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Quality in South African early learning centres: Mothers' and teachers' views and understanding

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This study investigated how quality in early learning centres (preschools) in South Africa was experienced and perceived by mothers and teachers. A theoretical framework, based on a model of quality development by Woodhead (1996), informed the study. This framework that consists of input (structural), process and outcome quality indicators is a well-established model for quality development, which has been used in developing countries. The findings generated from a thematical analysis of interview data showed that aspects perceived by mothers and teachers as quality indicators in early learning centres were predominantly process indicators and hard to 'measure' in a quantitative way. For mothers and teachers, children's social-emotional well-being, holistic development, a normative foundation for values and respect, effective infrastructure and accountable learning indicated quality. A quality school climate enhances emotional and social well-being, and the findings suggest that for mothers and teachers quality concerns were not about that which the early learning centres have provided in terms of facilities (input indicators), but rather about the process indicators where centres promote children's holistic well-being. The only outcome indicator that was regarded as extremely important by mothers and important, but not to the same extent, by teachers, is whether children are happy and content and enjoying school.

Introduction

Many young South African children face tremendous challenges in terms of their survival, development and well-being because of the challenges of poverty, unemployment as well as the effects of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) that attacks the immune system of the body. There is increasing recognition that practical and efficient solutions are urgently required to address the needs of today's and tomorrow's young children (Rochat, Mitchell & Richter 2008):

> Positive early learning experiences will lay the foundation for a lifetime of success ... High quality, effective services are needed for those young children who are competent, yet at risk for compromised development. (pp. 4–5)

Early learning centres are places that offer early childhood education to young learners, before entering formal schooling in the primary school (Morrison 2006:4).

In South Africa, the need and demand for good-quality early childhood care is extensive, but the lack of quality measurement of early learning centres (preschools) for children aged 3–6 years has been exacerbated by a development in national education policy, namely the discontinuation of government preschools in most provinces. Early childhood education has largely become a community-driven activity or private endeavour, resulting in a situation where owners run these centres as private for-profit businesses (Clasquin-Johnson 2010). This has resulted in pressure to appoint the most 'affordable' teachers, who are often not (the best) qualified for the job. Furthermore, the lack of government involvement implies the absence of a structure that would enable the coordination of efforts to determine whether these centres meet particular quality criteria (Chisholm 2004).

Trying to define quality is, as Myers (2007:3) has said, much like trying to catch a fish with your bare hands. For him, part of the elusive nature of the concept of quality can be understood by examining the tension between a 'modern' view that treats quality as something inherent, universal, independent of culture, place and history and a 'postmodern' view of quality that is constructive, relative, linked to specific values and influenced by culture, place and history.

Note: This article is based on the author's PhD thesis.

The purpose of this study was to conceptualise quality in early learning centres from the perspective of various beneficiaries. With this study, I wanted to investigate how the quality of early learning centres in South Africa was experienced and perceived by different stakeholders, in particular mothers and teachers of early learning centres and how that knowledge compares with the model of quality development developed by Woodhead (1996).

In the next section, the contextual background of quality in early childhood education in South Africa is addressed and the theoretical framework used in the study is explained.

Contextual background of quality in early childhood education in South Africa

There is an urgent need not only for more but for higher quality early learning centres globally and also in South Africa (Clasquin-Johnson 2009). Essa (2011) emphasised that there has been extensive debate and research regarding early education for special populations of children and families, in particular children from low-income families, children with disabilities and children at risk. South Africa has many children that fall into one or more of these categories. Aronstam and Braund (2015) point out that since 1994 with the new dispensation of a democratic South Africa:

> much has been done to improve the quality and availability of early learning programmes in South Africa, though we would argue that much research and investigation remains to be completed. (p. 4)

In recent years, in many countries with well-developed or developing early childhood education systems, the 'quality-issue' has become a matter of considerable apprehension. The past decade offered an assortment of reviews, public policies, investigations and research worldwide 'into what should constitute quality in early childhood education and care' (Ishimine, Tayler & Bennett 2010).

Ample ways potentially exist according to which quality of early learning centres can be determined. One specific method that has been applied in a number of countries is to implement quality assurance frameworks. A number of quality assurance frameworks have been used in different countries for more than two decades (Bredekamp 2011). Different terminology is used to describe the systems that educational organisations put in place to classify and determine the quality of early learning centres. Terms that are being utilised are quality assurance frameworks, accreditation frameworks, accreditation systems, rating scales, observation measures, accreditation schemes and childcare accreditation.

