

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

**LEADERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRES:
PERCEIVED EXPERIENCES OF FOUR PRINCIPALS IN A RURAL AREA**

BY

NTOKOZO MKIZE

(220108442)

**A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the Master of Education Degree in the
discipline of Educational Leadership, Management and Policy, School of Education,
College of Humanities, University of KwaZulu-Natal**

Supervisor: Dr S.B. Blose

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DECLARATION

I, Ntokozo Mkize, declare that:

- (i) The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated is my original work.
- (ii) This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
- (iii) This dissertation does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
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Researcher:




Ntokozo Mkize

Date: 20.06.2022

SUPERVISOR'S STATEMENT

This dissertation is submitted with my approval

Signature: _____  _____ **Date:** _____ 21.04.2024 _____
Dr. S.B. Blose

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my parents, Samson June Mkize and NobuhleMkize: it is through your sacrifices that I become what I am today. I also dedicate this dissertation to my son Mmqobi, and my daughter Hlelolwenkosi.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation reports on a study that explored the perceived leadership experiences of four principals overseeing Early Childhood Development centres in a rural setting in KwaZulu-Natal. The purpose was to comprehend the roles played by ECD principals and the leadership practices they employ in leading ECD centres in rural areas with few resources. The study also aimed to comprehend how rural environments affect the leadership practices of ECD principals. The study was properly situated within the interpretative paradigm, which sees reality as subjective and constructed from a person's personal perceived experiences. To comprehend participants' perceived experiences, the case study methodology was applied. Two techniques, namely semi-structured interviewing and document analysis, were used to generate the data. The interview sessions were recorded using a voice recorder. The process of generating data took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, and careful adherence to the Covid-19 safety guidelines was ensured. The content analysis method was used to analyse the data generated through both interviews. It was discovered that the participating principals faced difficulties with a lack of funding, a lack of parental cooperation, and an inability to register their ECD centres. Apart from this, the participating principals managed their resourced centres in large part through the use of servant leadership.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ECD	Early Childhood Development
DSD	Department of Social Development
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education Centre
ECCD	Early Childhood Care and Development
DoH	Department of Health
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
AIDS	Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
ECE	Early Childhood Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PPT	Project Preparation Trust
NPO	Non-Profit Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
DOE	Department of Education
PL	Pedagogical Leadership

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CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is the term used to describe the developmental process that takes place between birth and the age of five (Diga, 2016). However, other stakeholders believe that the early childhood period begins at birth and ends when a kid enters primary school, which is typically at age six or seven in most nations (Rao et al., 2014). Early childhood development (ECD) has become a crucial sector in South Africa in order to provide fair and high levels of care for the youngest members of the population between birth and the age of five (Mbarathi, Mthembu, and Diga, 2016). This study will focus on ECD centres that are in rural areas. Sometimes principals are owners of the centres and act as directors as well. Hence the term director and principals is used interchangeably in this study almost to mean the same thing. The main focus of this study is on the perceived experiences and practices of four ECD center principals who work in rural areas. In this chapter, I have included the study background, problem statement, justification for the study, significance of the study, thorough explanation of the key concepts, study location, research objectives, research questions, limitations of the study, study outline, and chapter summary.

1.2 Background to the study

ECD programmes were restricted to a few children in towns (Mpofu&Shumba, 2012). During that period, some private bodies and individuals were running ECD centres (Zvobgo, 2005). ECD is a crucial area, according to the South African government. Policymakers have worked hard to guarantee adequate, equitable ECD legislation, especially by assisting underprivileged and vulnerable kids (Biersteker, 2012). When implementing the Education White Paper on ECD, the Ministry of Education pays particular attention to ECD in the educational sector (Department of Education, 2001).

The study's focus was on ECD principals and their perceived experiences running ECD centres because it examines the experiences and practises of ECD principals. The study examined both their achievements and difficulties in running the ECD centre in a remote region in order to comprehend their perceived experiences. This study investigated the leadership behaviours and perceived experiences of four ECD principals working in rural areas. This study focuses mainly

on the perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals in ECD centres (crèches). I am interested in the principals' perceived experiences.

1.3 Problem statement

Most learners within the foundation phase struggle to read, write and count properly at the foundation phase, even at the intermediate phase (Machaba, 2013). This is a problem that they face throughout their school life until they reach matric. This problem may be traced back to lack of proper education during Early Childhood Development (ECD). Most ECD principals have challenges when discharging their duties. The ECD principals in rural areas operate with limited resources since the majority of the people are poor and unemployed, and parental engagement is limited. Additionally, rural contexts have limited access to internet connectivity and the remoteness of these areas make it difficult to reach out to Department officials and donors that can provide training and resources (Blöse & Muteweri, 2021; Muteweri, 2020; Mthembu & Nsibande, 2021).

Their difficult perceived experiences of teaching ECD learners are further compounded by the fact that learners face health care and nutritional problems and some of them travel long distances when coming to school (Tomlison, Rahman and Sanders, 2014). This affects their overall mental and physical development. The research shows that even though some ECD centres in rural areas face a myriad of problems, some in the same context are doing very well (Mthembu & Nsibande, 2021). This raises the issue of whether it is a contextual problem or a leadership problem as some ECD leaders seem to excel and others seem to struggle with managing their centres. This study sought to investigate perceived experiences of ECD principals with a special focus on how their leadership styles impact on ECD centre operations.

1.4 Study Rationale

As an Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioner, I face various challenges in my work. One major challenge is the limited resources available, which can impact the quality of care and education I provide to children (Jolly, 2007). Another challenge is the low pay and status that ECD practitioners often receive, despite the importance of our role in children's development. Additionally, I sometimes lack sufficient training and support in early childhood education, which impacts on the quality of education I offer to children. The heavy workloads and stress I experience also take a toll on my well-being and effectiveness. Ensuring inclusion

and meeting diverse needs, as well as building strong partnerships with families and communities, can be challenging without proper support (NIECD, 2019). Navigating complex policies and regulations is another difficulty, along with limited access to professional development opportunities. These challenges among many prompted me to engage in a study focusing in ECD centers. Considering that the rural context have multiple challenges as mentioned elsewhere in the above section, I wanted to explore the challenges faced by ECD principals leading centres in a rural context.

This study would add to the body of literature already in existence, particularly qualitative studies of early childhood education for children under the age of five in South Africa. The first national research to concentrate on quantitative data on early childhood provisioning was The Nationwide Audit of Early Childhood Provisioning (NAECP) in South Africa (Williams, 2001). In other cases, the education system, parents, legislators and policy-makers put pressure on early childhood centres to prepare kids for formal education and to be accountable for their terms. In order to prepare children for Grade R, studies (Pianta et al., 2005; Burchinal, et al., 2008) looked at children's development in school-related learning skills in the pre-preschool context. This study enables me to engage with, consider and theorise critiques of early childhood education research (Ebrahim, 2006; Bray & Tladi, 2007; Van Staden et al., 2007; OECD, 2008). Although much research has been conducted on this phenomenon, there is a gap that has not been bridged, which this study attempted to bridge.

1.5 Study Significance

It is important to understand what it means to lead ECD centres in a rural area. Again, the study focuses on the perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals leading ECD centres. It also helped to fill the gap in the existing body literature by revealing the impact of ECD principals' practices and perceived experiences. It provided insight into how ECD principals perceive their perceived experiences and their preparation to become good leaders. The study also provided a foundation for future development processes to develop ECD leadership.

Findings on ECD principals in rural areas could be useful to those working in the same context. They can learn from the perceived experiences of other ECD principals and apply different leading strategies. It is my aim that the outcomes of this study are to help ECD principals to foster and develop leadership skills. Lastly, this study enabled ECD principals to see themselves

as leaders and to become active participants in their ECD centres. My interest in the topic stems from the view that ECD principals can have significant benefits for the ECD centre and improved teaching and learning. As a teacher, I developed an interest in the leadership of ECD centres.

1.6 Key concepts

The study has four concepts, namely: Crèche, Early Childhood Development (ECD), leadership, and Rural Area. Below, I provide descriptions of these concepts.

1.6.1 Crèche

A crèche is a facility for infants and toddlers (Excell&Linington, 2008). For the purpose of this study, it must be noted that a crèche predominantly serves children from low-income households, ranging in age from 0 to 5 years.

1.6.2 Early Childhood Development (ECD)

Early Childhood Development (ECD) typically refers to the developmental process that takes place during the early childhood period, which most professional organizations estimate to be from birth to age eight (although some stakeholders believe that the early childhood period begins at birth and ends when a child enters primary school, which is typically at age six or seven in most countries).

According to Education White Paper 5 (2001), ECD is a holistic approach to policies and programmes for children between the ages of birth and nine, with the active engagement of their parents and caregivers. The White Paper (1995) ECD as "an umbrella term which applies to the processes by which children from birth to nine years grow and thrive, physically, mentally, emotionally, morally and socially". Early Childhood Development is a programme that endeavours to consciously promote the 0-5-year-olds' development and education (Bukaliya&Mubika, 2012). ECD forms the bridge that connects the 3-5-year-olds' learning processes with the care and facilities delivered by the schools to support child development (Tshabalala&Mapolisa, 2013).

1.6.3 Leadership

There are still various definitions of leadership, despite how many people have tried. To attempt to provide a comprehensive definition of leadership here would be pointless, but according to Jacobs and Jacques (2006), leadership is the process of providing a collective endeavour a goal (meaningful direction) and inspiring willing effort to be put out to achieve that objective. According to the theory of Jacobs and Jacques, effective leadership requires a goal. Leadership is the process by which one person determines the goal or direction for another person or group of people, and then skilfully and resolutely persuades them to move in that direction with them. Rost (1991, p.102) defines leadership as "an influence relationship between leaders and collaborators who aim for substantial changes that reflect their joint goals." For instance, Senge et al. (1999, p.90) define leadership as "the capacity of a human society to share its future and to maintain the significant processes of change required to do so."

1.6.4 Rural area

The origin of the word 'rural' is the Latin word 'ruralis'. This indicates that agriculture, fishing and forestry are vital to the rural areas where people live. It is a location or geographical region located outside of towns. Consequently, schools in such an environment face the same challenges (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). Rural areas are disadvantaged and lack essential economic infrastructure; rural residents have restricted access to power, banking, the internet, and stores, for example (Ellis, et al., 2009; Makahamadze & Tavuyanango, 2013). Similarly, according to Nkosi (2008), rural schools lack electricity, libraries, sanitation, and laboratories. Few academics define the word rural area, and their definitions all appear to point in the same direction. In the study by Seroto (2004), a rural setting is defined as a sparsely populated, remote region.

1.7 Study Location

The ECD centres are all located in a rural context of the KwaXimba area next to Cato-Ridge. The people living in KwaXimba are Black Africans as well as commercial white farmers. Economically, they depend on factories, tourism and small businesses. There are tar roads, small shops, electricity and water supply for the community. The centres are well-resourced. All the children come from the same culture and their home language is isiZulu.

1.8 Research study Objectives

The main objectives of the study are;

1. To understand the practices of principals in Early Childhood Development centres in a rural area.
2. To explore perceived experiences of leading Early Childhood Development centres in a rural area.
3. To establish how the leadership practices of ECD centre principals influence the operations of the ECD centres in a rural area.

1.9 Research questions to be asked

1. What are the leadership practices of principals in Early Childhood Development centres in rural area?
2. What are the principals 'perceived experiences of leading Early Childhood Development centres in a rural area?
3. How do leadership practices of ECD centre principals influence operations in their centres?

1.10 Study Limitations

The language barrier was a problem for this study, but I have dealt with this problem by asking translated questions to participants. The other problem was the long distance to reach my interviewees. However, I was able to get the necessary transport. Interviewees could have refused to give consent to participate, but to avoid this problem I explained the purpose of the study before they signed the consent form.

1.11 Outline of chapters

Chapter One:

This chapter starts by giving the background information on what motivated me to inquire into the phenomenon surrounding the perceived experiences of ECD principals. The introduction and background is presented followed by the problem statement. Following this, are research

objectives and research questions; also, the rationale as well as the significance of the study are resented.

Chapter Two:

This chapter focuses on reviewing literature relating to the challenges and perceived experiences of ECD principals in the rural areas of KwaZulu Natal. The chapter begins by clarifying the key concepts such as crèche, leadership and ECD practices in rural KZN. A conceptual understanding of a rural area is also expounded. Besides an analysis of the literature on challenges both local and international being explored, a theoretical framework guiding the study was presented.

Chapter Three

This chapter presents the research design and methodology utilised in this study. The Interpretivist paradigm is explained, showing how it fits into the study. The case study as a research design and its advantages are expounded in this chapter. This chapter also describes purposive sampling technique, data analysis technique and the ethical procedures followed.

Chapter Four:

Chapter four analyses and discusses findings with regards to interviews conducted on ECD principals. The thematic analysis was used as a tool to get to know the pattern of challenges and perceived experiences of ECD principals in rural areas and to see if there are common perceived experiences and similar perceived experiences.

Chapter Five:

Chapter five gives a summary of the study and draws conclusions based on the research questions as well as objectives that were described in chapter 1. This chapter also makes recommendations on what can be done with regards to the findings in chapter 4 as well as further research that can be undertaken by scholars to enrich the ECD centres in rural areas.

1.12 Chapter summary

The chapter presented the introduction and background. Firstly, introduction and background were given. The study's objectives and research questions were described. A brief conceptual framework on leadership was also given so to guide the study on the major ideas. The following

chapter investigates what literature posits about the perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals leading ECD centres, and also presents the theoretical framework utilised in the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter gave the background, rationale and explained the significance of study in the discipline of Early Childhood Developing (ECD). This chapter focuses on the literature review based on the key concepts, perceived experiences and practices of principals leading ECD centres. The chapter first elucidates the key concepts that are used in the discipline of ECD. Secondly, a description of the challenges faced by ECD principals in their day to day operations is explored. Thirdly, a description of the practices of the ECD leaders is presented. Fourthly, the influence of the ECD leaders' practices on operations of the ECD centres is explored. Fifthly, a theoretical framework that was used to inform the study is presented and lastly a conclusive analysis of literature is then given.

2.2. Outline of Key Words

There are four important concepts in this study. These concepts include: Early Childhood Development (ECD), ECD principals, ECD centres/institutions and leadership. These concepts are clarified in detail below.

