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KWAZULU-NATAL
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**EXPERIENCES OF ADOLESCENTS TRANSITIONING INTO
BLENDED FAMILIES FROM A SELECTED HIGH SCHOOL IN THE
UMLAZI DISTRICT**

BY

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Keiasha Harisingh (220113443), declare that the dissertation entitled *Experiences of Adolescents Transitioning into Blended Families from a Selected High School in the Umlazi District*, submitted in fulfilment of a Master of Education in Educational Psychology Degree, abides by the following rules:

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This dissertation is submitted with my approval.



Dr. Ncamisile P. Mkhize-Mthiyane
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17 January 2024

Date

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that adolescents across the globe experience stressful life events such as their parents' divorce, separation and other forms of family breakdown, which often results in them having to transition into blended families. For some adolescents, the transition process is often confusing and stressful and can affect their psychological, physical, mental, and socio-emotional health and educational achievements. The South African government and the Department of Basic Education have neglected to acknowledge or include provisions and support for blended families. This lack of inclusion is also experienced by teachers who are often ill-equipped and inexperienced to assist their learners who are transitioning into their new blended families. This study explored the experiences of adolescents transitioning into blended families and examined how they navigated their adjustment to their blended families. This study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm and theoretically framed by the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF).

A qualitative case study design was applied, and semi-structured interviews and diaries were utilised to gather data from twelve participants at a selected high school in the Umlazi District in KwaZulu-Natal. Ethical principles, including voluntary participation, non-maleficence, beneficence and confidentiality, were ensured, and the data was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that how adolescents received their transition announcements influenced their receptiveness to their new blended families. It was also discovered that the blended families engaged in varied methods of conflict resolution and levels of family involvement that ranged from effective to ineffective in terms of their family functioning. The findings further revealed the types of support that adolescents received throughout their transition as well as their evaluation of their emotional stability and the effectiveness of their transition into their respective blended families. The study concludes that all adolescents who transition into blended families have unique experiences based on varied circumstances, and this indicates that support initiatives for these adolescents must be personalised and cater to their individual needs.

Keywords: Adjustment, Adolescent, Blended Family, Experiences, Family, Parents, Stepparents, Transition

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

B Ed	Bachelor of Education
DoE	Department of Education
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DSD	Department of Social Development
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
KZN DoE	KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual
MMFF	McMaster Model of Family Functioning
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SA	South Africa
WHO	World Health Organisation

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

De la Rosa and Millán-Franco (2023) asserted that the number of blended families continues to increase worldwide due to the emergence of new mindsets, worldviews, relationships and family systems. The Centre for Social Justice (2019) reported that sixty-one percent of people experience family breakdowns during their childhood. They further reported, in a later study, that one in four children born in 2010 will experience parental breakdown before they reach the age of sixteen (The Centre for Social Justice, 2020). These statistics are staggering and exhibit the prevalence of family breakdowns across the globe.

Clinical counsellor Tom Frydenger said, “Becoming a blended family means mixing, mingling, scrambling, and sometimes muddling our way through delicate family issues, complicated relationships, and individual differences, hurts, and fears; but through it all, we are learning to love like a family” (Frydenger & Frydenger, 1984, p. 5). This quote is substantial as it accurately describes the turbulent and confusing process that individuals experience as they transition into blended families.

This chapter explains the background, focus, purpose and problem statement of the study. The chapter then proceeds to present the rationale, significance, objectives and key research questions of the study. Thereafter, relevant key concepts and delimitations of the study are presented followed by an outline of the study.

1.2 Background of the study

1.2.1 Legal contexts

Section 28 of the South African Bill of Rights defined a child as any person under the age of eighteen and maintained that every child has the right to family care, parental care, or appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996, p. 11). The South African Children’s Act No. 38 of 2005 confirmed this and added that its objective is to promote the preservation

and strengthening of families and to make provision for structures, services and means for promoting and monitoring children's sound physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional and social development (RSA, 2006, p. 28).

These documents indicate that the South African government has placed substantial consideration on recognising, protecting and providing for children and their physical, emotional, social and psychological well-being in its legislature. At the same time, the Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa of 2021 maintained that most families are ill-prepared and ill-equipped to manage the stressors that their family faces, which inhibits their ability to adequately respond to their family's needs (Department of Social Development [DSD], 2021). This demonstrates that most blended families require additional support to transition effectively and maintain the well-being of all family members.

1.2.2 Social contexts

A family is a system in which all members influence and are influenced by an ongoing interplay of family processes that can either be constructive or destructive to its family members (Miralles et al., 2023). Many children around the world witness and experience stressful life events such as divorce, separation and other forms of family breakdown before reaching adulthood (Perales et al., 2017). This breakdown in family structure often arrives as an unexpected shock to children as most of them cannot sufficiently comprehend the complexities of adult relationship dynamics (Dinisman et al., 2017).

Nuclear family structures are still upheld and are common within the Middle East and Asia; however, there is an increase in new-age family structures within the Americas, Africa, Europe and Australia (Pasley & Petren, 2016). Notably, Douglas (2017) asserted that children from divorced families possessed partial awareness of their parent's relationship difficulties as they often directly or indirectly witnessed them arguing with each other. However, most of these children expressed that they did not expect these arguments to lead to their parents' separation and eventual divorce (Miralles et al., 2023). This demonstrates that even though some children could detect their parents' relationship struggles, most of them were incapable of predicting the consequences of these relationship difficulties.

Most children who endure family breakdowns have to later adapt to transitioning into blended families, and these transitions often occur expeditiously, with children having very little time to prepare for this drastic change to their family dynamic and living structure (Silverberg, 2023). Blended families come in many shapes and sizes but most often refer to family units in which two adults form a union, and at least one of these adults includes their biological or adopted child or children from their previous relationship into this new family unit (Manton, 2014).

Blended families are also usually formed out of grief that results from the death or divorce of members of the original parental unit, and this significantly impacts not only the adults but also the child or children involved (Rawstrone, 2022). As a result, children need to fully manage and overcome the grief from their parent's death or divorce before they can begin to acclimatise to a new family structure (Lee, 2019). This was confirmed by Rustin (2018) and Sanders and Turner (2018), who added that the unexpected breakdown in family structure significantly impacts children as they encounter stressors, such as having to adjust to living with new family members, that children living in nuclear families (living with and being raised by both parents) do not experience.

Travers (2021) asserted that the age at which a child transitions into a blended family impacts the effectiveness of their transition. Adolescence, on its own, is defined as a critical developmental period located between childhood and adulthood and consists of children aged ten to nineteen (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2023). Studies by Rawstrone (2022), Gul and Nadeemullah (2017), de la Rosa and Millán-Franco (2023) reported that it is easier for younger children to transition and acclimate into blended families as opposed to adolescents, as they find it easier to adjust and form bonds with new people. This is not to say that all adolescents experience difficulties transitioning into blended families. However, it is highly likely since adolescents experience many physical, emotional, social, psychological and educational changes during this time and can only manage a certain number of changes before they begin to struggle and require additional guidance (Purswell & Taylor, 2013).

Adolescents who transition into blended families endure numerous stressors and adjustments as they accustom to new family members and adjust to new family dynamics that may differ from their original family dynamics (Bates & Bates, 2022).

These stressors and adjustments endured by adolescents can result in ramifications to their psychological, physical, mental and socio-emotional health, as well as their educational achievements and well-being however, this is not always the case (Gul et al., 2019). For example, adolescents who have feelings of resentment toward their parents because of their divorces take longer to transition effectively into their new blended families, compared to adolescents who feel happy that their parents found love again after the deaths of their spouses.

1.3 The focus and purpose of the study

This study focused on the experiences of adolescents transitioning into blended families, specifically from a selected high school in the Umlazi District. The study further sought to examine how these adolescents navigated their adjustment to their new family dynamics. Through addressing this gap in South African literature on blended families, the study sought to provide valuable insights and contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

1.4 Problem statement

Despite significant social and political changes that have occurred in South Africa (SA) in recent decades, including rising divorce rates and an increased number of blended families, there is evidence of a lack of support of these families in national policies. The Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education of 2001 provides guidelines and strives to create and achieve inclusive education within SA (DoE, 2001). While the document should be commended for placing strategies in place to support and help learners experiencing several barriers to learning, it fails to acknowledge, address or include support for learners who face unique challenges resulting from their transitions into their blended families (DoE, 2001). The question then remains of how can key role players such as the DBE, teachers, parents and stepparents support these learners if they are either unaware of what blended families are or what challenges these learners and children are experiencing. This study seeks to bridge this gap by providing insights into the experiences of adolescents transitioning into blended families, thereby informing these policymakers, educators and parents.

1.5 The rationale of this study

This study was driven by personal, professional and policy development motivations. Personally, my close friends' sudden thrust into a blended family during high school caused her many challenges including emotional outbursts, feelings of resentment and abandonment and her academic achievements drastically declined (Wasserman, 2020). Her experiences highlighted my lack of understanding about blended families as well as the need for better support systems for these learners at school level.

Professionally, my Bachelor of Education (B Ed) teaching practice revealed that many learners from blended families did not get along with their new family members, did not like going home, were not doing well academically, did not have many friends and exhibited isolating and emotionally troubled behaviour (O'Hara et al., 2019; Sorek, 2019). This revealed that many learners from blended families lacked adequate psychosocial support both at school and at home.

From a policy perspective, the Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa of 2021 fails to acknowledge, recognise or provide support for blended families (DSD, 2021). This thus necessitates research to advocate for their inclusion and support within legislation and policies.

1.6 Significance of the study

The findings of this study are expected to raise awareness among South African legislators and policymakers about the need to acknowledge, include and support blended families. Larsson (2021), advocated this as he explained that citizens are exposed to new concepts, policies, and laws from their governments, and the exclusion of groups of people fosters a culture of ignorance, intolerance, and judgement.

This study also expects to influence the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to incorporate the teaching of psychosocial support into teacher training programs and encourage the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to provide workshops to educate teachers who are currently in the workforce about blended families and the psychosocial support that they can provide to these learners. Moreover, the DBE may be inspired to implement inclusions in the Life Orientation

curriculum so that learners are taught about blended families and how to cope with changes to their family dynamic.

This study is also expected to help adolescents as key role players such as parents, stepparents and teachers will gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences transitioning into blended families. Orben et al. (2020) claimed that these key role players do not understand the totality of adolescents experiences as they often hide their feelings and emotions and usually tend to only share them with their peers. Through learning of their holistic experiences, these role players will be able to provide more applicable and effective support to guide their children and learners during this time of family upheaval.

1.7 Objectives of the study

The main aims of the study are:

1. To explore the experiences of adolescents at a selected high school in the Umlazi District as they transition into blended families.
2. To examine how adolescents at a selected high school in the Umlazi District navigate their adjustment to their blended families.

1.8 Key research questions

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the experiences of adolescents at a selected high school in the Umlazi District as they transition into blended families?
2. How do adolescents at a selected high school in the Umlazi District navigate their adjustment to their blended families?

1.9 Clarification of key concepts

Tam and Findlay (2017), explain that concepts related to family and family dynamics are compound and intricate. A comprehensive explanation of terms related to the study is necessary as it increases the understanding of the research phenomenon. The following section defines key terms that are related to the study:

1.9.1 Adolescence

Adolescence is a transitional period between childhood and adulthood, typically between ages ten to nineteen years (WHO, 2023). It is a critical stage that is characterised by significant physical, cognitive, emotional, social and psychological changes (Gul, 2015; Levin, 2017).

1.9.2 Types of families

Family refers to a group of people related to one another through biological ties, legal status or residence (Tam & Findlay, 2017, p. 6; Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Nuclear families are traditional families consisting of two parents and their children (Sear, 2021). Comparatively blended families include children from previous relationships of one or both partners (Manton, 2014). In both types of families, the partners do not have to be married and they can also include partners that are part of the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual) community (Parihar et al., 2017; Rawstrone, 2022).

1.9.3 Parents

Parents can be biological or adoptive and these are individuals that are responsible for the care and upbringing of their children (Bigner & Gerhardt, 2019). Stepparents are not biologically related to a child but assume the role of a parent through marriage to the child's parent (Ganong et al., 2021).

1.9.4 Siblings

Siblings are individuals that share at least one parent (Beer, 2017). Full siblings share the same biological parents, half-siblings share one biological parent, and stepsiblings are related only through their parents' marriage (Landon et al., 2020; Wiemers, 2019).

1.9.5 Transition

Transition refers to the process of individuals moving into new family structures and dynamics, often involving significant adjustment periods (Manton, 2014).

1.10. Delimitations of the study

Delimitations refer to the study's boundaries set out by the researcher (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). This study is delimited to adolescents aged ten to eighteen that attend a selected high school in the Queensburgh area, South of Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN). Primary schools in the Queensburgh area were excluded due difficulty obtaining permission from principals for learner participation.

1.11 Outline of the study

This study comprises five chapters, including:

1.11.1 Chapter One

Chapter One focuses on the introduction and background of the study. This chapter aims to give the reader an overview and understanding of the study. The chapter presents the background, focus, purpose, problem statement, significance, rationale, objectives, key research questions and delimitations of the study. The chapter draws to a close with a conceptualisation of the key terms and ends with an outline of the study chapters.

1.11.2 Chapter Two

Chapter Two presents a comprehensive and extensive literature review and theoretical framework. The literature review highlights the current composition of information as well as detailed explanations of the gaps within the existing literature surrounding the research topic. The chapter then details the theoretical framework, namely, the MMFF and how it was framed, integrated and used as a lens for this study to support the findings of Chapter Four.

1.11.3 Chapter Three

Chapter Three focuses on the research design and methodology utilised in this study. The chapter includes details regarding the research paradigm, approach, design, selection of participants, and study area. The chapter then describes the data

generation methods and procedures and the data analysis method applied to the study. Details surrounding how trustworthiness was ensured, and ethical considerations that were made are also provided.

1.11.4 Chapter Four

Chapter Four emphasises the presentation of the data and discussion of findings that were gathered and transcribed from both semi-structured interviews and diaries. The chapter presents the data gathered from the twelve research participants according to two main themes: adolescents' experiences transitioning into blended families and adolescents' adjustment to their blended families.

1.11.5 Chapter Five

Chapter Five presents the summary, recommendations and conclusion. The chapter reiterates the themes generated from the data and findings of Chapter Four and deduces conclusions from this. This chapter also presents limitations, recommendations and implications of further research and draws to a close with a conclusion.

1.12 Chapter summary

Chapter One introduced and provided a background to this study. The chapter highlighted information regarding the background, focus, purpose, significance, problem statement, rationale, objectives, key research questions and delimitations of the study. Moreover, it provided a comprehensive conceptualisation of key terms related to the study and detailed the outline of chapters of this study. The next chapter will provide detailed explanations of relevant literature related to the phenomenon of blended families, and explain the theoretical framework that framed this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter (Chapter One) highlighted the background and introduction to the study. Emphasis was placed on the study's focus, problem statement, rationale, significance and purpose. The chapter then proceeded to frame the objectives and key research questions before clarifying key concepts related to the study. The chapter ended by detailing the delimitations and an outline of the study chapters.

This chapter presents a comprehensive literature review surrounding the topic of blended families and the theoretical framework that shaped the study. The literature review focuses on different aspects of blended families, such as their formation, relationships, criteria of successful blended families and blended families within the South African context. The review then highlights the transition into blended families, the challenges of this process and is followed by the presentation of literature surrounding adolescent development and the effects that being part of blended families has on them. Lastly, an explanation of the MMFF, which served as the theoretical framework for this study, is presented.

2.2 Literature review

A literature review is a comprehensive presentation, review and analysis of current and past literature surrounding a particular topic. It is important as it assists researchers in gaining foundational knowledge of their topic and identifying gaps in which they can locate their study (Snyder, 2019). This literature review takes a thematic approach and organises literature according to four main themes: the nature of blended families, transitioning into blended families, adolescent development and factors influencing adolescents within blended families.

2.2.1 The nature of blended families

This section discusses the nature of blended families in terms of their background and formation. Emphasis will be placed on the formation of blended families and the criteria

for creating effective blended families. The discussion will then continue to describe the relationships within blended families and end by illuminating information surrounding blended families within the South African context.

2.2.1.1 The formation of blended families

Historically, blended families were formed due to the death of a spouse and parent. It was only in the 1970s that blended families started forming as a result of divorce and by the 1990s, they were predominantly formed due to remarriage or re-partnering (Cartwright & Gibson, 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2017). This illustrates the rise of blended families and highlights the upsurge in divorce rates in the past few decades. Blended families are unique in their structure as they follow non-traditional timelines as partners already have a child or children and have recently been through a divorce, separation or have been widowed (Sanner, 2018).

Blended families are often formed through instant cohabitation or sudden marriages as partners are often older and have their children's emotional and developmental stability to consider. This means that they do not have the luxury of spending years getting to know their new partner (Travers, 2021). Correspondingly, they are also formed through a significant amount of grief and a multitude of losses such as the loss of a partner, original parent, original family home, financial contribution by an original parent, original family dynamics and routines, as well as a loss of sense of self due to the separation from original family members (Aslam et al., 2015; Jensen et al., 2017; Wood, 2015).

Attachment and familial bonds are also important concepts to consider in the formation of blended families. Attachment is the secure and significant relationship between two individuals comprising of care, comfort and pleasure (Migena et al., 2022). Children entering blended family arrangements must learn to form attachments and bonds with their stepparent and stepsiblings and this is often difficult as the expectation is for them to form instant bonds with their new family members (Papernow, 2017). Fein et al. (2019) maintained that the development of secure attachments and bonds takes time and is further complicated due to personality clashes or negative feelings caused by children's resistance to accept their blended family. Parents and stepparents must

thus be patient with their children, as it takes time for children to get comfortable and form loving bonds with new family members.

2.2.1.2 Criteria for creating effective blended families

It is idealistic to assume that newly formed blended family dynamics will be harmonious from their onset. Instead, there is bound to be a period of adjustment in which all family members negotiate and accustom themselves to new rules, routines, personalities and relationships (Bean et al., 2021). Waleleng et al. (2023) confirmed this and claimed that creating effective blended families takes time, effort, and patience.

There are certain specific criteria that blended families should consider, comprehend, and master to transform into effective blended families. Firstly, blended families must develop, negotiate and agree upon family rules, boundaries and routines to function effectively (Miran-Khan, 2017). Children need to respect the parental authority of their new stepparents, and stepparents need to approach the setting of new rules, boundaries and routines with their new stepchildren with patience and understanding so that the family unit can function cohesively and with as little conflict as possible (Lahad et al., 2017).

Additionally, these rules, boundaries and routines should try to be as close to their 'original' families' as possible so that the children feel some sense of normalcy in their lives that are in a current state of confusion (de la Rosa & Millán-Franco, 2023; Phillips et al., 2018). This process is often challenging for children to comprehend as they may be confused about why they have to follow new rules, boundaries and routines. Thus, parents and stepparents need to guide and assist them in clearing any confusion and worries that they may have and provide them with leniency (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2020; Ganong & Sanner, 2023). The provision of leniency will allow children to adjust better as opposed to if they were immediately reprimanded for not adhering to these new rules, boundaries and routines that they still need to learn and become familiar with.

It is also imperative that blended families identify and finalise each family member's designated roles to eliminate what Miran-Khan (2017) called 'role muddling' in which

new family members do not understand their new roles. Examples of roles to be discussed include; which parent is responsible for school drop off and pick up and the division of chores amongst the children. The process of role identification is difficult for new stepparents, as they enter blended family arrangements with blurred roles and responsibilities, considering that they may have previously not had children of their own and have no legal rights to their stepchildren (Gachenia et al., 2021). This leaves them in a period of limbo in which they are uncertain of their parental power or boundaries and sometimes their stepchildren can take advantage of this by coercing their new stepparents to allow activities their original parents would not condone.

Correspondingly, non-resident parents (the child's other parent who is not part of the new blended family) also need to be consulted on the role identification process. Even though they are not directly part of the blended family, the roles of the new stepparent directly affect their child or children (Bean et al., 2021). It is, therefore, imperative that parents, non-resident parents and stepparents are respectful, effectively communicate and agree upon roles involving their children to avoid conflict and confusion.

The creation of affective communication is also paramount for the effectiveness of a blended family. Affective communication concerns family members appropriately sharing their feelings and thoughts with each other (Ran et al., 2021). The newly formed blended family members may feel a variety of positive and negative emotions and they should create and foster open communication so that their members feel comfortable sharing their feelings (Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017). Family members need to share their feelings so that they can cope with them, and this is especially true for negative feelings so that they do not manifest into bad behaviour habits or have negative ramifications on their mental health. Ayithey et al. (2022) explained that this form of open and honest communication is likely to cause the development of appropriate conflict resolution skills so that the family can negotiate and handle conflicts appropriately, resulting in harmony and conducive family relationships.

2.2.1.3 Relationships within blended families

Family relationships are important as they are the building blocks of any family. A presence of healthy and conducive relationships within blended families are vital, as these relationships can make or break the family (Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2023).

The following are the different relationships that require harmony for the blended family to function optimally:

2.2.1.3.1 The partner relationship

The most important relationship within the blended family is the partner relationship, as these two partners formed the initial union and if their relationship fails, it will result in the blended family being broken and separated (Jensen et al., 2017). Martin-Uzzi and Duval-Tsioles (2013) confirmed this and reported that blended family partners are more susceptible to expeditious declines in their relationship and marriage satisfaction when compared to first time married couples and therefore have a higher risk of separation. Partners must therefore, establish and maintain effective communication, a strong romantic bond, respect, understanding, flexibility, conflict resolution skills, and compassion for each other to maintain their relationship (Sloan, 2021). The establishment of a stable relationship foundation between the two partners is important as it sets the tone and example for the relationships among the rest of the family members.

2.2.1.3.2 The parent/stepparent and child relationship

Children should have close and harmonious relationships with their original parents, including their non-resident parents. Nixon and Hadfield (2016) maintained that if children have close relationships with their original parents, transitioning into their new blended families is easier, and they experience less stress. Establishing conducive parent-child relationships ensures that children feel comfortable expressing their feelings and this can enable their parents to assist in emotional stability and prevent them from feeling abandoned or resentful (Ward & Limb, 2019).

The relationship children develop with their new stepparent is also vital to ensuring harmony within the family. Stepparents should reassure their new stepchildren that they are not replacing their original parents and develop good relationships by showing interest in their likes and hobbies and building connections with them (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Stepparents are often viewed as outsiders, and the portrayal of them in the media as being evil and cruel does not help their image but instead makes children more likely to view them as threats instead of allies (Gates, 2018). This makes

it harder for stepparents to form healthy relationships with their stepchildren as it takes significant convincing and good actions to eliminate their negative perception of them. If children develop poor relationships with their stepparents, Njoroge & Kirori (2018) stated that it is likely to have a causal effect and negatively influence the relationships they have with their original parents, as children can sometimes feel that their parents are taking their stepparent's side instead of theirs.