Quality assurance frameworks have never been implemented in the South African early childhood development sector. These accreditation frameworks have primarily been designed, used and adapted by first-world countries. In countries where it has been implemented, many advantages have been reported. Golberg (1999:39), who conducted an extensive study, said 'Accreditation provides parents/consumers with a basis of comparison and choice. It sets quality standards and a means for measuring services to children'.

Because a framework is value-laden, certain criteria for identifying quality must be identified and selected. '… accreditation occurs in and is influenced by social, political and cultural contexts' (Bredekamp 1999:61). Golberg (1999:5) argues that when a quality assurance or accreditation framework is developed, it would be ideal to consider the quality criteria established by early childhood researchers, professional bodies, as well as a wide range of stakeholders such as children, parents and the community. In this study, the opinions of teachers and mothers in terms of quality in early learning centres are voiced.

In terms of the problem statement of the study, it is evident that in South Africa, teachers' and parents' views of high quality in early learning centres have received little attention despite researchers' and educators' attempts to identify the critical components for high-quality early learning centres.

This study was aimed at addressing this gap by including the views of parents (mothers). Essa (2011) is convinced that parents can be active participants and a tremendous resource in matters related to early learning centres. It has been shown that parents can contribute in a variety of ways in selecting, modifying, or maintaining various aspects of the environment. Some centres, for instance, have advisory or policy-making parent councils that may be involved in decisions about major purchases or construction (Essa 2011).

This research project also focused on exploring and describing how the quality of early learning centres was experienced and perceived by South African teachers. Early childhood teachers perform a complex and multidimensional role. It is the teachers' responsibility to implement a thoughtfully planned daily programme which is challenging, engaging, integrated, developmentally appropriate, and culturally and linguistically responsive, and that promotes positive outcomes for all children. (Ontario Ministry of Education 2006:1). The purpose of the interviews with the teachers was to create a platform and give them opportunities to voice their opinions and to share their experiences as insiders on the important aspect of quality in the early learning centre work environment. Interviews are useful to acknowledge teachers' and parents' right to be heard, or in this case, to hear the voices of those that are 'habitually marginalised' (Hauser in Cannold 2001).

The main objective for this study was to investigate mothers' and teachers' views and understanding of quality in early learning centres. The three sub-objectives were:

1. How do mothers understand quality in early learning centres?
2. How do teachers understand quality in early learning centres?
3. How do the understanding of quality in early learning centres of mothers and teachers compare?

Theoretical framework

In order to understand the generated data in terms of quality, I selected the model of Woodhead (1996) on quality development, as a basis to inform a possible framework for the South African context in early learning centres. Martin Woodhead, a developmental psychologist, developed this model in 1996.

In Woodhead's project, four case studies were carried out by local consultants in India, Kenya, Venezuela and France. These studies emphasise the extraordinary diversity in environments for early child development, in contrasting economic and cultural circumstances and focus on different models of early childhood programmes. Woodhead offers a view of quality issues in large-scale programmes for young, disadvantaged children growing up in poverty. The South African context bears resemblances with the contexts of the countries of Woodhead's project. Kenya, for example is also an African, developing country. By opting for Woodhead's framework, I attempt to avoid one of the pitfalls against which Woodhead (1996) warns us:

> There is a strong tendency for Euro-American models of quality to dominate research, policy, training, and practice in early childhood development. With a few notable exceptions, this tendency has been fuelled by the universalist aspirations of developmental psychology. I am convinced that universal models of quality are both untenable and unhelpful. At the same time, I am convinced we should not embrace the opposite extreme, an ultimately self-defeating form of relativism. Quality is relative, but not arbitrary. (p. 5)

The Woodhead model is based on three key questions: Who are the stakeholders in the 'quality' of a programme, who are the perceived beneficiaries of 'quality', and what are the indicators of 'quality'? The framework consisting of quality indicators grouped under three broad categories, namely input, process and outcome indicators, is presented in Table 1.

How can Woodhead's model be used? Woodhead explains that the model is intended 'as the starting point for appraising a programme and negotiating its development with all the stakeholders who are interested and involved in it'. He argues that it is not a top-down perspective, but an inclusionary model that 'takes account of other perspectives, which discourages narrow prescriptions about what makes for a good programme, which goals are worth pursuing, and which criteria should be taken as indicators' (Woodhead 1996:25–26). I am of the opinion that this model provides an appropriate theoretical framework to explain the relationship and interdependency between the main features of the study.

TABLE 1: The theoretical framework for indicating quality in early learning centres.

