the ECCE managers are competing for the same stakeholders, spreading them too thin. Ultimately, participants focus more on competition rather than offering improved care and education to the children, improved compliance with policies and sharing information on recent developments in the sector, particularly around the function shift. This competitive behaviour delays progress, and unfortunately, they miss out on multiple opportunities for training and development, resources and compliance strategies. P6 validated the competitive behaviour:

I mean even when we meet, the first thing we ask, is how many children do you have? It is a lot here. Too much competition (P6).

For example, I am already in the sector, when I give someone strategies on how to establish an ECD centre like me, a new person, she will definitely do way more than me (P4).

Despite the existing challenges and competitive behaviour, participants do realise the importance of collaborating. *Honestly speaking, collaboration can work if people are open towards one another, it is a pity we are not the same. Others are very jealous (P6).* There is some hope, as participants have already developed trust among themselves as ALS members. Below, I discuss a theme that emerged as participants realised their potential to collaborate, particularly as they came to understand that the DBE would still rely on private providers to offer ECCE services for children aged 0-4 years (DBE & DSD, 2022).

According to AL theory, meaningful change emerges through mutual trust, open dialogue, and shared problem-solving (Pedler, 2012). However, the absence of trust and the fear-driven isolation among ECCE managers and practitioners disrupted these core AL processes. Without safe and inclusive spaces for collective inquiry, ECCE managers and practitioners remained disconnected, reinforcing silos and limiting opportunities for knowledge co-creation. Although some began to recognise the value of collaboration, the lack of structured mechanisms to foster it meant the shift toward collective resilience was slow and inconsistent.

Upon conducting a thorough data collection and analysis, the four CAL critical reflection activities were highlighted as outlined by Rigg (2005). The first three were assumption analysis, contextual awareness and imaginative speculation, which led to the emergence of the four Cycle One key themes. There, I highlighted the ECCE managers' and practitioners' experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations. Some of them are operational, but mainly regarding the function shift. Having completed Cycle One, we then shifted focus towards Cycle Two. We approached this through the fourth critical reflection activity, reflective scepticism (Rigg, 2005). In our efforts to address the issues identified in Cycle One, we observed the emergence of a fifth theme along with its associated sub-themes. I will elaborate on this further below.

4.7 Theme 5: Recognising the potential of collaborating to navigate the complexities of the function shift

In this theme, I examine how ECCE managers and practitioners initially approached the function shift individually. In line with the action learning (AL) theory as outlined by Pedler (2012) and Serrat (2017), however, they utilised ALS sessions to gradually shift their perspectives and recognised the potential of collaboration as a valuable strategy to navigate its complexities. The decision to collaborate supports the notion by Wood (2020) and Wood and Esterhuizen (2024), who viewed collaboration as an effective approach to addressing common challenges. This aligns with Pedler's (2012) concept of action learning, where real issues are addressed through questioning, reflection, and support in a group setting.

Guided by PALAR principles, these sessions became spaces of critical dialogue and shared problem-solving, enabling ECCE managers and practitioners to co-create knowledge and take action within their own contexts. The Rekopantswe ECD Hub embodies this model; the ECCE managers and practitioners addressed shared concerns, experimented with ideas, and grew both individually and collectively through action and reflection. One activity that promoted this shift was the model building that I introduced during the initial sessions of Cycle One. I asked participants to collaboratively build their ideal ECCE centre. This activity, as illustrated in Figure 4.7, not only facilitated icebreaking among participants but also encouraged them to creatively express their thoughts and aspirations through metaphors (Nerantzi & Despard, 2014). This collaborative activity brought participants together and helped them identify common issues and aspects they were overlooking at their centres.

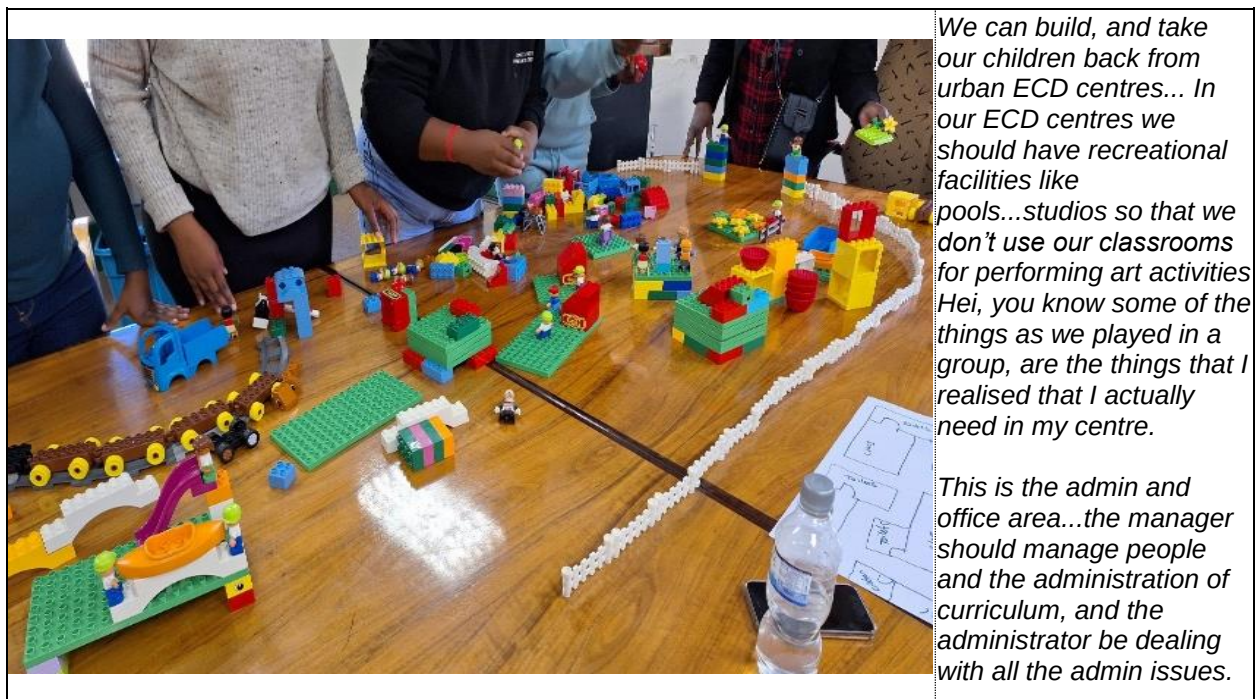


Figure 4.7: LEGO model (all participants)

The conclusion to collaborate emerged as participants experienced a sense of relief from sharing their challenges with fellow ALS members. This created a space where they could address knowledge gaps and resistance (Wilmott, 1994; Rigg, 2005; Serrat, 2017). In this collaborative environment, we built relationships and facilitated learning and open communication. While collaboration gradually emerged, power dynamics between ECCE managers and practitioners were evident, especially in the early ALS sessions. The ECCE managers tended to dominate discussions, while practitioners held back; sometimes the ECCE practitioners would only be more vocal when their manager is absent. As the facilitator, I recognised this imbalance and adapted my approach by asking for comments from every member, and validating all contributions equally. Over time, this helped level the participatory space and nurture mutual respect.

I also reflected on my own influence in shaping the ALS process. At times, both the ECCE managers and practitioners relied on me for validation or clarity, which I initially responded to directly. However, I soon shifted to a more facilitative stance, posing questions back to the members and promoting peer discussion instead. This supported PALAR's principle of learning from and learning with each other, and gradually empowered members to engage with one another, rather than through me.

Although the ECCE managers and practitioners were motivated to act, several practical barriers persisted, such as time constraints due to centre responsibilities, inconsistent session attendance, and limited access to reliable information from authorities. These factors, along with

concerns around funding and registration, revealed deeper sustainability issues. Nonetheless, participants began co-creating ways to manage these challenges through shared planning and mutual accountability.

This collaborative approach enabled participants to exchange accurate information, address misconceptions and build collective confidence. In line with the principles of PALAR, these dialogues became sites of learning, where ECCE managers and practitioners were not just recipients of knowledge but active agents in generating contextually relevant solutions. As Wood (2020) notes, PALAR encourages communities to identify problems and co-create solutions; an approach evident in the ECCE managers and practitioners' shift from isolated struggle to collective planning. From the initial session, participants aimed to establish channels to improve communication within the group, as voluntarily requested by P7:

Rre Koenane can I create a WhatsApp group so that we communicate some of the things there? (P7)

Upon discovering a local municipality WhatsApp group set up by district officials for both registered and unregistered ECCE centres, participants asked for my assistance in joining it. This highlighted my role as a facilitator in not only focusing on developing them as individuals but also creating spaces where they can be included (Hauser et al., 2023). Some, like P5, were unaware of this resource, as stated: *"It is my first time hearing about that group."* Figure 4.8 shows the group, now with 238 members, including our ALS participants.



Figure 4.8: Department's WhatsApp group

This WhatsApp group connected participants and kept them informed about developments, especially the mass registration drive, as one of the initial steps in supporting the function shift (DBE, 2024). The PALAR approach emphasises communication as a core principle (Wood, 2020), so improved communication quickly became the foundation of this ALS. Participants highlighted the need for reliable communication from authorities, a priority that emerged in various action plans I outline in the sub-themes below.

a) *Co-generated action plan to collaboratively navigate the function shift*

In this sub-theme, I explore how the ECCE managers and practitioners collaboratively navigated some of the function shift complexities. Participants collaborated to create an action plan aimed at addressing key challenges identified in the above themes. In Table 4.2 below, I outline the action plans that emerged.

Table 4.2: Overview of action plans

Action Plan No.	Action Plan Name
1	Formation of support groups and promotion of teamwork
2	Promoting stakeholder involvement
3	Ensuring compliance and financial stability
4	Conducting further research
5	Improving service delivery

(i) Action 1: Formation of support groups and promotion of teamwork:

Upon recognising the need to bridge isolation and lack of formal support, participants emphasised the need to form a support group, an approach advocated by Wood (2020) and Kearney et al. (2013). Figure 4.9 below illustrates this initiative.