2.2.1.3.3 The sibling relationship

Sibling, stepsibling and half-sibling relationships are another critical relationship within blended families as children who are close in age rely on each other for emotional support (Oliver, 2018). The presence of stepsiblings and half-siblings in new blended families can be difficult for children to adjust to, as the assumption is that they should immediately have a good relationship with these instant siblings whom they barely even know. Instead, children need time to adjust to new people and personalities, and not every person will have a good relationship with each other (Ward & Limb, 2019). Mostafa et al. (2018) advocates that parents and stepparents must intervene and guide their children towards having good relationships with each other. Some personality clashes and fights may occur, but Turunen (2014) claimed that this is normal and that parents and stepparents should resolve these issues immediately before they lead to significant conflicts and feelings of resentment among siblings as this could have a ripple effect on all family members.

2.2.1.3.4 The co-parenting relationship

Co-parenting refers to parents' taking joint responsibility for caring for and rearing their children and requires parents to communicate, make decisions, coordinate and support each other to raise their child or children while keeping the best interests of the child or children at heart (Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). The dissolution of a relationship between partners does not mean that it is the end of their parental link as these ex-partners must still co-parent and effectively communicate with each other to benefit the children they share (Ajenjo-Cosp & Garcia-Saladrigas, 2016). Ex-partners must establish and maintain effective communication and make joint decisions in terms of their children, as Favez et al. (2019) reported that less conflict between co-parents decreases stress among children. Co-parents should thus serve as guides for

their children during the transition into their blended families and assist them in making the transition process as smoothly as possible.

2.2.1.4 Blended families within the South African context

The latest report on *“Marriage and Divorce”* indicated that 18,208 couples proceeded with divorces in 2021 and of these divorce applicants, 10,308 had children younger than eighteen (Statistics South Africa, 2023b). This exemplifies that more than half of the divorced couples had children who had to endure family breakdowns. Statistics South Africa (2023a) also reported on children's living arrangements and found that 19.5 percent did not live with either parent, 32.7 percent lived with both parents, 3.7 percent lived only with their father, and 44.1 percent lived only with their mother.

A study by Motha (2018) aligned with these statistics as he reported that extended families are most common in SA, compared to other countries across the globe, with 70 percent of children living with other family members or family friends. These findings are also verified by the Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa, which stated that nuclear families are the least common type of family structure in the country (DSD, 2021). These statistics are eye-opening as they demonstrate a large number of South African children living in unique family structures including blended families.

The Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education stated that the education system must transform to accommodate the full learning needs (DoE, 2001, p. 11). This includes learners transitioning into blended families as they are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable during this time and require psychosocial support from their school and teachers (Schaan et al., 2019). Psychosocial support addresses and strengthens a learner's needs and ability to cope and overcome psychological, mental, social and emotional disturbances to achieve well-being (Gurgan, 2020). Pillay et al. (2023) maintained that many South African schools and teachers are under-resourced and incapable of providing psychosocial support to their learners. Consequently, many adolescents transitioning into blended families are left trying to manage and cope with the transition by themselves, and this is often difficult as they are not psychologically, emotionally and socially mature or equipped enough to manoeuvre through this transitional period alone without adult assistance.

The KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education [KZN DoE] (2020) released a document entitled *“Network of Support Providers for School Psychosocial and Health Support Services for Learners”*, which is exemplary in that it provides schools, teachers, learners and parents with information and contact details of various psychosocial support service establishments and personnel who can assist learners, such as psychologists, hospitals, police stations, speech therapists and social workers. This document is commendable in terms of the DoE’s effort to support its teachers and learners. However, the Umlazi District (where this study is based) does not have a designated psychologist like the other districts in KZN (KZN DoE, 2020). Moreover, each district only has one allocated therapeutic support personnel per category to assist learners at multiple schools in the entire district (KZN DoE, 2020). These are eye-opening facts as they demonstrate how under-resourced the DoE is in providing effective, quality and appropriate psychosocial support to its learners.

It should also be acknowledged that a fair amount of blended family studies have been conducted within the research space, however, very few studies have been conducted on blended families in SA. While reviewing literature, I discovered only three studies conducted in SA (Basson, 2007; Davids et al., 2016; Moore, 2011). This study is unique in that the geographical location is within the KZN province in which no blended family studies were conducted, as previous South African studies were conducted in the North West, Gauteng and Western Cape provinces (Basson, 2007; Davids et al., 2016; Moore, 2011).

This study also provides a multicultural and multiracial perspective regarding adolescents’ experiences transitioning into blended families. This bridges a gap as prior studies focused on a maximum of two races and cultures. To demonstrate, the study by Borrine et al. (1991) focused solely on the experiences of White adolescents and the study by Gul and Nadeemullah (2017), focused only on the experiences of Pakistani adolescents. Similarly, in terms of the three blended family studies conducted in SA, the study by Basson (2007) only included White participants, the study by Davids et al. (2016) only included Black African and White participants, and the study by Moore (2011) only included White participants. This study is unique, as it includes Black African, Indian and White participants. Documenting the experiences

of adolescents of all cultural and racial groups is helpful, especially in a country like SA, which has a unique blend of many different races and cultures.

This theme of the literature review served as valuable information as it added insight to the study's research objectives by demonstrating children's experiences at the beginning of their transition into their blended families. This theme also provided further information surrounding the formation of blended families, the criteria for effective blended families, relationships within blended families and blended families within the South African context.

2.2.2 Transitioning into blended families

Transition in terms of blended families refers to individuals moving into new family structures with different family dynamics (Beer, 2017). This section of the literature review focuses on the nature and challenges experienced when transitioning into blended families.

2.2.2.1 The nature of transitioning into blended families

Perry-Fraser and Fraser (2016) created the term 'transition daze' and maintained that it includes the first few years following the formation of a blended family and is likely to be tempestuous and conflict-ridden until the family members learn to adjust and function cohesively. Blended families endure numerous transitions, such as the termination of the original marriage between partners, the formation of a new partnership, the adjustment to cohabitating with new family members, as well as the change from an original to a blended family structure, relationships and dynamics (Bean et al., 2021; Kumar, 2017).

During the transition into blended families, children often receive little or no support and are often informed of their parent's decision to create blended families through the announcement of their marriages or the sudden cohabitation of their new stepparents in their homes (Cartwright, 2010). Transitions require a significant amount of empathy towards children who often experience immense confusion during this time and they are more likely to be burdensome to children who view the transition as overwhelming and unwarranted as opposed to those who are happy and welcome the

change to their family (Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017). Purswell and Taylor (2013) maintained that the effective and complete transition of blended families could take between five to seven years. In contrast, Favez et al. (2019) proposed that the effective transition into a blended family could take six months to ten years however, this is dependent on the subjectivity of circumstances and feelings of individual members of the family.

Family researcher Patricia Papernow (2017) proposed seven stages of family development as follows:

- The Fantasy Stage: Members of the blended family maintain idealistic and unrealistic expectations of members their family.
- The Immersion Stage: Expectations held by family members are ruptured, and they notice challenges existing within their family.
- The Awareness Stage: Various members of the family attempt to comprehend the confusion they are experiencing.
- The Mobilisation Stage: Members of the family first attempt negotiation and conflict resolution and express their emotions and feelings to each other.
- The Action Stage: Family members establish a solid foundation.
- The Contact Stage: Members form strong emotional bonds with each other.
- The Resolution Stage: A stable family unit is established.

These stages depict the development of families, and Papernow maintained that effective blended families are able to successfully accomplish and overcome each stage (Lloyd-Hazlett, 2020). Some blended families may accomplish all seven stages quickly, whereas others may get stuck on one stage and experience difficulties with it for months or even years (Broder, 2022). This demonstrates that blended families develop at their own pace and that all blended family experiences are subjective and are based on unique circumstances.

2.2.2.2 Challenges experienced during the transition into blended families

Every family endures and overcomes challenges at some point, and blended families are no different. The formation of blended families results in stress and destabilisation, which challenges its family members (Nixon & Hadfield, 2016). However, not all

blended families experience challenges; instead, some may experience no challenges, are harmonious and function optimally from the beginning of their formation.

A significant challenge experienced by numerous blended families revolves around family members conjuring up unrealistic expectations. It is common for people to create expectations concerning different situations. However, blended family members' expectations are often unrealistic and based on nuclear family dynamics, which is problematic, as these expectations are based on normative family structures which are different from those of blended families (Perales et al., 2017). The creation of unrealistic expectations often leads to negative emotions such as disappointment, shame, embarrassment, anger and frustration when a family member discovers that their expectations have not been met or exceeded (Kumar, 2017). This is confirmed by Gul and Nadeemullah (2017), who found that 40.6 percent of children felt embarrassed while 72.4 percent felt insecure and inferior, due to their broken families.

Blended families deal with many changes while adjusting to their new family dynamic and another challenge is the issue of children's loyalty ties. Loyalty ties refer to children upholding faithfulness, devotion and commitment to their parents (Nixon & Hadfield, 2016). Most children in blended family dynamics express strong loyalty to their original parents, and therefore they experience difficulties building bonds with their new stepparents and stepsiblings (Sanner et al., 2020). These children sometimes feel that if they form loving and close bonds with their new stepparents, that they are disloyal, betraying and trying to replace their non-resident parents. This results in children finding themselves in the middle of a lose-lose situation, in which they feel that their non-resident parents and their new stepparents will be angry at them for forming strong relationships with each other.

Another significant challenge that blended families endure is the issue of stigma and stereotypes. Blended families are typically not viewed in a positive light by mainstream media and social narratives, and this is especially true regarding how society views stepmothers, who are depicted as being wicked and cruel in many books and movies (Aslam et al., 2015). There is also a societal view that the prefix 'step' has negative

connotations, resulting in stepparents feeling inferior and considering themselves less than full parents (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013).

These stereotypes and stigmas further reinforce the idea that non-nuclear families are lacking in some way, which is detrimental to the survival of blended families (Anakwe et al., 2020; Kumar, 2017). Adding to this is the stigma, judgement and the casting of shame from society on people being divorced and children coming from 'broken homes' (Miran-Khan, 2017). This often results in couples trying to fake or replicate nuclear family dynamics, which often will not work, and they will also often stay within a dysfunctional blended family so that they do not experience another 'failed marriage' (Musavi et al., 2018). This act is unhealthy and results in monumental conflicts, which, in turn, affects the couple and the children. The challenge for blended families is to overcome these stereotypes and stigmas, which in some cultures and social groups proves to be an uphill battle compared to others.

Blended families also experience difficulties in establishing new family identities. A family identity refers to how the family shares views, morals, rituals, beliefs, habits and passions (Gates, 2018). Members of blended families must adjust from nuclear to blended family dynamics and this makes forming new blended family identities difficult, as most blended families only have nuclear family blueprints as depictions of healthy family identities (Miran-Khan, 2017). It is also important to reiterate that blended families are formed from grief and loss, and this makes the creation of new family identities difficult as members of the family, especially children, experience emotional challenges trying to let go of the old family identity that they had been used to (Sanner et al., 2020). Establishing blended family identities takes time since adjustments are required from all family members, who may sometimes have different ideas on what their family identity is about.

This theme highlighted significant information relating to the objectives of this study as it demonstrated the challenges and the transition process thereby relating to this study's objective two surrounding how adolescents navigate their adjustment to their new blended families.

2.2.3 Adolescent development

The WHO (2023) state that adolescence is a critical transitional period between childhood and adulthood from ages ten to nineteen. This section provides a comprehensive background surrounding adolescent development. Explanations surrounding adolescents' physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial development will be presented.

2.2.3.1 Physical development

Physical development refers to the anatomical changes in an adolescent's body triggered by the onset of puberty (Preedy et al., 2020). All adolescents experience puberty, characterised by the emergence and fluctuation of hormones, which lead to significant developmental changes, including physiological changes (Berenbaum et al., 2015). Adolescents begin to experience rapid physical changes from age ten; however, female adolescents encounter puberty earlier than male adolescents, meaning that for a brief time, female adolescents are taller and more physically mature than their male peers (Brown et al., 2017). Both male and female adolescents also experience physical changes to their bodies in pubic hair growth, growth spurts, weight gain, changes in body shape and the development of secondary sex characteristics (Best & Ban, 2021). Female adolescents also undergo breast development and the beginning of their menstrual cycle, whereas male adolescents experience an enlargement of their testes as well as a drop in their voice pitch (Levin, 2017).

These physical changes also accompany pubertal hormone shifts, which cause changes that affect adolescents' mood and sleep cycles (Waleleng et al., 2023). Adolescents experience an array of hormonal and physical changes, which in turn cause a destabilisation phase in their lives. The addition of transitioning into blended families during this time cause even more changes, which are likely to lead to feelings of confusion which Nixon and Hadfield (2016) and Berenbaum et al. (2015) claimed makes adolescents more resistant to accepting their new family dynamics as they feel overwhelmed by all the changes occurring in their lives.

2.2.3.2 Cognitive development

Cognitive development relates to the advancement of an adolescent's brain, which influences their ability to think and learn (Nketia et al., 2021). Jean Piaget created the Cognitive Development Theory in 1936, proposing that changes in cognition occur as children grow up. Stage four of this theory, the 'Formal Operational Stage', affects adolescents aged twelve and up (Babakr et al., 2019). Individuals at this stage enhance their abstract thinking abilities and can think logically, test hypotheses and form and follow logical arguments (Brown et al., 2017). Carpendale et al. (2020) further explained that they can also excel at problem-solving, tackle hypothetical problems, and offer many possible solutions and consequences to solve such problems.

Even though Piaget's theory proposes that adolescents at stage four can think and function like adults, it is important to be aware that they are still within the lower age range of the stage. This means that they lack effective decision-making skills as the prefrontal cortex of their brain is still underdeveloped and this leads to them engaging in risky behaviours and making poor decisions (Best & Ban, 2021; Bjorklund, 2022). Relating to this study, it is likely that the participants of this study align with the Formal Operational Stage as they are adolescents and this means that they possess the cognitive ability to recognize and describe their feelings and form logical conclusions concerning their blended family based on reflections of their experiences.

2.2.3.3 Emotional development

Emotional development refers to adolescents' ability to comprehend, manage and regulate their feelings and emotions (Hoemann et al., 2019). Adolescence is characterised by emotional sensitivity, meaning that adolescents experience feelings and emotions more intensely than children and adults (Casey et al., 2017). Adolescents also experience difficulties with emotion regulation, which moderates the intensity and duration of positive and negative feelings (Karibeeran & Mohanty, 2019). Due to their fluctuating hormones, adolescents struggle with emotional sensitivity and emotional regulation and, therefore, experience mood swings and exhibit emotional outbursts. Similarly, one of the most important influences on adolescents' emotion regulation abilities is their parents as they learn how to manage their emotions from

them (Morris et al., 2017). Hence, parents and stepparents must regulate and manage their feelings and emotions well to lead their children by example.

There is also an increased likelihood of mental health disorders and disruptions during adolescence because adolescents experience an increase in high-intensity positive and negative emotions compared to adults (McLaughlin et al., 2015; Pekrun, 2017). Orben et al. (2020) found that 75 percent of adults with mental health disorders said they had experienced such symptoms during adolescence. Interestingly, female adolescents have been known to experience more high-intensity emotions and are more susceptible to mental health disorders compared to male adolescents (Bailen et al., 2019). The participants of this study are therefore likely to be emotionally sensitive and, therefore, might express high-intensity emotions regarding their transition experiences. Moreover, how they exhibit their feelings and emotions should be closely observed as it is likely to provide insight into their dynamic with their parents and stepparents as adolescents replicate the emotion regulation they learned from their family members.

2.2.3.4 Psychosocial development

Psychosocial development concerns the evolution of an adolescent's personality and social skills (Kunnen et al., 2019). During adolescence, individuals seek to find their identity, develop their personality and discover where and how they fit into their social world (Gul & Nadeemullah, 2017; Motamedi, 2020). During this time, they also increase their self-awareness and distance themselves from their families; instead, they are increasingly influenced by their peers (Sumari et al., 2019). This is confirmed by Orben et al. (2020), who stated that adolescents seek peer acceptance and spend more time with their peers than with their families.

Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development of 1950 describes how social interactions and relationships play a role in the development of individuals (Knight, 2016). There are eight psychosocial stages of development and at each stage, an individual faces a psychosocial crisis they must overcome to develop their personality and accumulate developmental virtues and psychological strengths (Gachenia et al., 2021; Samsanovich, 2021). Stage five, the 'identity versus role confusion' stage, relates to this study as it focuses on individuals aged twelve to eighteen. The crisis at

this stage is identity development, which refers to the values and beliefs that make up an individual's personality and influence their behaviour (Branje & Koper, 2018).

Erikson states that adolescents at this stage need to discover their sexual and occupational identity, and the achievement of that then results in effective identity formation, and contrastingly, failure to achieve this causes role confusion and insecurity (Maree, 2021). This stage could be problematic for the participants of this study, as family plays a massive role in forming one's identity, and the dissolution of an adolescent's original family structure may affect their identity formation during these teenage years. Perales et al. (2017) confirmed this as they found that adolescents from non-traditional family structures often experience difficulties finding their personal and social identities compared to adolescents from traditional family structures.

This theme of the literature review aligned with this study's first objective relating to adolescents' experiences as it provided valuable insight regarding the physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial development that adolescents experience during the time of their transition.

2.2.4 Factors influencing adolescents within blended families

This section focuses on the factors influencing adolescents within blended families. It presents information regarding the adjustment of adolescents within blended families and describes the psychosocial, socio-emotional and educational effects that transitioning into blended families has on them.

2.2.4.1 Adolescent adjustment within blended families

Transitioning into blended families during adolescence is not an easy task for adolescents who are already experiencing substantial physical, cognitive, social and emotional changes. Therefore, adolescents prefer to keep the remaining sectors of their lives, such as their childhood home, constant so they are not overwhelmed. However, Raley and Sweeney (2020) reported that most adolescents experience geographical location changes during their transition, disrupting their familiar foundations. Adolescent's parents also play a significant role in their transition as they guide and teach their children how to effectively operate within two family systems

(Ward & Limb, 2019). Therefore, adolescents must develop and maintain healthy relationships with their parents as Digon (2023) reported that if adolescents have close relationships with their parents filled with mutual trust, respect and effective communication, their transition into blended families is less stressful.

Transitioning into blended family arrangements often occurs after adolescents lose one of their parents through death or divorce. Parental loss diminishes an adolescent's identity and the grief they experience never fully heals, which thus makes them cautious about immersing themselves in a new family for fear that they will lose that family as well (Bates & Bates, 2022). The adjustment into a new family is made even more difficult if the adolescent's parents are engaging in tumultuous custody battles, which often puts them in the middle whilst their parents engage in a tug-of-war-like battle over them (Dowling & Barnes, 2020). Tullius et al. (2020) confirmed this and explained that this puts adolescents in a difficult position, making them reluctant to accept their new blended families as their 'original families' issues are not yet resolved.

Adolescents who transition into blended families at a younger age are also more likely to adjust more quickly and effectively compared to older adolescents who have to adjust to new families. The introduction of new family members, especially new stepparents, to an adolescent is also anxiety-inducing as they find it burdensome to meet new people, as opposed to younger children who find meeting new people exciting and are able to form bonds and attachments with them more easily (Bormanaki & Khoshhal, 2017). Similarly, adolescents conceptualise stepparents in different ways as they view them as either a family member, a friend, an acquaintance or an enemy and are likely to reject their new stepparent, especially if they experience tension or conflict with them from the beginning (Hadfield & Nixon, 2013). It is, therefore, important that stepparents are gradually introduced to their new stepchildren so they are not overwhelmed and taken by surprise.

It is also highly probable that adolescents are provided with little to no preparation from their original parents about their transition, as blended families are formed rather quickly and they perceive this to be unfair as many of them are not given a voice or a choice and have to simply comply with their parent's decision to re-partner (Cartwright, 2010). This often makes adolescents unwilling and unaccepting of their blended family from the beginning which results in them exhibiting angry, indifferent or avoidant

attitudes, which delay the formation of a loving and harmonious family (Gachenia et al., 2021). Wasserman (2020) described a concept known as differential sensitivity, wherein adolescent males and females have varying responses to the same quality and quantity of social and emotional inputs and found that male adolescents are more affected by the transition into blended families and are more susceptible to emotional and behavioural issues compared to female adolescents. These findings are confirmed by Gul and Nadeemullah (2017) and Njoroge and Kirori (2018), who also found that male adolescents are more sensitive to familial changes and exhibit troublesome behaviours when compared to female adolescents.

2.2.4.2 Psychosocial effects of blended families on adolescents

Adolescents may demonstrate difficulties in internalising and externalising behaviours, which means they struggle to cope with negative feelings and emotions and do not know how to deal with them (Favez et al., 2019). This becomes increasingly difficult if they experience tensions in their new blended families, as the situation causes feelings of confusion and anger, which they do not know how to manage healthily. Compared to adolescents living in nuclear families, adolescents living in blended families have an increased risk of exhibiting anti-social behaviour, aggression, depression and behavioural issues (Kumar, 2017). A study by Motamedi (2020) corroborated this and further found that 21.4 percent of adolescents experienced poor social adjustment, 49.7 percent experienced good social adjustment and 28.9 percent experienced average social adjustment in their new blended families.

Conflicts within the blended family household also affect adolescents by disrupting their identity and feelings of autonomy, and frequent unresolved conflicts reduce the effectiveness of their psychosocial adjustment (Branje, 2018). Adolescents experience feelings of rejection, self-blame, loneliness and insecurity during this time as their sense of self and identity is disrupted as they try to navigate their transition and rediscover their social standing (Yosep et al., 2022). Schaan et al. (2019) affirmed this notion and reported that adolescents from non-traditional family structures experience higher rates of attachment insecurity and resulting personality disorders compared to adolescents in traditional family structures.

Stress is the body's reaction to a demand, situation, stimuli, or challenge that a person perceives as overwhelming and a threat to their well-being (Hudson et al., 2015). The transition into blended families is a stressful experience for adolescents and it is important to clarify that each person perceives and reacts to stress differently and this often depends on factors such as personality, attitudes, sensitivity and maturity (Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017). Stressors within blended families include the pressure placed on them to have good relationships with their new family members, feelings of isolation and displacement, loss of personal and family identity, conflict and the customisation of new rules and boundaries (Harrison et al., 2019).

Adolescents experience higher levels of stress at the beginning of their transition into their blended families, as they feel confused and overwhelmed and feel as if they must compete for their parent's attention and affection due to the presence of new stepparents and step siblings (Turunen, 2014). Moreover, they have less experience, skills and resources to cope with stress than adults in blended families, and therefore, they experience difficulties for a longer time as they adjust to their new family dynamics (Dianovinina et al., 2023). This accentuates the fact that they need additional support, as many of them are not capable of coping with their stress by themselves, which may lead them to engage in risky behaviours, such as smoking, to deal with their stress. This is confirmed by Sumari et al. (2019), who maintained that adolescents' stress decreases if they feel that they have effective support, communication, strong bonds and can confide in their new family members.