2.2.1 Early Childhood Development

Early Childhood Development (ECD) is defined by the National Department of Education as "...the processes by which children from birth to nine years of age grow and thrive physically, cognitively, emotionally, morally, and socially" (DBE, 2001a). Early childhood development is acknowledged as laying a strong groundwork for future academic performance. Early learning programmes help children prepare for adulthood by providing them with chances for social, spiritual, cognitive, physical, and emotional growth. These programmes help to create the groundwork for comprehensive development while also creating a passion for lifelong learning (Biersteker & Dawes, 2008). In 1994, when the country's first democratic elections were held, legislation and policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, various White Papers on Social Welfare and the Children's Act 38 of 2005 have all been passed which emphasising the necessity of ECD services (Atmore, 2013). South Africa has adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the South African National

Curriculum Framework (NCF) for children aged birth to four, and the first National Integrated Early Childhood Development (NIECD) Policy (Dhlamini, 2016; Dlamini, 2015). The National Development Plan (NDP) demands for high-quality early childhood development services that promote children's holistic development, regardless of who they are or where they reside (National Planning Commission, 2015). Both the NCF and the NIECD Policy are critical to the implementation of ECD services in South Africa, as they provide the first framework for the delivery of high-quality, equitable ECD services and programmes to all young children and their caregivers since the country's democratic transition (RSA, 2015). Majority of young children are still significantly impacted by a variety of social and economic inequities, including limited access to healthcare, education, social services, and nutrition (Atmore 2013). However, South Africa is yet to realise the goal of providing equitable high-quality services to all young children (Atmore, 2013; Aubrey, 2017).

2.2.2 ECD as an Institution

An ECD centre is an institution or location that offers partial or temporary care in the form of pre-school, day care, or aftercare to more than six children separated from their parents between the ages of birth and six (DSD, 2014). The centre may be operated for profit or not-for-profit. According to Excell and Limington (2011), a crèche is a daycare facility for young children (2011). The registration status of an ECD facility with the DSD is viewed as an indication of the service quality since it displays conformity to norms and standards as well as quality services. Infrastructure, health and safety laws, employee credentials, and other necessities are in place, allowing the ECD facility to function efficiently. DSD offers qualified ECD institutions with a means-tested stipend per child for early childhood development (DSD & EPRI, 2014).

ECD facilities must have a reception grade (Grade R) curriculum and additionally register with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), a procedure distinct from DSD registration (DSD and EPRI, 2014). In this study, ECD is defined as an institution that primarily serves children aged 0 to 5.

2.2.3 The concept of Leadership

There are many definitions of leadership that have been proposed (Bogenschneider 2016; Bass 1990). According to Jacobs and Jacques (2006), leadership is the process of giving collective

labour with a purpose of inspiring voluntary effort to achieve the goal. Leadership is the process by which one person determines the purpose or direction for one or more other individuals and drives those others to move in that direction with competence and entire commitment to him or her and to each other (Yukl 2006; Bogenschneider, 2016). According to Senge et al. (1999), leadership relies on collaboration with followers who want to effect major changes in an organisation; supporting this view is Rost (1999) who defines leadership in terms of capacity to share the future and maintain a change process in trying to do so. In this study, I perceive leadership as a principal who is a visionary, is empathetic to staff, networks with other ECD centres, advocates and coordinates parental involvement in ECD centres.

2.2.4 ECD principals

ECD principals are individuals responsible for the administration and operation of an Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme (Rodd, et al., 2013). Although the term ‘ECD principals’ is conceptualised in a broad meaning to cover leaders at many levels in the field of ECD and it is sometimes referred to as ECD principals in the study.. Locally, ECD establishments are also known as preschools or schools. According to Dunlop (2008), principals lead in the areas of teaching, planning, evaluating, organising staff, keeping records as well as managing resources.

However, ECD leadership language is difficult to define and differentiate (Muijs et al., 2004). There is a myriad of terms that are interchangeably used to refer to ECD which include a nursery, day care centre, pre-primary school, private kindergarten, infant department or school, elementary school, special school, or voluntary school, or a mix of these settings (Muijs et al., 2004; Solly, 2003). Different conceptions of leadership exist among professionals in ECD environments. However, research indicates that the majority of ECD principals perceive themselves as educators, as opposed to institutional principals or child development professionals. According to Muijs et al. (2004), ECD principals viewed communication with children and parents and children's accomplishments to be the most rewarding aspects of their jobs. Principals reported having less delight with managing responsibilities. According to another research conducted in New Zealand, those who are entrusted with leadership have the perspective and approach of community leaders (Thornton, 2021). Hatherley and Lee (2003) conducted participant interviews to promote leadership in ECD contexts.

2.3 Global importance of ECD

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were a set of eight international development goals that were established following the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000. The Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of achieving Universal Primary Education aimed to ensure that all children would be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015. This goal recognized education as a fundamental human right and a key driver of development (Shawar&Shiffman, 2017). It highlighted the importance of access to quality education in breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting sustainable development. To achieve this goal, countries were encouraged to eliminate barriers to education, such as school fees, and to improve the quality and relevance of education provided. While significant progress was made towards achieving universal primary education by 2015, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and persistent gender disparities remained in many countries (Reichter et al, 2015).

European countries do have some challenges in their Early Childhood Education (ECE). In a comparative study across Europe, Urban (2009) found that staff qualifications are uneven ranging from no qualification (30%) to a degree from one country to the other. In most European countries, ECE is publicly funded and those that are privately owned, parents struggle to pay school fees and he noted that there is positive co-relation between those that are public funded and the quality of ECE (Rodd, 2013). Challenges across European countries are that there are fewer men in ECE, policy differs from one country to the other, most countries use play as a form of teaching and learning. The Scandinavian region has the most underfunded ECE with poor communities failing to afford child-care (Urban, 2009). Key challenges also include weak ECE policy frameworks, parental involvement, big class sizes and with some European countries such as Poland closing some pre-schools. Most of these European challenges are similar to those of the South African Context (Urban, 2009).

2.4 ECD in South Africa

South Africa responded to Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2, which aimed to achieve universal primary education, through various initiatives and reforms (Mathwasa & Shumba, 2020). These included abolishing school fees for primary education in 2005, expanding early childhood development (ECD) programs, and improving school infrastructure. Efforts were also made to enhance teacher training and support and address language barriers in education. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms were implemented to track progress and identify areas needing improvement (Makhubela & Baloyi, 2018). While significant strides were made in

expanding access to primary education, challenges such as high dropout rates and unequal access to quality education remain areas of focus for further improvement in South Africa (Dhlamini, 2016).

Early Childhood Development Centre (ECD) refers to institutions that focus on early learning and development for children from birth to the year before they enter kindergarten (Department of Social Development, 2015). The Department of Social Development, the Department of Health and the Department of Basic Education manage ECD in South Africa (DBE). Each of these divisions is accountable to ECD for ensuring compliance with social, health, curricular and governance problems. The three government ministries have separate responsibilities for ensuring that the ECD sector provides excellent practices and services. In the context of South Africa, pedagogical leadership manifested inside the DBE, which is accountable for teaching and learning.

There are three types of ECD groups in South Africa. These include day care, grade RR, Foundation phase which is grade R to 3 (Bloese & Muteweri, 2021). In these centres, ECD teachers and principal are expected to provide leadership so that centres can achieve their organisational goals. However, in South Africa, leadership requires immediate action (Modise, 2019; Heika & Wanigayaneke, 2011). South African non-governmental organisations, teachers and administrators must initiate a dialogue about pedagogical leadership in ECD centres.

ECD centres have become a major concern in South Africa. The prevalence of poverty, inequality, unemployment and inequalities and service delivery has an impact on the teaching and learning in rural ECD centres. In addition, child poverty continues to be a serious issue in the United States and living situations in which children live, learn and play (Cassidy & Sanders, 2002). This shows that poverty affects learning across geographical periods.

The proximity of ECD centres, their pricing, their staffing and their physical conditions all play a role in parents' decisions to enrol their children in an ECD programme. Due to the need for a better understanding of such physical infrastructures in municipal planning, this project also investigates ECD centres in informal settlements. Planning for ECD centres in "grey zones," such as informal settlements or those on traditional property can be challenging, particularly

for ECD managers or principals acquiring access to much-needed ECD resources from the relevant ministries.

According to ECD policy, understanding the position of the poor and their limited options in ECD centres in aiding impoverished households, especially those living in informal settlements. Because the government recognises their limits, it may be able to provide a policy that is more relevant to their needs. According to our Constitution, education is a fundamental human right, and it is believed that children should begin learning concepts at a young age (Goswami, 2015). During this period of a child's life, receptivity and readiness for schooling improve. Children assimilate information rapidly; by age two, a child's brain is creating connections at a rate about double that of an adult (Stiles and Jernigan 2010). Teachers of early childhood development play a crucial role in fostering a high-quality learning environment because they teach students to ask 'why' and 'how' questions, help them determine what is true or untrue, form stereotypes, and "challenge their meaning" (Jones & Mules, 2001, p. 192).

Early Childhood Development emphasises the significance of early childhood education for children. Children's "rich interactions" rely heavily on the traits of their educators (Burr, 2006). Burr continues in her Review of ECD research by stating that ECD also guides the optimal delivery of early childhood intervention to children, and that this type of early contact leads to high-quality teacher-child relationships, which protect at-risk children from academic difficulties and later delinquency (Burr, 2006).

2.5 Policy perspective on the management of ECD centres in South Africa

In South Africa, the management of Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres is guided by various policies and frameworks aimed at ensuring the provision of quality early childhood education and care (Tshabalala & Mapolisa, 2013). The South African government has recognized the importance of ECD in addressing inequalities and promoting children's holistic development. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy, launched in 2015, provides a comprehensive framework for the management and provision of ECD services. The policy emphasizes the importance of partnerships between government, communities, and other stakeholders in the management of ECD centres (Dlamini, 2016). It also highlights the need for adequate resources, infrastructure, and support for ECD practitioners. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development (ECD) Policy in South Africa is guided by several

key principles and tenets aimed at promoting the holistic development of young children (Dlamini, 2015). These include the recognition of ECD as a fundamental human right and a critical foundation for lifelong learning and well-being. The policy emphasizes the importance of partnerships between government, communities, families, and other stakeholders in providing comprehensive ECD service (Dlamini, 2016). It also prioritizes the provision of quality ECD programs that are responsive to the diverse needs of children and families, including those in marginalized communities. The policy further highlights the importance of investing in the professional development of ECD practitioners and ensuring the effective governance and management of ECD centres (Reichter & Samuels, 2018).

Before admitting a child to the ECD centre, information, guidelines and policies must be appropriately documented and communicated to families. Such policies serve as a guide for parents and explain the ECD's expectations for their involvement in the development of their children (Department of Social Development, 2006). This comprises complaint procedures, admittance policies, HIV/AIDS and disabled children's admission policies, outing protocols, emergency preparations and a first aid kit (Department of Social Development, 2006).

The centre's operating hours, age groups served, transport arrangements for children, procedures and actions in the event of incidents such as injuries, admission policy for all children or children with special needs, feeding scheme, arrangement of children's needs, clothing, monthly fees, medication administered to children, and complaints procedure are detailed (Department of Social Development, 2006). ECD centres must also maintain admission registers, attendance registers for children and staff, attendance registers for ECD practitioners, accident registers and abuse registers (Department of Social Development, 2006). Each kid admitted to the ECD centre must have current records maintained.

Basic requirements for child admission include the completion of an admission form; additional needs include a copy of the child's birth certificate and immunisation card, parents' contact information, and an affidavit or proof of parental income (Department of Social Development, 2006). Even though the government declared ECD as a public good, many centres initiated by communities are still mismanaged and unable to offer acceptable ECD benefits or accountable and responsible services to the public. While the Department of Social Development (DSD) allocates grant or support funding, good governance and accountability which are key to ECD service delivery, are still indistinct.

Community participation which is a critical variable for improving the quality of ECD services is still deficient in these centres (Mathwasa and Shumba, 2020). The baseline study by National Development Agency, compiled by Mathwasa and Shumba (2020) showed that many practitioners lacked sufficient knowledge on the management of ECD Centres; it was observed that some practitioners operated without assessment records and learner files, non-implementation of developmentally appropriate practices and had inadequate learning resources to engage children in educative play. In some cases, there were no preparation books and there was no consideration for age-appropriateness in grouping children even though the daily programmes were displayed. Only a few principals have received training in early language literacy development and nutrition.

2.6 Running of ECD centres in South Africa

Early Childhood Development (ECD) centers in South Africa are managed through a combination of government and community efforts, operating under national policies and regulations. These centres can be owned and managed by various entities, including government departments, non-profit organizations, community-based organizations, or private individuals. Government-run centres are typically overseen by the Department of Social Development or the Department of Basic Education. ECD centres must register with the relevant government department to operate legally and comply with specific regulations regarding facilities, staff qualifications, health, safety, and curriculum. Funding for ECD centres may come from government subsidies, grants, donations, and parent fees, with subsidies often provided to support centres in disadvantaged communities. ECD centres are guided by the National Curriculum Framework for Children from Birth to Four Years, which outlines principles, goals, and learning areas for early childhood education. Staffing at ECD centres includes trained practitioners responsible for children's care and education, with government-mandated qualifications and training requirements ensuring quality standards. Government departments provide monitoring, support, and guidance to ECD centres to ensure compliance with regulations and the provision of quality services, including regular inspections, training programs, and resources for practitioners.

2.7 Leadership perceived experiences faced by ECD principals in South Africa

Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres worldwide are facing a myriad of global challenges that profoundly impact the well-being and development of young children. One of the most significant challenges is the unequal access to quality ECD services, particularly in low-income and marginalized communities. Globally, as reported by UNICEF, 5 million are mal-nourished and cannot access schools due to poverty (Jolly, 2007). Disparities in funding, infrastructure, and trained personnel often leave disadvantaged children at a disadvantage from the very start of their lives (Shawar&Shiffman, (2017).

Another pressing issue is the quality of ECD programs especially in global south (Neugebauer, 2011). This is alluded to by Mpfu and Shumba (2011) who did a study a study on challenges faced by ECD learners in Zimbabwe who further assert that leadership, advocacy and technological advancement hinder efficient management of ECD centres in rural Zimbabwe. Many centres struggle to provide developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive curricula and lack trained educators. Inadequate resources hinder the provision of nutritious meals and healthcare services, which are critical for a child's physical and cognitive development (Mpfu & Shumba, 2012).