Figure 4.9: Formation of support groups (P4 & P7)

Such a group would allow them to advocate as a unified voice, fostering solidarity when seeking assistance from NGOs or government departments. Despite initial thoughts of separating ECCE managers and practitioners, as expressed in Theme 4, they ultimately agreed on establishing an inclusive hub for all, named the “*Rekopantswe (We Are United) ECD Hub*.” In line with recommendations by Wood (2020), this hub aims to encourage teamwork, build capacity and create a support system open to all ECCE stakeholders. Participants motivated and emboldened each other. They learnt from one another and appreciated being listened to.

The Action Learning Set gives us the support we need to keep going (P2).

Through this hub, members will be able to receive more detailed guidelines and structured information sessions to help them adapt to the changes as required by the function shift. They could use this platform to share their struggles and provide emotional support to one another. Various stakeholders will be meaningfully involved, as expressed in Figure 4.10 below:



Figure 4.10: Working together to improve service delivery (all participants)

Participants were eager to make this work as they realised that everyone knew something or had a network that could assist the success of a whole or part of the group.

(ii) Action 2: Promoting stakeholder involvement:

Figure 4.9 above further articulated the importance of involving stakeholders and being transparent with them, particularly regarding finances. They identified the importance of building trust with parents and other stakeholders to sustain their centres.

I think we should be transparent and share our challenges with parents. Make them understand when you ask for stationery and other needs (P5).

P4 further illustrated the outcomes of transparency, explaining how parents accepted fee adjustments to support the centre's needs. She also shared how she realised that involving the wider community was beneficial for her centre.

My coach from an NGO that assists us came with a team and they gave bursaries to three children for six months. This will ease our pressure (P4).

(iii) Action 3: Ensuring compliance and financial stability:

Although participants were initially hesitant, they were encouraged by P7's successful experience with registration, which brought financial stability through subsidies. Even though the government will not pay their salaries as the participants initially expected, at least the subsidy would ease their operational expenses. Inspired by her example, others began pursuing registration, understanding it could help ease operational expenses and stabilise enrolment numbers. Participants also considered collaborating to cater to specific age groups at different centres, sharing enrolment to help each other.

You know, not long ago I was talking with P5 about centres that are closer to one another to make arrangements to share children according to age groups. I can do that (P6).

But it may happen that managers decide to do it that way, but are parents going to agree to that? (P4).

Moreover, participants also considered the buy-in of parents as a key stakeholder.

(iv) Action 4: Conducting further research:

Since the establishment of the ALS, participants indicated that they learned a lot and expressed a desire to continue learning about ECCE trends and function shift implications. They recognised that research could support evidence-based decision-making, keeping their practices relevant in a shifting landscape.

Research can really help us understand what is working and what is not. Like, if we want to try something new, we need to know if it worked somewhere else, otherwise, we just keep guessing (P1).

As illustrated in figure 4.11, they expressed that they should help parents to engage in assisting their children to discover new knowledge.



Figure 4.11: Conducting further research (P4 & P6)

Furthermore, conducting research will assist in improving service delivery as participants will align with current developments.

(v) Action 5: Improving service delivery:

Participants highlighted the need to enhance service quality, as indicated by P1: *We need improved service delivery and stakeholder involvement.* They advocated for continuous training and development programmes to meet various needs, where they should also be given first preference when opportunities to study arise. Participants proceeded to highlight their expectations from the function shift as expressed in Figure 4.12, including: *their salaries to be paid by government; to receive same service and treatment as the one given to the teachers and schools, including proper workshops; the government to focus on the home-based centres too and assist them in fighting the most battles they face; and a special needs ECCE centre.*

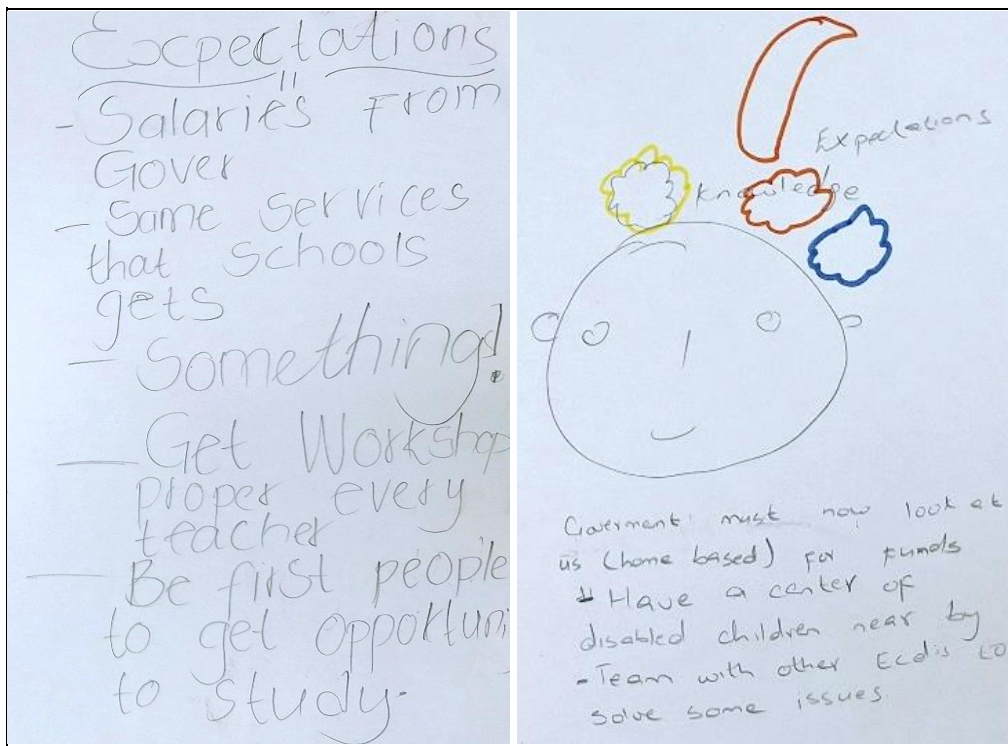


Figure 4.12: Expectations of ECCE managers and practitioners from the function shift (P1 & P4)

Such interventions will further improve implementation and ultimately produce high-quality outcomes. Improved service delivery, especially with adequate resources, would allow them to address each child's needs effectively, particularly when there is a special needs ECCE centre, as expressed in Figure 4.13 below:



Figure 4.13: Advocacy for a special needs ECCE centre (P4 & P6)

The above collaborative action plans provided a clear direction for moving forward. They addressed the day-to-day operational challenges and complexities of the function shift faced by ECCE managers and practitioners through practical actions and strategies. Through this navigation, participants also developed personally. I explore this in the next section.

b) Participant personal development: *Embarking on a quest for agency, ownership and lifelong learning*

In this sub-theme, I explore how the ECCE managers and practitioners personally grew throughout the collaborative process. By participating in the study, participants began to see themselves as active agents and co-generators of knowledge, taking ownership of the function shift challenges and navigation. They voluntarily engaged in activities they were comfortable with and gradually developed the confidence to attempt those they were initially not comfortable with.

Despite entering the ALS sessions with heavy hearts due to past negative experiences with forums, they ultimately ended up willing to collaborate with stakeholders across the ECCE sector. Initially, some participants were reluctant to pursue registration. However, this perspective ultimately changed as they recognised the benefits and opportunities that registration could offer. I further explore this transformative process below.

(i) Developing a sense of ownership through collaboration:

From the initial ALS sessions, participants shared responsibilities, which developed a sense of ownership. During the affirmation exercise, participants highlighted their strengths, which we then leveraged to maximise their contributions and build confidence.

When we work together, we can solve problems we can't handle on our own. The Action Learning Set gives us the support we need to keep going (P2).

This ownership extended to their willingness to adopt new roles and initiatives; through this, with my facilitation, they developed a hub. The Rekopantswe ECD hub is designed to provide ongoing support and resources for sharing. As participants realised how powerful they could be, P1 affirmed:

We should create an unbreakable chain, so that when you ask questions, people can't say, I do not know, go ask so and so"

(ii) Enhancing knowledge and skills for lifelong learning:

Participants' engagement in this study sparked a desire for ongoing learning. During one of the sessions, we attended a webinar on the state of ECCE post-function shift and explored the development and training programmes. This prompted participants to identify various short courses they were interested in pursuing. Furthermore, they indicated how they had improved their ability to use their phones for research. And developed a deeper curiosity around function shift and ECCE related matters.

There is knowledge and improvement on using a phone to research (P5).

I think it mainly improved in researching about the function shift... have more knowledge about the children's education (P6).

Mainly about the importance of education not forgetting the practitioners (P1).

This study, grounded in the PALAR principles (Wood, 2020), encouraged participants to willingly share their experiences, including personal ones, since they had developed trust towards each other. This helped to expand their understanding of ECCE developments. This pursuit of knowledge highlighted the importance of continuous development, as participants aimed to stay informed and adapt to the evolving ECCE landscape. As P1 expressed:

It is more information, we now know better about the function shift. Being professional and conducting ourselves professionally. By being more patient, more focused, and how to deal with and solve the problems (P1).

By working together, participants mitigated some of the mixed emotions explored in Theme 2, recognising that collaboration could counterbalance their lack of support and training. P6 indicated a shift in perspective:

It seems to me that when something new comes, we mustn't panic or be troubled, we have to think about the positive things that will come along [to the ALS] with that (P6).

This collaborative effort gave participants hope and enabled them to support each other, co-generate solutions, share information, expertise and resources, and alleviate some emotional and financial strains. As initially highlighted by Wood and Zuber-Skerritt (2013), this approach could further allow participants to focus more on sustainability and navigate the complexities of the function shift and other ECCE sector-related issues.

Furthermore, participants recognised that collaborative thinking reduced competitive tendencies, enabling them to make progress and leverage each other's strengths. In line with Rudolph et al. (2019), they realised that a collaborative group has a stronger voice for advocacy, ultimately benefiting everyone involved. Participants saw hope in collaboration, recognising it as their key strategy to successfully navigate the challenges they encounter. A collaborative unity could easily attract stakeholders such as parents, government departments, and local leaders, which is essential for centres to thrive under the function shift and beyond.

Through this study, believe we are now a group of very committed participants, who trust one another and are even more eager to learn, co-generate knowledge, and share information. In Table 4.3 below, I summarise the outline of the participants' action plan.