2.2.4.3 Socio-emotional effects of blended families on adolescents

Socio-emotional competencies refer to adolescents' ability to recognise, manage and become self-aware of their emotions while maintaining the ability to develop and maintain healthy relationships with those around them (Wiley, 2021). During the adjustment period to new family dynamics, all family members undergo emotional adjustments as they adjust to new family members. However, persistent problematic emotional responses and behaviour indicates poor socio-emotional well-being (Yosep et al., 2022). Parents play a crucial role in maintaining their children's socio-emotional well-being as they are the adults that adolescents turn to for support during emotional challenges (Ho-tang et al., 2016). Morris et al. (2017) emphasises that parents need to closely monitor their children, especially during the first few months of transitioning

into their blended families. Signs such as depression, excessive eating or sleeping, aggression, isolation or emotional outbursts require timely intervention to restore their socio-emotional well-being.

Positive co-parenting relationships between original parents and stepparents can enhance adolescents' emotional well-being and self-esteem (Wiley, 2021). Conversely, tumultuous co-parenting relationships can lead to depression and feelings of guilt in adolescents, who may blame themselves for their parents' arguments and failed relationship (Orben et al., 2020). Post-divorce, adults often become preoccupied more with their own emotions, failing to recognise and address their child's emotional issues and often do not even have the capacity or resources to help them (Schaan et al., 2020). This neglect can heighten family conflict and prolong dysfunction, leading to increased anxiety and depressive behaviour among adolescents (Wang et al., 2020). Parents must therefore monitor their children's behaviour closely and open and empathetic communication is vital for adolescents to feel comfortable sharing their problems.

Adolescents in newly formed blended families are likely to exhibit anxiety, eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem and early experimentation with drugs and alcohol due to their difficulty in effectively coping with changes to their family dynamic (Yosep et al., 2022). Gul and Nadeemullah (2017) reported that 23.5 percent of adolescents experienced anxiety, 72.4 percent experienced feelings of inferiority and 47.1 percent experienced depression, due to their family disruptions. Female adolescents are at higher risk of developing depression and anxiety, while male adolescents are prone to behavioural problems in blended family situations (Tullius et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020).

2.2.4.4 Education and its effect on adolescents from blended families

A shift in family dynamics affects multiple sectors of an adolescent's life, including their education. The academic results of adolescents transitioning into blended families are even worse than those of younger children who transition into blended families (Njoroge & Kirori, 2018). This once again shows that the transition to new family dynamics has less effect on younger children, who tend to adapt more quickly and harmoniously to blended families. Moreover, it is surprising to note that parental loss

due to death has less of an academic impact on adolescents compared to parental loss due to divorce and that this is mostly caused by co-parent conflict between parents, non-resident parents and new stepparents (Apelian & Nesteruk, 2017; Guzzo & Gobbi, 2023).

Adolescents in blended families generally have a lower level of educational achievement compared to adolescents raised in nuclear families (Turunen, 2014). Perales et al. (2017) confirmed this and further reported that adolescents from blended families exhibit lower cognitive abilities, particularly in subjects requiring high standards in reading, mathematics, and verbal skills. However, not all transitions into blended families have negative consequences on an adolescent's educational achievements; in some cases, the transition can have positive effects. This is likely to occur within blended families where the introduction of new stepparents has the effect of pushing adolescents to work harder at school to impress them, particularly when the new stepparents are actively involved and show genuine interest in their stepchildren's education (Helgertz & Tegunimataka, 2023). Park and Holloway (2018) affirmed this and proposed that increased parental involvement is associated with higher grades, more academic motivation, better school attendance and higher levels of well-being.

When blended families are dysfunctional and experience high levels of conflict, emotional disturbances and low levels of parental involvement, it increases the risk of adolescents struggling academically and, in some cases, may even result in adolescents dropping out of school (Nicholson et al., 2007). Gul and Nadeemullah (2017) verified this and found that 26.5 percent of adolescents skipped school, 66.5 percent experienced unpleasant thoughts during their studies, and 30 percent experienced confusion during class because of disturbances at home. This demonstrates the importance of adolescents having conducive home environments that are healthy and harmonious, as this affects their academic progress. Additionally, Wasserman (2020) reported that male adolescents who transition into blended families experienced more academic difficulties and were more likely to be suspended compared to female adolescents, and this further affirmed the findings of Njoroge and Kirori (2018), who found that male adolescents are more sensitive to shifts in family dynamics and are likely to experience negative effects from that.

Studies by Brigman et al. (2022) and Papernow (2018) have proven that there has been an increased need for support and intervention at school by psychologists and counsellors considering the rising rates of mental health issues and family breakdowns that children experience. Learners at school need as much holistic support as they can get to help them navigate the transition into their blended families. In a study conducted in Australia, it was found that 70.4 percent of children from blended families received support from school psychologists and counsellors to help them with their transitions (Carson et al., 2018). Correspondingly, a study by Sloan (2021) also found that children transitioning into blended families greatly benefited from speaking to professionals such as psychologists and counsellors. Unfortunately, this process is difficult amongst the majority of South African schools and they are ill-equipped with school psychologists, counsellors or resources to help their learners (Pillay et al., 2023).

This section of the literature review presented invaluable information regarding the psychosocial, socio-emotional and educational effects that transitioning into blended families. This section thus significantly aligned with both of this study's objectives as it presented information surrounding both adolescents' experience and how they were able to navigate the challenges that they approached.

2.3 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework demonstrates the application of a theory or theories to provide insights into specific phenomena related to a study (Hughes et al., 2019; Kivunja, 2018). The MMFF was utilised in this study to gain insight into blended family functioning and the consequential experiences of adolescents within blended families.

2.3.1 The McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF)

The MMFF was developed in 1978 at the McMaster and Brown Universities under the supervision of Nathan Epstein and Duane Bishop and has evolved for thirty years, as a result of clinical research conducted with various families, to become the model that it is today (Keitner et al., 2019). It was developed using Systems Theory and a conceptual framework called '*The Family Categories Schema*', which included a study of one hundred and ten families (Epstein et al., 1978). The MMFF was established to

discover and analyse the effectiveness of functioning within families and classify them as functional or dysfunctional in family therapy settings (Naidoo, 2018). The goal of using the MMFF in family therapy was to assist therapists in guiding families to recognise and solve their problems through treatments and intervention strategies so that they could function healthily (Reetsang, 2020). By having access to this level of support, families were thus enabled to function harmoniously while maintaining the well-being of all family members.

The MMFF describes six family functioning dimensions: problem-solving, communication, roles, affective responsiveness, affective involvement and behaviour control. Researchers and therapists using this model should not only focus on one dimension but rather, multiple dimensions concerning families should be assessed and analyzed so that a holistic understanding of a family's functioning can be achieved (Reetsang, 2020). Members of functional, effective or healthy families can easily and successfully adapt to changes in their development and environment and cope well with family stressors (Yöntem, 2019). Functional families also experience very few family problems. However, the minor problems they do encounter are solved speedily through adjustment while having minimum negative effects on the family members and their functioning (Pourmovahed et al., 2021). Comparatively, members of dysfunctional, ineffective or unhealthy families experience parent-child relationships based on fear and hatred, exhibit continued impairments in one or more dimensions (explained below) and experience poor adjustment and problem-solving abilities, which then often lead to bigger family issues (Keitner et al., 2019). The six dimensions of the MMFF are described as follows:

2.3.1.1 Problem-solving

Dimension one in evaluating family functioning is called 'problem-solving' and refers to a family's ability to resolve problems while maintaining effective family functioning (Staccini et al., 2015). When a family has trouble finding a solution to a problem, it can threaten the integrity and optimal functioning of the family (Davids et al., 2016). The model states that not all issues and conflicts are classified as problems, as some problems and conflicts do not threaten the integrity and functioning of the family (Saeedpoor et al., 2019). For example, adult partners arguing over who left the dirty dishes in the kitchen sink does not threaten the functioning of the family.

Family problems are classified into two subdivisions: instrumental and affective problems. Instrumental problems are concerned with mechanical issues of everyday life, such as how the family's mortgage payment should be divided between the partners or deciding which house the newly formed blended family should live in (Wang et al., 2020). Affective problems concern issues and conflicts that relate to feelings and emotional experiences, such as the feelings of resentment that adolescents may feel when one of their parents remarries, and their reaction to this in the form of disruptive and problematic behaviour. Both types of problems should be treated as equally important as neglecting to solve these problems can result in feelings and behaviours that may cause the family to be considered dysfunctional (Pourmovahed et al., 2021). Sianko and McDonell (2020) explained that the more instrumental and affective problems a family can negotiate successfully, the more functional the family will be as they continue to exhibit their ability to resolve conflicts while maintaining the well-being of family members.

2.3.1.2 Communication

Dimension two of the MMFF, called 'communication', refers to how information is exchanged between family members (Oltean et al., 2020). Communication comprises both verbal and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication is attributed to individuals sharing their thoughts, opinions and ideas through their spoken voice and contrastingly, non-verbal communication refers to individuals utilising gestures, body movements and facial expressions to convey their feelings (Hall et al., 2019). The MMFF only focuses on verbal communication between family members (González & Rodríguez-Naranjo, 2023). It also focuses on a family's communication abilities as a whole instead of on individual members' communication methods and skills, as the MMFF emphasises that family members are interconnected and, therefore, their functioning cannot be studied in isolation (Wang et al., 2020).

Like the problem-solving dimension, this dimension has two categories: instrumental and affective communication (Pourmovahed et al., 2021). Instrumental communication means communicating about everyday things, such as discussing what groceries must be bought whereas affective communication involves expressing feelings and emotions to other family members, such as children explaining that they are uncomfortable with their new stepsiblings (Sari & Dahlia, 2018).

The MMFF also states further subdimensions of communication relating to whether the communication is clear, masked, direct, or indirect (Wang et al., 2020). Clear or masked communication refers to whether a message is distinct or vague and obscure (Leeman et al., 2016). For example, adolescents who approach their parents and say they feel they are not receiving enough attention from their parents demonstrate clear communication, compared to the adolescent bunking school, hoping their parents will realise that they need support, which displays masked communication.

Correspondingly, direct or indirect communication refers to instances where a message is directed to whom it was intended, as opposed if the message not directed to a particular family member (Davids et al., 2016). An example of indirect communication would be if a stepmother enters the lounge filled with all the family members and makes a general statement, complaining that nobody does their chores in the house as opposed to her addressing specific family members with her grievances which exhibits direct communication.

The MMFF states that functional families utilise both instrumental and affective communication and that their communication is open, honest and exemplified, using clear and direct communication (Kiani et al., 2016). On the other hand, dysfunctional families might only exhibit one type of communication and their communication might be masked and indirect, which exhibits their failure to function and communicate effectively.

2.3.1.3 Roles

Dimension three of the MMFF explains 'roles', which refers to the frequent patterns of behaviour and routine tasks that individuals fulfil within their family system (Keitner et al., 2019). This dimension also classifies roles according to two categories, namely, instrumental and affective roles. Instrumental roles refer to everyday life tasks that family members are responsible for such as, which family members are responsible for walking the dog (Hall et al., 2019). Conversely, affective roles refer to family members who are tasked and responsible for dealing with the emotions and feelings of other family members (Jozefiak et al., 2019). For example, the mother in the blended family adopts an affective role by speaking to the children and finding out how they are coping with the transition.

Roles are also further classified into necessary family and other family functions. Necessary family functions include routine roles and tasks that must be repeatedly carried out for the family to function well, such as the children attending school and the parents working (Oltean et al., 2020). Other family functions are roles and functions that do not necessarily need to be carried out for effective family functioning, such as family members being responsible for gardening duties (Miller et al., 2000). It is essential to comprehend this dimension in order to determine whether family members adequately fulfil the necessary roles for their family to function effectively (Sianko & McDonnell, 2020). For example, a stepfather's necessary family function is to go to work to make money and thus this role cannot be given to a child in the family as they are not old enough to work and therefore cannot fulfil that role. The MMFF classifies effectively functioning families as those families where members can share roles equally among family members, based on their ability to execute their roles to the best of their ability (Naidoo, 2018).

2.3.1.4 Affective responsiveness

Dimension four of the MMFF is called 'affective responsiveness' and relates to a family's ability to respond to stimuli with appropriate and applicable quantity and quality of feelings (Pourmovahed et al., 2021). Regarding quality, family members should be able to react to stimuli using the full spectrum of human emotions and express emotions aligned with specific stimuli and context (Chasanah & Kilis, 2018). Family members should balance positive and negative feelings and emotions instead of only expressing one feeling and emotion. In terms of quantity, the degree of the responses to the stimuli, such as over or under-responsiveness, is considered (Miller et al., 2000). For example, if an adolescent told their parents that they had been expelled from school, the parents should express worry and disappointment and should not react nonchalantly, nor should they express extreme anger toward their child.

Affective responsiveness is further divided into two classifications, namely, welfare feelings and emergency feelings. Welfare feelings are those associated with positivity, such as happiness, love, kindness and joy, whereas emergency feelings are negatively associated including feelings such as anger, embarrassment and fear (Krug et al., 2016). Kiani et al. (2016) explained that, according to the MMFF, effectively functioning families express both positive and negative feelings appropriately,

depending on the context. In contrast, dysfunctional families either avoid expressing their feelings to each other altogether, or the family members exhibit extremes of either positive or negative feelings and are not be able to show a balance of both extreme feelings.

2.3.1.5 Affective involvement

Dimension five of the MMFF is called 'affective involvement'. It indicates how much and in what ways family members exhibit enthusiasm and support for other family members' activities, values and interests (Staccini et al., 2015). For example, do all the family members attend the adolescents' school play or do the stepfather and stepsiblings not even try to attend?

The MMFF classifies six different levels of involvement, including lack of involvement, in which family members show no interest in each other (Chasanah & Kilis, 2018); empathic involvement, which involves family members showing interest in other members as they understand the importance of investment and involvement in the lives of the other family members (Jozefiak et al., 2019); and symbiotic involvement, which includes family members showing intense involvement with each other that boundaries between them and their family members become blurred (Yöntem, 2019).

Correspondingly, involvement that is entirely devoid of feelings refers to family members showing some interest in each other but little investment in other family members' activities (Sari & Dahlia, 2018). Over-involvement depicts family members demonstrating over-intrusive involvement in the lives of their family members and narcissistic involvement, involves family members showing interest in other family members, but only to feed their ego (Keitner et al., 2019).

Considering these levels of involvement, the MMFF advocates that effectively functional families engage in increased empathic involvement, which is seen as the most effective and healthy form of engagement (Staccini et al., 2015). Functional family involvement is also authentic as family members show genuine interest in other members' lives, which inevitably helps the newly formed blended family develop strong bonds with each other.

2.3.1.6 Behaviour control

Dimension six of the MMFF is called 'behaviour control' and refers to the patterns of behaviour that a family expresses in handling different situations (Sari & Dahlia, 2018). The situations in which families should express control in their behaviour include physically dangerous situations, the expression of psychobiological needs and interpersonal socialising behaviour situations (Leeman et al., 2016). The MMFF states that families should develop their agreed-upon standards of acceptable behaviour to reduce conflict and behavioural chaos (Chasanah & Kilis, 2018). When blended families form, they should discuss and agree upon certain rules, boundaries, and behaviours that all members should follow. For example, families can set a rule that all the children can only have two hours of screen time per day, and if the children do not follow the rule, they will have to face a consequence.

The MMFF identifies four styles of behaviour control, including the following: rigid behaviour control, involving situations wherein there is little flexibility to negotiate and, therefore, behaviour is constricted to specific actions (Staccini et al., 2015). In laissez-faire behaviour control, family members exhibit total flexibility in behaviour (Jozefiak et al., 2019). Flexible behaviour control involves a fair amount of flexibility in behaviour, depending on the context and chaotic behaviour control demonstrates family members switching between rigid, flexible and laissez-faire behaviour control at different times (Wang et al., 2020). González and Rodríguez-Naranjo (2023) explained that the MMFF views functional families as those that engage in flexible behaviour control, as it exhibits that family members can act freely while knowing what their behaviour boundaries are. In contrast, dysfunctional families engage in chaotic behaviour control in which all the family members are confused about their behaviour boundaries.

2.3.1.7 Relevance of the McMaster Model of Family Functioning (MMFF) to this study

The research community has accepted the MMFF, and it has been utilised by a vast array of family researchers who have used it to determine the level of family functioning of participating families (Chasanah & Kilis, 2018; Krug et al., 2016; Leeman et al., 2016; Sari & Dahlia, 2018). To demonstrate, Pourmovahed et al. (2021) used the MMFF in their study to examine the effects of family functioning on married

couples. Yöntem (2019) utilised the MMFF in a mixed-method study to comprehend the development of family functions and relationships in families.

The MMFF was also utilised in South Africa by Naidoo (2018), who focused his study on understanding family functioning in families affected by substance abuse, and Reetsang (2020), who focused her study on adolescent perspectives of father involvement. A criticism of the theory should also be acknowledged to present an objective view of the study. A criticism of the MMFF is that it has been streamlined and mostly utilised in studies concerning the family environment (Wang et al., 2020). However, the theory does not explicitly state that it can't be utilised in other contexts such as schools and therefore I have adapted the theory to the setting of both family and school environments for this study.

In terms of this study, the MMFF was appropriate to use as a lens, as it provided insight to determine and analyse adolescents' perspectives about their transition into their blended families. Additionally, the MMFF greatly assisted in the development of the study's interview schedule as it is advised that researchers and psychologists should develop interview questions proceeding in the following order: 1) roles, 2) behaviour control, 3) problem-solving, 4) communication, 5) affective responsiveness and 6) affective involvement, which I adhered to (Epstein et al., 1978).

The MMFF has also been helpful as it has provided me with an increased and holistic understanding of which dimensions each blended family was experiencing successes and difficulties and how this affected the adolescent participants. Yöntem (2019) and Oltean et al. (2020) agreed with the stance and further explained that the understanding of dimensions enables key role players to guide adolescent children to achieving effective functioning within their families as they are often susceptible to experiencing increased stress, anxiety and depression compared to younger children which in turn, negatively affects their family functioning.

2.4 Chapter summary

This chapter presented literature that aimed to provide a holistic understanding of the concept of blended families, including its formation, relationships, and criteria for successful blended families and the transition and challenges associated with this.

The literature review also presented literature surrounding adolescents and their development and the impact that being part of blended families had on them. The chapter then comprehensively explained the theoretical framework, namely, the MMFF that was used to underpin the study. The next chapter focuses on the research design and methodology of the study.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter (Chapter Two) presented a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework. The literature review encapsulated the literature surrounding adolescents and blended families. Thereafter, the chapter progressed to explain the MMFF, which was used as a theoretical lens to frame the study.

This chapter highlights the research design and methodology adopted for this study. The chapter presents the research paradigm, design, and approach and then amplifies information regarding data generation and analysis methods. The chapter then explains the ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness that were considered and adhered to.

3.2 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is described as a researcher's worldview. It comprises a set of views, beliefs, perspectives and ways of thinking that encapsulate the meaning and interpretation of a research study (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). A research paradigm is essential in any research study as it influences the approach and how the study is conducted (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). For this study, I adopted an interpretivist research paradigm.

This paradigm was applicable as the aim of this study was to understand the unique subjective experiences of adolescents who were transitioning into blended families, which then aligns with the primary focus of interpretivism, which is to derive meaning from and create an understanding of particular social aspects and phenomena that are related to human behaviour (Kekeya, 2019). McChesney and Aldridge (2019) explained that this paradigm does not study people in laboratory settings but rather, they are explored within their own environment. This aligns with the study as this study explored the unique context and circumstances of the participants within their blended family environment.

Within the interpretivist paradigm, the ontological, epistemological and methodological positions influence how the research is understood and conducted. A paradigm's ontology refers to the nature and reality of the world. In effect, it relates to reality, how it is constructed and what is real and true within reality (Khatri, 2020; Nicotera, 2019). Within the interpretive paradigm, the ontological position asserts that there are multiple socially constructed realities and that contrasts in culture, socioeconomic status, family background, and environmental circumstances influence how people construct their social realities (McChesney & Aldridge, 2019).

Kumatongo and Muzata (2021) emphasised that these assembled social realities are constantly restructured or maintained through an individual's interaction with their current social environment and circumstances. Ontologically, the participants of this study have likely endured varying social realities as their realities were influenced by their experiences during their transition into their blended families. To demonstrate, adolescents who had a pleasant transition into their blended families are likely to have a different and positive worldview compared to adolescents who experienced a traumatic transition into their new family.

Epistemology refers to how knowledge is understood, validated and constructed (Nayak & Singh, 2021; Nicotera, 2019). The epistemological position within the interpretivist paradigm maintains that knowledge is fluid and constructed based on common sense and lived experiences (Kekeya, 2019). This suggests that people construct knowledge based on their worldviews and their interpretation of information, thereby making knowledge within this paradigm neither generalisable nor universal as it is entirely subjective (Khatri, 2020). This study shows that adolescents transitioning into blended families experienced different contexts and circumstances. Thus, only they can construct knowledge, depending on how the transition affected them, as they are the ones who experienced it first-hand. Rehman and Alharthi (2016) explained that, according to the epistemological position, researchers play a vital role in participants' knowledge as they construct and reconstruct knowledge together with their participants; so it then becomes a collaborative process of knowledge sharing and learning using qualitative data generation methods.

Methodologically, the interpretivist paradigm asserts that studies should rely on qualitative research methods to investigate social realities using observations or

accounts related by people in specific social situations and therefore, non-numerical qualitative data is required (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; McChesney & Aldridge, 2019). Qualitative research uses methods such as focus groups, interviews, case studies and narrative inquiries to gather information regarding the social realities of its participants (Dubey & Kothari, 2022; Koro et al., 2022). Methodologically, this study used qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and diaries to generate data.

3.3 Research approach

A research approach refers to the procedures and plans a researcher utilises as a foundation and guide for their study (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Research studies usually comprise either qualitative, quantitative or mixed-method approaches (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Grønmo, 2019). du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2018) stated that the chosen research paradigm determines the research approach. As I was positioned within the interpretivist paradigm, a qualitative research approach was subsequently adopted for this study. Kalu and Bwalya (2017) proposed that the qualitative approach materialised as a result of social and behavioural sciences to holistically comprehend humans' exclusive dynamics, perspectives, and experiences within their social worlds.

Adopting a qualitative approach was best suited for this study as it allowed me to study participants' lived experiences within their natural environment; being their blended families (Wester et al., 2021). This study also needed to gather non-numerical data to effectively explore, understand and describe the various societal realities that were reflected through participants' accounts of their experiences transitioning into blended families (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021; Kalu & Bwalya, 2017; Muzari et al., 2022). My choice of adopting a qualitative approach is further cemented by Tuffour (2017) and Islam and Aldaihani (2022), who maintained that the qualitative approach is better suited to answering 'what', 'why' and 'how' research questions, as seen in this study, as opposed to answering, 'how many' and 'how much' questions.