Framework	Indicator	Variable
Stakeholders in the 'quality' of programmes		
		Children. Parents. Employers. Teachers. ECE workers. Programme managers. Community leaders. Child development experts. Politicians. Funding agencies. Research investigators.
Beneficiaries from 'quality'		
		Children. Parents. Employers. Teachers in the primary school. ECE workers. Older children (do not have to care for younger siblings).
'Quality' indicators		
	Input indicators: Reflect the structural components of centres and are easy to define and measure	Building and grounds. Floor space. Toilets. Heating/cooling. Materials and equipment. Toys. Furniture. Teaching resources. Staff. Qualifications. Wages and conditions. Child/staff ratios.
	Process indicators: Reflect relationships and day-to-day interactions	Style of care. Adult's responsiveness. Consistency. Teaching learning methods. Cater for individual needs. Control/support. Experiences offered. Choices. Variety. Routines and transitions. Control and discipline. Boundaries. Rules. Management. Relationships among adults. Respect. Trust. Relationships between staff, parents and others. Open. Welcoming. Cooperative.
	Outcome indicators: Reflect the impact of using services	Children's health. Growth levels. Illness. Abilities. Overall skills and development. Adjustment to school. Transition and achievements in school. Family attitudes. Parent competence. Support for children's learning at home.

Source: Woodhead, M., 1996, *In search of the rainbow: Pathways to quality in large scale programs for young disadvantaged children*, Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections Series no 10. Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague

Method and procedure

In this section, the method and procedure being followed in this study are discussed. The case study design, selection of the research sites and participants, and data analysis are being explained.

In terms of addressing the main objective, a case study was chosen because through case studies researchers:

> get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings and partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires). (Bromley 1986 cited in Merriam 2009)

Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009:434) recommend case study research as a suitable choice 'when a researcher wants to answer a descriptive question (e.g. what happened) or an explanatory question (e.g. how or why did something happen?)' I chose an instrumental case study as research design, because I opted for a design featuring 'an in-depth study of interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system' (Opie 2004:74). In this study, I focused on a real situation (people's experiences of early learning centres quality), with real people (children, parents, teachers and teacher education students) in an environment familiar to myself (early learning centres). In order to answer the research questions, I thus studied interactions of events, human relationships and other factors.

The term 'case' or 'object of study' (Merriam 1998) has many definitions; in this study, 'cases' refer to mothers' and teachers' experiences of quality in early learning centres. Very often in educational research where case study research is the choice, one phenomenon is investigated but at various sites. In this study, teacher education students who did their teaching practice could select early learning centres for the teaching practice, and therefore there was a wide variety of centres used in this study. The teacher education students who participated as fieldworkers and collected data for this study live in different parts of the country and therefore 213 early learning centres were represented in 9 provinces.

Selection of research sites and participants

The early learning centres were selected through a non-probability, purposive method (Cresswell 2008:214). Selection criteria included: (1) that the fieldworkers (teacher education students) selected centres that were willing to accommodate teacher education students for teaching practice purposes; (2) that the centres used a play-based curriculum; (3) that at the early learning centres teacher education students had to be assigned to qualified teachers; and (4) that the centres were conveniently located in terms of distance, since the teacher education students were responsible for their own transport to and from the early learning centres.

In this study, early learning centres refer to the relevant settings studied. The setting was not only the physical environment of various centres but also those aspects that are not necessarily visible to the eye, like the atmosphere and the centres' character (Charles & Mertler 2002).

In this explanatory instrumental case study, teacher education students acted as fieldworkers to collect data by interviewing teachers and mothers from a middle-income group. I used purposive sampling to select the fieldworkers (teacher education students) who collected the data based on their particular interest in early childhood education and their exposure to early learning centres.

A non-probability, convenience sampling was used to select the participants. Both the mothers and teachers were targeted, with the knowledge that the group does not represent the wider population but a particular group with the same interest (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2001).

Data collection

During the curriculum-based 3-week teaching practice session, the 235 teacher education students conducted the teaching practice session at 213 different early learning centres. Towards the end of the session, they selected the case, namely 235 teachers and 235 parents, through convenience sampling and generated data through interview schedules (Zeni 2001).

As fieldworkers, the teacher education students informed the participants of the purpose of the data collection and obtained their consent that the information could be used in this research. Each teacher education student asked one teacher and one mother individually the same open-ended question, namely, 'According to you, what is a quality early learning centre (preschool)?' These responses on the question, if preferred so, could be audio recorded by the teacher students. The responses were then transcribed by the teacher students. The fieldworkers connected closely enough with the teachers and parents to establish an insider's identity without becoming part of the group membership (Merriam 2009).