Global challenges also extend to the lack of awareness and advocacy for early childhood development. Governments, communities, and parents must recognize the importance of investing in the early years to lay a strong foundation for a child's future success. Furthermore, ECD centres often grapple with the need for evidence-based research and data to guide effective policies and practices (Jolly, 2007). These challenges are also mirrored in South Africa. Challenges faced by ECD principals in South Africa are many. However, inadequate funding, limited infrastructure, scarcity of qualified staff, limited professional development, transportation barriers for learners, parental engagement, linguistic diversity, nutritional issues, networking challenges and the use of technology in the running of the centres (Richter, Tomlinson, Watt & Hunt, 2019) have caused a lot of challenges for ECD principals in South Africa.

2.7.1 Infrastructural constraints in ECD centres

Infrastructure was the major barrier cited in the 2014 ECD National Audit Report (DSD) as preventing ECD centres from registering with DSD. According to Richter et al. (2012), one of the main difficulties of Early Childhood Development policy and programme is that children living in poverty, disadvantaged societies, and with disabilities continue to be denied access to

ECD centres and excellent ECD facilities. Therefore, regardless of the legislative framework, whether it is the Children's Act or the National Integrated Plan for ECD, disadvantaged children continue to struggle with inadequate access to services (DSD, 2014).

2.7.2 Constraints with professional Development

In rural regions of South Africa, educators in early childhood development (ECD) centres encounter significant challenges due to the restricted availability of opportunities for enhancing their skills and knowledge. These hurdles encompass multiple factors such as the limited provision of professional development, geographical barriers, the absence of suitable training programs, and the scarcity of opportunities for networking and collaboration (Visser, Grossmark, Kruger & Smith, 2021). Professional development opportunities are notably scarce for educators in rural ECD centres. These centres frequently confront constraints in terms of access to such opportunities, which subsequently hampers educators' growth and effectiveness (Hussein & Swanepoel, 2018). Govender and Naidoo (2021) underscored the difficulties faced by educators in rural ECD centres due to the lack of available professional development programmes. The geographical obstacles prevalent in rural areas present challenges for educators seeking professional development. These educators encounter difficulties in attending workshops, conferences, or training programs due to the remote locations of the centres and the limited transportation options.

Govender & Naidoo (2021) also emphasized the geographical barriers that educators in rural areas confront, which impede their access to professional development opportunities. In rural areas, the absence of locally accessible training programs stands as a significant barrier to professional development in ECD centres. Educators often have to undertake lengthy journeys to access training opportunities, resulting in time and financial constraints. This is alluded to by Makhubela and Baloyi (2018) that there is limited availability of local training programs for educators in rural regions. To address these challenges effectively, professional development programs must be tailored to the unique needs of educators in rural ECD centres. Off-the-shelf training programs might not adequately address the specific challenges and contexts that educators face in these rural areas. Muthukrishna and Naidoo (2012) emphasized the importance of designing professional development initiatives that are targeted and aligned with the contextual realities of educators in rural South Africa. The significance of collaborative learning in professional development cannot be understated. While rural ECD centres require

opportunities for networking and collaboration, limited access to such platforms can hinder educators from learning from their peers and sharing best practices.

2.7.3 Constraints on Health, Safety and Nutrition

Food and nutrition are important factors in teaching and learning, and interventions to enhance children's health and nutritional status should be started as soon as possible to limit the consequences of malnutrition on their growth and development (DSD, 2014). In South Africa, the majority of children from impoverished neighbourhoods arrive at learning centres on an empty stomach, making it impossible for them to learn and for practitioners to teach successfully. The Department of Social Development (DSD) offers a R15 per child per day stipend to underprivileged children who attend registered ECD centres (Thorogood et al., 2020). The subsidy is meant to enable more equitable access to ECD programmes and to assist ECD centres in providing nutritious meals to children, paying employees, and providing instructional materials, with food accounting for 40% of the cost (Van Niekerk et al., 2017; Jonah et al., 2018).

However, eligibility for the subsidy is not guaranteed, and both the centre and carers must go through lengthy and difficult application processes. In actual fact, it was discovered from the baseline research by National Development Agency, compiled by Mathwasa and Shumba (2020), that protocols on health and nutrition were not adhered to and food supply was erratic due to lack of funding, especially in the unregistered centres. Assessing the issue of food and nutrition, the study found that the majority of registered centres were not getting the DSD subsidy and they relied on fees for sustenance or resorted to asking parents to pack lunch for children to bring to the centre. School fees, as the only source of funding, were inadequate to sustain viable ECD Centres. Health and safety practices in ECD centres were investigated during the baseline study which highlighted issues per participating district and demographical locations. Sarah Baartman district showed much better health and safety conditions while OR Tambo district presented the poorest conditions; meanwhile, township ECD centres fared better than its rural counterparts and this supported better learning for learners in ECD centres (Mathwasa & Shumba, 2020).

Collaboration with healthcare professionals and organizations can enhance access to healthcare services, promote health education, and ensure proper nutrition for children. Mpofu and Shumba (2012) emphasized the significance of partnerships with health agencies in addressing health and nutrition challenges in rural ECD centres. Addressing mental health and well-being

is essential in rural ECD centres. The holistic development of children involves nurturing their emotional and social well-being. Providing support and resources for mental health promotion and early intervention can positively impact children's overall development (Cassidy & Sanders, 2002).

2.7.4 Constraints on Informal ECD centres

Informal ECD facilities serve a vital role in low-income families, according to a research from the Project Preparation Trust (PPT, 2014). Informal centres are seen as being either located in an informal settlement or operating without formal registration, or both. The informal ECD clinics provide primary care assistance to low-income parents and caregivers who cannot afford to pay for traditional ECD services (PPT, 2014). The informal ECD centre assists people who are socially and economically excluded, particularly low-income families who do not have access to established ECD initiatives (PPT, 2014). The informal ECD services are underfunded and face hurdles such as deteriorating neighbourhood circumstances and an absence of basic infrastructure. Informal Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres are crucial for low-income families in severe need of cheap child care. In this context, ECD centres located in informal settlements act as unrecognised day care services that assist with the care of children, such as those of working mothers (PPT, 2014).

One of the key reasons why certain ECD centres may be of poor quality is a deficiency of resources. For example, they lack the resources to offer personnel with professional training, the necessary infrastructure and established ECD programmes (van der Merwe, 2015). Parents may entrust the caretaker with the supervision of their children despite their meagre financial resources. Unlike the bulk of ECD centres maintained by private corporations or, for the most part, non-governmental organisations, which are extremely expensive and well-resourced, located in secure locations, provide these parents with very few resources (PPT, 2014). Numerous informal ECD centres are located in informal settlements; where they are unregistered and so do not meet the minimum standard requirements. The DSD mandates that all ECD centres be registered so that they may be formalised and get access to different government resources; however, informal ECD centres do not meet the DSD's criteria, despite the fact that the communities require the service they offer (Blöse & Muteweri, 2021).

The number of unregistered centres in underprivileged communities is unknown. In addition, the PPT report contains a methodology for classifying the infrastructure's various physical states. The organisation utilises A, B, and C classifications. Categorisation 'A' includes either fully or partially registered ECD facilities. In the case that these organisations are only partially registered, the ECD centre can assist them in becoming full-fledged, officially recognised centres. Category 'B' ECD establishments require 'immediate help' in areas including improved health and safety. These centres may require prompt attention and assistance to complete their registration. According to PPT, Category 'C' comprises of ECD facilities that are in a terrible state and are judged as 'poorly functioning.' Moreover, these centres require immediate attention to improve their ECD services.

Presently, little is known about ECDs in low-income communities, such as informal settlements. The technical categories would serve as a starting point for defining the condition of ECD facilities in informal urban settings. In addition to lacking data on ECD infrastructure, the PPT research also missed information on poverty reduction. Some infrastructure, such as water and sanitation, may be inaccessible to ECD centres in informal areas. Land and structures may not be owned by the ECD caretaker, but owing to the high need for affordable child care, the centre operated through informal leasing arrangements and outside of official zoning regulations. Parents would prefer to leave their children in the hands of a responsible adult than at home or on the streets (van der Walt et al., 2014). In order to continue providing child care services, ECD caregivers within the settlement would benefit from infrastructural resource flexibility. For instance, the restrictions on particular elements of the ECD formalisation procedure might be lifted or altered to meet the present living circumstances, such as the lack of water and sanitary facilities in informal settlements. In view of the South African government's present intention to enhance informal settlements, consideration must be given to parental choices for access to affordable and high-quality child care programmes and facilities. Given the range of ECD centres now functioning in informal settlements, it would be in the best interest of ECD authorities to explore equitable resource allocation to the weakest facilities.

2.7.5. Constraints on transportation of learners

Transportation-related obstacles present notable difficulties for early childhood development (ECD) centres situated in rural South Africa. These challenges encompass factors such as the restricted array of transportation choices, the necessity for extended travel distances, concerns

about safety, the influence on staff commuters, and the role of community support. Rural ECD centres in South Africa often encounter limitations in terms of available transportation alternatives, impeding the movement of children, parents, and staff members. This restriction can have repercussions on attendance rates, the accessibility of services, and the level of engagement within the community.

Cohen (2006) underscored the array of difficulties faced by ECD centres in rural settings, prominently featuring the scarcity of transportation choices. The extensive distances between residences and ECD centres in rural areas engender transportation-related challenges. This circumstance necessitates substantial travel for children and their families, leading to time-consuming journeys and physical exertion (Biersteker&Dawes, 2019). Safety concerns associated with transportation can arise in rural locales where road conditions might be subpar or where adequate public transportation infrastructure is lacking. These apprehensions can potentially affect parental willingness to transport their children to ECD centres. Harris, Goudge, Ataguba and McIntyre (2011) acknowledged the apprehensions about transportation safety confronting ECD centres operating in rural areas.

2.7.6 Constraints with parental Engagement

The vast geographical distances present a notable hurdle for involving parents in rural ECD centres. According to Bayat and Madybi (2022) there are complexities tied to geographic distances in rural areas, which impact parental engagement within ECD centres. This further complicates parental involvement due to limited transportation options pervasive in rural locations (Richter & Samuels, 2018). Scarce accessible and cost-effective transportation options can impede parents' ability to visit the centres on a regular basis. Bridgemohan (2001) accentuated the transportation-related obstacles faced by parents in rural settings, which consequently influence their level of engagement with ECD centres. Communication barriers, encompassing language disparities or restricted access to communication technologies, can obstruct effective dialogue between ECD centres and parents in rural areas. These barriers can restrict parents' comprehension of their roles and responsibilities, hindering their active participation (Naicker & Naidoo, 2021). This is alluded to by Lemmer (2004), who asserts that if community support is garnered, ECD centres can become robust and this can enhance teaching and learning. Insufficient awareness and engagement inhibit their participation and hence the academic development of their children

2.7.7 Constraints with Collaboration and networking

Within rural South African ECD centres, establishing cooperative partnerships with community organizations is important. According to Koan, Neetling&Taylor(2021), collaborations offer a means to garner support, access resources, and tap into expertise, all of which contribute to enhancing the quality of education and services provided. The pivotal nature of collaborative engagements with community organizations within rural ECD centres cannot be underestimated (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). The act of networking with fellow ECD centres situated in rural areas facilitates the exchange of insights, best practices, and perceived experiences. By fostering collaborative networks, educators and administrators can engage in mutual support, idea sharing, and professional development (Garcia & Pence, 2010). Engaging in partnerships with parents and families holds profound significance for the efficacy of ECD practices within rural settings. Involving parents in decision-making processes, disseminating information, and enlisting their participation in their children's educational journeys foster robust alliances. Networking with local ECD centres as well as educational institutions such as universities can help with innovative teaching methods that can enhance teaching and learning in ECD centres (Koan et al, 2021). Multi-sectoral collaboration entails engaging with various stakeholders, including health agencies, social services, and community development organizations. Such collaboration ensures that the diverse needs of children and families in rural areas are comprehensively addressed (Koan et al, 2021; Makokoro, 2019). However, most ECD center principals do not have networking opportunities and it limits their capacity to build lasting mutual relationships in terms of professional development and funding.

2.7.8 Constraints with technology and Networking

The realm of technology and connectivity within early childhood development (ECD) centres located in rural South Africa offers a combination of prospects and hurdles. These encompass the constraints posed by restricted access to technological resources, challenges related to connectivity, the issue of the digital divide, the integration of technology, and the establishment of digital infrastructure (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). ECD centres positioned in rural South Africa frequently grapple with difficulties arising from their limited access to technological resources. This limitation can impede the seamless incorporation of technology into early childhood education, thereby restricting children's exposure to digital literacy.

According to Mhlanga and Moloji (2020), access to the internet and the unreliability of network coverage present obstacles for ECD centres in rural localities. These challenges can impact the utilization of online resources, communication platforms, and digital learning tools. The digital divide, signifying the gap in access to and utilization of technology, looms prominently in rural areas. ECD centres might encounter difficulties in ensuring that all children have fair and equal access to technology, thereby potentially exacerbating educational inequalities (Visser et al, 2021).

The integration of technology within ECD centres assumes significance as a means to enrich learning perceived experiences, cultivate digital literacy, and equip children for the digital era. This integration can provide interactive learning opportunities and facilitate access to educational resources. Establishing digital infrastructure, encompassing the enhancement of internet connectivity and the provision of suitable technological resources, becomes imperative to address technological challenges prevalent in rural ECD centres (Khoza-Shangase & Sebothoma, 2021). Only a few ECD leaders engage learners and parents by using technological applications such as You Tube, Google Classroom and Whatsapp which are very efficient in terms of data management and communication (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020).

2.7.9 Constraints specific to rural areas

ECD centres in rural areas face a myriad of challenges that hinder their ability to provide quality early childhood education. One of the most significant challenges is the limited availability of resources, including educational materials, books, toys, and infrastructure such as classrooms and playgrounds (Blose & Muteweri, 2021). This scarcity often results in a less stimulating learning environment, which can impact children's development. Additionally, attracting and retaining qualified staff is a persistent challenge, as rural areas often struggle to offer competitive salaries and professional development opportunities (Makororo, 2019). Moreover, access to training and professional development for teachers and staff is often limited in rural areas, affecting their ability to implement effective teaching practices. Engaging parents and caregivers in rural communities can also be challenging, as they may have limited education and awareness of the importance of early childhood development (Visser et al, 2021). Furthermore, providing adequate health and nutrition services to children can be a struggle for rural ECD centres, which may lack the resources to ensure access to nutritious meals and healthcare.