A qualitative approach does have its limitations in that it lacks scientific rigour, it is difficult to repeat the study and the findings are challenging to extend to the broader population (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Muzari et al., 2022). That being said, dependability and transferability is challenging in such an experience-based study as this one. In order to mitigate this, I have provided detailed explanations of the study

methodology so that it can be used as a model for future studies (Stenfors et al., 2020). In addition, a study such as this one cannot utilise scientific rigour as there is no 'one size fits all' approach when it comes to the experiences of blended families as each experience is subjective, unique and based on personal experiences, circumstances and world views.

3.4 Research design

A research design is a plan of action that specifies how data is generated, analysed and presented (Ford, 2020). For this study, a case study research design was adopted as it allowed me to explore the experiences of adolescents within the social phenomenon of blended families. A case study is an in-depth investigation planned to describe, explain or explore contemporary issues and phenomena that occur within the participants' natural context (Muzari et al., 2022).

My choice of a case study design is echoed by Ebneyamini and Moghadam (2018) and Ellinger and McWhorter (2016), who explained that case studies are one of the most frequently used research designs within the fields of education, psychology, social work and business. Gustafsson (2017) confirmed this and further stated that case study researchers are not able to manipulate the behaviour or feelings of their participants but rather, they gather authentic data as case studies occur contextually and with relevant participants who are familiar with the phenomenon being studied.

Heale and Twycross (2018) and Mfinanga et al. (2019) advocated that the first step of a case study is identifying the case, which is known as a 'unit of analysis' and refers to variables such as a person, a group of people, events, places, activities, processes, decisions, institutions or any other unit that the researcher finds worthy of investigation. The unit of analysis for this study included adolescents at a selected high school in the Umlazi District who were transitioning into blended families. Correspondingly, there are also two broad categorisations of case studies, including single and multiple case studies. A single case study was applicable as I chose to study only one aspect relating to the phenomenon of blended families rather than compare and contrast multiple phenomena across different cases, which happens in multiple case studies (Larrinaga, 2017; Priya, 2020).

Case studies are advantageous as they are one of the most flexible research designs and allow for application within both qualitative and quantitative studies (Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016). Case studies are also valuable as they enable the gathering of detailed descriptions, experiences and use multiple data sources, thereby contributing to the triangulation and credibility of the study (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018; Priya, 2020). In contrast, case studies have limitations in that their findings may be difficult to generalise, as the data is based on personal views, experiences, and contexts and thus the findings cannot be generalised to a larger population (Larrinaga, 2017). The data produced by case studies is also entirely subjective and, therefore, cannot contribute to scientific developments due to discrepancies in context, feelings, opinions and circumstances (Mfinanga et al., 2019). In order to mitigate these limitations, I have provided rich details regarding research design, implementation, the theoretical framework, population, sample and data generation methods, and analysis for this research to ensure that the study could be replicated as closely as possible (Adler, 2022).

3.5 Context of the study

This study was conducted using participants from a selected public high school in Queensburgh within the Umlazi District, which is located 16.8 kilometres away from Durban Central in the KZN province of SA (Census, 2011). Queensburgh comprises four residential areas, namely Malvern, Northdene, Escombe and Moseley and the suburb has a population of 54,846 consisting mostly of middle-income families and is home to 24 percent Black African, 54 percent Indian and 20 percent White South Africans (Census, 2011).

The selected high school caters for Grades 8 to 12 with an enrolment of 1183 multicultural and multiracial learners. This means that the school consists of learners and teachers from the Black African, Indian and White communities with diverse cultural and religious beliefs, including Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam. The high school comprises seventy-two staff members, including the principal. It is also classified as a Quintile Five school according to the Norms and Standards of school quintiles, according to the DoE (2005), which means that the school serves the least poor communities. The school also does not currently have a counsellor, a

psychologist or psychosocial support services available onsite to assist learners experiencing difficulties transitioning into their blended families.

I chose to conduct the study in this area as I am familiar with the area and have previously taught at two public primary schools in the vicinity during my B Ed undergraduate teaching practice. During my time at these schools, I noticed learners from blended families experience both success and difficulties during their transitions. Knowing this proved that there were possible participants that fit my criteria attending schools in the area which therefore increased the probability of me securing possible participants for my study.

3.6 The selection of participants and procedures

The study population refers to the entire group of people from whom information is required (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2018). For this study, the population included all adolescents who attended high schools in Queensburgh, located within the Umlazi District and a sample was chosen from that population. A sample is a subset of the population that relates to the study phenomenon and represents the population that a researcher has access to and thus can be included in the study (Priya, 2020). For this study, the sample included adolescents from blended families who attended a selected high school in Queensburgh, located within the Umlazi District.

I used two non-probability sampling methods, namely, purposive and snowball sampling, which enabled me to include participants that fit into my predetermined participant criteria (Sim et al., 2018). Purposive sampling requires researchers to deliberately select participants who they think will yield data that applies to their study (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). This sampling method was appropriate since it allowed me to purposefully choose elements to include in the sample based on a set list of characteristics or criteria (Campbell et al., 2020).

The selection of participants considered three components: adolescents living in blended families, the selection of the research site (one high school in Queensburgh located within the Umlazi District) and participants belonging to different racial groups. I acquired seven potential participants with the assistance of a Life Orientation teacher

at the school. Of these seven potential participants, six agreed to proceed with participation, and both the participants and their parents/guardians signed assent and consent forms, and their interviews were conducted. For this study, I needed more than six adolescent participants to meet the criterion of gathering multicultural and multiracial experiences and thus acquired six more participants using snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling uses suggested referrals from current participants to inform the researcher of potential participants who fit into the population parameters and are willing to participate in the study (Bhardwaj, 2019). Snowball sampling was applicable as it allowed me to be exposed to potential participants who may have previously been overlooked by the school as they may have not been aware of the participants' family dynamics. When I met with my procured participants for their interviews, I asked them if they knew of any other potential participants who fit into my criteria and would be willing to participate in my study. Three of my participants referred me to potential participants and I was able to secure the remaining six participants after meeting with them and their parents/guardians and signing their assent and consent forms.

It should be acknowledged that the use of snowball sampling could result in potential biases, researchers could recruit participants that do not accurately align with their predetermined criteria or potential participants could be dishonest and state that they fit into the criteria meanwhile they only wanted to participate as their friends were participating (Audemard, 2020; Leighton et al., 2021). To prevent these problems, I spoke with the potential participants parents/guardians first and I asked them to describe their blended families. Once I confirmed the truthfulness of their family dynamics with their parents/guardians, I spoke with the potential participants and confirmed this information which helped me to determine if the potential participants fit in my desired criteria (mentioned above). Only once I did this did I provide and explain the consent and assent forms to the potential participants.

Overall, I acquired twelve participants consisting of five girls and seven boys of which, four were Black African, four were Indian and four were White adolescents. This exceeded the recommended number of ten participants suggested by Malterud et al. (2016) and ensured that holistic and content-rich perspectives were gathered.

3.6.1 Biographic information of participants

The following table presents the biographic details of the selected participants, including their age, gender, race, the number of years they had spent living in their blended families, and their chosen pseudonyms.

<u>Participant:</u>	<u>Pseudonym:</u>	<u>Age:</u>	<u>Gender:</u>	<u>Race:</u>	<u>Number of years living in a blended family:</u>
1	Zella	17	Female	White	6
2	Ava	17	Female	White	15
3	Bob	18	Male	White	4
4	Miguel	18	Male	Black	7
5	Gwen	16	Female	Black	5
6	Sam	15	Male	Black	10
7	Drake	18	Male	Black	5
8	Natalie	18	Female	White	2
9	Cohen	16	Male	Indian	6
10	Havana	14	Female	Indian	9
11	Kev	18	Male	Indian	6
12	Tom	15	Male	Indian	4

3.6.2 Profiling of participants

Detailed below are the profiles of the participants wherein explanations regarding their blended family history are presented:

3.6.2.1 Zella

Zella is a seventeen-year-old Grade 11 learner. Her original family structure consisted of herself, her mother, father and older brother. She also has an older stepbrother and stepsister from her father's side; however, she rarely sees them. When she was in Grade 3, her mother became terminally ill, resulting in a difficult living situation for her. Due to her tumultuous experiences at home, her cousin's grandmother became her foster mother during that time. After her mother passed away, she had contact with her biological father as he used to visit her at her then foster family's house. However, that was not consistent. After her father lost custody of her, she was officially adopted by her foster mother and barely had any contact with him and later found out that he

had passed away in 2019. Her blended family now consists of herself, her brother, her adoptive mother, cousins, and two uncles and aunts.

3.6.2.2 Ava

Ava is a seventeen-year-old Grade 11 learner living with her mother and stepfather. Ava has never met her biological father and barely knows anything about him. She also has two stepbrothers from her biological father. However, she does not know them. Ava's mother met and married her stepfather when Ava was just two years old. Ava thus transitioned into a blended family when she was very young. She forgets that she is in a blended family and considers her stepfather her real father, as he is the only father she has ever known.

3.6.2.3 Bob

Bob is an eighteen-year-old Grade 12 learner. Bob's original family consisted of himself, his mother, father, and sister. He also has a stepbrother and stepsister from his mother's side. However, he only has contact with his stepbrother. Both his mother and father sadly passed away in 2015 and 2019, respectively. Before his mother passed away, he dropped out of school at the age of thirteen to take care of her, and after she passed away, he lived in different places as his father left and moved to Johannesburg without him. When he was fourteen years old, his sister's adoptive mother decided that he did not have a stable home and said she would take him in as well. After he moved into his blended family home, his adoptive mother re-registered him at school, and he continued with his education. His blended family comprises of himself, his sister, his adoptive mother, her daughters, their husbands and their two children.

3.6.2.4 Miguel

Miguel is an eighteen-year-old Grade 12 learner. His biological parents had him at the age of twenty, and he used to live in Port Elizabeth with them. When he was eight years old, his biological father passed away, and after a few years, his mother decided that they should move to Durban as living in Port Elizabeth brought back too many memories for her. His mother met his stepfather when he was eleven years old, and

he transitioned into a blended family when his mother married his stepfather when he was thirteen. His blended family consists of himself, his mother, stepfather and two-year-old half-sister.

3.6.2.5 Gwen

Gwen is a sixteen-year-old Grade 10 learner. Her biological parents married straight after high school and had her shortly after that. Her father had always wanted a son, but Gwen's mother experienced difficulties getting pregnant for many years after having her. When she was nine years old, she found out that her father was having an affair. Shortly after her father found out that he was having a son with his mistress, he decided to leave the family, and she has not seen or spoken to her father since. When she was eleven, her mother got a boyfriend she instantly loved, and they married. Her blended family consists of herself, her mother, stepfather and half-sister.

3.6.2.6 Sam

Sam is a fifteen-year-old Grade 9 learner whose parents had him when they were still in high school. His grandparents made his parents marry when they turned eighteen. However, they separated when he was three years old and eventually divorced. Both his parents remarried when he was five years old, and he has lived in two households ever since. He lives with his mother for half the week and his father for the other half. His blended family consists of himself, his mother, father, stepfather, stepmother, an older stepsister that he gained through his stepmother and three younger half-siblings born out of his parents' current marriages.

3.6.2.7 Drake

Drake is an eighteen-year-old Grade 12 learner. His mother is South African, and his father is Mozambican. After ten years of long-distance dating, his parents got married, and a year later, his mother gave birth to him and his twin sister. When he was two years old, his mother discovered that his father was already married and had children who lived back in Mozambique. More shockingly, his father had obtained a fake marriage licence, so his mother was not even legally married to him. As a result, his mother kicked his father out, who then left for Mozambique and never looked back.

When he was thirteen years old, his mother came out as a lesbian and introduced him to her girlfriend, whom she then married. Through his blended family, he gained a stepmother and a step-grandmother who also lives with them.

3.6.2.8 Natalie

Natalie is an eighteen-year-old Grade 12 learner. She had always known her biological parents to have a happy marriage, and she never once saw them argue. However, that all changed when she was sixteen years old, as she and her mother found out that her father was having an affair, and she witnessed them argue for the first time. Her father then moved out to live with his girlfriend, and her parents divorced. Shortly after the divorce, her mother got a boyfriend who turned out to be her father's current girlfriend's ex-husband. However, they did not know that when they decided to start dating. Both of her parents remarried, and she gained a stepbrother and a stepsister through her stepparents.

3.6.2.9 Cohen

Cohen is a sixteen-year-old Grade 10 learner. He had a tough upbringing as his biological parents had him when they were in Grade 11, and they dropped out of school and eventually became drug addicts. His maternal grandparents intervened and got custody of him during that time. He does not have a relationship with his father since he is always intoxicated, and he is not allowed at their home as he steals their belongings to secure money for drugs. His mother went to rehabilitation twice and was eventually able to regain custody of him. When he was nine years old, his mother met her boyfriend at an addict support group and married him a year later. Cohen gained a half-brother the same year his mother got married. Recently his mother entered a depression and barely leaves her room and his abusive stepfather found a new girlfriend and hardly stays at their home.

3.6.2.10 Havana

Havana is a fourteen-year-old Grade 8 learner. Her biological parents met while studying at university, and they married after graduating and had her three years later. Sadly, her biological mother passed away six hours after her birth due to

complications. When she was four, her uncle convinced her father to find a mother figure for her. Her father met someone at work and started dating her, and they married a year later. Havana's blended family consists of her, her father, stepmother, and two older stepbrothers.

3.6.2.11 Kev

Kev is an eighteen-year-old Grade 12 learner whose biological parents married in 1998. In 2017, he and his family were shocked to discover that his mother was having an affair with his father's best friend. A week after this shocking revelation, his biological father committed suicide and left a note stating that his wife's affair was what pushed him over the edge. Less than a month after his passing, his father's best friend moved in with them, and less than a year later, he got married to his mother. His mother is also currently expecting a baby, his half-sibling. A few months ago, when he turned eighteen, his mother agreed for him to go and live with his sister, which was what he had always wanted due to his tumultuous relationship with his stepfather.

3.6.2.12 Tom

Tom is a fifteen-year-old Grade 10 learner. His biological parents met at work, got married in 2002 and had him in 2007 and his brother in 2009. He had always believed that he had a happy family. However, that changed in 2018 when his father found out through a friend that his mother was having an affair. His father confronted his mother and asked her to leave the family home. His mother then moved in with her boyfriend and married him a few months after her divorce from his father was finalised. He gained a younger stepbrother and a half-brother through his mother's marriage. His father met someone in 2020 and married her, and he gained a stepmother and another half-brother through that marriage.

3.7 Data generation methods and procedures

Data generation methods refer to collecting, creating or producing information related to a study using various means and sources (Priya, 2020). This study utilised two data generation methods, namely, semi-structured interviews and diaries to gather data from the participants.

3.7.1 Semi-structured interviews

A semi-structured interview is a qualitative data generation method whereby a researcher presents questions to participants to gather data about their views, opinions, experiences and feelings concerning the phenomenon being investigated (Bearman, 2019). Before each interview, I explained and reviewed the consent and assent forms with the participants and their parents/guardians again.

Semi-structured interviews take the form of a friendly conversation between the researcher and a participant, as opposed to an interrogation; and they contain both open and closed-ended questions, as well as predetermined and spontaneously prompted questions (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020; Roulston & Choi, 2018). This study utilised open-ended questions and predetermined and spontaneously prompted questions, which allowed for flexibility, clarifying information and prompting further responses from the participants (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Saks and Allsop (2019) stated that a researcher can either ask their participants specific questions based on the research questions or introduce the topic to them and let them answer in their own way. To ensure that the participants stayed on topic, I presented them with questions instead of introducing them to the topic and allowing them to speak unreservedly about it. I also utilised the same interview schedule for each of the participants however, I excluded and included some questions due to the participants' family dynamics. For example, if the participants' original parents had passed away, I excluded the question asking them if they still see or spend time with their original parents.

This data generation method was applicable as it provided me with content-rich qualitative data and the opportunity to ask clarifying questions, leading to an in-depth understanding of adolescents' experiences when transitioning into their blended families (Bearman, 2019). Each interview with the participants lasted for approximately sixty minutes and was audio-reordered with permission from the participants and their parents/guardians. During the interviews, I used the interview schedule as a guide and asked probing questions to clarify some of the participant's responses based on their experiences with their blended families.

The use of semi-structured interviews can be quite advantageous as it provides researchers with highly detailed data based on their participants' experiences, and it also allows for flexibility as the researcher can ask for additional clarifying information or prompt further responses (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The disadvantage of semi-structured interviews is that the researcher cannot guarantee that the participant presents accurate information as they could be omitting or embellishing information due to embarrassment or creating stories as they do not have an answer to the question/s (Brown & Danaher, 2017). To minimise this, I attempted to create a safe and comfortable environment for the participants by building a rapport with them and reassuring them that they would not be judged; to ensure that they felt safe to share information that might have brought up unpleasant memories (Priya, 2020; Nayak & Singh, 2021).

To build rapport, I introduced myself and told them more about my life and my interest in blended families and the reason I am so passionate about the topic. This seemed to make them feel comfortable and reassured them that I would not judge them as I was genuinely interested in their experiences. I also encouraged them to not think of me as an interviewer but more of a peer that they could share their stories with. This seemed to put them at ease and it also helped that I look younger than my age so children do not feel intimidated by me. Moreover, I acknowledged that using interviews as a data-generating tool might be time-consuming and had attempted to minimise that problem by steering the participants to answer the questions directly if they went on tangents, away from the topic. (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020; Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018).

3.7.2 Diaries

A diary is a qualitative data generation method that consists of a participant keeping a book and writing down entries based on their perspectives, experiences, feelings, reflections and thoughts related to a particular topic (Alamri, 2019). For this study, participants had to complete a diary based on their experiences transitioning into their blended families. Solicited, semi-structured diaries were used to generate data in which participants created diary entries with guidance from me, the researcher (Nezlek, 2020).

After the interviews with the participants, I presented each participant with a book that would serve as their diary and I explained the diary task to them wherein they were required to create two diary entries per week based on experiences they wanted to share and diary prompts that they had to answer based on reflections of their transitions into their blended families (Cao & Henderson, 2021; Lee & Ocepek, 2022). All the participants were required to complete one diary prompt and one reflection-based entry per week for eight weeks, thus totalling sixteen entries. Wildemuth (2017) recommended keeping diary logs for one to two weeks. However, this study required participants to create a total of sixteen entries and considering that I interviewed learners during assessment time at school, the participants requested extra time to complete their entries. Due to this, the timeline for the diary entries extended to eight weeks so that participants only had to complete two diary entries per week. By adjusting the timeline, it ensured that accurate and content-rich data was collected.

The diaries created for this research were also interval and event-contingent (Ohly & Gochmann, 2017). Interval-contingent diaries are used when participants make diary entries at specified times and this was utilised when the participants answered the weekly diary prompts (see Appendix G). (Wildemuth, 2017). Event-contingent diary entries occur when participants create diary entries due to a specific event or trigger (Nezlek, 2020). This was utilised when the participants created a weekly diary entry by remembering a specific incident or occurrence while transitioning into their blended families that they wanted to share. After the eight weeks of diary entries were completed, I visited each of the participants again to collect their diary entries. It was also during this time that I provided the participants with transcripts of their interviews so that they could confirm the accuracy of their interviews against the audio recording and to confirm that the transcript was a true reflection of their experiences.

Diaries are advantageous as they provide detailed and content-rich data that brings insight into the phenomena being explored (Altalhab et al., 2021). Additionally, participants provide more in-depth and accurate explanations of their experiences as they are not under time pressure, as opposed to explaining experiences during a timed interview (Pudyastuti & Wulandari, 2014). One of the disadvantages of using diaries in research is that they may be rushed and completed as an afterthought by participants, as the researcher is not present to ensure that they are providing accurate

and detailed accounts of their experiences (Alamri, 2019). Moreover, participants may also falsify information as they have time to construct falsified experiences; or they may not be able to answer a diary prompt provided by the researcher and may therefore falsely create one (Grimm, 2019). To avoid this, I informed the participants that if they could not answer a specific diary prompt or think of an experience to share that they could leave it blank.

Both semi-structured interviews and diaries were applicable and appropriate to use for this study as these data collection methods aligned with the interpretivist paradigm. Both of these data collection methods produced content and context rich qualitative data that presented the experiences of the adolescents in relation to their views about their blended families. Moreover, the data produced by the semi-structured interviews and diaries shared the unique subjective experiences of the adolescent participants that were based on their circumstantially influenced social realities.

3.8 Data analysis method and procedures

Data analysis is a process whereby a researcher views and reviews data gathered from participants and interprets it using rational reasoning to discover patterns, themes and commonalities (Mertova & Webster, 2020). I utilised a thematic analysis approach which is a process whereby a researcher identifies, explores and accounts for themes, trends and patterns found within their data (McAllum et al., 2019). I applied Clarke and Braun's 2006 six-step method of thematic analysis. Their method, as explained by Byrne (2022), Braun and Clarke (2019) and Kiger and Varpio (2020) was adhered to in the following manner:

- 1) **Familiarising yourself with the data:** In this stage, I transcribed the audio recordings of the twelve interviews. Once I completed the transcription of the interviews, they were checked against the audio recordings to ensure that they were accurate. When I collected the diary entries from the participants after eight weeks, I also provided them with their interview transcripts and asked them to review it and confirm the accuracy of the transcript. Once I collected the diary entries, I organised them by separating them into categories: i.e. 1) diary prompts and 2) participant reflections. Thereafter, I read and re-read all

the transcribed interviews and diary entries several times to get an overall sense of the data.

- 2) **Generating initial codes:** In this stage, I began to discover patterns in the data and started creating codes. Coding refers to rereading and sorting data and identifying key patterns that are present and meaningful to the study phenomenon (Butina, 2015). Regarding coding, I assigned labels to phrases extracted from the participant's interviews and diaries. I had the following initial codes: “conflict, original family facts, composition of blended family, family support, friend support, teacher support, external support, coping, awareness of the transition, family involvement, demographic information, family activities, communication, feelings, effects”.
- 3) **Searching for potential themes:** In this stage, I re-read and scrutinised the coded data. This resulted in the identification of potential themes as I discovered patterns within the initial codes. Themes are patterns of coded data that signify interesting information relating to the research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).
- 4) **Reviewing the selected themes:** This stage comprised a two-level process. In level one, I looked at the coded data within each theme and re-sorted codes into their appropriate themes. During that process, that I discovered that there were potentially missing themes and utilised a deductive approach wherein I used the theoretical framework (the MMFF) to generate the remaining themes. Morgan (2022) praised the use of a dual inductive and deductive approach to developing themes as it was found that this method produced high-quality qualitative research. Once this was complete, I engaged in level two, where the themes were re-read, and the codes within the themes were assessed to determine whether they fit the research study.
- 5) **Defining and naming the selected themes:** In this step, I refined the themes by identifying and finalising what information each theme presented about the research questions. Thereafter, I created the final theme names that would be used in Chapter Four to showcase my discussion and findings, namely:
 - Adolescents’ awareness of their transition into their blended families.
 - Family involvement within blended families.
 - Conflict resolution within blended families.