Data analysis

The qualitative data in this study comprised the transcribed responses obtained during face-to-face interviews with mothers and teachers. The structured interview responses of the teachers and parents were already documented in hard copy format by the fieldworkers when I received them. I analysed these responses electronically and identified themes and topics. I grouped themes that emerged from the interviews under broad categories based on the theoretical framework (see Table 1), specifically the quality indicators, namely the input, process and outcome indicators. I organised and coded the inscriptions in broad categories to produce a record of the things that I have noticed (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen 2003:258).

During the process of data analysis, I initially ended up with a huge number of themes and encountered a challenge to distinguish between possible and suitable themes for data interpretation and to strike a balance between rigour and flexibility concerning the identification of suitable themes that emerged from the interviews. In order to interpret the analysed data and to establish themes that were not too generalised, but which were also not too particular and specific, I had to repeat the analysis process a number of times to look out for regularities and patterns, and to create clarifications and options to enable me to answer the research questions (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford 2001:158–159). Guided by the structure of the theoretical framework, themes and subthemes were eventually identified that were specific

enough to capture the uniqueness of the data, but which simultaneously grouped categories together that were not just related, but which were also manageable in terms of their numbers.

Findings

In this part, I discuss the organisation of the data according to the themes that emerged from the theoretical framework.

Organising the data in view of the theoretical framework

Following the coding of individual interview data, all the responses of the interviews were analysed in terms of interrelated themes to investigate specific patterns and categories that arose from the data. These patterns and categories were reflected in the interpretation of findings where I explored comparisons, causes, consequences and relationships to make sense of the data (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen 2003). The theoretical framework of Woodhead was used to organise the themes that emerged from the data according to the different quality indicators. Table 2 provides a visual summary of the broad themes derived from the data.

In terms of the theoretical framework (see Tables 1 and 2), the majority of factors, captured from the interviews, and indicated by mothers and teachers as quality factors, were process indicators and were concerned with children's socio-emotional well-being, holistic development, values and respect. The other two categories of quality indicators, infrastructure and learning, were input (or structural) indicators. In terms of the infrastructure, mothers and teachers did not focus on detailed features of indoor or outdoor areas as quality indicators. However, both mothers and teachers regarded safety and security, hygiene, neatness and cleanliness, sufficient space, well-equipped playgrounds and qualified teachers as important quality factors.

In the next section, the findings derived from the data are discussed according to the themes as indicated in Table 2.

Input (structural) indicators: Infrastructure

It was evident that safety and security were seen as an extremely important quality indicator by teachers as well as mothers. In South Africa, where the crime rate is high and citizens are concerned about safety issues (Altbeker 2011), it follows that this aspect scored the highest number of responses. Safety was also no longer perceived merely as sheltering the child (Elliott 2010). Environmental care, health, being prepared for emergencies, protecting children and safety consciousness were also included when discussing safety. Safety, support and supervision therefore were fundamental components of the daily early childhood programme (Howes 2010).

The need for a clean, neat and hygienic centre with spacious class rooms was also an aspect specified as quality indicators by many teachers and mothers. This view is supported by Palaiologou (2010) who emphasised that young children's emotional, social and personal development were influenced to a large extent by the space and the quality and quantity of play materials. In centres where children were constrained by a relatively small play area, and an inadequate amount of toys to share, there was an increase in fights and disruptions. Children's health and physical well-being were more frequently affected by the quality of the physical environment than adults (Bullard 2010).

Where mothers and teachers considered spacious classrooms as important, only teachers indicated spacious, interesting, well-designed and well-equipped playgrounds as quality indicators. Palaiologou (2010) points out that children will develop social skills such as respect for friends, when they participated in games that require space and free movement and where they were waiting to take turns or have to play in pairs.

Input (structural) indicators: Learning

Mothers and teachers value a high-quality educational programme that provides sufficient learning opportunities to enhance children's holistic development. Essa (2011) specified that school readiness will best be achieved when focusing on the whole active child instead of focusing predominantly on the intellectual or the social aspects of children. In this study, teachers and mothers indicated that they valued a quality programme that encourages learner participation. Likewise, Bertram and Pascal ([s.a]:2) indicate that children's involvement in an activity is a measure for quality and applicable to an endless list of situations and observable at all ages. In their view, children who participate and are actively involved, have good concentration, a specific focus, 'want to continue the activity and to persist in it, and are rarely, if ever distracted'. Bertram and Pascal refer to evidence that children gain deep, motivated, intense and long-term learning experiences from their involvement

TABLE 2: Themes that emerged from the data, organised according to the quality indicators of the theoretical framework of Woodhead (see Table 1).