Transportation poses another challenge, especially for children living in remote areas with limited public transportation. The lack of community support and understanding of the importance of early childhood development can also hinder the efforts of rural ECD centres (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). Without community engagement and investment, these centres may struggle to secure the resources and support needed to thrive.

2.8 ECD leadership Perceived experiences

It is the responsibility of an ECD principal to provide the best quality child care. For this reason alone, ECD principals charged with maximising the potential of young children and maintaining their well-being must be adequately trained, empowered and prepared to provide high-quality services (McCrea, 2015). Page and Taylor (2016) describe an early childhood leader as an educator, coordinator, or anybody selected as an educational leader in an ECD context to oversee the creation and implementation of educational programmes.

Leadership in ECD has not been a subject of extensive research, although the significance of leadership in early childhood is currently receiving considerable attention. In South African elementary and secondary schools, instructional, transformational and distributed leadership have been the subject of considerable study and controversy. According to Andrews (2009), there is a growing interest in Pedagogical Leadership (PL) in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) due to the need to raise quality and impact organisational change. Any organisation's leaders have a primary responsibility to steer the organisation toward the achievement of its objectives. This can be accomplished through the leaders' efforts to develop and maintain a high-quality environment for teaching and learning that is distinct from administrative duties (Modise, 2019). It necessitates a new type of leadership, known as pedagogical leadership.

Pedagogical leadership necessitates a shift from an exclusive emphasis on administrative and managerial obligations to an emphasis on teaching and learning as well (Modise, 2019). It takes knowledge of the subject matter and expertise in the field to provide necessary support and direction. Andrews (2009) contends that the ECD manager and the teacher are both pedagogical principals inside the ECD environment, but with distinct roles and duties. Leadership in ECD should be able to guide and support teaching and learning practices in the proper direction. The teacher is also a pedagogical leader in his or her own area, where legitimate expertise and comprehension of classroom teaching and learning are expected

(Modise 2019). This knowledge and comprehension should favourably influence practice to the extent that it enhances quality.

The sector of early childhood development must support and promote high-quality early learning environments for young children. Therefore, the most essential responsibility for ECD principals is to progress and enhance the teaching and learning environment so that it is of the highest quality. Andrews (2009) contends that in addition to administrative duties, instructional leadership is essential for this purpose. This is currently more prevalent in instructors' conversations and publications than in the field. The concept of pedagogical leadership could foster quality ECD practice. Pedagogical leaders, according to Rodd (2013), strive to apply the concept and vision of the centre through mentoring and collaborating with other teachers, while emphasising that students are competent and capable. The majority of ECD principals and teachers in South Africa lack professional training, which has a frequently negative impact on the quality of their activity (Strehmel, 2016). This idea is supported by Fonsen's (2013) assertion that pedagogical leadership is required to provide high-quality Early Childhood Education (ECE). According to Strehmel (2016), leadership is essential for boosting the quality of early education and is the subject of much interest and debate worldwide. In the field of Early Childhood Education and Care, Andrews (2009) asserts that pedagogical leadership has received growing attention due to the need to improve quality and drive organisational change.

2.9 Influence of ECD Leadership on implementation

In rural South Africa, the leadership within Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres wields significant influence over the implementation of educational programs and initiatives (Andrews, 2009). Effective leadership provides a clear vision and direction for the centre, ensuring that efforts are aligned towards common goals. Leaders are crucial in managing resources efficiently, including financial, human, and material resources, to support program implementation. They also play a key role in motivating and developing staff, enhancing their skills and morale (Stremmel, 2016). Additionally, strong leadership facilitates community engagement and partnerships, creating a supportive environment for children's development. Leaders monitor and evaluate programs, using data to make informed decisions and improve program quality. In resource-limited rural settings, leaders must be adaptable and innovative, finding creative solutions to challenges (Kirsten, 2018). They also advocate for their centre and children, networking with stakeholders to access additional resources and support. Effective

leadership is essential for overcoming challenges and positively impacting children's development in rural South African ECD centres.

2.10 Leadership practices of ECD Principals

Overcoming the above challenges requires strong leadership, creativity, collaboration, and community engagement. ECD center principals in rural areas must advocate for resources, develop innovative solutions, and build strong partnerships to ensure quality early childhood education for children in their communities. Leadership practices of principals in Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres in rural areas are vital for ensuring the effective operation and provision of quality education and care. Key leadership issues in this context include: Ability to craft vision and mission of the ECD center, community engagement, advocacy, staff development, inclusive practice, resource management, data informed decision making as well as communication and transparency.

2.10.1 Crafting mission and Vision of ECD Centres

ECD Principals are involved in crafting the mission and vision of the centers. Establishing a distinct vision assumes paramount importance within ECD centres operating in rural South Africa. This vision articulates the sought-after outcomes and long-term objectives of the center, delivering a sense of orientation and intent (Kirsten, 2018) It effectively steers decision-making processes and shapes the contours of the center's initiatives (DBE, 2014).

Ensuring congruence between the vision and mission of ECD centres in rural South Africa and the national policies and frameworks is essential. This alignment guarantees consistency and bolsters the pursuit of national educational objectives in harmony with vision and mission of national policy statement (DBE, 2019). Within the rural context, the vision and mission of ECD centres should prioritize the comprehensive growth of children. This encompasses catering to their cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and cultural requisites. The National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (NIECD, 2019) emphasizes comprehensive approach in the crafting of the vision and mission of ECD centres. However, ECD principals in rural areas do not see the importance of crafting a mission and vision statement at their centres and this facilitates haphazard growth in terms of infrastructure development (Kirsten, 2018; Blose & Muteweri, 2021).

2.10.2 Community Engagement

Community engagement encompasses a spectrum of activities such as collaborative partnerships, encouraging parental participation, embracing local cultural practices, conducting community outreach initiatives, and facilitating collective decision-making processes (Sharma, 2014). The establishment of collaborative partnerships with community organizations assumes a pivotal role in community engagement within ECD centres. These partnerships bolster the center's capacity to cater to the varied requirements of children and families, providing them with the essential support and resources. Involving parents and families stands as a cornerstone of community engagement in ECD centres. Engaging parents in the decision-making process, disseminating information, and fostering a sense of ownership in their children's educational journey all contribute to cultivating a robust alliance between the center and families (Fourie, 2013).

Cultural practices and beliefs of the local community hold paramount importance for effective community engagement. Extolling and integrating cultural diversity serves to foster a sense of belonging and reverence within the ECD center. Muthukrishna and Naidoo (2020) discussed the importance of embracing cultural practices and beliefs within ECD centres operating in South Africa, including rural regions. Conducting community outreach programs and events emerges as an effective avenue to engage the community and raise awareness about the importance of early childhood education. These activities facilitate conversations, collaborative efforts, and the shared responsibility for children's development. Incorporating community members in collaborative decision-making processes fosters a sentiment of ownership and empowerment. Seeking input from a spectrum of stakeholders, encompassing community principals and parents, ensures that ECD centres are attuned to the specific needs of the local community (DBE, 2019). However, most ECD leaders seem to run their centres without an awareness of the cultural community practices and this hinders their ability to access collaboration and cooperation from parents.

2.10.3 Advocacy

Advocacy assumes a pivotal role within early childhood development (ECD) centres situated in rural South Africa especially fundraising for those ECD centres that do not receive funding from the Department of Social Development. These advocacy endeavors encompass a spectrum of actions, such as policy promotion, raising awareness, fostering collaboration, addressing equity concerns, and advocating for professional advancement (Visser et .al. 2021).

Advocacy undertakings in ECD centres aim to bolster policy endorsement across national, regional, and local levels. These efforts significantly contribute to establishing an environment conducive to the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care. Activities associated with advocacy in ECD centres encompass heightening awareness about the critical importance of early childhood development and mobilizing resources to buttress ECD initiatives. This entails engaging with stakeholders, policymakers, and the community to garner backing and secure funding for ECD programs (Biersteker, 2010). Collaborative advocacy endeavors entail forging alliances with other organizations, stakeholders, and community members to amplify the voice of ECD centres. These partnerships serve to fortify advocacy initiatives, magnify the impact of advocacy messages, and contribute to a stronger advocacy network. Advocacy within ECD centres situated in rural South Africa often centres on rectifying issues of equity and inclusion. These advocacy efforts strive to guarantee equitable access to quality early childhood education and care for all children, encompassing those confronted with barriers (Hodgson & Papatheodorou, 2014). Since most centres do not receive funding from Department of Social Development, it is critical that ECD principals be advocates of their centres to potential funders (Biersteker, 2010). It seems however that ECD principals do advocate for parents to bring learners to their centres but they struggle to do so at a district and regional level which can give them financial leverage.

2.10.4 Professional Development

Developing the skills and knowledge of educators stands as a critical factor within early childhood development centres located in rural South Africa. This process of continuous professional development assumes significance for educators in rural ECD centres, enabling them to remain current with best practices and elevate their instructional capabilities. The provision of ongoing training sessions and workshops empowers educators to augment their understanding of child development, curriculum execution, and pedagogical methodologies (Govender & Naidoo, 2020). Designing tailored training programs that directly address the specific needs and challenges encountered by educators in rural areas holds paramount importance for staff development. Generic training may not aptly cater to the distinctive circumstances and requisites of rural ECD centres (Muthukrishna & Naidoo, 2020). Mentorship and coaching initiatives contribute significantly to supporting and guiding educators within rural ECD centres. This can happen through pairing seasoned educator, collaborative learning and exchange of best practice. However, this does not happen in rural ECD centres (Govender & Naidoo, 2021)

2.10.5 Inclusive Practice

Incorporating inclusive approaches stands as a vital component within early childhood development (ECD) centres situated in rural South Africa, ensuring that every child is provided with equitable access to quality education and assistance. Inclusive practices encompass efforts to cater to the varied backgrounds and individual requirements of children within rural ECD centres. This encompasses making provisions for children with disabilities, accommodating diverse cultural backgrounds, and embracing a spectrum of learning styles (Bipath, Tebekana&Venketsamy, 2021). The creation of inclusive learning environments assumes critical importance in guaranteeing that all children feel esteemed, supported, and encompassed within the ECD center. This entails adapting physical spaces, learning materials, and pedagogical methodologies to address the requisites of a diverse student body (Stofile, 2008). Collaborating with specialized services, including therapists, psychologists, and social workers, constitutes an imperative step in supporting inclusive practices within rural ECD centres. These partnerships contribute to the provision of targeted support and interventions for children with disabilities or additional requirements (Maguvhe, 2015). Unfortunately, due to lack of training on differentiated instruction, most ECD leaders do not see the importance of this critical component of teaching and learning in their centres and teaching and learning takes place without taking into account the difference in ability of their learners.

2.10.6 Resource Management

Efficient resource management holds utmost significance within early childhood development (ECD) centres. This ensures the provision of high-quality education and assistance. Skillful utilization of resources encompasses a spectrum of strategies, including optimizing existing resources, resource mobilization, promoting sustainable resource management, and fostering resource sharing (Middlewood& Lumby, 1999).

ECD centres situated in rural South Africa frequently encounter obstacles associated with constrained funding and financial administration. Limited financial resources can impede the availability of essential resources required for quality education, spanning from learning materials to equipment. Resource management within ECD centres entails maximizing the utilization of available resources, encompassing both financial and material assets. This involves meticulous planning, budget allocation, and setting priorities to ensure optimal deployment and value for investment. There is however a lack of resource management skills

by ECD principals in rural areas and this hinders infrastructural and material development of their centres (Hashmi, 2014).

2.10.7 Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

Servant leadership is based on the idea that principals who are most effective at motivating followers are those who prioritise the fulfilment of followers' needs before their own personal desires (Greenleaf, 1970). Principals who care more about others than themselves are modest, and their humility develops strong relationships with their followers and motivates them to fully commit to their mission (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Servant leadership is a constructive approach to organisational behaviour (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012), with its emphasis on leader behaviours that enable followers to realise their full potential (Luthans, 2002).

Liden, Wayne, Zhao and Henderson (2008) identify seven dimensions of servant leadership, which include emotional sensitivity to the personal setbacks of followers, creating value for the community, encouraging followers to participate in volunteer activities that benefit local communities, conceptual understanding of problems, task knowledge, providing assistance to followers, and checking employability. Although other leadership strategies involve assisting followers, servant leadership is unique among leadership approaches since it focuses an emphasis on leading by serving followers. It is asserted that when principals prioritise providing practical and emotional support to followers and assisting them in reaching their full potential, followers view the leader as a role model and engage in appropriate behaviours not because they are forced to, but because they want to (Greenleaf, 1970).

As a result, I chose one concept to understand the perceived experiences and behaviours of ECD principals at ECD centres: Servant Leadership concept. I chose to adopt this concept because it tackles the core problems that this study addresses, namely, the development of community and the roles of leaders in achieving this aim. This research is based on Greenleaf's (1970) conception, which emphasises the development and safety of individuals and the communities in which they live. Traditional Leadership is characterised by the expansion and exercise of power by those at the 'head of the pyramid,' but Servant Leadership is unique in that it focuses on those at the bottom of the pyramid. Servant Leadership is founded on the notion that leaders who are best able to motivate followers are those who prioritise the fulfilment of followers' needs over their own personal wants (Greenleaf, 1970).

Servant leaders achieve success for their organisations by paying close attention to their followers and the needs of their followers (Greenleaf, 1970). Unlike many other approaches to leadership, which focus on how top-level leaders may influence and motivate those below in the hierarchy, Servant Leadership emphasises teamwork, trust, empathy and ethical behaviour (Langhof&Guldenberg, 2020). The leader should first and foremost be a servant, leading from a desire to better serve others rather than from a drive to gain more authority. The notion is that if leaders focus on their followers' wants and desires, followers respond by increasing teamwork, deepening engagement, and improving performance. 'The Servant as Leader,' a 1970 essay by Greenleaf, was the first to present this notion. Many other thinkers, on the other hands, have added to our knowledge of servant leadership. By analysing Greenleaf's work, ten qualities of a servant leader come out: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, dedication to others' growth, and community building are the ten traits (Spears, 2010).