Table 4.3: Participants' action plan to navigate the complexities of the ECCE function shift

What is to be done?	Skills, Knowledge, Actions, or Network Needed	Responsible ALS Member/s	Action Steps	Target Date
Forming a Hub	Attend meetings and workshops. Recruit more members.	All members	Communicate and support each other. Get more information.	Last quarter of 2024
Developing stakeholder relationships	Proactive engagement and trust-building	All members	Conduct regular meetings and be transparent.	2024-2026
Ensuring compliance	Register to comply. Contact social workers or any registered member.	All members	Arrange files, submit and follow-up on progress.	Last quarter of 2024
Conducting further research	Lifelong learning, data gathering	All members	Research ongoing issues and solutions	Continuous

We are aware, as the ALS, that we face challenges in officially launching a hub due to various commitments. During this time of the year, many ECCE managers and practitioners are deeply engaged with year-end preparations at their respective centres. However, the ALS developed a clear plan to navigate the complexities of the function shift. I strongly support this action plan, particularly the formation of a hub. This action plan is likely to be officially rolled out in the first quarter of 2025. Below, I proceed to discuss the implications of the findings.

Despite widespread concerns, some ECCE managers and practitioners began to recognise potential opportunities associated with the function shift. For instance, P5 expressed a desire to improve her qualifications in response to the upcoming changes:

That's why I ask about qualifications, so that I can upgrade myself to meet the requirements (P5).

This demonstrates a shift in mindset, where policy change sparked aspirations for personal and professional growth. Additionally, the ECCE managers and practitioners acknowledged that compliance with the function shift could eventually lead to better standards across ECD centres, with P6 raising concerns about infrastructure and asking:

Let us say, I am in a shack, will I be shut down and told that this is not an ECD centre or what? (P6)

This shows an emerging awareness of quality assurance, even amid uncertainty. Although such positive aspects were less prominent, their emergence signalled growing engagement and agency among the ECCE managers and practitioners; a significant step in navigating the change process collaboratively. As ECCE managers and practitioners engaged in the action learning process and co-created the Rekopantswe ECD Hub, they increasingly viewed the function shift as an opportunity for growth, inclusion, and professional recognition. These insights suggest that when ECCE stakeholders are given space to reflect, learn together, and access reliable support, they are better able to respond constructively to systemic change.

4.8 Implications of collaboration

Support at Rekopantswe ECD hub grounded on PALAR principles could boost members' confidence, improve service quality, and better equip ECCE centres to comply more easily with policies. This would ultimately lead to a sustainable education and professionalised sector and benefit children, ECCE managers, practitioners, and the sector at large.

Through Rekopantswe, members can easily identify areas of need for professional development, advocate for well-structured support as a unit and be addressed accordingly. In this instance, as the needs will be centralised, support will be sought from government departments and also other stakeholders such as NGOs, including members of the hub with more experience, expertise and knowledge. The overlooked areas, such as children with special needs, may receive the urgent attention it needs. Rekopantswe ECD hub will ultimately lead to reduced emotional and financial challenges, allowing participants to focus more on their roles with less fear for personal survival. In the subsequent section, I present a summary of this chapter. These summarised implications, much like the developed action plan, offer guidance for navigating the complexities of the ECCE function shift. If used as guidelines, they have the potential to improve the quality of ECCE service delivery, enhance children's care and education, and further build financial stability for ECCE managers and practitioners. In the subsequent section, I present a summary of this chapter.

4.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I reported on the findings of the study. The main research question guiding the study was: How can ECCE managers and practitioners best navigate the function shift towards quality and sustainable education? This question was answered through two PALAR cycles, informed by CAL theory. Cycle One was guided by the question: What are the experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations of the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift? I established an ALS that consisted of seven ECCE managers and practitioners and conducted several in-person sessions. In these sessions, we engaged in discussions and participatory data generation methods to arrive at five key themes.

Furthermore, as we moved to Cycle Two which was guided by the question: What actions can they take to address the issues identified? Participants decided on five actions. The establishment of a hub was identified as a starting point as it is central to many of these actions. The ALS continued to develop an action plan to realise the actions that emerged. The ECCE manager who has successfully registered, is currently assisting other participants through the registration process. Due to various commitments of ECCE managers and practitioners, the official launch of Rekopantswe ECD hub will only occur early in 2025. However, we developed guidelines for navigating the complexities of the function shift and intend to share them with various stakeholders. They also presented their findings at a regional seminar hosted by the ETDP SETA Research Chair in Early Childhood, attended by practitioners from four other provinces. This chapter laid a foundation for Chapter 5, where I will subsequently reflect on the learning that occurred during this study.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION ON LEARNING

5.1 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the experiences of ECCE managers and practitioners and what they learnt about navigating the complexities of the function shift. I revisit the research question: How can ECCE managers and practitioners best navigate the function shift towards quality and sustainable education? I critically reflect on what implications this has for the participants and the ECCE sector going forward. Ultimately, I offer guidelines for various stakeholders in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector, the limitations of the study and personal reflections.

I was guided by critical action learning (CAL) theory as a framework for exploring how ECCE managers and practitioners could collaboratively navigate the complexities of the function shift. The ALS consisted of five ECCE managers and two practitioners who learned together through repeated cycles of action and reflection.

5.2 Revisiting the research questions

In essence, I conducted this study to address the following sub-questions through the two research cycles:

5.2.1 What are the experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations of the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift?

We addressed this question in Cycle One, where participants identified their experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations regarding the function shift. These led to the emergence of the four key themes: 1) *Participants' lack of knowledge, uncertainty and resistance towards the function shift*; 2) *Lack of support and training for ECCE managers and practitioners*; 3) *Emotional and financial challenges set against sustainability and survival*; 4) *Competitive tendencies delaying collaboration and progress*. These themes highlighted a lack of knowledge and some misconceptions regarding the function shift due to a sense of exclusion and perceived undervaluation by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and parents. Participants further expressed that the miscommunication also impacted parents, leading to them shifting their children to schools as soon as they could. Limited orientation on the function shift hindered participants' ability to comply with registration requirements as a first step in regulating the sector.

This caused mixed emotions among participants, such as frustration, fear, anger, and despair. However, some also expressed feelings of hope and happiness. Underlying mistrust and jealousy emerged among ECCE managers and practitioners, fuelling competition and the tendency to work in isolation. This conduct was aggravated by a fear of losing children to the better-resourced centres. As a result, participants experienced various complexities regarding the function shift. Upon reaching this conclusion, we proceeded to Cycle Two, where we addressed the second sub-question.

5.2.2 What actions can they take to address the issues identified?

We addressed this question in Cycle Two, where participants identified actions to address complexities highlighted in Cycle One. This led to the emergence of the fifth key theme: 5) *Recognising the potential of collaborating to navigate the complexities of the function shift*. Guided by the principles of PALAR, participants recognised the significance of building strong relationships. They developed confidence and trust towards one another, co-generating new knowledge throughout the process. Consequently, this collaborative effort led to the establishment of the Rekopantswe ECD hub. This hub was established to address the complexities within the ECCE sector, offer mutual support, facilitate professional development, and engage with stakeholders to align with the evolving ECCE sector demands. Below, I discuss the implications of the findings.

5.3 Implications of the findings

Support provided through the Rekopantswe ECD hub, grounded on PALAR principles, has the potential to:

- Boost members' confidence,
- Improve service quality,
- Better equip ECCE centres to comply more easily with policies,
- Lead to a sustainable education, professionalised sector and benefiting children, ECCE managers, practitioners and the sector at large.

The hub will enable members to easily identify areas requiring professional development and collectively advocate for well-structured support as a unit and be addressed accordingly. With centralised needs, support can be sought from government departments and other stakeholders. These include NGOs and hub members with more experience, expertise and knowledge. Overlooked areas, such as support for children with special needs, may receive the urgent attention it needs. Furthermore, the Rekopantswe ECD hub is likely to reduce emotional strain

and financial challenges by enabling centres to register and qualify for subsidies. This would allow participants to focus effectively on their professional roles with less fear about personal survival. In Table 5.1 below, I summarise the implications of this study and guidelines for the sector.

Table 5.1: Implications of the findings and guidelines for the sector

Findings	Implications	Guidelines for the sector
1. Participants lacked knowledge, were uncertain and therefore resistant towards the function shift: They expressed that they felt under consulted and undervalued by the DBE. They experienced miscommunication and misperceptions, fears, and did not always believe the information	There is a need for improved communication about the function shift from the DBE. Without clear communication, participants will continue to be misinformed, and to be excluded, undervalued, resulting in disengagement. This will hinder the process of improvement the function shift is supposed to support.	• Develop equitable and consistent communication to ensure all stakeholders receive accurate and timely information. • Leverage technology and create more channels of communication, to disseminate information and ensure inclusivity. • Strengthen and align the phased approach to policy implementation across the sector, particularly throughout government levels. This will reduce misalignment and confusion. • Encourage ECCE managers and practitioners to comply with policies, which includes registration for partial care and programme, to maximise the benefits.
2. Participants experienced a lack of support and training: They required specialised knowledge to support children with special needs. They needed support for the function shift implications, policy changes and new processes.	There is a need to prioritise professional development and training. The lack of professional training and development limits ECCE managers and practitioners to effectively support children, especially those with special needs.	• Provide easily accessible training opportunities, with preference to the existing ECCE staff. • Conduct a thorough ECCE work skills audit, to identify gaps and needs. • Tailor training and development programmes to address the identified needs in ECCE. • Promote and enable ECCE managers and practitioners to practice lifelong learning. • Ensure adequate teaching and learning materials are consistently available. • Develop and implement strategies to support children with special needs through: ○ Specialised training of practitioners, ○ Accessible inclusive ECCE centres, ○ Parent support
3. Participants experienced emotional and financial challenges set against sustainability and survival.	There is a need to build support groups and to receive subsidies. In the absence of these, participants will continue to feel isolated, emotionally and financially strained.	• Create systems to address ECCE managers' and practitioners' emotional and financial needs. • Promote peer support. • Provide ECCE managers and practitioners with formal job contracts that clearly outline their roles and responsibilities. Review these to align with sector developments. • Advocate for equitable and timely distribution of subsidies to reduce financial strains. • Explore partnerships with other NGOs and stakeholders, to secure additional subsidy and resources for sustainability.
4. ECCE managers and practitioners engaged in competitive tendencies,	There is a need to eliminate competitive tendencies. ECCE	• Acknowledge that competitive tendencies delay progress in the sector.