Input (structural) indicators	Process indicators	Outcome indicators
Reflect the structural components of centres and are easy to define and measure	Reflect relationships and day-to-day interactions	Reflect the impact of using services
Themes		
Infrastructure.	Socio-emotional well-being.	Happy and content.
Learning.	Holistic development.	Enjoying school.
	Values and respect.	

Source: Woodhead, M., 1996, *In search of the rainbow: Pathways to quality in large scale programs for young disadvantaged children*, Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections Series no 10. Bernard van Leer Foundation, The Hague

and participation. Involved children are usually motivated, remarkably observant and responsive to relevant stimuli, whereas involvement does not occur when the activities are too easy or when the task is too demanding. Therefore, is important for quality learning to take place.

In this study, teachers and mothers strongly indicated the value they placed on having qualified, dedicated and motivated teachers. Similarly, there is research to confirm that one of the most significant factors indicating quality in early learning centres is the quality of the staff (Jaeckle 2010:3). According to Golberg (1999) for instance, the level of teachers' formal education is 'related to positive outcomes for children such as increased social interaction with adults, development of pro-social behaviours, and improved language and cognitive development'. Jaeckle (2010) also supports this statement in saying that high-quality practices in early learning centres impact on children, specifically those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. According to Jaeckle research has identified some specific quality provision indicators, including highly-qualified, well-trained teachers. Yamamoto and Li (2011) also found that parents of all the different participating groups in their study identified teacher qualities, referring to qualifications, experience, responsibility and teachers being loving, as the most important element of a high-quality early learning centre.

In the same way in which teachers in this study particularly focused on the type of curriculum being offered in early learning centres, Howard (2010:51) emphasises the necessity for shifting from a curriculum that is content-driven to one that applies content as a vehicle to provoke and provide an unequivocal consciousness of 'effective thinking and problem-solving strategies'. Using the correct curriculum and exposing children to group work was also regarded by teachers as important. Literature supports this view by explaining that the most suitable curriculum for children is one that is theoretically sound but grounded in early childhood practices and principles of development (Carnahan & Terorde-Doyle 2007).

How teachers interpret a specific curriculum, compared with their own views on teaching and learning and their attitude regarding curriculum materials in general, impacts on how the curriculum is used. Teachers' views and commitments thus inform how they apply the curriculum, not in isolation, but with the children and in a learning environment. Additionally factors in the environment influence the curriculum. Resources, facilities at the early learning centres and support available by means of parents and paraprofessionals are examples of such factors. Teachers should be competent to consider the children's individual contexts and adjust the curriculum harmoniously with those contexts (Kruger *et al*. 2015).

In this study, whereas teachers focused on the type of curriculum, relationships and facilities, mothers focused on school readiness and a challenging and stimulating programme that addresses life skills as quality indicators. Gilliam (2009:i) confirms that school readiness is the goal of early education but specifically states that 'the goal of school and education itself should be to develop healthy, happy and productive citizens'.

Process indicators: Holistic development

Although mothers clearly emphasised the necessity for school readiness they simultaneously stated the need for sufficient playtime. Research shows that emphasis on play does not detract from academic learning but actually enables children to learn. For example, Becker and Becker (2009:114) explain that 'through mature play, children learn the very foundational skills that will prepare them for the academic challenges that lie ahead'.

In this study, only mothers regarded sufficient opportunities for social interaction as an extremely important aspect of quality early learning centres. This is surprising given the fact that the teachers indicated that they believe in play-based learning. Similarly several studies (Mayesky 2012; Rivera 2008; Santrock 2008; Sciara & Dorsey 2003; Stegelin 2008) confirmed that positive interactions between teachers and children can influence children's social and emotional development. Furthermore, studies indicate that a positive teaching style results in more pro-social and socially competent children (Essa 2011). They will later display positive interactions and relationships with teachers and peers in the primary school and show 'lower levels of challenging behaviours and higher levels of competence in school' (Ostrosky & Jung 2008:42).

Process indicators: Socio-emotional well-being

The style of care the children received at the centres seems to be very important to teachers and mothers. In support of this finding, Becker and Becker (2009) state that young children cannot learn without a solid underpinning of love and care. They furthermore say according to Howes 2010:

> if the early childhood teacher, who sees the child for the better part of most days, carries forward the work of the parents and provides this solid foundation, the child will go on and learn for the rest of his life. (p. 15)

Likewise, Howes (2010) states that warm, caring and trusting relationships with teachers enable children 'to explore other interpersonal relationships and learning opportunities' (Howes 2010:15).