Because it is relevant to my research topic, I employed the Servant Leadership concept as conceptualised by Spears (2010). This concept assisted me in examining and unpacking knowledge gaps because it focuses on leadership characteristics such as listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of others, and community building, all of which are directly related to work of principals of early childhood centres. This concept aided my understanding of the studied phenomenon.

2.11 Chapter Summary

Literature examined in this chapter looked at the background of the development of ECD center in South Africa. This was followed by description and analysis of literature that looked at the challenges that ECD principals face in their day to day operations in rural South Africa. Leadership practices of ECD principals and how they impact on the operations of the organization were described. The concept of servant leadership was also described in detail and was used to inform the study. The next chapter will describe the research methodology that was used to gather data from ECD principals in order to elucidate more on their challenges and practices as described above in the literature review.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter gave a study of the scholarly controversies surrounding ECD leadership challenges. A conceptual framework of servant leadership is also explored and how it was utilised to shape the study. This chapter intends to describe the study's research design and methodology. This begins by describing the interpretive research paradigm, followed by a description of the case study research design. This is then followed by the methodological techniques such as sampling, data collection instruments, data analysis and the discussion around ethics.

3.2 Interpretive Research Paradigm

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), a paradigm is a collection of essential concepts that reflect a worldview. This study used the interpretive paradigm in order to investigate the perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals of rural ECD centres. The interpretive paradigm is a research approach that enables researchers to examine the world through the eyes and perceived experiences of participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Willis, 2007). Additionally, an interpretive paradigm in research is a philosophical framework that emphasizes the subjective and context-dependent nature of human perceived experiences and the importance of understanding and interpreting these perceived experiences. Researchers adopting this paradigm believe that knowledge is constructed through the interpretation of meaning rather than discovered through objective observation. They often use qualitative methods, such as interviews, content analysis, to explore and interpret the perspectives, beliefs, and perceived experiences of individuals or groups, seeking to uncover deeper insights and patterns within the rich tapestry of human understanding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The interpretive paradigm encourages researchers to acknowledge their own biases and actively engage with the perspectives of participants, aiming to provide a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of the phenomena under investigation. (Creswell, 2013; Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2014). This is suitable for this study as it helps to have an in-depth understanding of perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals. This relationship of trust between principals and participants empowers participants to freely voice

their thoughts and share their perceived experiences in leading ECD in their own ECD centres. According to Willis (2007), ontology is the study of the nature of reality (or being or existence), and different ontological perspectives reflect different prescriptions of what may and may not be real. Interpretivism employs qualitative methods like case studies and ethnography, and its reports are generally more in-depth (Willis, 2007). Hence, this study adopted a qualitative approach as it gives more in-depth exploration of the perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals in rural KZN.

3.3 Research Design (Case Study)

This study explores rural ECD centres in the Caro Ridge area of KwaZulu Natal South Africa. A case study in research is an in-depth and comprehensive examination of a single individual, group, event, or entity within its real-life context. It is a qualitative research method that aims to provide a detailed and holistic understanding of the specific case under investigation (Cresswell, 2014). Case studies are typically used in various fields, including psychology, sociology, business, education, and healthcare, to explore complex and multifaceted phenomena. In a case study, researchers collect and analyze a wide range of data, which can include interviews, documents, and other relevant materials. The goal is to uncover the intricacies of the case, gain insights into its unique characteristics, and often, to generate hypotheses or theories that can be generalized to broader contexts (Cohen et. al, 2018). Case studies are particularly valuable when researchers want to:

1. Explore rare or unique occurrences: When a phenomenon is rare or has unique aspects, a case study can provide an in-depth examination that might not be possible through other research methods.
2. Investigate complex interactions: Case studies allow researchers to examine the interplay of multiple factors within a real-world context, helping to uncover how different variables affect the case.
3. Understand context-specific issues: Researchers can use case studies to explore issues that are highly context-dependent, such as cultural, organizational, or historical factors.
4. Develop theories or hypotheses: Case studies can serve as a foundation for developing theories or hypotheses that can be further tested in larger-scale research.

This is suitable in our study as we explore the unique perceived experiences and practices of our ECD principals in rural KZN and goes on to complement the qualitative research design as well as the interpretive paradigm which all seeks to have an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon. This also then addresses the research questions which are qualitative in nature.

3.4 Qualitative research approach

According to Stead (2001), qualitative research helps the researcher to grasp the participants' ideas, emotions, and viewpoints on certain situations. The qualitative approach in research offers several distinct advantages. Firstly, it allows for a deep and nuanced exploration of complex phenomena. Through methods like in-depth interviews, participant and content analysis, researchers can delve into the intricacies of human perceived experiences, emotions, and behaviors, uncovering rich layers of meaning that quantitative methods might overlook. Secondly, qualitative research is particularly valuable when studying topics that are poorly understood or emerging, as it provides a flexible and adaptive framework for investigation. Researchers can adapt their methods and questions as they gain insights, allowing for a more dynamic and responsive research process (Leedy&Ormrod, 2001). Furthermore, qualitative research is well-suited for exploring the diversity of perspectives within a given context. It captures the voices and perceived experiences of individuals, giving marginalized or underrepresented groups a platform to share their stories and concerns (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Finally, the qualitative approach encourages reflexivity and self-awareness among researchers, promoting a deeper understanding of their own biases and assumptions. This self-awareness can lead to more rigorous and ethical research practices (Silverman, 2000). Research questions are not having any variables nor do they seek to establish the effect of one factor over the other. They simply explore the perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals in a unique context and from their own perspective and reality. Hence the interpretive paradigm adopted dictates that we use the qualitative method to collect data.

3.6 Sampling

Frankel and Wallen (2003) emphasise that the population of interest in educational research is often a collection of persons with certain characteristics. Sampling is the process of picking, from the population (a concrete list of objects in the population), the study participants or topics (McMillan, 2000). According to De Vos et al. (2011), researchers analyse the sample to grasp the population from which it was drawn.

Using sampling, qualitative researchers choose from a wide variety of data sources (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). Choosing which persons, locations, events, behaviours, or social processes to observe is necessary for sampling. Furthermore, in qualitative research, purposive sampling is the most prevalent sampling technique. The objective of purposive sampling is to choose persons, items, or locations that can provide the most exhaustive and thorough data to help answer research questions (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). This study made use of purposive sampling. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2006), in purposive sampling, the researcher chooses persons with a wealth of information about the researched issue since they may be knowledgeable about it. Participants were selected based on their capacity to provide important expertise to address the problem at hand.

An effective purposive sample must have clear criteria and a rationale for inclusion (McCombes, 2019). This study was conducted among four ECD principals from four ECD centres in a rural area. These principals were selected because the study focused on their leadership perceived experiences; for this reason, ECD principals were the only group of people that could provide me with the information that I required. Only four ECD principals were selected because this is a qualitative study that sought to gather detailed information regarding principals' different perceived experiences of leading ECD centres in a rural area.

3.7 Research Instruments

Qualitative data may be generated from a variety of sources, including interviews, documents, field notes, and so forth (Cohen et al., 2011). This study used primary data sources such as semi-structured interviews of four ECD principals in a rural setting. Semi-structured individual interviews were the most appropriate methods for this study because they allowed me to acquire in-depth information regarding the perceived experiences and practices of ECD principals heading ECD centres in rural areas. This research used semi structured interviews to collect data.

3.7.1 Semi-structured interview

There are different types of interviews, namely: structured, semi-structured and unstructured (Pollock, 2019). In this study, the semi-structured interview was adopted. Open-ended questions were used (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). The objective of the semi-structured interview is not to obtain responses to questions, to test the hypothesis, or to assess in the conventional

sense. At the heart of in-depth interviews is a desire to comprehend the lived perceived experiences of others and their interpretations of those perceived experiences (Seidman, 2006). In addition, interviews allow the researcher to converse normally with subjects. This type of interview allows people to express their emotions openly. I conducted separate interviews with the four key participants.

Semi-structured interviews offer several advantages in this research. They strike a balance between flexibility and structure, allowing researchers to have a predefined set of questions while also permitting spontaneous follow-up inquiries (Dearnley, 2005). This adaptability encourages participants to express themselves freely, providing rich and detailed insights into their perceived experiences, opinions, and perspectives. Semi-structured interviews are particularly valuable when exploring complex or sensitive topics, as they enable researchers to establish rapport and build trust with participants, resulting in more candid responses (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Additionally, the semi-structured format allows for cross-comparison of responses across participants, facilitating the identification of patterns and themes within the data, making it a versatile and robust qualitative research method. They also generate thick descriptions of phenomenon at hand especially perceived experiences, practices and operational activities of ECD leaders in rural KZN. Age and qualifications are closed ended and thick descriptions of perceived experiences in ECD centres are open ended. This makes semi-structured interviews more suitable.

3.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a method of establishing order through the data interpretation process (Cresswell, 2014). In this work, I employed content analysis to identify and classify frequent words, phrases and concepts in qualitative data. Analysis of content is a research technique used to find patterns in recorded communication. In this study, data obtained from both semi-structured interviews were analysed using content analysis. Data analyses assist the researcher in organising generated data to make sense of obtained data (Regenesis, 2003).

During the transcribing process, it is important to write the words as uttered, however, this can be problematic because some people speak without a break. According to Krippendorff (2013), “content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” The process of analysis requires data to be interpreted, coded and categorised into common themes. Rule and John (2011) assert that

the process of coding is time-consuming and requires constant interpretation and recoding of data, therefore the textual data was coded then grouped into categories according to common themes that resulted from participants' responses. This coded data was interpreted and used to provide an analysis of results.

I ensured that all the transcripts were read thoroughly to gain a sense of the 'whole'. During this process, I made notes on the transcripts as ideas came to mind. Interview information was digitally captured. I began by recording the semi-structured interview sessions with a digital voice recorder and cell phone for backup purposes. The voice recordings were then transformed into text or word format. According to Lodiso, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010), data should be organised so as to make analysis by the researcher straightforward. Following data transcription, I coded and organised the data in a table with themes. Each part of work analysed from the transcripts' text was coded. Each component received a code and a theme. Coding is the process through which researchers regularly examine recorded information and divide it into primary logical components (Maree, 2007). After the data were coded, they were categorised into themes. The analysis was then utilised to generate conclusions and validate that the findings matched the primary research questions.

3.9 Trustworthiness

Credibility is an effort to confirm and assure that the research is of high quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 290) state that credibility enables the researcher to "persuade its readers that the study's conclusions merit attention and consideration." Credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability are the four essential factors or methodologies used to verify trustworthiness. Below, I describe these facets of credibility in detail:

3.9.1 Credibility

Interviews using a semi-structured format and observation techniques were utilised to guarantee that the study measured its intended aim and trustworthiness. Credibility is all about evaluating and confirming the accuracy of the facts used to demonstrate the observed social phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study's credibility was ensured by the utilisation of a reasonable sample size of four principals teaching in an overcrowded setting. The participants were interviewed and observed in their respective schools. The interviews were recorded on tape for reliability. I did not present the data as if they were my own words. I was not using

common sense and I did not use general knowledge when I was presenting my study. I made sure that my findings are credible; I explained the process of generating data in detail.

3.9.2 Conformability

Conformability is the method used to eliminate biases in research. Conformability depends not just on researchers' descriptions and hypotheses, but also on participants' views and perceived experiences (Shanton, 2004). Conformability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is a strategy qualitative researchers employ to establish their objectivity in the study. Using member checking, I validated and re-verified the accuracy of all participant data. This strategy entailed giving the participants copies of the transcripts so they could verify their correctness. All participants confirmed the findings' validity. In addition, I utilised copies of interviews to confirm the transcriptions' results.

3.9.3 Dependability

Yin (2014) considers dependability as a method for evaluating the quality of the data generating process. Furthermore, I assert that there was a substantial relationship between credibility and reliability. In order to assure the reliability of this study's findings, semi-structured interviews and observation were utilised alongside one another. Since this was a qualitative study, I ensured that it delivered more in-depth or high-quality information to aid future researchers in replicating the concept.

3.9.4 Transferability

The extent to which the reader may generalise discoveries to his or her setting is referred to as transferability (Morrow, 2005). Lodico, Spaulding and Voegtle (2010) concur that transferability is a measure of similarities between the context of the researchers and other settings, as seen or evaluated by the audience. To enhance transferability, I provided background and all methods involved in this research in great detail. This was done to allow the reader to evaluate the applicability of the findings of this study to similar contexts. I did not intend to transfer the findings; I presented them sequentially. Everything was explained and left to the reader to transfer the findings.

3.10 Ethical issues

Ethics in research is a crucial consideration while performing human research investigations (Cohen et al., 2007). McMillan and Schumacher (2010) outline the parameters that must be followed while conducting a study. Participants must provide informed permission, prevent deceit, maintain confidentiality and anonymity, avoid damage, and have their privacy respected. The researcher is responsible for obtaining consent, protecting subjects from injury, and maintaining confidentiality (Drew, 2007). The participants were asked to participate in the research via letters. The consent of the participants was obtained, and they were required to sign the consent form. Consent forms are crucial to research (Clark & Dawson, 1999). A thorough description of the goal of the research and participant expectations was included in the consent form. A conscious choice was taken. Participants were advised that their real names would not be revealed; instead, pseudonyms were used. Neuman (2000) believes that the autonomy of all study participants must be respected. The researcher submitted letters to the Education Department and school principals where the study was completed to request permission to conduct research. The researcher also requested ethical approval from the University.

3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the study's research strategy and methods. The chapter opened with a brief description of the paradigm within which the study is situated, followed by a discussion of the qualitative technique chosen to connect with the perceived experiences of participants. Also mentioned are the case study methodology and procedures I used to sample participants, generate and analyse data. I concluded with a discussion of concerns of credibility and ethical considerations. In the following chapter, I will discuss the findings of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the research design and methodology that informed the gathering of data. It included a discussion on interpretive paradigm, qualitative research design and case study research methodology. This chapter aims to report the analysis of data that was gathered. Profiles of participants are provided. This is followed by the discussion of themes that emerged in the analysis of data, which include shortage of funds for ECD operations, leading with minimal teaching aids, dealing with difficult parents who do not pay monthly fees, fundraising and solicitation of sponsors, communication with parents through social network, attending workshops and trainings, and working as a team with teachers. The chapter concludes by summarising all major findings.