Findings	Implications	Guidelines for the sector
which often delayed collaboration and progress.	stakeholders should collaborate and improve progress. Failure to do that, unnecessary divisions will persist, ECCE managers and practitioners will miss out on opportunities and the sector will continue to suffer.	• Use local ECD hubs to facilitate collaboration, for sharing information and resources, strategies and best practice, including compliance to policies (registration & subsidy application). • Share problems and find solutions to common challenges. • Resolve problems collaboratively before approaching external authorities. Only when collaborative interventions and solutions are exhausted, participants can then approach authorities with consolidated challenges.

These summarised implications and guidelines, much like the developed action plan in Chapter 4, offer guidance for navigating the complexities of the ECCE function shift. If applied well, they have the potential to:

- Provide accessible support to ECCE managers and practitioners, which will help reduce the emotional strain of trying to do things independently.
- Provide opportunities to learn new skills by learning with and from each other and engaging with external training organisations.
- Share information about the proposed changes with each other and discuss how they can respond to them.
- Help them to help each other to comply with government requirements for registration and reporting, thus enabling them to access subsidies.
- Improve the quality of ECCE service delivery and contribute towards professionalising the ECCE sector.

The findings also revealed future research directions. Below, I discuss questions emanating from this study that can be explored further.

5.4 Questions emanating from this study for future exploration

The ECCE function shift is a relatively new phenomenon, with limited research conducted around it. This presents an opportunity for further exploration and extensive research. The use of the PALAR approach in this study has shown to be beneficial. Going forward, I believe this is the approach to employ, as it promotes inclusivity, social justice and empowerment of stakeholders. For future research, I propose studies related to the following questions/topics:

- **How can we sustain and expand the ECD hub in terms of recruitment, retention and longevity?** There is a need to explore how members who established the ECD hub recruit

new members, retain them and address power relations within the hub. Some ECCE managers and practitioners had previously participated in forums where certain members were excluded and/or mistreated. Will the experience gained during this study have a lasting influence on their practices? How far do the PALAR principles extend upon the conclusion of a study that introduced them? With many ECCE managers motivated to register their centres, they are likely to remain in the hub for support and guidance. Upon registration and receiving a subsidy, will they still be active members of the hub. Why?

- **How can we promote inclusive care and education for children with special needs at ECCE?** In the ECCE sector, the identification and support of children with barriers to learning are not receiving sufficient attention. The ECCE managers and practitioners are not trained to deal with these children. Parents do not disclose their children's special needs for fear that they would be denied access to the ECCE centres. I became interested in this area as participants highlighted some of the challenges they encountered regarding this issue. Ultimately, we may develop ways in which special needs should be navigated in the ECCE sector.
- **What is the state and impact of the ECCE function shift: A comparative analysis of the sector pre- and post-transition?** This study could evaluate the state of the ECCE sector post- function shift to determine if it has improved as envisaged. Below, I discuss the limitations of this study.

5.5 Limitations and challenges of the study

The PALAR approach does not seek to generalise but is context-bound so I only worked with a small group (ALS) of participants. This ALS included ECCE managers and practitioners from registered and unregistered centres. Weekly sessions were held, which restricted me to working with participants from one geographic semi-rural area. Participants were also located near the meeting venue, which was convenient for everyone.

Unfortunately, attendance was a challenge we faced. Due to various other commitments, only two participants were present during the collage-making activity. Although this might have overlooked the insights from other participants, the collages were later presented to them, and they indicated that their insights were captured. Furthermore, we collectively developed an action plan based on the challenges identified. This ensured that the broader group's inputs were incorporated into the plan.

We agreed to hold two-hour sessions weekly in the afternoon after participants finished work. Sometimes sessions ran over time as discussions would go astray from the function shift to day-

to-day operational issues. I allowed these discussions to continue, as it was clear these matters were deeply concerning to them and, in fact, were closely related to the current state of the sector. Consequently, we had more sessions than initially planned. We are still going to develop a leaflet for dissemination during the official launch of the hub in the first quarter of 2025. Below, I discuss personal reflection on learning.

5.6 Personal reflection on learning

This study both challenged me and fostered my development in ways beyond what I could have imagined. Below, I discuss how.

5.6.1. As a researcher

Initially, I was familiar with objective qualitative and quantitative research methods, and their combinations. However, this study deepened my understanding of a participatory approach. I learned that research becomes more meaningful and authentic upon establishing a relationship with participants. This approach fostered voluntary participation, as participants felt valued, respected, and heard within the group. Consequently, participants were more willing to open up about issues they might otherwise have kept to themselves.

Furthermore, I learned the importance of patience during data collection. Once participants feel comfortable, they naturally take the lead in providing genuine raw data. Often, as researchers we approach a study with preconceived notions, thinking we already understand the problem and merely seeking to just validate our assumptions. I initially assumed that since the ECCE function shift was the most prominent change in the sector, I thought it would then be the primary concern for ECCE managers and practitioners. However, it became clear that their immediate worries were around day-to-day operational challenges and survival issues. I was once more reminded, “do not make assumptions”.

Researchers often overlook social injustices, or they are recorded as data without meaningful action being taken. This study taught me the importance of focusing on participant empowerment for action to promote social justice. Through my facilitation, participants not only shared their challenges but also supported one another and took actionable steps by establishing the Rekopantswe ECD hub. Through this hub, they will continue to support one another to address future issues.

5.6.2. As a stakeholder in the ECCE sector

As individual stakeholders, we often focus solely on our perspectives and immediate concerns, overlooking those who are truly in need. Through this study, I realised that the people who need the most assistance are often the ones we unknowingly leave behind. As a stakeholder working with the ECCE centres, I realised that we need to equitably continue and improve on working with ECCE managers and practitioners through a collaborative approach. For instance, the organisation I work for has primarily been supporting ECCE managers and practitioners operating in the [name of the nation] buildings. We provide these ECCE managers and practitioners with adequate support, as outlined in Chapter 4. Meanwhile, those operating from their homes have not received the same level of assistance. However, it is important to focus on equitably supporting centres in need. This will ensure that benefits extend to all the children in the [name of the nation].

There are many capable ECCE stakeholders in this area, so we need to find ways to collaborate effectively. Each stakeholder, particularly managers and practitioners, has something valuable to contribute to the continuous development of the ECCE sector. By leveraging our vast expertise and strengths, we can have a significant impact.

These ECCE managers and practitioners are deeply appreciative of any support they receive. While I encouraged them to collaborate, I believe there is still more we can do as stakeholders in facilitating the collaboration. We, as stakeholders, need to contribute to developing systems that enable these ECCE managers and practitioners to progress from one phase of development to the next. Allow them to progress and create opportunities for others who are in even greater need of support.

We need to become stakeholders who simplify processes and provide meaningful support by working with focus groups in specific areas. Just as I established the ALS with the willing participants in this study, we can adopt a similar approach. Once these groups are established, we can collectively identify challenges and develop strategies to address them. This will give ECCE managers and practitioners enough time to focus on their core responsibilities: the care and education of children.

While we often claim to redress the inequalities of the apartheid era, it seems we are also unintentionally perpetuating class inequalities. We prioritise the haves and neglect the have-nots. Through this, I learned that we need to change our approach if we genuinely aim to improve the ECCE sector. We should be equitably inclusive in our approach.

5.6.3. As a person

I remember being very worried during the initial ALS sessions, fearing that I was losing control of the discussions. I wanted to direct the discussions towards the ECCE function shift. I was worried that if I didn't maintain control, I might appear unprepared and incompetent and, even worse, waste each other's time. I was worried that I might not get any data regarding the function shift, and participants might find these sessions useless. However, through this study and support from my supervisors, I learned that it is okay to lose control. In fact, I realised that I shouldn't even be in control. My role was not to dominate the sessions but to facilitate them, creating an environment where participants felt free to express themselves and actively engage.

Through this study, my critical thinking skills were strengthened, and I developed substantially as a facilitator. My communication skills also improved, extending to my personal and professional relationships as well. I have become more empathetic and a better listener. These qualities improved my ability to meaningfully connect with others and understand their context and perspectives. The spirit of *Ubuntu* was revived in me. Below, I discuss the contribution of the study.

5.7 Contribution of the study

This study contributes meaningfully to the various dimensions of knowledge, practice and policy in the ECCE sector.

5.7.1 Contribution to knowledge and theory

This study contributes to the knowledge and understanding of ECCE transformation by exploring and addressing the experiences, feelings, knowledge and expectations of the ECCE managers and practitioners. It provided valuable insights into how the function shift was perceived by ECCE managers and practitioners in a semi-rural area that I focused on. It revealed the gaps in communication, which caused most of the complexities. These gaps as the study revealed, can be addressed through collaborations. The findings about the emotional and financial stresses experienced by participants contribute to knowledge about practitioner wellbeing. The PALAR process demonstrated the effectiveness of a collaborative group to offer emotional and practical support to counter such stress. Through this collaborative group, participants learned together from and with one another. Through this process they were able to co-generate the new knowledge and develop plans to support each other and address complexities they encountered.

5.7.2 Contribution to practice

Based on the findings and the developed plans to address challenges, participants proposed practical and actionable solutions which could improve practice in ECCE. This could assist in the development of focused intervention programmes. When such programmes are provided, they have the potential to improve the quality of practice in the ECCE sector.

The collaborative problem-solving approach, exemplified by activities like the LEGO model building, enabled participants to realise the importance of collaboration in addressing challenges.

5.7.3 Contribution to policy

This study provided valuable insights for policymakers by highlighting the need for improved communication to reduce misconception and resistance to policy adaptation. Furthermore, it emphasised the importance of efficient, equitable resource allocation and support for ECCE centres. Lastly, the study identified a need to prioritise support for children with special needs at ECCE centres. Below, I present my concluding thoughts.