- Support received by adolescents during their transition into their blended families.
 - Adolescents' emotional stability throughout their transition into their blended families.
 - Adolescents' evaluation of their transition into their blended families.
- 6) **Producing the report:** Once the above-mentioned steps were complete, I began to engage with the coded data and finalised themes and began to write a final analysis and description of the findings, using a storytelling process in which I detailed how data extracts in the form of direct quotes from the participants, along with the literature corresponded with the themes to answer the research questions.

These six steps were completed for the data gathered from each of the twelve participants using their semi-structured interviews and diaries.

3.9 Ethical considerations

Ethics is the researcher's moral or professional code of conduct that helps them to recognise what actions are right or wrong within the research space (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2018). It is imperative that the research process protects the participants and ensures that their rights and privacy are not violated in any way (Husband, 2020). For this study, I considered and adhered to the Belmont Report of 1979, which states that there are three basic principles regarding the ethical considerations of human subjects, namely, respect, beneficence and justice and adhered to those principles when making ethical decisions (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, & National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioural Research, 1979).

Before proceeding with this study and data generation I received *consent and permission* from the KZN DoE and ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Thereafter, I arranged meetings with principals at primary and high schools in Queensburgh to discuss the study and the recruitment of potential participants. Only one high school principal agreed to let me recruit learners from their school. After receiving the principal's consent, I met the potential participants and their parents/guardians and presented them with the study and the consent and assent

forms. During my meetings with the principals, parents/guardians and participants, the study's objectives and the data generation methods were thoroughly explained, as consent can only be provided if participants are comprehensively informed about the study (Ramakrishnan, 2022). This was especially true for this study since the participants were minors; therefore, their parents/guardians needed to provide consent and understand what was required of their child or ward for the study (Hariri et al., 2022).

My consent and assent forms included a *no-incentive clause* as offering incentives to potential participants could have distorted the findings of the study as it might have influenced potential participants to provide false or inauthentic information just so they could receive the incentive for their participation (Johnson et al., 2020). Also, during those meetings with the principals, participants and parents/guardians, I emphasised that participation was *entirely voluntary* and that participants would be free to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences (Husband, 2020). I further assured the principals, parents/guardians, and participants that their *identities would not be disclosed* as pseudonyms would be used and that only I would have access to the consent and assent forms that contained their real identities. Kang and Hwang (2021) explained that this conforms with confidentiality rules, which ensures that only the researcher is aware of the true identity of the participants and that this information is not made available to anyone else.

Researchers must also be sensitive to participant's experiences and ensure that the research would *not harm the participants* in any way (Asiedu et al., 2021). Since the study required participants to recall events that might have elicited emotional responses, I needed to ensure that the participants did not suffer any emotional, physical or psychological harm (Johnson et al., 2020). I had arranged for counselling services by a professional psychologist to be on standby before, during and after the data generation process so that, should there have been a need for it, participants could have had counselling to restore their well-being (Jonas et al., 2022).

3.10 Issues of trustworthiness

Qualitative studies use the term 'trustworthiness' to determine the validity and reliability of the study. Trustworthiness refers to the degree of confidence the research

study has in its interpretation, data and methods used and refers to the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and reflexivity (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021). This study ensured that it applied trustworthiness by adhering to the following procedures:

3.10.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the research and its findings are accurate and believable and describe the reality of the studied phenomena (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). A researcher can ensure credibility if the participants find the description of their experiences believable and realistic (Nyirenda et al., 2020). I ensured credibility by audio recording the participants interviews to ensure the accurate capturing of their interview transcripts. I also used member checking, where participants were asked to read their interview transcripts to ensure that their words matched their intentions and that I had accurately captured their experiences (Johnson et al., 2020). Moreover, the credibility of research increases through triangulation, which states that more than one data generation method must be used (Lumsden et al., 2019). To ensure triangulation, I utilised semi-structured interviews and diaries to gather data, which increased the credibility of this research.

3.10.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree of generalisation of the results and the extent to which the study findings would apply in other contexts (Rose & Johnson, 2020). In qualitative studies, results cannot be generalised, which is evident in this study as every adolescent who transitions into a blended family experiences their transition uniquely (Purswell & Taylor, 2013). However, qualitative researchers can ensure transferability by providing 'thick' and detailed study descriptions (Stenfors et al., 2020). To ensure transferability, I have provided meticulous descriptions of the research setting, design, sampling as well as data generation methods and analysis.

3.10.3 Dependability

Dependability assures that if the research were repeated in the same context, using the same methods and participants, similar results would be obtained (Stahl & King,

2020). Determining dependability can be problematic as qualitative research focuses on dynamic changing phenomena (Adler, 2022). However, a researcher can overcome this by providing immense detail of the research methodology and design to ensure that the research can serve as a model for future studies (du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2018). I have thus provided rich details regarding research design, implementation, the theoretical framework, population, sample and data generation methods, and analysis for this research to ensure dependability.

3.10.4 Confirmability

Confirmability ensures objectivity by ensuring the data supports the participants' contributions rather than simply reflecting the researcher's preferences or opinions (Rose & Johnson, 2020). I have ensured confirmability by initiating member checking with the participants. I requested each participant to read their interview transcripts to ensure that their words matched their intentions and that their experiences were accurately captured.

3.10.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity means investigating the researcher's beliefs, practices, and judgements and analysing how these may affect the research findings (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Firstly, I did not allow my friend's prior negative experience transitioning into a blended family (highlighted in the study's rationale in Chapter One) to influence the research in any way. I was and still am of the belief that every person's experiences are different in some way and therefore did not allow preconceived ideas or expected responses from the participants to influence the data produced. Additionally, I am of Indian descent and I have acknowledged the fact that I do not comprehend the logistics, norms, values and customs of every single culture. Hence, I asked for further clarification from the participants if it was necessary, based on their responses. By doing so, I aimed and accomplished in gathering a true multicultural and multiracial reflection of the adolescents' experiences as they have transitioned into blended families.

3.11 Chapter summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive look into the research methodology and design that was followed. The chapter emphasised the research paradigm, approach and strategy. The chapter then continued to provide details on the study area and selection of participants before proceeding to detail the data generation and analysis methods. The chapter then explained the ethical considerations that were adopted as well as how trustworthiness was ensured. The following chapter presents the data and discusses the research findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter (Chapter Three) presented this study's research design and methodology. This chapter presents the analysis and discussion of data gathered from the participants using semi-structured interviews and diaries. The main aim of data analysis and interpretation is to make meaning or sense of the information to understand the participants' views regarding the phenomena being studied (Mertova & Webster, 2020). In this chapter, data are presented using a thematic approach in which data is themed and sub-themed based on the analysis of the data that was gathered from the participants.

Before data generation, informed consent was gathered from the participants and their parents/guardians. Semi-structured interviews and diary entries were used to gather data from twelve participants from a selected high school in the Umlazi District, which included four Black African, four Indian and four White adolescent learners so that a multicultural and multiracial perspective of blended families was displayed. Participants chose the following pseudonyms to protect their identities: Zella, Ava, Bob, Miguel, Gwen, Sam, Drake, Natalie, Cohen, Havana, Kev and Tom, respectively. The participants also checked their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and transparency.

For this analysis, quotes are presented verbatim and may include spelling or grammatical faults as they have not been tampered with to ensure the transparency and accuracy of the data. Moreover, literature and the theoretical framework were integrated into the analysis and discussion to substantiate the research findings.

The findings of the study aimed to answer the following two research questions that shaped the study:

1. What are the experiences of adolescents at a selected high school in the Umlazi District as they transition into blended families?
2. How do adolescents at a selected high school in the Umlazi District navigate their adjustment to their blended families?

4.2 Data presentation and discussion

Two main themes emerged while transcribing, coding and categorising the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries: adolescents' experiences transitioning into blended families and adolescents' adjustment to their blended families.

4.2.1 Adolescents' experiences transitioning into blended families

This theme presents data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries on adolescents' experiences transitioning into blended families. This theme focuses on adolescents' awareness of their transition into their blended families, family involvement within blended families and conflict resolution within blended families.

4.2.1.1 Adolescents' awareness of their transition into their blended families

The findings from the semi-structured interviews and diaries indicated how adolescents were made aware that they would be transitioning into blended families. These announcements served as critical turning points for the adolescent's life trajectory as they signalled the beginning of the change away from their original family structures.

When asked about how they were made aware of the transition into their blended families, two participants shared a little of what they remembered since they transitioned into their blended families at a young age. Sam, who was five years old, and Ava, who was two years old, regarded their age as a barrier to recalling how they were made aware of their transitions. Sam said:

I don't remember since I was five years old. Maybe my parents explained everything to me, but I can't remember. Both my parents remarried when I was five years old. I only remember having to live in two different houses.

Similarly, Ava recalled the following:

I wish I could say what it was like moving in with my stepdad, but I was only two years old when my mom met him... and I'm not quite sure when exactly they decided to move in together, but I do remember living with him. He was like my

dad from the start basically, so it's not that I... had to... it was less of a transition. Just more of it like... it just happened. It was... it was normal to me.

Zella and Bob's experiences were unique in that, being young children at the time, they were given a choice on whether they wanted to transition into their blended families. Zella, who was eleven years old at the time, explained when her foster mother gave her such a choice:

My mom was terminally sick, so I was staying at my blended family during the week, and I only went home to my parents on holidays. When my mom passed away the blended family asked me if I wanted to like live here for a while longer because it wasn't the ideal environment to go home to because my school was already behind, and everything was just not good at home, so I was... I said that it's okay and I'd stay on and then I became permanently part of blended family.

Like Zella, Bob, who was fourteen years old at the time, also experienced the passing of his mother and shared how this led to the situation where he did not have a permanent residence and had to drop out of school. He explained the events as follows:

Before she passed away, I left school, and I was taking care of my mother. After my mom passed away, I started working with the auntie's one daughter's husband. So, I was working part-time at his firm and then... basically I was living here and there. I was living at different places and initially, the aunty said she will take me in and try and get me back to school and then... that's when I moved in here full-time and she regis... re-registered me to go back to school and finish my school.

Three adolescents conveyed that they experienced pleasant announcements of their transition into their blended families as their parents took the time to explain, answered their questions properly and considered their feelings and opinions about the transition. Gwen, who was eleven years old during her transition, said:

She sat me down and asked me what I thought of... my dad and I said that I loved him and that he treated me good. The she asked what I thought about

him moving in with us and I immediately said yes because I loved him, and I am so lucky to have him, and he stepped up when my father didn't.

Havana, who was five years old at the time, shared:

I remember my dad saying that he has a girlfriend and that she would be my mom if I wanted that and if I was okay with that. And...of course I was since I've always wanted a mom.

Drake also had a pleasant announcement; however, this was accompanied by additional news of his mother coming out as a lesbian. Drake, who was thirteen years old at the time, disclosed:

The transition announcement also came with my mom's coming out announcement. She was actually secretly dating my stepmom without anyone knowing and when they decided this was the real thing for them... they decided to announce it to their families. She basically told us that she loved our stepmom and that she's a female and not a male and asked us how we felt about it. We were okay with it. It was nice to have someone else to love and care for us after our father abandoned us.

Comparatively, some adolescents had the opposite experience and felt blindsided by their parents' announcements. They felt they had no choice but to simply accept and agree with their parent's decisions. For example, Miguel said:

I... wouldn't say that I was made aware. It's not like my parents sat me down or anything. It's just uhm... I had to... obviously meet my mom's boyfriend at the time. So, I had to meet him, and we did the usual routines of stepson and stepfather to get to know each other better.

Likewise, Cohen, who was ten years old at the time, revealed:

I don't think I was even made aware properly. My mom just told me that she got a boyfriend the same day that I met him. It was quite a shock to me.

Kev, who was twelve years old at the time of his transition, felt angered by his mother's announcement as his father had only passed away a month before his new stepfather moved in. Kev said:

[redacted] moved in a month after my father's death. My mother sat my sister and me down a week before and told us that she loved him and that he would move in and take care of us now that our father was no longer. We did not want that since we knew about the affair, and we treated [redacted] like our uncle our entire lives since he was our father's best friend. We did not want him to move in and especially so close after our father's death.

Uniquely, two adolescents experienced pleasant announcements in which they felt heard by one parent while experiencing the opposite with their other parent. To demonstrate, when speaking about how her mother made her aware of her new partner, Natalie shared:

With my mommy, she sat me down and told me that she got a boyfriend and asked me how I felt about it and actually cared about my feelings. I was involved in the wedding planning with my mommy and everything.

However, when explaining how her father announced his new partner, she had the following to say:

With my daddy, I found out he had a girlfriend that night they had the big fight and he admitted to cheating for the past three months. With my daddy... they just told me the wedding date when I went over one weekend. They didn't ask how I felt or even include me. I was very upset with my daddy, and I still am since he didn't stand up for me or make an effort to include me at all.

Tom had a similar experience to Natalie's; however, he had a good announcement experience with his father and an unpleasant one with his mother. Tom, who was eleven years old at the time, said:

For my mom... obviously she didn't tell us about the affair, but I knew she was going to be with my stepdad when my dad kicked her out. So, I knew. When they got married after the divorce, they just signed the papers and didn't have a wedding or anything, but my mom didn't tell us about it. She only told us once it was done. She came to our house and told my dad and made my dad tell us and he did. And then with my dad... when he got a girlfriend, he dated her for like six months before he introduced her to us. My dad asked us how we felt

and if we liked her and when we said yes then he asked us how we felt if she was our stepmom and we said we liked her and we wanted our dad to be happy.

Correspondingly, some participants expressed that they would have liked their parents to have conducted their announcements differently. They said that they would have liked their parents to have considered their feelings and choices and included them in attempting to make them understand and explain their decision to transition. Zella shared:

I do wish that at some point there could have been a conversation between me, my biological parents and my foster family. I feel that having a discussion about all of this would have made it a bit easier for me to fit in and adapt.

Cohen, Kev and Tom said that they would have liked their mothers to explain their affairs and the choices that they made so that they could try to understand them. To demonstrate, Cohen said:

I would've liked her to sit me down and explain in private that she was pregnant and getting married. I would've liked her to ask me how I felt about everything and tried harder to be there for me.

Similarly, Tom explained:

I think and would've liked my mom to sit me and my brother down and explain what she did and why she did it instead of just leaving us and the house and making my dad tell us what was going on. I feel she handled it wrong.

When asked what they would have liked their parents to have done differently, some participants explained that they would have benefitted if their family members had provided them with more support. Miguel said:

I would have liked it more if my stepdad was a bit more sympathetic towards us. For him, sympathising with us when we're sad and being a bit helpful.

Natalie felt abandoned by her father during this time and expressed the following:

I would've loved it if my daddy was there more for me. I feel like he just dropped a bomb and then ditched my mommy and I when we needed him the most and

now, he lives far away in Ballito, and I barely even see him cause of my stepmom and siblings.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries indicated that at least one of their parents informed the participants of the news of their transition, regardless of whether this was done constructively where their feelings were considered or in an abrupt manner where they felt blindsided. Making participants aware of their transition into blended families is the responsibility of parents, as it was their choice to form their blended families due to having found new partners (Bean et al., 2021). Literature confirmed that effective communication of transition news is vital as children have lost bonds with their original parents due to death, divorce or neglect and, therefore, need to fully manage and overcome their grief before they can begin to acclimatise to a new family structure (Lee, 2019; Rustin, 2018).

Bearing this in mind, how children are informed of their transition affects their receptiveness towards their new blended family. This is seen as participants who felt that they received their transition news effectively, such as Gwen and Havana, were more willing to accept their new blended families. This act of transition awareness is indicative of affective communication and roles, as highlighted in the 'communication dimension' and the 'role dimension' of the MMFF theory and is thus paramount to blended families as family members need to communicate, be supportive and share their feelings about the transition with each other in a healthy manner (Jozefiak et al., 2019; Sari & Dahlia, 2018).

The findings also indicated that most participants were made aware of their parent's decision to form blended families when they were under the age of fourteen, which meant that it was likely that they were not able to comprehend the totality of the situation at the time. This is confirmed by Carpendale et al. (2020), who claimed that children do not understand how the shift in their family structure could affect their lives as their brains are not yet at the stage to comprehend complex ideologies. This was evidenced by both Sam and Ava's difficulty recalling how they were made aware of their transition as they were very young at the time. However, they both recalled meeting their new stepparents for the first time. Wei et al. (2019) explained that these participants appraised the meeting of their new stepparents to be of significant value

to them and this was thus stored in their memories, as opposed to their memories of how they were informed of their transition.

Some participants endured pleasant announcement experiences as they felt their parents gave them a voice and included them in the decision to form their blended families. These adolescents declared they had positive and conducive relationships with their parents, with trust and open communication. Nixon and Hadfield (2016) confirmed that this resulted in them being receptive to the idea of transitioning into blended families, as they felt comfortable expressing their feelings to their parents and trusted their decisions, which made the transition process easier. For example, Zella and Bob expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be assimilated into their foster homes and later blended families as their original home environments had not been stable or ideal. Zella explained that her academic performance began to fall behind, while Bob stated that he had dropped out of school and find a job to earn money to support himself. For these participants, transitioning into their blended families was not received negatively; instead, it had felt like an opportunity for them to have caring parents, go to school like other children, and return to a safe and stable family.

The findings further revealed that for some participants, entering blended families felt like an opportunity to find a missing piece that had been lost due to the death, divorce or abandonment by one of their original parents. This is supported by Gwen, Havana and Drake, who expressed joy and welcomed their new stepparents and hoped that their involvement in their lives would fill a void for them as they felt abandoned by one of their original parents. This aligns with the findings of Garcia and Serra (2019), who stressed that the presence and involvement of two parents in an adolescent's life is crucial to optimal development and high levels of well-being.

The findings also indicated that some participants, such as Cohen, Miguel, Kev and Tom, had unpleasant announcement experiences as they met their new stepparents for the first time on the day of their announcement. This was shocking to them as they felt blindsided and had limited time to process the news before moving into their new families. Literature confirmed that partners often form blended families through a short dating phase followed by instant cohabitation or sudden marriage without properly informing and guiding their children through this process (Travers, 2021). This is difficult for children who may feel their feelings are not considered. Ward and Limb

(2019) also confirmed this and added that transitioning into a blended family is confusing for children as it takes time to build conducive relationships with new family members.

Correspondingly, when asked what they would have liked to be done differently regarding their announcements, findings demonstrated that some participants (Natalie, Miguel, Kev, Tom, Zella and Cohen) felt unsupported and excluded, and their feelings were disregarded. They stated that they would have liked an opportunity to voice their views and feelings about the transition. Their views indicate that they could have benefitted if they had been better prepared and supported by their parents. The findings further illustrated that mostly male adolescents expressed the need for more family support and more considerate announcements from their parents. This corresponds with the study of Njoroge and Kirori (2018), who found that male adolescents are more sensitive to familial changes than female adolescents. This can be seen from Miguel's response as he expressed that he would have liked his stepfather to be more sympathetic towards him.

4.2.1.2 Family involvement within blended families

The findings from the semi-structured interviews and diaries revealed the extent of family involvement experienced by the participants' blended families. Family involvement refers to how family members show interest in individual family members' values, activities and interests. This plays a significant role as it helps members within blended families form loving and attached bonds with each other (Staccini et al., 2015).

When discussing how they experienced family involvement in their blended families, a few participants revealed that they experienced a high level of family involvement filled with family members exhibiting love, support and genuine interest in each other. For example, Havana shared:

We support each other emotionally and also give each other advice about things happening in our lives. We are always there to help each other at any given time. It also helps that we have so much in common and they actually take an interest in my life and the things that I do.

A similar sentiment was felt by Sam, who said:

Both my families always come together as one and we all love and support each other. I love that my family shows genuine interest in each other's lives, and we are always there for each other.

Bob felt the same high level of involvement in his blended family that he had not experienced in his original family, as he explained:

They've always been good to me. Always been kind to me. They've always been there when I needed them. So, I've actually mostly seen them as my real family. I didn't have any support from my real parents.

A few participants also experienced this emotionally supportive high level of involvement. However, they expressed gratitude to their new stepparents for that. When discussing her stepfather, Gwen expressed:

He was also there for me emotionally. He... used to always reassure me that he's not there to replace my father but I told him that he's actually a better person than my father and that I love him more than I ever loved my father.

Natalie felt the same about her stepfather and said:

My stepdad... I really love him a lot and he has really stepped up. I admire him as a person because he is so kind and supportive. He really makes an effort to spend time with me and also genuinely cares about my feelings.

Havana and Drake felt the same love and involvement from their stepmothers as Drake disclosed the following:

When she moved in, she... basically told us that she's not trying to be a replacement for our dad but that she would be whatever we wanted her to be and that she loves us like we were her own kids. She really is... a special person. I mean to take on two teenage kids that are not your own... it's a lot and I really admire her for stepping up and being there for us. We didn't really feel the loss of our dad with her there. And I know she's not his replacement. She's... actually better than his replacement.

Similarly, Havana shared the following in her diary:

I'm so grateful to have gotten the mom that I have now. I will never forget everything that she has done for me and how she had made my life complete. From the very beginning she has treated me like her own child and has never made me feel less than my brothers ever. She really has been the only mom that I've ever known.

Conversely, some participants experienced a total lack of involvement in their families, but this was due to their fathers or stepfathers. When asked about family involvement in her family, Zella commented:

I only had contact with my dad after my mom passed away and he would come visit... randomly just visit my blended family home and be like you know making promises that he didn't keep. It upset me for a while because I was crying, and I was like no I don't want this anymore because if he's going to be a dad then I expect him to show up. So, he moved to Johannesburg leaving me and my brother here. The last time I saw him was on my 14th birthday.

Drake and Gwen also found themselves well-versed in the lack of involvement from their biological fathers, as they had not had contact with them since they abandoned them years ago. Drake said:

He left us when we were two years old. He did not call us, come see us or even send us money. He just... he just went... radio silent.

Gwen experienced the same with her father and claimed:

We have not seen or spoken to each other since I was nine years old. He hasn't contacted me since he left us, but I saw his new wife's Facebook and they now have three children together.

When discussing the lack of involvement from his biological father, Cohen shared:

My dad and I barely have a relationship since I told you he's not allowed at our house because he steals things. I also don't want a relationship with him because sometimes when he does come to fetch me and takes me to his house, he's too high on drugs to even have a proper conversation with me so I don't want that drama in my life.

Cohen experienced the same lack of involvement. However, he received this from his stepfather too and expressed the following:

We both don't really like each other that much anyways. He stays at home during the week, but he doesn't stay at home on the weekends. I don't know where he goes. If he goes to his girlfriend's house or goes and does drugs somewhere.

Similarly, Tom shared that his stepfather is also barely involved in his life as he declared:

My stepdad didn't really make an effort with me or my brother to get to know us or anything and he just seemed angry all the time. He focuses on his own son.