4.2 Profiling the participants

In this work, the generated data was obtained from four participants who came from different ECD centres. Due to anonymity reasons, the names of the principals and their ECD centres are not revealed; instead, pseudonyms are used. However, it is important to understand who participants are as sources of data as this gives insight into the nature and quality of data that they have provided. The following section provides the participants' profiles to give readers a picture of who the participants are. The table below shows the names of the principals and their ECD centres. Thereafter, profiles are presented.

Name of participant	Name of ECD centres
Miss Moya	Siphepho Creche
Miss Mvula	Manzi Pre-school
Miss Msebe	Langa Pre-school
Miss Nkanyezi	Khwezi Creche

4.2.1 Miss Moya

Miss Moya, who is between 40 and 45 years old, formerly taught grade R in a primary school adjacent to her ECD centre while she held a diploma in Early Childhood Development. Miss Moya was approached in 2009 by an elderly woman from her rural community who was launching a crèche and required her assistance. She quit her work and joined the elderly woman. Miss Moya was appointed principal based on her expertise and perceived experience, despite the fact that the old lady founded the crèche. For purposes of secrecy, Miss Moyamanages an ECD centre called Siphepho crèche.

The crèche has been led by Miss Moya for twelve years. Her ECD centre is situated in a rural part of eThekweni District's Mpumalanga Circuit. The enrolment at her centre is 70, and the students are housed in four classrooms. Currently, there are five instructors at Miss Moya's centre: two teachers for babies, one for the two-year-old group, one for the three-year-old group, and one for the four-year-old group. As a result, it receives financing from DSD. The walls of the ECD centre are painted in vibrant hues, however there is insufficient teaching equipment for the youngsters.

4.2.2 Miss Mvula

Miss Mvula, who is between 50 and 55 years old, is the principal of the Manzi pre-school. In 2008, the Manzi pre-school opened in the rondavel with 15 students. They relocated into the shanty in 2009 to teach youngsters. One teacher instructs the two-year-old group, another instructs the three-year-old group, and a third instructor instructs the four-year-old group. The preschool became a non-profit organisation in 2011. This pre-school has been directed by Miss Mvula for thirteen years, and she possesses a National Diploma in ECD. Her ECD centre is situated in a rural part of eThekweni District's Mpumalanga Circuit. There are 70 students enrolled, who are housed in three classes. The ECD centre's outdoor amenities, include a jungle gym, sand pit, water play, and scooters. These are insufficient to accommodate all the students. In 2013, the pre-school became registered with DSD and began receiving money from DSD.

4.2.3 Miss Msebe

Miss Msebe is between 40-55 years old. The Langa pre-school started in Miss Msebe's house with only five children in 2010. In 2011, they moved into the shack to teach children. One of the parents donated an outdoor jungle gym for the pre-school outdoor in 2013 to attract the community. The pre-school was registered in 2014 as an NPO. Miss Msebe is leading an ECD centre named LangaPre-school for anonymity reasons, and she never thought of working with children when she was young. She has a passion for children and loves working with them, and is well-trained to work with children. Miss Msebe has three teachers in the centre, one teacher is teaching the two-year-old group, another teacher teaches the three-year-old group, and another teacher teaches the four-year-old group.

Miss Msebe has been leading the pre-school for 11 years and she holds an Honours Degree in Education, and a National Diploma in ECD. Her ECD centre is located in a rural area of Mpumalanga Circuit, eThekweni district. The enrolment is 60 and the learners are accommodated in three classrooms. The ECD centre building looks very old with no painted walls. There is a shortage of outdoor equipment, and the space is not enough for children.

4.2.4 Miss Nkanyezi

Miss Nkanyezi is between 45-50 years old. The Khwezi crèche started in the community church in 2007 with 10 children. In 2009, they moved into two rooms to teach children. Now, they have an attractive building for the centre. The Umsunduzi community resource centre built the crèche for them. One of the neighbours built the outdoor jungle gym for Miss Nkanyezi in 2013 to attract the community. The crèche was registered in 2011 as an NPO. Miss Nkanyezi has three instructors at the centre; one teacher instructs the two-year-olds, another instructs the three-year-olds, and the third instructs the four-year-olds. Miss Nkanyezi has led this crèche for 14 years and possesses a degree and national diploma in Early Childhood Development. Her ECD centre is located in Mpumalanga Circuit in the district of eThekweni. Seventy students are enrolled, and they are housed in five classes. The centre is registered with DSD and receives financing from the organisation. All children gather to sing songs, repeat bible passages from memory and listen to a bible tale because Miss Nkanyezi believes that the Bible is the key to everything. They start the day with worship as they train children to put God first. They have enough outdoor equipment for children.

4.3 Data Presentation

The results of this study are organised into three groups of themes that arose from the data; these groupings correspond to the most important research issues. These three groups are the perceived experiences of leaders in rural ECD centres, the leadership practices of leaders in rural ECD centres, and the effect of leadership practices on the operations of rural ECD centres. The following sections explore key data themes.

Group one: Leaders'perceived experiences of leading Early Childhood Development centres in a rural area

This section provides answers to the first research question, which focused on the perceived experiences of ECD principals in the context of rural areas. Data revealed three themes to address the first research question, namely: shortage of funds to keep the ECD centre running, leading with minimal resources, and dealing with difficult parents who do not pay fees.

4.3.1 Shortage of funds for ECD operations

According to Kika-Mistry and Wills (2022), operating costs for ECD centres are for staff, nutritional needs, administration, and security. Funds are important in an organisation to cater for salaries, buying of operational resources, insurance, marketing material, among other things (Giese & Bundlender, 2011). In the case of ECD centres, toilets, kitchens, beds, blankets, toys, and outdoor playing grounds are very important. Procurement of these materials requires funding. In order for children to learn properly, appropriate meals with a balanced diet as well as physical and mental development of children are very important (Makanjana & Naicker, 2021). All participants complained about the non-payment of fees in their centres due to partial funding from DSD. Parents have to pay additional fees to augment the partial funding from DSD. Those centres which are not registered receive partial funding from DSD. They cited parents as the main problem in this regard. The four ECD centres that were examined in this study were located in a rural area. In these areas, most people are unemployed which results in parents' inability to pay school fees.

Miss Msebe alluded to the non-payment of fees by parents is the major contributor to shortage of funds at her ECD centre:

Difficult parents can be a problem. If you make demands about non-payment of fees to parents, they are generally unhappy. Most parents, therefore, get into arrears with their school fees. But then, this is a private school and we do not have many cases. We do not receive funding at all from DSD and we rely on school fees to finance our centres.

Miss Moya agreed with Miss Msebein terms of the non-payment of fees by parents. She said this made work at the ECD centre very difficult when undertaking operations. She also recognised that the non-payment of fees is a result of poverty as some homes are headed by children and grandmothers.

The other thing is the financial situation. Some of the parents do pay and some of them don't pay and don't explain the problem. So, those are the things that are hindering us. At the centre, we have lots of children that are being taken care of by their grannies and child-headed home and some of those people do not pay and they just come with stories and tell you that I don't have money today.

Miss Nkanyezi had a different perspective on the non-payment of fees by parents; she looks at it as misplaced priority as she believes that parents can afford to pay the fees, but prefer to buy luxury goods instead of paying school fees. She had the perception that most parents have the money to pay, but have misplaced priorities.

We are finding that there are quite a lot of parents that can afford to pay fees but they are very often choosing not to pay fees but they will drive fancy cars and they are not prioritising school fees over other expenses, unfortunately.

Miss Mvula explained the lack of funding from the government as one of the reasons for shortage of funds. Most ECD centres require that there is proper registration so that there can be funding from the government for activities at the centres. However, some ECD centres show that there was partial funding (Manzi Pre-School & Khwezi crèche). Registration of ECD centres does not also guarantee full funding. This results in partial funding and resources have to be augmented.

Another reason besides parents not paying school fees is that we do not get enough funding from Department of Social Development (DSD) to do some of the activities we set as an ECD

centre. We receive partial funding as full funding is difficult to get and we have to charge school fees and seek donations.

Some ECD principals have managed to get support from DSD. Those centres registered with DSD received partial funding from DSD. This minimised the impact of the shortage of funds. This has impacted positively on the delivery of educational services to learners and there were shortages of learning materials compared to those centres where there was lack of funding from DSD. Miss Mvulashared:

We are also working closely with the Department of Social Development, and they always make sure that we are in line with the conduct of ECD development strategies and . So, that it also keeps us handy and that we are aware of the information that is needed from us as well. So, for the staff for example our education equipment gets funded by the Department of Social Development. So, they give as many donations as possible to buy the equipment for the teachers. So, we make sure that all the equipment, the tools, the materials that they need, we do supply the school to make sure that we teach effectively.

As data shows, shortage of funds at the ECD centres could be caused by parents' inability to pay fees. This could be because of poverty or parents' 'unwillingness to pay fees. According to Mampane and Boucher (2011), South African townships are characterised with high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime and violence. This is alluded to by Atmore, Van Nieke and Ashley-Cooper (2012), who says that the lack of funding impacts directly on the operations of the ECD centres in South Africa. This also confirms the findings in a study done by Bloese and Muteweri (2021) that most principals in disadvantaged communities struggle with financial resources every year. However, strong leadership can make a huge difference in the funding of ECD centres.

Another reason for lack of funding could be the lack of registration of the ECD centres in order to receive funding from government DSD. Principals failed to access funding from DSD with the exception of Miss Mvula and Miss Nkanyezi who received partial funding from DSD. This can be attributed to good leadership skills on their part in terms of the registration of centres with relevant authorities as well as their ability to forge links with relevant power sources to enhance operations at their ECD centres (Kagan & Hallmark, 2001). Servant leadership shows that leaders should be creative visionaries who can solve problems beyond what they can

experience now (Greenleaf, 1970). This can be seen through the actions of Miss Mvula and Miss Nkanyezi that registration with ECD centres was essential in providing partial funding for their ECD centres. One of the key research questions is to explore the perceived experiences of ECD principals with regards to the centres they lead and lack of funds is coming out as the main impediment. As discussed above as well as in literature review in chapter 2 section 2.6.4, most ECD centres in rural areas operate without registration, are situated in economically disadvantaged communities and the majority of people living there are unemployed. This alludes to the finding by Project Preparation Trust (PPT, 2014) that lack of funds leads to poor material and human resourcing of these centres and hence poor quality of curriculum delivery. Additional to registration of centres, servant leadership manifests by allowing poor kids who are unable to pay school fees to continue learning as compassion and kindness is a hallmark of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970). Soliciting donations is another creative way of showing servant leadership as they have learners first making sure that learning is taking place despite lack of resources in their ECD centres.

4.3.2 Leading with minimal teaching aids

Teaching aids have numerous advantages in teaching and learning. They make learning permanent, supplement verbal instruction, attract attention to learners, save time and improve the interaction between teacher and learner (Tonks, 2012). According to Matthew and Alidmat (2013), most learners in ECD centres learn through play and concretisation of content as they are not yet intellectually mature to think in abstraction. Hence, learning materials and tools are critical in their learning. Data shows that resources at the ECD centres are a problem. Miss Moya had this to say about teaching aids:

The perceived experience in the outdoor activities is not satisfactory. Kids 'toys for outdoor activities are inadequate in our centre. So, you find kids fighting for the scooters, fighting for something but we do manage to make them play together. The other thing is that we do have the sand pits, so we take the children when the others are playing with the scooter and some of them, we just put them in the swing and some of them in the sand pit.

Other principals indicated that they had adequate teaching aids. They indicated that inadequate teaching aids would hinder children from relaxing and playing with each other. They further

asserted that it affected the motor and social development of children. Miss Mvula shared the following:

Outdoor activities are set up on the ground where learners go outside and choose activities that are set up by the teacher. Activities include playing in the jungle gym, motor biking and swinging, sensory play including water play, sandpit and I have also learnt that learning preparation is important and it is a good part of learning. However, these jungle gym and bikes are not enough for the kids and often we have to put them in groups and take turns to utilize the resources.

Miss Msebe agreed to this assertion that teaching aids are not enough in her ECD centre. This can be addressed by the provision of more jungle gyms and other playground infrastructure.

We have two jungle gyms, swings and they can play in the sandpit and they have bikes they can ride and so basically we can just manage with those few it's very important because this is what they needed and they need to be developing their large motor and fine motor skills more throughout activities and stuff like that and also the sensory table. If we can have more of these gyms it would be better.

An analysis of data above shows that three out of four participants had challenges of working with inadequate resources especially those that are involved with the development of motor and social skills. This could be due to some funding issues and non-payment of school fees which made it difficult to procure the essential teaching aids. ECD centres where there was support from DSD had their teaching aids maintained properly and there was no sharing. Mualam and Lerner (2022) asserted that lack of modern and age appropriate equipment in township and rural ECD centres have a negative impact on quality education in those centres. This finding is similar to the one revealed by participants in this study. Although ECD principals had few resources to work with at their centres, it can be seen that they provided the service despite the challenges that they were facing. According to Smith (2005), putting service before reward is one of the cornerstones of Servant Leadership. Most of the ECD principals in this study showed this capacity to serve despite a lack of teaching aids. Lack of funding leads into infrastructural constraints where learners' share books, toys and the play grounds are not well resourced especially shortage of jungle gyms. This reflects a finding by DSD (2014) that most ECD centres in rural and informal settlement suffer from lack of material resourcing as

well as human resourcing in the form of trained teachers. A large part of them are helped by non-governmental organisations that donate and maintain their facilities.

4.3.3 Dealing with difficult parents

Parents are the first educators before a child attends school. They offer care and support to the child in all areas including physical protection, nutrition, social skills and intellectual development (Whitaker, 2015). When a child attends school, this responsibility is taken over by teachers. However, parents are expected to offer support, especially financial support and intellectual development through homework given by teachers. Two participants complained about difficult parents and said that the major problem was parents not co-operating. Miss Moya expressed:

Okay, firstly it's the parents. They bring children not on time. So, the program that you have running at school is disturbed because you have to do breakfast late because all the children are not there, and the other thing is the financial situation. Some of the parents do pay and some of them don't pay and don't explain the problem. So, you have to think for yourself and that no parent is making payment and how can I buy things without having money. So, those are the things that are hindering us.

Miss Msebe also alluded that the major problem was the non-payment of fees which hindered the purchase of important school stationery as well as the payment of staff. This, as discussed in earlier sections, is a perennial problem in most ECD centres in this study.

Having said that, difficult parents can be a problem. If you demand schools fees they are not happy. Most parents get into payment areas which affect the operations of our school. This brings difficult times to our school and staff.