5.8 Concluding thoughts

Above all, this study highlighted the profound significance of collaboration. I realised that many of the challenges we face emerged from working in silos. Witnessing participants proposing collaboration and establishment of the Rekopantswe ECD hub was very encouraging for me. They recognised this as a starting point for addressing the many challenges they encountered. When grounded in the principles of PALAR, this hub can provide a strong foundation for progressive and sustainable improvements in the ECCE sector. It can also facilitate a seamless adaptation to the function shift and related issues, ultimately benefiting everyone involved. This is succinctly captured by the African proverb:

If you want to go quickly, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.

REFERENCE LIST

- About, F., & Proulx, K. (2019). *Strengthening early childhood care and education*. Global Partnership for Education Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX). Retrieved from <https://www.globalpartnership.org/node/document/download?file=document/file/2019-007-17-kix-ecce-final-english.pdf>
- Aina, A. Y., & Bipath, K. (2022). Availability and use of infrastructural resources in promoting quality early childhood care and education in registered early childhood development centres. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1), Article e980. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.980>
- Akhtar, M. I. (2016). Research design. In *Research in Social Science: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 68–84). Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/30071609/Research_Design
- Akhtar, N., Kerim, B., Perwej, Y., Anurag, T., & Praveen, S. (2021). A comprehensive overview of privacy and data security for cloud storage. *International Journal of Scientific Research in Science, Engineering and Technology*, 8(5), 113–152. <https://doi.org/10.32628/IJSRSET21852>
- Akinyemi, A. F., Nkonki, V., Baleni, L., & Mudehwe-Gonhovi, F. (2021). Building effective working relationships among academics through participation in communities of practice. In *IntechOpen*. Retrieved from <https://www.intechopen.com>
- Akkari, A. (2022). Early childhood education in Africa: Between overambitious global objectives, the need to reflect local interests, and educational choices. *Prospects*, 52(1), 7–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-022-09608-7>
- Alase, A. (2017). The interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA): A guide to a good qualitative research approach. *International Journal of Education & Literacy Studies*, 5(2), 9–19. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1149107.pdf>
- Asghar, J. (2013). Critical paradigm: A preamble for novice researchers. *Life Science Journal*, 10(4), 3121–3127. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260675135_critical_paradigm_a_preamble_for_novice_researchers

- Ashley-Cooper, M., Van Niekerk, L.-J., & Atmore, E. (2019). Early childhood development in South Africa: Inequality and opportunity. In N. Spaul & J. D. Jansen (Eds.), *South African Schooling: The enigma of inequality (Policy of implications of research in education)* (pp. 87–108). Springer.
- Atmore, E. (2013). Early childhood development in South Africa – progress since the end of apartheid. *International Journal of Early Childhood Development*, 321(2–3), 152–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2013.832941>
- Atmore, E. (2019). An interpretive analysis of the early childhood development policy trajectory in post-apartheid [Doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from <https://scholar.sun.ac.za/bitstreams/001173db-0325-411a-99a9-df020dbfeddf/download>
- Atmore, E. (2022). Early years. *Bulletin of the Centre for Early Childhood Development*, 28(265). Retrieved from <https://cecd.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/early-years-february-2022.pdf>
- Attanasio, O., Cattan, S., & Meghir, C. (2021). Early childhood development, human capital and poverty. *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series*, 29362. <https://www.nber.org/papers/w29362>
- Babbie, E. R. (2016). *The practice of social research* (14th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Baloyi, T. V., & Makhubele, J. C. (2018). Challenges impeding the successful implementation of early childhood development programmes in South Africa: Implications for practice. *Gender & Behaviour*, 16(1), 10773–10783. Retrieved from <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gab/article/view/175242/164626>
- Bartoli, A. (2020). Every picture tells a story: Combining interpretative phenomenological analysis with visual research. *Qualitative Social Work: Research and Practice*, 19(5–6), 1007–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325019858664>
- Bhatia, M. K. (2017). Data analysis and its importance. *International Research Journal of Advanced Engineering and Science*, 2(1), 166–168. Retrieved from <https://irjaes.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/IRJAES-V2N1P58Y17.pdf>
- Boru, T. (2018). Research design and methodology. In T. B. Lelissa (Ed.), *Research methodology* [Doctoral dissertation]. Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21467.62242>

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.
- Brooks, L. (2021). Early childhood care and education can boost women's employment in South Africa. In A. Bosch (Ed.), *Women's Report 2021: Childcare as an enabler of women's economic participation*. Retrieved from <https://www.womensreport.africa/wr2021-paper-three/>
- Brooks, L., Mohamed, Z., Almeleh, C., & Maharaj, S. (2022). Accelerator 1: Towards universal access: A three-year acceleration plan for ECD funding. *Early Childhood Development Accelerator Series*. Retrieved from <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/ECD-Acceleration-Funding-2022-Digital.pdf>
- Buckingham, D. (2009). 'Creative' visual methods in media research: Possibilities, problems and proposals. *Media, Culture & Society*, 31(4), 633–652.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0163443709335280>
- Cardona, M. A., & Neas, K. (2021). Supporting child and student social, emotional, behavioural, and mental health needs. *United States Department of Education*. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/students/supporting-child-student-social-emotional-behavioral-mental-health.pdf>
- Chang, B. (2019). Reflection in learning. *Online Learning*, 23(1), 95–110. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1210944.pdf>
- Chukwuere, J. (2021). Theoretical and conceptual framework: A critical part of information systems research process and writing. *Review of International Geographical Education Online*, 11(9). <http://dx.doi.org/10.48047/rigeo.11.09.234>
- Conti, G., & Heckman, J. J. (2012). Early childhood development: Creating healthy communities with greater efficiency and effectiveness. In N. O. Andrews & D. J. Erickson (Eds.), *Investing in what works for America's communities* (pp. 327–337). Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco & Low Income Investment Fund.
- Cook, T. D., & Campbell, D. T. (1979). *Quasi-experimentation: Design & analysis issues for field settings*. Houghton Mifflin.

- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- D'Angelo, S., Cameron, L., Igodoe, A. A., & Nfundiko, J. S. (2023). Early childhood care and education: A GPE KIX scoping study working paper. *International Development Research Centre*. Retrieved from https://www.gpekix.org/sites/default/files/Media%20Document/2023%20GPE%20KIX%20Working%20Paper%20ECCE_FINAL_EN.pdf
- Dawadi, S. (2020). Thematic analysis approach: A step-by-step guide for ELT research practitioners. *NELTA Journal*, 25(1–2), 62–71. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED612353.pdf>
- Dawes, A., Biersteker, L., Girdwood, L., Snelling, M., & Horler, J. (2020). Early learning programme outcomes study technical report. *Innovation Edge*.
- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (1995). *White paper 1: White paper on education and training*. Government Printers. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=855fT9w3A2U%3D&tabid=191&portalid=0&mid=484>
- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (2001). *Education white paper 6: Special needs education: Building an inclusive education and training system*. Government Printers. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=gVFccZLi%3D&tabid=191&portalid=0&mid=484>
- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (2009). *National early learning and development standards for children birth to four years*. Department of Basic Education. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/media/1746/file/ZAF-national-early-learning-and-development-standards-for-children-birth-to-4-years-2011.pdf>
- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (2010). *Interim policy for early childhood education*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/interimpolicy-earlychildhood19970.pdf
- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (2015). *The South African national curriculum framework for children from birth to four years*. Department of Basic Education.

- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (2022a). *Report on function shift*. Retrieved from <https://cecd.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ecd-function-shift-faqs.pdf>
- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (2022b). *ECD census 2021*. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.za/LinkClick.aspx?link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.education.gov.za%2FPortals%2F0%2FDocuments%2FReports%2FECD%2520Census%25202021%2520by%2520the%2520Numbers.pdf&tabid=57&portalid=0&mid=10281>
- Department of Basic Education [DBE]. (2023). *South Africa's 2030 strategy for early childhood development programmes*. Department of Basic Education. Retrieved from <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/ODG%20Workspace/2024Lekgotla/South%20Africas%202030%20Strategy%20for%20Early%20Childhood%20Development%20Programmes%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2024-03-13-105446-230>
- Department of Basic Education, & Department of Social Development [DBE & DSD]. (2022). Update on the early childhood development (ECD) function shift. *Joint Portfolio Committee on Basic Education and Social Development*. Retrieved from <https://eelawcentre.org.za/wp-content/uploads/ecd-joint-dbe-dsd-function-shift-presentation.pdf>
- Department of Social Development [DSD]. (2006). *Guidelines for early childhood development services*. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/childhooddev0.pdf
- Department of Social Development [DSD]. (2007). *Children's Amendment Act No. 41 of 2007*. Government Printers. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/a41-070.pdf
- Devereux, S., Hochfeld, T., Karriem, A., Mensah, C., Morahanye, M., Msimango, T., Mukubonda, A., Naicker, S., Nkomo, G., Sanders, D., & Sanousi, M. (2018). School feeding in South Africa: What we know, what we don't know, what we need to know, what we need to do. *Food Security SA Working Paper Series, 004*. Retrieved from <https://foodsecurity.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CoE-FS-WP4-School-Feeding-in-South-Africa-11-jun-18.pdf>
- DG Murray Trust [DGMT]. (2018). *A plan to achieve universal coverage of early childhood development services by 2030*. Retrieved from <https://dgmt.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/ECD-Vision-2018-digital.pdf>

DSD see Department of Social Development

Dulvy, E. N., Devercelli, A. E., Van Der Berg, S., Gustafsson, M., Pettersson Gelande, G., Kika-Mistry, J., & Beaton-Day, F. M. (2023). South Africa public expenditure and institutional review for early childhood development (Report No.178252). World Bank Group.

Retrieved from

<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099192001242341964/pdf/P1756791e5e59bde1ad6714d311b6261dd284d0e6d65.pdf>

Ebrahim, H., Waniganayake, M., Hannaway, D., & Modise, M. (2021). Being and becoming thinking teachers. In *Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment: A handbook on early childhood education in South Africa*. Pearson South Africa.

Edwin, K. (2019). Reliability and validity of research instruments. Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335827941_Reliability_and_Validity_of_Research_Instruments_Correspondence_to_Edwinedwinyahoo.com

Elg, M., Gremyr, I., Halldórsson, A., & Wallo, E. (2019). Service action research: Review and guidelines. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 34(1), Article 0000.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JSM-11-2018-0350>

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, 5(1), 1–4.

Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359634247_Comparison_of_Convenience_Sampling_and_Purposive_Sampling

Evans, J. (2021). *A path unexpected: A memoir*. Jonathan Ball Publishers.

Fabillar, E., & Wang, A. (2019). Building a culture of continuous improvement: Guidebook and toolkit. *Education Development Center*.

Fay, B., & Moran, L. (2013). What is drawing? *Education and Community Programmes, Irish Museum of Modern Art*. Retrieved from

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236199844_What_is_Drawing_-_Irish_Museum_of_Modern_Art

- Field, M. J., & Behrman, R. E. (Eds.). (2004). Understanding and agreeing to children's participation in clinical research. In *The ethical conduct of clinical research involving children* (pp. 146–210). The National Academies Press.
- Fleming, J., & Zegwaard, K. E. (2018). Methodologies, methods and ethical considerations for conducting research in work-integrated learning. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 19(3), 205–213. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1196755.pdf>
- Forceville, C. (2022). Visual and multimodal communication across cultures. In I. Kecskés (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of intercultural pragmatics* (pp. 527–551). Cambridge University Press.
- Fox, S., & Geddes, M. (2016). Preschool: Two years are better than one. *Mitchell Institute Report No. 03/2016*. Retrieved from <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/two-years-are-better-than-one-mitchell-institute.pdf>
- Fredman, S., Donati, G., & Naicker, S. (2023). New beginnings: The right to equality and early childhood care and education. *South African Journal of Human Rights*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02587203.2023.2214372>
- Gauntlett, D. (2005). Creative visual research methods for understanding the media audience. *Journal for Theory and Practice of Media Education*, 9(1), 1–32. <https://doi.org/10.21240/mpaed/09/2005.03.29.X>
- Germain, A., Nolan, K., Doyle, R., Mason, S., Gambles, M., Chen, H., Smeding, R., & Ellershaw, J. (2016). The use of reflective diaries in end-of-life training programmes: A study exploring the impact of self-reflection on the participants in a volunteer training programme. *BMC Palliative Care*, 15(28), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12904-016-0096-5>
- Glaw, X., Inder, K., Kable, A., & Hazelton, M. (2017). Visual methodologies in qualitative research: Autophotography and photo elicitation applied to mental health research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917748215>
- Goto, R., Frodl, T., & Skokauskas, N. (2021). Armed conflict and early childhood development in 12 low- and middle-income countries. *Pediatrics*, 148(3), Article e2021-050332. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-050332>

- Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your “house”. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research*, 4(2), 12–26. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1058505.pdf>
- Harrison, G. D. (2020). A snapshot of early childhood care and education in South Africa: Institutional offerings, challenges and recommendations. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 10(1), Article e797. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v10i1.797>
- Hauser, B., Rigg, C., Trehan, K., & Vince, R. (2023). How to facilitate critical action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 20(2), 116–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2023.2206994>
- Heckman, J. J. (2014). James Heckman changes the equation for American prosperity. *The Economics of Human Potential*. Retrieved from https://heckmanequation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/F_Heckman_Brochure_041515.pdf
- Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2015). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Herzog, P. S. (2019). Visual research methods: Integrating images in the study of social problems. In P. S. Herzog (Ed.), *The science of generosity: Causes, manifestations, and consequences*. Springer.
- Hill, Z., Tawiah Agyemang, C., Kirkwood, B., & Kendall, C. (2022). Are verbatim transcripts necessary in applied qualitative research? Experiences from two community-based intervention trials in Ghana. *Emerging Themes in Epidemiology*, 19(5), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12982-022-00115-w>
- Igwenagu, C. (2016). *Fundamentals of research methodology and data collection*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.21467.62242>
- Kaiser, K. (2009). Protecting respondent confidentiality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19(11), 1632–1641. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732309350879>
- Kampira, A. (2021). A brief introduction to thematic analysis. *Afregarde Research*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351051073_A_Brief_Introduction_to_Thematic_Analysis

- Karisa, A., Samuels, C., Watermeyer, B., McKenzie, J., & Vergunst, R. (2022). Priorities for access to early childhood development services for children with disabilities in South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1).
<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1119>
- Karnieli-Miller, O., Strier, R., & Pessach, L. (2009). Power relations in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19(2), 279–289.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732308329306>
- Kearney, J., Wood, L., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2013). Community-university partnerships: Using participatory action learning and action research. *International Journal of Community Research and Engagement*, 6(1), 113–130. <https://doi.org/10.5130/ijcre.v6i1.3105>
- Khatri, K. K. (2020). Research paradigm: A philosophy of educational research. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 5(5), 1435–1440.
<https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.55.15>
- Kherid, Z. Y. A., Soeteja, Z. S., & Masunah, J. (2024). Visual culture: Reading digital collage art. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 771(1), 222–230.
https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-100-5_32
- Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 6(5), 26–41.
<https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v6n5p26>
- Klein, S. (2016). Benefits of early care and education for children in the child welfare system. *OPRE Report*, 68. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606722.pdf>
- Kotzé, J. (2015). Can pre-grade R be the stepping stone to social equality in South Africa? *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 5(2), 1–27. Retrieved from <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/sajce/v5n2/02.pdf>
- Kubicek, K., & Robles, M. (2016, November 11). *Resource for integrating community voices into a research study: Community advisory board toolkit*. Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute.
- Kumar, R. (2019). *Research methodology: A step-by-step guide for beginners* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Leedy, P. D., & Ormrod, J. E. (2015). *Practical research: Planning and design*. Pearson.

- Maalouf-Manasseh, Z., Oot, L., & Sethuraman, K. (2016). Giving children the best start in life: Integrating nutrition and early childhood development programming within the first 1,000 days. *Technical Brief: Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project*. Retrieved from <https://www.fantaproject.org/sites/default/files/resources/Nutrition-Early-Childhood-Development-Technical-Brief-Jan2016.pdf>
- MacDonald, C. (2012). Understanding participatory action research: A qualitative research methodology option. *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 13(2), 34–50. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274063607_Understanding_participatory_action_research_A_qualitative_research_methodology_option
- Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 8(3), 3351–33514. Retrieved from <https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/335/553>
- Manohar, N., MacMillan, F., Steiner, G. Z., & Arora, A. (2018). Recruitment of research participants. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 1–28). Springer Nature.
- Maree, K. (2016). *First steps in research* (2nd ed.). Van Schaik Publishers.
- Marquardt, M., & Waddill, D. (2004). The power of learning in action learning: A conceptual analysis of how the five schools of adult learning theories are incorporated within the practice of action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 1(2), 185–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1476733042000264146>
- Mathikithela, M. S., & Wood, L. (2019). Youth as participatory action researchers: Exploring how to make school a more enabling space. *Educational Research for Social Change*, 8(2), 77–95. Retrieved from http://ersc.nmmu.ac.za/articles/ERSC_Sept_2019_Vol_8_No_2_Mathikithela_and_Wood_pp_77-95bb.pdf
- Mbarathi, N., Mthembu, M. E., & Diga, K. (2016). Early childhood development and South Africa: A literature review. *National Research Fund*, 6. Retrieved from <https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/29db68de-de55-49fa-bd65-758faa28ac4b/content>

- Mertens, D. M. (2007). Transformative paradigm: Mixed methods and social justice. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(3), 212–225. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689807302811>
- Mertens, D. M. (2017). Transformative research: Personal and societal. *International Journal for Transformative Research*, 4(1), 18–24. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijtr-2017-0001>
- Mertens, D. M. (2021). Transformative research methods to increase social impact for vulnerable groups and cultural minorities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, Article 16094069211051563. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211051563>
- Mosala, S. J., Venter, J. C. M., & Bain, E. G. (2017). South Africa's economic transformation since 1994: What influence has the national democratic revolution (NDR) had? *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 44(3–4), 327–340. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12114-017-9260-2>
- Müller, A., Ronaasen, J., & Besada, D. (2023). Adequate nutrition: A pillar of early childhood development. *Real Reform for ECD*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecdreform.org.za/uploads/adequate-nutrition-a-pillar-of-early-childhood-development.pdf>
- Mumford, A. (1995). Managers developing others through action learning. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 27(2), 19–27. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00197859510082870>
- Mwaipopo, C., Maundeni, T., Seetso, G., & Jacques, G. (2021). Challenges in the provision of early childhood care and education services in rural areas of Botswana. *African Educational Research Journal*, 9(3), 753–761. <https://doi.org/10.30918/AERJ.93.21.097>
- Nerantzi, C., & Despard, C. (2014). Do LEGO® models aid reflection in learning and teaching practice? *Journal of Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice*, 2(2), 31–36. <https://doi.org/10.14297/jpaap.v2i2.81>
- Nguyen, T. T. L. (2019). Selection of research paradigms in English language teaching: Personal reflections and future directions. *KnE Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v3i19.4826>
- Okesina, M. (2020). A critical review of the relationship between paradigm, methodology, design, and method in research. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 10(3), 57–68. Retrieved from <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jrme/papers/Vol-10%20Issue-3/Series-1/K1003015768.pdf>

- Omodan, B. I. (2022). Transformative research in context: An argument for relevant methods. *SAICEd 2022 Proceedings*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366824099_TRANSFORMATIVE_RESEARCH_IN_CONTEXT_AN_ARGUMENT_FOR_RELEVANT_METHODS
- Ong, P. A. L. (2020). Visual research methods: Qualifying and quantifying the visual. *Beijing International Review of Education*, 2(1), 35–53. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25902539-00201004>
- Oppenheim, C., & Archer, N. (2021). The role of early childhood education and care in shaping life chances. In *The changing face of early childhood in the UK*. Retrieved from <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/early-childhood-education-care-shaping-life-chances>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2016). *Starting strong IV: Monitoring quality in early childhood education and care country note*. OECD Publishing. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/ECECMN-Finland.pdf>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. (2020). *Early childhood education: Equity, quality and transitions. Report for the G20 Education Working Group*. Retrieved from https://intrans.issa.nl/sites/default/files/2023-02/C%29%20international%20framework%20transitions%20part%201_0.pdf
- Pedler, M. (Ed.). (2012). *Action learning in practice* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Peterson, A. D., & Ziegler, A. (2021). Building a multiple linear regression model with LEGO brick data. *Journal of Statistics and Data Science Education*, 29(3), 297–303. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26939169.2021.1946450>
- Pretorius, A., & Plaatjies, B. (2023). Self-awareness as a key emotional intelligent skill for secondary school principals' leadership toolkit. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 5(2), 52–74. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2023.9>
- Raikes, A., & Shaeffer, S. (2016). Equity in early childhood: The cornerstone of a new global development agenda. In *The global report on equity and early childhood* (pp. 1–11). International Step by Step Association.
- Raikes, A., Rao, N., Yoshikawa, H., Cohrssen, C., Behrman, J., Cappa, C., Devercelli, A., Boo, F. L., McCoy, D., & Richter, L. (2023). Global tracking of access and quality in early