Similar to the findings of this study, evidence from other studies also reflects parents' (and researchers') concerns regarding the well-being and best interest of children as an indication of the quality in early learning centres. According to Howes (2010), the following questions are often asked by parents:

> Are they safe and healthy? Do they feel secure and sure that the teachers will keep them safe? Are they learning the skills that they will need to be successful in school? In short, does the

> school environment enhance children's development in various ways and provide them with a good start for the rest of their lives? (p. 33)

The results of this study further support the work of Becker and Becker (2009) who emphasised that children cannot learn anything, cognitively, emotionally or socially without a loving, trusting relationship with a reliable adult caregiver, who substitutes the parent for the majority of the day.

In this study, the provision of individual attention to children in a loving, caring, peaceful, friendly and safe atmosphere featured prominently as a special concern to both mothers and teachers. Howes (2010) confirms that warm and sensitive interactions encourage children to trust the teacher, not only to take care of them but also that they can rely on the teacher's help if needed. Howes further explains that from an attachment theory perspective, children's relationships with adults contribute significantly to their experiences of being in early learning centres. Warm, caring and trusting relationships with teachers enable children 'to explore other interpersonal relationships and learning opportunities' (Howes 2010:15).

Both mothers and teachers expressed the need for children to experience love in the centre. Literature within this context supports the importance of safety and security as a prerequisite for the feeling of being loved. In Katz's view (2010), young children need a deep sense of safety. She refers to safety on a psychological level, meaning feeling secure, as a subjective feeling of 'being strongly connected and deeply attached to one or more others' (Katz 2010:5). This feeling of attachment, connectedness and feeling safe, she explains, 'comes not just from being loved, but from feeling loved, wanted, feeling significant, to an optimum (not maximum) degree' (Katz 2010:5).

Good communication between the staff and parents and an interpersonal relationship of trust between the teachers and children are also mentioned by mothers as indicators of quality centres. Existing literature on studies conducted in the United States confirms the importance of communication, not only for the children's welfare, but to notify parents and to assist them in understanding the aims and programme of the centre (Howes & Richie 2002).

Process indicators: Values and respect

Teachers and mothers all emphasised the importance of having discipline, rules and regulations in early learning centres. Literature supports these results by referring to teachers' important role when facilitating play and providing boundaries with clear rules and agreements for safe play indoors and outdoors and to give clear structure to the children (Laevers 2005).

Mothers also deemed a balance between love and discipline and supportive, helpful teachers as key factors of quality early learning centres. According to Howes and Richie (2002), teachers who were available and responsive to children were usually capable of communicating with children about emotions.

Teachers and mothers felt that children must be treated with *respect* and should also be taught to be respectful of each other and of adults. Katz (2010) remarks that young children need to be near authoritative adults who can apply their extensive power 'over the lives of young children with warmth, support, encouragement and adequate explanations of the limits they impose upon them' (Katz 2010:7). In her view, authoritativeness also implies respectful treatment of children's 'opinions, feelings, wishes and ideas as valid, even when we disagree with them' (Katz 2010:7). In this regard Katz (2010) concludes by saying:

> to respect people we agree with, is not a problem; respecting those whose ideas, wishes and feelings are different from ours or troubling to us, may be a mark of wisdom in parents and of genuine professionalism in teachers. (p. 7)

In confirming the results of the study, there is sufficient literature to support the significance of teachers acknowledging the importance of each child, and altering strategies to provide individual attention and meet the unique needs of the children in their care cannot be overemphasised. When teachers develop relationships with young children, they should specifically be aware of the cultural, linguistic and individual needs of the children (Ostrosky & Jung 2008).

For mothers, non-discrimination and multicultural centres, as well as the development of children's identities, were important. Within this context, Falk (2009:88) refers to the importance of relationships especially where young children's identities 'are still newly in the making'. In addition, Falk explains that such relationships can assist in nurturing children's well-being and sense of self-efficacy or alternatively undermine the self-confidence which is needed to take control of their own learning and life. Literature also indicates that practices for supporting children on an emotional level were not culturally specific but universal and reliant on adults being sensitive to children and their consciousness of discrimination, bias and exclusion (Howes 2010).