However, one participant (Miss Nkanyezi) reported a positive rapport with parents, and this has brought a positive impact to the learners and the staff. Positive rapport improves communication between administration, teachers and parents. She said:

What I also love about it is the contact that I have with parents. I have a much closer contact with parents than the older grades and I would say those two stands out more than anything.

It can be seen from the data above that parents are problematic and do not co-operate with ECD principals. As shown above, bringing children to school on time is a problem and the other challenge is non-payment of school fees. According to Whitaker (2015), parents are difficult to deal with for several reasons. The first reason is that parents have varied motivations for bringing their children to school. The second reason is a lack of understanding on the part of parents in terms of the value of their involvement in their child's work. The third reason is the lack of skills on the part of the principals when dealing with parents. This is in agreement with data referring to those that managed to establish good ties with parents; they were able to achieve parent co-operation and a good example of this is Miss Nkanyezi. According to Greenleaf (1970), a servant leader utilises personal, rather than positional power, to influence followers and achieve organisational objectives. The ability or inability to get co-operation from parents can be a result of the presence or absence of this leadership skill in ECD principals. As discussed in section 2.6.6, if parents support ECD centres, they can become robust and improve quality of education (Lemmer, 2004). ECD principals struggle in parental engagement because they lack community leadership skills as well as networking skills with community power sources and this makes their perceived experience with parents difficult (Naicker & Naidoo, 2021). This agrees with assertions made in section 2.6.5 where findings were made in which a lot of ECD principals perceived experience lack of collaboration from parents and this tends to affect many aspects of the ECD operations such as funding, payment of teachers and buying of teaching resources.

Group two: Leadership practices of principal in early childhood development centres in a rural area

This section addresses the second research question, which explores the leadership practices of the ECD principals. Two themes emerged. Due to lack of funding in their ECD centres, principals were involved in fundraising. Principals also engaged parents in innovative communication strategies.

4.3.4 Fundraising and solicitation of sponsors

As discussed in section 4.1.1, fundraising is critical to sustaining the ECD centres. Data shows that only one ECD centre is fully funded by DSD and the other is partially funded by DSD. The other two centres are not funded at all. Those that are not funded had to be creative to sustain operations. Miss Mvula, whose crèche is not funded, expressed the following:

We always fundraise. We make sure that every day we send a letter somewhere to get some kind of donation. This ensures that we do not have a shortfall in our funds to operate our crèche.

Ms Moya also showed some creativity as she was not funded by DSD. Since some of the centres are not funded or are partially funded, ECD principals had to show some innovation and initiative to raise funds for their centres. She does this to complement money to buy food for the children at the crèche.

I will stick to the point of financials. We have financial challenges and we overcome them through fund-raising, and we also write to the sponsors to get something and that is how we survive because some parents do not pay. So, for the children to keep having food at school we have to ask for donations and we fund-raise.

Two ECD centres are funded by DSD. Those that are not funded had to find creative ways to raise funds to keep up with operations. Two centres are partially funded by DSD and showed that they had adequate resources for the children. Data shows that lack of funding made ECD principals engage in fundraising activities to keep their centres running. They did not fold their arms due to a lack of funding as they were aware of the impact it would have on the physical and intellectual development of children. The fundraising events seem to have sustained the operation at the ECD centres. This is in agreement with a study done by Valerio and Garcia (2013) as well as Atmore (2013) who found that financial shortfalls can impact on the quality and coverage of ECD services. The ability to raise funds and continue with ECD work is a form of empathy that Servant Leadership advocates for. According to Smith (2005), empathy is the ability to project one's situation onto another. ECD leaders empathised with parents regarding their inability to pay schools fees and supplemented that shortfall with fundraising so that ECD operations continue despite the challenges faced. As discussed in

section 2.7.3, in chapter 2, advocacy plays a crucial role in seeking funding for under-resourced ECD centres. This ensures that every child receives the necessary educational provisions that are crucial for development. This is possible by reaching out to potential funders as well as the necessary government agency that can make resources available to learners (Visser, 2021; Biersteker, 2010).

4.3.5 Communication with parents through social network

Effective communication between teachers and parents in terms of student achievement and attendance is very important (Ozmen, Akuzum, Zirncirli, & Selcuk, 2016). Firstly, communication facilitates effective planning which allows an organisation to operate efficiently. Secondly, communication with stakeholders helps with proper decision-making as information flows to and from all parties involved in the organisation, and in this case parents of children. Thirdly, communication helps to co-ordinate activities in the organisation (Graham-Clay, 2005). This improves efficiency and effectiveness in the organisation. Data shows that two of the four participants were involved in effective and innovative communication strategies with parents. Miss Nkanyezi used modern communication applications such as WhatsApp and D6 communicator to communicate with parents. She explains:

We put all our communication on a D6 as well as class WhatsApp groups. Although this is helpful, we are still getting a lot of parents who are not reading the communication and they are sort of expecting us to constantly remind them and give them communication, but they refuse to actually spend the time checking for the communication. We do ask parents to send absentee notes or messages through D6, if a child is not coming. With regards to the agreement with the teachers, if somebody is off for longer than two days. Then the teacher will message the parent and say “is so and so ok, are they sick” is there anything we can help with. If they continue with being off without messaging us. Then I will actually email the parents and I will just say that we have noticed that your child has been off for quite a while, can you bring them back.

Communication is very critical for the smooth running of the organisation. Just like Miss Nkanyezi, Miss Mvula used the latest social media platforms to communicate with parents and

learners. In addition to using the D6 communicator and WhatsApp groups, Miss Mvula also meets parents face-to-face frequently and this has improved her communication with parents. *Firstly, we do have a WhatsApp group where we interact with our parents on a daily basis or weekly. We do have parents' meetings where all the parents need to come to school and engage with the school and teachers including myself. Thirdly, we do have an open day where each and every parent is allowed to come to school to check their child's progress as well. We do have days where parents can come and volunteer their time at the school, so they can see what the organisation does.*

Mrs Moya however used traditional methods of communication with parents such as face to face interactions when they pick up children as well as arranged parent meetings at the centres. This is what she had to say:

As parents come to fetch their kids at school, I usually take time to talk to them about issues such as performance of their kids, attention span, payment of school fees, shortage of toys and any formal meetings that we need to have.

The same sentiments were alluded to by Ms Msebe who echoed that most parents in her school were averse of technology and WhatsApp groups have not been effective let alone the use of D6 as it has many features that they may struggle with. Hence, she used the same strategy of arranging formal meetings and face to face decisions with parents when they come to the school.

As the previous sections show, communication and partnering with parents is very important for effective delivery of ECD services. Technology can enhance communication where physical meetings are not possible. Teachers need training in initiating pro-active communication with parents as well as the use of technology such as email and social media platforms (Graham-Clay, 2005). It is clear from data that some ECD principals are implementing effective communication strategies (two participants), and some are not (two participants). One of the key attributes of a Servant Leader is effective communication within the organisation and outside the organisation (Smith, 2005). Communication is an accompanying attribute of an effective Servant Leader (Greenleaf, 1970). One of the research questions is to investigate leadership practices of ECD principals in rural areas. As discussed in section 2.2.8, integration of technology and the establishment of digital infrastructure are very important in improving communication with parents as well as improving the quality of

educational provision (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). As noted in the above findings by participants, it can be seen that only one participant engaged and integrated technology in communication with parents and this greatly improved payment of fees and collaboration at their centres.

Group three: The influence of principals' practices on the operations of the ECD Centres in a rural area

This section addresses the third research question. This question sought to explore the influence of the leadership practices of the ECD principals. Two themes emerged from this section. One of the major practices of principals is ensuring the professional development of teachers through workshops and training and the other practice was ensuring allstaffwork as a team.

4.3.6 Ensuring ECD teachers' professional development

Ensuring professional development of teachers in ECD centres was one of the practices of the principals. Training and development are very important for every organisation. According to Pachauri and Yadav (2014), there are several reasons why skills development is important for teachers. Firstly, it addresses teacher weaknesses and enhances skills; this subsequently makes sure that learners are taught effectively. Secondly, improved skills correlate to increased work performance. Thirdly, teachers are more satisfied with their work if they can effectively carry out their duties; this can be enhanced by on-job training. Fourthly, developing teachers can lead to high productivity and improved quality of work. The fifth finding is that training staff can save the time of the principal as there is less supervision of co-workers (Yadav, 2014). Data shows that three of the four participants were constantly training their staff. Miss Msebe expressed the following:

Training keeps our staff up-to-date. A good example is Michelle (pseudonym) who has done lots of early childhood development courses over the years and we always just try to inspire each other and we look for ideas and we plan to together and because we love what we do. It's easy to be creative and we love what we are doing.

Due diligence is shown in the recruitment of staff at some of the ECD centres. This demonstrates that training for ECD teaching and learning is taken seriously in some of these centres and this has the capacity to enhance the quality of work delivered. Miss Moya checks

and verifies ECD qualifications before employing a staff into the school and she explains her due diligence in making sure that teachers are qualified for what they do.

I am able to recruit them properly. External training is as good as internal refresher courses that we give them. The reason being my ECD centre is up to standard and abiding by all the laws. So, when they come into the centre I check if they have passed all their university and college courses and see the certificates and everything. We make sure that we recruit teachers that are well trained by colleges and universities.

Training of educators can be external, or it can be internal. Another centre that fully practices staff development is that led by Miss Nkanyezi. Her method involves invitation of specialists in certain social and academic specialties. The invitation of specialists to train staff is very critical for quality delivery of educational services.

We do constant staff development. So, we do in-house staff development at school with various different people coming to speak to the teachers and engage with them and we have got a Speech Therapist and an Occupational Therapist and psychologist that do talks for the teachers once a term and then we also encourage our teachers to go on courses outside of the school at least once a term. So, we are quite strict about staying up to date with any issues, policies, any educational concerns at all.

With the exception of Miss Mvula's ECD centre, data shows that other ECD principals are involved in constant staff development to achieve effectiveness in their centres. This is confirmed by Tang (2020), who asserts that teacher training enhances effective and quality teaching, career development enrichment as well as effectively managing student skills development. Although principals were involved in training their staff, the purpose for doing so differs a lot from one to the other. Miss Msebe and Miss Nkanyezi do it for improving quality of teaching and learning, whilst Miss Mvula does it for accountability purposes required by the Department of Social Development. One of the cornerstones of Servant Leadership is a commitment to the growth of people (Smith, 2005; Greenleaf, 1970). Data shows that three participants out of four do train and workshop their staff. This practice of Servant Leadership definitely improves the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers for ECD, which were referred to as crèches were not formally trained in universities and colleges and hence educators and principals of ECD centres were not properly trained for their roles and responsibilities. Even

today, in South Africa, there are few qualified ECD practitioners. According to the discussion done in section 2.6.2, in chapter 2, professional development of ECD staff is critical to keep up with current trends and skills for effective teaching and learning (Govender & Naidoo, 2020). It is interesting to note from data above that almost all ECD principals involve professional development as part of their operations. Another practice used by principals was ensuring teamwork within staff.

4.3.7 Ensuring team work within staff members at the centres

Ensuring that teachers work as a team is one of the practices that were implemented by ECD principals. According to Bencsik, Noszkay and Marosi (2009), working in teams in education has the following advantages: effective group roles, efficient delegation of duties, flexible coaching, intergroup learning and an effective community of practice. Team leadership tends to focus on how to improve their team, leading to higher levels of performance and enhances communication, ownership, conflict resolution and decision-making in order to achieve higher performance (Brounstein, 2002). In this study, three participants showed an active engagement with teamwork, and they agreed that it brought positive results in the centres they were leading; it also improved cohesiveness of the group. Two participants used this approach in their leadership roles at the crèche and this has improved cohesiveness of the staff. Miss Nkanyezishared:

I think the best thing that we have managed to do here is to create a support network for the staff. So, we always try and encourage each other as well as support each other. We also do a lot of appreciation days to encourage each other and things like that for the staff just to try and reduce their stress.

This team leadership approach was also implemented by Miss Mvula. She supported her staff members through collaboration and guidance. This brought out the best in her team by guiding them through goals and obstacles.

I can say that my perceived experience in the office is good due to constant collaboration with staff. We do have an admin day with my teachers where in the morning on a Friday, we come and design our weekly plan for the following week. So, we make sure that our learning and

teaching is sufficient, and all of that work is done prior, so it does help us and it does assist us a lot.

Miss Msebe, however, showed that she does not use collaboration and teamwork. This leadership style has caused so much strain and stress on her part as she does all the work by herself. This might be due to lack of funding from DSD as well as community support. As she alludes to doing all the work alone and that it can be strenuous:

I run my own admin. So, I don't have a secretary or anything like that. So, I do all my own market and my own admin stuff. I send out my own invoices myself because it's small. So, it's the least favourite of the job and I don't like the admin, but I have to do it.

Evidence from data shows teamwork has numerous advantages as ECD principals were able to enhance group work, cohesiveness, model work, motivate and encourage each other towards achieving organisational goals. As noted, Miss Msebe shared that lack of teamwork introduced stress which might reduce her efficiency and effectiveness in leading her staff. According to Hazel, Heberle, McEwen and Adams (2013), teamwork improves workplace learning, effective communication, cohesiveness and loyalty which are essential ingredients for a productive team. Ability to teach, empower and model work and behaviour are key attributes of servant leadership (Smith, 2005; Greenleaf, 1970). As noted in section 2.6.7, collaborative effort with staff and parents are critical elements of a successful ECD centre as one can tap into unique strength of a team member (Garcia & Pence, 2010). Team work is critical to a successful organisation: Hussein & Swanepoel, 2018; Makokoro, 2019). Although collaboration and teamworking are ideal education operational activities, data from participants shows that teamwork is not adopted by all ECD principals and this shows the need for leadership training to most ECD principals in rural settings.