- childhood care and education. *International Journal of Child Care and Educational Policy*, 17(14). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-023-00116-5>
- Ramaphosa, C. (2019, February 7). State of the nation address [Speech]. Government of South Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-2019-state-nation-address-7-feb-2019-0000>
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. SAGE Publications.
- Reed, M. S., Ferré, M., Martin-Ortega, J., Blanche, R., Lawford-Rolfe, R., Dallimer, M., & Holden, J. (2021). Evaluating impact from research: A methodological framework. *Research Policy*, 50, Article 104147. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2021.104147>
- Republic of South Africa [RSA]. (1996). *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996)*. Government Printers. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/images/a108-96.pdf>
- Republic of South Africa [RSA]. (1997). *White paper for social welfare*. Department of Welfare.
- Republic of South Africa [RSA]. (2011). *National Development Plan: Vision for 2030*. National Planning Commission (Ed.). Government Printers. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201409/devplan2.pdf
- Republic of South Africa [RSA]. (2013). *South African integrated programme of action for early childhood development – moving ahead (2013/14–2016/17)*. Government Printers. Retrieved from <https://pmg.org.za/files/140819saipaecd.pdf>
- Republic of South Africa [RSA]. (2015). *National integrated early childhood development policy*. Government Printers. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201610/national-integrated-ecd-policy-web-version-final-01-08-2016a.pdf
- Republic of South Africa [RSA]. (2024). *Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (Act No. 32 of 2024)*. Government Printers. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202409/51258basiceducationlawsamendmentact32of2024.pdf

- Richardson, E., Haworth, K., & Deamer, F. (2022). For the record: Questioning transcription processes in legal contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 43(4), 677–697.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amac005>
- Rigg, C., & Trehan, K. (2004). Reflections on working with critical action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 1(2), 149–165.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1476733042000264128>
- Rigg, C. (2005). Critical action learning. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*. Retrieved from <https://livrepository.liverpool.ac.uk/3001209/1/Critical%20Action%20Learning.pdf>
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. SAGE Publications.
- Rose, G. (2022). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials*. SAGE Publications.
- Rudolph, N., Millei, Z., & Alasuutari, M. (2019). Data practices and inequality in South African early childhood development policy: Technocratic management versus social transformation. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 9(1), 1–11. Retrieved from http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_abstract&pid=S2223-76822019000100045
- Samman, E., Presler-Marshall, E., Jones, N., Bhatkal, T., Melamed, C., Stavropoulou, M., & Wallace, J. (2016). *Women's work: Mothers, children and the global childcare crisis*. Overseas Development Institute.
- Serrat, O. (2017). *Knowledge solutions: Tools, methods, and approaches to drive organizational performance*. Springer.
- Shaeffer, S. (2019). Inclusive early childhood care and education. *Background Paper for the International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education – Every Learner Matters*. UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000370417>
- Shanker, A., Marian, D., & Swimmer, C. (2015). Effective interventions aimed at reaching out-of-school children: A literature review. *UNICEF*. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED573790.pdf>
- Smit, N. A., Van der Linde, J., Eccles, R., Swanepoel, D., & Graham, M. A. (2020). Exploring the knowledge and needs of early childhood development practitioners from a low-resource

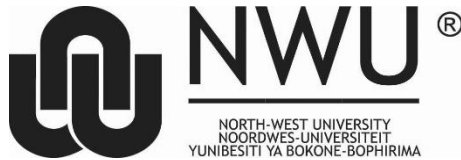
- community. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01063-3>
- Spaull, N., & Kotzé, J. (2015). Starting behind and staying behind in South Africa: The case of insurmountable learning deficits in mathematics. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 41, 13–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2015.01.002>
- Stahl, N. A., & King, J. R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 44(1), 26–28. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1320570.pdf>
- Thorogood, C., Goeiman, H., Berry, L., & Lake, L. (2022). Food and nutrition security for the preschool child: Enhancing early childhood development. In L. Lake, R. Shung-King, & S. Hendricks (Eds.), *South African Child Gauge 2020* (pp. 96–110). Retrieved from https://zero2five.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/CG2020_ch6_food-and-nutrition-security-for-the-preschool-child-1.pdf
- Tracy, S. J. (2019). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Trehan, K., & Rigg, C. (2015). Critical action learning research: Opportunities and challenges for HRD research and practice. In M. Carroll, P. Nicholls, & A. White (Eds.), *Critical action learning for HRD practitioners*. Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781785362953.00016>
- Tsegay, S. M., Kansale, C., & Goll, S. P. (2017). An analysis of early childhood education policy in China. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*, 11(1), 69–84. <https://doi.org/10.17206/apjrece.2017.11.1.69>
- UNESCO. (2019). *Regional guidelines on innovative financing mechanisms and partnerships for early childhood care and education (ECCE)*. Retrieved from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371189>
- UNICEF. (2017). *UNICEF's programme guidance for early childhood development: UNICEF Programme Division 2017*.
- UNICEF. (2020). *Access and equity in early childhood education: Evaluation of five countries in Latin America and the Caribbean*.

- Uthman, Y. O. O. (2023). How transformative education empowers social justice: Bridging the gap between knowledge and action. *Competitive: Journal of Education*, 2(4), 276–283. <https://doi.org/10.58355/competitive.v2i4.81>
- Van der Westhuizen, M., Smith, R., & Beukes, J. W. (2019). Exploring the social function of congregations: A community development approach to develop 'hub-and-spill' early childhood development centres. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 75(2). <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i2.4850>
- Van Dyk, H., & White, C. J. (2019). Theory and practice of the quintile ranking of schools in South Africa: A financial management perspective. *South African Journal of Education*, 39(1), Article a1820. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v39ns1a1820>
- Vandenbroeck, M. (2020). Early childhood care and education policies that make a difference. In R. Nieuwenhuis & W. Van Lancker (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Family Policy* (pp. 169–191). Springer.
- Vaughn, L. M., & Jacquez, F. (2020). Participatory research methods: Choice points in the research process. *Journal of Participatory Research Methods*, 1(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.35844/001c.13244>
- Visser, M., Grossmark, J., Krüger, S., Smith, C., van Zyl, M., Willemse, Z., & Wright, C. (2021). The challenges experienced by practitioners from under-resourced early childhood development centres in South Africa: A single site study. *South African Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 51(3), 14–24. Retrieved from http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2310-38332021000300003
- Vorwerk, M. (2020). Collaboration of ECD networks (CECDN): Provincial dialogues on the ECD function shift. *Collective ECD Civil Society Response*. Retrieved from <https://www.ecdalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Collective-ECD-Civil-Society-Response-on-Function-Shift.pdf>
- Vu, H. M. (2020). Employee empowerment and empowering leadership: A literature review. *Technium*, 2(7), 20–28. <https://doi.org/10.47577/technium.v2i7.1653>
- Wills, G., & Kika-Mistry, J. (2021). New foundations: Strengthening ECCE provisioning in South Africa after COVID-19. *Research on Socio-Economic Policy*. Retrieved from <https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Wills-KikaMistry-Building-new-foundations-1.pdf>

- Wilmott, H. (1994). Management education: Provocations to a debate. *Management Learning*, 25(1), 105–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507694251008>
- Wimer, C., & Wolf, S. (2020). Family income and young children's development. *The Future of Children*, 30(2), 191–211. Retrieved from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1293559.pdf>
- Wood, L., & Esterhuizen, S. (2024). Enhancing the well-being of early childhood education practitioners working in resource-constrained contexts. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v14i1.1477>
- Wood, L., & Neethling, M. (2024). Professionalising ECCE in South Africa is not child's play! Determining skills gaps and implications for future sector development. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 32(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2023.2241119>
- Wood, L., & Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2013). PALAR as a methodology for community engagement by faculties of education. *South African Journal of Education*, 33(4), Article a780. Retrieved from http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0256-01002013000400003
- Wood, L. (2019). PALAR: Participatory action learning and action research for community engagement. In O. Zuber-Skerritt & L. Wood (Eds.), *Action learning and action research: Genres and approaches* (pp. 193–206). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Wood, L. (2020). *Participatory action learning and action research: Theory, practice and process*. Routledge.
- Xu, A., Baysari, M. T., Stocker, S. L., Leow, L. J., Day, R. O., & Carland, J. E. (2020). Researchers' views on, and experiences with, the requirement to obtain informed consent in research involving human participants: A qualitative study. *BMC Medical Ethics*, 21(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-020-00538-7>
- Zuber-Skerritt, O. (2011). *Action leadership: Towards a participatory paradigm*. Springer.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O., & Teare, R. (2013). *Lifelong action learning for community development: Learning and development for a better world*. Sense Publishers.
- Zuber-Skerritt, O., Wood, L., & Kearney, J. (2020). The transformative potential of action learning in community-based research for social action. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 17(2), 147–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767333.2020.1712840>

Zulu, P. P., Aina, A. Y., & Bipath, K. (2022). Education and training experiences of early childhood care and education practitioners in rural and urban settings of Durban, South Africa. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1).
<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1167>

ANNEXURE A: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM



Private Bag X6001, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222

Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Faculty of Education

(Research entity details)

Tel: 018 111 1111

Email: Name.Surname@nwu.ac.za

Date: 16 May 2024

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

I herewith wish to request your consent to participate in this research. Before you give consent, please acquaint yourself with the information below.

The details of the research are as follows:

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT:

Enabling early childhood care and education (ECCE) managers and practitioners to navigate the complexities of the function shift: A PALAR approach.