Process indicators: Children being happy and content and enjoying school

According to the theoretical framework (see Table 1), the only outcome indicator that was regarded as extremely important by mothers and important, but not to the same extent, by teachers, was whether children were happy and contented and enjoyed being at the centre. Two studies done in Australia support these findings (Noble 2005; O'Gorman 2007). Similar findings were also obtained in a study about the perceptions of parents from Hong Kong (Yuen & Grieshaber 2009). This finding is also supported by the results of an extensive study done in the United States on the similarities and differences between Chinese-immigrant and European American parents' views of

high-quality preschool education (Yamamoto & Li 2011). This study also shows that the positive psychological state of children, such as being happy and loving the early learning centre, was deemed very important by parents in the United States.

Silences or absences in the data with regard to the theoretical framework

In this part, I refer to findings that are part of the theoretical framework (see Table 1), but which were not reported by the teachers and mothers, which thus indicate an absence and hence neither confirm nor contradict the results of the current study.

In terms of input indicators, heating and cooling were not mentioned by any of the participants. South Africa is a country with mild weather without severe, long winter seasons with extensive rain or snow. In addition, the data were collected in areas known for mild temperatures during January, which was a pleasant summer month, and the aspects of heating and cooling were not relevant at that time. Although heating and cooling specifications were important and relevant quality factors in many buildings located in countries known for their severe temperature conditions, most schools and other buildings in South Africa are not primarily designed and built with that in mind. In countries like Australia where extreme temperatures may be experienced, the education policies require the provision of heating and cooling equipment to maintain a comfortable temperature for children (Department of Education & Children's Services 2009).

Another input indicator mentioned in Woodhead's framework is teaching resources (Woodhead 1996:23–25). In this study, although the importance of toys and equipment, thus resources for children, was emphasised by teachers, nothing was reported about resources for teachers. Literature confirms that teaching resources like learning guides, software packages and online information that teachers can use, can enhance the quality of learning (Edwards 2010; Entz 2009; Good 2009; Redleaf 2009; Snyder Kaltman 2009). In Davin *et al*.'s (2010:224) view resources for learning and teaching ought to be used and dealt with in an appropriate way, and can then contribute towards quality in terms of the 'planning, teaching, learning and assessment processes of the curriculum'.

Other quality indicators from the theoretical framework that were not reported in this study are wages and conditions. Local and international literature reports on early childhood teachers being ranked among the most poorly paid professionals, together with challenging working conditions. These are the main reasons for a high turnover of staff which in turn negatively impacts on the quality of early childhood education (Awopegba 2007:4; Clasquin-Johnson 2011:56; Gilliam 2009:iii; Segal *et al*. 2012:80).

New insights regarding quality in early learning centre

The following findings derived from the data provide new insights regarding beneficiaries' experiences of indicators of quality in early learning centres.

One finding of this study that was not indicated in the theoretical framework was that both mothers and teachers highly valued the use of faith-based activities in early learning centres. Although existing international early childhood education literature was silent on this matter, South African literature foregrounds the importance of religious education to inform parents when choosing schools. According to Bray and Tladi (2010), regarding the right to freedom of religion, *School Act* (section 15) in South Africa embodies parents' freedom to choose a religion at a public or independent school or early learning centre. This choice is accommodated by the establishment of educational institutions, such as private religious institutions, that make provision for such a choice.

Another new insight based on the views of the teachers, was the setting of the centre. In this study, the physical location, whether central, close to the primary school or situated in a friendly, caring, loving and peaceful area was an indication of quality centres for teachers. Australian studies (Noble 2005; O'Gorman 2007) found that location appeared to override educational and learning criteria when parents choose educational centres for their children. However, although mothers in this study were silent on this matter, they did indicate the availability of an aftercare service for children where children can be cared even after the morning programme's hours was significant. This finding complies with the findings of studies by those such as Noble (2005) and O'Gorman (2007).

A last new insight in this study was that teachers (but not mothers) viewed the provision of extra and/or extramural activities as an indication of quality in early learning centres. In this regard, Hirsh-Pasek, Michnick, Golinkoff, Berk and Singer (2009:13–14) refer to 'another way in which the preschool academic emphasis manifests itself in [*the USA*] society', namely the increase of specialised classes devoted to teaching a specific skill, for example computer science, formal reading instruction, music, and acrobatics. These classes were advertised to parents as a way of 'enriching' their children's learning to 'pave the way for their academic success' (Hirsch-Pasek *et al.* 2009:14). The authors, however, do not see these activities as indicators of quality. They criticise this view that formal extra mural activities enhance children's academic abilities, and which contradicts playful learning, by stating 'what is needed are preschools that impact necessary content through playful learning and provide time for the spontaneous free play that is so crucial to social-emotional and academic growth' (Hirsch-Pasek *et al.* 2009:14).