Likewise, Kev explained the following concerning his stepfather:

We basically coexist. He knows I don't like him, so he stays out of my way. He doesn't show any interest in my sister and I or our lives. My stepfather is not involved in parenting at all.

Other participants endured a mix between the two above-mentioned manners of family involvement. These adolescents experienced some involvement from their family members. However, they felt this type of involvement was emotionally stunted and aloof. To demonstrate, Miguel said the following about his stepfather:

it's almost like that cliché in every movie. You know. Like my stepdad and me, we don't talk as much. We don't connect emotionally or anything. I think my stepfather doesn't show his affection due to fear. I feel like maybe he doesn't show his emotions because you feel like the moment he drops his guard, that's the moment we'll hurt him or something.

Natalie expressed that her father's involvement was emotionally stunted and she exhibited sadness as it had not been like this in her original family. In her diary, Natalie wrote:

I really feel that my daddy dropped the ball with me. Like, we used to have such a close and open relationship and this whole transition destroyed that relationship. Talking to him now feels like talking to a stranger and he's not really that involved in my life as he used to be. He hasn't really supported me

that much during all this. I feel like he just up and left and abandoned my mom and I. We don't spend quality time with each other. We used to before he left but not now.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries highlighted various lengths that blended family members went to engage in family involvement. One method of family involvement consisted of family members showing high levels of love, kindness and support to one another. The MMFF theory recommends this high level of involvement and classifies it as empathic involvement according to the 'affective involvement' dimension, as all family members show interest in each other's lives and understand the importance of investment and involvement (Jozefiak et al., 2019). This type of involvement was experienced by Havana and Sam, who said that they were grateful that their new family members had taken the time to get to know them and had shown genuine interest in their lives from the beginning.

Some participants, who also experienced this high level of involvement, further shared how their new stepparents had gone above and beyond for them, which changed their perceptions of them from regarding them as stepparents to referring to them as their biological parents. This was acknowledged by Gwen, Natalie, Drake and Havana, who felt that their new stepparents had undertaken more earnest roles in their lives. Their stepparents reassured them that they were not attempting to replace their original parents but were there to serve as bonus parents.

Literature advocated the actions of these new stepparents and their level of involvement as they embraced the parental roles and responsibilities that the adolescents felt had been lacking and were desperately needed (Ganong et al., 2021; Schrodt & Braithwaite, 2011). Literature also confirmed that authentic, long-lasting bonds between stepparents and stepchildren are created when children feel that their stepparents are taking the initiative to get to know them, take part in their interests and build rapport with them from day one (Dowling & Barnes, 2020; Papernow, 2017; Seltzer, 2019).

The findings further indicated that some participants experienced a lack of involvement from their family members as they had barely bothered to get to know each other, communicate their feelings or show an interest in each other's hobbies and interests.

Their experiences signify what the 'affective involvement' dimension of the MMFF theory calls a lack of involvement in which family members show no interest in each other (Chasanah & Kilis, 2018). This was confirmed by Zella, Cohen, Drake and Gwen, who shared that they had not had contact with their biological fathers in many years. Personal validation from their fathers would have been appreciated as literature claimed that children always seek validation and learn their identities through their parents, who are key role players in their socio-emotional well-being (Ho-tang et al., 2016; Motamedi, 2020).

The absence of their fathers during these significant developmental ages thus made these participants feel that the abandonment was their fault, which then resulted in them feeling deficient as if there was something wrong with them that had caused their fathers to abandon them. Amodia-Bidakowska et al. (2020) emphasised that father involvement positively affects children's cognitive, behavioural, social, emotional and educational development and this means these participants had been negatively affected in at least one developmental domain. Additionally, Zella and Cohen said they had decided to cut ties with their fathers due to their lack of involvement. Their actions align with the Cognitive Development Theory, which states that adolescents in the Formal Operational Stage have enhanced abilities to engage in problem-solving and can think logically to make good decisions (Brown et al., 2017; Carpendale et al., 2020). Their actions proved their maturity and cognitive development and align with the 'problem-solving' dimension of the MMFF theory, as they were able to evaluate their relationships with their fathers and decided to cut ties with them for the sake of their well-being.

The findings also revealed that some participants experienced emotionally stunted involvement from their family members as they felt the absence of positive emotions from them. This type of involvement aligns with what the 'affective involvement' dimension of the MMFF theory calls involvement devoid of feelings, which signifies family members showing some interest in each other but with little investment in their emotions (Sari & Dahlia, 2018). This type of involvement was seen by Miguel, who explained that he did not connect emotionally with his stepfather, and Natalie who disclosed that she felt as if she was talking to a stranger when she spoke to her father. Literature confirmed these participants' experiences as Casey et al. (2017) and

Dowling and Barnes (2020) maintained that adolescence is a period characterised by emotional sensitivity and that stepparents and stepchildren do not usually connect emotionally due to poorly defined roles. This could serve as an explanation for why these adolescents evaluated their family's involvement as being emotionally stunted, as their family members did not exhibit the same intensity of emotions as they did, which left them feeling emotionally neglected.

4.2.1.3 Conflict resolution within blended families

Conflict within all family structures is inevitable. However, how a family resolves conflict is indicative of their family functioning and dynamics. Oduma-Aboh et al. (2018) explained that conflict resolution involves placing intervention strategies to decrease or eliminate disturbances within a family to restore family functioning and well-being. The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries indicated various methods blended families utilise to resolve conflicts.

Several participants stated that their families employed the method of conducive communication skills to discover possible solutions and resolve conflicts in their families. To demonstrate this method, Sam explained:

We tell each other if we are upset about something that someone else did and then we talk about how we can change whatever happened and when we're all happy with the plan then we do it and say sorry and all is done after that.

Drake experienced the same in his family, as he shared:

We talk to each other about what happened and then we tell each other if we were wrong and then we apologise to whoever and then we forget the fight. When my mom is involved in a conflict she leaves and likes to be alone and then later she comes and speaks to us. My stepmom doesn't like conflict and so, she likes to sort the problem there and then and talk about it and end it there.

Havana found that one person acted as a mediator in her family and guided the family to resolve their differences. To support this, she said:

When we do have conflicts, there's always one person in our family not involved in the argument so that person gets involved and tries to act as the peacemaker and tries to solve the issue by listening to both sides and give advice on how to move forward.

Gwen shared that her blended family also communicated effectively to solve problems. However, her family members also encouraged each other to acknowledge their own actions and mistakes. Gwen explained:

My mom always taught me to take accountability for my actions. So... when I do something wrong, I apologise to my parents and even though sometimes I think it's unfair and I squeal about doing my chores, I know that they make me do things so I can become more responsible. When there is a conflict, we communicate with each other and try to find solutions for the problem together.

Tom experienced the same at his father's house, where everyone could voice their thoughts and feelings. To this effect he said:

My dad always taught us that we mustn't be silent and if something is bothering us then we must speak about it. So, if there's a minor conflict then we all speak about it and then say sorry if we hurt someone else's feelings and then we move on.

Conversely, Tom experienced a different type of conflict resolution at his mother's house that involved pretending that the conflict did not exist, as he explained:

With my mom and stepdad, it's not like this and they like to pretend that everything is okay and that nothing is wrong. So, when there's a conflict in their house, we're just expected to ignore it and move on. Which is actually not the right thing to do.

Natalie expressed that she endured the same type of conflict resolution at her father's house and said:

The conflicts are mostly about how my stepmom and siblings treat me and then when I tell my daddy and he doesn't believe me then he just tells me that I misunderstood and tells me to let it go.

Likewise, Cohen and Kev also experienced this method of ignorance of conflicts. However, they think that this method is what many Indian families utilise. Cohen claimed:

We don't really deal with conflicts in our household. Gosh, I think all Indian people do the same. We just brush things under the rug and pretend not to think about them. When my stepdad starts a problem and then storms off, we don't talk about it after that and then just get on with our day. So... basically we don't handle conflict and just forget about it and don't actually deal with it. Which is a bad thing.

Similarly, Kev shared:

We basically do what any typical Indian family does. We sweep it under the rug and pretend that everything is fine when it's clearly not. My mother doesn't like to get involved when [redacted] and I argue, and my sister tries to be the mediator but often fails at that. So, after a fight, we just ignore each other and pretend that nothing is wrong.

Only one participant described the conflict resolution within his family as being combative. Miguel explained:

My stepdad's way of solving... or not solving, beating the argument, is him getting loud. He, of course, knows that my mom doesn't like it when he gets loud. So, he thinks he wins when he gets loud.

Miguel continued to explain that when his family has arguments, they find someone to blame. To demonstrate, he said:

Like almost like if we find the culprit, that culprit is gonna fix the problem. Like that's how we feel. We do yell at each other, and we do feel like... we get a bit angry. We'll still fix it.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries revealed various methods that participants' blended families used to resolve conflicts within their families. Transitioning into a blended family is stressful and involves numerous changes and adjustments that individuals endure, likely leading to a significant amount of confusion (Nixon & Hadfield, 2016). This, along with the fact that many blended

families utilise nuclear family blueprints to function, is the reason for conflicts and the reason why there is a need for conflict resolution (Miran-Khan, 2017).

The findings indicated that some participants resolved conflicts in their blended families through the use of conducive and effective communication skills. This method of conflict resolution was used by Sam, Drake, Havana and Tom's blended families, who discussed their conflicts and devised methods to resolve them. This method aligns with the 'communication dimension' and the 'problem-solving dimension' of the MMFF theory, as these families demonstrated their ability to use instrumental and affective communication to resolve their family problems. Literature reinforced this method of conflict resolution and maintained that the use of conducive communication skills is the most effective method of conflict resolution. This is said as blended families exhibit their ability to establish and foster open and honest communication in which their members feel comfortable sharing their feelings, regardless of whether they are negative or positive and it inevitably results in the development of appropriate conflict resolution skills (Ayithey et al., 2022; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017).

The findings also exhibited that some participants resolved conflicts within their blended families by taking accountability for their actions. These participants explained that their families engaged in conflict resolution by learning to recognise if they were wrong, accepting responsibility for their actions and apologising to the relevant family members. For example, Gwen explained, "*When I do something wrong, I apologise*". This method of taking accountability was also seen in Drake and Tom's blended families. The use of this method suggests that these adolescents can maintain effective and loving relationships with their family members as they learn their family's conflict triggers and can, therefore, recognise the development of potential conflicts and resolve them before they fully materialise. Literature explained that these adolescents' ability to take full accountability for their actions is indicative of their high level of cognitive development as they demonstrate success in the ability to communicate their feelings in a conducive and non-aggressive manner while making refined decisions based on evaluations of their circumstances (Branje, 2018; Luria et al., 2020).

The findings also revealed that several participants' conflict resolution within their blended families entailed dismissing the conflict and pretending that it did not exist.

For example, when faced with conflict at his mother's house, Tom is "*expected to ignore it and move on*". Similarly, Natalie's family requires her to "*let it go*", while Cohen and Kev's families encourage them to "*sweep it under the rug*". Literature maintained that this method of dismissing and ignoring conflicts is not effective as it teaches those who practise it to suppress their emotions and encourages people-pleasing behaviours, which may result in emotional outbursts, aggression, resentment, poor mental health in the future and eventually results in prolonged family dysfunction (Miyahara, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). These findings and literature indicated that these blended families should adjust their method of conflict resolution if they want to function harmoniously in the future, as ignoring conflicts does not make them disappear. Instead, if unresolved conflicts are left, they will likely fester and develop into larger conflicts. Additionally, Cohen and Kev said that this method of dismissing conflicts and pretending that they do not exist is typical within families of Indian descent, which aligns with Parikh and Garg (2023), who found that a significant number of Indian families experience difficulties expressing their feelings, especially if they are negative and therefore tend to avoid them.

The findings of this study also revealed a fourth method of conflict resolution utilised by participants' blended families. However, only one participant experienced this method. Miguel shared that his blended family engaged in combative conflict resolution as they resolved conflicts by shouting and screaming at each other. He further explained that his stepfather mostly used this method as he "*thinks he wins when he gets loud*". Literature maintains that this method of conflict resolution is extremely ineffective as it requires large amounts of power assertion passed between family members (Cui & Lan, 2020). Moreover, the continued use of combative conflict resolution skills teaches adolescents aggressive and manipulative behaviour that they are likely to copy and enforce on others in the future (Bockstaele et al., 2020). This further consolidates the idea that children and adolescents mirror their parents' behaviours as they are their main adult role models (Morris et al., 2017). Copying this aggressive and combative behaviour further teaches adolescents that this is the only way to resolve their problems. Blended families should, therefore, distance themselves from this method of conflict resolution as it increases hostility among family members, and this is affirmed by Yosep et al. (2022), who found that the existence of

continued problematic emotional responses and behaviour is indicative of poor socio-emotional well-being in adolescents.

4.2.2 Adolescents' adjustment to their blended families

This theme focuses on how adolescents navigated their adjustment to their blended families. The theme highlights the support that adolescents received from role players such as their family, friends, teachers, and professional psychologists. The theme then presents findings related to the adolescents' emotional stability throughout their transition and proceeds to depict their overall evaluation of how they transitioned into their blended families.

4.2.2.1 Support received by adolescents during their transition into their blended families

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries made it apparent that the adolescents received support from various role players such as their family members, friends, teachers and professional psychologists during their transition into their blended families. The requirement of support from these role players suggests that these adolescents experienced many physical, emotional, social, psychological and educational changes and, therefore, needed guidance during this time to help them adjust (Purswell & Taylor, 2013). The study participants revealed that they received support through three different means: emotional, instrumental and informational support.

4.2.2.1.1 Emotional support

Emotional support refers to the verbal and non-verbal assistance received from others regarding care, sympathy or encouragement (Kort-Butler, 2018). Most participants shared that they received emotional support from the mere presence of their friends and family. For example, when speaking about his blended family, Bob shared:

They've really been supportive. They've always tried to make me feel welcome. Always tried to tell me that, if I need anything or if I need any help, they would always be there for me.

Zella, who, like Bob, was adopted into her blended family, also experienced immense emotional support from them as she said the following:

When I found out my mom passed away, she just held me and was like... I don't really know how to describe it... it's like feeling that I was supported, and everyone knew what I was... They didn't know what I was going through but they tried to understand what I was going through. It was really different for me to have the support and love.

Drake also shared the emotional support that he received from his mother by stating the following:

My mom is such an amazing woman. A true inspiration. My mom has always been there for me and my sister. Always. We could always go to my mom if we needed to talk about something or if something was bothering us.

Likewise, Zella felt that her friends played a significant role in her emotional support. She explained:

My friends wouldn't ask me to like talk about it if I didn't want to. They would just support me when I needed it and would just be there for me if I wanted them to be. They really cared about what I was going through but they took the time to ask me if I was okay and whether I was having a bad day or just how I was doing.

Gwen also received emotional support from her friends. however, she expressed that they played a reassuring role. Gwen explained:

Usually, the only time I feel sad about my family is when I think about my father, so they reassure me that I'm better off without him and that God has blessed me with my dad who is a much better person than my father ever was.

Participants further revealed that they received instrumental support from key support role players such as family members, friends, teachers and professional psychologists.

4.2.2.1.2 Instrumental support

Instrumental support is defined as the acquisition of tangible materials or actions for assistance (Qian et al., 2021). The study participants explained that they received instrumental support through assistance from their friends and teachers.

Natalie shared that she experienced a difficult transition that affected her education. However, her friends helped her in the following manner:

My friends reminded me about homework and projects and gave me their notes since I wasn't really paying much attention in class since my mind can't get over what happened. My friends would also come over and help me study for tests and overall, just being in their presence made me feel so much better and made me feel love and support when my whole world was falling apart.

Zella also experienced difficulties with her schoolwork. However, she said that she received the following support from her teacher:

My math teacher has supported me cause when I went to talk to her, she helped me with my maths because she knew that I was struggling.

Correspondingly, several participants said their teachers also provided instrumental support in making certain provisions after learning about their blended family experiences. For example, Natalie shared:

My register teacher allowed my friends and I to stay in her classroom during break since she knew that I didn't really want to be around lots of people and only wanted to be around my friends since I was struggling emotionally.

When asked about the provisions his teachers made, Cohen felt that his teacher went the extra mile as he adopted more of a parental role, as he explained:

There is one teacher that I confide in a lot. He's my Geography teacher. He knows the full story about my family, and he also listens to me. Another time my grandparents could not fetch me from school because they had to take my brother to the hospital because he was sick, and my teacher actually took me

and drove me to the hospital so that I could be with them. I appreciate everything that he does for me.

Similarly, Tom's teacher exhibited parental concern after observing and talking to him. Tom detailed the following continued actions taken by his teacher:

I remember my Grade 6 teacher helped me a lot. She called my dad to school to speak to him and told him to make me an appointment to see a psychologist and that's what my dad did. After that she always checked in with me all the time to see if I was doing okay and even continued to do this until I finished primary school.

Furthermore, participants revealed that they received informational support from key support role players such as their family members, friends, teachers and professional psychologists.

4.2.2.1.3 Informational support

Informational support refers to aid provided to those who require verbal advice or guidance (Cohen & McKay, 2020). Several participants explained that they received informational support through advice from friends and teachers. Miguel shared the following advice received from his friend:

My other friend... he told me that he's also in a blended family so then... it made me more connected to my friend cause I understood his situation, he understood mine and he said that No, we're still family. We're not like... like biologically family but we're facing the same problems. We have the same lives, and we have to help each other.

Kev also received advice from his friends as he stated:

My friends have always listened to me when I was having a hard time, and they gave me advice and also tried to distract me from the whole situation. They offered advice on how to deal with my stepfather.

Conversely, Drake received advice from his teacher and information about how to adapt to his mother after she announced that she was part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Drake explained:

My other teacher that I told you about. The one who is a lesbian also spoke to my sister and I about my stepmom, since she knew it was a new concept to us. So, actually having her talk and explain things to us made understanding the fact that my mom had a girlfriend easier to understand and accept.

A significant number of participants also shared that their family arranged professional help in terms of them speaking to psychologists and that they received informational support through them. Kev detailed how his psychologist helped him as he stated:

The doctor really has helped me heal and deal with my anger and resentment issues. I learnt a lot from her, and she taught me how to deal with my stepfather too.

Cohen shared similar sentiments as he explained the following in his diary:

Seeing the psychologist was really great for me since she helped me a lot to deal with everything I was going through. I don't think that I would be able to function today at all if it wasn't for her. She listens to me and has taught me so many different exercises and ways to deal with my feelings and emotions in a healthy way.

Likewise, Natalie wrote the following in her diary:

Talking to my psychologist really helped me through this transition as she was able to get me to talk about my feelings about everything and she really helped me to deal with my emotions and gave me helpful coping strategies to use.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews and diaries indicated that participants received support from key role players such as their family, friends, teachers and professional psychologists in three main forms: emotional, instrumental and informational support. Regarding emotional support, the findings revealed that participants only received this type of support from their friends and family in the form of them being there for them. This is affirmed by Hall (2019), who stated that adolescents maintain the closest relationships and intimate bonds with their family and friends instead of other individuals. The emotional support received by participants exhibits the affective roles and communication that they received from their friends

and family, which aligns with the 'role dimension' and 'communication dimension' of the MMFF (Jozefiak et al., 2019; Staccini et al., 2015).

The majority of the participants' friends and families also supported them emotionally by attempting to empathise with them, as seen by Zella, who shared that both her friends and family members tried to understand what she was going through at the time. Literature agrees with this use of empathy to support adolescents as Perry-Fraser and Fraser (2017) found that adolescents experience immense confusion during their transition into their blended families and, therefore, require a significant amount of empathy as they feel that nobody understands them. Additionally, Clayton et al. (2019) claimed that adolescents require reassurance as a form of emotional support. Gwen's experiences echoed this as she shared that her friends tried to reassure her that her new blended family was better than her original family. This also aligns with literature as it was confirmed that adolescents seek the most emotional support from their friends as they spend more time with their peers during adolescence and, therefore, seek their reassurance and acceptance (Orben et al., 2020).

The findings also showed that the participants received instrumental support in the form of tangible assistance and this was mostly from their teachers. This was seen as Natalie and Zella revealed that they required help from their teachers and friends as they were not '*paying much attention*' in class and were falling behind academically. Seeking academic assistance aligns with the 'problem-solving dimension' of the MMFF theory, as these participants recognised their need to improve their academics and took action to achieve this (Kiani et al., 2016). Literature also verified that adolescent participants from blended families are generally seen to have lower educational achievements compared to adolescents who are raised in nuclear families (Turunen, 2014). Wasserman (2020) reported that male adolescents who transition into blended families experience more academic difficulties than female adolescents. The findings of this study contradict this claim as it was found that female adolescent participants experienced more academic difficulties compared to their male peers.

Some participants also shared that their teachers went above and beyond to support them in an instrumental capacity. For example, Cohen's teacher drove him to the hospital when his grandparents could not, and Tom's teacher met with his father and advised him to take Tom to a psychologist as she could see that he was not coping

well with his transition. Literature confirmed that teachers serve as loco parentis to adolescents during their time at school and, therefore, play a crucial role in shaping and supporting them and identifying learners who are at risk (Laletas & Khasin, 2021). These teachers did not have to perform these acts for the participants. However, they undertook these measures to provide additional support that their schools may have been unable to provide. Pillay et al. (2023) echoed this sentiment as they stated that many South African schools are under-resourced and incapable of providing psychosocial support to their learners.

The findings also indicated that participants received informational support through advice from friends and teachers and benefitted from exercises and advice provided by professional psychologists. This aligns with the 'communication dimension' of the MMFF theory, as participants received both instrumental and affective communication in the form of advice (Leeman et al., 2016). Participants who received advice from their friends and teachers accepted this enthusiastically, as they felt that their friends and teachers could empathise and understand what they were going through. For example, Miguel received advice from his friend who also lives in a blended family and Drake acquired advice from one of his teachers who was also part of the LGBTQIA+ community, which he had recently been introduced to when his mom came out to him. Literature affirmed that adolescents are more likely to accept advice from individuals who have previously experienced the issues they were enduring, as the advice is more likely to be authentic and trustworthy (Achterbergh et al., 2020).

Additionally, several participants, such as Kev, Cohen and Natalie, said they had received informational support from professional psychologists who provided them with exercises and coping strategies to utilise daily. This aligns with the 'behaviour control' and 'problem solving' dimensions of the MMFF theory, as participants utilised the exercises recommended by psychologists to adjust their behaviour and cope with their emotions and problems (González & Rodríguez-Naranjo, 2023). The requirement of this external informational support by psychologists aligns with the findings of the Revised White Paper on Families in South Africa of 2021, which maintained the requirement of additional support services as most families are ill-prepared and ill-equipped to manage the stressors that their families face thereby resulting in them not being able to adequately respond to their family's needs (DSD, 2021).