4.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter analysed and presented data of four ECD principals Miss Moya, Miss Mvula, Miss Nkanyezi and Miss Msebe. In the analysis of data, it was revealed that all ECD principals complained about shortage of funds in their centres due to non-payment by parents. Data also revealed that ECD principals had to deal with minimum resources due to parents not paying fees or due to partial funding from DSD. This compromised operations in some of the ECD

centres. Analysis of data also showed that some of the ECD principals had advanced communication strategies such as D6 and WhatsApp applications to constantly communicate with parents. Training of staff also emerged as an important theme. Most ECD principals were involved either in external or internal staff development. This showed strong instructional leadership. Lastly, this chapter examined the leadership practice of ECD principals and data revealed that ECD principals are involved in teamwork to enhance collaboration, loyalty and group efficiency. The following chapter will discuss important findings, draw conclusions and provide recommendations for future research as well as insights for ECD principals.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter provided the data analysis and findings. Three groups of themes emerged from the data, and these groupings of topics correspond to the primary research questions. The first classification is rural Early Childhood Development centre leadership's perceived

experiences. The second classification is rural Early Childhood Development centre leaders' leadership methods. The third classification is the impact of leadership techniques on the operation of the ECD centre. In this chapter, I give the study's executive summary, the findingsconclusions, and my recommendations.

5.2 Summary of the study

This research investigated the perceivedleadership experiences of four rural ECD centre principals. The study is structured into five chapters, with each chapter focusing on a certain aspect. I present an outline of each chapter below.

Chapter One:

This chapter centred on the historical context that informed and supported the research inquiry. The chapter opened with a discussion of the study's context, followed by a declaration of the issue. In addition, the study's rationale and purpose, research objectives, research questions, and elaboration of important ideas were presented.

Chapter Two:

This chapter included a literature review. The purpose of this chapter was to examine the literature surroundingthe leadership techniques of rural ECD centre principals. In addition, the chapter explored Servant Leadership, the philosophy that served as the study's theoretical foundation.

Chapter Three:

The third chapter addressed the study's research strategy and methods. The chapter begins by discussing the interpretivism paradigm under which I explored the perceived experiences of four ECD centre Principals in rural areas. Second, the qualitative design utilised to comprehend the qualitative perceived experiences of ECD centre directors was presented. The third section of the chapter addressed the case study technique that guided the research procedure. Methods, including sampling, data production and data analysis, were described in the fourth section. Finally, the questions of trustworthiness and ethics were discussed.

Chapter Four

This chapter discussed the data and reported the findings. The chapter opened with participant biographies, followed by the presentation of findings thematically in three groupings of topics that arose from the data: Principals' perceived experiences of leading Early Childhood Development centres in a rural location, the influence of leadership practices in Early Childhood Development centres in a rural area, and the influence of leadership practices on the management of ECD centres.

5.3 Conclusions from the findings

In the next part, I will give the conclusions taken from the study's findings. There is a connection between these results and the three study questions. Below, the research questions are listed:

4. What are the principal's perceived experiences of leading Early Childhood Development centres in a rural area?
5. What are the leadership practices of principals in Early Childhood Development centres in rural area?
6. How do the leadership practices of principals leading Early Childhood Development centres influence the operations of the ECD centres in a rural area?

5.3.1 Principals perceived experiences of leading Early Childhood Development centres in a rural area

Perceived experiences of principals cannot be decontextualized from the economic realities of rural life in South Africa. According to Hall (2007), rural areas are inhabited by poor black South Africans who own no means of production such as land and industries. Most live in areas of abject poverty due to limited production as well as limited access to well-paying jobs. Black South Africans in rural areas are therefore disenfranchised from most of the economic activities. Hence, poverty affects them in many ways.

As data had shown, ECD principals perceived hardship as they had to deal with numerous and diverse challenges relating to the community that they served. The first challenge was the shortage of funds to sponsor operations at the ECD centres. The second challenge was dealing with minimal resources which were somehow caused by a lack of funds as alluded to in the findings. The third challenging perceived experience of ECD principals was dealing with difficult parents; the shortage of funds was caused by an inability of parents to pay school fees as some parents are poor and some parents misuse their money instead of paying school fees for their children. It was also found that the centres that were not registered had to struggle a lot with funding and those that were registered received partial funding. Funds are very important as they can be used to drive the curriculum of the school and build infrastructure for children to learn. Funds can be used to pay salaries for volunteers and staff to drive the operations of the ECD centre. ECD principals had to deal with difficult parents from non-attendance of meetings, communication as well as payment of fees.

From these findings, one can conclude that the shortage of funds at ECD centres is one major negative perceived experience of principals. If parents can pay school fees and if principals can properly register the ECD centres under DSD, these challenges can be minimised as all their challenges revolve around finances.

5.3.2 Leadership practices in early childhood development centres in a rural area

As mentioned in the preceding section, parents were reported as being difficult to deal with. This made payment of fees very difficult and hence there was a shortage of funds in the ECD centres. The principals that did not receive enough finances in terms of payment of fees as well as funding from DSD had to be creative in raising funds. This was done to supplement shortfalls in resources such as teaching aids and toys which were critical in the delivery of the curriculum. Teachers and community members were all involved in fundraising. All ECD centres were

involved in fundraising, indicating a strong indication of Servant Leadership, especially the element of advocacy.

ECD principals practiced effective communication with teachers, parents and community members. Effective communication helps in planning, decision-making among stakeholders and co-ordination. These are important functions of any organisations that can achieve its vision and mission by making sure that each stakeholder is informed of organisational activities. Communication with stakeholders was mainly in the area of absenteeism of learners as well as informing parents of meetings taking place in the school. Tools used during communication were the D6 communicator and WhatsApp groups. This made rapport with parents easier and eased the difficulty of dealing with parents. ECD principals who did not use social media tools such as D6 communicator and WhatsApp reported poor attendance of learners and had difficulty communicating with parents.

One could therefore conclude that taking initiative and creativity when faced with problems can help principals to ease the impact of challenges faced by ECD centres. Fundraising and effective communication provided effective solutions to challenges that ECD principals faced in implementing their duties. The use of social media tools such as D6 communicator and WhatsApp can enhance the smooth operation of the centres by making sure that stakeholders are in the loop of all activities happening in the school.

5.3.3 The influence of leaders' practices on the operations of ECD Centres in a rural area

In South Africa, teachers are trained by Universities and they graduate from different disciplines. Over the years, ECD teachers have been graduating with a diploma in ECD for them to be effective in carrying out their duties; recently, universities are rolling out a degree programme for ECD teachers. One can argue that formal training does not guarantee effective classroom delivery. Continuous professional development is very important as teachers would continue upgrading their skills depending on the teaching needs and demands at the time. It is, therefore, important that in-service training and workshops are done for teachers (this may include Speech therapists and Occupational Therapists). The ECD principals who participated in this study recruited qualified teachers and they invited specialists to their centres to develop teachers who are in-service to keep them up-to-date. All ECD centres were involved in the training of teachers, and they reported effective teaching and learning.

Principals of ECD centres were involved in team building except one principal; they agreed that team building brought positive results to the organisation through effective delegation and team cohesion. This enhanced performance of teachers and effective teaching. Teachers formed effective support networks which enhanced teamwork and co-ordinated effort. Principals were able to put their ears onto the ground and quickly respond to concerns. This collaboration increased the efficiency of the organisation and improved teacher morale. Those who did not practice teamwork reported increased stress as they were doing all the work alone.

From this evidence, one can conclude that ECD principals' understanding of leadership concepts has a positive impact of the operations of their schools. An understanding that teachers need in-service training shows strong instructional leadership skills and coaching teachers in teamwork shows that leaders understood the advantages of democratic principles.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on evidence discussed in chapter 4 and this chapter, I made recommendations to three groups of people, namely ECD practitioners, Researchers (academics) and Department of Basic Education.

Concerning ECD Principals, it can be seen that there are two main challenges. The first challenge is financial shortage that crippled operations at the ECD centres. The second challenge was lack of leadership skills especially in accessing power sources such as DSD. It is recommended that ECD principals receive leadership training either from the Department of Basic Education or enrol for a course at tertiary institutions (Universities). This course should specialise in leadership training. This could be helpful and can positively impact the way ECD centres are run.

Concerning the Department of Basic Education, it is crucial, if resources allow, that ECD centres be absorbed into the mainstream education system and their operations streamlined with other phases such as foundation phase, intermediate phase, senior phase and FET phase. When such is achieved, skills transfer, payment of staff and operational problems would be phased out due to leadership skills transfer and collaboration from other qualified teachers. Infrastructural challenges can be solved as those schools would be registered and registered

government schools receive funding. Therefore, ECD centres would not struggle with human and material resources.

The last recommendation concerns academic research. A review of literature shows that most of the studies done are mainly on the leadership of ECD principals. Again, most studies used the interpretive approach which investigated qualitative data on ECD centres and teachers. Additionally, they do not investigate more factors impacting the quality of teaching and learning at ECD centres in South Africa. Impact studies with a quantitative inclination can add to scant literature which does not use this approach. Large samples in quantitative research can increase generalizability of findings.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter provided a summary of the whole study. To this end, an introduction to the chapter was given and a short summary of each chapter in this dissertation was provided. Conclusions were drawn from each research question, and finally, recommendations to ECD practitioners, Academics (researchers) and the Department of Education were made.

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Appendix A
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

First set of questions

- a. Tell me about your good perceived experiences of leading the ECD centre.
- b. Tell me about your bad perceived experiences (challenges) you have encountered that prevented you from leading effectively.
- c. How do you overcome the challenges mentioned above?
- d. What are your perceived experiences with regard to teachers?
- e. Are you able to recruit skilled people in this centre? taking to account that your centre is in a rural area.
- f. What are your perceived experiences with regard to parents? Do they cooperate? Do they pay the monthly fees?
- g. What are your perceived experiences in your office?
- h. What are your perceived experiences in the classrooms?
- i. What are your perceived experiences in the ground?

Second set of questions

- a. How do you ensure that your teachers are always on task time?
- b. What is your leadership role to ensuring safety of the children?
- c. How do you ensure that your ECD centre operates under such circumstances?

- d. What do you do to make sure that parents bring their children in your centre every day?
- e. What do you do to ensure that your teachers teach effectively?
- f. What can you do to keep your centre always clean?
- g. How can you do to make sure that your ECD centre looks attractive to the community?

Appendix B

ETHICAL CLEARANCE



26 August 2021

Miss Ntokozo Mkize (220108442)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Miss Mkize,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002807/2021
Project title: Leadership in Early Childhood Development centres: Experiences of four principals in a rural area
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 05 May 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted FULL APPROVAL.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 26 August 2022.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX C
PERMISSION LETTERS FROM COLLEGES

Egeekeni Primary School
P.O. Box 3146
Poloony
3624

The Principal
ITHEMBALABANTU

Dear Sir/Madam

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT YOUR SCHOOL

I am NtokozoMkize and I am conducting a research as a requirement of the University of KwaZulu-Natal towards a Degree of Masters in Education. The title of the research study is "Leadership in Early Childhood Development centres: Experiences of four leaders in a rural area".

I would like to use your school as one of the research sites, and this letter intends to request your permission. The focus of the study is on the experiences and practices of ECD principals in ECD centres (crèches). I am interested in leader's experiences; therefore I would like to request you to participate in the study. Should permission be granted, the interviews with you will be scheduled for dates and times that are convenient for you. Care will be taken that no disruption is caused during such interviews. Please also note that the participation in this study is voluntary, and the participant has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequence. In addition, you are assured that details of the school and the participant will be kept confidential, and your identity will never be disclosed to anyone.

For more information and questions about the study, you may contact the researcher or the research supervisor on the following details:

Name of researcher: NtokozoMkize: [REDACTED]
Supervisor: Dr. SB Blose: Tel No.: (031) 260 1870; Email: Blases@ukzn.ac.za

You may also contact the Research Office through:
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel.: 2731 260 4557 – Fax: 2731 260 4609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thanking you in advance,
Yours in Education

Miss N Mkize

APPENDIX D CONSENT LETTER

Your address

date

Your participant

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH

I am and I am conducting a research as a requirement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal towards a Degree of The title of the research is ".....". The objectives of the study are:

- Outline the objectives of your study

The study will focus on This letter intends to elucidate the purpose of the study and to request your participation in the study.

Please note that:

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your inputs will not be attributed to you in person, but reported only as a population member opinion.
- The interview may last for about 1 hour and may be split into two parts depending on your preference.
- Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.
- If you are willing to be interviewed, please indicate (by ticking as applicable) whether or not you are willing to allow the interview to be recorded by the following equipment:

	Willing	Not willing
Audio equipment		

I can be contacted at:

Email: ...

Cell: ...

My supervisor is Mr. SB Blose who is located at the School of Education, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He can be contacted at:

Email: Bloses@ukzn.ac.za

Phone: 031 260 1870

I hope this letter will find your positive consideration, thanking you in advance.

Yours Sincerely

APPENDIX E

Turn-it-in Similarity Report

Ms N Mkhize

ORIGINALITY REPORT

17 %	17 %	1 %	0 %
SIMILARITY INDEX	INTERNET SOURCES	PUBLICATIONS	STUDENT PAPERS

PRIMARY SOURCES

1	researchspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	8 %
2	hdl.handle.net Internet Source	3 %
3	ir.lib.uwo.ca Internet Source	1 %
4	ukzn-dspace.ukzn.ac.za Internet Source	1 %
5	www.scielo.org.za Internet Source	1 %
6	es.scribd.com Internet Source	1 %
7	cerc.edu.hku.hk Internet Source	1 %
8	psppdknowledgerepository.org Internet Source	1 %
9	www.coursehero.com Internet Source	<1 %

10	www.questionpro.com Internet Source	<1 %
11	www.yumpu.com Internet Source	<1 %
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Exclude quotes On
 Exclude bibliography On

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APPENDIX F

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
KLOOF
3610

Phone [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
Fax 031 - 7110458
E-mail:
dr1govender@telkomsa.net
[REDACTED]
[\[REDACTED\].com](http://[REDACTED].com)

Dr Saths Govender

04 APRIL 2024

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

LANGUAGE CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE

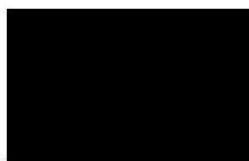
This serves to inform that I have read the final version of the dissertation titled:

LEADERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRES: PERCEIVED EXPERIENCES OF FOUR PRINCIPALS IN A RURAL AREA

by NTOKOZO MKIZE. Student no. 220108442

To the best of my knowledge, all the proposed amendments have been effected and the work is free of spelling and grammatical errors. I am of the view that the quality of language used meets generally accepted academic standards.

Yours faithfully



DR S. GOVENDER
B Paed. (Arts), B.A. (Hons), B Ed.
Cambridge Certificate for English Medium Teachers
MPA, D. Admin.(2003)