In conclusion, it seems that those aspects perceived by mothers and teachers as indicators of a good quality early

learning centres were predominantly process indicators and hard to 'measure' in a quantitative way. The following aspects were foregrounded by both mothers and teachers: the children's emotional and social well-being, as well as an unprejudiced milieu, depicting high norms and values. How the children were treated and the way they feel whilst at the centre were thus considered as foundational to 'quality' in early learning centres by both mothers and teachers. That is, both mothers and teachers valued the fundamental cornerstones of love, care, morals, trust, discipline, respect and security to set the scene for quality education.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the formal instructions provided to the teacher education students who conducted the interviews did not specify that they should interview both fathers and mothers, only that they had to interview parents. The fact that only mothers were interviewed could perhaps be ascribed to two factors: (1) more mothers than fathers brought their children to the centres, and (2) all the fieldworkers were young females and they possibly felt more at ease in the presence of mothers. A possible implication of this situation is that I was not able to distinguish between potential differences in understandings or experiences of quality by mothers and fathers respectively.

Another limitation of this study is that the teachers and mothers who were selected for interviews were not representative of the South African population. I used non-probability, convenience sampling to select the participants, with the knowledge that the group did not represent the wider population but a particular group with the same interest (Cohen *et al.* 2001). Teachers and mothers were selected by teacher education students (fieldworkers) because they were connected to the centres where the teacher education students conducted their teaching practice and were therefore conveniently accessible to obtain data (Maree & Pietersen 2007).

The teacher education students completed their fieldwork in centres which had to adhere to certain criteria. The teachers who were interviewed were all educated, and qualified as early childhood teachers. The interviewed mothers were literate and from middle-income groups (DoBE 2011). There were more urban than rural centres and although all nine provinces of the country were presented, one province (Gauteng, an urban area) represented the majority of the participants.

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2001:156) contend that the generalisation of findings of a non-probability sample cannot be done outside of the convenience sampling where the participants were selected 'according to convenience of access'. Consequently findings from this study could be generalised to early learning centres of middle-income, educated, groups of teachers and parents in urban or rural areas. Another delimitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalised to the majority population in South Africa, which are low socio-economic, with low educational levels and have teachers without relevant education qualifications (DoBE 2011).

Closing remarks

From the findings in this study, it appears that mothers and teachers were concerned, not so much with what the centres have, but that the centres can provide a safe and secure place with a loving, trusting, caring, respectful atmosphere for children to promote learning and holistic development and to adhere to the children's emotional and social well-being. This finding was confirmed by Denham and Brown (2010) who found that academic success depends on socio-emotional learning.

By drawing on the work of Fromm (1978 [1993]), I argue that the focus for all the beneficiaries was placed on 'being' needs rather than on 'having' needs. According to Fromm, having and being are two fundamental modes of experiences, to different kinds of orientations towards self and the world. In the having mode of existence, one's relationship to the world is one of possession and owning which, for the purpose of this study, would refer to matters such as facilities and equipment for the sake of having. In the being mode of existence, the focus was on aliveness, authentic relatedness to the world and well-being (Fromm 1978 [1993]).

In this study, for the mothers and the teachers, quality apparently does not primarily concern what early learning centres have at their disposal in terms of funds or facilities, but whether the centres promoted children's well-being. This finding is noteworthy given the emphasis put on 'having' needs satisfied by a current consumer culture.

The knowledge gained from mothers' responses in this study was valuable to the service providers of early childhood education, because it provided insight into parents' demands for quality early learning centres (Gilliam 2009). It was further explained by Gilliam (2009) that early learning centres served two primary interests in society. The first aim of early learning centres was the provision of quality education to develop successful learners and contributing citizens. Secondly, the early learning centres strive to offer safe and reliable childcare for parents. As explained above, both these factors also surfaced clearly as expectations of quality by the mothers and teachers in this study. Both teachers and mothers equally voiced their opinions regarding the importance of safety and security. This specific indicator received the most responses of any indicators accentuating the significance of safety in early learning centres. Based on these findings, I posit that the quality factors, socio-emotional well-being, holistic development, normative foundation of values and respect, infrastructure and accountable learning, concerning quality factors, derived by the teachers and mothers, can be used to inform the development of a quality assurance framework for South Africa. The outline for a proposed measuring instrument is already in existence (Van Heerden 2012:264–284).

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