4.2.2.2 Adolescents' emotional stability throughout their transition into their blended families

Emotional stability refers to an individual's ability to manage or maintain their feelings and emotions under stressful circumstances (Cohrdes & Mauz, 2020). Perales et al. (2017) maintained that the transition into blended families is stressful for adolescents regardless of whether they endure positive or negative family experiences. It is, therefore, important to analyse adolescents' emotional stability during this transitional time, as it is indicative of their adjustment to their blended families.

Two participants, Gwen and Havana, explained that their emotional stability remained positive throughout their transition. Gwen shared:

I've always been happy about my blended family and am so happy that I got a dad who loves me like his own daughter. I felt super happy because I was sad for a long time about my father wanting nothing to do with me so when my dad came along, I... felt welcomed and like I belonged, and I felt loved.

Havana also experienced this maintenance of positive emotional stability as she wrote the following in her diary:

From the beginning I was happy, and I think that happiness just increased as the years went on as my family are such amazing people. We all love and support each other in any way. I was always happy to be getting a new mom and brothers.

Conversely, some participants experienced the opposite as their emotional stability remained negative throughout their adjustment and transition process. Tom explained this as he said:

I wasn't happy at the beginning. I felt hurt, angry and betrayed about my mom's affair and then to find out that she moved in with her boyfriend after my dad kicked her out was sad for me. What made it worse is that he never made an effort to get to know us and my mom didn't even apologise to us or explain herself to us. So, I was angry and hurt at the beginning and now I don't like that side of my family.

Likewise, Kev described his poor emotional instability and stated:

I think from the beginning there was a whole lot of anger, hurt and resentment and I don't think that it has stopped since I still feel this way today. This whole relationship between my mother and stepfather came as such a big shock to everyone that we all felt betrayed by her and then her actions are what caused my father to commit suicide. I did like [redacted] as he was my father's best friend and we spent so many weekends together but after finding out how he and my mother betrayed my father, I've hated him from then.

Some participants expressed feelings of confusion in the beginning. However, as they adjusted to their new family members, they found themselves experiencing favourable emotional stability. For example, Sam detailed the following in his diary:

I think at first, I was confused because I was so young. I did not understand why my father had to leave. It took adjusting when my new stepparents and stepsister came along because these were new people that I had to get to know and live with. Now I feel happy about my family and am happy at the place we are at in our lives. We all love and respect each other.

Likewise, Drake experienced the same shift from confusion to favourable emotional stability as he wrote the following in his diary:

At first, it felt weird and confusing since I was the only male in the house then I also had to get used to two new females moving in. It was weird for my mom to be in a relationship after eleven years, so it took a lot of getting used to. Once I got used to the idea then my new family became normal, and I felt comfortable and loved.

Zella and Bob, who were adopted into their blended families, said that their emotional stability showed an upward trajectory as their emotions changed and converted from negative to positive as they adjusted to their new families. To demonstrate this shift, Zella shared:

In the beginning, I was angry, frustrated and sad. I blamed my parents for not trying enough to be better parents and I was sad that I lost them. I was rejective towards my foster family because I felt like they did not understand what I was

going through. Now that I've been living here a while, I've seen how they had to adjust their lives to have me fit in. I feel actually really relieved that I'm here and that I ended up somewhere that I have people who care about me, and I could've ended up somewhere totally different.

Bob shared a similar experience and said:

In the beginning, it was difficult but with time it got easier. At times I was sad and depressed, as time goes, I began to feel at home and all those feelings turned to joy and gratefulness.

Other participants also experienced a shift in their emotional stability when adjusting to their new families. However, they described their emotional stability as shifting from hopefulness to significant negative feelings and emotions. Natalie described this in her diary:

I had hope in the beginning before he introduced me to my stepmom and siblings for us to get along and be a happy family, but that vision shattered the minute I met them. After I met my stepmom and siblings, I was angry and hurt. Hurt that they hated me without getting a chance to know me and hurt that they act fake in front of my daddy but say mean things to me when he's not around. I felt angry that my daddy always believes their lies over what I tell him which is the truth.

Cohen also experienced this shift from hope to negativity, as he explained:

At first, I was okay with the idea of getting a stepdad since I barely ever saw my own dad, so I was excited about that. It was okay in the beginning because I had hope for my relationship with my stepdad and I thought that we could eventually be a happy family once he got over his hate of my dad but that all changed the night, he hit my mom. I was willing to let go of the fact that he didn't really like me, and he treated me differently than my brother but once I saw his other side, I didn't want to have anything to do with him because I didn't wanna become like him.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries showed that all the participants experienced varying levels of emotional stability during their transition and adjustment to their blended families. Adolescence is a period in which individuals experience difficulties in emotional regulation and emotional stability, meaning they cannot properly maintain the intensity and duration of their positive and negative feelings and emotions (Karibeeran & Mohanty, 2019). Similarly, they experience more high-intensity positive and negative emotions than adults (McLaughlin et al., 2015; Pekrun, 2017). Adolescents' emotional stability relates to the 'affective responsiveness dimension' of the MMFF theory, which explains that individuals exhibit welfare feelings, which relate to positive and emergency feelings associated with negative feelings (Krug et al., 2016).

The findings revealed that some participants experienced balanced emotional stability throughout their transition and adjustment to their blended families. Participants, such as Gwen and Havana, displayed consistent positive emotions, such as happiness from the beginning of their transition, and they accounted for this as being due to their immediate acceptance of their new stepparents. Literature maintained that these adolescents exhibited more positive feelings and immediate acceptance towards their new stepparents as they lost one of their original parents through death, divorce or neglect (Sanner et al., 2020). This statement was proven by Gwen, who expressed happiness at getting a new stepfather after her father abandoned her, and Havana, who wholeheartedly accepted her new stepmother after losing her mother during childbirth.

Conversely, some participants also experienced balanced emotional stability; however, their emotional state consisted solely of negative emotions and feelings. These participants rejected the acceptance of their new stepparents from the beginning and did not change their minds, even as they adjusted to their new family members. This is seen as both Tom and Kev stated that they felt significant hurt, anger and betrayal and still feel that way today. Their feelings align with those of Gates (2018), who found that stepparents are seen as outsiders, and their stepchildren view them as threats from the beginning and sometimes never develop relationships with them.

The findings further demonstrated that some participants experienced unbalanced emotional stability as they endured a range of positive and negative emotions during their transition and adjustment periods. Some participants shared experiencing an upward trajectory of emotional stability during this time and said that it required time for them to develop positive emotional stability as they had to adjust to their new family members. Sam and Drake expressed being confused at the beginning of their transition, but once they got to know their new family members better, they felt comfortable and loved. Literature echoed these participants' initial confusion as Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2020) found that children experience immense confusion at the beginning of their transition and require patience to adjust. Similarly, Zella and Bob also experienced an upward trajectory of emotional stability. However, instead of feeling confused initially, they felt negative emotions such as anger and sadness. They explained that the reason for their initial negative emotions was because their original parents had passed away, and they had to transition into foster families who later adopted them. Bates and Bates (2022) justified these participants' feelings as they endured a significant amount of stress caused by the death of their parents and therefore experienced initial difficulties establishing relationships with their new family members as this was different from their original family dynamics.

A few participants also experienced unbalanced emotional stability however, their emotional stability showed a downward trajectory as their emotions converted from positive to negative feelings as they adjusted and transitioned into their blended families. Cohen and Natalie said they had "*hope in the beginning*" for their newly formed blended families. However, the feeling was expelled after they met their new stepparents, who treated them badly. These participants had idealistic visions for their new families, and their hopeful views were dispelled, and they developed negative feelings towards their new family members. Literature explained that these participants created expectations that were not met, which led them to experience negative emotions such as disappointment, shame, embarrassment and anger (Kumar, 2017). Perales et al. (2017) confirmed this as they mentioned that the reason for these idealistic expectations was that the adolescents created hopeful expectations based on nuclear family dynamics and were, therefore, destined to be disappointed as blended and nuclear family dynamics are significantly different.

4.2.2.3 Adolescents' evaluation of their transition into their blended families

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and diaries revealed that the participants evaluated their transitions into their blended families differently. This theme presents the participants' evaluation of their adjustment in terms of the time taken to adjust and their perception of the effectiveness of their transition into their new blended families. These evaluations are entirely subjective and are based on the personal experiences that they endured during their transition.

A significant number of participants shared that they thought they transitioned effectively into their blended families even though they had to endure an adjustment period. For example, Ava said:

It was like a really smooth transition. It was easy. We adjusted when the transition happened. Since I've known my dad since I was very young, it was like he was my real dad. It was... it was normal to me.

Two participants shared that their transition took three months. For example, Havana wrote in her diary that:

I think it probably took me about a few months. I would say about three months. Since I was so young it probably took less time for me to adjust. But since we got along so well it was a smooth process. I don't see myself as part of a blended family but part of a real family. My family has made the transition so easy with the kind of people they are and how they handled everything. It was a super smooth transition.

Similarly, Drake expressed the following in his diary:

Yes, I think that I have transitioned effectively. Although it did take some getting used to. I would say it took me about three months to get used to everything. It was weird getting a new stepmom and step granny and as I said, I felt left out being the only male but once I got used to it then I was happy and thankful for the family that I have.

Sam and Gwen also evaluated their transitions and thought it also took them a few months to adjust; however, they both said their transition took six months. Sam shared:

I think my family has transitioned really well. I think it took me about six months to get used to everything after both my parents got remarried. It was already a bit weird having to live in two houses but then I got comfortable around them then it was smooth sailing.

Likewise, Gwen detailed the following in her diary:

I think it took me about six months to adjust. The only thing that I had to adjust to was a male being in my life cause I was so used to it just being my mom and me. Once I got used to my dad being there 24/7 everything settled nicely. I am so happy now. My whole life has changed for the better and I love my family so much.

Comparatively, some participants said that their transitions took them a few years. Bob claimed that his transition into his blended family took two years as he said:

It took me two years to adjust because I was not used to being around this many people all the time and had to adapt and get used to their schedules. I do feel that I have because when I just came here, I felt like a total stranger and outsider but now I feel like I'm part of the family.

Miguel discussed that his transition also took a few years as he had to transition into his blended family and adjust to moving provinces. He explained:

I would say that it took me about three years to adjust. I mean, it was harder for me since I had to also move provinces and schools and leave my family behind in PE. As a family, we know what buttons not to press so we live in harmony. Once we understood each other's limits it was pretty much smooth sailing.

In contrast, three participants shared that they had not yet transitioned into their blended families even though they had been living with their new family members for years. Kev wrote:

I don't think that I've adjusted. I mean it's been six years now and I still feel uncomfortable there and that's why I moved in with my sister. I don't think that I will ever adjust or accept the situation and family. There's just too much drama and anger for me to adjust to my stepfather so it hasn't happened yet.

Similarly, Cohen has also been living in his blended family for six years now and shared:

I don't think that I've adjusted yet since my situation is always changing. So, for the past six years, I don't think I've adjusted as everything constantly changes in my life. I think that my family is just too messed up to be a healthy blended family. I mean we have my mom who is depressed and barely leaves her room and then we have a stepdad who hates me, is barely even home and even has a side girlfriend and then there's my grandparents taking the place of parents to us. I'm not sure how we can be a healthy family without some serious help.

Natalie shared the same sentiment about having a poor relationship with her stepparent and wrote:

I would say that no, I haven't transitioned effectively. My daddy and I have a strained relationship and my stepmom, stepsiblings and I do not get along at all. I feel uncomfortable in their presence, and they never even bothered to get to know me at all. I don't know when or if we will ever transition effectively. But I hope that we will in the future.

The findings from the semi-structured interviews and diaries revealed how adolescents personally evaluated their transition into their blended families. Some participants described their transitions as occurring quite smoothly with a short adjustment period, and they ascribe that to the fact that they transitioned at a young age. Havana wrote, “*Since I was so young, it probably took less time for me to adjust*”. Literature confirmed that it is easier for younger children to transition and acclimate into their new blended families than for adolescents (Rawstrone, 2022; Gul & Nadeemullah, 2017; de la Rosa & Millán-Franco, 2023). These participants further indicated that since they transitioned at a young age, they never felt part of blended families; rather, they felt like the stepparents were their original parents. For example, Ava said that her stepfather was her real dad and that living in a blended family was “*normal*” to her. The findings also showed that these participants took the least time to transition, with their adjustment periods being only a few months. Havana recalled that it took her “*about three months*” to adjust and transition into her blended family, which

occurred when she was five and this confirms that the younger children are when they transition into families, the faster they adjust.

Some participants expressed that they required some time to adjust and transition into their blended families as they needed to get used to their new family members and family dynamics. For example, Drake and Bob found it “*weird*” having to live with so many new people, and Gwen had to manoeuvre around having a male living in the house, as she had previously only lived with her mother. Bormanaki and Khoshhal (2017) and Yöntem (2019) stated that the introduction of new family members, especially the introduction of new stepparents to adolescents, is anxiety-inducing as they find it burdensome to meet new people as opposed to younger children who find meeting new people exciting and can form bonds and attachments with them more easily. These participants had to adjust their behaviour and become accustomed to living with new people, as described by Bob and Gwen, who mentioned having to “*adapt*” to their new families and schedules. This aligns with the ‘behaviour control dimension’ of the MMFF theory, as the participants had to practise flexible behaviour control so they could transition effectively (Wang et al., 2020).

The findings revealed that three participants evaluated their adjustment and declared they could not transition effectively. They explained that they had tumultuous relationships with their stepparents and considered their blended families to be toxic. To demonstrate, Natalie said that she had “*strained relationships*” with her family. Additionally, Cohen said his stepfather “*hates*” him, and Kev shared that he is too angry at his family. These demonstrations of feelings align with the ‘affective responsiveness dimension’ of the MMFF theory as these participants revealed that they experienced emergency feelings toward their family members, which is why their families could not transition effectively (Chasanah & Kilis, 2018). Literature demonstrates that if adolescents have close relationships with their parents filled with mutual trust, respect and effective communication, their transitions are less stressful (Dignon, 2023). These three participants did not have harmonious relationships with their family members. Instead, their families exhibited feelings such as anger and resentment toward each other, which resulted in them not being able to transition effectively.

The findings indicated that nine out of the twelve participants thought that their blended families transitioned effectively. These participants explained that their transitions and adjustments into their new blended families took between three months and three years. This is demonstrated as Sam and Gwen's transitions and adjustments took *"about six months"*, and Miguel's took *"about three years"*. Literature corroborated these findings as Favez et al. (2018) proposed that an effective transition into a blended family can take six months to ten years however, that this is dependent on the subjectivity of circumstances and feelings of individual members of the family. Moreover, Purswell and Taylor (2013) maintained that blended families' effective and complete transition can take five to seven years. Even though nine of the blended families managed to effectively transition and adjust within the recommended time frames, this does not mean that those families that have not yet transitioned effectively are a lost cause, as there are still opportunities for them to develop healthy behaviours and relationships and eventually transition effectively.

The findings of the study thus presented a holistic understanding of adolescents experiences transitioning into blended families. The findings revealed that all participants had varied experiences transitioning and adjusting to their blended families and this was influenced by a variety of factors, including the age of their transition, their willingness to enter blended family arrangements, their level of acceptance towards their new family members, their feelings about the transition as well as their abilities to cope with stress and change.

4.3 Chapter summary

This study aimed to explore the experiences of adolescents transitioning into blended families from a selected high school in the Umlazi District and how these adolescents navigated their adjustment to their blended families. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews and diaries and analysed using thematic analysis, and two main themes emerged.

The first theme centred around adolescents' experiences transitioning into blended families. The findings revealed how these adolescents were made aware of their transition into their blended families and their experiences of family involvement and

conflict resolution within their families. The second theme focused on adolescents' adjustment to their blended families.

The findings demonstrated how these adolescents were supported, their emotional stability during their transition period, and their perception of how they had transitioned and adjusted to their blended families. The data revealed that all blended families are different, and each has unique subjective experiences. Therefore, each adolescent has exclusive needs, feelings and experiences that need to be understood so that they can receive the best support from key role players. The following chapter presents the study summary, conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

STUDY SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter (Chapter Four) presented, discussed and analysed the findings of this study, relating to the experiences of adolescents transitioning into blended families as well as the navigation of their adjustment to their blended families.

The primary focus of this chapter is to conclude the study by providing a summary, presenting the conclusion, offering final statements and presenting limitations and recommendations. The study summary will provide an outline of chapters one to four. The conclusions of this study will then be presented after having reached them through the interpretation, analysis and discussions surrounding the gathered data. The chapter will then conclude with recommendations and implications for further research.

5.2 Study summary

This study aimed to explore the experiences of adolescents transitioning into blended families as well as how these adolescents navigated their adjustment to their blended families. The study used semi-structured interviews and diaries to gather data from twelve adolescents who were transitioning into blended families at a selected high school in the Umlazi District. The following chapters were included in the study and entailed the following:

5.2.1 Chapter One

Chapter One presented an introduction and background to the study. It further explained the focus, purpose, rationale, significance, objectives and research questions. The chapter then clarified the relevant key terms related to the study and presented an outline of the study chapters.

5.2.2 Chapter Two

Chapter Two presented a comprehensive literature review that illustrated relevant literature related to the study. The chapter then detailed the theoretical framework, the MMFF, which served as a lens for this study.

5.2.3 Chapter Three

Chapter Three emphasised the research design and methodology that was adopted. The chapter outlined the research paradigm, design, and approach and then amplified information regarding the data generation methods, and explained how these were analysed. The chapter then presented the ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness that were considered and adhered to.

5.2.4 Chapter Four

Chapter Four presented, analysed and discussed the data gathered from the participants according to specific themes and sub-themes. The data presented in Chapter Four was gathered using semi-structured interviews and diaries. The data presented findings using two themes: adolescents' experiences transitioning into blended families and adolescents' adjustment to their blended families.

5.3 Conclusions

This section presents the conclusions discovered and informed by the key research questions, and the findings gathered from the participants, which were presented and analysed in Chapter Four.

5.3.1 Adolescents' experiences transitioning into blended families

The findings of this study revealed how the participants were made aware of their parent's decision to transition into blended families. All participants shared that at least one of their parents informed them of their transition, and this occurred when the majority of them were under the age of fourteen, which meant that they may not have fully comprehended the totality of what blended families entailed as their brains were

not yet at the stage to understand complex ideologies (Carpendale et al., 2020; Lee, 2019; Rustin, 2018; Ward & Limb, 2019).

The participants expressed receiving their blended family announcement news in two main manners. Some participants had pleasant announcement experiences as their parents informed them of their new partners and involved them in the decision-making process by listening to their thoughts and opinions (Bean et al., 2021; Nixon & Hadfield, 2016; Wei et al., 2019). Comparatively, other participants had unpleasant announcement experiences in which they felt blindsided by their parents' announcement to transition into blended families and felt that they did not have a choice and had to simply comply with their parent's decision (Cartwright, 2010; Fein et al., 2019; Travers, 2021). These participants further expressed that they would have preferred more support and conducive conversations with their parents in which the transition process was properly explained and their feelings were considered.

The findings also revealed the level of family involvement experienced by these blended families. Some participants experienced empathic involvement from their families that was filled with love, kindness and support, and they found that this made bonding and forming loving relationships with their new family members easier (Dowling & Barnes, 2020; Ganong et al., 2021; Jozefiak et al., 2019; Papernow, 2017; Seltzer, 2019). They expressed that this empathic involvement helped them to transition more effectively as their new family members took a genuine interest in their lives, and their new stepparents fulfilled the roles and responsibilities of their missing parent. The MMFF, which was used as a theoretical lens for this study, advocated the use of empathic involvement within families as this type of involvement signifies functionality within the 'affective involvement dimension' and 'role dimension' of the theory (Casey et al., 2017; Dowling & Barnes, 2020; Sari & Dahlia, 2018).

Other participants identified a lack of involvement as some of their original parents abandoned them or their new stepparents exhibited no interest in their lives (Chasanah & Kilis, 2018; Ho-tang et al., 2016; Motamedi, 2020). Some of these participants even cut ties with their original parents due to their lack of involvement, and this demonstrated their advanced cognitive and problem-solving abilities (Amodia-Bidakowska et al., 2020; Brown et al., 2017; Carpendale et al., 2020). Additionally, a few participants described their family involvement as being emotionally stunted as

their family members barely communicated with them, and the little communication they did exhibit was devoid of emotions in which they felt as if they were talking to strangers.

The findings of this study also displayed various conflict resolution strategies adopted by the participants' blended families. Many participants shared that their blended families resolved conflicts using conducive and effective communication skills. This method is highly recommended and is viewed as the most effective method of solving family conflicts and demonstrates functionality within the 'communication dimension' and 'problem-solving dimension' of the MMFF, which served as a lens for this study (Ayittey et al., 2022; Dignon, 2023; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017; Sloan, 2021). Other participants' families utilised the method of taking accountability for their actions as a method of conflict resolution, and this demonstrated these families' abilities to convey their feelings healthily while taking responsibility for their actions (Branje, 2018; Luria et al., 2020; Oduma-Aboh et al., 2018).

Conversely, other participants shared that their families preferred to dismiss conflicts and pretend that they do not exist by "sweeping it under the rug", and this method was found to be ineffective as it encouraged the repression of feelings and emotions (Miyahara, 2022; Wang et al., 2020). The findings also displayed that only one participant's blended family engaged in a combative method of conflict resolution in which they screamed at each other, and this method was also found to be ineffective as it was aggressive and reinforced power plays amongst family members (Bockstaele et al., 2020; Cui & Lan, 2020; Yosep et al., 2022).

5.3.2 Adolescents' navigation of their adjustment to their blended families

The findings of this study demonstrated that adolescents navigated their adjustment by receiving support from key role players such as their family, friends, teachers and professional psychologists. Participants shared that they received emotional, instrumental and informational support. Participants revealed that they received the most emotional support from their friends and family in the form of empathy and reassurance as they experienced a significant amount of confusion during their adjustment to their blended families (Clayton et al., 2019; Hall, 2019; Orben et al., 2020; Perry-Fraser & Fraser, 2017). Participants further revealed that they received

the most instrumental support from their teachers and friends, in the form of assistance with schoolwork and the creation of provisions for them at school. These participants expressed that their teachers went the extra mile to assist them during their adjustment period as they could see that they were not coping well academically (Laletas & Khasin, 2021; Pillay et al., 2023; Turunen, 2014; Wasserman, 2020).

Moreover, some participants expressed that they received informational support from professional psychologists whom their family and teachers thought they needed to consult, and they shared that they learned effective exercises and coping skills from them, which greatly assisted them during their adjustment and transition period (Achterbergh et al., 2020; DSD, 2021; Favez et al., 2019). The support that these participants received aligned with the 'communication', 'problem-solving', 'role' and 'behaviour control' dimensions of the MMFF theory in that the key role players in the adolescent's lives utilised various methods to support them and make their adjustment and transition process into their blended families easier (González & Rodríguez-Naranjo, 2023; Kiani et al., 2016; Leeman et al., 2016).