ETHICS APPLICATION NUMBER

NWU-00320-23-A2

PROJECT SUPERVISOR: Prof. L. Wood
CO-SUPERVISOR: Dr. A. Schoonen
ADDRESS: NWU – Potchefstroom
CONTACT NUMBER: 018 299 1111/2222

MEMBER OF PROJECT TEAM MEd-Student: K.J. Thakalekoala
ADDRESS: NWU – Potchefstroom
CONTACT NUMBER: 073 448 9145

FACULTY OF EDUCATION RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Contact person: Ms Erna Greyling, E-mail: Erna.Greyling@nwu.ac.za, Tel. (018) 299 4656

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education of the North-West University and will be conducted according to the ethical guidelines of this committee. Permission was also asked from the provincial Department of Basic Education/other relevant body (please describe) as well as the school principal (if relevant).

What is this research about?

The aims of this research are:

- To enable ECCE managers and practitioners to navigate the function shift towards quality and sustainable education.
- To explore the experiences of the ECCE managers and practitioners regarding the function shift.
- To identify and implement actions that can be taken to address the issues identified.

Participants

- ECCE managers and practitioners.

What is expected of you?

The participants will be expected to actively participate in several action learning set meetings (2 hours) to determine what they want to change in their practice and how they will do it.

Benefits

You will engage in knowledge-building and sharing sessions, allowing you to acquire additional insights on this new phenomenon from one another.

Risks involved

No anticipated risks are foreseen for the prospective participants, aside from the investment of their time for the sessions.

Confidentiality and protection of identity

Since you will be participating in an action learning group, confidentiality will depend on the norms set by the group. All will be required to sign a confidentiality form, but identity of each person will of course be known within the group. Your name will not be used in any research report unless you expressly wish this and sign accordingly. Names of the centres will also be anonymised.

Dissemination of findings

You will have access to all findings since you will be involved in data generation and analysis. The group will decide how to disseminate the findings.

If you have any further questions or enquiries regarding your participation in this research, please contact the researchers for more information.

Yours sincerely

Koenane Thakalekoala

DECLARATION BY PARTICIPANT:

By signing below, I agree to take part in a research study entitled:

Enabling early childhood care and education (ECCE) managers and practitioners to navigate the complexities of the function shift: A PALAR approach.

I declare that:

- I have read this information and consent form and understand what is expected of me in the research.
- I have had a chance to ask questions to the researcher and all my questions have been adequately answered.
- I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary and I have not been pressurised to take part.
- I may choose to leave the study at any time and will not be penalised or prejudiced in any way.
- I may be asked to leave the research process before it has finished, if the researcher feels it is in my best interests, or if I do not follow the research procedures, as agreed to.

Signed at (place)_____on (date) ____/____/20____

Signature of participant

Researcher

ANNEXURE B: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



Private Bag X1290, Potchefstroom
South Africa 2520

Tel: 018 299-1111/2222
Fax: 018 299-4910
Web: <http://www.nwu.ac.za>

Senate Committee for Research Ethics
Tel: 016 103 4440
Email: Feziwe.Mseleni@nwu.ac.za

ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY

Based on approval by the **Education Sciences Research Ethics Committee (EduREC)** on 30 November 2023, the Education Sciences Research Ethics Committee hereby **approves** your application as indicated below. This implies that the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SCRE) grants its permission that, provided the special conditions specified below are met and pending any other authorisation that may be necessary, the study may be initiated, using the ethics number below.

Study title: Enabling ECCE managers and practitioners to navigate the complexities of the function shift: A PALAR approach

Study Leader/Supervisor (Principal Investigator)/Researcher: Prof L Wood

Student / Team: KJ Thakalekoala (MEd student - 22006044), Dr A Schoonen

Ethics number:

N	W	U	-	0	0	3	2	0	-	2	3	-	A	2
Institution			Study Number						Year		Status			

Status: S = Submission; R = Re-Submission; P = Provisional Authorisation; A = Authorisation

Application Type: Single study

Commencement date: 30/11/2023

Risk:

Low Risk

Expiry date: 30/11/2024

Approval of the study is initially provided for a year, after which continuation of the study is dependent on receipt and review of the annual (or as otherwise stipulated) monitoring report and the concomitant issuing of a letter of continuation.

Special in process conditions of the research for approval (if applicable):

General conditions:

While this ethics approval is subject to all declarations, undertakings and agreements incorporated and signed in the application form, the following general terms and conditions will apply:

- The study leader/supervisor (principle investigator)/researcher must report in the prescribed format to the ES-REC:*
 - annually (or as otherwise requested) on the monitoring of the study, whereby a letter of continuation will be provided, and upon completion of the study; and*
 - without any delay in case of any adverse event or incident (or any matter that interrupts sound ethical principles) during the course of the study.*
- The approval applies strictly to the proposal as stipulated in the application form. Should any amendments to the proposal be deemed necessary during the course of the study, the study leader/researcher must apply for approval of these amendments at the ES-REC, prior to implementation. Should there be any deviations from the study proposal without the necessary approval of such amendments, the ethics approval is immediately and automatically forfeited.*
- Annually a number of studies may be randomly selected for an external audit.*
- The date of approval indicates the first date that the study may be started.*
- In the interest of ethical responsibility, the NWU-SCRE and ES-REC reserves the right to:*
 - request access to any information or data at any time during the course or after completion of the study;*

- *to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modification or monitor the conduct of your research or the informed consent process;*
- *withdraw or postpone approval if:*
 - *any unethical principles or practices of the study are revealed or suspected;*
 - *it becomes apparent that any relevant information was withheld from the ES-REC or that information has been false or misrepresented;*
 - *submission of the annual (or otherwise stipulated) monitoring report, the required amendments, or reporting of adverse events or incidents was not done in a timely manner and accurately; and / or*
 - *new institutional rules, national legislation or international conventions deem it necessary.*

The ES-REC would like to remain at your service as scientist and researcher, and wishes you well with your study. Please do not hesitate to contact the ES-REC or the NWU-SCRE for any further enquiries or requests for assistance.

Yours sincerely



Prof CP van der Vyver
Chairperson NWU Education Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Original details: (22351930) C:\Users\22351930\Desktop\ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER OF STUDY.docm
8 November 2018

Current details: (22351930) M:\DS51\0533\Monitoring and Reporting Cluster\Ethics\Certificates\Templates\Research Ethics Approval Letters\9.1.5.4.1 ES-REC Ethical Approval Letter.docm
5 December 2018

File reference: 9.1.5.4.2

**DO YOU WANT TO FIND OUT HOW YOU
CAN CHANGE YOUR PRACTICE TO
BETTER MEET THE REQUIREMENTS
EMANATING FROM THE
FUNCTION SHIFT?
THEN, COME AND BE PART OF A
RESEARCH PROJECT.**

AIMING TO:

- ⇒ **ENABLE ECCE MANAGERS AND PRACTITIONERS TO NAVIGATE THE FUNCTION SHIFT TOWARDS QUALITY AND SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION.**
- ⇒ **EXPLORE THE EXPERIENCES OF THE ECCE MANAGERS AND PRACTITIONERS REGARDING THE FUNCTION SHIFT.**
- ⇒ **IDENTIFY AND IMPLEMENT ACTIONS THAT CAN BE TAKEN TO ADDRESS THE ISSUES IDENTIFIED.**

IF YOU WANT TO HEAR MORE THEN PLEASE COME TO:

**LOCATION: NAME AND
ADDRESS**

**MAY, 16, 2024
14:30**

**ATTENDING THE MEETING DOES NOT MEAN YOU
HAVE TO PARTICIPATE—JUST FIND OUT MORE.**

ANNEXURE D: REFLECTIVE DIARY

STAGE	REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS
Before the session	1. What might happen? Some participants might not show up and fail to report their absence. Participants might arrive late, as they usually do.
	2. What do I need to know or do to be best prepared for this session? I need to understand the purpose of the study and session better. I need to be on time and ready to welcome everyone. I need to be well prepared for the webinar (connectivity & devices).
During the session	1. What is happening now? Only four participants showed-up. The webinar went well.
	2. Is it happening as I expected? The webinar went as expected.
	3. What am I learning from this? English is still a challenge for to express ourselves in a platform like that webinar.
After the session	1. How did it go? The session went okay.
	2. Additional comments from the ALS • The ECCE managers and practitioners would appreciate if they can be taken to short courses that upgrade them from what they already have (NQF L4/5). • Some of the ECCE managers and practitioners were already paying NATU, as members who signed up using their ID numbers. They were promised that they would be assisted with professional development through the existing teachers' channels. However, they had challenges with the Department of Education as they do not have a persal number. They then decided to stop paying the monthly contributions towards NATU. • The ECCE managers and practitioners would like to be exempted on some admission requirements based on their experiences (RPL). • The ECCE managers and practitioners would like a clearer and advocacy on career paths.
COMMENTS: It was not officially reported, but some participants did not attend because they complained about the sessions ending very late (17:30). We are currently discussing adjusting the schedule to start at 14:00 and end at 16:30. We agreed that the ECCE managers and practitioners should send additional comments regarding the webinar. I am still waiting for their input.	

ANNEXURE E: CERTIFICATE OF LANGUAGE EDITOR



Date: 08 December 2024

DECLARATION OF EDITING

I, Professor Margaret Williams, hereby declare that I edited the dissertation's language as detailed below. The dissertation is for submission purposes to fulfil the requirements for the Magister Education degree in Special Needs Education at the North-West University. It has been edited for English language, grammar, syntax, punctuation, and spelling, followed by proofreading.

TITLE

Enabling ECCE managers and practitioners to navigate the complexities of the function shift: A PALAR approach

AUTHOR

KJ Thakalekoala

Disclaimer: The author, KJ Thakalekoala, is free to accept or reject my changes to the document after I edit and proofread it. However, I am not responsible for revisions made to the document after I edited and proofread it on 09/12/2024.

Signed:

Associate Professor/Research Associate
Faculty of Health Sciences
Nelson Mandela University.
Editor/proofreader/academic support
Member: Professional Editors' Guild

Email: maggie.williams@mandela.ac.za
Cell: 0825270600