The findings also displayed the participant's emotional stability throughout their transition and adjustment period and found that all the participants experienced varied emotional stability, and this was due to their personal experiences with their blended families (Cohrdes & Mauz, 2020; McLaughlin et al., 2015; Pekrun, 2017; Perales et al., 2017). The participants' emotional stability related to the 'affective responsiveness dimension' of the MMFF theory in that they exhibited either emergency feelings, welfare feelings or a combination of both during their transition and adjustment to their new blended families (Krug et al., 2016; Miller et al., 2000; Pourmovahed et al., 2021). Four participants revealed that they experienced a consistent balance in their emotional stability consisting of either positive or negative feelings and emotions throughout their entire adjustment and transition period (Gates, 2018; Karibeeran & Mohanty, 2019; Sanner et al., 2020).

The remaining eight participants shared that their emotional stability was unbalanced and consisted of a mix of high-intensity positive and high-intensity negative emotions (Baeder & Higginbotham, 2020; Bates & Bates, 2022; Kumar, 2017; Perales et al., 2017). Some of these participants experienced a positive trajectory in their emotional stability as they entered their blended families with negative emotions such as anger

and confusion and later developed positive emotional stability consisting of feelings of happiness and love as they adjusted. Contrastingly, others experienced a negative trajectory in their emotional stability where they entered their blended families with feelings of happiness and hope, and these transformed into negative emotions as they adjusted to their new family members.

The findings of this study further revealed the participant's evaluation of their transition into their blended families. It was found that nine participants thought that they had effectively transitioned into their blended families and three participants expressed that they did not effectively transition into their blended families. Some participants described their transition as effortless and consisting of a short adjustment period, and they accredited this to them being so young when they transitioned into their blended families (Rawstrone, 2022; Gul & Nadeemullah, 2017; de la Rosa & Millán-Franco, 2023). Those participants who described that they did not transition effectively have been living in blended families for six years and explained that they have tumultuous and toxic relationships with their family members and were therefore not able to transition and adjust effectively; however, this does not mean that they may never adjust and transition effectively in the future.

Comparatively, participants who transitioned effectively perceived their transition and adjustment period as lasting between three months and three years which aligns with the findings of Favez et al. (2018) and Purswell and Taylor (2013). Adjustment requires time to form loving and healthy bonds with new family members and is dependent on several circumstances; hence some participants required more time to adjust compared to others (Bormanaki & Khoshhal, 2017; Wang et al., 2020; Yöntem, 2019). Moreover, the adjustment of these participants to their blended families relates to the 'behaviour control' dimension of the MMFF theory, as every single blended family member had to make modifications to their feelings, routines and behaviour to transition into their new blended families (González & Rodríguez-Naranjo, 2023; Sari & Dahlia, 2018; Sianko & McDonell, 2020).

Overall, the findings of this study have made it evident that every single adolescent participant's experiences relating to their blended families were unique. Therefore, their experiences cannot be generalised to other adolescents living in blended families. Moreover, key role players such as the DBE, parents, stepparents and

teachers should, therefore, view this study and realise that providing support for these adolescents should be individualised and based on their exclusive needs and blended family circumstances. Correspondingly, the study highlighted that multiple facets at play result in the optimal and healthy functioning of blended families. Therefore, understanding and providing support for these families should be administered holistically.

5.4 Limitations of the study

This study was limited to recruiting participants from one high school in Queensburgh, located within the Umlazi District, as other primary and high schools in the area did not permit me to recruit their learners for the study. It would have been preferred if one of the primary schools in the area had granted permission for their learners to participate in the study, as it would have increased the age range of the adolescent participants.

Another limitation experienced was that one participant did not feel comfortable being interviewed at his home as he did not want his parents to overhear his feelings surrounding his blended family. I therefore made alternative arrangements and secured a venue for his interview, which was conducted at the my parents' office on a Saturday morning when no staff were present so that the participant's privacy and confidentiality was upheld. It should be acknowledged that this participant was eighteen years old and did not need his parent's permission to conduct the interview elsewhere.

In addition, I felt that while the participants did a commendable job completing their diaries, some of them could have provided more in-depth descriptions of their weekly experience-based diary entries so that I could have received more detailed descriptions of their experiences.

5.5 Recommendations

This section presented recommendations that were informed by the results and conclusions of the study. These recommendations are targeted to parents, stepparents, teachers, and the DBE.

5.5.1 Increase in parental involvement and intervention

As previously stated, parents play a huge role in their children's lives. It is recommended that parents have deep, open and honest conversations with their children about their initial thoughts and feelings surrounding their remarriage before they announce their decision to transition into blended families and introduce their children to their new partner and family members. In addition, they should seek the help of a trained professional such as a psychologist to assist their children through the transition process and adjustment period to ensure minimal negative consequences to their child's psychological, social, socio-emotional, psychosocial and educational development. Moreover, it is highly recommended that parents inform their children's teachers about the shift in their family dynamic so that teachers are aware of the process, can effectively monitor it and can intervene if the child is experiencing difficulties with these changes in their family.

5.5.2 Training and workshops for teachers

It is recommended that teachers be trained and attend workshops related to blended families so that they are aware of what they are, as many teachers do not understand the totality of what blended families entail. The training and workshops should also inform teachers how to identify learners who are not coping well with their transitions and offer strategies on how they can assist them. If teachers are trained and exposed to workshops related to blended families then they can learn and adopt effective strategies and interventions for their learners who are not coping well.

5.5.3 Initiatives from the Department of Basic Education

It is recommended that the DBE create, provide, and recommend blended family training and workshops to their teachers, as mentioned above. Moreover, with the increase in mental health-related issues, the DBE should provide each education district with more psychologists, social workers and counsellors who can help intervene and support learners struggling to cope with changes to their family structure and dynamics. This includes learners who are transitioning into blended families, as research indicated that this process is incredibly stressful for children, regardless of whether they are happy about being part of a new family or not.

The KZN DoE has provided some support to schools in their 'Network of support providers' for school psychosocial and health support services for learners' document, which offers access to the contact details of support service personnel such as psychologists. However, not enough of these support personnel are available in each education district to assist the learners. Therefore, more should be employed to meet learners' needs. It is acknowledged that employing and providing more psychologists is a big ask, considering the financial constraints in developing countries such as SA. It is recommended that the DBE start off small by employing one more support person per school district and having them visit schools in their area once a month to support the learners. Once this has been established and the DBE, teachers, principals, parents and learners start seeing results, the initiative can develop and increase so that they can employ more support personnel.

5.6 Implications for further research

The following section showcases possible future studies that could be conducted relating to the topic of blended families within South Africa, as very few blended family studies based in SA have been conducted.

Possible future studies include the following:

- Support initiatives and strategies that adolescents transitioning into blended families feel assisted them during their transitions.
- A supplementary study could be carried out with these same participants in adulthood to discover if the support they received as adolescents influenced their family dynamics.
- Determine what support initiatives and strategies could be employed by teachers to assist learners who are transitioning into blended families.
- Discovering how the DBE improved its initiatives to help support learners from blended families through teacher training and support initiatives.
- Determine parents' and stepparents' perceptions of how their child or stepchild is handling their transition into their blended family.
- Present parental reflections and advice on how they could have handled their child's transition into their blended families differently.

5.7 Chapter summary

This chapter provided a comprehensive conclusion of the study undertaken regarding the experiences of adolescents transitioning into blended families from a selected high school in the Umlazi District. The chapter presented the conclusions reached in the study and provided information regarding limitations, recommendations and implications for further future research on this topic. Overall, the study highlighted that transitions into blended families are stressful for adolescents. However, some adolescents experience pleasurable transitions while others experience unpleasant transitions, as experiences are subjective and circumstance-dependent.

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APPENDIX A: Ethical Clearance Certificate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal



10 November 2022

Keiasha Harisingh (220113443)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear K Harisingh,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00004783/2022

Project title: Experiences of South African adolescents transitioning into blended families: A narrative inquiry

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 08 November 2022 to our letter of 01 November 2022 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**

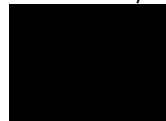
Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further 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 for one year until 10 November 2023

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.

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

Yours faithfully



.....
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX B: Permission to Conduct Research Letter from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1063

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Phindile Duma

Ref.:2/4/8/4057

Miss K Harisingh
PO Box 39978
QUEENSBURGH
4070

Dear Miss Harisingh

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: “EXPERIENCES OF SOUTH AFRICAN ADOLESCENTS TRANSITIONING INTO BLENDED FAMILIES: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY”, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 09 May 2022 to 09 May 2025.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

UMLAZI DISTRICT

Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 09 May 2022

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

APPENDIX C: Principal Consent Form

PRINCIPAL'S CONSENT FORM:

Dear potential Principal,

My name is Keiasha Harisingh, and I am currently a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, my student number is 220113443.

You are invited to consider allowing selected learners at your school to participate in a study entitled: Experiences of Adolescents Transitioning into Blended Families from a Selected High School in the Umlazi District.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the blended family culture that exists in South Africa and use this information to assist teachers and parents/guardians in helping their children/learners through their transition into blended families.

The study is expected to enrol 15 adolescents aged 10-18 who currently live in blended families and reside in Queensburgh. The participants will be recruited from selected schools in the Queensburgh area.

This study will involve participants engaging in an interview of approximately one hour as well as the completion of two weekly diary entries for a period of eight weeks. One of the diary entries will include the answering diary prompts that are provided by the researcher and the other is based on reflections of the participants' experiences of their transition into their blended family. The duration of your learners' participation is expected to be eight weeks.

The study may involve elicitation of emotional responses or cause the participants to think of emotional or painful memories. Since this study does require the participants to recall events that may elicit emotional responses, I need to ensure that the participants do not suffer any emotional, physical or psychological harm. I can ensure this by offering counselling services to those participants who require it. Should a participant require counselling, I will speak to the participant's parents/guardians and, with their permission, arrange a counselling session with a qualified psychologist so that the participant can restore their well-being.

It should be noted that the school and participants' identities will be protected using pseudonyms, and all the information obtained from them will only be used for this study. It is also essential to note that participation is completely voluntary, and the participants can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

I hope this study will be of value to teachers and parents/guardians so that they can develop strategies to help their children/learners cope socially, emotionally, and psychologically effectively through this time of upheaval caused by the transition into a new blended family system.

Please note the following:

- The school and participants will not receive any material gains (in the form of money, favours, presents, bribes, etc.) for participating in this research study.
- The school and participants' identities will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used.
- The participants will be expected to respond to interview questions and diary prompts reflecting their true opinions.
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and participants will be free to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences.
- The participants will not be forced to reveal any information they choose not to.
- Audio recordings of the interview will be done if permission by the participant and parents/guardians is provided.
- The information obtained from the participants will only be used for this study.
- The information obtained will be stored in the researcher's safe and destroyed after five years.

I have been granted permission by the KZN Department of Education to study at selected Queensburgh schools. My reference number for my permission is 2/4/8/4057. The UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has also ethically reviewed and approved this study. My reference number is HSSREC/00004783/2022.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may contact the researcher at 220113443@stu.ukzn.ac.za or her supervisor Dr. Ncamisile P. Mkhize-Mthiyane at

mthiyane1@ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

CONSENT

I _____ have been informed by Keiasha Harisingh, a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, about the study entitled: Experiences of Adolescents Transitioning into Blended Families from a Selected High School in the Umlazi District.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my learner's participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits to which they usually are entitled.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to my learners as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at 220113443@stu.ukzn.ac.za or her supervisor, Dr. Ncamisile P. Mkhize-Mthiyane at mthiyane1@ukzn.ac.za. If I have any questions or

concerns about my learners' rights as study participants, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Signature of Principal

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

APPENDIX D: Parent/Guardian Consent Form

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM:

Dear potential parent/guardian,

My name is Keiasha Harisingh, and I am currently a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, my student number is 220113443.

You are invited to consider allowing your child to participate in a study entitled: Experiences of Adolescents Transitioning into Blended Families from a Selected High School in the Umlazi District.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the blended family culture that exists in South Africa and use this information to assist teachers and parents/guardians in helping their children/learners through their transition into blended families.

The study is expected to enrol 15 adolescents aged 10-18 who currently live in blended families and reside in Queensburgh. The participants will be recruited from selected schools in the Queensburgh area.

This study will involve participants engaging in an interview of approximately one hour and completing two weekly diary entries for eight weeks. One of the diary entries will include the answering diary prompts that the researcher provides, and the other is based on reflections of the participants' experiences of their transition into their blended family. If you choose to enrol and remain in the study, the duration of your child's participation is expected to be eight weeks.

The study may involve elicitation of emotional responses or cause the participants to think of emotional or painful memories. Since this study does require the participants to recall events that may elicit emotional responses, I need to ensure that the participants do not suffer any emotional, physical or psychological harm. I can ensure this by offering counselling to those participants who require it. Should a participant require counselling, I will speak to the participant's parents/guardians and with their permission, arrange a counselling session with a qualified psychologist so that the participant can restore their well-being.

It should be noted that the school and your child's identities will be protected using pseudonyms, and all the information obtained from them will only be used for this study. It is also essential to note that participation is completely voluntary, and the participants can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

I hope this study will be of value to teachers and parents/guardians so that they can develop strategies to effectively help their children/learners cope socially, emotionally and psychologically through this time of upheaval caused by the transition into a new blended family system.

Please note the following:

- The school and your child will not receive any material gains for participation in this research study.
- The school and your child's identities will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used.
- Your child will be expected to respond to interview questions and diary prompts that reflect their true personal opinion.
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and your child will be free to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences.
- Your child will not be forced to reveal any information they choose not to.
- Audio recordings of the interview will be made if the participant and parents/guardians give permission.
- The information obtained from the participants will only be used for the purpose of this study.
- The information obtained will be stored in the researcher's safe and destroyed after five years.

I have been granted permission by the KZN Department of Education to study at selected Queensburgh schools. My reference number for my permission is 2/4/8/4057. The UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has also ethically reviewed and approved this study. My reference number is HSSREC/00004783/2022.

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mthiyane1@ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

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CONSENT

I _____ have been informed by Keiasha Harisingh, a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, about the study entitled: Experiences of Adolescents Transitioning into Blended Families from a Selected High School in the Umlazi District.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my child's participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits to which they usually are entitled.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to my child as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 220113443@stu.ukzn.ac.za or her supervisor, Dr. Ncamisile P. Mkhize-Mthiyane at mthiyane1@ukzn.ac.za. If I have any questions or concerns about my child's rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers, then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my child's interview	YES / NO
Use of my child's actual diary entries for research purposes	YES / NO

_____	_____
Signature of Parent/guardian	Date

_____	_____
Signature of Witness (Where applicable)	Date

_____	_____
Signature of Translator (Where applicable)	Date

APPENDIX E: Participant Assent Form

PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM:

Dear potential participant,

My name is Keiasha Harisingh, and I am currently a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, my student number is 220113443.

You are being invited to consider participation in a study entitled: Experiences of Adolescents Transitioning into Blended Families from a Selected High School in the Umlazi District.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the blended family culture that exists in South Africa and use this information to assist teachers and parents/guardians in helping their children/learners through their transition into blended families.

The study is expected to enrol 15 adolescents aged 10-18 who currently live in blended families and reside in Queensburgh. The participants will be recruited from selected schools in the Queensburgh area.

This study will involve participants engaging in an interview of approximately one hour as well as the completion of two weekly diary entries for a period of eight weeks. One of the diary entries will include the answering of diary prompts that the researcher provides, and the other is based on reflections of the participants' experiences of their transition into their blended family. If you choose to enrol and remain in the study, the duration of your participation is expected to be eight weeks.

The study may involve elicitation of emotional responses or cause the participants to think of emotional or painful memories. Since this study does require the participants to recall events that may elicit emotional responses, I need to ensure that the participants do not suffer any emotional, physical or psychological harm. I can ensure this by offering counselling to those participants who require it. Should a participant require counselling, I will speak to the participant's parents/guardians and, with their permission, arrange a counselling session with a qualified psychologist so that the participant can restore their well-being.

It should be noted that the school and your identity will be protected using pseudonyms, and all the information obtained from them will only be used for this study. It is also essential to note that the participation is completely voluntary, and the participants can withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

I hope this study will be of value to teachers and parents/guardians so that they can develop strategies to effectively help their children/learners cope socially, emotionally and psychologically through this time of upheaval caused by the transition into a new blended family system.

Please note the following:

- You and your school will not receive any material gains for participation in this research study.
- The school and your identities will be confidential, and pseudonyms will be used.
- You will be expected to respond to interview questions and diary prompts reflecting your true opinion.
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you will be free to withdraw at any stage without negative consequences.
- You will not be forced to reveal any information they choose not to.
- Audio recordings of the interview will be done if you and your parents/guardians give permission.
- The information obtained from you will only be used for the purpose of this study.
- The information obtained will be stored in the researcher's safe and destroyed after five years.

I have been granted permission by the KZN Department of Education to study at selected Queensburgh schools. My reference number for my permission is 2/4/8/4057. The UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has also ethically reviewed and approved this study. My reference number is HSSREC/00004783/2022.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions, you may contact the researcher at 220113443@stu.ukzn.ac.za or her supervisor Dr. Ncamisile P. Mkhize-Mthiyane, at

mthiyane1@ukzn.ac.za or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000
KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

CONSENT

I _____ have been informed by Keiasha Harisingh, a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, about the study entitled: Experiences of Adolescents Transitioning into Blended Families from a Selected High School in the Umlazi District.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits to which they usually are entitled.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if any injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 220113443@stu.ukzn.ac.za or her supervisor Dr. Ncamisile P. Mkhize-Mthiyane at mthiyane1@ukzn.ac.za. If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers, then I may contact:

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Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview	YES / NO
Use of my actual diary entries for research purposes	YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date

CONFIRMATION OF TRANSCRIPT:

I acknowledge that I have read the transcript of my interview and can confirm that the transcript is a true and accurate reflection of the words I expressed in the interview I participated in.

Signature of Participant

Date

APPENDIX F: Interview Schedule

Interview schedule:

Semi-structured interview:

It should be noted that this is a semi-structured interview, and questions will differ slightly for each participant depending on their unique family compositions.

Date: _____

Venue: _____

Time starts: _____

Time ends: _____

I. Opening:

Hello, my name is Keiasha, and I am a Master of Education student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Today I will be interviewing you to find out more about your blended family experiences.

Before we begin, I would like you to confirm that you and your parents/guardian consented to this interview and that you have chosen the pseudonym (Insert pseudonym) to protect your identity. Please can you confirm this for me?

I would now like to ask you some questions about your background and about the experiences that you have had while transitioning into a blended family. I hope to use this information to shed light on what other adolescents like you may experience and what their teachers and family can do to help them transition smoothly into their new families.

The interview should take 1 hour at maximum, and I thank you for taking the time out of your day for this interview. Shall we begin?

II. Body:

A. Personal and family background

- How old are you?
- What grade are you in?

- Could you tell me more about your parents?
- Do you have any siblings, stepsiblings or half-siblings?
- How old were you when you transitioned into a blended family?
- Who lives with you in your household?
- How often do you visit or stay with your other parent?

B. Initial transitional period

- How were you informed that you would transition into a blended family?
- How did you initially feel about your blended family?
- Please describe how you feel other family members have adjusted to your new blended family and living arrangements.

C. Support received from family

- How did you receive help and support during this transitional time?

Prompts: From biological parents

From stepparents

From siblings, stepsiblings or half-siblings

- What would you have liked your family to have done or done more of to help you during this transitional time?
- Do you speak to any of your family members about your feelings and emotions? If yes, who and why do you choose them to confide in? and what do you speak about?
- In your opinion, do you feel that your family members support each other? If yes, can you please describe the support?

Prompts: Communication

Parenting

Quality time

Shared interests

D. Support received from teachers

- Are your teachers aware that you live in a blended family?
- Do you feel as if your teachers treat you differently because you are part of a blended family?
- Did your teachers help and support you in any way during your transition into a blended family?

E. Support received from friends

- Are your friends aware that you live in a blended family?
- Do you feel as if your friends treat you differently because you are part of a blended family?
- Did your friends help and support you in any way during your transition into a blended family?

F. Effects of transitioning into a blended family

- In your opinion, how did transitioning into a blended family affect you?

Prompts: Socially

Emotionally

Academically

- Do you feel that there is a stigma attached to being in a blended family? Do you feel that other people and families judge you, and why?
- What would you like to tell people that do judge?

G. Feelings about your blended family

- How do you feel living in a blended family now compared to the beginning?
- What activities do your family members enjoy doing together?
- What feelings do you associate with your family?
- How do you feel that you and your family members respond to different situations using your feelings and emotions?

H. Conflict within your blended family

- What are some of the frequent conflicts that arise in your household about?
- How do you and your family resolve conflict within your household?

I. Communication within your blended family

- How would you describe the communication between you and your family members?

Prompts: With non-resident biological parent

With resident biological parent

With stepparent

With siblings

- Did or does your family seek outside help from friends, family or professionals to help everyone transition smoothly?

J. Roles and behaviour control

- Could you please describe the different roles assigned to each family member?
- Could you please describe the discipline arrangements in your household?

Prompts: Manner

Who disciplines them?

Consistency

K. Stress and coping

- Do you think that you have experienced stress during your transition into a blended family? If yes, please describe what events caused you to stress.
- How do the members of your family deal with stressful events?
- During your transition period, do you feel as if you had to use coping strategies to help you manage the stress of the transition?
- What coping strategies did you make use of during your transition into a blended family?

Conclusion:

To conclude, I would like to say that I am extremely grateful and thankful to you for sharing your experiences with me today. I hope that by sharing with me, you can see just how far you have come as a family, and you can reflect on ways to enhance your connection with each other. Before we say goodbye, I would like to explain the diary task to you, and I would like to thank you once again for sharing your truth and experiences with me.

APPENDIX G: Diary Prompts

Diary prompts:

The participants will be required to provide two diary entries per week for a period of eight weeks. One diary entry would consist of the participant reflecting upon their experiences and answering a diary prompt. The other for the week would consist of them sharing any experience about the transition that they would like to share.

Weekly diary entry prompts:

Week 1: Describe the first day of moving into your new home with your new family.

Week 2: Could you please describe a significant conflict that occurred between you and your stepparent?

Week 3: What do you feel is the best way in which your biological parent/s could have informed you about the transition and why?

Week 4: Describe your evolution of feelings throughout this transition.

Week 5: What advice would you give to other adolescents who are currently experiencing the same or similar situation to you?

Week 6: Describe how long it took you to adjust to your new living situation. If you have not completely adjusted yet, that is fine too.

Week 7: Reflecting on the coping strategies you used to cope with the stress of the transition, what coping strategies would you rather have employed and why?

Week 8: Overall, do you think you have transitioned effectively? Please provide reasons for your answer.

APPENDIX H: Language Editor's Certificate



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PROOFREADING AND EDITING CERTIFICATE

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[REDACTED] – BA Psychology and Drama (UCT)

For Busy Bee Editing: Hugo Chandler

For Busy Bee Editing: Brenda van Rensburg

Date: 18 December 2023

APPENDIX I: Turnitin Certificate

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